Restoring Life and Love, and Love Again

by sevali

Summary

At age 25, Katsuki Yuuri suffered a devastating, career-ending injury that destroyed everything he loved, including his relationship with Viktor Nikiforov. Four years later, living alone in Kumamoto, he thought he’d severed all ties to the skating world that he’d so bitterly left behind, essentially fading from existence to all but the very few who knew where he lived.

Little did he know that there was someone who grew too impatient waiting for his return, and was willing to do whatever it took to drag him back.

Notes

This is the first fic I’ve ever uploaded for public consumption. Please be gentle.

Dedicated to Sam
She didn't make me start this fic, but she sure as hell pushed me to finish it
I never thought I’d see any of them again.

My name is Katsuki Yuuri. I’m 29 years old, and was once the top men’s figure skater in Japan. I suffered a career-ending injury at Worlds four years ago, and since then, my life has never been the same.

My time with Viktor was the best two years of my life, but it was something we couldn’t seem to hold onto. After my injury, I went into a deep depression, and couldn’t even look at the ice anymore. I couldn’t watch him skate, I couldn’t go to competitions, I couldn’t take part in the one thing he loved besides me.

It was easy to see how it all fell apart.

When I learned that I would never skate competitively again, everything in my life stopped making sense. Viktor would try his hardest to cheer me up, but I never felt like he was really listening or understanding what I needed. Our life together had become hinged on the push and pull of our coach and student relationship, and without that hinge, we couldn’t seem to make it work anymore. It was for the best that we split up, really.

Or at least that’s what I told myself to get through the day.

When I returned to Japan, I couldn’t stay in Hasetsu for long. Everywhere I looked I was reminded of Viktor, or skating. Even seeing Yuuko-chan or Minako-sensei hurt too much sometimes. No one really understood what happened, and I could never bring myself to properly explain things to them. I found a place for myself in Kumamoto, trying to run away from the things that stabbed at my heart.

Unfortunately, I could never quite get away from the seagulls.

I used my degree to find a boring job I could sink my mind into on a day to day basis. There was no motivation there. Everyone knew it, but no one said anything; no one demanded more of me than I offered, and I offered just enough to keep myself employed. In a way it was peaceful, but it also went against the grain of my nature. I was used to being pushed. I was used to Viktor’s motivation, urging me to my limits. My life had become so empty.

Would anyone even really call it a life?

As far as the world knew, Katsuki Yuuri faded from existence. Though I’d tried my best to keep away from any news related to figure skating, a year after I’d left Hasetsu, a co-worker asked me if the rumors were true, and presented me with an article suggesting that I had eloped with Viktor Nikiforov. It was only then that I had learned that he had disappeared from the world, too. I always thought he would become a proper coach after I retired. He was always good at everything he tried —once I was out of the picture, he would find someone else to dedicate himself to. That’s what I always assumed.

In the months after I’d read that article, though, it became clear that I was completely wrong. Viktor seemed to wander aimlessly, showing up in a picture with a fan in Sochi one night, to being seen in a bar in Los Angeles a few weeks later. After that, he was spotted in Paris, then London. I had to stop
searching for his name, because it was torture to keep asking myself what I would do if he showed up in Japan. I didn’t have an answer to that. In my heart, the Viktor Nikiforov who had loved me was dead and buried—a bright spark that had brought so much light before fizzling out and leaving my life darker in its wake.

I couldn’t imagine seeing any of them again. I knew that Phichit tried to visit me, a couple of years after my injury. He’d gone to Hasetsu and uploaded plenty of pictures, but left after a few days, having never seen me. Others tried to reach out in various ways, sending letters to the onsen or Minako-sensei that would eventually get forwarded to me. I never knew what to say or do in response, so I did nothing. The guilt was easier to deal with over time, and eventually the letters stopped coming. I thought I had finally broken from that world I’d left behind, and I could put all my effort into carving out a new one here in Kumamoto.

The problem is, shadows of the past often have a way of creeping back when they’re least expected.

It was a Sunday in April, early in the morning. I had just gotten back from my morning run, the only training habit I’d kept over the years, and I was in the middle of a shower when the door of my tiny apartment pounded loud enough to hear over the water. At first I thought it might’ve been the neighbor’s door, since the walls here weren’t exactly soundproof, but its persistence made me think twice. Then I heard the voice, speaking in English.

“OPEN UP, KATSUDON! I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE!”

It couldn’t be… There was no way. I raced out of the bathroom, hardly drying off, loosely wrapping a towel around my waist before I wrenched the door open.

Leaning casually against the frame, as if he hadn’t been frantically knocking for a good three minutes, stood the top figure skater in the world, Yuri Plisetsky. Already taller than me when I’d left, he seemed to have grown a few more inches on top of that, to the point where he looked down at me now as if I were no higher than a worm.

Though that might’ve had more to do with his expression than his height.

“Are you going to let me in?” he growled, his English clearer and less accented than I remembered.

“A-ah, sure,” I said, stepping aside and clutching at the towel around my waist. “Come in.”

Yuri glared at me, then at my apartment. It was embarrassingly empty—I didn’t even have a TV.

“Where’s the rest of it?”

“Thi-this is it,” I said. It was the first time anyone else had set foot in my apartment, and I was suddenly very conscious of that fact.

“Tch. Where the hell do you even sleep? It’s just a square room and a kitchen.” Yuri began digging through the cabinets, though what he was looking for, I couldn’t imagine. He didn’t seem to find it, as he slammed the doors and went to sit on the floor. He hadn’t even taken off his shoes, though I knew it was an affront to me rather than ignorance. Even after all these years, he still took pleasure in being intentionally rude to me. “Alright, where is he?”

“Where is who?” I asked, afraid I knew the answer.

He glared up at me. “Where are you hiding him? Don’t act like an idiot and pretend he isn’t here.”

I sighed, annoyed. “Viktor isn’t here. I haven’t seen him in almost four years.”
I expected him to call me a liar, and the glare he gave me said as much. But as the seconds ticked on, his resolve seemed to break, his lip quivering. “You haven’t?”

“No,” I said, going to pull out some clothes from my dresser. Even if Yuri had seen me naked before, I didn’t like the feeling of being so exposed like this. I had a feeling I was going to need all the dignity I could muster, and the towel wasn’t providing much. “How did you find me, anyway?”

“Turns out your sister is still one of my biggest fans. Didn’t take much to get her to tell me where you were.”

I slammed my drawer, clothes clutched tightly in my fist. “Please tell me you did not seduce my sister to get information out of her.”

Yuri turned his head, a slow smile stretching his lips. The little shit. He let out a laugh. “No. It’s amazing how far a couple of autographs and photos can get you, though.”

“I can’t believe my sister sold me out for a couple of photos,” I muttered, pulling a t-shirt over my head. It didn’t escape my notice that Yuri was looking at me the entire time I changed, though what he saw, I had no idea.

“I expected to find you fat and happy,” he said. “They said that Viktor hadn’t been around for years, but I didn’t believe them. I thought you were just good at hiding him, but I guess I was wrong.”

“Like I said, I haven’t seen him,” I said again. As soon as I was dressed, I joined him on the floor. “As far as I know, he hasn’t even tried to contact me.”

“And I take it you haven’t tried to contact him,” Yuri said, pulling his knees up to his chest. “I was afraid of that.”

Silence lingered, and for a moment I just looked at him. I saw echoes of the boy I knew years ago, but they were mostly hidden by the man he’d turned into. He’d grown out his hair, the shiny blonde locks no longer hanging in front of his eyes but pulled back into a tail at the back of his neck. He still had a long dancer’s body, but it was thickened and hardened with the sort of muscle that only came from regular, intense training. I suddenly found myself regretting that I hadn’t seen any of his performances lately—I had a feeling he was a vision on the ice.

“So—have you been searching for him, then?” I asked, wanting to break the silence.

“Only recently,” Yuri said, looking aside. It looked like he was hiding something, but I had no idea what. “For a while, we could mostly track him through the few social media posts he’d pop up in. For the past year he seemed to mostly be in Switzerland with Giacometti, but after New Year he stopped showing up. I was so sure I’d find him here that I almost didn’t come, because I didn’t want to be wrong. But Beka told me I should come see, because I was having trouble focusing.”

“…Beka?”

Yuri raised an eyebrow. “Otabek Altin? One of the top figure skaters in the world? My best friend?”

“I remember him,” I muttered. “I just didn’t know the nickname. He’s one of the top, is he?”

“Man, Yuuko wasn’t kidding when she said you really broke off from skating,” Yuri said, pulling out his phone. He pulled up a picture and showed it to me. It was a podium photo from Worlds, taken less than a month ago, with Otabek standing in the middle, Yuri to his right and Guang Hong to his left. “It was the first time he beat me. I was so mad, but proud at the same time. If a Russian takes gold, it’s expected, but in Kazakhstan it’s a big deal. They even threw him a parade and a
I tried to ignore the stabbing feeling in my heart, watching Yuri look at his phone so fondly. Of all the things I missed about skating, that friendship and rivalry with people from other countries was high on the list. “Good for him,” I said weakly.

“He’s getting married soon,” Yuri said casually, flipping through the photos and landing on one with Otabek standing next to a pretty blonde woman. “I hate her so much, but even I can admit she’s good for him.”

“But, I thought that—” I cut myself off, knowing how it would sound. Yuri glared at me anyway, as if he knew exactly what I was going to say.

“We were just friends, idiot,” Yuri said. “Not everyone falls in love just by hanging around someone for a long time.”

There was something in the way he said it that made me think there was more there. Had Yuri loved Otabek, only to not have his feelings returned? If that were the case, it couldn’t have been easy, knowing his best friend was getting married.

“So…you really haven’t heard from Viktor at all?” Yuri asked. “No letter, or email?”

“Nothing at all since I left Russia,” I said. Yuri seemed to distract himself with his phone, so I took my opportunity to get up and do something with myself. “Do you want some tea, or something?”

“Oh, uh, sure,” Yuri said. “Tea is fine.”

Thankfully I had two cups, despite never having anyone over. While I waited for the water to heat, I set up the little table I used for eating.

“So this really is your entire place,” Yuri said with a touch of awe. “Kind of a step down from Hasetsu, isn’t it?”

“It’s fine for what I need,” I said. To my surprise, Yuri got up and went outside, stepping out for just a second before bringing in a small carry-on-sized luggage. Was he intending to stay here!? He rolled it to the corner, out of the way, saying nothing about it.

“I couldn’t live in a place like this,” Yuri said, settling back down onto the floor, phone in hand. “You don’t even have any decorations or anything. How do you spend any time here?”

“I work most of the time,” I informed him, preparing the teapot. “I eat dinner out after work, then I come home and sleep. I don’t spend much time here.”

“Yuuko told me the sort of job you had, but it was so boring-sounding I immediately forgot what it was. How can you go from skating to that? I’d die.”

His words froze me. “I had to get away from it,” I said, willing the pain to not show on my face. “I didn’t have a choice.”

“You had a choice!” Yuri yelled, suddenly angry. “You and Viktor both had a choice, and you chose to be stupid and selfish, like you always were! Neither of you even had a thought for Yakov, or me. He really liked you, you know. It broke his heart when you left without saying thank you, or even goodbye.”

The kettle shrilled, and I went to it automatically, though my mind felt like it had short-circuited. It
was all I could do to fill the little teapot without spilling hot water everywhere. I carried the tea tray over to the table, arms trembling so much that the cups shook.

“Say something, you idiot!” Yuri demanded.

I let the tray clank loudly on the table. “What do you want me to say? That I’m sorry? Well fine, I’m sorry! I’m sorry I broke my ankle and ruined my career! I’m sorry Viktor and I couldn’t figure out how to live together anymore! I’m sorry I left you all behind without saying goodbye, because I couldn’t even look at an ice rink without wanting to die! Don’t even think for a moment that this guilt hasn’t been crushing me ever since I left, because it has.”

“Screw your guilt!” Yuri countered, his fist pounding on the table. “Guilt is fucking useless! Guilt is nothing but your own selfish need to punish yourself, and it helps literally no one. It was that same stupid selfishness that ruined Viktor.”

Tears flooded my eyes, but I shook my head to clear them away. “What did I have left to offer him? I couldn’t love skating anymore.”

“That fucker loved you, and tried his absolute hardest to pull you back together after everything.” Yuri rubbed at his temple, like he was easing a headache. “You two were practically married. It made me sick seeing you together sometimes, but I also saw how that force drove you both to do your absolute best. Watching you perform together for exhibitions was really cool. Everyone was dumbfounded when you two broke it off.” He looked aside. “Well, everyone except me, I guess.”

I looked at him in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“I mean,” Yuri said, digging his fingernail into a scratch on my table, “I understood why things happened the way they did. I thought you were both stupid, but I got it. Viktor was never all that great at comforting people when they needed him, which was why he never really had any close friends. I saw him try with you a couple of times, and I wanted to kick him for how dumb he was. You didn’t need someone telling you that you’d still skate again someday, just not competitively. You didn’t need someone bringing you flowers every day like they were a fucking comfort. You needed someone to tell you to fucking get over yourself and realize the great things you still had left, and that he’d always be with you no matter what.”

I couldn’t help but cry then, knowing those were the exact words I’d longed to hear, but never did. I don’t think I could have said at the time what I’d needed, but I knew now, that if Viktor had just said those things, we might have been able to stick together. Or maybe not. I might’ve been too far gone to save.

“Viktor was afraid of putting himself in that position,” Yuri went on, ignoring my tears. “Even though a lot of people relied on him and looked up to him, he wasn’t used to having someone depend on him like you did. He pretended to be flighty and forgetful, so that people would forgive him when he disappointed them. He did it to me, back with the Onsen on Ice stuff, though he made it up to me in his own way by giving me that short program. But even then I knew I couldn’t rely on him, so I never tried. I worried you were depending on him too much, but I knew there was nothing I could say that would be worth anything. You two seemed to do okay sorting out your own problems, anyway, until that last one.”

I had to dig through my things to find tissues to combat the gross amount of snot streaming out of my nose. Seeing my efforts, Yuri pulled out what seemed to be a leopard-print handkerchief out of his pocket and handed it to me. “Thank you,” I said.

“You’re always so ugly when you cry,” Yuri said, though somehow it didn’t sound like the insult it
was meant to be.

“I never expected you to see things so clearly,” I said once the sobbing had subsided. As usual, I felt a little calmer after crying.

Yuri lowered his eyes. “No one watched you as closely as I did.”

“While it’s true that Viktor and I could have done things differently, we’ve both moved on, it seems,” I said. “Not really worth bothering over.”

“Like hell you’ve moved on,” Yuri growled. “You ran away and dug a hole for yourself to die in. This isn’t ‘moving on.’ You’re not living. Viktor isn’t, either. He’s wandering around trying to find anything that inspires him as much as you did, and he’s failing.”

I couldn’t easily argue with him when I was this off-balance. The teetering walls I’d built between myself and my old life were beginning to crumble, and it was taking all of my efforts to stubbornly hold them up. “And what do you expect me to do about it?”

“I don’t care,” Yuri said, idly turning on his phone screen. “I just wanted to see if Viktor was here. I’m going to go back to Hasetsu for one last katsudon, then I’ll fly back to Russia. You idiots can die alone, for all it bothers me.”

I’d known Yuri long enough to tell when he was flat-out lying, and while I didn’t know the full extent of his feelings on the matter, I could tell he cared at least a little bit. He wouldn’t have come all this way trying to find me if he didn’t. He wouldn’t have given me that speech, either. His talk about Viktor seemed to imply that he knew exactly where the man was, and it wasn’t here. I decided to try and call him out on it. “Why did you think Viktor came here?” I asked.

“Because he hasn’t been seen,” Yuri said, as if it were obvious. “I figured if he was wanting to actually lay low, he had a reason, and that reason could have been you.”

“Don’t you think, though, if he’d showed up in Hasetsu again, someone would notice and talk about it? It’s not like it’s easy for him to hide there.”

Yuri flushed and looked aside. I was getting closer.

“Not to mention if we actually had reunited, he would have posted pictures online as soon as he got here. He’s never one to hide when he’s happy. And I think you knew you wouldn’t find him here when you begged my sister for my address.” I sipped at my tea. “I think you came here for a different reason.”

Yuri let out a little breath, a small shuddering gasp that told me I’d struck something deep. He’d pushed me, so I decided to push back.

“Tell me, when is Otabek getting married? Probably pretty soon, right, so he can enjoy some time with her before the season starts again?”

“Shut up! This isn’t about that!”

But I could tell it was, to some extent. I smiled. “I was just curious.”

He glared at me. “Don’t smirk at me like that.”

I only smiled wider, knowing it annoyed him. I missed teasing him. He’d always been so easy to anger, but in a harmless way, never quite stepping over the line to hurt someone over it.
At some point it occurred to me that this was the first time I’d really smiled over anything in recent memory, and the sobering thought wiped the smile off my face. Silence settled over us in the tiny apartment, and I really didn’t know what to say. What did he want from me? Why did he come to visit?

Yuri seemed to get lost in his phone for a moment, and I considered finding where I’d left mine. It was off, I knew that much. Perhaps it was in my suit pocket? But what would I even look at on it? I had no messages.

“So you really haven’t seen any of the competitions since your retirement?” Yuri asked.

“I haven’t, no.”

“Come over here and watch this, then,” Yuri said, shifting his position a little to make room for me beside him. “You need to see this Short Program from two seasons ago.”

I hesitated, afraid of what it would do to me. But I knew Yuri would argue with me if I tried to get out of it, and my resolve wasn’t strong enough. I could handle one short program, couldn’t I? I got up and sat next to him, and he held the phone between us so we could both watch.

To my surprise, it wasn’t one of Yuri’s programs he was showing me. It was Minami’s.

“I think it’s safe to say he was inspired by you,” Yuri commented. “I mean, that costume alone…”

Minami was wearing a vest over a white shirt, but the vest was the same navy color as the suit I wore for my “Yuri on Ice” program. When the camera showed his back, I saw it had the same sequin pattern as well, clearly from the same costume designer I’d used back then. He performed to a beautiful piano solo, the graceful movements at odds with the high-energy skater I remembered him to be. His jumps had greatly improved, too, stepping out of just one of his quads.

“He’s so different…” I said at the end, watching him greet the crowd with a sober smile.

“He’s trying to be like you,” Yuri said. “And failing. But when you retired, he took your place as Japan’s top skater, and I think the pressure went to his head a little. This was the Cup of China that year, and he placed third, just barely losing out on the Grand Prix Finals. He didn’t do as well this past season, and I think he’s considering giving up.”

“But that’s such a waste,” I protested. “He’s really good.”

“He needs to stop copying you,” Yuri said, putting his phone away. “Someone needs to tell him that it’s not working.”

“I guess I could talk to…” I stopped myself, and narrowed my eyes at Yuri. “No.”

Yuri drank his tea, ignoring my glare. “I’m just saying, it’d be a shame if he gave up because of this. He’s running out of time if he wants to develop a program for this season, and I heard from Yuuko’s kids that he recently gave an interview where he hadn’t decided yet. Someone needs to kick him back into it. I’d do it myself, but his English is really terrible, and he thinks I hate him.”

“What gave him that impression?” I asked, curious despite myself.

“I might’ve said that I hate him,” Yuri said casually. “Anyway, come back to Hasetsu with me.”

“Why? Minami’s not in Hasetsu.”
“No, but a lot of people dying to see you are. People who say they haven’t seen you in three years. People like your family. People that supported you all throughout your shitty career and you thanked them by disappearing.”

I closed my eyes, letting out a deep sigh. “You said guilt was useless.”

“The way you’re carrying it around right now, it is useless. Doesn’t stop me from trying to use it against you.”

I stood up, going to the kitchen for some reason. I had to do something with myself, because sitting still was not an option. “But I can’t just get up and leave. I have a job—”

“A job you don’t care about,” Yuri said.

“People are counting on me to be there tomorrow,” I said.

“I bet you one of my gold medals that you can’t name one thing you like about that job,” Yuri said. He tapped his finger on the table. “Just one thing. Anything.”

I opened my mouth, expecting to have an easy answer, but the words stuck in my throat. Somehow, I couldn’t lie to him in the same way I’d been lying to myself.

Rather than smile smugly at being right, his face fell. “Come on, Yuuri. I expected you to say something. A coworker you like. Maybe the bathrooms are nice?”

My knuckles went white as I gripped the kitchen counter. “Nothing. There is absolutely nothing I like about it. I hate myself for even taking it.”

“Then come back with me,” Yuri said, a hint of pleading in his tone.

This felt like one of those world-shifting moments, a decision made in a second that could change the course of my life. I hadn’t felt anything like this since the moment I bought the plane ticket back to Japan after my retirement. I knew what my heart wanted. I knew what I had to do. But even going home felt like it would be one of the hardest things I’d ever done.

“Okay.”
Yuri insisted we go back that day. I had a feeling that if he hadn’t convinced me by nightfall, he would have insisted on staying in the apartment with me, and I had no idea how that would have gone down. I wasn’t willing to find out. Close quarters with Yuri Plisetsky traditionally hadn’t gone well for me, though in fairness I hadn’t spent much time with this older, adult version. He seemed oddly reserved on the train rides back to Hasetsu, only speaking when necessary. I didn’t really know what to say to him, myself. I was too worried about what I would say to Yuuko-chan and her family, and Minako-sensei. Would an apology mean anything to them?

We went through the front entrance to Yu-topia, though I would have preferred going in the back. The onsen was a lot less busy than I remembered. Just a couple of regulars drinking and watching TV. Unfortunately, because I had a tall Russian with me, I stood out enough to draw attention.

“I—I’m home,” I called.

Mom popped her head out of the kitchen, then came running, a wide smile on her face. “Welcome home! It’s been a while.”

“Y-yeah. Sorry for not visiting more.” Or at all. I was the worst. The train ride wasn’t even that long.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said with a dismissive wave. “Are you hungry? How long are you staying?”


“I’ll make two right now,” Mom said cheerfully, and disappeared back into the kitchen. Yuri seemed to make himself at home, just casually going up the stairs to the bedrooms. I followed, wanting to at least put away my luggage, but also wanting to confirm my suspicions that he was staying in the room Viktor used to use. I peered in, and saw that Viktor’s old bed and sofa that he’d bought were still here, along with a scattering of things that clearly belonged to Yuri, like a tiger-print blanket and a few jackets. When he caught me looking, he gave me a challenging glare, and I shrugged and went down the hall to my room.

It was mostly as I’d left it. A few things looked like they’d been moved around for cleaning, but nothing important. The one noticeable thing was the single framed picture of Viktor that still sat on my desk, untouched even after I’d taken down all the posters. I’d put it there for inspiration when I was thirteen, glancing over at his photo as I did my homework. He’d been smiling in the photo, but after knowing him personally for years, I knew that smile in the photo wasn’t genuine. It was the smile he got when someone put a camera in front of his face, prompting him to look happy no matter how he felt. I took the frame and shoved it into my desk drawer, putting that fake smile out of sight.

Mari-neechan came to greet us while we ate our katsudon, giving Yuri a strange smile.

“So I heard you gave away my address for a couple of autographs,” I said to her.

“It wasn’t me,” she said. “I got enough autographs and photos to last me a lifetime, though.”

I looked at Yuri, who shrugged, somehow following the conversation. “I have to appreciate my fans,” he said in Japanese.

“When did you learn Japanese?” I asked him.
“I have a lot of Japanese fans,” he said, as if that explained everything.

“If Mari-neechan didn’t tell you where I lived, who did?” I asked.

“I did,” Mom said, bringing in a fresh pot of tea. “He promised he would bring you back if we told him, so I made the decision. If you have to be angry with someone, be angry with me.”

“I’m not angry…” I said. “I just didn’t expect it.”

“Even though you never visit and hardly call, I still know when my son isn’t happy,” Mom said. “Yurio came all the way here, and I wasn’t about to let him return without seeing you. He promised he could bring you back, so I told him where to go.”

I turned to Yuri, who was eating his katsudon with enthusiasm while pointedly not looking at me. I wondered why he’d been so confident that he could bring me back. And why had he been so insistent on seeing me, anyway?

After we ate I took advantage of the onsen, having my first proper bath in a long time. I took it for granted growing up that I lived in an onsen, but being away for years always renewed my appreciation. Yuri joined me not long after, elegantly entering the outdoor pool that no one else happened to be using. There weren’t many customers at this hour, anyway.

Because I had grown up in an onsen, I never really noticed people’s naked bodies. It was something my eyes tended to just glance over and accept, without really responding in any way. Viktor would sometimes put himself on display in a way that made me take notice, but it was always on purpose, and I never really knew how to react.

Yuri, though, I noticed just on the sheer contrast. It had been years since I’d seen him, and it was clear his body had matured into something strong and elegant, not entirely unlike Viktor’s had been when he was in top physical form. Yuri had longer limbs, though, and his movements took on a grace even beyond the great Viktor Nikiforov. My regret for not watching him skate only grew, and I made a mental note to look up some videos after my bath.

Yuri gave me a haughty look when he noticed my eyes on him, and he pushed some of the long, damp hair out of his face. “What are you looking at, katsudon?”

I decided to be honest. “You’ve changed. I was just noticing.”

He smiled sardonically. “Imagine that, I’ve changed in four years. You have, too. You’re starting to look like a boring old man.”

So much for honesty. I knew it was true, though. I could no longer see my old self in the mirror, the one who used to win competitions. The one who used to enthrall audiences and capture hearts. The one who could bring Viktor Nikiforov to his knees with a dark look and a few words. I’d let that man slip away from me, and I resigned myself to the fact that I would never see him again.

Yuri came up beside me, resting his arms on the edge of the pool. “I don’t know why you would ever want to leave Hasetsu. Viktor never exaggerated when he said this place was heaven on earth.”

“I guess I didn’t appreciate it as much I should have,” I said. “But I couldn’t stay here when everywhere I looked, I was reminded of him. I couldn’t even properly see Yuuko-chan without hurting. Anything that reminded me of Viktor, or skating, made me want to die.”

“All that proves to me is that you made the wrong decision,” Yuri said. “You should have never left skating.”
I glared at him. “What was I supposed to do, just stand on the sidelines and watch?!?”

“Yes,” Yuri said calmly. “Watch us like the rest of us watched you. I know it must have hurt, knowing that you couldn’t return to competition, but you would have gotten over it.”

“How can you be so certain I would’ve gotten over it?” I asked, annoyed.

“Did you want to die when you saw me at your doorstep this morning?” He had his face propped up on his hand, blue-green eyes regarding me with sincerity.

“No.”

“Then I think it’s safe to say you would have,” he said, leaning back and stretching his arms. “It probably wouldn’t have taken four years and a shitty job, either. Viktor would have found some way to help you move on, if you’d given him the chance. But you took that chance away from him, not to mention the rest of us. One of us would have stumbled on the right thing to do eventually, the right support to give you or whatever, but you ran away. You didn’t want to get better. You wanted to grieve and sulk on your own. And even that would have been fine if you hadn’t cut yourself off from everything and everyone you loved in the process.”

“I didn’t want this,” I said. “I didn’t ask for this. You act like I made this decision on a whim.”

“No one asks for a career-ending injury, but they happen,” Yuri said, still infuriatingly calm. “We run that risk every day. After they took you to the hospital that day, I wondered what I would do if it were me. Other than the fact that it would take a pretty devastating injury to end my career completely, I probably would have reacted about the same. Only luckily for me, I don’t have the luxury of being able to run away from the people who love me. They depend on me too much, and would never let it happen.”

“At least no one was depending on me to keep going,” I said.

Yuri glared at me. “Bull. Shit. People were depending on you. Not to keep going, maybe, but to at least stay in their lives and support them. The world isn’t always about you. Your life isn’t entirely about you.”

“I didn’t know what else to do!” I yelled, unnamed emotions pouring out of me. Somehow I couldn’t hold back around Yuri. “I was making everyone else miserable, not to mention compounding my guilt by watching Viktor try his hardest and fail! It was better for everyone that I left!”

“It wasn’t better for Viktor,” Yuri countered, finally raising his voice. “And it certainly wasn’t better for me! You had finally hit your stride, giving some of the best performances of your life, and to watch you fall was one of the hardest moments I’ve had to endure. I can’t even begin to imagine how you must have felt, but you still could have spared a thought for the people who supported you!”

I took deep breaths, willing myself not to cry again. It was easier than I expected, though my blood hummed with emotions that threatened to overcome me.

“You’re always so selfish,” Yuri went on in a quieter voice. “Even after all Vikt was for you, you still think you’re alone, facing the world by yourself. Well, you’ve proven that you can’t handle it on your own, so you should stop pretending you don’t need other people in your life.”

“I don’t want to be a burden on other people…” I said pathetically.

“Then let them decide for themselves if you’re worth it,” Yuri said. “Don’t make that decision on
your own based on your own skewed assumptions. If people don’t want to be around you, they can leave. Don’t force them out of your life.”

I let those words roll around in my head as I went to bed that night. Before I slept, I pulled up a video of one of Yuri’s performances and watched him skate. He really was a good dancer, better than Viktor ever was. His jumps weren’t as flawless, but his movements were more expressive, his long limbs giving him an advantage in presence. I found myself watching another, then another, until I was sure I’d exhausted every performance of his that I’d missed. His remarkable talent was addictive, his energy and grace a powerful force that pushed through all the barriers I’d built to emotionally separate myself from skating. This was beauty in its rawest, most expressive form, and like his words, his dancing stuck in my mind like a thorn.

The next morning, Yuri silently joined me for my morning run, and somehow, despite my trying to avoid it, we ended up at Ice Castle. I knew Yuri led me there on purpose.

Since it was normal hours, there were a few people there using the rink, but not many. The town had really gone back to sleep after my career ended.

“Yuuko, I brought him back!” Yuri called in Japanese as we walked through the door. I ducked my head in shame.

“Yuuri-kun? Really?” she asked, as if she couldn’t believe that I would come back.

“It’s been a long time, Yuuko-chan,” I said, finally looking at her. She was a little older, maybe, but she looked exactly as I remembered. She beamed at me, radiant as always.

“We’re going to use the rink,” Yuri said, dragging me off to the benches. “Bring him some skates.”

I didn’t really know what to say to Yuuko-chan, but she didn’t seem to expect anything from me. She just kept smiling as she handed me skates to wear. I put them on reluctantly, my heart pounding as I wondered if I could even balance properly anymore.

It was easier than I expected, remembering how to skate. I wasn’t fast, and I could feel my body wasn’t as accustomed to the movements as it once was, but I didn’t fall spectacularly like I’d feared. I was stiff, but I could manage even a few single jumps.

Yuri, on the other hand, stole everyone’s attention, including mine. He was working on some new choreography I didn’t recognize, possibly from one of his new programs for next season. I’d wondered if he was taking a break from training to visit here, but he was clearly still managing to get some practice in. He sped up, headed towards a clear space, and landed a quad toe loop beautifully. I found myself cheering with the rest of the onlookers without even realizing it.

I wound up tiring myself out a little, and stood on the sidelines to watch Yuri practice. Eventually, Yuuko-chan joined me, and for a while said nothing, only standing near me.

“I’m glad you came back,” she said, just as Yuri landed a triple axel. “We all missed you.”

“I’m… sorry,” I said, unable to articulate my feelings. I was beyond sorry, but I didn’t know how to say it.

“Don’t worry about it,” she said in a distant voice. “We just worried, more than anything. Takeshi threatened to go kidnap you from Kumamoto a bunch of times, just to get you away from there for a little while, but I never let him.”

“Why not?”
“I knew you had to find your own reasons for coming back,” Yuuko said. “Maybe someone could have inspired you to return home, but I didn’t think Takeshi, or even me, would be the right person to do it. We all hoped that Viktor would come for you again, but I think Yurio got tired of waiting.”

“Did everyone just… expect me to come back someday?”

“In your own time, yes,” she said. “That’s always how you’ve done things. Everyone knew that you weren’t meant for that life in Kumamoto, but I always told myself, if that’s what it took for you to figure things out, maybe it was for the best. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I should have tried harder.” She wiped at the corners of her eyes and gave me a smile. “But what’s important is that you’re here now. I’m glad Yurio talked you into it.”

“I didn’t mean to worry you so much,” I said to her. “I’m sorry.”

“Just stick around for a while, and you can stop apologizing to me.” Yuri landed another jump, though I’d missed the entry and couldn’t tell what it was. “He’s so good. I think he might even be better than Viktor was at his age.”

“I think so, too,” I said. “But it’s hard to compare. Their styles are so different.”

She leaned over the wall, chin resting on her palm as she watched. “He does things his own way, but he builds well on the ballet training he’s had. He’s a bit like you, that way. He works really hard on his choreography and step sequences.”

“Unlike me, though, he’s actually consistent with his jumps,” I said.

“You were getting much better at those, towards the end,” she said. “Even Viktor had trouble with consistency until he was 23. Yurio seems to have more raw talent in that area, but he works his hardest at his dancing. Or at least, that’s what the girls tell me. I sort of lost my drive to follow the competitions as much after you retired.”

I fought back the urge to apologize again. “Are they all three still megafans?” I asked instead.

“Oh, definitely. Now that they’ve grown up, I can’t keep them away from it. They’re always fighting over their favorites—Axel loves Guang-Hong the most, while Lutz and Loop feel she’s betraying Yurio. But I know Lutz secretly likes JJ, and Loop’s favorite is Otabek, though she claims it’s fine since he’s Yurio’s friend. It’s kind of grating to listen to them argue sometimes, but I’m glad they haven’t lost their passion yet.”

“Yuri told me about Minami,” I said, wondering if she knew anything.

“Mm. Yeah, he’s been considering retiring, even though he’s only 23. It’s a shame, really, because he’s good at entertaining a crowd. Kind of reminds me of your old friend Phichit, that way. But the programs he’s been choosing don’t work well with his strengths. It’s almost like he was…”

“Like he was trying to be me,” I finished for her. She nodded in agreement. “I think maybe I should talk to him, but I don’t know if I’d be overstepping. It’s not like I’m in the best position to offer advice.”

“I think he’d listen to you, though,” she said. “He’s admired you for so long. If you can convince him to be more himself, you might be able to save him from retirement.”

“Maybe…” I still wasn’t convinced, but I could tell my heart was inching closer. Yuri skated nearby, practicing a masterful step sequence I didn’t recognize. I only caught a glimpse of his face as he passed, but for a brief second I thought I saw him smiling at me.
“Thank you,” I said to Yuri as we walked home later that day. “I probably needed that.”

He turned to look at me, clearly surprised at my gratitude. “You did,” he agreed. “And you’re going to come with me every day that I stay here.”

“How long are you staying?” I asked. “I thought you were going home tomorrow.”

“It’s undecided,” he said vaguely. “But until I do, I still need to practice, and you’re going to watch me.”

“Why?”

“Because you need to,” he said simply.

I met Minako-sensei that evening, letting her blather on about how sad she was about my choices as she got increasingly more intoxicated. I tried to explain myself, but she was in a mood where she wanted to talk rather than listen, so I let her talk at me well into the night.

The next day, I formally quit my job. I went to submit my resignation letter in person, cleaned out my apartment, and that was all. In the span of a day I wiped away over three years of my life. Three wasted years where I accomplished nothing. Three years where I stood still, waiting for something to happen that never did.

Or maybe it did, after all. Maybe I was just waiting for someone to tell me that it was okay to come back. Or some sign that I hadn’t completely ruined everything by disappearing. No matter what the actual reason, I knew that returning to Hasetsu felt like breathing after being underwater. It still hurt to think of Viktor, and I did often. I couldn’t get away from our memories no matter where I went. But the pain was a distant feeling now, one that I could live with.

I just had to start living again.
Finding Minami Kenjiro’s contact information was surprisingly easy. The triplets gave me a person to call, and one mention of my name got me his phone number. I struggled to think of what to say to him, until Yuri suggested that I just text him and ask to meet in person. It was an obvious answer to a simple problem, highlighting just how socially inept I had become over the years.

In the end, Minami immediately agreed to come to Hasetsu. His texts were covered with emojis and exclamation points, making me think that he really hadn’t changed at all since the last time I saw him.

I asked for Ice Castle to be reserved for part of the day, and watched Yuri practice on his own while I waited for Minami to show up. I was beginning to recognize parts of Yuri’s program, and started to imagine what sort of music it would go to. He’d done everything from hard rock to classical music in the past, though lately he’d been favoring the latter. I couldn’t decide what type of music this was for. It was high energy but elegant, mixing elements that Yuri was famous for. I wondered who did the choreography for it. It was beginning to look like he might have done it himself.

I was so enthralled watching him that I didn’t notice someone standing next to me until they began to speak.

“Katsuki Yuuri. It’s been a while.”

Minami hadn’t grown at all since I last saw him. His hair had changed—he’d kept the red streak in his bleached hair, but it was a shorter, more mature cut. But that height. He couldn’t have been much taller than 155cm, and he was well past his growing years.

I tried a smile. “Minami-kun. Thanks for coming all the way here.”

“Why is he here?” he asked, nodding his head toward Yuri on the ice.

“Your guess is as good as mine,” I said. It was almost the truth. “But I wanted to talk to you.”

“Yeah, you mentioned that,” Minami said, looking uncharacteristically reserved and shy. “I think I know why. You wouldn’t be the first to try to talk me out of retirement.”

“Do you want to be talked out of it?” I asked.

He looked up at me, clearly not expecting that question. “I don’t know. I felt like I tried my hardest, and it wasn’t good enough, so what’s left for me to do?”

“Keep trying,” I said, letting my eyes follow Yuri. He was doing that step sequence again, his eyes turned to me. “That’s all anyone can do, really. I was watching your performances, though, and I wanted to say that I think your approach is wrong.” I looked down at him. “You weren’t being yourself.”

“Other people have said the same,” Minami said sadly. “But I don’t know what it means to ‘be myself’ anymore.”

“That’s not a question that anyone else can answer but you,” I told him. “But let’s take a different approach. Tell me about the time you felt best on the ice—not necessarily which performance scored the highest, but when you felt the best about what you were doing.”

Minami thought for a moment. “I always liked it when the audience really got into my performances.
They’d clap along, and it always got me fired up to do my best. But it’s been a while since I was able to do that.”

“Maybe try that approach, then,” I told him. “Work on a program that will get the audience involved. Phichit was always good at that—should I put him in contact with you?”

Minami’s eyes widened. “Would you? I would love to do a program with him.”

I blinked, surprised at myself for even offering. “I’ll ask him. I know he’s busy with his own work now, but I think this is something he’d enjoy.” I heard Yuri speed up, so I turned just in time to see him attempt a quadruple flip, and end up flat on the ice. He got up easily, clearly disappointed with himself.

“That’s what you get for trying to show off!” I called to him teasingly.

He held up his middle finger at me, and I couldn’t help but laugh. It brought back memories of the delinquents I’d see in Detroit.

“You two get along well, now,” Minami said. He sounded almost jealous. “Listen, Yuuri-kun. I’m going to ask you something that I want you think about seriously. I’m not asking this on a whim.” He looked down, wringing his hands together. “Would you please consider being my coach?”

“Eh?” I looked at him with surprise. “You—you can’t be serious! I haven’t even thought about skating in four years. I haven’t followed the competitions, or the rule changes, not to mention I don’t know the first thing about coaching. I would be an awful coach to you.”

Minami’s shoulders fell in disappointment. “Somehow, I knew you would say something like that. But I couldn’t live with the regret of not asking.”

“Why do you want me as a coach, anyway?” I asked.

“Because you were my idol,” he said. “I looked up to you in every way. I know that if I had you supporting me, there’s nothing I couldn’t accomplish on the ice.” His eyes shone with such sincerity that it made my heart break.

“If I thought for a moment that I could be a good coach to you, I would consider it,” I said honestly. “But if you promise me you won’t retire this season, I’ll be sure to cheer you on at every competition I can. It’s the least I can do to thank you for supporting me all those years.”

Minami blinked, looking like he might cry. “You—you mean it, Yuuri-kun? You’ll come watch me skate?”

I didn’t know what else I would do with my life at this point, but this was something I felt I could commit to. “Yes, I will.”

He looked like he might burst with energy, the way he beamed at me. “I promise I won’t let you down! Do—do you think I could skate for a while?”

“Go ahead,” I said. “We have the rink reserved for the rest of the day.”

Yuri didn’t look too enthusiastic about sharing the rink with Minami, but they mostly ignored each other. I watched them for a while, deciding not to join in just now, and instead considered contacting Phichit. He’d retired just a year after me, growing tired of competition and wanting to pursue a different type of performance. I pulled up his social media accounts and looked through them, trying to get an idea of where he was and what he was up to.
His photos told me he was in Thailand, and he’d just wrapped up his first production of an ice show based on a popular children’s movie. It seemed to be a huge success, if Phichit’s excitement about it was any indication.

Trying not to worry too much, I gave him a video call. He picked up immediately.

“Yuuri!” he greeted warmly. He seemed to be at an ice rink, though he wasn’t skating. “Good morning! It’s been too long since I’ve heard from you!”

“Good morning,” I said. “I hope you’re not too busy?”

“Not at all. Just clearing my head this morning with a little warmup. What’s up?”

I always envied his ability to be so cheerful all the time. “I wanted to ask a favor, but only do it if you really want to,” I began.

“Ooh, a favor for Yuuri? What sort of favor?”

“Do you know Minami Kenjiro?” I asked, briefly turning my camera towards Minami, following his movements.

“Yeah, of course.”

“He wants to work with you for his programs this year. Says he wants to create a show that will really get the audience fired up. Your programs were legendary for doing that, so I told him I’d ask if you’d be willing to work with him.”

He made a high-pitched sound of excitement that echoed loudly through the ice rink. Both Yuri and Minami stopped moving, giving me curious looks.

“I take it that’s a yes?” I asked.

“Yuuri, it would be my dream to choreograph for someone else’s competition!” Phichit said. “No one asked me before, but I always hoped someone would.”

“Minami-kun, he said yes!” I called over to him. The excited dance he did in response was precious.

“I take it this will be for this season?” Phichit asked. “So we should get started soon.”

I nodded. “Yeah. He was thinking about retiring, so I was hoping he’d make a big comeback.”

“Are you going to be his coach?” Phichit asked excitedly.

“Ah, n-no,” I said, embarrassed. “He asked me, but I don’t think I could do it. I’ve been out of the game too long. Sorry.”

Phichit’s face fell. “And here I was hoping to work with Yuuri again…”

“I—I’ll be around, though! I already promised to cheer him on. I’ll even come to practice sometimes, if he wants me there.”

Phichit brightened a little. “Okay. Text me his info, and we’ll get in touch a little later. I need to think about what sort of program we could do, and I need to make arrangements to come to Japan.”

I smiled at his eagerness to get started. “Alright. Thank you so much, Phichit-kun.”
“And Yuuri,” he said, leaning into the camera. “You and I have some catching up to do, okay? I’m not letting you off the hook this time. You’re going to tell me everything, alright?”

“O-okay,” I said apprehensively.

He straightened and beamed again. “Alright! Talk to you later.”

The call ended, and I sighed. I never expected to be doing anything like this, but somehow, I was excited. I hoped I wasn’t in over my head, though so far I’d only just promised to watch.

I skated a little for my own sake, just to warm up my body. I refused to do any jumps out of fear of looking pathetic, but I pulled out some tiny bits of choreography from my old programs for fun. I was aware of the other two watching me from time to time, but I did my best not to let it bother me, and lost myself to skating for the first time since my retirement.

Eventually I was the only one on the ice, and from a distance I could see Minami and Yuri talking. They had a cold distance between them, but they seemed to be speaking civilly, at least. I wondered what they were talking about. I skated closer, but whatever conversation they were having ended by the time I got over there.

“Yuuri-kun, it’s getting kind of late. Do you want to go get okonomiyaki with me?” Minami asked.

“Er, sure,” I said, with an apprehensive look at Yuri. “Do you—”

“I’m not going to impose on your date,” Yuri said, clearly annoyed at something. He stalked off to change out of his skates.

“What’s his problem, all of the sudden?” I muttered. Minami looked like he wanted to say something, but kept his mouth closed.

Minami gushed endlessly with ideas throughout dinner, talking about his career so far and what he thought it was missing. He really hadn’t changed at all, and thinking back to that program Yuri showed me, I couldn’t imagine why he’d chosen to do something so quiet and sentimental when clearly he had boundless energy just waiting to be unleashed. I hoped Phichit could come up with a program that capitalized on that energy.

I drank a little too much at dinner, but with Minami’s help I was able to stumble back to Yu-topia without much trouble. Afraid of making a fool of myself, I took myself up to my room and avoided people for the rest of the night.

Unfortunately, I was still drunk enough to search for the name of the one person I shouldn’t have been thinking about. Yuri said he hadn’t been seen or heard from since New Year’s, but I quickly learned that that was a lie. Photos as recent as March had been tagged with him, and he was clearly having fun in Moscow.

And he wasn’t alone in any of the photos.

I didn’t recognize the man’s face or name, but he and Viktor had their arms around each other in every photo. And Viktor was smiling—not the fake smile of promotional or commemorative photos, but the real smiles he used to give me. The smiles that said he was happy and fulfilled, and couldn’t ask for more out of life. I stared at those photos a long time, until I couldn’t handle the pain of what they meant anymore.

I always assumed Viktor would move on. I knew it in the back of my mind like a universal truth, but somehow, when presented with undeniable evidence, I couldn’t take it. I thought I should be happy
for him, but I was too selfish and too lonely to find any happiness to draw from. It wasn’t fair that he was happy all this time. I hated it.

It hurt. It hurt so deep that I shook violently, falling off my bed and onto the floor with sobs that racked my entire body. Hot tears poured down my face as I huddled into myself, wondering if the pain would ever stop. I had no idea if it was jealousy, or loss, or guilt, or loneliness that fueled me. All I knew was that it hurt.

I sat there a long time, crying until there were no tears left. The sobs wouldn’t end, though, and they eventually turned into painful hiccups. I wanted to die. If it would make the pain go away, I would have taken the option just then.

A beam of light hit my face, and I realized someone opened my door.

“Gross, you’ve been drinking.”

Yuri came into my room, turning on my desk lamp and shutting the door. He had his hair loose and wore a robe, like he’d just come from the bath.

“Yuri…” was all I could croak out.

“You saw the photos, didn’t you?” he asked, sliding down to the floor beside me. “Of Viktor.”

I nodded. “How long have you known?”

“New Years,” he said. “He wrote Yakov a long letter of thanks, and said he was finally ready to stay in one place again. He didn’t say who it was, but it was pretty clear he’d found someone. For a while I hoped he was just being coy, and he’d somehow managed to get back with you again, but we figured out pretty quick it was someone else.”

“Then why did you… You said you came here to search for him.”

“And I’m amazed that you bought it at first,” Yuri said, then sighed. “I was worried about you, okay? Everyone in Russia was always ‘Viktor this, Viktor that, I wonder what happened to Viktor?’ I felt like I was the only one who remembered that you existed, too, and were worth worrying about. I knew Viktor would be fine, eventually, even if he had to be dramatic about it for a while. But I had no idea about you. You were the one who lost everything.” He pulled his knee up to his chest, regarding me with sad eyes. “I came as soon as Worlds was over, and I’m glad I did. You clearly needed help.”

“I just…I don’t understand why I’m like this. I knew it was over years ago. Why does it hurt so much now?”

“You ask me as though I have any experience with relationships,” Yuri said. “But maybe it’s because you never properly grieved it. Maybe in the back of your mind, you always thought he would come back to you, someday, when things were different.”

“Maybe…” I said, my head not clear enough to tell one way or another if it made sense.

“I debated for a long time whether to tell you, or let you find out on your own,” he said. “I guess I waited too long to decide. I’m honestly surprised you hadn’t looked him up before now, but I guess you don’t use social media as much as I do.” He sighed. “You were doing so well today, too. Minami said you were going to support him this season.”

“I am,” I said, finally getting a hold of my voice. “He asked me to be his coach, but I didn’t think I
could do a good job of it.”

“You’d be a lousy coach,” Yuri agreed. “But your support is still worth something, especially to him. Don’t disappoint him.”

“I won’t,” I promised.

“Somehow, I believe you,” he said. “I never believed Viktor when he said he would do something for someone, but you, I think, will keep your promises.”

“I don’t think I could take it to let anyone else down,” I said. “But right now, I just…” I didn’t really know how to finish that sentence. The sharp pains had subsided into a dull ache, but everything still hurt too much to think.

Yuri shifted, moving to kneel in front of me. With trembling arms he pulled me against his chest, his hands warmly stroking my back. “You’ll be alright,” he said. “I know you. You’re strong. Stronger than whatever you’re feeling right now.”

Was this really happening? Was I getting a hug from Yuri Plisetsky? Once the shock faded, though, I realized how good it felt. I let him embrace me, and I let myself cling to him, because it was the first time I’d felt the warmth of someone’s touch in years. He smelled like the soap of the onsen, a scent I knew would always remind me of home. His body was strong and solid, surrounding me and holding me in a way I hadn’t been held in a long time.

“Go to bed, Yuuri,” he said softly, pulling away. His fingers pushed back my hair as he looked down at me with eyes gentler than I’d ever seen. “Get through tonight, and we’ll worry about tomorrow in the morning.”

I lowered my head, unable to deal with the strange feelings swirling in my chest. “Alright,” I managed to say. He stood and left without another word.

Somehow, I managed to fall asleep.
The next day Yuri dragged me out of bed with idle threats, and despite my pounding headache I succeeded in getting ready for our morning run. The cool air cleared my head, and I felt a little better by the time we made it to Ice Castle.

I hadn’t been drunk enough to forget about last night. I remembered the photos, and I remembered every word Yuri said. He came here because he worried about me. A part of me felt like I’d known it from the first day, but to hear him say it aloud really cemented the fact in my mind, and gave birth to new feelings I didn’t quite know how to describe.

It was a normal day at Ice Castle, but no customers had come in yet, so we had the rink to ourselves for a couple of hours that morning. I put on my skates and got on the ice, but couldn’t concentrate on myself at all. My eyes kept following him, especially when he would do that step sequence where his eyes always seemed to anchor on me. It was a beautiful dance, really, but I had no idea what it meant.

I did a few slightly more difficult jumps that day, just to see if I still could. When I didn’t land flat on my face after a double toe, I felt a small thrill of elation that quickly turned into shame when I realized I used to regularly land quads. As if to illustrate my point, Yuri sped by and landed a beautiful quad toe, smirking at me. I gave him a congratulatory smile, and drifted back to the sidelines.

Minami had gone back to his home rink that morning to talk things over with his coach, so my life now was simply waiting until Phichit arrived. As I watched Yuri complete his practice, I wondered how much longer he would stay. As selfish as it was, I didn’t want him to go back to Russia right away. I was enjoying watching him too much. His presence alone opened my life up in ways that I had forgotten were even possible, and I wanted to hold on to this odd, tentative friendship we were building.

It was strange to consider our relationship before. Viktor had always been there, monopolizing my thoughts and feelings, and I rarely considered anyone else. I saw Yuri as a friend, but a somewhat distant one that quickly turned into a rival during competitions. I knew from Viktor and Yakov that he regarded me with something like admiration, but it was rare that either of us actually acknowledged it. Most of the time he’d treated me with either contempt, apathy, or disappointment. I didn’t really think about him at all, except when he put himself right in front of me trying to get my attention.

But now… Now that I saw him clearly, I felt something different. My eyes couldn’t stop following him. I couldn’t stop thinking about how kind he was to me, and how much he worried. I always knew him to be beautiful and determined, but now I could see how much that defined him, how hard he strived to maintain that part of himself. He was one of the world’s top figure skaters, and he was here because of me.

Why did this suddenly feel so familiar?

In the days that followed, I noticed him watching me. I wondered if he worried that I was still depressed because of Viktor, but he never voiced what was on his mind. The truth was, it did still hurt to consider Viktor, but I was getting better at pushing him from my mind. It had been four years since I’d seen him, after all, and he had every right to happiness without me. I knew that if I’d managed to find my own happiness, I’d be happy for him, too.
But that was far simpler in words than in my heart.

Phichit made his arrangements, and soon enough he showed up at Yu-topia. He was just as I remembered, and his familiar cheeriness helped put me at ease.

“Yuuri, you’re looking better than I expected,” Phichit said by way of greeting.

“What do you mean?” I asked, leading him up to my room.

“I heard about Viktor,” he said, closing the door behind us. “I knew you two had broken up after your injury, but I also know that you’re not the type to move on easily from something like that. I figured you’d be heartbroken to know that he finally moved on.”

“I was,” I admitted. “But I’m okay.”

“I’m surprised to see Yuri Plisetsky here with you, too,” Phichit said, settling down on my bed. “What’s that about?”

“I don’t… really know,” I said, lying a little. I didn’t think Yuri would appreciate me telling other people that he worried about me. “He likes it here, I guess. The onsen, I mean. I think he wanted a break after last season.”

“Hmm.” Phichit sounded like he wasn’t buying it. “Something going on between you two?”

“Nothing,” I said firmly. “In fact, he’s probably going to go back to Russia soon.”

Phichit tilted his head, regarding me with a strange smile I didn’t like. I turned away from him, pretending something on my desk captured my attention.

“At any rate, I’m glad you called me. I was looking for something new to do this year.”

“How was your ice show?” I asked.

“It was fine,” he said with a sigh. “Not the resounding success I’d hoped for, but the children loved it, at least. I hoped to revitalize the competitive ice skating scene a little, and it might have helped, but the new children we got are all so young. It will take years to know whether or not they’ll stick with it. I have ideas for a new show, but it will take a while to get off the ground, so I’m glad I’ll have something to occupy me in the meantime.”

“Thank you again for considering Minami,” I said, sitting backwards in my desk chair and resting my chin on my arms. “I can’t help but feel a little responsible for his slump.”

“I watched some of his performances before I came here, and yeah, it was pretty clear he was trying his hardest to be the next Katsuki Yuuri. Didn’t work at all. He’s not you.”

“I know,” I said.

“But his earlier shows had a lot of character,” Phichit said. “I hope I can find a way to bring that out again. I talked it over with Ciao Ciao a bit, and he seemed to come to the same conclusion—he’s like a little fireball on the ice. He’d work best with speed, high energy, and big gestures to make up for his small stature.”

I couldn’t help but smile, imagining it. “I think that’s a good idea, too.”

“Be honest, though, Yuuri—how is his English? Will it be hard to communicate with him? Do I need to take some more Japanese lessons from you while I’m here?”
“It’s not the greatest,” I admitted. “I can give you lessons, or teach him more English. I feel the latter will probably be more useful overall, but if you’re going to stay here a while, you might want to know more Japanese to help you get around.”

“Mm, let’s see how it goes, and we can decide later.” He leaned forward, eyes intense. “Now tell me what happened to you after your injury. Spare no details.”

Reluctantly, I launched into the whole gruesome tale, including the many arguments Viktor and I had that led up to my leaving St. Petersburg for good. It was painful to dredge up the memories, but relieving, too, in a way. I hadn’t really talked about it with anyone before, and Phichit was easy to talk to. He remained completely on my side the entire time, and when I was done, I was relieved to still have his support. It had been a very real fear that he would think I’d been completely irrational.

Our conversations didn’t end after that. We talked all through dinner and a bath, and I even offered him my bed, choosing to sleep on the floor so we could keep talking until we fell asleep. Nothing we spoke of was all that important, but it seemed we both had a lot to say after not talking for over four years. I missed having a friend like him in my life, and I didn’t realize just how much until then.

He left the next morning to go meet Minami and his coach, and I promised to see them both soon, once they’d reached some more concrete decisions.

Yuri had left us alone for the entire duration of Phichit’s visit, and when I went to see him at Ice Castle that day, he seemed more distant than usual. I didn’t like it, though I couldn’t easily explain why. Yuri had always kept a certain distance from me, holding me at arms’ length for all but the rarest of moments, and today was no different. But I’d begun to believe that things might have started to change between us, that we were becoming closer somehow. That he might want me around him, the way I seemed to suddenly want to be around him.

I watched him practice for as long as he remained on the ice, not joining in this time. I remembered that my days of witnessing this were limited, and became determined to notice every detail I could. I still couldn’t figure out what sort of music he danced to, but I wasn’t sure I wanted to know before the season started. It would feel too much like cheating to find out now.

He ignored me as he slid off the ice and put on his skate guards, stalking out of the rink towards the benches to change his shoes. Undeterred, I caught up with him.

“Yuri—” He turned and glared, making me take a step back. “I was wondering if you wanted to go to dinner with me tonight. I—I know a place you probably haven’t been to yet. It’s pretty quiet—I don’t think anyone would bother you.” While I could easily pass as just a regular person, especially these days, Yuri stood out too much to really go anywhere in public without being noticed. He didn’t have as many overzealous fans here as Viktor once did, but people would still ask him who he was and randomly ask for photos. He’d grown kinder to his fans over the years, but I knew it still bothered him to be so noticed.

He raised an eyebrow, glancing up at me as he tied his shoes. “You want to go out with me?”

“Yeah, if you’re not too tired,” I said. “I wanted to talk to you.”

“Okay,” was all he said. He pulled his hair out of its tail, and gripped the elastic band in his teeth as he raked his fingers through the glossy blonde locks. He pulled it all back into a tighter, neater tail, and a part of me suddenly became overwhelmed with a desire to know if it felt as soft and smooth as it looked. I shook my head to clear it.

“What?” he asked with a glare.
“N-nothing,” I said lamely. “Ready to go?”

He didn’t say anything the whole way there, following one step behind me with his arms folded across his chest. It wasn’t cold, and he was wearing a jacket, so I could only take his body language to mean that he was uncomfortable or nervous.

Strange. I wasn’t usually so aware of other people’s moods or body language.

The ramen place we went to only had a few customers, none of whom regarded us with more than a glance as we entered. It had a long bar, but also a few tables by the walls, so I took one of those, hoping it would make conversation easier. We ordered, and waited.

It was a while before either of us said anything. “You said you wanted to talk,” Yuri reminded me in a low voice.

“Ye-yeah,” I said. “I wanted to ask when you were planning on going back to Russia.”

“You want me to go home that badly?” he asked. “You could have said something before now.”

“N-no,” I said hastily. “That’s not it at all. I just know you’ll have to go soon, and I didn’t want to wake up one day and find you suddenly gone. I wanted to… to have some time to… prepare myself.” I wanted to kick myself for how lame I sounded. I couldn’t look at him directly.

He let out a long sigh. “I don’t know. Yakov wanted me back last week, but he trusts me enough to practice on my own now, especially since I’m developing this program myself. But I do need to get back to my home rink soon. I need Lilia’s advice on some of my choreography.”

“I see,” I said, unable to completely hide how sad I felt. “Well, I understand. I know I can’t keep you here forever—you’re at the top of your career, and you shouldn’t put it at risk because of me. I was just… really glad to see you again. You helped me more than I could have imagined, and I don’t think I could ever thank you enough.”

His eyes widened, and his ears went a little red at the tips. “Yuuri, I—” He was interrupted by our server putting food in front of us. Even after the server left, though, he didn’t finish his sentence, instead focusing on his food. I wondered what he planned to say.

I was a bit too afraid to ask.

We didn’t say much for the rest of dinner, both of us spending too much time in our own heads. As we crossed the bridge on our way back to Yu-topia, though, Yuri began speaking again.

“I wanted to come here a long time ago,” Yuri said. “Not long after you left, I wanted to come find you again. I told Yakov you’d make a good coach, with the right training. I even got him to agree to advise you, if I could bring you back to St. Petersburg. I knew that, with Viktor gone, someone else would have to be your bridge into skating, and I thought that person could be me. But I never gathered the courage. I still felt like a child. I thought there would be no way that you’d come back just for me, because Viktor was the only reason we were in each other’s lives, and without him, there was no reason for you to be around me.” He clutched his arms, hugging himself. “Instead I just held out hope one of you would come to your senses and find the other. I thought that was the only way I could see you again.” He stopped walking, turning to look over the railing, the light from a streetlamp making him glow against the darkening sky. “But when Viktor moved on, I knew if I didn’t do anything myself, I would never see you again.”

“Why did you care so much about seeing me again?” I asked, leaning on the rail beside him.
“I always thought that you belonged to skating,” he said softly. “It was your outlet, your breath, your energy. Your life. When you left us, I knew you were throwing it all away because you couldn’t be with Viktor anymore. Viktor and skating were so intertwined with you, that when you gave up on one, I knew you would give up the other. And I hated that. You were so much more than just Viktor’s partner. You could stand on your own when you allowed yourself, but no one expected you to. I don’t think you expected yourself to. The only one besides me who seemed to want you to was Viktor, but he could never leave your side long enough for that to happen.” He lowered his eyes, swallowing nervously. “How do you think you would feel if—if when your career was just hitting its stride, the one skater you looked up to the most suffered a career-ending injury, and disappeared from the world?”

“I don’t know,” I said honestly. “Probably pretty devastated.”

“Well, let me be the one to tell you that it fucking sucks,” he said, his eyes taking on a glassy sheen. “Beka was there to help me through the worst of it, and I somehow managed to perform well, but I never felt the same about skating after you left.”

“But you’re one of the top skaters in the world,” I protested. “You hold all the records. You beat my Free Skate record just last year!”

“None of that matters if I don’t love skating as much as I used to,” he said. “Viktor was the same, if you remember—the absolute top of his game, scoring high and winning gold medals left and right. He wasn’t happy. He never was happy with his skating until he had you. I’m beginning to fear I might be the same way.”

A trembling breath escaped my lips. “What are you saying?”

He said something in Russian that was probably a swear. “I hate that you’re so dense. Viktor always complained that he had to spell things out to you if he wanted to be understood, and now I see he was telling the truth.” He turned towards me, eyes intense and sincere. “I’m saying I want you in my life. I’m saying I dragged you out of that hole you dug yourself for selfish reasons, because I want you to be a part of skating again. I know I can’t keep you to myself, but I at least want to know that you’re watching me again.”

“Yuri…” I couldn’t think of any appropriate words to say. Instead, I put my arms around him, pulling him against me in a tight hug.

His body stiffened. “What are you—”

“I already can’t take my eyes off of you, Yuri,” I said to him. “Watching you has made me remember why I loved skating. Even if you say you were selfish, I’m grateful you came to find me. I needed someone to kick me out of that life, and I’m glad it was you.” I turned my head just a little, brushing my lips against his cheek in a slight kiss. I’d spent enough time in Russia to know that it was a gesture of fondness and familiarity. “I’ll watch you for as long as you continue skating. You can count on it.”

He let out a sound that might have been a sob, and pushed away from me. He wiped at the corner of his eyes, opened his mouth like he might say something, but instead turned and ran away towards the onsen.
Yuuri

After locking himself in his room all night, Yuri seemed to be back to normal the next morning. Our morning run never had much talking, and he lost himself in practice while I skated idly by myself for a while, then stood by to watch him.

“You seem unusually happy today,” Nishigori said, coming up and slapping me on the back.

“Eh? I do?”

He grinned. “Did something good happen?”

“Not particularly,” I said, my eyes drifting back onto the ice. “I’m just glad to be back, I guess.”

“Yuuko told me you were going to support Minami Kenjiro this year,” he said. “He could use someone like you behind him. I want Japan to get back up to the top again.”

I didn’t care so much about that, but I did want Minami-kun to succeed, if only for his own self-worth. “We’ll do our best,” I said.

“It’s a shame that Yurio is the one to beat. He’s a monster on the ice. Even watching him practice like this, you can tell he’s the best of the best.”

“Yeah,” I agreed.

“He certainly draws a crowd, too. We’ve had three times the customers since he’s showed up—hasn’t been this busy since Viktor came to visit that first time. Speaking of, have you heard from him at all?”

That dull ache settled over me again. “I haven’t.”

“Ah—sorry. I assumed you two parted on good terms.” He rubbed his head awkwardly. “Well, I need to get back to work. See you around, Katsuki.”

I sighed, slumping against the wall of the rink. Was this what I was going to be like, now? The moment someone mentioned Viktor, my mood would fall? I didn’t even know what exactly made me sad, anymore. I couldn’t remember what it felt like to be with him. I just knew I felt hollow when I thought about him, as if an important piece of me were missing.

Yuri skated over to where I was, grabbing for his water bottle. “What happened to you, katsudon?”

“Nothing,” I said dully. It was the most he’d said to me all day.

He took his water bottle and pressed the bottom of it against the top of my head playfully. “I’m cutting practice short,” he said. “We’re going to a park or something.”

“What? Why?”

“I want to take some good pictures of the cherry blossoms. I missed them the last time I was here, and I don’t want them to disappear before I get a chance.”

“O-okay,” I said. They had been in full bloom for a few days. I didn’t think Yuri cared that much. First, though, we returned to the onsen. Yuri wanted a bath, and I changed into clothes that didn’t
have my morning sweat on them.

“You’re going to look at cherry blossoms?” Mom seemed strangely excited when I told her what we were planning. “Let me pack you some snacks.”

“Oh, d-don’t go through the trouble, it’s not a big deal,” I protested weakly. But she packed us a lunch, anyway, and handed us a stacked bento as we went out the door.

Yuri had dressed in his iconic style, with the same sort of animal prints he wore as a teenager. Most skaters I knew went through several different styles throughout their career, but not Yuri. Some things never changed, it seemed, and honestly, I couldn’t imagine him dressing in any other way. He embraced his style, and it suited him.

Hasetsu wasn’t really known for cherry blossom viewings, but I remembered a park from my childhood that I decided to take Yuri to. There weren’t many people around, and Yuri trekked around the grass to get the best photos while I found a place to settle for lunch. I spread out the blanket my mother had given us, and began setting out the food as he finished his selfie spree.

“I can take some pictures of you, if you want,” I offered, watching him struggle to get a good angle. He looked at me and hesitated, but finally nodded. “If you navigate away from the camera, I’ll kill you,” he threatened as he handed me his phone.

“Yes, yes,” I said.

“And make sure to get the cherry blossoms in there, too, or else it’s useless.”

“Okay,” I said, and squatted down to get a lower angle. “Like this?”

“Yeah, that’s good.” He posed, and I snapped a few photos. He was clearly used to being in front of a camera, because he knew just how to make his face look natural, a skill I was never great at.

“Get one over here, in the light,” he said, pointing to another spot. I moved with him, and squatted down again.

When he tilted his head, the sunlight hit him in such a way that it gave his whole head a golden halo, illuminating his soft, shiny hair while the cherry blossoms danced above him. “Wait, hold still,” I said to him. I snapped a few candid photos of him looking surprised. He was dressed like a delinquent, but for just a moment he looked like an angel. Even after I took the photos I continued to stare at him, a little entranced by his beauty.

This was bad. Even off the ice, I couldn’t look away from him.

“That’s enough,” he said, snatching his phone away. I snapped out of my reverie and turned back to the food.

“I can’t believe she put a katsudon in a bento,” I said. The components were separate, and the egg was fried, but it was still unmistakably a katsudon bento.

“Why not? It’s good.” Yuri dug in to his, using the fork she’d given him, even though I knew he was perfectly capable of using chopsticks now.

It still surprised me that katsudon was one of Yuri’s favorites, like mine. I’d been lucky enough to experience amazing food from all over the world, and yet nothing tasted quite as good to me as my mother’s katsudon, and I knew it was at least partially because it reminded me of home. But what did
katsudon taste like to Yuri?

After he’d finished eating, Yuri laid back on the blanket and went through his photos, no doubt trying to decide which ones were worth keeping. He didn’t say much, but I didn’t mind, as it was easy to just relax and enjoy the cool breeze underneath the cherry trees. When I looked over at him after a moment, I saw his phone had been lowered to his chest, and his eyes were closed. A stronger wind wound through the trees, creating a shower of petals that decorated our blanket. One of them landed in the hair on Yuri’s forehead, and it was clear he was too asleep to notice.

Feeling inspired, I took out my own phone and stole a photo of the sleeping Yuri. Somehow I knew quiet, relaxed moments like this would be rare, and I wanted to cherish them in any way I could. Something told me whatever was between us was as fragile and temporary as the blossoms we sat under.

And sure enough, the next day, Yuri told me he was returning to St. Petersburg.

“I’ve practiced all I can on my own,” he told me after training. “I have to go back and complete my program. I bought my ticket already, and I fly back tomorrow morning.”

“I see,” I said, really not sure what else to say.

He stopped walking, and turned to me. “Before I go, I need a promise from you.”

“I promise I’ll keep watching you,” I said automatically.

He shook his head. “Not that. Keep that promise too, but I need something else.” He leaned forward and put his arms around me. “Promise me you won’t disappear again. Promise me that, if you start to feel like you’re alone, you’ll call me.”

I closed my eyes, returning his embrace. “Can I call you even if I’m not feeling like I’m alone?”

He laughed a little. “Alright. But not too often. I’ll block you otherwise.”

“Can I ask a favor in return for the promise?”

He pulled away, regarding me with a curious expression. “What sort of favor?”

“I want that photo I took of you yesterday. The one with the cherry blossoms. You never posted it online, so I never got to save it.”

“You…want my photo?” he asked, pulling out his phone with a frown. “Why?”

“Because I like it.” I said simply, pointing out the one in question. Wordlessly, he pulled it up and sent it to me via text, his cheeks going pink as he did so.

“Seems a dumb thing to ask for,” he muttered, shoving his phone back in his pocket. He started walking again, and I fell in step beside him.

“It won’t be long before I see you again, right?” I asked.

“That’s up to you,” he said. “I can’t travel around on a whim anymore. We’d definitely meet if Minami and I get assigned to the same Cup, but you know that might not happen.”

“In that case, I’ll make it a point to come to one of yours,” I said.

“Don’t abandon your skater,” he said sternly. “If I find out you’ve hurt his motivation because of me,
I’ll never forgive you. Just watch me. If you’re not there in person, do something to let me know you’re watching. That would be enough.”

“I can do that,” I said. I wanted to ask why it was so important, but I stopped myself. Something told me I wouldn’t have the answer until I saw it for myself.

He left early the next day—so early he was gone before I woke up for my morning run. Even knowing he would probably leave without saying goodbye, I still felt empty realizing that he was really gone. I couldn’t even go into Ice Castle that day, because I knew it would be too lonely if I couldn’t watch him.

Thinking on his words, I decided to send him a text.

Yuuri: Goodbye Yuri. I hope you have a good flight.

His reply came faster than expected. He must not have been on the plane yet.

Yuri: We’ll meet again soon. Go help Minami.

Taking his words to heart, I did just that.

Rather than travel back and forth intermittently, I moved in with Phichit at the place he rented near Minami’s home rink. It seemed they’d cemented their partnership, and he was planning on staying for the entire season. The apartment we shared was about as small as the room we used to share in Detroit, only with a kitchen and bathroom attached. It was lucky that we knew how to get along so well, because there wasn’t much personal space to speak of.

On the rink, Minami was as enthusiastic as ever. Despite their limited communication, he and Phichit managed to establish a theme for the short program before I arrived, selecting the music and developing some basic choreography. It was clear that I came at the right time, though, as they were just beginning to find some errors in communication.

“So you… you want me to…” Minami waved his arms. “Like this?”

“No no, I’m talking about gestures,” Phichit said. “You need to make it bigger. Reach out farther.” He stretched his arm out to illustrate.

Minami mimicked him. “Like this? For that part?”

“No, I meant—” Phichit pinched the bridge of his nose, easing a headache. I’d never seen him look so close to frustration before.

I hesitantly walked up to them. “What’s going on?” I asked Phichit.

“I’m trying to explain to him that I want his gestures to be bigger in general, but he’s thinking that I mean only this specific part,” Phichit said. “He needs to make them wider, so that everyone can see exactly what he’s doing. No subtlety or ambiguity.”

I translated the best I could to Minami, who finally smiled. “Oh, that’s all? Got it.” He pushed off the wall and go back to practice.

His coach, Odagaki Kanako—who spoke about as much English as Minami—seemed content with deferring the choreography to Phichit, while she focused on the jumps and other technicals. She wasn’t as bold as Minami with trying out her English, so I quickly became the go-between when she wanted to communicate something to Phichit or vice-versa. I hadn’t expected translation to be my
primary job when I told Minami I would support him, but I wasn’t regretting it. My English had
grown a little rusty in the four years I didn’t use it, so with Yuri gone, I was glad to practice it
regularly with Phichit.

“Is everything okay, Yuuri?” Phichit asked me one night in late May. We’d been living together for
about a month at that point, and Minami’s program was coming along steadily, despite a few small
snags in his dancing skills.

“Yeah, everything’s fine,” I said. “Why do you ask?”

“Because you never really say anything,” Phichit said, settling on the floor with me. “You’ve always
been a master of hiding all your ugly emotions, so I want to be sure. Do you think Minami’s
progressing well?”

“Yeah,” I answered without really thinking.

“Well, I don’t,” Phichit said bluntly. “And if you were paying half the attention to him that you
should be, you’d know it, too.”

His sternness caught me off guard. “Eh? But I—what do you mean? I pay attention.”

“You don’t,” he said accusingly. “You’re not watching him. You’re seeing that he’s doing the work,
and you’re thinking about something else. Or someone else. You only talk to him when I have
something to say that he’s not understanding, and even then, you do it half-heartedly. You’re not
entirely in this, Yuuri, and I’m starting to wonder if you’re hurting more than you’re helping.”

I couldn’t understand what I was hearing. “What? What are you talking about?”

He jabbed me in the forehead with his finger. “You’re failing at your job, Yuuri. You’re supposed to
be supporting him. He didn’t ask you to be his translator.”

“No, he asked me to be his coach, which I turned down,” I pointed out. “I only offered to support
him because it was the best I could do.”

“Well if this is the best you can do, you might as well just be a boring old translator,” he said, sitting
back and folding his arms. “He’s looking at you for guidance. He needs to know that you think he
can win with what he’s doing, and right now, he doesn’t have that. He’s listening, and he’s going
through the motions, but it’s clear he doesn’t believe he’s getting any better than he was last season.
He’s not motivated, because he’s waiting for your input. So give some.”

“I—I don’t know what sort of input to give,” I admitted.

“Because you’re not watching him. If you were paying attention, you’d see what he was doing
wrong, and you’d know what he needs to focus on going forward. Kanako and I are doing our best,
but there’s only so much we can say that gets through to him. You, on the other hand, occupy a
special position where I’m positive he would take anything you say to heart.” He tilted his head,
scrutinizing me. “What I really want to know, though, is what’s been occupying your mind so much,
these past few weeks. You don’t seem depressed, so I wouldn’t guess that you’re still hung up on
Viktor…”

“I’m not,” I said honestly.

“But I feel like I’m getting closer,” Phichit said, leaning so close my eyes couldn’t easily focus on
him. “Tell me, Yuuri. What’s been on your mind? What has you, who cares so little for social media,
looking down at your phone at all times of day?”
I froze. How had he noticed? I didn’t even check it all that much. “I—it—it’s nothing out of the ordinary, really.”

“Do you really expect me to believe you? I know you, Yuuri. Even at the height of your career, you hardly touched your phone. You’re one of the very few I know who actually turned your phone off. But now I see you scrolling through photos and text like you’re looking for something. You’re not posting anything—I would have noticed. You’re also not sending messages. So what is it?”

“I—I” I couldn’t find the right way to answer, because I wasn’t sure I knew myself. What was I searching for, exactly?

“Let me see your phone,” Phichit said suddenly, reaching for it.

“No!” I snatched it off the floor, holding it close.

“Why not? What are you afraid of me seeing?”

“Nothing!” I said. “How would you feel if I went through your phone?”

He reached into his own pocket and pulled it out, unlocking it and offering it to me. “I’d let you. Unlike you, I don’t have anything to hide.” When I didn’t take it, he sighed and put it back in his pocket. “Yuuri, you’re worrying me. You’ve worried me ever since you retired, and I just want to be sure you’re not hurting. I’m afraid you’re going to disappear on us again if I don’t keep a close watch on you.”

“I won’t disappear,” I said. I took a deep breath, unlocked my phone, and handed it to him. “I don’t know what you’re looking for.”

I watched as Phichit seemed to go through everything—no doubt checking all of my accounts and going through my texts and photos. Though I was fairly sure that the source of my distraction wasn’t obvious, I still watched him nervous, afraid of what he might think.

Phichit slumped resignedly as he handed back my phone. “You’re so boring, Yuuri.”

I relaxed, relieved he didn’t find anything. He fell onto his back on the floor, looking up at me with that same worried expression. “So do you want to tell me why you’ve watched Yuri Plisetsky’s performances dozens of times each, or should I draw my own conclusions there?”

I seized up, feeling my ears grow hot. “I—I was just looking for inspiration for Minami’s program. Sizing up the competition, that’s all.”

“I won’t disappear,” I said. I took a deep breath, unlocked my phone, and handed it to him. “I don’t know what you’re looking for.”

Phichit poked me in the thigh, emphasizing each word with another poke. “You. Like. Him. I wondered ever since I saw him at your parents’ place. Judging by your lack of messages, I presume he either doesn’t know, or rejected you, though I’m leaning towards the former since he still replied to your last message.” He sat up, a concerned frown on his face. “Are you alright, Yuuri? You’re not hurting about this, are you?”

I felt violated, to the point where I wanted to run out the door and not look back. Intense embarrassment clouded my mind, making it hard to think, but more so I felt angry at having something I held as a deep secret spoken about so casually. “I need to go,” I said, and stood up.
“Wait,” Phichit pleaded, grabbing me by the arm. “Talk to me about this, Yuuri. Please. Don’t keep it all inside.”

“Fine,” I said coldly, shaking off his hand. “You want to know the truth? The truth is I can’t get him out of my head. When he visited me in Hasetsu I couldn’t keep my eyes off of him, and now I find myself thinking about him all hours of the day. He probably knows about it, to some extent, but if he doesn’t, he’s better off never knowing.”

Phichit’s mouth hung open, his eyes wide as I confessed my heart. “Is this… just an admiration thing? Is this like you were with Viktor, before he was your coach?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I don’t know what it is. He was the one who came to find me in Kumamoto, to get me to come back home. He said he was worried about me. He made me watch him practice every day he was there, and he kept doing this bit of choreography that caught my attention. I couldn’t forget it. After he left, I kept watching his old videos, because nothing made me remember the joy of skating as much as watching him perform.” I fell to my knees and buried my face in my hands, afraid these unnamed emotions might spill out of me. “I hate being like this. I hate feeling obsessed. It’s like I’m a child with no self-control, but I can’t stop.”

“Yuuri…” Phichit came over and put his arm around my shoulders. “Yuuri, you poor, poor idiot.” He was laughing at me as he rubbed my back. I didn’t understand why. Was I really so pathetic that even Phichit, who I considered my best friend, would laugh at me?

I pulled away from him. “Just leave me alone. I’m going for a run.”

“No, you’re not,” Phichit said, still laughing as he pulled me back. “Yuuri, he likes you. I was wondering why he kept staring daggers at me while I visited you, but now it all makes sense.”

“What?”

“I can’t claim to know exactly what he’s thinking, but it’s clear to me he likes you. Did he say anything to you, when he went back to Russia?”

“He just—he told me to watch him, when he skates. I said I would go see him at a competition, but he wants me to support Minami. He just wants me to let him know that I’m watching somehow.”

Phichit just laughed harder, and I was starting to get annoyed.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said, reading my expression. “But Yuuri, it couldn’t be any clearer he likes you, in some capacity. Maybe like you he has trouble understanding or expressing it, but you don’t just fly to Japan on a whim to help someone you don’t care about. You told me his Japanese was better, too, and I would bet anything he kept up his lessons because of you. And that last part… Do you remember when Viktor first became your coach, and you couldn’t skate Eros without him watching you?”

It was so long ago, but of course I remembered. “But Yuri wouldn’t… He’s one of the top skaters in the world. He doesn’t need me watching him to perform well.”

“You were one of the top skaters, too, and you didn’t need Viktor to skate well. But he made you better. Yuri wouldn’t ask you to watch him if he didn’t get something out of it, and I get the feeling he’s wanting to skate for you.”

I couldn’t believe it. There was no way he could want to skate for someone like me. There had to be another reason.
“You’re doubting yourself,” Phichit said. “Stop it. You told me yourself that Yuri looked up to you when he was younger.”

“But that was then,” I protested. “I’m nothing now.”

“He clearly doesn’t think so,” Phichit said, squeezing my shoulders. “And no one else does, either. Not me, and especially not Minami.”

I shook my head. “I don’t deserve any praise for the way I’ve been acting. You were right about all of it. I’m not paying enough attention to Minami, because I’ve been too obsessed with Yuri.”

“You’re right, you don’t deserve praise for the way you’ve been acting,” Phichit said. “But I’m not going to let you use that as an excuse to put yourself down. What you need to do now is recognize your feelings for what they are, and do something about them.”

“What do I even do?” I asked. I still wasn’t convinced any of my feelings were returned, but I could agree that I needed to move on from whatever this was.

“I don’t think I can answer that for you,” Phichit said, finally pulling away. “But I think the best thing to do right now is just listen to him. Support Minami, and watch Yuri when the time comes. And, most importantly, be honest with me. I can’t help you through this if you keep trying to hide everything you’re feeling out of shame.”

Resigned, I nodded. “Alright. Thank you, Phichit-kun.”

He smiled and patted my head. “It’s my duty as your best friend to see you happy. I supported you with Viktor, and I’ll support you with this, too. If he makes you happy, I’ll do everything I can to help you.”

I felt my cheeks flush at the thought of Yuri making me happy. I hadn’t really thought about it in those terms, but I knew simply watching him filled me with a warmth I couldn’t easily describe—a warmth I hadn’t felt in the years since I’d ended it with Viktor. Which only told me that I was in deeper than I should be.

But maybe it wasn’t the worst thing.
I had to admit, talking with Phichit helped me more than I expected. Once I’d shared that particular secret with him, I became more aware of the effect I was having on others, and tried to remedy some of the problems I’d caused.

The first thing I did when we got to the rink the next day was put on my skates. So far I’d avoided skating in front of Minami out of embarrassment, but my need to focus outweighed my shame. Today I watched Minami not just from the sidelines, but from all angles, as Phichit went through the choreography of his short program. Phichit was right—as soon as I started paying attention, I began to see the parts where Minami was struggling, and no amount of encouraging words or explanations would fix it. There was some sort of disconnect between his mind and his body as he moved—when Phichit told him to embolden his gestures, Minami mimicked him perfectly, right up until he put the whole sequence together. He moved so quickly that he lost the impact, and everything ran together in a messy blur.

By the end of the session, I had a feeling I knew how to fix it, so I brought them all together for a proposal.

“I have an idea,” I told them. I ran the idea by Phichit separately first, so I spoke to Kanako and Minami in Japanese. “I want to kidnap Minami for about a week.”

“K-kidnap?” Minami asked, his voice trembling.

I nodded. “You need some extra practice off the ice for a while. Don’t worry,” I added to Kanako, “we’ll get some skate practice in, too. But I want to take him back to Hasetsu for a few extra lessons I think might help.”

“Is Phichit coming too?” Minami asked.

I looked over at Phichit, who shook his head. “It’ll just be us,” I said. “Is that okay?”

I couldn’t tell if he wanted to cry or hug me, but he managed to hold back on both accounts. “Of course that’s okay! When should we leave? Today?”

“Er—I guess we could go back today,” I said with a wary glance at Kanako, who nodded.

“I’ll go pack my bags and meet you at the station!” Minami said, rushing off so excitedly that he forgot to put his guards on his skates. Kanako rushed after him, scolding him loudly.

“Will you be alright by yourself?” Phichit asked me once they were out of earshot.

“I’ll be fine,” I said, more confidently than I felt. “I just hope it helps.”

We got back to Yu-topia late that evening, though I’d at least had the thought to send an email to my sister before we left, so she could prepare a room for Minami. The next day I contacted Minako-sensei, and asked to use her ballet studio.

Minami’s major problem was that, though he could learn and retain all of the choreography Phichit taught him, his body was having trouble making it impactful and dramatic. I knew this problem from my earlier years, when Minako-sensei would drill into me the importance of doing every move like you meant it. The easiest way to solve the problem was to make yourself more aware of your body and the way it looked in movement, so I borrowed the ballet studio to do just that.
“When you’re mirroring Phichit, you get things mostly right,” I told Minami. “But you get too distracted while you’re skating. I used to do it, too.” I didn’t mention that I hadn’t had that problem since my junior years, but Minami didn’t have the privilege of growing up with a world class dancer as a family friend like I did. “Don’t let this room fool you—we’re not trying for ballet here. While you want to be graceful, you’re going to be stomping and thrusting and flinging yourself around the ice.”

Minami, for his part, was a good student. He seemed a bit more relaxed when it came to listening to instructions from me than from Phichit, and once we got past the initial awkwardness of being alone in a ballet studio, he seemed to fall into practice without any trouble. I’d never had to teach anyone so closely before, but despite my four years of absence, I found it surprisingly easy to get back into the feel of dancing and skating. I remembered more than I’d forgotten, at least, which was a blessing.

Once I felt he’d become more aware of body movements, we switched to the ice rink, where things were a little different. Dancing on the ice required a different sort of balance and awareness, and Minami struggled accordingly to apply what he learned in the studio to what he was doing on skates. But by the middle of the week, it was clear my instructions were helping, and I was even able to recruit Minako-sensei to give a few lessons to fill in the gaps that I’d missed.

On the last night in Hasetsu, Minami joined me for an after-dinner bath in the onsen.

“Yuuri-kun, I—I wanted to thank you for all your help. I know I’m not doing all that well, but you’ve made me feel a little better about this season, at least.” For all that he was too embarrassed to look at me naked for longer than a glance, he seemed intent on having a private conversation while we soaked in the water.

“I’m sorry it took this long for me to really get into it,” I said.

“No, no, don’t worry about it! I never even expected you to come to all my practices—I thought you might just visit sometimes, or send me encouraging emails.”

It hurt a little, knowing his expectations for me were so low, but I supposed I hadn’t really set any precedent for support.

“Um… can I ask a personal question? Could you talk about what happened with you and Viktor?”

I should have expected this at some point, but I was still so caught off-guard that I didn’t really know what to say.

“You—you don’t have to,” he said hastily, when I didn’t answer right away. “I just—no one really knew what happened to you two. Was it all because of your injury?”

“Maybe,” I said, sighing. It got a little easier to talk about it each time, and I supposed it couldn’t hurt to share it with Minami as well. “We probably would have stayed together longer if my career hadn’t ended so suddenly. But the problems were already there, and harder to solve than we both realized. It’s been pointed out to me that we were both too selfish to give each other what we needed, so maybe it was only a matter of time.”

“Was it too much conflict?” Minami asked.

“Mmm, more like we weren’t communicating well.”

“Like a language barrier?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “Though maybe it was a language barrier, in an abstract sort of way. When I
broke my ankle, I was really upset. Everything made me angry, and when that anger upset the people around me, I felt guilty. That guilt made me push away the people who would otherwise support me, because I didn’t want to hurt them any more than I already had. Viktor pushed through, trying to cheer me up, but he did it in ways that were more annoying and upsetting than helpful. I didn’t appreciate his efforts, and my lack of appreciation upset him. He couldn’t perform well any more, and one night he came home late from drinking alone and blamed everything on me. I don’t think he sincerely meant everything he said, but I knew, deep in his heart, that at least a small part of him believed it to be true. I made the decision to leave soon after. We were continuously wounding each other, and I couldn’t see a clear path out of it. We haven’t spoken since then.”

“Wow…” Minami looked sincerely sad, and I gave him a reassuring smile.

“It’s okay. He’s moved on and happy now, and I’m… getting there, I guess.”

“Is there anyone you’ve liked since then?” he asked, intensely curious.

“I—maybe,” I admitted.

He leaned forward. “Do they know? Did you tell them?”

“I don’t think they know,” I said, lowering my eyes as I thought of him. “I didn’t tell them, but it’s possible my feelings were obvious in another way. I won’t see them again for a while.”

“You have to go for it, Yuuri-kun!” Minami said fiercely. “I’m sure whoever it is would be really happy to know how you felt about them.”

“I just worry about how I’ll react if my feelings aren’t returned,” I admitted. “It’s selfish to think that way, but I don’t know how I would take a broken heart.”

“It’s not worth it to keep it all inside,” Minami said. “You’ll always wonder ‘what if,’ and then eventually, it will be too late. I—I waited too long with my childhood friend. I wanted to confess to her after I got to the Grand Prix Final, but that didn’t happen, and now she’s engaged. Coach Kanako said when that happens, it’s not meant to be, but I still wonder if she would have returned my feelings if I’d only told her the truth.” He sighed. “Don’t do what I did, Yuuri-kun. When you see them again, let them know how you feel.”

“Even if they reject me fully and I get depressed again?” I asked, half-jokingly. “What if I lose my enthusiasm, and can’t support you anymore?”

He gave me a dumbfounded look. “What kind of monster do you think I am that I wouldn’t understand that? As it stands, you don’t owe me anything—you’re going well beyond what I expected, and I’m incredibly grateful for everything you’ve done for me. But even if you’d signed on as my coach, I would have said the same thing. You have to let yourself love, even if it leads to hurt, because then you can heal and love again even stronger the next time.”

I smiled, and pressed my knuckle into Minami’s head. “When did you get so smart?”

He ducked away and grinned at me.

I spent a long time awake in bed that night, pondering Minami’s words. Should I tell Yuri how I felt about him? Deciding that would mean figuring out the extent of my feelings for him. What did I want from this? What exactly did I want to convey? With Viktor our relationship was always like a dance, a push and pull of leading and following where nothing was direct. We were prone to falling, but when we moved together it was perfect. With Yuri, I knew we couldn’t do that dance. It didn’t strike me as his style, and I wasn’t sure I had it in me to endure something so volatile again. I wasn’t
about to delude myself into thinking anything between us would be simple, but at least I could hope for something more straightforward.

But how would I even tell him? What would I say? He was still Yuri Plisetsky, arguably the best competitive skater in the world. I didn’t have any right to ask for more from him. Did I?
Assignments came in, and I couldn’t stop staring at the lists.

Minami’s first competition was Skate America, the first in the series. He’d be competing against Guang Hong Ji, Otabek Altin, and plenty of younger skaters I didn’t recognize. His second competition was the Rostelecom Cup, where he’d be competing with Otabek again, and skaters like Leo de la Iglesia, Jean-Jacques Leroy, and Seung-il Lee.

And Yuri Plisetsky.

Yuri would also go on to also participate in the NHK Trophy, which I filed away for later as a possible excuse to see him again if things went well in Russia. Even seeing his name written on the lists made my heart pound, and I had to force myself away whenever I caught myself looking at it again.

“You keep checking the lists like they’re going to change,” Phichit commented one night as we were getting ready for bed. “Why does it bother you so much?”

“It doesn’t bother me, exactly,” I said, powering my phone all the way off so I wouldn’t be tempted to look again. “I’m just nervous. I feel like I have to keep reminding myself that it’s actually happening.”

“Or you’ll what, forget about it?” Phichit teased. “You should text him. Say something like, ‘See you in Russia!’ or ‘It’ll be good to see you in November!’ I bet it would make him happy.”

I sighed. “I’m not going to text him. He’d probably just tell me to shut up and focus on Minami. Which I should be doing, anyway.”

“And you have been, right up until assignments were announced,” Phichit said, crawling into his futon. He turned to face me. “It’s alright, Yuuri. Minami’s doing great because of you. You can afford to be a little obsessed right now, but don’t drop the ball when competitions start.”

“I won’t,” I promised.

He smiled. “It’s cute the way you’re acting like a teenager over this, though.”

I flushed and covered my face. “I’m terrible at this.”

“I think it’s good for you,” Phichit said. “It was so hard for me to watch your confidence get completely shattered after that injury—and then to hear that you’d all but disappeared from the skating world to live some boring life on your own? I’ve known you long enough to know that that’s not any sort of life for you. Yuri’s giving you life again, and I think that’s a wonderful thing. You should hold onto it.”

I hoped he was right, because I didn’t think I could let go of this feeling.

We had an appointment for costume fittings the next day, and I couldn’t help but remember my own fittings with Viktor. They were some of my strongest memories, because Viktor always chose my costumes with immense care, making sure I looked my absolute best when I tried them on so he could see the complete effect. He would argue with the designers if he thought something didn’t look right, and while I hated that he made such a fuss over it, I couldn’t help but feel treasured and looked after.
The memories didn’t make me sad, exactly, but I felt a little distant as I watched Phichit and Kanako discuss the details of Minami’s colorful costumes. His first one was a suit with a bright red jacket, tiny silver crystals cascading down the fabric and gathering at the cuffs of his jacket and pants, giving it a sort of frosty look. Phichit wasn’t satisfied with the tailoring of it, and Minami whined that he’d have to come back for another fitting later.

The second outfit was a little more elaborate, featuring an orange and yellow sequined vest that hurt my eyes to look at up close. On the ice, though, I knew it would create just the image Phichit was looking for. It was paired with a cream-colored shirt and matching pants, a pattern of red flames circling around his legs. His theme this year was “Setting the World Ablaze,” something he and Phichit came up with together, and both costumes emphasized that theme well.

Minami worked tirelessly through the remaining months until his competitions, and I saw his programs come together in a way that both amazed me and made me nostalgic for my own career. Phichit, despite only ever developing his own programs before, put together choreography that was both impactful and elegant and perfectly suited to the image I’d always had of Minami. His coach, Kanako, was brilliant with helping him practice his difficult jumps. Aside from the occasional translation request, I ended up feeling pretty superfluous by the time October came around.

The day before we flew out to Detroit, Minami had several interviews that I accompanied him to, which turned out to be a mistake. They kept asking what I was doing there, was I one of his coaches, was I returning to the skating world? My answer was always the same—that I was just there to support Minami. But as I looked at the news articles while waiting for our flight, most of the articles were about my return. It drained me to hear accounts of my retirement written over and over in simplified lists of facts. Katsuki Yuuri retired after an injury left him unable to compete. Katsuki Yuuri broke off his relationship with Viktor Nikiforov. Katsuki Yuuri hasn’t been seen in four years. Katsuki Yuuri is seen supporting Minami Kenjiro, is he going to become a coach?

“Don’t let it get to you, Yuuri,” Phichit told me after we’d gotten on the plane and I couldn’t stop reading my phone. “None of it matters. Think about the people we’ll get to see again. Ciao Ciao will be there, and Guang Hong. I’d bet I could even track down some of our old friends and meet up with them, if you’re interested.”

I made a noncommittal noise and turned off my phone with a sigh. I didn’t want to think about meeting people right now.

As we were landing, I realized that I hadn’t really missed Detroit at all. Nothing about it felt all that familiar to me, even though I’d spent years training here with Phichit. This was Minami’s first time in America, though, so he was bursting with excitement as we left the airport. Phichit soaked up all that enthusiasm and started listing all the places we could visit while we were here, while I faded back and daydreamed about sleeping off my jetlag.

Absurdly early the next morning—I’d fallen asleep at 9:30pm and I couldn’t sleep any more—I went out for a brief run, a little too apprehensive to put in the full time I normally did. When I returned to the hotel, I ran into Otabek Altin in the lobby. He didn’t approach, but kept staring, like he might’ve wanted to say something to me. I really wanted to ignore him and go back to my room to shower, but I remembered he was Yuri’s best friend, and curiosity got the best of me.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you,” I said to him. While he’d visited Yuri a few times during our training in Russia, we had never really spoken before.

“Yeah,” he said simply.

Silence lingered, and I scrambled to think of something else to say. “C-congrats on your marriage.”
turned to leave, but a heavy hand fell on my shoulder, stopping me.

“Thank you. You and I need to talk.”

His English was heavily accented, but I’d spent enough time around Russians to understand him. The accents were fairly similar. “Talk? About what?”

“About Yuri. Plisetsky,” he clarified, even though I knew he wasn’t referring to me.

“What about him?”

He glanced around at the crowd of people, some of whom were clearly members of the press. “Not here. Come to my room.”

I nervously followed him to the elevators, wondering what he could possibly want to say. His room was on the 8th floor, like ours, and I prayed that Minami and Phichit slept late enough to not catch me going into Otabek’s hotel room.

“Do you talk to him at all?” Otabek asked, dropping his bags in a corner.

“Not really,” I admitted. “Not since he came to visit me in Hasetsu.”

“He visited you?” Otabek asked, his normal frown deepening slightly. “When?”

“Back in April.”

“Back in April?”

“I see. Was he… Out of the ordinary?”

I blinked. “I’m not sure. I hadn’t seen him in four years. He wasn’t exactly as I remembered him, but I assumed, like everyone else, he’d just grown up a little.”

Otabek sat heavily on his bed, resting his arms on his thighs with a sigh. “He didn’t come to my wedding. I’d known it was a possibility ever since I told him I was engaged, but I thought I could earn his approval before we got married. He never responded to my invitation, and now I know that he was in Japan.”

My jaw fell. “He didn’t show up? But you’re his best friend!”

“You make it sound like he’s the bad guy, but it’s more complicated than that,” Otabek said. “My relationship with her was a betrayal to him. There was no way around it, though—I was unwilling to be with him when I knew he was settling for second-best with me. I told him I did not want to be second-best, and he shouldn’t settle, either. I fell in love with someone else, and I hoped that would be the moment he would move on. But things were never as easy between us.” He looked down at his clenched fists. “I’m sorry for telling you this. If he didn’t mention it, it shouldn’t be your problem. But I’m desperate to know if he hates me now. He never responds to my messages.”

“I didn’t get the impression that he hated you, when I saw him,” I said. “He said your fiancé—I guess wife, now—was good for you. He mentioned you helping him through a tough time, and I didn’t feel like he thought of you bitterly. He mostly just seemed… sad, I suppose.”

“I see. Thank you for telling me that.”

I smiled at him, and turned to leave.

“Wait, Katsuki.” I turned back to face him, and he regarded me with a pained expression. “As
someone who has hurt him before, I have little ground to demand this from anyone, but I beg you to
do your best not to hurt him. He has had so little happiness in his personal life. He doesn’t let anyone
take care of him anymore, and I think he needs it.”

I was taken aback by the raw anguish in his voice. I never expected a man who looked like Otabek
to get so plainly emotional, and yet I was moved. “I’m not going to hurt him if I can help it,” I said.
“That’s the last thing I want.”

“Then you care for him?”

I nodded solemnly. “Very much. When he came to Japan, he rescued me from the awful life I’d
pushed myself into, and urged me to take back my life again. I owe him so much. And I…” Could I
say it out loud? “I think I’ve…I might have fallen for him.”

Otabek smiled a little and turned away. “That is good. Be sure to tell him when you see him again.”

“I intend to,” I said, and left, returning to my room as quickly as possible. My head boiled and my
heart pounded so loudly I couldn’t hear anything else. Did I really just say that to Otabek? But his
response… Did he know something about how Yuri felt about me? And what did he mean by
“settling for second-best”?

Minami was incredibly nervous for his Short Program, but unless someone knew him personally,
they’d never see it on the ice. Overall it wasn’t the most difficult of the programs performed that day,
but it had a complicated step sequence that would net him a lot of points if executed well. Which he
did. Minami ended up scoring the top of his group and third overall, right below Otabek and a young
American skater, and just above Guang-Hong.

His confidence boosted, Minami gave an explosive performance during his Free Program, and only
missed taking gold by a few tenths of a point. He celebrated profusely, despite my warnings of
keeping himself in top condition, and we all left Detroit in fairly high spirits, hangovers aside.

I returned to Hasetsu for just a few days to relax and shake off the travel before we had to fly
Moscow. When I met with Minami, Phichit, and Kanako at Narita, all three had an air of excitement
that, while catching, I couldn’t seem to share. My own excitement felt more like anxiety. I’d spent
my time at home thinking of what I might say or do when I saw Yuri again, and while I couldn’t
reach any real decisions, I was more determined than ever to make my feelings known. This wasn’t a
passing infatuation.

“You really like that picture, don’t you?” Phichit asked, catching me looking at the photo of Yuri in
the cherry blossoms.

“Yeah,” I admitted. We were several hours into our flight, and Minami was asleep by the window.
Normally I would be sleeping, too, but I couldn’t ease my restless thoughts.

“Are you going to tell Minami?”

“Maybe after the competition,” I said. “I don’t want him to think I’m not fully with him.”

“But you won’t be fully with him, and he’ll know it,” Phichit told me sternly. “Maybe you don’t
have to be specific, but at least tell him what has you distracted. He’s already noticed.”

I glanced over at him, still sound asleep. “Really?”

“He still watches you, Yuuri. Even now he looks up to you. Maybe you don’t notice because you’re
you, but you being here is a big deal to him. I think if you told him the truth, though, before the

competition, he would appreciate it. He likes knowing that you trust him.”

I wasn’t used to sharing myself with others—even with Viktor it had been difficult to speak my heart directly. Maybe that had contributed to our downfall, and was something I should work on. “I’ll tell him the truth,” I decided. “All of it. He deserves to know.”

“I’m proud of you,” Phichit said, patting my thigh. “I know none of this was easy for you, but I really think it’s been good for you overall. I do hope that Yuri returns your feelings, but if he doesn’t, you know that Minami and I will be here for you. Don’t hide away again if you get rejected.”

I smiled, trying my hardest not to think about getting rejected. “Thanks. I won’t.”

While I got ready for bed that night in the hotel, I told Minami what I planned to do.

He was predictably surprised and excited. “Yuri Plisetsky? Really? He’s the one you like?”

His voice was a little too loud, though I wasn’t all that worried, since we were speaking Japanese. “Yes,” I said in a quieter tone, hoping he would match me. “And I’m sorry it’s now, during your competition, but I don’t want to miss this opportunity.”

“No, you have to do it now, while you’re here!” Minami exclaimed, still loud. “Ah, it’s going to be so romantic, you confessing your feelings here in Moscow. Yuuri-kun and Yurio… Former rivals finding love after a long separation…” He did a swooning motion, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“I don’t know how romantic it will be,” I admitted. “He might not even feel that way about me. But I appreciate the support.”

“Of course!” Minami said, patting me heavily on the back. “I’ll always support you, Yuuri-kun. You can count on it for as long as I’m breathing.”

Despite my jetlag and lack of rest during the flight, I found it hard to sleep that night. It wasn’t exactly late—around 10:30pm—but I had been awake for almost twenty hours, and probably should have taken my opportunity to get a long rest, even if I wasn’t competing anymore. The problem was I kept thinking about the fact that Yuri might be close by, staying in this very hotel right this moment. I wanted to talk to him. I wanted to see him and hear his voice so much that my chest ached. Before I realized what I was doing, I was in the hallway waiting for the elevator.

Down in the lobby, plenty of skaters and their supporters gathered, waiting to check in to their rooms. I heard at least five different languages as I looked around for familiar faces, and didn’t find any. Some I might’ve seen from afar at previous competitions in my career, but I had no idea who they were. I ducked away whenever I saw anyone who looked like they might be a reporter, and eventually ended up in a corner of the lobby where I could sit.

I checked my phone, though of course I didn’t have any messages. I hadn’t sent any. I decided that if I wanted to see Yuri, I needed to let him know I was looking for him. I fussed over the phrasing, trying my best to keep my overwhelming feelings out of it, and finally came up with something I was comfortable with.

Are you in Moscow yet? Can I talk to you when you’re free?

My thumb hovered over the ‘Send’ button, and just as I’d convinced myself to push it, I heard a familiar, growling voice. I turned in my chair and saw none other than Yuri Plisetsky, rolling leopard-print luggage in tow, walking through the entrance. He was speaking Russian, but I recognized the word “Beka.” He seemed angry or annoyed at something, which wasn’t unusual, but Otabek said something that made him laugh. I was glad to see they’d made up and were chatting like
friends again.

He didn’t look in my direction as I watched, and I didn’t watch for long, afraid he’d notice me. He was so beautiful even after a plane ride, hair smoothed back and shiny, and I felt like a slob showing up in the sweats I’d been trying to sleep in. While minutes ago I would have done anything to see him, I now felt too ashamed to face him. If I tried to change and freshen up now, I would likely wake up Minami, who needed all the sleep he could get, so I decided to just stay in my chair.

I unlocked my phone again, intending to delete the message I was about to send, only to find out that it had sent anyway without my noticing. Had my thumb slipped when I looked up? I glanced over at Yuri, who was now waiting in the long line to check in, and watched with a pounding heart as he pulled out his phone to look at it. His eyes widened a little, but he didn’t break his conversation with Otabek, even as I saw his thumb typing out a reply.

_Talk to me after the Short Program._

I was hit with a mixture of relief and anxiety that he didn’t want to talk right away. Relief that he wasn’t intending to meet me tonight, and anxiety that I had to wait almost two full days to speak with him.

_Okay. I’ll be watching_, I texted to him.

_You better_, he replied, which made me smile and relax a little. Skirting around the crowd of people, I snuck back to the elevators without him noticing. Once I crawled back into the large bed I shared with Phichit, I fell asleep almost immediately, the hours finally catching up to me.
The next day Minami woke me up by pestering me for more details about my feelings for Yuri, then spent the entire day in high spirits, practicing with the admirable energy of a child. He honestly looked livelier than some of the younger skaters there, and I hoped he could hold onto that energy for competition. He skated best when he was happy, not to mention it completely suited his image. Viktor had always tried to surprise the judges and audiences, but there was something to be said for the consistency of a well-loved persona. Minami loved firing up his audiences, their cheering giving him the wings to soar, and he lived for making people happy. He and Phichit had that in common, and I had the privilege to see their friendship grow on that fact.

I really and truly wanted Minami to succeed. He was such a positive person that I felt he deserved it, but I also knew that positivity wasn’t enough to win competitions. He had the talent, the passion, and the perseverance, too, and now all he needed was the confidence that he could stand with the top skaters of the world.

“I’m going to win this for you, Yuuri-kun,” he told me the next day as we prepared for his Short Program. The previous skater had already left the ice and was waiting on his score. Minami was the second skater to perform in his group, and I could sense he was getting a little nervous at being so early.

“Don’t win it for me,” I said to him sincerely. “Don’t skate for me. Skate for Japan, to remind them all that our country still produces top skaters. Skate for Phichit, who put everything he had into your programs. Skate for Kanako, who’s been with you since the beginning and never failed to push you to your limit.” I embraced him, even knowing how many eyes were on us out here. “And, if all else fails, skate for yourself, because you’re amazing, and everyone else should know it.”

When I pulled away Minami had tears in his eyes. “I’ll do my best.” He turned to Phichit and Kanako. “Here I go.”

“Good luck!” Phichit cheered. He had his phone out, and was taking as many pictures as he could. Once Minami skated out to center ice, he switched to recording video.

The music started, and I stopped breathing. I had never seen Minami perform like this. The audience loved him, clapping along to his rhythmic music, and Minami seemed to grin up at them whenever he could. He danced with fervor, and landed every single one of his jumps cleanly. Then, suddenly, it was over, and I wondered how three minutes could feel both so long and so short at once.

He scored just over a hundred points, a personal best for him. I’d never seen him celebrate so fiercely in the kiss and cry. He and Phichit jumped up and down as they laughed, and Kanako and I got pulled into a big group hug. I thought it was a little premature to celebrate so much, but I wasn’t about to say anything to dampen Minami’s spirits.

While Minami went to go change out of his skates, Phichit hung back and pulled me aside.

“He’s at the end of Minami’s group, isn’t he?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I said, swallowing nervously. It was almost like a switch had flipped inside me, and now all I could think about was Yuri’s impending performance. What did he want to say to me through his program? Would I understand it clearly? What would I say to him afterwards?

“It’s going to be fine,” Phichit said reassuringly. “And if it’s not, I want you to call me immediately,
okay?"

I nodded, not sure if I could commit to it, but knowing it would be easier if I told him I would.

“I'll take care of Minami tonight,” Phichit said. “Don’t worry about us. Come back as late as you need to.” He winked at me and left.

I flushed, and went to find a seat close enough to the rink that I could see everything perfectly. Somehow I ended up near the table with the English-speaking commentators, and could hear their observations clearly. The skater before Yuri was in the middle of his performance when I caught a glimpse of pale gold in the corner of my vision, and then my eyes couldn’t leave him.

Lilia pulled off his jacket, revealing a beautiful green, white, and gold costume. Leaves and vines twined up the legs of his white pants, circling his torso and reaching down his arms. Small gold blossoms dotted the vines, standing bright against the light mesh that covered his back and torso. It was a bit flashier than the costumes he’d worn in recent years—something a bit more like his early seasons in the senior division. It emphasized his long, graceful limbs and hugged his well-defined muscles. It even left little to the imagination in the back, which definitely wasn’t the modest style that Yuri had been favoring lately.

When the previous skater’s scores had been announced, Yuri got on the ice and began scanning the audience. Our eyes met, and I had to resist the urge to wave at him in acknowledgement. He nodded, and I nodded back, too nervous to cheer or even offer a smile. The announcer called his name, and Yuri turned away, greeting the audience with a performance smile and open arms. His fans chanted his nickname, and he stood still, looking calm and centered, everyone’s eyes on him.

The music started—a feisty violin intro—and immediately Yuri began a complicated dance that deftly showed off his ballet skills. It was chaotic, yet sultry; fast, yet graceful. I heard the commentator say that it was called Primavera Portena by Astor Piazzolla, but I had never heard the song before. He further explained that this was the first program Yuri had choreographed himself, and that it was meant to fit in with his chosen theme of “Resurrection.” When the second commentator asked why that was his chosen theme when he’d had a very successful and consistent career, the first one replied that Yuri specifically stated in interviews that it wasn’t his Resurrection, but someone close to him.

Their conversation faded from my awareness after that, because it felt like every sense I had was focused on Yuri and Yuri alone. The rapid movements in between his jumps looked incredibly difficult, but Yuri moved as if he were born dancing that way. I couldn’t believe he’d done this himself. Once he reached the step sequence at the end, I started to recognize the movements, and saw the coy little smile flashed in my direction, the same one he would give me at the rink in Hasetsu. It felt like my heart stopped, and when he stood there in his final pose, he stared right at me. He panted with fatigue, and I thought I saw a pleading look in his eyes, even though he was far away. I wanted to go to him. I wanted to jump over the railing and probably break my ankle again just to be closer to him. But all I could do was stare with my jaw open, breathless and awed.

And completely in love.

When Yuri got off the ice I made my way down to the waiting area. His score didn’t matter to me—I knew he’d done well, but that wasn’t what he wanted me to see. He wanted me to see the work he’d done, how he’d poured his soul into this graceful, chaotic program, and he wanted me to love it. He wanted me to find my love for skating again.

If that was his message, I heard him loud and clear.
He came into the waiting area with Yakov and Lilia, the three of them looking mildly satisfied with whatever score he’d received. I tried to catch his attention, but when he met my eyes he gave a small, nearly imperceptible shake of his head. *Later,* it said.

*How much later?* I wondered. I wasn’t sure how much more I could take.

A moment after Yuri had disappeared to change, my phone buzzed with a text.

*Meet me in the hotel lobby after the second group is finished. I have to watch Beka.*

*Don’t keep me waiting,* I replied back, letting some of my impatience show. To soften it, I added: *You were beautiful out there.*

I was too impatient to stay at the rink, so I decided to go back to the hotel to wait, choosing that same seat I’d taken before. I felt so close, so devastatingly, heart-wrenchingly close to what I wanted that it was almost impossible to wait. I bobbed my knees, I clenched my jacket, I finger-combed my hair and turned my phone screen on and off. I couldn’t sit still, couldn’t even think straight. The only thing I was certain of was that I wanted—needed—to talk to him.

I closed my eyes and took deep breaths to try and calm myself when it felt like just too much. I couldn’t remember ever wanting something so much that it hurt like this.

“Katsudon.”

I looked up, a gasp escaping me when I saw his face. Yuri smiled down at me, looking a little exasperated, impatient, and—hopeful? I immediately stood and pulled him against me, my body moving almost on its own.

He tentatively put his arms around me, but I could tell by the stiffness of his body that it wasn’t entirely welcome. “Not here, please,” he said. “They’ll be coming back soon.”

It took almost all my willpower to let go. I glanced around the lobby, which was mostly empty save for the hotel staff. He’d come here alone.

“There were two skaters left,” Yuri explained, leading me to the elevators. “I didn’t think I should keep you waiting.”

“You don’t need to see the rankings?” I asked.

“I don’t care,” he said. The elevator doors closed, and he hit the button for his floor. “It won’t matter until tomorrow, but I’m almost completely sure that only Beka beat me. And unless there’s an upset, Minami will be in third.”

“Oh.”

He gave me a sidelong look. “You don’t care?”

“I care,” I said. “I’m glad Minami is doing well, but I knew that as soon as I saw him give the best performance of his career. Ranking doesn’t matter all that much at this point.”

“As long as the three of us beat JJ,” Yuri muttered. I laughed.

“You still don’t like him, after all this time?”

“He’s a jerk, and he’ll always be a jerk!” Yuri growled. “I guess his kids are cute, though.”
For that brief moment in the elevator I was able to relax, but once we reached his floor and stood at his hotel room door, I felt all my nerves spring back into action. I wasn’t the only one—Yuri’s hand was trembling as he slid the key card into the slot. Somehow knowing that Yuri was nervous too helped me calm down a little.

Yuri turned on the lamps, and I followed him tentatively into the room. He was clearly successful enough that he didn’t feel the need to be frugal—he had the entire room to himself. He sat on his bed and pulled a water bottle out of his backpack, drinking heavily before setting it aside.

“So you saw it?” He asked. “The whole thing?”

“Every second,” I said. “It was amazing, Yuri. I couldn’t… I couldn’t keep my eyes off of you.” I wrung my hands together nervously, wanting to say so much more but unable to find the words.

He smiled, but it was almost sad. “That’s what I was hoping.”

“Yuri—”

“Yuuri—”

“—I have something to tell you,” we said together.

“You first, then,” I urged.

He shook his head. “I can’t until I know what you’re going to say.”

I could have said the same thing, but I’d been waiting so long that I couldn’t hold it in any longer. I sat beside him on the bed, leaving enough space between us that I could easily turn and see his face. “Alright. I—ever since you left Hasetsu, I haven’t been able to get you out of my head. Actually, it started even before that, but it was only after you left that I realized just how much you affected me. You saved me from drowning in my own guilt and regret, and I can’t begin to describe how much I appreciate it. But it’s more than gratitude that I feel for you.” I took a deep breath that shuddered on its release, finding myself suddenly unable to meet his eyes. “I’ve fallen for you, Yuri. I think you’re incredibly beautiful and talented, but I’ve come to realize it’s so much more than that. You’re one of the strongest people I’ve ever had the pleasure to meet, and you shared some of that strength with me when I needed it the most.” I looked up to see an expression of deep shock on his face, and I had no idea how to interpret it. “Even if you don’t return my feelings, I needed to let you know. You helped me find my love of skating again, and now I know I’ll never be able to return to a life without it. So… Thank you.” I closed my eyes, bracing myself for whatever his response might be.

The bed shifted, and I suddenly felt his warmth near me.

“Look at me, Yuuri,” he commanded, and I obeyed. His eyes were wide and glassy, his mouth a thin, determined line. With just the briefest hesitation he leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine, so hard and demanding that it almost hurt. He quickly pulled away and buried his face in his hands, a sob escaping him.

I blinked, unsure what was happening. Was that his reply? Why was he crying? Was it that terrible of a kiss?

“St-stupid,” he said between sobs. Who was stupid? What was stupid? Was it me?

I carefully put my arm around him. He flinched, but didn’t pull away. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said in a watery voice. “Nothing’s wrong. I’m just—I can’t—” He cried even harder,
whatever he was trying to say drowned out by sobs.

Bewildered, I pulled him into my arms, rubbing his back gently. He leaned into me and returned the embrace, and I knew all at once that he was simply overwhelmed. And probably tired, considering it was a competition day. I pressed a soft kiss into his hair. “It’s okay,” I assured him. “You’re okay.”

It took him a few moments to calm down, and when he did, he pulled away and went to the bathroom without saying anything. I waited, still unsure what his response was. Considering he hadn’t kicked me out yet, I assumed it wasn’t terrible, but the anticipation was still eating away at me. I wanted to know exactly what he was thinking.

When he emerged from the bathroom, he’d removed his jacket, and his hair hung loose around a face reddened by scrubbing.

“Can you help me?” he asked, his voice still not its clearest. “I can’t reach the zipper on this thing.”

He was changing, right now? Right here? Even if we’d seen each other naked dozens of times in the onsen, this was an entirely different context, one where my mind raced with implications. Still, I couldn’t say no, and with trembling hands grasped the tiny zipper and pulled it down the center of his back, resisting the urge to reverently touch the smooth skin as it was revealed.

“Thank you,” he said softly, and slid the whole thing off of his shoulders. He carefully stepped out of the costume and hung it up inside a garment bag, wearing only a small pair of briefs underneath. With only a brief glance at me, he went to the bathroom again, and emerged wearing the soft cotton robe the hotel provided.

“Sorry, the sequins get itchy and I don’t want to damage it,” he said, coming to sit beside me again.

“I know how it is,” I said with a tentative smile. I couldn’t resist reaching over and tucking a strand of hair behind his ear. “Will you tell me what you were going to say?”

He flushed. “Maybe. If I can do it without crying again.”

“Even if you cry, I want to hear it,” I said.

“Okay.” He took a deep breath, then settled his eyes on mine. They were so beautiful in the dim lamplight, wide and green and so expressive. Even if he never spoke, I could have lost myself in those eyes for hours. “The important thing I wanted to say was that my Short Program was entirely for you. I had been wanting to try my hand at producing a program on my own for a while, but never found the inspiration until this year. It started with the song—that composer’s work reminded me a little of your old Eros routine. It was fast, sexy, and beautiful, but there was chaos, too, like the chaos between us over the years. I had so many images, so many memories in my mind when I was coming up with the choreography. Finding you again helped me bring more of my feelings to the surface, and the entire thing ended up being about you. I wanted you to see it, and I wanted you to return to the skating world in some capacity, because I selfishly wanted you back in my life again.”

He looked aside. “That’s all, really.”

I smiled. It was strange to see him suddenly shy. “That can’t be all you want to say.”

“I was hoping the rest would be obvious,” he muttered. “Fine. I want you, Yuuri. I’ve wanted you for longer than I should have. I wanted you when Viktor had you. I wanted you before Viktor had you, if you count my stupid childhood crush as anything serious. I admired you, and when I learned enough about you to stop looking up to you, I found myself still wanting you. Viktor’s heart wasn’t the only one that shattered when you left us, but no one knew about mine.” He wiped at the corners
of his eyes. “I told Beka out of desperation to move on, and he encouraged me to go after you, but I couldn’t. I didn’t think I had anything to offer you, much less any hope that you would see me as anything more than the child I was. I tried to replace you with Beka, and while we were happy for a while, he rightfully left me and eventually fell in love with someone else. I felt so guilty at the way I treated him that I couldn’t even show up to his wedding.”

“Why couldn’t you tell me this back in Hasetsu?” I asked.

“I wanted to,” Yuri said. “I came very close so many times. My original plan was to confess to you and convince you to come back to St. Petersburg with me. But I kept thinking it wasn’t the right time. I kept thinking about you finding your love of skating again, and how I didn’t want it to be directly tied to me. If you ended up disappearing again because it didn’t work out between us… I don’t think I could live with myself. So I told myself to wait, and I told you to work with someone else. And you did.”

He had given this so much more thought than I expected that I suddenly felt a little selfish with my own feelings. “I don’t think I could ever go back to that life I had. There was too much misery.”

“Good,” Yuri said, sliding a little closer to me. “Then my plan worked.” He looked at me, eyes soft and sultry, his tongue peeking out a little to wet his lips.

I didn’t wait for him to close the distance, instead snaking my hand around his neck to bring him close enough to press my lips to his. His hair felt like silk through my fingers, his tongue warm velvet as it pushed into my mouth. I ached, never imagining that kissing Yuri Plisetsky would feel as beautiful as he looked.

His throat made a sound that made my heart sing, and his fingers dug into my shoulder as we fell deeper into the kiss. The slight physical pain brought everything into focus, and I had to pull away before I completely let go of my sanity. His grip kept me close, though, and he trailed a string of kisses along my jaw and neck.

“We shouldn’t do this now,” I said.

Yuri sighed against my shoulder. “It’s just kissing, Yuuri.”

“You know that’s not all this.” I grabbed his shoulders and eased him away. “I’m not saying I don’t want to. I’m just not sure it’s the right time.”

“No,” Yuri said. “But when is the right time? I’ve waited years for this opportunity. We’re together, we’re alone, we want this… What’s the problem, here?”

“I don’t know how much you know about me, but I prefer to take things a little… slower.” I lowered my voice, leaning into him a little. “You’ve done your dance, now let me do mine.”

Yuri leaned away, clearly perturbed by my change in demeanor. “Viktor always complained that you could be a tease.”

I chuckled. “That does sound like something Viktor would inappropriately share out loud.” I leaned in close again and nuzzled Yuri’s ear. “But did he ever mention how satisfied I would leave him, when he finally got what he wanted?”

Yuri inhaled sharply as I ran my tongue along his neck. “N-no. But we could g-guess.”

I nibbled at his jaw, then pulled away to look at him. His cheeks were beet-red, and I couldn’t resist resting my palm against one of them to feel its warmth. “Don’t you want that for yourself, Yuri?” I
cupped his chin, and ran my thumb along his bottom lip. “Don’t you think it’s… worth the wait?”

Yuri shut his eyes and gritted his teeth. “How long?”

“If I told you, it would take away half the fun,” I purred. “If you’re worried about your competition tomorrow, though, I can do a little something to ease the tension. But only on my terms.”

“God, you really do have a switch,” Yuri said bitterly. “Isn’t it too early to be playing these games?”

“Nope,” I said cheekily, releasing him. “If it really bothers you, though, I can walk away now.” I said it with an air of indifference, but inside I squirmed with fear of what he would say in response. He could end it now with a word, and I didn’t want that to happen. Surely he could see this was a game?

“Don’t you dare,” he said immediately. “I’ve already been waiting four years, just—just give me what I want tonight, and we’ll do it your way next time.”

A slow smile stretched my lips. “That’s not how it works, Yuri.” I walked my fingers across the bare skin of his thigh that peeked through the parted fabric, getting dangerously close to the prize I knew waited beneath the folds. “I give what you earn. And you earn it by being patient.” My fingertips lightly brushed the bulge at his crotch.

“F-fuck.” Yuri was near panting now. He was so beautiful. “And what if I decide to withhold from you, huh? What if I want you to be patient?”

I tilted my head, regarding him thoughtfully. “You can try. I’d be surprised if your patience could outlast mine, though. Viktor tried that once. It didn’t end well for him.” I laughed. “Well, I guess it ended well. But he never tried it again.”

Yuri’s face twisted, a mixture of arousal and disgust. “Fine. What exactly do you want?”

I shook my head. “You tell me what you want, and I tell you what to do to earn it. I’m open to hearing your preferences, too. What turns you off? What turns you on? What boundaries do you have?”

He was shy and relatively inexperienced—I knew that immediately by the way he reacted. Viktor had given me a list of things almost the moment our relationship turned sexual, but Yuri would take some experimentation.

“I—I don’t know,” he said, and he looked annoyed by that fact. “I’ve only—with Beka—”

I shushed him with a finger. “It’s alright,” I said. “We’ll find out together.” I replaced my finger with my lips, giving him just the softest brush of a kiss to reassure him. “And we’ll ease into it. What were you hoping for tonight?”

He turned away. “I don’t know.”

“You had some idea, or you wouldn’t be this frustrated,” I said.

He scowled. “Are you going to make me say it out loud?”

I brushed my fingers through his hair affectionately. “Yuri, I’m always going to make you say it out loud. It’s one of my rules. You’ll get used to it quickly enough.”

Yuri looked down, his cheeks flaring with shame. “I didn’t have much specific in mind, I guess. I
just thought—you could spend the night. And we could—could do stuff.” He pressed his face into his hands. “Gaaah, I feel so stupid.”

“No, no, no, you’re not stupid,” I said, prying his hands away. “Look at me, Yuri.” He obeyed, and I gave him a smile. “Let me help you.” He was such a different partner than Viktor had been. Viktor had been eager and willing from the moment I said go, and he eased me into my sexuality like he’d known all along about this hidden side of me. Viktor had helped me break past the shame and embarrassment that held me back, and now I felt confident I could do it for Yuri. I just needed to figure out what sort of partner he wanted to be.

“Are you sure this is going to work out?” he asked, tears pricking his eyes. “I don’t think I can do this the way you want to.”

I kissed him again. He returned it warmly, which was a good sign. “I think you can, but you need to talk to me. What’s bothering you? Are you upset that I’m this way?”

“I’m more surprised than anything else… I mean, I always knew you had another side to you, but it’s nothing like the way you are normally.”

“Does it bother you? Do you think you can only love me the way I am normally?”

“Not at all!” he cried, looking appalled that I would even suggest it. His expression sobered, and he traced a finger along a crease in his robe. “You’re sexy. You were sexy on the ice, too. I just don’t know how to react to you here, like this. I guess… I guess it feels like you’re on an entirely different level.”

“I’m sorry if I started off too strongly,” I said sincerely, finally realizing my mistake. “It probably would have been better to ease into it. I think you were right when you said it was too early for games.”

“I’m not some weak-willed virgin!” Yuri growled. “You want to know what I wanted? I wanted you to suck my dick! It felt like it was too early to try anything more than that, and I didn’t want to risk being sore. I wanted us both to get off and sleep together, so I could know what it felt like to wake up next to someone on the day of a competition.”

Anger. Yuri liked to be angry. But in a soft way—more a release of energy and emotions than intent to cause harm. Perhaps his early reactions were just his natural way of playing against my teasing and taking control. It was worth exploring, but I set it aside for now.

“You wanted me to suck you off, hm?” I lowered my voice again, resting my hand on his hip. “Is that something you’ve thought about often?”

He glared at me, clearly onto my game. “And if it was?”

“Well, then you’ve been waiting a long time, haven’t you? You’ve been… patient.” His breath shuddered, and I smiled. “I think I can give you that much.”

He attacked my mouth fiercely, and I let him lose control for just a moment before easing him away. “Impatience will cost you.”

“Cost me how?” he asked, bewildered.

I gave him a gentle push, urging him to lay on the bed before I knelt between his legs. “Mm, you’ll know soon enough. Just relax.”
In the depths of my mind, far in the back, was a quiet voice reminding me how lucky I was. How sweet it all was, how wonderful my life had become tonight. As soon as I came down from my arousal I knew that voice would get louder, and my heart would be flooded with affection and happiness at this new chapter of my life. But right now, mind clouded with desire, I thrived on a very deep pleasure in torturing my new lover.

Yuri squirmed as I relentlessly licked, kissed, and nibbled everywhere I could reach, except the one place he wanted me to. Every now and then I would ghost my lips or tongue along the shaft of his throbbing, pink erection, but nothing that was enough for him. He really had a beautiful body—his strong, lean, and exquisitely toned thighs occasionally closing around my head in desperation for direct pleasure. It wasn’t the right time to admit it aloud, but I loved that feeling.

“Keep your hands down, or I’ll tie them behind your head,” I warned when I saw him reaching for his dick. He whined and lowered his hand, fingers gripping the sheets.

“Just get it over with already!” he cried. Close. I wasn’t going to test his real limits on our first time, but we were approaching what I’d call his soft limit.

“Ten more licks,” I told him. I didn’t count aloud, but I made each one long and slow enough that I knew he was counting. By four, he was breathing out the numbers. He whimpered through six and seven. I got to nine and stopped for just a few seconds, and he let out an anguished sob. One last lick to his inner thigh, and I lifted up to swallow him whole.

One, two, three bobs of my head, and he came forcefully down my throat, back arching as he muffled a scream with his hand. He sobbed as he came down from the orgasm, and I nuzzled his belly affectionately.

“That was beautiful, Yuri,” I said softly to him.

“Fuck you,” he spat, wiping at his eyes.

“Did you hate it?” I asked.

“Yes. No.” He turned his head to the side, looking away from me. “Fuck you.”

“Perhaps some other time,” I said teasingly. “I don’t think you’re up to it just yet.”

He growled and pulled me down on top of him, kissing me deeply and fiercely, with no regard for the taste of himself in my mouth. His hand slid between us, and he palmed my erection with clear intent. This was new to me. Viktor always had to be commanded to give me pleasure, but he thrived on that sort of thing, and I usually made him get me off before I let him finish. I wasn’t used to being taken like this, after my partner had orgasmed. I had already resigned myself to finish on my own after Yuri had fallen asleep, but it seemed that wouldn’t be necessary.

While we kissed he opened my pants and freed my dick, then began firmly jerking me in a steady rhythm. I was already so wound up that it didn’t take long, and with a trembling moan I released myself over his beautiful exposed chest. He let his arm fall limply to his side, and closed his eyes with a sigh.

I rolled off of him, falling onto my back as I caught my breath. It had been far, far too long since I’d done anything like that. I felt satisfied, though, at my performance—it was good to know I hadn’t entirely lost my skills in my years of laying dormant. I turned to look at Yuri, and wasn’t surprised to see him completely asleep, his mouth hanging open a little.

I got up and cleaned the mess I’d made with a warm, damp cloth from the bathroom. He barely
stirred at all as I wiped down his chest, and once I’d closed up his robe for him, he curled onto his side and smiled, making my chest swell with affection.

I watched him sleep for a moment, unsure what to do. Yuri wanted me to sleep with him, but I knew how important sleep was before a competition, and I didn’t want to risk waking him up in the middle of the night because we weren’t used to each other’s sleeping habits. But as soon as I considered the tragic thought of him waking up and realizing I wasn’t there, I knew I couldn’t leave him.

Me: Are you in the hotel?

Phichit: We’re headed there now, why?

Me: Can you bring me a change of clothes and my toothbrush?

Phichit: !!!!!!!!!!!!

The following few texts were incomprehensible, full of excited emojis and keyboard mashing.

Phichit: you are

Phichit: tellingme EVERYTHING

Me: Tomorrow.

Phichit: hell yes tomorrow. congrats Yuuri!!!

I smiled, both at his embarrassing reaction and in realizing that I had a friend I could share this moment with. I really hadn’t appreciated Phichit enough, and made a mental note to remedy that.

Tomorrow.
In the six years since I’ve known him, I never once thought I would find myself waking up next to Yuuri Katsuki.

My name is Yuri Plisetsky. I’m 21 years old, and currently the top male figure skater representing Russia. I’m an Olympic gold medalist, and have taken gold at Worlds three times now. I’m at a high point in my career, but I’ve been starting to feel myself slip a little.

And now, I was apparently Yuuri Katsuki’s boyfriend.

I wasn’t used to waking up with people in my bed. Even when Beka would stay over, he almost always woke up before me, in the shower long before I opened my eyes. I especially never knew what it felt like to wake up with someone the day of a competition, though I always wondered.

Competition days were the days I usually felt the most alone. Even with Yakov and Lilia supporting me, from the moment I woke up in the morning to the time I got off the ice after my program, there was me, and only me. Words of support meant little. Conversations with friends meant little. I essentially ignored everything that wasn’t related to preparing for my performance.

When I’d watch Viktor and Yuuri, they seemed to be the opposite. They leaned on each other so heavily that, when they were apart, their performances visibly suffered. I used to think it was stupid. Their dependency was a clear weakness, and I couldn’t imagine leaving myself so vulnerable.

But I’d always wondered what it would be like. What it would feel like to have someone always there with me to lean on when I had trouble standing on my own.

Yuuri slept quietly on his side, a little puddle of drool pooling on his pillow. For all that he was almost thirty, I still thought he looked cute. He hadn’t visibly aged that much since I’d known him, and especially now, completely relaxed in sleep, he didn’t look that much older than me. Not that I would have cared much if he did.

Like most everything about me, my feelings for Yuuri had changed over the time that I knew him. When I first saw him skate, he drew my attention with his alluring step sequences. As I quickly learned, despite being a disappointing competitor back then, he really was a talented dancer, and I hated it. I hated that he was better than me, but I could admit that, without his competition to drive me, I wouldn’t be as good as I was now.

Off the ice, I didn’t care much for Yuuri at first. He had an annoying obliviousness about him, never responding to my anger or really paying that much attention to me at all, except in a distant, friendly way. It didn’t help that Viktor hung off of him all the time, practically waving Yuuri in my face like a flag. I could admit now that I had been jealous, but I didn’t truly recognize my jealousy for what it was until about five years ago, when I’d started to witness their relationship falling apart.

I never wanted them to break up. Despite my jealousy, I truly did want Yuuri, and to a lesser extent Viktor, to be happy, and they made each other sickeningly happy. If they could have gotten married in Russia, they would have, and I would have been right there, cheering them on while pretending not to care as much as I did. I was content to watch from the sidelines as they built their lives together, because around them, I felt very much like the inexperienced child I was.

And then it all changed in an instant.

The ironic thing was that it was a triple axel that did him in, the most consistent jump in his entire
career. His Free Program had only been half-completed, and there was a grotesque moment where the music still cheerfully continued while he laid there on the ice, shuddering with pain and unable to stand. The landing was bad. I wasn’t sure if it was my imagination or not, but I’d thought I even heard the bone snapping when he hit the ice. I felt so helpless. I wanted to go to him, but I’d long since removed my skates, and Viktor was at his side in seconds, anyway. I couldn’t have done anything.

And I couldn’t do anything in the aftermath, either. I visited Yuuri often enough after practice, but every time he plastered on a smile that I knew masked deep pain. I saw Viktor at first put on a cheerful, optimistic face, and I saw that face turn gradually into one of helplessness, then despair. I tried to be encouraging, but it felt entirely futile. I convinced myself that nothing I could have said or done would have saved them.

Everyone on our team assumed that Yuuri had made the decision to leave on his own. It was true to an extent, but I also knew that Yuuri wouldn’t have made that decision lightly, meaning Viktor had to play his part in pushing Yuuri over the edge. I didn’t know exactly what happened, but I could gather that they both weren’t in a good place for an extended time, and I knew that when Viktor was in a bad place, he had the tendency to drink and get a little too honest. I could easily envision him saying something incredibly insensitive to push Yuuri away, and judging by the resigned, guilty way Viktor reacted, I knew I was right in at least some capacity.

I wondered if Yuuri would tell me, someday, or if the memories were too painful. At any rate, now wasn’t exactly the time to think about it.

He stirred, turning onto his back and wiping the drool off of his face. He looked over at me blearily, a confused frown on his face that slowly turned into a gentle smile.

“Good morning, Yuri.”

Before he’d left, he and Viktor almost exclusively called me Yurio. Ever since I saw him again, though, he’d just called me “Yuri.” I didn’t know what caused the change. Everyone in Japan still called me Yurio.

“Good morning,” I replied, feeling a little awkward. How was this supposed to work? Despite everything that happened last night, it still didn’t feel like this was real.

Yuuri sat up and yawned, and grabbed his glasses from the bedside table. “Mind if I use the bathroom?”

“Go ahead,” I said. He closed the door, and I felt like I could breathe again. Why was this so difficult?

A part of me was still intimidated by him, I knew. Last night had been a clear reminder that there was another side of Yuuri, a side I had really only seen when he was drunk or performing. I had often dreamed of what it would be like to get close to that side of him, personally and intimately, but nothing could have prepared me for the reality of it. Demanding, sultry, achingly sexy—and that voice. God, that voice. I feared that that voice could coax me into doing anything he asked.

Was I in over my head here?

When he came out of the bathroom a minute later, he couldn’t quite look me in the eyes, and his cheeks were flushed. “Should I go?”

“Why would you?” No, don’t go. Please stay with me, at least a little while.
“You seem…” He shook his head. “Nevermind.” He came over to me and brushed a strand of hair out of my face before leaning down and placing a kiss on my forehead. “Good morning.”

“You said that already.”

“It’s still true,” he said, a little too cheerfully for six in the morning. “Breakfast?”

“It’s already ordered,” I said. “Er, just mine, that is. I always order my food in advance. I didn’t know…”

“It’s okay,” he said. “I used to do the same thing, since I could only eat specific things before competitions. I can go fend for myself.”

“No.” Don’t go. “Tell me what you want. It’ll come later than mine, but I want you to stay and eat.”

I thought he would protest. I thought he would do that thing that he always did, saying he didn’t want to be a bother and insist he take care of himself. But he didn’t. He smiled.

“Okay. Thanks.”

I’d spent a long time trying to figure out my feelings for Yuuri. His injury hurt me more than I thought possible—so much that I even considered taking a season off, because skating didn’t feel the same to me. That was the turning point when I realized I didn’t just admire him, or enjoy him as a competitor. I cared about him as a person. As I stood by helplessly, watching Viktor fail to support him, I could feel Yuuri slipping away from us, away from the skating world. I had only just turned seventeen; what could I even do?

Once he was gone, my heart changed. Beka was the only one I felt safe confiding the truth in, but I was pretty sure everyone else on the team noticed, too. Some who didn’t know me as well might have thought that I was upset that Viktor left, but Mila, Yakov, Lilia—they probably knew the truth. I didn’t really know what to do with myself, so I threw myself into competing.

As if the world had decided that things needed to get worse for me, Grandpa died that year after the Grand Prix Finals. It wasn’t a surprise, really, considering his health, but I still didn’t know how to process grief. It was suggested many times that I take the rest of the year off, but I couldn’t. What else did I have at that point? If I couldn’t skate, what else would I be doing?

I amended my short program to a level that everyone called impossible, then shattered the record at Worlds the following March. I felt like a machine—technically perfect, but heartless and disconnected from everyone around me. Beka saw what was happening, and put a stop to it. He got permission to train under Yakov the next season, just so he could be near me and keep me from self-destructing. I had never cried so much in my life than when he was alone with me. I’d never been so angry, or yelled so much. I’d never felt so supported, either.

Yuuri looked up from the menu, and handed me his written order for breakfast.

“That’s all?” I asked. It was just two eggs and a piece of toast. “You know I can afford—”

“It’s all I want,” he insisted, looking strangely shy. “Since I’m not really training anymore, I can’t eat much. I gain weight too easily.”

I gave him a sidelong glance, and called room service to place the order. Why was he worried about his weight? He might not have been in top physical condition anymore, but he still ran several kilometers daily. I knew he still ate katsudon—not every day, but on occasion—so why was he being so frugal with breakfast?
I hoped he wasn’t concerned with his weight because of me. I really didn’t care that much what shape his body took.

I hung up the phone, after promising them a hearty tip if they brought all our food at once rather than separately. Yuuri would have complained if he’d understood me, but luckily his Russian never extended farther than a few words and phrases.

He sat on the other side of the bed, feeling so far away from me. Oddly, he had his phone in his hand, typing something.

“Texting someone?” I asked.

“Yeah. Phichit-kun. Just letting him know what’s going on.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You’re telling him about us?”

He smiled sheepishly. “I kind of already told him last night, when I asked him to bring me my toothbrush and a change of clothes. That’s not a problem, is it? He already knew how I felt about you, so it would be hard to hide it.”

“Oh, no, don’t worry about it. It’s fine.” He had changed so much, just in the time since I’d left Hasetsu. I couldn’t ever recall him talking with a friend on a personal level like this while he’d lived in St. Petersburg.

He finished whatever he was typing and set his phone down, turning to me. “Are you alright? You seem a little…” He trailed off again, still apparently unable to finish that sentence. What exactly was he seeing?

“I’m fine,” I said. “Just—thinking too much.”

I still didn’t quite know how to act. With Beka everything had been easy—our relationship had begun more like a friendship, only with more kissing and touching in private. This was different. Yuuri and I had never really been friends. Even at Hasetsu, there had been a distance between us that I couldn’t close because I was too afraid to confess my feelings. I felt like I still needed to close that distance, but I didn’t know how.

I slid against him and put my arm around his shoulders, bringing him closer to me, just so I could hold him. So that I could reaffirm that he was here, he was real, and he wanted to be with me.

He relaxed into me with a sigh, the top of his head brushing my chin. I felt a tear escape my eye, and I gripped him close so he wouldn’t see.

“Yuri? Are you alright?”

I cleared my throat. “Fine.” Perfect. “I just still can’t believe this is actually happening.”

He laughed, probably a little harder than the situation called for, but I didn’t question him. “I was thinking the same thing. Well, that, and I woke up remembering your program from yesterday. I can’t wait to watch you skate again.”

“Why?” For anyone else, I wouldn’t have asked that question. I knew why people in general wanted to watch me skate. But I needed to know specifically why Yuuri Katsuki did.

“Because you’re the most beautiful skater I’ve ever seen,” he said solemnly. His fingertips brushed the back of my hand where it rested against his chest. “You’re the skater I always wanted to become
--a perfect balance of dancing and technical skill. Never neglecting one for the other. But even putting that aside, I’ve never seen anyone move like you. You’re fierce, and strong, but also so incredibly beautiful. I watched every video of your performances I could find, some of them dozens of times. I became so obsessed with you after you left that Phichit had to confront me about it.’’

“You were… obsessed?”

“Yeah. It was hard to stop watching, some nights. I felt like I’d suddenly become your biggest fan.”

I never expected this. No matter who I spoke to about him, everyone always said that Yuuri had only ever been a fan of Viktor, and no one else. Yuuko even told me that Yuuri once had posters of Viktor all over his room, and named his poodle after him. They’d apparently bonded over their mutual admiration for Viktor, but Yuuri took it a step further and tried to go after him competitively. It was one of those stories that you’d think would have a happy ending, considering they met and fell in love.

But I was a tiny bit grateful the world didn’t always work out that way.

“Sorry, I know it’s probably weird to hear,” Yuuri said.

“Not at all,” I said. “It’s just unexpected from you.”

He breathed a laugh. “I know. I felt like a teenager again.”

“I wish I could compete against you again,” I admitted. “It’s not the same when it’s just me and Beka.”

“Don’t overlook Minami. He’s about to take gold here.”

“Gold?” I pulled away. “Those are high expectations for someone who didn’t even make it to the Grand Prix Final last year.”

“Mark my words,” he said, giving me an almost sinister smile. “He’ll take gold here, and make the podium at the Grand Prix Final.”

“I’m not sure I like you betting against me.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Who was the one who told me to support Minami this year?”

“Yeah, but—”

“Don’t get me wrong, you’ll do well. But Minami’s getting gold here.”

I looked at him skeptically. “Are you planning on sabotaging me and Beka?”

He looked genuinely taken-aback. “No, of course not.”

“So you just magically know how the performances will go tonight?”

“I’m saying—” he got up and straddled my lap “—that I’m confident my skater is taking gold. But if you don’t believe me, we can make it more interesting for you.”

I couldn’t help myself—I had to pull him down for a kiss, simply because he was in kissing range. He kept things fairly chaste, though, not allowing any tongue. “What did you have in mind?” I asked when we parted, afraid of the answer.
“If you or Otabek takes gold over Minami, I’ll let you request one thing from me, with no strings attached.”

I tilted my head. “A sexual thing?”

“Anything. Doesn’t have to be sexual.”

“And what do you get if Minami wins gold?”

“The satisfaction of being right.”

“That’s all?” I asked.

“I don’t want anything more from you than I already have,” he said with a shy smile. “Think of it as an incentive for you to do well, if nothing else.”

How could a man like him be so cute? I spent years of my life trying to shake the “cute” image thrust upon me by my fans, and here he was, nine years older than me and blushing like a virgin while saying things that made my heart swell. It wasn’t even fake, for all that it contrasted so deeply with the man who tortured me last night. Though thinking about that now made me flush like a virgin.

“Fine,” I said. “I’ll take that bet. I won’t go easy on you if I win.” I had no idea what I’d ask for, but I’d think of something later. I wasn’t going to lose.

“I’d expect nothing less,” he said cheerfully.

If I knew anything about Yuuri Katsuki, it was that he wasn’t a predictable person. Even Viktor, who knew more sides of him than any other person in the world, still found himself surprised by Yuuri up until the end. He was both intriguing and frightening, that way. Yuuri wasn’t untrustworthy, or unreliable, but he could really find ways to send you off-balance when you least expected it. Viktor always said that surprising nature was what made him fall in love with Yuuri in the beginning. I couldn’t say the same, but I could admit it made things far more interesting, and it made me look forward to getting to know him better.

We ate breakfast quietly while I had the morning news on the TV—it was one of my pointless rituals that I never bothered to break. Yuuri watched with me, for all that he couldn’t understand a word of what they were saying. He could be polite like that.

I found myself suddenly wondering what was going through his mind. I’d practically begged him to stay with me this morning when he should have been with his own skater, and while I felt a little selfish for it, I wasn’t willing to give him up just yet. But did he think I was selfish for keeping him here?

He finished eating before me, which wasn’t surprising, and started looking at his phone again. He smiled at whatever he was reading, and I couldn’t get over how different he looked from when I saw him back in April. The same air of depression that I felt in his tiny apartment had followed him back to Hasetsu, and while it thinned a little during my visit, I knew it was still clinging to him when I left. Now, though, I couldn’t sense it at all. Yuuri would never be an overly sunny person, but he at least seemed—content. Maybe a little cheerful. Friendly. He even had a little of that competitive spirit back, which I hadn’t expected.

And he had a friend who could make him smile like that. I never knew him to have a close friend before. I knew he and that Thai skater shared a coach back in Detroit, but when Viktor was around, I never got the sense that Yuuri regarded Phichit with anything more than the distant, friendly competitiveness he had for all the other skaters. Now, while I admittedly hadn’t seen much, I could
tell they were closer friends, probably even best friends by the way Yuuri smiled at his phone.

“So what sorts of things do you do before competition?” he asked me.

“Nothing, really,” I said. “I usually try not to think about my program at all until warm-ups.”

“I always tried to do the same,” he said. “I had the tendency overthink, so Viktor would distract me until it was time to go to the rink.”

I had borne witness to some of those “distractions” before, and they were usually sickeningly romantic gestures like presenting Yuuri with poems and flowers or impromptu couples’ dancing in the hotel lobby. I hoped Yuuri didn’t expect that level of romance from me—or worse, to expect to give me that sort of romance. It always seemed like a distinctly Viktor thing, though, so I wasn’t too worried.

In the end, it simply wasn’t practical to keep Yuuri around any longer. He went off for a run while I showered, and before I knew it, it was time for Lilia to come help prepare me for my performance. I sent Yuuri a text message telling him not to come back until later.

“Yura, you’re looking different today,” she said to me after I let her in. “Did something happen?”

I couldn’t lie to her. After all these years she’d only ever given me honesty, and while it took me longer than I’d like to admit, I eventually learned it was always best to do the same. “Yes,” I said, pulling out the costume for my Free Program.

She snatched the costume from me and laid it out on the bed, checking for any missing pieces or blemishes that needed to be repaired. She always checked them meticulously before we left for a competition, but Lilia was nothing if not thorough. “Does this have anything to do with why you so rudely left us last night?”

“Yes,” I said, laying out the kit she used for my hair and makeup. “I couldn’t wait.”

“Your impatience will cost you, Yura,” she said, and those words unexpectedly made me flush. Even if spoken in a different language, their meaning made me think of last night. She held out the costume. “This is fine. But you know that you gain valuable experience watching other skaters. Some of them will surpass you someday.”

“I know, Lilia, but last night was important.” I slid the robe off my shoulders and carefully slipped into my costume. It was less flashy than the costume for my Short Program, but it was delicate, and if I wasn’t careful I could easily snag the fabric.

“So important that you couldn’t wait an additional fifteen minutes? What happened?”

“I talked to him,” I said, knowing she would know precisely whom I spoke of. “I told him everything.”

Her expression softened a little—as much as it ever did, considering her features were so severe—and she came over to pull up the zipper for me. “And what did he say?”

“My feelings were returned,” I said, lowering my eyes. Even though it was Lilia, my mentor for six years, I still couldn’t say some things without being embarrassed. She never judged me for my feelings, or told me to throw them away, but I still had trouble speaking them aloud.

She grasped my shoulders and turned me around to look at me. “I’m glad for you,” she said, her lips tightening into what I knew, for her, was a smile. “What will happen now? Will he come back to St. Petersburg?”

“Not likely,” I said, thinking quickly. “But I know what you’re thinking: that I should never have left last night. But I had to tell him. I had to be honest, even though it was scary at the time.”

“Your honesty will cost you, Yura,” she said firmly, her tone more stern than ever. “I think you need to think about that before you rush into anything like that again.”

“I know,” I said, feeling a mixture of guilt and relief. “I’ll be more careful next time.”

“Good,” she said, her tone softening a bit. “But remember, Yura, honesty is always the best policy.”

I nodded, feeling grateful for her understanding and support. “Thank you, Lilia.”

“Anytime, Yura,” she said, giving me a gentle smile. “Now, let’s get you ready for your performance.”

And with that, she began preparing me for my Free Program, checking every detail of my costume and making sure everything was in place. I knew I couldn’t let her down, and I promised myself I would be my best on the ice today.
“I don’t know,” I admitted. “Probably not yet. He’s supporting Kenjiro Minami right now, and I assume he’ll continue to do so for the rest of the season. But we haven’t spoken much about the future.”

She touched my hair, probably checking to see that it was properly dry. “Well, I hope you can find a way to be together someday. I won’t have you hopelessly pining for him like that idiot used to.”

I smiled. “You know me better than that.”

“That I do.” She patted my shoulders, encouraging me to sit in the desk chair. She draped a sheet over my shoulders and began treating my hair, combing the smoothing product through from the roots to the ends.

“Do you think I should tell Yakov?” I asked her.

“Not much surprises him, these days,” she said. “If you don’t, he’ll find out quickly enough. It probably doesn’t matter either way—he knew it was only a matter of time.”

“I just know he won’t want to hear it. I’ll get a lecture.”

“You’ll get a lecture either way,” she said. “But he trusts you to not make the same mistakes Viktor did. You’re not as flighty and unreliable. You even asked us permission, the last time you flew to Japan.”

Even if I’d wanted to, I wouldn’t have been able to hide my trip from Lilia and Yakov. It would have hurt the trust we’d built between the three of us over the past six years, and I would have felt too guilty to give Yuuri the focus he needed from me.

I closed my eyes, quieting my mind as I focused on the feeling of her hands in my hair. This was one of the rituals I would never give up. The silent meditation, the calming, precise touches, the odd chemical perfume of the product—all of it centered me before a performance.

She finished tying it back. “Your hair is getting so long, Yura. When will you cut it?”

I had to resist the urge to touch it. It was a habit she had long since scolded out of me, but the temptation was still there. “Yakov has been bothering me to cut it all year. I haven’t decided what to do with it yet. I like it long.”

“Just as long as it doesn’t get in your way,” she said. “It’s grown out beautifully, and it would almost be a shame to cut it all off.”

I couldn’t help but smile—Lilia wasn’t easy with her compliments, especially when it came to beauty. For that comment alone, I knew I wouldn’t be cutting my hair any time soon.

She turned me around and put on my makeup—nothing dramatic for this program—and then left me to finish preparing on my own. There wasn’t much left to do, anyway—usually I texted Beka, who would distract me until it was time for warmups, but this was the rare time he would be preparing at the same time. I needed to talk to him about Yuuri, but I knew it could wait.

Instead I texted Yuuri, telling him to come back to my room. I was a little afraid he’d make me too tense, but I really wanted to see him, to remind myself that it was still real.

When I opened the door, he put a hand to his mouth, stifling a little gasp.
I tilted my head, not expecting that response. “What?”

He looked away, cheeks flushed. “You’re just so beautiful. I didn’t know you were already ready.”

“Well, yeah,” I said, blushing too. I stood aside so he could come in, and I when I shut the door, I realized I had no idea what to say or do. I didn’t really know how to be with him romantically. When Yuuri was with Viktor, they were always holding onto each other, sharing sweet touches and comments that let everyone know how much they loved each other. What was he expecting from me?

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“You told me to come as soon as I could,” he said sheepishly. “I thought you needed me for something.”

I do. I do need you. I’ve needed you for years. “Do I need a reason to call you over?”

“O-of course not! I… I wanted to see you, too.”

“I hope I’m not stealing you away from Minami.” Not that it mattered all that much to me if I were.

“Not really. Phichit-kun and Kanako-san worry with the costume and hair. I was never great with those things.”

I looked him over, noting his messy hair and clothes that seemed just one step removed from sweats. “You don’t say.”

His eyes widened. Had I gone too far? Why couldn’t I keep my stupid comments to myself?

But then he laughed. “I know. I don’t think I’ll ever be as fashionable as you, or Phichit-kun, or Vi… any of them really. I never could bring that style off the ice with me.”

And I knew Viktor had tried. He’d taken Yuuri out shopping more times than I could count, but Yuuri refused to buy almost anything. Anything Viktor insisted on buying for Yuuri sometimes made an appearance at parties or other special occasions, but the day-to-day Yuuri never changed much.

If I were honest, I’d say I didn’t mind his frumpy look. If I were really honest, I’d say that I preferred him being completely himself, including the loose, unfashionable clothing, if only because it made his transformations that much more dramatic and sexy. God, just thinking about last night again made me—

“Yuri?”

I blinked out of my thoughts. How long had we just been standing there? Why was I so stuck in my own head?

He smiled, regarding me with concerned eyes. “You looked spaced out a bit. Something on your mind?”

Just you. Always you. “I’m fine. It’s nothing.” I pushed aside some of the clutter of hair items and discarded clothes and sat on my bed, which prompted him to sit near me. Good. At least we weren’t standing. I decided to bring up a subject that had nagged at me since I visited Hasetsu. “Back when
we trained together, you always called me Yurio, but now it’s just ‘Yuri.’”

He looked aside. “Oh. Y-yeah. In the time after I left St. Petersburg, I realized that we never really asked permission to call you that. My sister is kind of rude like that. I went along with it because Viktor kept using it, and it didn’t seem to bother you after a while… But when I saw you again, I thought it wouldn’t be right to call the world’s top skater by a nickname he didn’t seem to like.”

He gave it a lot more thought than I expected. “I don’t really mind it, anymore,” I admitted. “I have a lot of nicknames. My fans in Russia and my family always called me Yurochka. Lilia and Beka call me Yura. And, thanks to your sister and the rest of them, all my Japanese fans call me Yurio now. I kind of like signing my name in katakana, too. It’s easy to write.”

“I noticed your Japanese was actually pretty remarkable, the rare times I heard you speaking it. Did you take lessons?”

I nodded. “I’ve been taking classes in University.”

“You’re in University?” he asked, surprised for some reason.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“I don’t… I guess I expected them to tell you it was a waste of time, and that you should dedicate yourself to skating only. Since you’re the top skater, and everything.”

I sighed. “Well, you’re not wrong. But I don’t want to be that sort of person whose entire life is skating. I didn’t choose to do anything too ambitious in school, but I like learning new things.”

He fidgeted with his hands. Was he nervous, too? “So, um… Did you have a nickname you wanted me to use? Should I go back to calling you Yurio?”

“Do what you want,” I said indifferently. “I only wondered why you’d changed it.”

Silence stretched between us, and I couldn’t shake the crushing awkwardness. Why didn’t I know how to be with him? Why couldn’t I be comfortable? Everything I wanted to say died in my throat, killed by my shame and embarrassment. It actually began to hurt.

“Yuri,” he said, his voice clear and commanding. I turned to him, and he kissed me firmly, his hand squeezing my shoulder. He broke the kiss but stayed close, our foreheads nearly touching. “Stop worrying. It’s okay.”

“Is it?” I asked, unable to focus on his eyes for how close he was. “I don’t know what to do.”

“I don’t, either,” he said. “It’s different. It’s so different. But I know it’s alright, and I need you to know that, too.”

I had to admit, it calmed me a little. To know that he was feeling similar at how weird and new this all was—it helped me relax. I closed my eyes and kissed him again slowly, easing into it, letting him know he was helping. I noticed how careful he was being with his hands. He rested one on the bed, on top of mine, and the other he just gently placed on the side of my neck, careful not to touch my makeup, hair, or costume. But I hungered for more. I grasped at him, pulling him closer, and pressed my tongue forcefully into his mouth.

“Woah,” Yuuri said, breaking the kiss. “Don’t get carried away. We don’t want to mess anything up.”
"I don’t care," I growled.

"Yes, you do," he said, his thumb brushing my jawline. "I’m not going to be the distraction that ruins you. Go slowly, Yurio. I’m not going anywhere."

The way he said it, in that soft, erotic voice of his, made me wonder why I ever hated that name. I felt so weak when he spoke to me like that. "You say that, but you’re flying back to Japan tomorrow."

"Mm true, but I’ll see you again in Sapporo next week. And then again at the Grand Prix Final."

"All competitions," I complained. "When will I get to see just you?"

"Considering you’re a competitive figure skater, I assume when the season’s over," he said dryly. "If you want, you can come back to Hasetsu after Worlds again."

"I can’t stay away for more than a few weeks," I said sadly. "Is this how it’s going to be?"

"Hey." He cupped my chin and tilted my head up. "I don’t know what I’m doing next season. Even if I stay supporting Minami, I’ll have time to travel in the summer. We’ll see each other often. I’ll come watch you at every major competition I can."

I raised my brow skeptically. "Can you even afford all that travel? Minami doesn’t pay you."

"I’ll think of something," he said, turning away ashamed.

I didn’t mean to step on such a sore spot, but I didn’t know what to say to remedy it. I could offer to pay for his travel, but that seemed like it would just hurt his pride more. I suddenly felt a tiny bit of remorse for pushing him away from his job. I was sure he had some money saved up, but I knew how quickly it would diminish with nothing to replace it with.

"Sorry," I said. "I would like that. If you could." What I really wanted was for him to come back to St. Petersburg and stay, but that was too selfish for even me to suggest. If he expressed interest in becoming a coach I might try to push him in that direction, but as it stood now, it didn’t feel like that would happen.

"Don’t worry, Yurio," he said, taking my hand and using that voice again. "I’ll make sure I’m worth the wait."

Holy shit, I wanted him so badly. But he stood up like he was about to leave, and I dredged up all my willpower to not drag him back onto the bed. The costume. Remember the costume. It was expensive, and I needed it in less than two hours.

"I’m going to check up on Minami," he said at the door. "I’ll see you at the rink." In public, my mind added.

"And tonight?" I managed to croak out.

He winked at me. He honest-to-god winked at me, then left my room. Yuuri Katsuki was going to drive me insane.

But really, how was that different than before?
Shit.

Minami might’ve taken gold.

I sat there and watched, dumbfounded, as he cleanly landed four quads. His choreography and step sequence were explosive. I couldn’t look away the entire time. I watched him beam with pride as he waved to the audience and glided off the ice, picking up some large, squishy plush thing as he did so. I watched as Yuuri and that Thai skater enveloped him in an excited hug.

And then I stopped watching.

I took deep breaths to center myself as I got on the ice. Don’t look at the scores, don’t look at the scores. There was no way for him to beat my record. I glanced up and saw—no record beaten, but a very, very strong score, within two points of the world record. I never expected it from him.

Lilia and Yakov stood close by. They knew by now I preferred not to hear any encouragement; I just drew strength from their presence. Yuuri got up from the kiss and cry and came closer, hovering about two meters away from us. We hadn’t discussed it, but I was glad he decided not to come over just then. I thanked him with a nod, and when the announcer called my name, I pushed away and slid out to center ice.

I could do this.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them again. I saw Yuuri in the distance, and remembered how he’d made me feel earlier. So unsettled. So euphoric. So warm. The seconds ticked by as I waited for my song to start. Were they having trouble? I looked around in the audience, and saw something that made me miss my cue.

It couldn’t be.

I scrambled into the opening steps, easy, easy, something I’d done hundreds of times before. I hadn’t missed anything major. Extend. Let the music push me forward.

I landed my first jump. This was easy. I could do this in my sleep.

Why was he here?

Combination jump—not as clean as I would have liked, but landed with full rotations. Easy, easy. Shake it off. Yuuri’s watching; he thinks you’re beautiful.

More beautiful than *him*.

Combination spin—easy, easy. Another jump—clean. A moment to breathe, and I looked out at the audience again. I wasn’t imagining him—he couldn’t help standing out, even here in Moscow.

Stay away from Yuuri.

I tried my hardest to fall back into my performance, but now that I knew for sure it was him, I couldn’t bring myself back. It was all I could do to push myself into my final jumps. My step sequence lacked my usual flair. As I went into the final movements, I knew I hadn’t beaten Minami. It was a solid, difficult program, but not my best.
My first bronze since my senior division debut.

My fans cried out to me, and at the last moment I decided to go over to a small group of them. With tears in their eyes they placed a handmade flower crown on my head, one that somehow had cat ears attached to it. It was actually kind of cute, even if my dignity took a hit as I wore it over to the kiss and cry. Yuuri smiled at me, but again kept his distance, and I hoped with every fiber of my being that that smile wasn’t about to be shattered by the man sitting in the stands nearby.

My score came in, and I smiled a little for the cameras on me, but there was nothing that could be done. Beka would beat me easily—he had the most consistency out of all of us—but he’d have to give the performance of his life to beat Minami tonight. Even though I was loyal to my best friend, that little fireball deserved every point he got.

Since Beka was at the end of the second group, I had a brief period to myself where I could change out of my skates and gather my bearings. That performance should have hurt more than it did. I knew I could do so much better. But all I could think about was Yuuri, and the man I never wanted to see again.

Unfortunately, he waited for me as I emerged from the bathroom.

“That’s a cute crown,” Viktor said, reaching for it. I swatted his hands away.

“Don’t touch it, old man. You’ll wilt the flowers with your wrinkly hands.”

For a second, he looked surprised. Then his stupid mouth cracked open with a grin, and he laughed.

“Why are you here, anyway?” I chanced to ask. I knew why, but I wanted to hear it from him. “You haven’t been to the Rostelecom Cup in five years.”

“I wanted to see you skate,” he said, disgustedly cheerful. “How disappointing you won’t get gold, though. You really can do better than that.”

“Fuck off. If you were here for me, you’d have been here yesterday.”

His expression sobered, turning almost menacing. “You caught me. I didn’t know Yuuri was here until I saw him on TV yesterday.”

“Yeah, and? Don’t you have a boyfriend?”

“Does that bar me from talking to him?”

“Yes.”

Viktor shrugged. “Then I don’t have one. Hugh isn’t exclusive, anyway. We have fun, but he’s flighty.”

“I don’t need to know the disgusting details of your relationship,” I said. “Leave Yuuri alone.”

He smiled coldly. Sometimes it felt like I was the only person in the world who knew this side of Viktor—as though he’d always known about my feelings for Yuuri, and he reserved his ugly possessiveness just for me. “Is there a reason you’re trying to protect him?”

“Yes, and it’s none of your fucking business. Fuck off and go home.”

“Yurio?”
Shit. I should have known he’d come looking for me. He probably recognized my voice yelling down the corridor, even if it was in Russian. He was all smiles as he turned the corner, but that smile faded when he saw who I was talking to.

“Viktor! I didn’t know you’d be here.” He wasn’t coming any closer. I wanted to put myself between them, to shield Yuuri from whatever the bastard wanted to say, but I couldn’t force my body move.

Viktor’s face fell back into a warm smile. “I wanted to see you, Yuuri. It’s been too long.”

Yuuri stood there blinking, like a scared deer.

Viktor stepped towards him. “Can we go someplace to talk? I know a coffee shop—”

“No!” I protested without thinking. I really didn’t want them going off alone together, even if I knew it should be Yuuri’s decision.

“I actually want to talk to you, too,” Yuuri said, with only a brief glance at me. He had a polite mask on, hiding whatever he felt. “There are a lot of things I’ve wanted to say to you, but never could.”

Viktor’s smile got even wider. “Then, we should—”

“Yurio has to come too, though.”

Viktor’s smile fell into a pout. He went forward and put his hands on Yuuri’s arms. “Why Yurio? I was really hoping we could talk in private.”

Get your hands off of him, asshole.

Yuuri nodded, not reacting at all to Viktor’s closeness. “Private is good, but he comes, too. The things I need to say are for both of you. If you still want to talk to me alone afterwards, I’ll consider it then.” He turned to me and smiled. “Let’s go watch Otabek, and see if I win our bet.”

We went off to find seats in the stands, Viktor silently following us as if afraid Yuuri would disappear if he took his eyes off of him. Viktor was clearly nervous, but most people wouldn’t know it just by looking at him. He smiled at people who recognized him, but he was too stiff. Good. Let the bastard be nervous.

I tried to urge Yuuri into an aisle seat, but he took one next to the aisle, so I sat on one side and Viktor sat on the other. I thought about taking Yuuri’s hand as a silent gesture of support, but it was firmly shoved into his coat pocket, inviting no one’s touch. I couldn’t tell what he was thinking or feeling, and it made me itch. Viktor leaned over and whispered something in Yuuri’s ear, but Yuuri didn’t respond.

Keep away from him.

I was so distracted by Viktor that I couldn’t pay attention to the skating. Even Beka’s program, which I loved, couldn’t hold my attention for more than a few seconds at a time. All I knew was that it was a fairly clean performance, so it would be interesting to see how he measured up to Minami.

Beka’s score came in, and he was just one point shy of Minami’s insane score. So consistently good, damn him. I wondered if anything could shake him enough to hurt his performance.

I stood up. “Have to go to the podium.”
“I should find Minami,” Yuuri said, standing too. He left first, but I lingered, because I saw Viktor getting up about to follow him. I grabbed Viktor by the collar of his coat.

“Leave him alone,” I said in a low voice. “I’ll never forgive you if you hurt him again.”

Viktor shrugged me off and turned. “What did he say to you?”

“Not much, but I knew you two well enough to piece it together,” I said. “I don’t know what you’re planning, but you’re not getting him back.”

“And why do you say that?” he asked, searching my face with interest. “Don’t tell me…”

I averted my gaze and tried to pass him, but he stood in my way. “Move!” I growled.

“Don’t tell me you actually fell for him?” Viktor asked, sounding oddly gleeful. “Oh, you poor kitten. Can you actually handle him? Or do you even know what he’s capable of?”

I felt myself flush. I really needed to get out of here. “It’s none of your business! Now move!”

He stepped aside, laughing. I wanted to punch him in that smug face, just to see if he was as attractive with a bloody nose. If we weren’t in public with so many cameras around, I might have.

I found Beka waiting on the sidelines. He smiled and put his arm around me. “What has your feathers all ruffled? You’re not mad that I beat you, are you?”

I leaned on him, his scent and strength calming me down. “Of course not. I didn’t deserve any higher than I got. Am I ever mad at you for beating me?”

“I thought you might’ve been mad at me for Worlds…” he said. “But really, what’s wrong, Yura? You’re not usually this worked up after a competition. Or so clingy.”

“We have a lot to talk about later,” I said. I heard Yuuri’s voice and turned to see him, Minami, and Phichit talking animatedly nearby. Minami was practically glowing.

“Is this about Katsuki?” Beka asked, following my gaze.

“Sort of. He’s not who has me upset, though.” I reluctantly dislodged myself from Beka’s grasp and straightened out my jacket.

“I like the crown,” Beka said, reaching up to adjust it. “Reminds me of your younger years.”

“I needed something to cheer myself up after that awful performance,” I admitted. He was probably the only person I’d admit something like that to.

“What was that about, anyway? Is it the same thing?”

I nodded. “I promise I’ll tell you everything, but first I have to get through tonight.”

“When do you fly back?”

“Tomorrow evening. We could have lunch, if you want.”

“Sure,” he said. Any other friend might’ve pressed me for more details, but not him. I loved Beka so much. I didn’t deserve him as my best friend at all.

We were ushered out onto the podium. It was strange to share it with Beka and not be next to him,
but I couldn’t be mad at the results. Seeing Minami so joyful and proud made me smile, despite everything that was happening.

After some interviews I said my goodbyes to Beka, handed my medal over to Yakov, and went to find Yuuri. He was caught in Minami’s embrace, and it was looking like he couldn’t get away.

“Good job, Minami,” I said as I approached. “Don’t get cocky, though—I’m beating you at the Grand Prix Finals.”

“Bring it on,” he said, a fire sparking in his eyes. Then, as if suddenly realizing what he was doing, he sheepishly let go of Yuuri. “Sorry.”

Yuuri ruffled Minami’s hair. “Don’t worry. You deserve to celebrate all you can. I’m sorry I won’t be able to join you tonight.”

“It’s okay, Yuuri-kun,” Minami said. “I understand completely.”

“I’ll take good care of him,” Phichit said cheerfully. He leaned in and whispered something into Yuuri’s ear, and Yuuri nodded.

“Thanks.” Yuuri turned to me. “Shall we go, then?”

Once we were a few paces away from the others, I leaned over a little. “We don’t have to do this, you know. We can ditch him and go back to the hotel.”

“I need to do this now, while I can,” Yuuri said quietly. “Don’t worry, though. I’ll be fine.”

“Wait,” I said, and pulled him aside into a tucked away corner. “I just—I need to ask this now. You’re not… you don’t want to get back together with him, right? There’s not a part of you that wishes it had worked out?”

“There’s always going to be a part of me that wishes it worked out,” Yuuri said, his honesty taking me by surprise. “But I don’t want him anymore. We had our chance, and it… well, you know.”

“If… If you did want to try again with him, I would step aside. If it was really what you wanted.” Those words were some of the hardest I’d ever had to say. I couldn’t even look at him, afraid of what he might say.

“Yurio…” I felt him get closer to me, and tilted my head up just in time to meet his lips in a brief kiss. “I don’t want him,” he whispered. “You came and filled the hole he left in my heart, and I like you there. There are a lot of things I need to tell him, but that’s the most important thing.”

Someone came closer, so he stepped away from me, and we started walking again towards the exit. I felt a little relieved, but I still couldn’t shake the anxiety at watching Yuuri and Viktor together again.

Viktor waited for us by the entrance, beaming and waving at Yuuri as if they’d never broken up. Yuuri flushed, but didn’t respond in kind. “Trust me, Yurio,” he whispered before going to greet him. Somehow we ended up going to dinner at an expensive restaurant I knew Viktor went to regularly. It was crowded, but they let us in immediately. I discreetly went to the waiter to tell him that I would pay for anything Yuuri ordered.

“That won’t be necessary,” he said, glancing back at our table. “That gentleman has already given us his card to pay for anything ordered at your table.”

Embarrassed and fuming, I returned and took my place next to Yuuri, who glanced at me with
concerned eyes. I shook my head and picked up the menu. Everything was in Russian. How did Viktor expect Yuuri to order anything?

“I figured you hadn’t had any proper Russian food in a while,” Viktor said to Yuuri. “They have the best golubtsy I’ve ever had.”

I knew that was one of Yuuri’s favorites. Viktor even tried making it for him once, with mediocre results.

Yuuri smiled, giving up on the menu. “You’re right, I haven’t had any Russian food in years. Do they have pelmeni?”

Viktor grinned and summoned the waiter, ordering a long list of foods he knew Yuuri liked. What was his game?

“I wish I’d known we were coming to a place like this,” Yuuri said. “I feel underdressed.”

“You’re fine,” Viktor said. “It’s not like you stand out, next to Yurio.”

Crap. I was still in my costume. I had my jacket on over it, but there was still a very real possibility I could spill on it or tear it. Lilia would kill me if I messed it up.

“Oh no,” Yuuri said. “Is that going to be okay?”

“Maybe you should go change,” Viktor suggested.

I was not leaving because of this. “No. Excuse me for a moment.” I got up from the table and went outside, then called Beka. He picked up after two rings.

“Beka, I’m so sorry, but I need your help. I know you’re probably at dinner with Vira right now, but I wouldn’t ask if I weren’t desperate.”

“Sure, Yura. What do you need?”

“Clothes. I’m at a restaurant right now and I can’t leave, but I’m still in my costume.”

Thankfully, he wasn’t far, having stayed at the rink for interviews, and came by with his wife to take my room key. I went back inside to wait. Yuuri and Viktor seemed oddly comfortable when I returned, making me feel even more out of place.

“Yuuri was just telling me about how you got him to support Minami this season,” Viktor said conversationally. “Seemed to have worked out well, though I guess not so much for you, Yurio.”

Because your ugly face distracted me, I wanted to say, but didn’t. “I’ll get gold in Sapporo,” I said casually. “I wasn’t used to having such steep competition. I wasn’t in my top form.”

“Still must hurt, getting bronze for the first time in your career,” Viktor said with mock sympathy.

I shrugged, letting his words roll off of me. He had an agenda, and I needed to not let it get to me. I felt Yuuri’s hand squeeze my thigh under the table, and that tiny reassurance made everything feel just a little easier.

I sipped at my wine, noticing that Yuuri had an untouched glass in front of him. I wondered briefly if Viktor were trying to get Yuuri drunk. Surely he wouldn’t stoop that low. It was normal to have wine in a place like this.
They continued to make small talk about Yuuri’s life, dancing inelegantly around the subject that loomed over our heads. Eventually Beka came back with my clothes. Bless him and the fact that he rented a motorcycle everywhere he went.

I changed as carefully as I could in the men’s bathroom, putting my costume in the backpack Beka brought everything in. Reluctantly I removed my flower crown, but held onto it, afraid it would get crushed in the bag. It really was lovely. I wondered if I could get it preserved, somehow. I made a mental note to ask Lilia later.

When I returned to the table, there was an awkward silence between the two of them. The food had arrived while I was gone, and they both had their heads down, picking at the things they chose for their plates. I couldn’t handle this.

“I leave for five fucking minutes and now you act like someone died,” I said, snatching a piroshky. “Cut it out already. Say what you want to say and get it over with.”

They gave me identical stunned looks, then shared a smile that reminded me of old times. There. That wasn’t so hard.

Yuuri put down his food and finally sipped at his wine, probably to loosen his tongue. “I just wanted to say that I’m sorry, Viktor, for leaving like I did. It wasn’t fair to you, even though I’m sure you know why I did it.”

“Don’t apologize, Yuuri,” Viktor said. “I messed up. I hurt you. I felt so guilty that I didn’t feel like I deserved to try and make amends. I’m so sorry.”

This was all well and good, but I was mostly concerned with what happened next. At least the piroshky was decent. Nothing like Grandfather’s, but decent.

“You could have made amends, you know,” Yuuri said. “A part of me kept hoping you would. But you didn’t even try to contact me. I figured when you didn’t, I’d made the right decision by leaving.”

Viktor hung his head, but I caught a glimpse of his glassy eyes. “And I’m guessing it’s all too late, now?”

“Don’t you have a boyfriend?” Yuuri asked, his tone seemingly oblivious to Viktor’s emotional state.

“Yes, but…” Viktor wiped at his eyes with his sleeve. Always so dramatic. “He’s nothing but a bandage, and he knows it. I searched the world trying to find someone who made me feel the same way you did, Yuuri.”

“You searched everywhere, except for where I was waiting for you,” Yuuri said in a low voice. “I’m not going to blame all of this on you, Viktor, but you had your chance with me. You had four years’ worth of chances, and the only time you’ve taken one is when I was conveniently nearby.”

“I thought it was fate bringing us back together,” Viktor said.

“Fate had nothing to do with it!” Yuuri’s voice was just a little too loud, and his ears went pink. He lowered his voice and kept going. “The only reason I’m here and not still miserably and pathetically waiting for you back in Japan is because of Yurio.”

“You left, and expected me to come for you?”

“I didn’t expect anything!” Yuuri said fiercely. “I thought my life was over. I thought I would never
think about you, or ice skating ever again. I had a miserable job and a miserable life, and I thought that was all I would ever have, until Yurio kicked down my door and dragged me back to Hasetsu.”

“So you’re saying, that I’d still have a chance if it weren’t for him?” Viktor asked bluntly. I glared at him, but his eyes were transfixed on Yuuri.

“I’m saying that I wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for Yurio, and you wouldn’t have come for me anyway, so it doesn’t matter,” Yuuri said. “Whatever we had, Viktor, it’s long gone. Years gone. Maybe if you’d kicked down my door instead, I would have fallen for you again, but you didn’t. You ended it with what you said that night.”

Viktor pressed his eyes into his hands, clearly trying to grab hold of his emotions. “So all the support I gave you meant nothing?”

“You didn’t support me, in the end,” Yuuri said coldly. “You tried to fix me so that you’d feel better. I loved you more than I’ve ever loved anyone, and when I reached my lowest point, I needed you there beside me. Instead, you resented me. You half-heartedly tried to cheer me up with flowers and other stupid things, and then blamed me when you couldn’t do your best anymore!”

“I’m sorry!” Viktor burst out. “I was stupid, and selfish, and didn’t know what to do.”

You could have started with not blaming your partner, I thought to myself.

“And I was selfish, too, as I’ve been told,” Yuuri said a little more gently, glancing at me. “But the point still stands, Vitya—we messed up, and we both need to move on. I’m not willing to try again. It’s been too long, and our lives are too different. But more importantly, I love someone else now.”

Viktor shook his head. “I should have expected this. Yurio was always pining for you when we trained together.”

“I was not!”

He gave me a cold, level stare. “You were. You were always jealous. You pretended to hate both of us, but I knew that sharp tongue of yours was always for me. You hated seeing us together, because from the moment he danced with you at the banquet, you wanted him for yourself. It didn’t matter that you were still mostly a child then—I knew what you wanted.”

I had an angry response ready, and was in mid-breath when Yuuri stopped me with a hand on my shoulder.

“Viktor, stop,” Yuuri scolded. “This isn’t about him at all, and you teasing him is just wearing down my already thin patience with you. I get that you’re hurt. I get that you’re upset, and disappointed. I was hoping the three of us could talk it through, and maybe be friends again.”

“Like hell I’m going to be friends with him,” I spat.

“I have no interest in seeing you as a friend, either,” Viktor muttered.

“You’re just angry that I know how petty and ugly you can be,” I said.

“You’ve never seen me angry, kitten, and I don’t suggest you try to provoke me.”

I glared at him. “Well you—” I was cut off by a sob beside me. Yuuri had his face in his hands, suddenly crying.
“Move,” he said to me.

I blinked at him, bewildered. “Yuuri, I—”

“MOVE!” he demanded. I slid out of the booth and he pushed past me, rushing out of the restaurant. I could only stare at the door. What just happened?

“Not going to go after him?” Viktor asked, switching to Russian. He drained his glass of wine, his face unreadable.

“He didn’t look like he wanted to be followed,” I said.

He smiled a little. “You have a lot to learn about him. Yuuri Katsuki always wants to be chased. He often hates to lead, but he likes to know that when he does, he’ll be followed.” He looked up at me sternly. “That’s the only piece of advice you’ll get from me.”

I smiled smugly. “I don’t need your advice, old man.” I put my hand on his head, touching that little bald spot I knew he was self-conscious about. His hair wasn’t even that thin.

He grabbed my arm as I was about to gather my things and leave, and regarded me with a sad, tired expression. “Yuri. I know you know how fragile he can be. Please cherish him.”

“I also know how strong he is,” I said, taking my hand back. “He doesn’t need me the same way he needed you. I know he can stand on his own; he just needs someone to push him in the right direction.” I put my crown back on, deeming my head the safest place for it, and grabbed one more piroshky. “Thanks for dinner. See you around.” I shouldered my backpack and went after Yuuri.

I didn’t know which direction he would go. If he wanted to be found, he might’ve gone back to the hotel, but something told me he didn’t go that way. I wandered around for a few blocks until I decided to call in my lifeline once again.

“Yura, what is it this time?” He didn’t even sound exasperated or annoyed. Just curious.

“Have you seen Yuuri around anywhere? I didn’t know if you were still out and about.”

“Yes, actually. I think I saw him run by while we were waiting for a table. He was headed in the direction of the park by the rink.”

“Beka, have I ever told you how much I love you?”

He chuckled warmly. “Once or twice. Do you need me to help you find him?”

“No, I’ve got it. Thank you. I know I owe you like a million favors by now.”

“You owe me nothing. Good luck, Yura.”

I hung up, holding my phone to my chest for a moment, wondering what I’d done to deserve a friend like him. With a deep breath, I set off towards the park.

I wandered around for about twenty minutes, growing less and less confident that he was here. During that time I tried to piece together what had upset him so much that he felt the need to run away. Had he really had such high hopes for Viktor and I being friends? Or was that just the strike that broke him after being so emotionally charged all evening?

Eventually I found him sitting quietly on a bench, huddled in his oversized coat and shivering. It wasn’t that cold, considering it was November, but I knew Yuuri wasn’t as used to the cold as I was.
I sat down next to him, leaving a little space, uncertain if he wanted me near.

“I’m surprised you found me,” he said quietly, his voice a little ragged. He cleared his throat, but didn’t say anything more.

“Why did you run?” I asked, hoping directness would give me better answers.

“I couldn’t handle it anymore.” I waited for him to elaborate, but again nothing came.

“What specifically couldn’t you handle?”

He huddled deeper into his coat, pressing his face into his scarf. “How much I was clearly hurting him.”

That wasn’t what I was expecting. “What do you mean?”

“He’s only that prickly when he’s hurting. He couldn’t direct his anger towards me, so he was taking it out on you. I couldn’t handle watching two people I care about deeply going at each other like that. Especially not because of me.”

I shifted closer until our sides were touching. “Yuuri, he’s always been that way towards me. We tried to hide it from you, but we’ve never liked each other very much. I don’t hate him, and I’m pretty sure he doesn’t hate me, but I think your dream of a close friendship between us is a long shot. He might’ve been hurting because of you, but he was jabbing at me just because I was there to be jabbed.” I let out a sigh. “He was right, though. I was always jealous of you two. Not just because I liked you, but because I wanted what you two had. He saw it long before I even realized it myself.”

Yuuri didn’t say anything, his eyes trained on his shoes as he breathed into his scarf, fogging up his glasses. I slid my arm around his shoulders. “Come on. Let’s at least go back to the hotel and warm up.”

He didn’t respond, but he didn’t pull away, either. I pressed a kiss into his cold cheek. “Yuuri. He’s going to be fine. You will be, too. Maybe you’ll even be friends again someday.” I took the crown off of my head and put it on his. “I promise I’ll tolerate him better when that happens.”

My gentle prodding eventually got him to smile a little, which was the best I could hope for. I’d done the same sort of thing for Beka whenever he was down and quiet, with usually good results. I stood up and reached for Yuuri’s hands, prying them out of his pockets. “Come on, Yuuri. It’s cold. You’re cold. If you’re going to mope, let’s at least do it someplace warm.”

Yuuri got up reluctantly, and gripped tightly to my hand as we walked back toward the hotel. I wondered what was going through his mind. This wasn’t at all what I’d expected our second night together to be like.

But, I supposed, it helped to get some of the drama out of the way early.

I ignored the people staring at us in the hotel lobby as we went to the elevators, Yuuri still holding tight to my hand, as if afraid he’d get left behind if he let go. When we got to my room I sat him down firmly on the bed, then quickly put away my costume so I wouldn’t damage it any more than I already had by stuffing it in a bag. I also removed the flower crown from Yuuri’s head, moving it to a table where it wouldn’t get crushed.

“At least take off your scarf and coat,” I told him after he’d been sitting there motionless for a few minutes. When he didn’t move, I leaned over and tugged his scarf off. “Yuuri. Talk to me. Tell me what’s wrong.”
He shook his head.

I knelt in front of him. “Yuuri, what is it? You can say it, no matter what it is.”

His voice was so tiny it was almost inaudible. “I think I…” But he couldn’t finish the sentence. He started openly crying, and I stood up with a sigh. I could tell what he was going to say just by looking at him.

He tried to get up, as if he wanted to run again, but I held fast and pushed him back onto the bed. He blinked up at me with wet eyes, bewildered.

“You still have feelings for him,” I said simply.

His eyes widened. “But I—”

“But you like me, also. And now you’re confused and ashamed and guilty, and you don’t know what to do about it. If you stay with me, you’ll be hurting Viktor, and throwing away everything you two had for good. If you try again with him, you’ll be breaking my heart and disrespecting everything I’ve done for you the past half a year.” It hurt to say it all, but it needed to be said. I couldn’t leave things in the shadows like that.

“I’m so sorry, Yurio,” he said in a watery voice.

“Don’t apologize to me,” I said, turning away from him. “You feel what you feel. I’ve known this was a possibility from the beginning, because drawing you closer to me was always going to put you closer to him, as well. I’m just glad it happened sooner, rather than later. I’m going to the bathroom. If you want to leave, the door is there. I won’t ask anything more from you—just don’t try to contact me again.” I managed to hold myself together for the five seconds it took me to close the bathroom door and turn on the sink. The water sound drowned out the stifled sobs that tore at my throat. I couldn’t handle this. It hurt so much.

I just wanted Yuuri to be happy. It felt like all I ever wanted. I might’ve wanted him closer to me, but as long as he was happy where he was, I could keep going. But now—now that I’d had a taste of him, I couldn’t fathom seeing him and not being with him. It felt selfish, but the pain was undeniable. If he wanted to be with Viktor again, I could let him go. But I didn’t think I could handle being around him after that, and the thought of cutting him out of my life tore a hole in my heart.

The sobs made me throw up what little I ate for dinner. The acid burn helped mask some of the deep ache in my chest, but I still felt miserable, and the tears wouldn’t stop as I washed the makeup from my face. Brushing my teeth was pain when I couldn’t stop sobbing. I needed Beka. I didn’t want to bother him again—I’d already bothered him plenty tonight—but I knew he wouldn’t forgive me if I failed to call him at a time like this.

I was already working out everything I needed to tell him when I opened the bathroom door, and saw Yuuri still sitting on my bed. He’d even removed his coat, and looked like he’d calmed down a bit.

I dropped my face towel. “Yuuri… you’re…”

He smiled weakly. “I meant everything I said tonight. I don’t want to be with him. It was a little overwhelming seeing him again, but I realized it was just… echoes. I was confused. It felt like I was betraying you, and I couldn’t handle that even a little. I’m so sorry.”

I was frozen in place, like my body had forgotten how to move.
“Do you hate me now?” he asked, tilting his head a little. “I’ll understand if you’d rather… not be with me tonight.”

“I could never hate you,” I croaked out, and tackled him onto the bed with a firm kiss. I pulled away, my loose hair curtaining our faces as I looked into his tearstained eyes. “I didn’t want you to leave.”

He reached up and brushed his fingertips across my cheek. “I didn’t want to leave. Between you and him, I knew immediately I couldn’t give you up. There wasn’t even a question in my heart. I just hope you can forgive me for even thinking about him, because you deserve better than that.”

“There’s nothing to forgive, Yuuri. I knew you didn’t hate him. I knew you had unresolved feelings for him. I was just afraid you’d see him again and remember how happy you were together, because I don’t think anyone can deny that you were.”

Yuuri looked aside. “I did remember. But I also remembered how miserable he made me feel in the end.”

“What exactly did he say to you?” I chanced to ask. “If you’re okay telling me.”

He lowered his eyes, then slid out from under me, sitting huddled in the middle of the bed. “He’d been drinking. Normally that would be enough to excuse someone for saying awful things, but since it was Viktor…”

“He just gets more honest with alcohol,” I said knowingly.

Yuuri nodded. “I hadn’t gotten out of bed all day. He’d tried to coax me out to dinner, but I refused because I didn’t want to be around people, so he went out on his own. I knew by that point I was wearing him down—he hadn’t been performing well, and I learned that he hadn’t been showing up to practice on time, or at all some days. He came home and tried to… to have sex with me. I refused him. I hadn’t wanted it since I fell. I don’t know if he’d already been angry, or if that set him off, but he started yelling at me. I don’t remember everything he said—some of it didn’t make sense to me, because he was slipping into Russian sometimes. But the last thing he said before he left again that night, I’ll never forget. He said: ‘I don’t like this anymore. There’s no love in my life, and I can’t be happy. You’re draining away everything good, leaving me empty and cold. It’s always dark around you, and I don’t know what to do about it. You’re ruining my life.’ Then he went quiet for a few minutes, and left.”

I ached for how sad he sounded. “Wow. And you left the next day?”

“That night, actually. After he left, I packed my luggage and went to the airport. I couldn’t bear what I was doing to him any longer. I bought a ticket for the next flight to Japan. I had twelve hours to wait. I thought, in those twelve hours, he might’ve called me and tried to convince me to stay, or at least apologize for what he said. I was ready to be convinced to come back and work things out. I took his silence as a sign that I really wasn’t wanted anymore, and when it came time to board, I got on and never looked back.”

I embraced him, because after hearing that I had to do something. “That couldn’t have been easy to face alone.”

“It wasn’t,” he said, leaning into me. “And every time I think of my time with him, I’ll remember how it ended. I don’t want to give him a second chance. I want to forgive him, and I want us both to move on. Completely.” He shuddered in my arms. “I’m sorry for being such an emotional wreck. This can’t be easy on you, either.”
“Come on, don’t apologize for that,” I said. “If you’re going to apologize for anything, apologize for making me chase you out in the cold for half an hour.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, though there was a little laugh in his voice.

I squeezed him, then pulled away. “You’re forgiven. Do you need to air anything else out, while we’re both wrung out? Because I have some things I could tell you, just to keep things honest between us.”

“I think that’s all I can really think of,” Yuuri said, settling more comfortably and regarding me with steady, tired eyes. “What do you want to tell me?”

I bit my lip, hesitating. I knew he probably wouldn’t think it was a big deal, but it was hard to dredge up the courage to say it. “Okay. The first thing you need to understand is that—what I’m about to say doesn’t change anything about us, or how I feel about you. This is its own monster, separate from us.”

“All right.”

I raked my fingers through my hair, pulling it back from my forehead. “I love Beka. I call him my best friend because it’s the closest thing I can get away with, but there’s always been so much more than that between us. He’s like a piece of my soul. He and I have been close almost since the moment he introduced himself to me, and I don’t think anything will ever really separate us. His wife went into a relationship with him knowing this, and she’s way more understanding than I have any right to ask for.” I took a deep breath, and released it slowly, my hands trembling a little. “Beka admitted to me that he told you we were together for a while, but sometimes to me it feels like it never really ended or begun. We’re not sexual anymore, but everything else… I guess what I’m trying to say is, if you’re jealous of him, or expecting me to distance myself from him to be with you, it’s not going to work out between us.”

“I don’t mind that you’re close to him,” Yuuri said after a pause, his expression thoughtful. “Though I’m wondering what you’re wanting from a relationship with me if you already have someone to love. Is it just sex you’re craving?”

“God,” I groaned. “No, of course not! I want to be with you because I care about you. I want to be close to you and make you happy. I want you to watch me skate. I want to go on dates with you, and, maybe…” I hesitated, knowing I was getting ahead of myself.

“‘Maybe’?” he urged.

“Maybe even live together someday,” I said, my cheeks flaming. “I know it seems selfish, wanting to have both Beka and you in my life, and maybe I am selfish for it. If you really don’t want to be with me, knowing my heart will always be shared between you two, I’ll understand. But don’t think that I only want you for the physical relationship I can’t have with Beka. To put it like that is ignoring so, so much of how I feel that it’s insulting.”

Yuuri looked at me with a gentle smile. “I didn’t really think that was the only reason you wanted me, but I wanted to be sure. I don’t mind that your heart is shared—I like Otabek. I don’t know him all that well, but I’m glad you have someone like him in your life, and I look forward to knowing him better.”

Relief washed over me, so heavily that I almost wanted to curl up and sleep right then. But I remained upright, because it looked like he had more to say.
“You have a big heart to share,” Yuuri said, sounding almost sad. “I’m a little jealous. I have a hard enough time opening my heart to one person—I would feel so exposed and vulnerable.”

“Because you’ve been hurt before,” I said. “And it’s not just anyone I open up for—I’d trust Beka with my life. I want to build that trust with you, too, if you’ll let me.”

“I’d like that,” he said. His smile faded. “I’m sorry I got us off on the wrong foot tonight.”

“It’s something we would have had to deal with sooner or later, and I’m glad it was sooner.” I plucked at his hair, the messy, springy locks making me happy in a way I couldn’t quite describe. “Stop thinking about it now. I’m tired.”

He flushed and turned away. “Do you want me to go?”

I gave him a disbelieving look. “No, of course I don’t. Did I do or say anything to make you think that? It’s our last night together for a week. At least sleep with me.”

“I’d thought… maybe…”

“Well, you thought wrong,” I said, my patience wearing out. I leaned in close, my eyes on his. “Stay. With. Me. You can go get your clothes or whatever you need, but come back to me. Please.”

“Okay,” he said, sounding relieved. “I—I guess I’ll be right back, then.” He left, leaving me in the silent, messy room.

It was too quiet, so I called Beka while I cleaned up the clutter from preparations that morning.

“Yura, is everything alright?”

“It is now,” I said. “Am I bothering you?”

“No, we’re at a café with some of the other skaters. Vira and Mila are swapping stories about you, and I’ve been trying to defend your honor. I might be failing.”

I laughed. “Well, I appreciate the support, anyway.”

“Are you busy? You should come join us. We’re not too far from the hotel.”

“Not now. Too tired. Just cleaning up and getting ready for bed.”

“Is Katsuki with you?”

“Not right now. But… He’s probably going to be back soon.”

“You’re sure everything’s alright? You sound anxious.”

I sighed. “I’m in too deep, Beka. He’s tearing me open.”

“You know I’ll kill him if he hurts you.”

“It won’t come to that. I’m just… he’s hurting too, you know? All that stuff with Viktor came back to the surface today, and… God. I can’t even imagine how bad it was for him. I won’t go into it now, since I don’t want to ruin your evening, but it hurts me, Beka.”

“Then I’ll kill Viktor for hurting him,” he teased.
“Always so violent,” I scolded. “Anyway, I really just wanted to thank you for your help tonight, and to let you know everything was alright. Sorry again for interrupting your time with Vira.”

“I know you wouldn’t bother me if it wasn’t important to you. Call me whenever you need me.”

“I will. See you for lunch tomorrow. Love you, Beka.”

“Love you too, Yura.”

I sighed, feeling a little better. Beka always made me feel just a little steadier, no matter if he was standing next to me or halfway across the world. I owed so much of my life to his support that I didn’t think I could ever repay him, or even simply convey how much he helped.

Yuuri came back, knocking timidly on the door with an armful of clothes.

“You could have left the door open,” I said, letting him in anyway.

“Did something happen?” he asked, looking at my face. “You look…happier.”

Was I really that obvious? “I just got off the phone with Beka. He brought me clothes and helped me find you tonight, so I just wanted to let him know that things were alright.”

“He brightens you,” Yuuri said. “Like he just washed away some of the damage I did to you tonight.”

“You didn’t damage me,” I said. “But I know what you mean. That’s just the effect Beka has on me.”

Yuuri crossed the room and settled his clothes on the far bedside table. By his silence I knew he was at least a little envious, but I also knew there was nothing I could say to ease that.

Instead, I jumped onto the bed and propped my chin up with a fist, regarding him closely. “You should ask for something from me.”

“What?”

“You won the bet. I know you had nothing to win, but I want you to ask for something.”

“Like what?”

I knew he wasn’t that naïve. I turned onto my back, looking at him upside-down. “Anything within reason.” I stretched out like a cat, and when I glanced up at him again, his eyes had darkened, taking in my form with a hungry gaze. My lips stretched into a satisfied smile.

“I don’t want to ask you for anything,” he lied. “I’ve put you through enough tonight.”

“Put me through more,” I urged him. I tugged up my shirt a little and unfastened my pants.

“I thought you were tired,” Yuuri said, his eyes following my movements.

“I am,” I said, sliding my fingertips under the waistband of my underwear. “Exhausted.” I grasped my slowly building erection, encouraging it a little.

“What are you doing?” His voice trembled slightly.

“Seducing you,” I said, lazily stroking myself. “Come on, Yuuri. I’m going to do this either way—I
won’t be able to sleep comfortably with you otherwise. Either I give you a show on my own, or you tell me what to do.”

His lips parted in a silent breath, his eyes trained on the movements of my hand. I could almost see the switch flipping inside him with the rise and fall of his chest. He swallowed, and removed his glasses.

“Stop,” he commanded. I froze, a little confused. Did he not want to do this after all?

He climbed onto the bed near my legs, straddling my thighs. Oh. He was just doing what I asked. He grabbed my wrist and tugged my hand out of my underwear before pressing his tongue into my mouth. “I can’t have you so far ahead of me,” he whispered, breath hot on my neck.

“Are we playing a game tonight?” I asked, unsure how I felt about that. I knew I almost invited it, but I was hoping for something a little more straightforward than the prolonged teasing from last night.

“I’m too tired for my usual games,” he said. “And we’re leaving tomorrow. Rest assured we’ll do something more interesting after your next competition.” He kissed me again and rolled his hips forward, until I could just feel the throbbing hardness in his pants.

“More interesting?” I asked. I wanted to keep him talking. His voice was like liquid fire in my belly, arousing me more than anything I’d ever heard or seen before.

“Mm.” He was doing something to my neck that made my whole body tingle. “I think we’ll have a fun time figuring out exactly what makes the great Yuri Plisetsky aroused beyond measure.”

“We’re halfway there,” I said, groaning at his attacking mouth. “You already turn me on more than anything else.”

He lifted up, searching my face for sincerity.

“I mean it,” I assured him, sliding my hand around to the back of his neck and pulling him back down until our lips were a mere inch apart. “Keep talking.”

“Who’s telling whom what to do, now?” he asked, pulling up again.

“I’m waiting for my command,” I said.

“And you’re impatient,” he said in a slightly scolding tone.

“Your fault.” I grasped his hips and pushed up against him.

He smiled that sly, silky, sinister smile that I loved, and freed himself from my grasp, sliding off the bed. “Strip,” he told me. “Slowly.”

I wanted to grin at the request, but I could tell he wanted a performance, so I kept my expression sober. My body aroused him, I knew—I’d known since I caught him staring at me in the onsen back in Hasetsu. Back then I didn’t quite know how to feel about it. I was used to being ogled by my fans, but never by someone I wanted to be with, and I briefly feared that he’d only want me for my body. Those fears had dispersed fairly quickly when I saw how he watched me during practice, his steady gaze always assessing me with more than simply lust, and I came to love the feeling of his eyes on me.

His tongue wet his bottom lip as my shirt popped over my head, the gesture subtle but showing his
clear hunger. I slid my pants down my hips slowly, though struggled a little to get them completely off my legs. Was there even a sexy way to do it? Yuuri didn’t seem to mind. My pants finally on the floor, I fell onto my back, saving the best for last. There was a sexy way to take off tight underwear, after all. I fixed my eyes to his face as I grasped the waistband and slowly, gracefully pushed them down. I lifted my legs to finish removing my underwear, giving Yuuri a nice view before I relaxed onto the bed. There was something deeply appealing about acting as his plaything, a feeling I couldn’t quite understand but wasn’t going to question just now. He came forward, putting a knee on the bed, but I stopped him with a hand. “You too,” I told him. “I want to see you.”

He was clearly not used to being told what to do. He seemed almost shy, averting his eyes as he tugged off his clothes in a utilitarian fashion, tossing them aside like trash. Was he ashamed of his body? I could see now he’d put on a little weight since I’d last seen him in the onsen, sporting a small belly that was easily hid by the slightly baggy clothes he wore. But he wasn’t, by any means, unattractive to me. If anything, I took his weight to mean that he was eating regularly again, something I’d wondered if he bothered doing while he lived in misery for so long.

Compelled by his hesitation, I sat up and reached out to him, putting my hands on his smooth skin. I felt no urgency to get off, anymore—I just wanted to make Yuuri feel even half as good as I felt when he set those fiery eyes on me. I kissed his chest and ran my hands down his back, grasping his round ass firmly. As I laved at a nipple, he melted against me with a groan. I entertained a couple of fantasies as I made out with his chest, wondering how it would feel to have him beneath me, writhing and moaning in that perfect voice of his, urging me faster. Perhaps some other time. I doubted either of us came to Moscow prepared, and I wasn’t about to run to a drugstore in the middle of this. I wasn’t even sure if he’d agree to something like that, eccentric as he was, but it didn’t stop me from thinking about it.

Apparently over his apprehension, he pushed me away and back onto the bed, taking over my body. “You’re so beautiful, Yurio,” he said against my neck. “Every inch of you.”

Our hands continued to explore, our passions accelerating slowly but steadily until our cocks were sliding together between our clasped hands, desperately seeking release. He didn’t say much, but he was still vocal, those sensual moans penetrating and electrifying my skin until I felt consumed by them.

He came with a strangled sound, gasping for air as the hot spurts painted my chest. I’d desperately held off my release just long enough to see his face in orgasm, then let myself fall over the edge, my mess joining and tangling with his. He rolled off of me onto his back, chest rising and falling, his face covered with a light sheen of beautiful sweat. I’d missed this last night, falling asleep immediately after he’d finished. Even though I felt the claws of sleep grasping for me again, I fought to stay awake so I could enjoy it just a little longer.

His hand nudged mine, and we twined our fingers together. Despite all that had happened that night, for that moment, everything was perfect.
“Well, I guess we’re leaving,” Yuuri said to me. He’d pulled me aside in the hotel lobby, which was full of people carting luggage around. Phichit and Minami stood nearby, the former making some attempt at conversation with Beka.

I didn’t really know what to say. I wasn’t great with goodbyes, even when I knew I would see him again in a week.

“I’m… thank you,” he said, a little awkwardly.

“Don’t be an idiot,” I said, pulling him against me in a tight embrace. “No thank yous, no apologies. Call me when you get home.”

“But it’ll be late at night,” he protested.

“I don’t care,” I said, pulling away. “Are you going to Hasetsu?”

He nodded. “I’ll be staying there until the NHK Trophy.”

“Good.” He wouldn’t be cooped up in that tiny apartment with Phichit all week. “Definitely call me, then, even if it’s just for a few minutes.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’m…”

“Go on,” I said, nudging him back towards his friends. “I’ll see you in a week.”

His apprehensive face brightened a little. “Yeah. See you.” The three of them, plus Minami’s coach, left the hotel lobby together.

I went over to Beka and leaned on him a little.

“You okay, Yura?” he asked in that deep voice of his.

“Mmm.”

His arm snaked around me. “Let’s go for a walk.”

“Where’s Vira?” I asked absently, letting him steer me out into the cold morning.

“Sleeping in. She knows I’m yours for the morning and afternoon.”

“Don’t want to steal you from her,” I muttered, a half-lie.

“You aren’t,” he said soothingly.

We walked in silence for a while, Beka demanding nothing from me. He knew I would talk when I was ready. I wanted to, but the problem was I didn’t know where to start.

Somehow we ended up at the same park as last night, and everything that happened flooded back to me in a rush. “Viktor was at the competition last night.”

“Is he what distracted you?”

“Yes,” I said. “I saw him before my performance, and I was afraid he would upset Yuuri. I shouldn’t
have let it get to me.”

“Did he?”

“What?”

“Upset Yuuri?”

I sighed. “In a way. But I played my part, too. We all went out to dinner last night, they apologized to each other… I think Viktor wanted to try to get back with Yuuri, but I missed that part because I was changing. Whatever request he’d made, Yuuri wasn’t having it. Eventually Viktor started prodding at me, we got into an argument, and Yuuri…”

“Ran away upset?”

I nodded. “I knew it was a possibility that Yuuri would still have feelings for Viktor, or at least still care about him, but it really seemed to wound him that we were fighting. I think he wanted us to be friends.”

“And you can’t be?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. With anyone but Beka I wouldn’t have even considered the possibility, but his tone carried a weight of expectation, like he knew I could do better. “I don’t want to. I don’t want to ever see him again, after the story I heard last night, because I’m afraid I’ll punch him in the face. He… He blamed Yuuri for draining all the happiness out of him and ruining his life. I know you don’t know him that well, but that is not something you want to say to Yuuri Katsuki. He already has a tendency to blame himself for things that aren’t his fault, and to have confirmation of that from the one who’s supposed to love him…” I shuddered. “I can’t imagine how much that broke him. I’m surprised there was anything left when I went to find him back in April, but I know he’s stronger than most people give him credit for.”

As if sensing my agitation, Beka found a bench and sat me down on it. He sat next to me, close enough so that I could lean on him if I wanted.

“Are things okay now?” he asked me.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It feels like there’s so much still to unpack, and we’ve had so little time together—hardly a full day if you take out the preparation, practice, and competition. Everything with Viktor still seems unresolved, and I know he’ll try to worm his way back into Yuuri’s life one way or another.”

“Maybe you should just let Yuuri deal with him,” Beka suggested. “You say he’s stronger than most give him credit for—give him credit. Let him be strong.”

I sighed miserably. “I know you’re right, but it’s hard. I want to protect him. I want to make sure Viktor never hurts him again.”

Beka smiled. “I’m not used to seeing you so aggressively protective.”

“I’d have done the same for you, but you never seemed to need it,” I said, leaning into him. “You were always trying to protect me.”

“You never needed protection,” he said. “You needed support. Someone to lean on.”

I looked up and saw him grinning, then leaned harder. “Maybe that’s what Yuuri needs. I can’t
protect him from Viktor, but I can let him know I’ll be there if something does happen. If he needs me.”

“He needs you,” Beka assured me. I don’t know how he knew, but he seemed sure of himself, and I wasn’t going to argue.

I took a deep breath and released it slowly, feeling a little better about everything. “I don’t know how I lived without you, Beka. Did I say how sorry I am that I didn’t come to your wedding?”

“Only about two dozen times since we met at the airport,” he said. “It’s okay, Yura. I’m sorry too. I’m sorrier I didn’t call you for months before or after. I knew I should have, but I was being stubborn.”

“I was stubborn, too,” I said distantly. “I couldn’t fathom the idea of letting go of you, even a little bit. Which now seems absurd, since it just kept us completely apart, and now I feel almost closer to you than before.”

“Would Katsuki be okay with this, if he knew?”

“He knows,” I said. “I told him last night. I made sure to explain the separation between how I feel about you and how I feel about him, and I think he’s alright with it. Only time will tell his level of comfort with knowing that we’re like this, but if it comes down to it…”

“Don’t say it.”

“You know where my heart is, Beka,” I said, pulling away to look at his face. “And you know where my soul is. I don’t think he’d ever make me choose, but if I had to, I’d let him go to keep you in my life. He’s not worth keeping if he makes me choose, anyway.”

“It’s not always that simple,” Beka said. “He won’t make you choose. He probably wouldn’t even tell you if it made him uncomfortable. You’ll have to pay close attention to how he reacts, and make sure he doesn’t get jealous of us.”

“I don’t care for jealousy,” I said.

“But the man who couldn’t fathom sharing me with a woman,” Beka pointed out.

He had me there. “But I understood eventually,” I argued. “I came to terms with it. And I get the feeling Yuuri is a bit less possessive than I am.”

“Or he just doesn’t show it as much,” he countered. “Yura, I’m not trying to be a pessimist here, but don’t take everything he says at face value. I think you’re doing well in being honest with him up front, but don’t let your guard down until you’re sure.”

“How does Vira take it?” I asked, curious. “She never seems to mind when I steal you away.”

“Because I’m honest with her about how I feel about you,” Beka said. “That, and she’s a patient person in general, and independent enough to not need me around all the time. She enjoys time to herself. I don’t think I would have fallen in love with her otherwise.”

“You’re really lucky you found her.”

Beka shrugged. “Luck was part of it, but we were together for over a year before I was sure I wanted to marry her.”
“That’s right, you were,” I said. “I still remember when you first told me about her, before you started dating. You were describing her to me—I still don’t know why you didn’t take a picture—and for a while I thought you were talking about me.”

He laughed. “You sure liked to tease me about that. I still don’t think she looks anything like you.”

“Well, she cut her hair, so now of course she doesn’t.” I joked, running my fingers through my own loose hair. I sobered a little. “She’s good for you, though. It’s clear she makes you happy. I didn’t let myself see it for the longest time, and even when I did, I didn’t let you know. I’m sorry.”

“It’s behind us, Yura,” he said.

I still felt guilty about the whole thing. I would probably regret for the rest of my life that I didn’t go to Beka’s wedding. I’d never regret what I ended up doing instead, though, and my thoughts turned back to Yuuri.

“I’ll make sure I pay attention,” I said after a while. “To Yuuri.”

“You already seem to,” Beka said. “And I won’t hesitate to say that I think he’s good for you. He’s already bringing out your caring side. I don’t think I’ve ever seen you so thoughtful towards another person.”

“I’m thoughtful when it comes to you!” I cried indignantly.

He just raised an eyebrow, the corner of his mouth twitching.

I slumped forward. “Okay, you’re right.”

He put a heavy hand on my back. “There’s a reason why I never wanted you to settle for me, Yura. I didn’t mind being your support, but Katsuki brings out your passion in a way I never could. Even now your face has changed, like you’ve had a full-night’s sleep for once.”

Damn him for noticing. I couldn’t deny it, though—I hadn’t slept straight through the night in a long time, not until Yuuri came and slept with me. Even on days I’d completely exhausted myself with training, something would always wake me up in the middle of the night, and my mind would grow too active to fall back asleep. The last time I remembered having regular full-nights’ sleep was when Beka came to stay with me the year after Grandfather died.

We walked around for a while longer, catching up, sharing notes on each other’s programs, and telling stories from our respective hometowns. We still hadn’t run out of things to say even as we stopped for lunch, and when it came time for Beka to return to his wife, I still felt like there were things I should’ve told him.

I’d missed him so much. He had a way of scrubbing out my insides, making all the guilt and shame and stress go away.

And then my phone buzzed to bring some of it back.

yurio

can we talk

I didn’t recognize the number, but I didn’t need to. I could count on one hand the people who spoke
English and called me by that name, and all but one were already in my phone. I’d never deleted his number, but he must have gotten a new one at some point.

Me: why should I please

I sighed. I didn’t really have anything to do until my flight that night, but I didn’t want to talk to him. Whatever he had to say would probably just piss me off.

In the end, though, whether it was curiosity, boredom, or that tiny pinprick of caring for the man that Yuuri instilled in me, I decided to arrange to talk to him. In public, so I could run away if I felt like it. Also so I wouldn’t be tempted to punch his lights out.

He came into the coffee shop looking tired and lost. I wondered if he slept at all last night—he might’ve even been wearing the same clothes as yesterday, but I hadn’t paid enough attention to know for sure. He ordered a coffee first, then sat down with his drink, hardly looking at me.

“Is he gone, then?” Viktor asked. He was clutching his cup, staring down into the black liquid.

“He left early this morning.”

“His skater—he’s going to the Grand Prix Final, right?”

He could have easily looked that up on his own—why was he asking me? “Yes.”

“And you?”

“I still have the NHK Trophy.”

“I see.” He clearly didn’t want to talk about ice skating, so why was he asking?

I bobbed my leg impatiently when he stopped talking, hating that he made me anxious just by sitting there.

His face twisted in pain. “Do you… Do you think he’ll ever talk to me again?”

“Depends on what you want to say,” I said.

“I just—I want to apologize to him.”

“Didn’t you already?”

He shook his head vigorously. “Not enough. I… The things I said…”

“He told me,” I said. “How could you say things like that, to him of all people? Even drunk, you must’ve known how much it would break him.”

“I don’t know,” he said, tears forming in his eyes. “I replay it in my mind every day, and I don’t… It feels like it wasn’t me.”

“But it was you. You destroyed him. He went back to Japan and he stopped living because of you.”

“I know that,” he said in a watery voice.

“You don’t know anything!” I growled. “You didn’t see him! He lost everything he loved in the
span of a few months, and spent the next four years in complete misery. I’d never seen someone so clearly depressed. And, at any time, you could have gone back to him and made up with him. You could have called him, could have apologized, and despite everything he probably would have taken you back.”

“I know!” Tears streamed down his face. “I didn’t feel like I deserved to. He was better off without me.”

“Clearly not,” I said. “But now he is. Even so, he still wants to make amends.”

Viktor blinked, wiping at his eyes. “He does?”

I sighed. “Somehow. He still cares about you. He hasn’t said it, but I know that a part of him blames himself for making you miserable, and he probably wants to make up for it somehow. Even though it wasn’t his fault.” I met his eyes, daring him to challenge that fact.

He didn’t. He hid his eyes behind his hand, but I saw the tears falling onto the table as he shook silently with sobs. I wasn’t going to try and comfort him, but I could feel myself soften a little. This wasn’t a man who was happy with his decisions. I hated him for hurting Yuuri, but it was clear he hated himself enough for the both of us right now.

I sipped at my lemonade, waiting for him to get over this bout of crying. It didn’t take long for him to compose himself, wiping at his red-rimmed eyes with the edge of his scarf.

“Is that all you wanted to know?” I asked.

“Do you think I could call him? Would he pick up?”

“Like I would know,” I said indifferently, then thought better of it. “Knowing Yuuri—probably. Maybe not right away. But you better think long and hard about what you want to say to him if you do call, because if I hear that you upset him again, I’ll fly back down here and murder you.”

He smiled a little. “I understand. Believe me, I don’t want to do any more damage.”

“You still love him, don’t you?”

“I never stopped,” Viktor said. “But I don’t deserve him. He was my absolute treasure, and I broke him and threw him away because I couldn’t handle him when he was so miserable. I was a coward. I couldn’t face what I’d done to him. And then I further ruined things by trying to replace him.”

“Guessing that didn’t work out too well,” I said cheekily.

His eyes narrowed. “No. You know there’s no replacement. Hugh was the closest I’d felt to happiness in years, so I held onto him. But it was too fast and too strong, and he felt stifled by me. I let him go yesterday.”

“Seriously?”

He shrugged his shoulders, slumping a little. “I’m not in a place where I can be a good partner. To anyone. I think Hugh knew it was coming; we haven’t been a real couple for weeks now.”

“You have a lot to figure out, old man,” I said. I certainly wasn’t going to help him.

“I think I’ll go back to Switzerland for a while.”

“And bother Giacometti again?”
“I feel like he’s the last friend I have, and even then, I’ve neglected him,” Viktor said sadly.

I often wondered if anything had gone on between Christophe and Viktor in the years they’d known each other. Before Viktor met Yuuri, they’d usually go off together after competitions, and as a kid I just assumed they were good friends. In the years since, though, I sensed there was more there—not a full romantic relationship, but perhaps a step further than mere friendship.

“Maybe start there,” I said. “And… I don’t think you deserve it, but Yuuri will probably be your friend, if you let him. I know he wants to forgive you, but he needs to know how much you regret saying those things. Make sure he knows you don’t blame him for what happened.”

“I don’t blame him,” Viktor said, his eyes focused on the table. “A part of me did at first—why couldn’t he give me another chance? But I knew—I always knew he wasn’t to blame. That fall wasn’t his fault. His depression wasn’t his fault. My ineptitude wasn’t his fault. My guilt and shame and cowardice weren’t his fault. Sometimes I wonder… If I hadn’t pushed him to keep competing, and just let him retire—”

“That’s not the path you should be going down,” I said. “You can be blamed for some terrible things, but his injury isn’t one of them, so don’t even think about it. He was happier that season than I’d ever seen him.”

“Thank you,” Viktor said, smiling a little. “I know you didn’t want to talk to me, and I can’t blame you, but I’m glad you did. I feel a little better.”

I rolled my eyes. “I didn’t talk to you to make you feel better. Just don’t hurt Yuuri again.”

“It’s the last thing I want,” he said with conviction. “Which is why I feel I should tell you—he has vulnerable spots that you might not see right away.”

I raised an eyebrow, interested despite myself. “What do you mean?”

“Sometimes it’s easy to hurt him without intending to. He has a lot of pride.”

“I know that.”

He tilted his head, regarding me thoughtfully. “You’ve probably learned more than I realize. You’ve slept with him already?”

“That’s none of your fucking business,” I snapped, though I knew my reddened cheeks gave the truth away.

“He’s shy,” Viktor went on, with no reaction to my outburst. “He doesn’t always show it, but he’s immensely shy and self-conscious, even when he’s ‘on’. Too much embarrassment will put a quick end to whatever you’re doing. Too much coddling will, too.”

I narrowed my eyes skeptically. “Why are you giving me sex advice?”

Viktor’s eyes narrowed right back. “Because this doesn’t just stay in the bedroom—it applies to everything about him. And I’m telling you because I want to make sure he’s taken care of. If I can’t be the one, I want at least someone to know what I learned the hard way, and avoid my mistakes.”

“Should you really be giving me advice on how to treat him?”

Viktor sighed heavily, clearly growing impatient with me. It took longer than I expected. “You can disregard everything I say if you want, but if you’ve been watching him all this time, you know
there’s at least some truth to what I’m saying.”

The thing was, everything he said did make sense. I wasn’t aware of the embarrassment thing, but I could easily see Yuuri deflating if things went too far in that direction. And I already knew not to coddle him, so I had no reason to doubt Viktor on the rest of his advice.

But I didn’t have to tell him that.

I shrugged indifferently. “I assume I’ll figure things out as we go. We’ve only done it twice, anyway —there’s a lot of things we still haven’t tried.”

His brow crinkled with frustration—good. Angry Viktor was better than sad Viktor. But was he mad that I wasn’t listening, or was he upset that we’d had sex? I couldn’t tell by his face.

Viktor drained his coffee and stood, straightening his coat and scarf.

“He’s staying in Hasetsu this week,” I said as he turned to leave. “He’ll have plenty of free time.”

His eyes widened a fraction, then he ground his knuckle into my head.

“Ow. Get off me, old man!”

But he was gone a moment later, without a glance back at me.
Friday (2:20 am St. Petersburg, Russia; 8:20 am Hasetsu)

Yurio: (Russian) “Who… What?”

Yuuri: “Eh? Yurio?”

Yurio: (English) “Oh, Yuuri. How was your flight?”

Yuuri: “Long. But I managed to sleep most of the way, so maybe I won’t be too jetlagged. I’m sorry, did I wake you?”

Yurio: “I wasn’t even in bed. I fell asleep on the couch watching a movie.”

Yuuri: “Oh. Was it a good movie?”

Yurio: “I don’t remember. Couldn’t have been too good if I fell asleep.”

Yuuri: “Heh. I guess not. Well, I didn’t want to bother you, but you told me to call…”

Yurio: “Don’t worry about me. I’m usually up this late, but airplanes always tire me out. Even short flights.”

Yuuri: “How was your day otherwise? Did you do anything?”

Yurio: “I spent the morning and afternoon with Beka. And then I… Viktor sent me a text that he wanted to talk.”

Yuuri: “…I see.”

Yurio: “…”

Yuuri: “…Did you talk to him?”

Yurio: “Yeah. We met at a coffee shop and talked a little. Mostly…mostly he was just afraid you wouldn’t want to talk to him. I reassured him, just a little bit. So you might be getting a call this week.”

Yuuri: “Oh.”

Yuuri: “…Was that bad? I can tell him off. I still have his new number.”

Yuuri: “N-no, don’t worry about it. I’ll talk to him. I just… didn’t expect you to tell him…”

Yurio: “…I don’t hate him, Yuuri. I wasn’t going to lie and say you didn’t want to talk to him. Ideally you’ll both talk it out and get over it, so you can move on without worrying so much.”

Yuuri: “Was…was he alright? Did he seem…”

Yurio: “He looked pretty miserable. Oh, he broke up with his boyfriend. That might’ve had something to do with it, too.”

Yurio: “I dunno, something about not being in a good place. Wasn’t paying that much attention—I really don’t care about his life.”

Yuuri: “I think you care a little.”

Yurio: “Shut up.”

Yuuri: “Well, I appreciate you being honest with me, and with him. I hope we can have a conversation that doesn’t make things worse.”

Yurio: “Call me as soon as it happens. I want to know everything. If he says anything to upset you, I’ll—”

Yuuri: “Don’t worry, Yurio. I’ll call you. Viktor can’t do any more damage than he’s already done—I’m not vulnerable to him like I used to be. Not that I think he wants to hurt me.”

Yurio: “I know, but…I’m here for you, alright?”

Yuuri: “I know. Thank you. I should probably go now—Mari-neechan knows I’m home, and she’s dying to hear everything about you.”

Yurio: “Are you going to tell her about us?”

Yuuri: “Maybe. I don’t know, she might die of a heart attack if she knew. Or she might kill me out of jealousy.”

Yurio: “Tell her I’ll kill her if she tries. Or maybe—tell her I’ll never sign anything again.”

Yuuri: “Harsh. I’ll let her know, if I decide to tell her. You get some sleep. Don’t want to be late for practice.”

Yurio: “Yakov yells at me at 6am regardless of how much sleep I’ve had. But yeah, I should sleep. Goodnight, Yuuri.”

Yuuri: “Goodnight, Yurio. Sleep well.”

**Sunday (10:40am Moscow, Russia; 6:40pm Hasetsu, Japan)**

Yuuri: (Japanese) “Hello? This is Katsuki Yuuri.”

Viktor: “…”

Yuuri: (Japanese) “Hello? Is anyone there?”

Viktor: “Yuuri…”

Yuuri: (English) “Viktor? Is that you?”

Viktor: “I’m…”

Yuuri: “…Are you alright? Yurio told me you might call.”

Viktor: “Oh… Are you busy right now?”

Yuuri: “Not at all. How are you?”
Viktor: “…”
Yuuri: “You can talk to me, Vitya. It’s alright.”
Viktor: “I’m... sorry, Yuuri.”
Yuuri: “…”
Viktor: “…”
Yuuri: “…It’s okay, Vitya. I know.”

Viktor: “I don’t think you do. I really don’t deserve your forgiveness after those things I said. Those words have haunted me ever since I said them, and I can’t even begin to imagine how they haunted you.”

Yuuri: “Even if you think so... I don’t think I can be happy knowing that you’re still hurting from what went on between us, so I... I forgive you, Vitya. I know you’re sorry. I’m sorry too, for the things I—”

Viktor: “No, Yuuri. You have absolutely nothing to be sorry for.”

Yuuri: “I’m not letting you take the blame for everything that happened to us. I was awful to you, too. Especially at first—you were trying your hardest, and I wasn’t giving you any of the reassurance you needed.”

Viktor: “I can’t blame you for any of that. You’d lost everything.”

Yuuri: “…But I didn’t lose everything. I still had you, and I took you for granted. Your efforts didn’t feel like what I needed, but I should’ve been grateful for them, anyway. If I’d just been more honest with you, and myself, things wouldn’t have gotten as bad as they did.”

Viktor: “You were depressed, Yuuri. No one can blame you for that.”

Yuuri: “I just don’t want you to shoulder the whole thing yourself, Vitya. Our breaking up was a joint effort. We both needed something the other couldn’t give us, and in the end, it tore us apart.”

Viktor: “…I still don’t deserve your forgiveness, Yuuri.”

Yuuri: “Well you’re getting it whether you think so or not.”

Viktor: “…”

Yuuri: “Vitya, are you alright?”

Viktor: “…”

Yuuri: “Are you crying?”

Viktor: “Of course I’m crying! Even after all this time, you still know how to ruin me.”

Yuuri: “…I’m sorry.”

Viktor: “This is not something to apologize for, Yuuri. I love you. I’ve loved you since we met at that stupid banquet, and I’ve never stopped, even in the years we’ve been apart.”
Yuuri: “Vitya…”

Viktor: “But it wasn’t enough to keep us together, and it wasn’t enough to push me back to you when you needed me. So I just hope… I hope you’re happy with Yurio. He cares deeply about you. Thank you for talking with me, it… I didn’t deserve even this chance, but I’m grateful.”

Yuuri: “I…”

Viktor: “Goodbye, Yuuri. We’ll talk again someday.”

Yuuri: “As friends, next time.”

Viktor: “Friends…”

Yuuri: “Take care of yourself, Vitya. You deserve to be happy, too. I’ll look for you if you disappear for too long.”

Viktor: “…”

[call ended]

Sunday (2:05pm St. Petersburg, Russia; 8:05pm Hasetsu, Japan)

Yurio: “Yuuri, what’s wrong?”

Yuuri: “…how did you know something was wrong?”

Yurio: “I figured you wouldn’t call me during practice unless something was wrong.”

Yuuri: “Oh. Sorry, am I interrupting your—”

Yurio: “Nevermind that. I’m taking a break for lunch. What is it?”

Yuuri: “I just got off the phone with Viktor.”

Yurio: “…I thought so. Well? Did you two make up like you wanted?”

Yuuri: “I guess, maybe… Nothing bad happened, but I just…”

Yurio: “You’re not feeling too great, I take it?”

Yuuri: “Yeah…”

Yurio: “Mm, it’s about… Just after 8pm there, right? Have you eaten dinner yet?”

Yuuri: “Not yet.”

Yurio: “Do that. If your mom’s not busy, ask for a katsudon.”

Yuuri: “But I haven’t… I can’t eat them too often.”

Yurio: “Give yourself a fucking katsudon, Yuuri. I don’t care at all if you gain weight; just keep yourself happy. Eat, have a bath, and sleep early if you want to. If you’d rather not sleep, give me another call. Doesn’t matter if you think I’m in practice or not.”

Yuuri: “I… okay.”
Yurio: “You’ll do it?”

Yuuri: “I’ll do it. Thanks, Yurio. Enjoy your lunch.”

Yurio: “Enjoy your katsudon. Take care.”

[called ended]

**Sunday/Monday (9:35pm St. Petersburg, Russia; 3:35am Hasetsu, Japan)**

Yurio: “Why the hell are you still up?”

Yuuri: “I’m not. I fell asleep before eleven; I just woke up from a dream and couldn’t go back to sleep.”

Yurio: “Oh.”

Yuuri: “How was practice?”

Yurio: “You don’t have to make small talk, you know. You can say what’s on your mind without being polite.”

Yuuri: “…I just wanted to hear your voice.”

Yurio: “…”

Yuuri: “…Yurio? Are you still there?”

Yurio: “Sorry, I was moving to my room.”

Yuuri: “I hope I’m not stealing you away from anything.”

Yurio: “I was watching shitty TV. But I’d leave even if it was good TV.”

Yuuri: “Hehe. Thanks.”

Yurio: “Did my plan help you feel better?”

Yuuri: “Yeah, it did. I relaxed in the bath for a long time, thinking about everything. It feels like I might… I might be able to move on, now. Or start to.”

Yurio: “That’s good. Why couldn’t you go back to sleep, though? Was it a nightmare?”

Yuuri: “…Not—not exactly. A different kind of distracting dream.”

Yurio: “…”

Yuuri: “…Yurio?”

Yurio: “Locking my door. Tell me about it.”

Yuuri: “Eh? Well… Part of it was more a memory than anything. I was watching you do your Short Program again… It might’ve had something to do with the fact that I was watching the video of it before bed. But instead of being on the stands, I was on the sidelines, and after you finished, we… Well, you came off the ice and hugged me. And once we got your score at the kiss and cry, you took me to the bathroom, except it was that same bathroom where we first met in Sochi…”
Yurio: “Yeah? What happened there?”

Yuuri: “…You said you won the bet, and you had me get on my knees there in one of the stalls. Your costume had changed, and somehow you were out of your skates by then, but since it was a dream I didn’t question it. I took you in my mouth… And then someone came in, and I almost panicked, but you held on to my head to keep me still. Then whoever came in started banging on the stall door, and I was so startled I woke up.”

Yurio: “…Fuck.”

Yuuri: “…I was so worked up that I couldn’t fall back asleep. I thought about taking care of it myself, but my phone was right there…”

Yurio: “You made the right choice. God, Yuuri, I… fuck. It’s only been a couple of days, but I miss you. It actually kind of hurts.”

Yuuri: “Yeah, it does. Well, right now it hurts for me in a different way, but I know what you mean.”

Yurio: “…Are you hard?”

Yuuri: “Absolutely.”

Yurio: “Me too. Just hearing you talk in that voice gets me so worked up, I almost feel I could come without touching myself.”

Yuuri: “I wonder if we could make that happen.”

Yurio: “Well it’s too late this time, I’ve already been—”

Yuuri: “Stop. Hold off for now. Put your hand behind your head if you have to.”

Yurio: “More games?”

Yuuri: “No whining, or I’ll hang up.”

Yurio: “…Fine. Hand behind my head. Can I at least take off my pants first? They’re so tight.”

Yuuri: “Mm. Yeah. Leave your underwear on, but the pants and whatever else you want can come off.”

Yurio: “…Okay. Pants off. What about you? What are you wearing?”

Yuuri: “Nothing that’s staying on for long.”

Yurio: “Do you get to touch yourself during this game?”

Yuuri: “Yes.”

Yurio: “That’s unfair!”

Yuuri: “…We’ll see. Alright, since we got to know each other a little better in Moscow, tell me what you like the most about being with me.”

Yurio: “Just sexual stuff, or anything?”

Yuuri: “Just sexual stuff for now. You can tell me the other things later if you want.”
Yurio: “Okay, hmm… Well, we’ve already established I love your voice. I can’t—it’s like I can feel it all over my body when you speak to me that way.”

Yuuri: “Is that so?”

Yurio: “God, yes. It makes me want to do anything you say.”

Yuuri: “Mm. That’s good. Is there anything else?”

Yurio: “I like your confidence. You know what you want and you just… say it. I wish I knew how to do that.”

Yuuri: “You’ll get there. It gets easier with time. You’re even doing a little right now.”

Yurio: “It’s easier when you can’t see how embarrassed I am.”

Yuuri: “Don’t be embarrassed—it’s just me. Now, was there anything you wanted to do while we were in Moscow, but couldn’t?”

Yurio: “…Yes. But I don’t know if you’d be interested. I’m not sure if it fits with what you want.”

Yuuri: “…I see. Why would you think that?”

Yurio: “I don’t know. You seem to have specific things you like.”

Yuuri: “I realize my tastes seem like they might be already established, but I promise I’m open to new things. It’s just… I was with one person for so long, and everything I know about myself was learned through him. I want to learn things with you, too. It’s already so different.”

Yurio: “…Oh. In that case, would you want me to fuck you?”

Yuuri: “F-fuck…? Oh, God, yes please.”

Yurio: “Did you never… have you done it before?”

Yuuri: “Yes, but not often. It wasn’t really our style… But I liked it when it happened. I bet you’d be good at it.”

Yurio: “Ehehe, I don’t know about that. My experience is pretty limited, but I… I really want to. It’s relieving to know you want it, too.”

Yuuri: “Please don’t be afraid to tell me what you want. I know I’ve come across a little strongly, but I—”

Yurio: “I like that about you, though.”

Yuuri: “I’m glad. Just tell me what you want, though. There’s…probably not much that would turn me off.”

Yurio: “I’ll keep that in mind. I wouldn’t mind it the other way, either, for what it’s worth… If you’re interested in fucking me.”

Yuuri: “I’m interested in a lot of things involving you.”

Yurio: “Am I allowed to ask you questions?”
Yuuri: “You’re allowed to say anything you want. Just don’t touch yourself.”

Yurio: “Okay. What about you, then? What do you like in particular about being with me? And was there anything you wanted to do that we didn’t get around to in Moscow? Preferably something we might find time for in Sapporo…”

Yuuri: “Mmm… It was really hard to think around you, sometimes, because I can’t get over how beautiful you are. Your hair, your eyes, your graceful body… Everything just short-circuits my senses. Even the way you smell drives me crazy. I loved it best when you were on top of me, surrounding me… Mm. I want to feel you prepare me… Those long fingers probing inside me…”

Yurio: “Fuck…”

Yuuri: “Yes, that’s the idea.”

Yurio: “Heh. Hey… do you have any lotion, or something handy? You could do it to yourself and pretend it’s me.”

Yuuri: “Would you like that?”

Yurio: “Mhmhm.”

Yuuri: “I can probably find something. I don’t have much, but… Ah. Here’s a bottle. I’ll just take off these pants…”

Yurio: “Get completely naked.”

Yuuri: “…Okay, I am. God, I’m so… I want you so much, Yurio.”

Yurio: “I’m here, Yuuri. Touch yourself. Feel how hard your cock is.”

Yuuri: “…It’s pulsing in my hand. It wants you.”

Yurio: “I want it. I didn’t get to taste it in Moscow—I’ll remedy that in Sapporo. As soon as I see you.”

Yuuri: “Even if I meet you at the airport?”

Yurio: “I’ll drag you into an empty bathroom, like in your dream.”

Yuuri: “Oh God…”

Yurio: “I’ll get down on my knees for you, Yuuri. I don’t care who sees.”

Yuuri: “Haa…”

Yurio: “Are you getting close? Stop touching your cock. Move a little lower. Use some of that lotion you found. Coat your fingers and touch your hole, Yuuri.”

Yuuri: “Mm… Ngh. It’s cold.”

Yurio: “But I know you’re warm. I bet you’re hot all over. I bet you’re starting to sweat with how hot you are.”

Yuuri: “Haa… Yurio…”
Yurio: “Loosen yourself, Yuuri. Open up for me. I bet the lotion’s not so cold anymore, is it? You’re so hot inside.”

Yuuri: “Ha… haaaa… Ngh.”

Yurio: “Do you feel it, Yuuri? Do you feel me inside you right now? How does it feel?”

Yuuri: “Ah… Tight…”


Yuuri: “Nnn… Ah—haaaa…”

Yurio: “Beautiful. You’re so beautiful Yuuri. Fuck yourself for me. I want to hear you.”

Yuuri: “Nng… haa… haa… mmm… haa… Ah—ah—haaa…”

Yurio: “I bet you’re so close now. I bet you’re dripping.”

Yuuri: “Haa… haa… Come with me, Yurio… Want to—ah—hear you…”

Yurio: “Can I touch myself?”

Yuuri: “Haa… Yes… nn… Hurry…”

Yurio: “Nnnn… I’m ready, Yuuri.”

Yuuri: “Mmmnn… Haa… Haa… Ah—! Ngh! Haaaaa…”

Yurio: “Ngh… I’m coming…F-fuck—aaaaaah…”

Yuuri: “Nnnnnn…”

Yurio: “…”

Yuuri: “…”

Yurio: “…”

Yuuri: “…”

Yurio: “Still awake, Yuuri?”

Yuuri: “…Barely. You?”

Yurio: “Same. That was…”

Yuuri: “You’re good at that. I’m not… I haven’t done it quite like that before.”

Yurio: “I enjoyed myself, too. You made the right call, telling me not to touch myself. I’d have probably finished way too early otherwise. Your voice… I barely had to touch myself when the time came.”

Yuuri: “Heh… Patience is rewarded, Yurio.”

Yurio: “So you say. I’m starting to believe it.”
Yuuri: “I should probably clean up and try to sleep a little more. Thank you for indulging me.”

Yurio: “And thank you for doing… all of that. I really do miss you, Yuuri. It feels absurd to say it, considering we’ve been together for about five days now, and we’ve only been apart for three. But I…”

Yuuri: “I know. I feel it too. Can you stay in Japan for more than three days?”

Yurio: “I shouldn’t. The plane tickets are already bought, and if I make it to the Grand Prix Final…”

Yuuri: “You’ll need to practice. It’s alright. We’ll just have to make the best of the time we have.”

Yurio: “…No. I’m going to move my flight back another day, so we’ll have a full day together after the NHK Trophy. It’s not much, but I need a full day with you to myself.”

Yuuri: “Okay. I’ll move my flight too.”

Yurio: “…You have to fly?”

Yuuri: “It would take a full day to travel by train. Over fifteen hours. Don’t worry—it’s not too expensive.”

Yurio: “I guess I never realized how far it was from Hasetsu.”

Yuuri: “Opposite sides of the country. It’ll be cold up there. Speaking of cold…”

Yurio: “Oh. Yeah. Go clean up. Will… Will I hear from you again before I fly out?”

Yuuri: “Of course. When is a good time for you?”

Yurio: “Are you still waking up early? You can call me after your run.”

Yuuri: “Each day?”

Yurio: “If you want. Not this morning, though—I think I’m going to fall asleep soon.”

Yuuri: “Okay. I’ll call you Tuesday morning. Sleep well, Yurio.”

Yurio: “You too.”

[call ended]

**Tuesday (1:15 am St. Petersburg, Russia; 7:15am Hasetsu, Japan)**

Yuuri: “Good morning, Yuuri.”

Yuuri: “Good evening. How was your day?”

Yurio: “…I told you, you don’t have to make small talk.”

Yuuri: “I’m not. I want to know.”

Yurio: “It went about as normally as any day I guess. Feeling a little sluggish tonight. I think I ate too much.”

Yuuri: “Too many piroshky?”
Yurio: “...I do eat other things besides piroshky, you know.”

Yuuri: “Was I wrong?”

Yurio: “...Shut up.”

Yuuri: “Mari-nee-chan finally got me to talk about you last night... She won’t talk to me at all now.”

Yurio: “Huh? Why not?”

Yuuri: “She thinks I’m not good enough for you. She said she liked it better when you were with Otabek.”

Yurio: “...Huh? She knew about that?”

Yuuri: “All your fans did, apparently. Or speculated, maybe—I don’t know for sure. I told her she was probably the first one of your fans to know about you and me, but she said she won’t believe it until she sees it. And now she won’t talk to me.”

Yurio: “Did you tell anyone else?”

Yuuri: “Not yet. My mother noticed that I’m happier, but she might just think it’s because Minamikun won gold. Mari-nee-chan will probably tell her soon, anyway. I haven’t been by to see Yuuko-chan yet, but I want to tell her, and Minako-sensei, if you’re alright with it.”

Yurio: “Everyone’s going to know by the end of the NHK Trophy anyway, so you might as well.”

Yuuri: “Really? Are you planning something?”

Yurio: “Not really. I just know how fast news travels. And... I don’t really have a reason to hide you, unless you’re wanting to avoid any sort of spotlight.”

Yuuri: “Mm, as long as the attention doesn’t steal from Minami-kun.”

Yurio: “I don’t think that’s possible at this point. He’s already qualified for the Grand Prix Final. If it steals attention from anything, it will be my performances.”

Yuuri: “...Are you okay with that?”

Yurio: “Of course. No one’s really had much to say about my performances, lately. No one’s surprised anymore.”

Yuuri: “...Sounds like someone else I knew.”

Yurio: “If you compare me to him, I’m hanging up right now.”

Yuuri: “You should hang up anyway; it’s late. Besides, I would think you’d be used to the comparisons by now.”

Yurio: “...Not from you.”

Yuuri: “...I’m sorry.”

Yurio: “It’s okay, just... don’t. I know the similarities. And I know that dating you is only going to encourage the comparisons, but I’m tired of his shadow looming over me no matter how hard I try to get away from it. I feel sorry for the next talented Russian skater who will probably have their
entire career compared to mine.”

Yuuri: “I didn’t know you felt so strongly about it.”

Yurio: “It just wears me down. I know they don’t mean anything bad by it—everyone loved Viktor, after all—but I’m my own person. I’m not him, I’m not trying to be him, and I’ll never be him. I can’t ask everyone else to stop, but for you… please don’t compare me to him.”

Yuuri: “I won’t. I promise. But you should know that, as someone who knew him better than most people, I do see just how different the two of you are. Aside from some superficial award comparisons, you’re not at all alike.”

Yurio: “…We just happen to have the same taste in men, it seems.”

Yuuri: “Yurio…”

Yurio: “Sorry. I’m not feeling well, tonight. I should go to bed.”

Yuuri: “…Okay, then. Sleep well.”

Yurio: “Thanks.”

[call ended]

Wednesday (12:45 am St. Petersburg, Russia; 6:45 am Hasetsu, Japan)

Yuuri: “…Yuuri.”

Yuuri: “Hi Yurio. How are you?”

Yurio: “…

Yuuri: “Is everything okay?”

Yurio: “…I’m sorry for how I acted last night. You hit a sore spot, but I should’ve been nicer about it.”

Yuuri: “No, no, don’t worry about it. You were in the right. I shouldn’t have even mentioned him.”

Yurio: “You shouldn’t be afraid to, though. I just…”

Yuuri: “It’s okay, Yurio. I understand. I realized yesterday, that shadow you talked about? It’s the same sort of thing that made things difficult for Minami-kun. Only for him, of course, it was my shadow.”

Yurio: “He broke free of it, though. He’s nothing like you, now.”

Yuuri: “And you’re nothing like him, no matter how many people say you are.”

Yurio: “…Thanks.”

Yuuri: “Was your day fine, otherwise?”

Yurio: “I’m exhausted. Lilia’s been drilling me on my more difficult choreography, and while it’s probably good enough to impress the judges, it’s not up to her standards yet.”

Yuuri: “I know it’s meaningless coming from me, but don’t overdo it.”
Yurio: “Don’t worry; she and I both know my limits.”

Yuuri: “…”

Yurio: “…Yuuri?”

Yuuri: “…I want to know your limits.”

Yurio: “…Fucking hell, Yuuri.”

Yuuri: “Heh, sorry.”

Yurio: “No, just… you’re way hornier than I expected you to be.”

Yuuri: “Is it a problem?”

Yurio: “Uh, no. Absolutely not. I just wonder how much I’ll be able to take, the next time we get more than a few days together.”

Yuuri: “That’s where we find out your limits.”

Yuuri: “…I’m going to die, aren’t I?”

Yurio: “Nope. But you might hate me for a little while.”

Yuuri: “Why?”

Yurio: “Tell me you didn’t start to hate me a little, that first night we were together.”

Yuuri: “Hate isn’t the word for it. Frustrated. Do you get off on making me wait?”

Yuuri: “There’s a certain pleasure in it, yes. Mostly what I like is my partner being driven to incoherency, begging me for release because I’m the only one who can grant it. I think… I think it will make you angry. When we get the chance to do it properly.”

Yurio: “I won’t get angry.”

Yuuri: “I think you will, and I want you to. Anger is the way you express your passion. You don’t want to hurt anyone; you just want to growl and scream and let the world know how you feel. You already channel it into your skating—I want you to be angry in bed, too.”

Yurio: “But… why? What’s the point of making me angry?”

Yuuri: “Because anger is a release for you. Sex—for me, at least—is always about release. Letting things go. The pleasure is a wonderful bonus, but it’s the overwhelming calm afterwards that I’m after. That state of mind where everything’s just… gone for a while, and you can’t think about anything.”

Yurio: “So the longer I’m made to wait, the stronger the release?”

Yuuri: “That’s the basic idea, yes.”

Yurio: “What about you, then? It sounds like it’s all about making me wait.”

Yuuri: “I usually deny myself for as long as I can, unless I’m asked to do otherwise. I can’t really describe the way it makes me feel, teasing my partner for a long time. It burns inside me slowly, until
I almost feel like I can’t take it anymore...almost like I’m teasing myself at the same time.”

Yurio: “So have you ever... was it ever the other way around? You getting the teasing?”

Yuuri: “Let’s just say I’ve never been with anyone who had the patience or control to do it properly.”

Yurio: “…I don’t really want to think too hard about it, but I have no trouble believing you.”

Yuuri: “Mmm.”

Yurio: “…Would you want me to try?”

Yuuri: “I’d love for you to try. I’d love for you to try a lot of things with me. I want to find out what drives you insane.”

Yurio: “You’re already driving me insane.”

Yuuri: “Mm, there has to be something else. We’ll find what you like the best, trust me.”

Yurio: “…Yuuri.”

Yuuri: “Hm?”

Yurio: “Is it okay that I’m touching myself right now?”

Yuuri: “We’re not playing a game, Yurio. Sometimes it’s fine to just get off normally.”

Yurio: “Do you ever... by yourself?”

Yuuri: “Of course! All the time. What kind of man do you think I am?”

Yurio: “Okay, okay. I wasn’t sure, because you’re so... unusual, sometimes.”

Yuuri: “…I’m really beginning to believe I came off too strongly, that first night. I might’ve given you the wrong impression.”

Yurio: “It was certainly a memorable impression, I’ll give you that much. And not a bad one. But I didn’t really know what to think.”

Yuuri: “Well, I guess I don’t really know for sure, but I think I’m normal in most respects…”

Yuuri: “You just get off on denial and teasing.”

Yuuri: “More or less.”

Yurio: “Nn... That’s fair.”

Yuuri: “Is it normal to get off while thinking of you touching yourself?”

Yurio: “I wouldn’t know, I don’t think of myself while I’m masturbating.”

Yuuri: “Yurio…”

Yurio: “I like hearing it, though, so who gives a fuck if it’s normal?”

Yuuri: “Nnn…”
Yurio: “…Fuck, I’m so close.”

Yuuri: “Finish, then… Let me hear you…”

Yurio: “Hnn… Ngh—! Aaaaaaaaah… Haa….”

Yuuri: “Oh God, Yurio…”

Yurio: “F-fuck…”

Yuuri: “Nn…Nn… Haa…”

Yurio: “You come, too… I want to hear it again…”

Yuuri: “Nnn… Haaaaaaaaaa… Haa… Haa…”

Yurio: “Heh… That was quieter than last time.”

Yuuri: “Haa… Not as intense… Too many people awake…”

Yurio: “Will you get really loud if we’re alone in a hotel room?”

Yuuri: “Nn… Probably… If you’re good enough…”

Yurio: “Is that a challenge?”

Yuuri: “A challenge I hope you’ll win.”

Yurio: “…

Yuuri: “Yurio?”

Yurio: “Shit, I’m falling asleep. I should… clean up…”

Yuuri: “Alright. Goodnight, Yurio.”

Yurio: “Goodnight, Yuuri. Talk to you tomorrow.”

[call ended]

Thursday (1:07 am St. Petersburg, Russia; 7:07am Hasetsu, Japan)

Yurio: “Good morning, Yuuri.”

Yuuri: “Hi, Yurio. How was your day?”

Yurio: “Eh… You’re going to ask me this every time, aren’t you?”

Yuuri: “Well, it’s probably the last call before your flight tomorrow, so… I guess so?”

Yurio: “Tch. Well, my day was okay, I guess. Mila told Yakov about us, and he lectured me for a while and made me promise not to take next season off to—how did he put it?—‘waste my efforts on getting a hopeless Japanese skater to the GPF’. I told him I didn’t know any hopeless Japanese skaters, and he left me alone after that.”

Yuuri: “Haha. That sounds like something he’d say.”
Yurio: “…I’m not going to stop skating to be with you, Yuuri. I’m not at that point in my career yet.”

Yuuri: “Eh? I would never expect you to. Why this, all of a sudden?”

Yurio: “Because, I… nevermind. It’s not worth talking about now.”

Yuuri: “Yurio…”

Yurio: “Just drop it for now. Did you ever tell anyone else about us?”

Yuuri: “Oh, yeah. I told Yuuko-chan privately yesterday, but I think… I think her daughters overheard. So all your Japanese fans might know about us even before the NHK Trophy.”

Yurio: “Urgh… Well, I guess that’s alright. Might make some of the interview questions annoying, but I’m already bracing for that. What about Minako-sensei? Or your parents?”

Yuuri: “Mari-neechan told my mother a couple days ago, apparently, and I assume my father knows through her. Neither of them have talked to me about it, yet, but I don’t really expect them to. They never said much about Viktor, either. Minako-sensei I told last night, and… Well, I got lectured, too. Not an entirely coherent lecture, considering the alcohol involved, but she made me promise not to disappear again if things went wrong between us. I’ve already made that promise to Phichit-kun, so it was easy enough to make it to her, but…”

Yurio: “You should make that promise to as many people as you can manage. Actually, you should promise me, too. Don’t disappear from their lives if it doesn’t work out between us. I’ll never forgive you if you forget about the people who care about you.”

Yuuri: “…”

Yurio: “I’m not compromising on this, Yuuri. If you can’t make that promise, I’m ending it now.”

Yuuri: “…I promise.”

Yurio: “Good. Now entertain me.”

Yuuri: “Eh?”

Yurio: “I have to pack, and it’s boring. Either entertain me, or hang up so I can listen to some music.”

Yuuri: “So demanding… What do you want to hear?”

Yurio: “I don’t know… Tell me something funny. A story from your childhood, or something.”

Yuuri: “Hmm… from my childhood… Ah, it’s hard to think of something on the spot.”

Yurio: “It can be anything really, just—”

Yuuri: “No, I’ve got one. You know Nishigori Takeshi, right?”

Yurio: “Yuuko’s husband, yeah. We don’t really talk much but I know him.”

Yuuri: “Well, when we were children, he used to bully me around. He was only a year older than me, but back then it made a big difference, not to mention he was just naturally taller and bigger. He thought that I was stealing Yuu-chan from him, and in a way it was true… She and I were huge fans
of Viktor, and we were closer friends because of that. Takeshi didn’t really care for him.”

Yurio: “I like him better already.”

Yuuri: “So one day, I think when I was nine or so, Takeshi finally got fed up with us always talking about Viktor. He stole my magazine that I’d bought with my allowance, and drew all over every picture of Viktor while I was on the rink with Yu-chan.”

Yurio: “Now I really like him.”

Yuuri: “I cried when I found it. I didn’t understand what happened. I couldn’t believe that anyone could do that to Viktor’s face, because I thought everyone loved him. Yuu-chan used her own allowance to buy me a replacement the next day, and Takeshi got mad, stole it from my things, and tore the whole thing to shreds. I got so mad at him that I tried to fight him, but since I was on my skates, I dared him to get on the ice. Normally he could knock me over and pummel me easily, but on the rink he was unable to stay up for long. No matter how hard he tried, I wouldn’t fall over, and I was able to keep kicking him.

Yuuri: “Yuu-chan got scared one of us would get hurt, so she went to get Minako-sensei from the bathroom. I heard later from Yuu-chan that Minako-sensei stood there watching for a little while as Takeshi tried and failed to knock me over. She separated us and took me home, but on the way she told me I should consider skating competitively. She’d never had a student with such good balance.”

Yurio: “Is that really how you got started? Because he tore up your magazine?”

Yuuri: “I could’ve gotten over the first one getting marked on, but destroying my precious gift from Yuu-chan? No mercy. As for me going competitive, it took a little more convincing from Minako-sensei for me to actually want to perform, and I think she’d seen the signs of my talent even before the fight. So it wasn’t the only reason, but I guess it was a start.”

Yurio: “What happened to Takeshi? Did he ever replace your magazine?”

Yuuri: “No. And I’ve hated him ever since. I only pretend to be his friend as part of my ultimate plot for revenge. He won’t see me coming when I finally destroy his life.”

Yurio: “Savage.”

Yurio: “I told you, patience is rewarded.”

Yuuri: “...I fucking love you.”

Yurio: “...What?”

Yuuri: “...”

Yurio: “...”

Yuuri: “...I—I didn’t mean it that way, I just—it just came out, and—”

Yurio: “Yurio.”

Yuuri: “—and I didn’t mean to—to say it like that, really, but I—”

Yurio: “Yurio.”

Yuuri: “...What?”
Yuuri: “I love you, too.”

Yurio: “No, don’t—not like that, I—”

Yuuri: “Shh. Finish packing. I'll see you at the airport tomorrow. Goodnight, Yurio.”

Yurio: “…”

[call ended]
I couldn’t believe I said that. Over the phone. Not even a full week after I’d confessed. The word ‘fucking’ thrown in for good measure.

He’d made me laugh so much I couldn’t think straight. It wasn’t like the words weren’t true, but I hadn’t meant to say them, not when things were still so new between us. I’d long imagined sharing my heart with him in some romantic place, maybe during a vacation in Hasetsu, when the weather was warm but the nights still cool, walking along the shoreline, surrounded by the smell of salt. I wasn’t much for romance, but I figured that, at least, I could manage.

No, instead I just said it over the phone. In response to a joke.

He even said it back.

I felt so embarrassed after he’d hung up that I immediately composed a long text explaining that it was just a sudden thought, not all that serious, and I hadn’t meant to say it— but when I read it over, I deleted the whole thing in disgust. I couldn’t so brazenly deny what I felt about him. We might’ve only been together for a week, but I’d spent years sorting out my feelings for Yuuri, and I knew that love was definitely in the equation.

But did I really have to say it like that?

I’d texted Beka instead, knowing that my embarrassment would feel a little less sharp if I shared it with someone. It hurt to send, but Beka told me he didn’t think there was anything to worry about. If it bothered me, I could just hold off saying it again until a more appropriate time. Taking those words to heart, I actually managed to sleep a little before my flight the next morning.

In the long hours of the flight, I tried to sleep, but instead just ended up thinking of what we might do together. I tried to think of dates or other romantic things, but like a rubber band my mind kept snapping back to sex, and the conversations we’d had over the week. Yuuri was ruining me—I’d never thought about sex so much before, at least not in the terms he’d spoke of.

With Beka, sex had always been about getting off. We’d get horny, we’d make out, we’d touch each other, and at the end of everything, we were friends again. I wouldn’t often think about when it would happen, or how—we just did it occasionally at night, if we weren’t too exhausted from practice. Beka was a good partner, too—attentive, open, occasionally creative, and incredibly sexy when the mood struck him. I really felt the loss of his intimacy when he started dating Vira.

But with Yuuri... Yuuri got me thinking. Not just visualizing sex, but actually thinking about what I wanted, what he wanted, and how best to achieve the goals he set for us. In some ways he was far less straightforward than I was used to, but in other ways he put things in far bolder terms than I expected. He almost treated sex as a way of life, rather than simply a private activity shared between partners, and I could admit to myself that I was a little apprehensive about that. But I was more intrigued than put off. The tastes he’d given me so far left me excited for more.

But anger? Why did he think I wanted to be angry?

It was true that certain things pissed me off easily, and I usually had little holding me back from expressing it. Lilia taught me to channel my anger into skating when the moment called for it, but I couldn’t just skate through it all the time. I could run sometimes, but nothing calmed me down more than some yelling, or occasional physical violence towards an inanimate object.
Our conversations continued to swirl around in my head as I got off the final plane ride, groggy and in a sour mood. I went through the motions, following Lilia without really thinking, watching all the people pass by me in a blur.

But when I stepped out to baggage claim, my eyes immediately gravitated to a man standing off to the side looking at his phone. He glanced up, our eyes met, and without thinking I went to him, putting my arms around him with a poorly held-back sigh.

“Yurio…” he said, his voice muffled against my shoulder. I held on tighter, feeling my heart settle for what seemed like the first time in a week. He somehow still smelled like the onsen.

With a great deal of effort I pulled away, and his smile refilled some of my energy.

“How was your flight?” he asked, shyly reaching out and tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.


“I’ve only been here an hour or so. It was a short flight, which was nice.”

Lilia, who hadn’t gotten much sleep on the plane either, urged us to head to the hotel, and hailed us a taxi. Yuuri had tried to protest the offered ride, saying he was fine taking the train, but I impatiently shoved him into the car before he could get away.

The car ride was awkwardly silent. Lilia sat in the front seat, leaving Yuuri and I in the back, and I had no idea what to do with myself. Yuuri and I shared a smile or two, but most of the time I stared out the window at the completely unfamiliar city. I found myself wishing I was going to Hasetsu instead, rather than another competition.

Lilia pulled me aside as the driver unloaded the car. It was after dark, and I was greatly looking forward to the soft bed that awaited me upstairs. “I don’t think I need to remind you, but avoid anything that could compromise your performance tomorrow,” she said to me in Russian.

“I know.” It was an echo of the lecture she’d given me a few days ago. She wanted me to refrain from sex that would leave me sore, and I’d painfully listened to her concern like the good student I was. There hadn’t even been any judgment or disdain in her tone—I just found it awkward to know that she knew I was having sex again.

She nodded and let a bellboy collect her luggage while I returned to Yuuri.

“Yakov isn’t with you this time?” he asked.

“He wasn’t feeling well, so we made him stay home,” I said. “Didn’t want to risk him getting me sick.”

“I see. I hope he feels better soon.”

I held back a comment that Yakov probably wouldn’t care one way or the other about well-wishes from anyone, realizing at the last second it was unnecessarily negative. I gathered my luggage and led Yuuri inside.

“I take it you came here assuming you’d be rooming with me?” I asked him while we waited in line.
His eyes widened. “Eh? I—I mean, yes, but I can get another room if you’d rather—”

I put my hand in his hair, messing it up even more than it already was. “Don’t be stupid.”

I was rewarded with a sour look that I couldn’t return, as I was called forward to check in. I had intended to show off my Japanese when dealing with the hotel staff, but they addressed me in English, and I was too groggy to switch to my weakest language just to try to impress Yuuri. I asked for two keys for the first time in a very long time, and we made our way up to the twelfth floor.

I could feel a strange apprehension from Yuuri as we entered the room—he seemed a little uncomfortable, and I wasn’t sure what to do to remedy it. I just wanted to wash the airplane off my body and go to sleep, which wasn’t the fairest plan for him, but I knew he’d understand if I asked to refrain from anything intense tonight.

He set his luggage aside and sat at the foot of the bed, looking a little lost.

“You know I was just teasing down in the lobby,” I tried, sitting next to him.

“Oh, I—I know. Sorry, I’m kind of spaced-out.”

“It’s okay. Do you mind if I shower? I feel gross after being on a plane for so long.”

“No, go ahead.” He looked at me almost expectantly, so I leaned in and kissed him gently on the lips before retreating to the bathroom.

I showered as quickly as I knew how, and when I emerged from the bathroom, Yuuri had changed into what I recognized as the sweats he normally slept in. I still didn’t know how to act. I wasn’t nervous, exactly, but I couldn’t figure out how to relax around him. Yuuri, too, looked a little stiff, and I knew that nothing would change until one of us pushed past the awkwardness.

Yuuri was sprawled out on the bed, eyes unfocused as they looked vaguely in the direction of his upheld phone. He smiled timidly at me when he noticed I was staring at him, and without warning I launched myself onto the bed and slid my body closer to him.

“Hi,” I said.

“Hello.”

Careful not to let my damp hair get in the way, I snuggled in close, putting my hand across his chest.

“You’re in my bed.”

He looked a little bewildered, but pleased. “I am.”

“I missed you, Yuuri,” I said, pressing my nose into his shoulder. “Your phone calls were nice, but having you here…”

“I missed you, too,” he said softly, his hand enclosing mine. “Should I ask how your day was?”

I didn’t dignify that question with an answer. Instead I turned my captured hand around, lacing our fingers together. “Listen—about what I said on the phone yesterday—”

“What? Oh.” He smiled a little. “It’s okay if you didn’t mean to say it…”

“I didn’t mean to say it like that,” I said. “But I did mean it. I’d just hoped to say it in person, at a better time.”
He shifted, sitting up a little. “Like when?”

“Like now. I love you, Yuuri.”

“I—love you too, Yurio.” He was flushing all over, from his cheeks and ears to his neck, clearly not expecting this. I knew I probably had a similar blush. I felt silly and giddy and couldn’t help the grin that spread across my face.

I laughed, just for the pure joy of it. Yuuri Katsuki loved me. It was nothing I didn’t already know, but to hear it again in person made it feel more real. Our lips met in a soft kiss, as if to seal our words and make them true.

But he still looked uneasy. I couldn’t let that stand.

“What’s wrong, Yuuri?”

“What? No-thing’s wrong.”

“Don’t lie to me,” I scolded. “Tell me.”

“I—I was just—”

I put a hand to his lips. “Shh. Breathe. Stop being so nervous around me. Just tell me.”

He blinked, then let out a sigh. “I was just trying to figure out how to tell you that I wasn’t… wasn’t really up for anything tonight. I didn’t want to disappoint you.”

“I’m not disappointed,” I said, nuzzling his cheek. “I’m fucking tired. But even if I wasn’t, I’d understand. I’m just glad you’re here.”

His face relaxed into a tired smile. “I’m glad to be here. A week is too long without you.”

“It is.” I reluctantly got up, sighing heavily. “I need to dry my hair, or it’ll be too hard to manage tomorrow.”

“Could I…?” Yuuri offered.

“You—really? You want to?”

He nodded. “If you think I could without hurting you or making a mess.”

“Just brush gently, and work out the tangles from the ends,” I said, and went to grab the hair dryer and my brush from the bathroom. Yuuri sat on the edge of the bed, and I pulled over the desk chair in front of him, plugged in the dryer, and sat down gratefully. I was so tired, and hated the thought of dealing with my hair.

Yuuri was remarkably gentle. I was used to Lilia’s tugging and pulling as she styled my hair, but this was more like a massage, Yuuri using his fingers just as much as the brush to work out tangles. I had to admit, I felt pampered. I closed my eyes, focusing on the gentle attention, and found myself dozing to the white noise of the dryer.

The dryer turned off, and I slowly came out of my daze. “Done already?”

“I think so,” he said.

I touched my hair. It was warm and completely dry, which was more thorough than I ever did
myself. I sighed contentedly. “Thank you so much. It’s such a pain to dry my hair.”

He flushed. “I—I enjoyed it. I think your hair is beautiful.”

“Ah, I wish I could take you back with me just so I have someone to dry my hair every time I shower.”

“I would do it,” he said shyly, and went to put away the hair dryer.

I wanted to kick myself. I’d meant it as a throwaway comment, even if it betrayed one of my deepest wishes, but now I was afraid of what he’d say in response. It was too early to ask him to come back with me. He was still tied to Minami—I was just borrowing him until the GPF.

Yuuri thankfully didn’t say anything else, instead using the bathroom and then crawling in bed. It was still a little early to sleep, but I couldn’t go on much longer. I shrugged off my robe and pulled on a night shirt, enjoying his lingering eyes on me as I did so. But when my head hit the pillow, I almost immediately forgot about everything else, and curled on my side to sleep.

I felt a shift in the bed, and a soft pressure at my back. “Is this okay?” he asked, snaking his arm around my waist.

I murmured my assent and leaned back into him, falling asleep within minutes.

Our morning was mostly silent, but I just attributed it to my own inability to come up with things to say. Eventually he went out for a run, and I began my ritual of texting Beka. My best friend was most definitely still asleep, but I left him some informative messages to wake up to, like how boring my flight was and how awkward I felt around Yuuri.

Yuuri didn’t return by the time Lilia came to find me, and we ended up going to lunch without him. I sent him a couple of texts telling him where we were, but didn’t receive an answer until we were nearly finished. He just apologized without explanation.

Lilia did a costume check, styled my hair, and was just finishing my makeup when Yuuri returned.

“It’s about time,” I said, annoyed, but the bathroom door closed behind him a second later.

“Is everything alright, Yura?” Lilia asked me in Russian.

“I hope so, but I don’t know for sure.”

She patted me on the shoulder and kissed my forehead. “Figure it out before tonight. And don’t ruin your costume.” She left.

“Yuuri, if you’re not busy, you can come out of the bathroom,” I shouted, getting up and putting things away. I didn’t want to come back to a messy room after my performance.

It was a few more minutes before he emerged, looking a little lost.

“Did you eat lunch?” I asked him.

“Oh—er, yeah. Bought something small at the convenience store. I wasn’t very hungry.”
“Where were you for so long? Did you really run the whole time?”

“Not—not really. But I didn’t really go anywhere in particular. I just wandered.”

“It’s 3 degrees outside,” I said incredulously. “Yuuri—is everything okay?”

He blinked, then smiled a little. “Everything’s fine. I just didn’t want to bother you before your competition.”

I crossed the room to stand in front of him. “Where did you get the idea that you were bothering me? I want you by my side, Yuuri.”

He flushed. “O-oh. Okay.”

I couldn’t understand why things felt so uneasy between us. Was it me? Was it him? Was it that we weren’t really compatible, aside from maybe in bed? I thought back on our phone conversations, and how easy it was to talk to him then. Why were things so different now?

“I’m going to shower, if that’s okay,” he said timidly. Why was he timid? Did he still want to be with me? Was I making him uncomfortable, somehow?

“Sure, go ahead.”

The second the door closed, I picked up my phone to text Beka. He hadn’t yet replied to my messages from that morning, but he’d read them, so I knew he was awake.

Me: help

Beka: What’s wrong?

Me: I don’t know what to do about yuuri

Me: it’s so awkward

Me: I didn’t think it would be like this

Me: I don’t know what’s wrong

Beka: Does it have to be taken care of now? You have to skate today.

Me: it’s going to bother me if I don’t

Me: help me, Beka. what do I say to him?

Beka: Did you ask what was wrong?

Me: he won’t tell me anything.

Beka: I don’t know what to say Yura

Beka: if he won’t tell you, and you can’t figure it out by other means, I can’t offer any advice

Beka: what exactly is the problem? It’s awkward, but how?

Me: I don’t really know what to say to him. We’re not talking like before

Me: how do I have a relationship
Beka: you haven’t been together very long

Beka: you spent a week apart

Beka: I don’t know Yuuri that well, but he doesn’t seem to be the most sociable person

Beka: He’s probably used to other people leading the conversation

Beka: You have a strong personality, and he might expect you to take charge

Beka: If it’s awkward, make light of it

Beka: If something is wrong, it will come out eventually

Beka: But you probably just need time to get used to each other

Beka: You once told me that Viktor and Yuuri spent weeks together before Yuuri was comfortable around him

Beka: So maybe he just takes a while to get used to people

Me: you’re probably right

Me: thanks

Me: I feel a little better

Beka: Anytime Yura

Beka: Good luck on your SP today

Me: thank you

I put my phone down, again silently thanking whatever benevolent gods decided I was worthy of Beka’s friendship.

When Yuuri came out of the shower, he wore nothing but a towel around his waist, with a smaller one draped around his neck to catch the drips from his hair. I stared at him for a while, not saying anything, trying to determine specifically what it was that I liked about him. Why I insisted he be with me. Why I wanted him to come back to St. Petersburg so badly.

It was easy to pinpoint the beginning of my feelings, why I fell in love with him in the first place, but what exactly possessed me to move forward was still a little vague. The sex—what tastes I’d had of it, anyway—was great, but it wasn’t why I wanted to be with him. Or, at least, not the main reason. Physically, he was attractive in a cute, familiar way, a way that gave me a warm feeling with a touch of nostalgia whenever I looked at him. His smile brightened me, his laugh was contagious, and his voice could soothe me or make me weak, depending on how it was used. Those were all wonderful things, but they didn’t feel like the thing.

“Did I miss rinsing something?” he asked, breaking through my thoughts.

“Huh?”

“You’re staring at me,” he said bashfully.

I shook my head. “No, you’re fine. I’m just…”
“It’s a little awkward, I know,” he said. “I don’t really know…”

“Yeah… me too.” It felt a little better that he felt the same way, though I still didn’t know how to move forward. “Do you… not want to be here?”

“What?”

“You just—you don’t seem like you’re comfortable around me.”

He didn’t answer for a moment, rubbing his damp hair with the towel and looking lost. “It’s not that I don’t want to be here. It’s that I’m… I’m intimidated by you.”


“Have you seen yourself lately?” he asked, not meeting my eyes. “You’re so beautiful, it hurts to look at you sometimes. I still can’t believe that you want to be with someone like me. It… It felt easier to talk to you on the phone.”

“Yuuri, that’s ridiculous,” I said, going to him. I put my hand under his chin, urging him to look at me. “You’ve known me since I was fifteen. I’m the same as I ever was.”

“You’re the top skater in the world,” he said. “You’re the most beautiful man I’ve ever seen. Someone like me doesn’t even deserve to be in the same room as you, much less date you.”

“Fucking hell,” I growled, and released him. “Someone like you? Do you even remember winning gold at Worlds? You were the top skater once before, Yuuri, and I only got to where I am today by chasing you.”

“I’m not that person anymore,” he said, turning away from me with his arms wrapped around himself. “He died a long time ago. I’m just a sad old man now.”

“You’re not old, and he didn’t die! You’re the same Yuuri Katsuki I’ve always known, you just don’t remember what it was like to be him.” I felt desperate, like my feelings weren’t reaching him. “When I was fifteen, do you know who I thought the most beautiful man in the world was? You. You, out there on the ice, dancing like you were born to do it.”

“Don’t just say things like that…”

I laughed incredulously. “You really don’t know me well at all if you think I would ‘just say’ things like that. I wanted to be you, Yuuri. And now, I just…” I hesitated as everything in my mind slowly clicked into place.

“Just…what?”

“I just want you. I want you here, by my side, in my life. Beside me. Not watching me from afar or putting me on a pedestal. I want… I want something like what you had with him. I know I can’t just ask for that out of nothing. But there was a time you felt hopelessly intimidated by him, wasn’t there?”

“Yes, but…”

“I think we can get past this, Yuuri,” I said, putting myself in his line of sight. “I just need to know that you think so, too.”

He looked up at me, eyes shining a little. “I want to. But I… but you…”
“I can be ugly if you want. I can shave off my hair and binge on piroshky until I get fat.”

A strangled laugh escaped his throat. “Even that wouldn’t make you ugly. But no, I… I think I can get past this. You’re right. It took a little time with him. Do you really want someone like me, though? I’m nothing like I used to be.”

I brushed my knuckles against his cheek. “You’re still you, Yuuri. You’ll always be you, and you’re the one I looked up to. You’re the one I want to see happy. You’re the one I want to be with.” I brought my lips to his in a gentle kiss. “I’m not going to let you get away just because you think you’re not worthy of me. It wouldn’t be fair, since there was a long time where I didn’t think myself worthy of you.”

“Eh? Really?”

“Absolutely,” I assured him. “Granted, it had more to do with maturity and consistency rather than talent. I knew I could catch up you, skill-wise, but I felt like such a child when I’d see you practice. You never seemed to tire. You listened. You kept Viktor in line when he tried to bring his drama to the ice. It felt like, even if Viktor weren’t in the picture, you wouldn’t have wanted anything to do with me.”

“You were a child, then,” he said. “You were so young, and I don’t think I could’ve looked at you as any more than a competitor and a friend, back then. But now…” He hesitated, his cheeks flushed as he looked aside. “You’ve matured into a beautiful man, and not just physically. I’ve seen the way you value and respect people, even the fans you used to find annoying. It’s clear you take your training seriously. And on the ice… You’re everything I ever wanted to be as a skater. You’re amazing, Yurio. It’s just hard to imagine standing by your side when you’re so much higher than I ever was.”

“Stop that,” I said, squeezing his face and making him look at me again. “Quit putting yourself down. Why the fuck do you think I worked so hard to bring you back? Because I want you. You, as you were then, as you are now, and whatever you’ll be in the future. I might not know what to do with you yet, I might not understand what it means to have a relationship with you, but the important thing is that I love you. And I need you, whether you’re able to see it or not.”

“Why do you need me?” he asked, his words mangled by my manhandling. I released him.

“Because, I…” How could I answer that question? “I just… feel like I do. Being apart from you that week was painful to me. Being apart from you for the months before that was torture. And not the good kind.”

His face softened a little, looking at me with understanding. “I’m sorry. I… I’ve been spending too much time in my own head, today. I tend to doubt myself when that happens.”

“Me too. Which is usually why I try to distract myself as long as possible during competitions. Though I guess I am distracted, but not in a good way.”

“Can we change it to a good way?” he asked, his words free of implication, clearly open to any sort of suggestion.

I glanced at the clock. “I need to be down in the lobby in about half an hour…” I let my eyes linger on him again, suddenly remembering that he was wearing just a towel. I grabbed his shoulder, pushed him against the wall, and pressed my lips to his in a hard kiss. He gave just a tiny amount of resistance before relaxing and opening up, letting my tongue explore his mouth. I held him down with one hand, while the other I slid down his side, my fingertips brushing lightly enough to make
For the first time today, I knew exactly what I wanted and needed to do. I pulled back a little and grinned before grasping his towel and snapping it off of him.

“Wha—mmfmmm” I cut off his question with my lips, then sank to my knees.

“What about your costume?” he asked, a little breathless.

“I’ll be careful,” I promised, overwhelmed with the desire to finally taste him. His pink cock jutted out at me, and for a brief moment I just admired it up close, licking my lips a little. With a glance up at his patient face, I gave the shaft a long lick, tasting nothing but skin and the slightest hint of soap. I had to press my nose against the dark curls before I found even a hint of his natural scent, lamenting that I hadn’t taken him before he showered.

I teased him for a while, spreading his thighs apart with my hands and licking all the creases I could reach, but I was a little too eager to do it for long. Someday I would give him the teasing and release he deserved, but not this first time, when I only had half an hour to spare.

When I took him in my mouth he groaned languidly, leaning back against the wall with his fists clenched. I felt my cock twitch. I wanted those fingers in my hair, but it was already braided and gelled into place, and Lilia wouldn’t appreciate having her work undone.

It had been a while since I’d done this, but Yuuri’s cock was remarkably suckable, a perfect size and shape to fill my mouth and throat without making my jaw ache too much. I could see myself doing this for over an hour, under the right circumstances.

“Yurio…” he panted, and I could tell by his breathing he was getting close. I eased off for a moment, generously using my tongue again, but a glance at the clock told me I was running out of time, and my makeup would need to be touched up beforehand.

I relished in his moans as I took him all the way to the base, grasping his hips to keep him still while I worked a quick rhythm. It wasn’t long before he jerked forward and gave a shuddering gasp, flooding my mouth with his semen. His knees gave out when I released him, and I stood to help him stumble over to the bed. His face and chest were beautifully flushed, and I gave myself a mental note to watch him more the next time I did this.

“What about you?” he asked, still a little breathless.

I looked down, noting that my costume left little to the imagination. “There’s not time. I’ll calm down through warm-ups.” When the nerves took over.

“Are you sure?”

“I can be patient,” I said, and watched as his lips twisted into a wicked little smile that made my heart flip over.

He got dressed while I wiped saliva off my face and retouched my makeup, and before long we were at the rink. He and Lilia stood nearby the whole time, and a tiny part of me was glad Yakov had stayed home. Lilia always seemed to hold a certain measure of respect for Yuuri that she never had for Beka or Viktor—probably due to his ballet training—while Yakov still held a grudge against Yuuri for vanishing after his injury. For all that he would probably never admit it, Yakov liked Yuuri, and he’d thoroughly planned to train him through his rehabilitation to ensure that, while his competitive days were over, he’d retain his skills enough to keep performing if he wished.
I, too, had wished that Yuuri would keep performing. But I didn’t want Yakov here to guilt him about it right now.

The wait was entirely too long. I was part of the second group this time, and while I could waste time watching the other performances, I had no emotional attachment to any of the other skaters here. I had my headphones on the entire time, but as usual at this point in the season, the music did little to prepare me. I had it memorized so thoroughly that I could play the entire thing in my head if I wanted to. This was usually where I got complacent and started getting rants from Yakov about paying attention to the details.

Not this time. Yuuri was watching me, and I would give him nothing less than a perfect performance if I could help it. I still heard his words echoing through my head—that I was the skater he’d always wanted to be—and they made me feel more powerful than they had any right to. I could only hope to translate that power into skill.

Finally, it was my turn. I handed Lilia my phone and headphones, and this time Yuuri stepped forward to remove my jacket. The move felt strangely intimate, coming from him, and I turned to face him.

His expression seemed… awed. Understanding better how he felt about me, I let his admiration seep into my skin, enveloping me in a warm feeling I couldn’t quite describe with words.

“For you,” I said simply, and skated off to center ice. I didn’t greet my fans this time. Sorry, this one isn’t for all of you.

The music started, and the few plucks of the violin pushed my body into movement. I could admit that I was proud of the choreography I’d developed for this piece. No one else would ever attempt anything like it, and it perfectly suited my strengths. I wanted this to be the performance people remembered when talking about me years from now, but even if they didn’t, I knew Yuuri would remember. In this moment, he was all that mattered.

I felt my elation building as I cleanly landed each jump, then let that energy flow out to my limbs as I went into my complicated, chaotic step sequence. Every movement felt like my best. Yuuri loved me.

Yuuri loved me.

I let my eyes anchor on him as I went into the final turns, and altered my final pose to reach out to him. I felt myself grinning in that tiny space of silence between the end of the music and the audience’s applause. I didn’t usually grin on the ice—it didn’t fit my image at all, but this time there was nothing I could do to hide my feelings. I bowed and waved to the audience as flowers and stuffed cats flew onto the ice. Even after all this time, they still gave me cats.

At least the cat plushes were cuter in Japan.

Strangely, I saw a large stuffed onigiri fly onto the ice, and I moved to intercept it from the young girl who was about to gather it up for me. I smiled an apology for startling her, and skated to where Yuuri waited for me.

He wiped at his eyes, but it seemed like a futile attempt to hide his tears. I shoved the onigiri against his chest before accepting my skate guards from Lilia. He pressed his face into the thing, and I put my arm around his shoulders and steered him over to the kiss and cry with me.

I almost didn’t care about my score. Yuuri’s reaction was everything to me.
But still, it was high enough to put me in first, and I accepted the hugs from both Lilia and Yuuri in turn while the cameras were on us. I couldn’t gather the courage to kiss him so publically yet. Maybe tomorrow.

There were just two skaters after me, and they’d probably be done by the time I made it back out to the stands, so I didn’t bother with plans to watch them. If there was going to be an upset, I didn’t want to care about it right now.

“Change out of your costume,” Lilia told me when I removed my skates. Yuuri had excused himself to go to the bathroom, leaving me alone with her.

“Why?” I asked. I assumed we’d be going back to the hotel after this.

She didn’t answer, putting my clothes on the bench beside me. She tugged the zipper of my costume down my back, and left the room. What was going on?

When I went back to the waiting area, I saw why. Yuuri apparently wasn’t the only one who’d come from Hasetsu to watch me skate. Minako, Mari, Yuuko, and the triplets were all there, the latter three excitedly talking to Yuuri about something my limited Japanese didn’t allow me to follow. Minako, surprisingly, seemed to be chatting in a friendly way with Lilia, who looked as if she was suddenly lost in a good memory. They all turned to me when I approached.

“I didn’t know you’d all be coming,” I said in Japanese, for the sake of Mari, who didn’t speak English like the rest of us.

“We all flew with Yuuri,” Yuuko said. “But we wanted to surprise you, so we told him not to mention it.”

Still, Yuuri looked a little sheepish, the onigiri still clutched in his hands.

“Thank you for coming,” I said sincerely, putting a hand on Yuuri’s back to reassure him. “Are you taking me out to dinner?”

“That’s the plan,” Minako said. “If you’ll join us,” she added in English to Lilia.

The place they’d chosen was apparently within walking distance, though it was bitterly cold outside. I wished I’d thought to bring my coat, but again, I’d thought we’d go back to the hotel first. The girls all spoke amongst themselves while I walked beside Yuuri, and I couldn’t help but shiver a little at a sharp wind that whipped through our group.

Yuuri removed his scarf and put it around my neck.

“You don’t have to do that,” I resisted weakly, but his stern look put me in my place. It was warm, and I appreciated that it smelled faintly of him, even in the cold air.

“I thought you Russians were supposed to be immune to the cold,” he said, enveloping my naked hand with his gloved one.

“Normally we wear more than a flimsy jacket when it’s below freezing,” I said, my teeth chattering embarrassingly. I leaned into him. “How far is this place? Do you know?”

He shook his head. “It was Minako-sensei’s idea.”

It turned out we were going to a rather fancy French restaurant, one with a menu that I could just barely understand enough to order from. I ended up using my phone to translate some of the dishes,
and helped Yuuri do the same.

Dinner was a pleasant, if a little noisy, affair. Yuuri seemed intent on listening to the triplets’ and Mari’s heated debates about their favorite skaters, and Minako and Lilia appeared to be reminiscing about their work. It had been a little shocking to find out that they had known each other at the height of their careers.

Yuuko, seated on the other side of me, was a little more subdued.

“Is everything alright?” I asked her.

“Everything’s fine,” she said with that charming smile. “I’m just not used to travel or strange foods. Doesn’t agree with me that well.”

“I understand. I used to sort of be that way. Yakov had a hard time getting me to eat anything when we’d travel to other countries. He’d go all around town looking for piroshky, because that was the only thing I’d eat, the first few years I skated competitively. Obviously I had to grow out of it.”

She laughed. “Your coach sounds like he really cared for you. Where is he now?”

“At home, a little sick. Nothing to worry about,” I added hastily, when I saw her concerned face. “He’s old, but not *that* old. He just didn’t want to risk getting me sick.”

“That’s good. I hope he feels better.”

Yuuko was so sweet. When I was younger, I thought I might’ve had a crush on her, for all that she was ten years older than me and married. But I eventually realized the feeling she gave me wasn’t romantic, really, just more of a warm, pleasant feeling.

Almost like family.

“So, you and Yuuri…” she started, then trailed off.

“Yeah.”

“I can’t thank you enough for helping him, back then,” she said quietly. “Takeshi and I were getting so worried. I still worry about him, sometimes, but I don’t know what to do to help.”

“Why do you still worry?” I asked, curious.

“Because Yuuri’s problems aren’t the kind that just go away when he’s happy. He’s always doubting himself, no matter how many reassurances he has.”

I sighed. “I know.”

“I take it he’s already giving you a difficult time?”

I glanced over at him, still talking animatedly with his sister. “A little,” I admitted. “Things are a bit awkward right now.”

“I’m not surprised,” she said. “When Viktor first came to be his coach, there was always this distance between them, because Yuuri couldn’t see himself on the same level at all. It was clear Viktor wanted to be closer, but couldn’t figure out how to bridge that distance.”

“Do you know how it happened?” I chanced to ask.
She pressed her lips together thoughtfully. “It just—did. I know they talked a lot, and spent a lot of time together, but I’m not sure it was any one thing that did it. Yuuri’s just slow to warm up—for just about everything, actually. His relationships, his career, his feelings. If he dives in headfirst he gets too self-conscious and shuts down. Starts doubting everything.”

It made a lot of things Yuuri said earlier today make sense. We had gone in headfirst, and neither of us really knew where to go from there. He, with his self-doubt, and me, with my lack of experience, made for a disastrous combination.

“I’m just glad he’s loving something again,” she went on. “Whether it’s skating, or you, or both, he really needed some love in his life.”

“I don’t think there’s much I can do for him,” I said honestly. “If Viktor couldn’t fix his problems, I’m not sure what I’ll be able to do differently.”

“He doesn’t need fixing,” she said. “He just needs love and support from the right person. Someone to help him remember he’s not alone in the world.”

I nodded, knowing I’d been doing my best to do at least that much.

“For what it’s worth, I think he’s happier now than I’ve seen him in years,” she said. “So even if it’s not perfect, you’re doing something right.”

That thought warmed me all the way back to the hotel. I’d insisted on getting us all cabs, as my thanks to Minako for taking care of dinner.

Back in the hotel, Yuuri sat on the bed holding his onigiri, flushed from the cold but looking happy.

“I wonder why they threw this for you,” he mused.

I shrugged. “Maybe it was one of the superfans who knew that you’re with me, now.”

He hugged it close. “I used to have so many of these…”

“What’d you do with them?”

“Some I left in St. Petersburg. I might have a few at Hasetsu in storage somewhere, from early in my career. Most of them, though, I gave away.”

“I always wondered why they gave you food,” I said, sitting next to him. “I mean, I knew you had the whole katsudon thing, but it didn’t seem like it started with that.”

“Oh,” he said, laughing a little. “It started just after my senior debut, when I was giving an interview at Nationals. They asked me what I planned to do before next season, and I said I was going to eat a lot, since I’d been dieting all season and I was really hungry at the time. The way I said it was apparently really funny to a lot of people, and they played the clip on TV a lot. The next season, they started throwing big plush food like this.”

“You seem to love food a lot, when you let yourself eat it,” I said, wondering if that clip could be found on the internet. “I fully expected you to be fat when I found you in April. But you were skinnier than I’d ever seen you.”

“I didn’t love anything, in those years,” he said, hugging his onigiri close. “I ate just enough, hardly ever drank, and ran every day so I wouldn’t hate myself completely. It’s hard to describe exactly how I felt, but nothing gave me joy. Nothing gave me pleasure. Some days were better than others,
but it was all bleak and meaningless.”

“I will never forgive the man who did this to you,” I muttered.

“It wasn’t his fault,” he insisted. “This… this is me. It’s who I am. That person I was when I was alone… he’s always there, lurking just below the surface, waiting for an excuse to come out. You saw a glimpse of him this morning.”

It hurt to hear him talk about himself like this. I put an arm around his shoulders. “You know who else you are? That crazy man who just spent the last hour happily conversing with twelve-year-olds about figure skaters. You’re also the man who cried at my performance tonight. You’ve made me cry with your performances. So you were depressed—I get that. I’ll still probably mostly blame Viktor for it, because I’m petty. But your depression is not who you are. It’s something you have, something you carry with you, but it never, ever defines you. It just means you need help, sometimes, like most people.” I breathed deeply, releasing some of the tension this heavy talk was giving me. “I was chastised by Yuuko today for saying I couldn’t fix your problems.”

“Wh-what?”

“She said I shouldn’t be trying to fix you. And she’s right—there’s nothing about you to fix. All I want is to make sure you know that I’m here for you, always, no matter where our relationship takes us. Even if, someday in the future, you decide you don’t want to be with me, I’m still going to do everything I can to make sure you never go back to that darkness. Because I care about you.”

“Yurio…” He was crying again, the tears falling freely. I took off his glasses and turned my body so I could pull him against my chest, and wrapped my arms around him tightly.

It was a while before he calmed down, but when he pulled away, he was smiling.

“When I first met you, I never dreamed you’d be so nice to me.”

“I was a little shithead when we first met,” I said. “I still am to most people, but I can’t pretend with you anymore.”

He laughed, and wiped at his eyes. I gently put his glasses back on his face before kissing his forehead. “Let’s start over,” I said. “Now that we understand each other better, there’s something I need to ask you. Something I should have asked from the start, but was afraid of the answer.”

“What’s that?”

“Will you—not right now, but someday soon—will you come back to St. Petersburg with me? I can’t stay away from you for so long and expect to keep my sanity. I know I pushed you towards Minami, and if you think it would hurt him too much to see you leave, don’t even consider saying yes. But I need to know where you stand on this, because it’ll eat away at me until I know the answer.”

His eyes widened. Clearly he hadn’t expected this question so soon. “I—” He closed his mouth, and lowered his eyes, hesitating before speaking. “I don’t know if I can. I don’t have much money, or any training for a job—”

“Fuck all of that. I make more than enough for both of us.”

“I can’t be leeching off of you.”

“You wouldn’t be,” I said. “You’d be coming to training with me, every day, and learning from
Yakov. He thinks you would make a good coach, and I do, too. You just need more experience with it. If you’re not interested in that, I’d bet good money Lilia would help you become a choreographer. You could even be her assistant for a while, since you understand the limitations of skating more than she does.”

I could see his mind working through the possibilities, his hand on his chin as he actively considered this. It was a good sign. Better than the outright rejection I’d mentally prepared myself for.

“Where… where would I be staying?” he asked.

“Wherever you want. I still live with Lilia and Yakov in Lilia’s huge house, and we could easily find a room there for you. Or if you find that too oppressive, we could get an apartment somewhere. Or if you’re not ready to live with me, you can live on your own, and I’ll pay for your rent as long as you keep coming to practice. Oh, there’s one tiny catch, though.”

He raised an eyebrow.

“No matter if you go with Lilia or Yakov, I want you to create a program with me for next season. That can be your payment to me.”

He cringed. “I’m not sure I... It’s been so long…”

“You can, and you will,” I said. “And you’ll have two of the best figure skating resources at your disposal to help you, plus me.” I covered his hand with mine. “Please, at least say you’ll think about it. You don’t have to answer me right away.”

He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. He smiled. “I can’t make any promises until I sort some things out here, but I want to do it. I don’t particularly like showing up on your doorstep with no money and no real job, but I’ve let my pride hold me back before, and I don’t want to do it again. Not if it would keep me away from you.”

I felt my chest swell with hope. “Really? You’ll come?”

“If I can get away with it,” he said. I could tell he was nervous about this decision, but I didn’t want him to be.

I threw my arms around him and nuzzled his cheek. “And here I was expecting to have to beg you.”

“You still can, if you want,” he said quietly, and I pulled away to see his eyes had darkened, just a little.

“I’d rather beg for something else.” I pressed my lips to his. He opened up just a little, and I surrendered, letting him take control.

“You have been patient today,” he said when we parted, pitching his voice lower and melting my insides. He ran a finger from my lips down my throat. “Let’s see how long your patience can last, shall we?”

From one kiss and a few words, I already felt myself get rock hard. God, I was so weak for him.

He first had me strip and lie back on the bed, admiring me for long, silent minutes. He remained fully clothed, his eyes raking over my naked skin as he slowly walked around the bed, sometimes putting his hand on the sheet, but not touching me. I felt so exposed, so vulnerable. He could do anything he wanted to me, and I felt as though I would be powerless to stop him.
I trusted him completely.

“Close your eyes and put your hands behind your head.”

I did so without thinking, that voice lulling me into obedience.

“Keep them closed. We can use a blindfold if you need to, but I’d like to see how well you do without one.”

A blindfold? I wanted to ask what the point was, but something told me I’d understand if I kept silent. He was the expert, at least in this area.

He began with light touches, a brush of fingertips along the sensitive skin of my neck. Those fingertips trailed all over my body, lingering nowhere for long, reaching my shoulders, my wrists, my hips, slowly sliding down to my toes. He worked his way back up to my inner thighs, the touches on my balls and dick excruciatingly light. I wanted more. I couldn’t have more. Not yet.

The bed shifted, and I could feel the heat of his body crowding me. His breath I felt in hot puffs against my neck, smelling faintly of the wine from dinner. He pressed kisses along my jawline, then across my cheeks and in the corners of my mouth. My lips parted in anticipation of a kiss, but he didn’t give one, instead moving down my body in much the same way as before. He took his time, using lips and teeth to nibble everywhere. Were the bites getting more intense?

He left off for a full minute, no doubt testing me to see if I would open my eyes. I didn’t. By now my body was shivering, but not entirely from cold—I felt electrified and sensitive in a way I’d never felt before. When he finally touched me again, it was a hard pinch to my nipple, making me yelp and arc off the bed.

“You’re so good, Yurio,” he said silkily. “So beautiful. So patient.”

I was panting. A bead of sweat traveled down my temple towards my ear, and even that tiny sensation made me tremble. Somehow he noticed it, and wiped it away.

“Lift your head,” he said, and I did it without a thought. He removed the tie that kept my tail in place, and loosened the braids that crowned my head. I hadn’t realized how tight my hair had been until he began massaging my scalp, the tension melting away beneath his fingertips. I moaned with pleasure at the release.

“Beautiful… So beautiful,” he crooned, and pressed a kiss to my forehead. “No thinking, now. Just feel.”

The sensations left little room for thought. He continued his biting and licking, but this time when he reached my thighs, he pushed them apart and positioned himself between them. That wicked tongue wormed its way into my creases, making my body jolt and shiver of its own accord. I was lost to it all. I wasn’t sure I could open my eyes even if I wanted to, for how little control I had.

I began to severely ache for release. I had no idea how long he’d been doing this, because time didn’t matter when you lived on sensations. It felt like eternity. I couldn’t remember before, couldn’t think of after. There was only Yuuri, and his tongue, teeth, and lips on my skin.

He began to feel more aggressive, his tongue probing, his sucks stronger. It hurt. It hurt in the best way, but I couldn’t hold out my longer.

“Yuuri—Yuuri p-please…” My words came out as sobs.
He immediately let off, and I desperately wanted to reach for him, to restore contact. Somehow it felt like my wrists were bound, with the way I couldn’t seem to move them.

The bed shifted again, and his voice dripped right into my ear. “Come for me, Yurio.” He grasped my dick and pulled once, twice, three times, and I came so forcefully I saw stars behind my closed eyelids.

I had no idea the sounds I made. I had no awareness of what my body had done. All I knew was that the release left me boneless and senseless, unable to move or think.

“Yurio… Yurio…” His voice sounded a little distant, slowly growing louder as I regained awareness. “Look at me, Yurio.”

I opened my eyes, the dim lights of the room suddenly too bright. He was over me, straddling my hips, his face flushed and strained with arousal. I reached out with a stiff arm and pulled him down for a lazy, tongue-filled kiss, the best I could offer in my current state.

“Yurio,” he breathed out when we parted.

“You keep saying my name,” I said, my throat drier than I’d realized. “What do you want?”

He seemed to be denying himself for some reason. His cock looked desperate to be free of the tent in his pants, but he wasn’t touching it. I reached out, and the barest brush of the fabric made him jolt.

“I’ll give you anything you want,” I said. It wasn’t quite true, but he knew my current limitations. He wouldn’t want to take the time to fuck me, anyway.

He looked aside. There was something he wanted, but was afraid to ask for.

I pulled his face back to look at me. “Anything,” I said again. “If you can’t ask, just do it.”

His eyes were dark, so flooded with arousal that I actually felt a little afraid. With one hand he pulled down the waistband of his pants, freeing his angry erection. With the other he pressed two fingers to my lips, prying them open and probing into my mouth. I used my tongue to wet them obediently, and he withdrew and used the saliva to stroke his cock.

“Close your eyes,” he said.

That wasn’t fair. I wanted to see. “But I—”

“Now, Yurio,” he growled, and I obeyed. A few seconds later he cried out, and I felt something hot and wet land on my face.

Oh.

He took a moment to regain his breath, and then I felt him climb off of me. A minute later a warm, wet cloth was stroking my face.

“I’m sorry,” he said timidly.

I honestly didn’t know how I felt about it. “Is that one of your things?”

“Maybe. But we don’t have to do it again if you didn’t like it. I only did it this time because you gave me permission. You can probably open your eyes now.”

I did. He moved down to clean the mess off of my chest with practiced care, his face relaxed and
smiling a little.

“Well, as long as you take responsibility for it, you can do it sometimes,” I conceded. “I didn’t hate it. It was just…”

“Well, weird and unexpected, I know. I didn’t even want to ask, but I… I really wanted to do it.”

He finished cleaning me off and returned the cloth to the bathroom. “Do you need anything?” he asked when he came back, then answered his own question. “Water, probably.”

Without me saying anything or even nodding, he brought me my water bottle, and I drank gratefully. “How did you guess?”

He gave me a long look before answering. “Breathing heavily for long periods of time, as well as sweating, can easily leave you dehydrated.”

I wanted to kick myself for not realizing that he’d probably done this many times before with Viktor. He clearly knew how to care for his partner after something intense like this. Did Viktor like having come on his face?

That was a question I never wanted to know the answer to.

Fuck intrusive thoughts.

“Don’t be afraid to say no to me, Yurio,” he said, coming to sit beside me.

“I’m not afraid,” I said, and handed him my water bottle. If I was dehydrated, I knew he had to be, too. He’d done all the work, and probably used up all his saliva.

He shot me a grateful smile and drank. “Just promise me you’ll tell me if I do anything that bothers you. If the teasing gets too intense, I need to know.”

“I think I told you when I was at my limit,” I said, though my memory was a little fuzzy.

“You did, and you were so beautiful,” he said. “I—In the past I’ve been a little more forceful, but I don’t think that’s something you need.”

It was getting annoying, talking around Viktor so much. As much as I hated the idea of hearing about him in this context, it grated more to hear Yuuri so apprehensive about mentioning him. “You can say his name, you know. I don’t care anymore.”

“You’re making an effort, and I appreciate it, but it’s okay,” I said. “I know probably all of your experience with this comes from him, and I get that. I understand. I don’t necessarily want to know everything you two did together, but you don’t have to pretend he doesn’t exist.”

“I’m not going to talk about it if it makes you uncomfortable, though,” Yuuri said, resting his hand over mine. “I think… Well, the reason I am the way I am is probably mostly because of him. A lot of what I do, a lot of what I like, is because of his encouragement. Maybe I was predisposed to it and he just brought it out of me, but whatever the case, I was afraid that I would have trouble breaking the connection between sex and him. And I did at first, I admit. My switch was flipped, and I did things the way I remembered, without really thinking about what you wanted. You didn’t resist, so I thought maybe you just had similar tastes, but I get the feeling that’s not the case.”
I frowned. “If you think I didn’t enjoy what just happened—”

“Oh, I know you enjoyed it,” he said cheekily. “But I also know that you’d probably enjoy just about any sort of pleasure with me. You don’t need these things to get off. But Viktor… he did. Regular sex wasn’t enough for him. It worked at first, when he was dying for it, but over time he encouraged me to do crazier and crazier things, until we seemed to find a place where we were both happy. The games—and there were a variety of them—ended up being necessary. The one I’ve played with you is the one I always liked best, and he liked it, too, but he was always a little more extreme about it.”

“What…” Did I dare ask? “What made it more extreme?”

Yuuri hesitated, his cheeks flushing. “Full bindings. Ankles and wrists. A blindfold. Occasionally toys for sensation, like feathers or combs. A ball gag sometimes. Keep in mind these were all his choices—all he wanted from me was to be in control, and I was. The games would last for hours, sometimes. Sometimes I’d tease him, leave the apartment, and come back some time later. He loved that sort of thing.” He looked a little distant, no-doubt remembering. “And after my injury, I lost my taste for most of the things he wanted. I lost my taste for sex in general, if I’m honest. I still think it was my continued refusal that drove him over the edge.”

My head fell back in a groan. “Yuuri, it was not your fault. He should have—”

“I know, Yurio,” he said, forcefully enough that I closed my mouth. “I’m just trying to say how important it was to our relationship, so much that he couldn’t stand to be with me not knowing when he’d get his next release. He should have stayed beside me, he shouldn’t have said those things. He and I both know this, and I’ve forgiven him.”

I turned my hand, lacing our fingers together. “I would never do that to you. Sex is not so important that I’d get angry for you refusing me.”

“I know. With him, though, all parts of our relationship were so heavily intertwined that when one unraveled, the entire rope came undone. Our coach and skater relationship, our sex life, our daily lives, our love and respect for one another—it all fell apart once I couldn’t skate anymore.” He sighed. “I’ve thought a little more about your proposal, and I don’t think I can be your coach.”

“I never asked you to be,” I said. “You can be a coach, but you won’t be mine. Yakov is the only coach I need until I retire. I couldn’t imagine competing without him.”

“O-oh. I guess I misunderstood.”

“I want you by my side, Yuuri, not above or below me,” I said. “Except in bed. When we feel like it.”

He smiled and leaned into me. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For understanding. For indulging me. For… wanting me.”

I pressed a kiss into his hair. “Of course I do. I only regret not coming to you sooner.”

“All that matters is that you came at all.”
Yurio

I took gold at the NHK Trophy.

It wasn’t as easy as I’d anticipated—a couple of the skaters pulled really high scores in the Free Skate, but with Yuuri at my side, I was in top form.

Even with my excitement in celebration, though, I couldn’t kiss him in front of the cameras. It didn’t feel right. Viktor and Yuuri’s relationship had been incredibly public, but I wasn’t really comfortable with letting the world know just yet. They could speculate, and I wouldn’t deny it if asked, but I didn’t want it to be what everyone talked about. I still wanted people to pay attention to my skating, at least until the Grand Prix Finals.

We celebrated one more time with the Hasetsu crowd, this time at a place that served katsudon, at my request. It couldn’t compare with Hiroko’s, but hers often had the strong advantage of coming after a long bath in the onsen, two pillars of paradise for me.

Lilia had declined to come, wanting to rest before her flight home in the morning.

Yuuri drank a little more than last night, apparently really enjoying the beer. He got into an argument with Minako in slurred Japanese I couldn’t easily follow, though the English word “choreographer” came up a couple of times. Yuuko took the triplets back to the hotel, since they too had an early flight, and I made sure to thank them for coming all that way to see me.

While it was tempting to be reintroduced to the living legend that was drunk Yuuri, I responsibly cut off his alcohol and put water in front of him instead. Minako held no such restraint with Mari, and the two of them got into an argument about up and coming skaters. Yuuri and I ended up leaving without them, though not without leaving behind enough money with the host to ensure they got a cab safely back to the hotel.

Yuuri wasn’t entirely gone, but he was drunk enough to lean on me as we got out of the cab and made our way through the lobby. I deposited him on the bed in our hotel room before going to untie my hair and wash off my makeup.

“Yuuuriiiooo,” he slurred, leaning against the doorframe of the bathroom. His cheeks were flushed with drink, his eyes a little clouded.

“Do you need to use the toilet?” I asked, inwardly grimacing at the thought of him throwing up.

“I’m not that drunk,” he insisted. “You just take too long. Come to bed with me.”

“For someone who lectured me about patience, you’re being awfully impatient,” I pointed out, wiping at my face.

He came to stand behind me, wrapping his arms around my torso and leaning against my back. His breath came in hot puffs along the back of my neck, raising goosebumps. “I want you to fuck me,” he said, his voice dripping with almost cartoonish seduction. I hated that it still worked on me. “Can you do that for me, Yurio?”

“Maybe,” I said, keeping my voice firm over my quickly growing arousal. “If you sober up a little.”

He made a whining sound and started kissing my neck. “Why are you so cruel?”
I patted his head and gently pushed him away. “Go drink some water.”

He clung to me again, and I pointedly ignored him.

“Yuuriiiiooo…”

“Go away,” I told him, rinsing my face.

“Whyyyy? I thought you wanted to…”

I sighed, prying his arms off of me. I turned to meet his eyes. He wasn’t that drunk, I could tell; there was definite awareness and sincerity in his pleas, but I didn’t want it this way. “I do want to. But I want you to remember this in the morning, and for that, I need you a little more sober.”

His eyes darkened. “There are other ways of making me remember in the morning.”

I leaned in close, just a couple of inches from his face. “I want you to remember everything. I want you to remember my face, the way I prepare you, everything I say to you. Of course you’ll feel it in the morning, but I don’t want you to forget what led to that feeling. Go sober up. We’ll wait half an hour.”

It might not have been much time, but it was all I could probably stand. I could tell he wanted to argue further, and with enough persuasion he could have gotten me to bed earlier than that. But setting a limit, a goal, seemed to work for him.

It didn’t work as well for me.

After I’d finished in the bathroom, I had to come up with my own distractions to keep my eyes off of Yuuri. I stared at my phone, unable to really absorb anything I was reading. The articles spoke of my advancement to the Grand Prix Finals, but the words just passed right through me. I kept thinking about Yuuri instead, his body, his eagerness, his face glancing at me with open anticipation and wanting. It made me ache to wait.

Eventually, an excruciating twenty minutes had passed, and I decided it would be worth it to dig out the things we might need. I presumed Yuuri brought similar things, but he’d done little except bob his leg up and down impatiently while drinking water, so I took it upon myself to get out the lube and condoms, as well as a small towel from the bathroom.

“Is sex while I’m drunk really so bad?” he blurted.

“I mean, I’m not going to mess with you if I don’t think you’re capable of saying no,” I said.

“But even if I was?”

I sighed. “You’re a horny, rowdy, energetic drunk. I know. I wouldn’t care so much except that it’s the first time we get to do this, and I want to get it right. I want you to remember. I don’t care if you drink, and I don’t care if you want to fool around after. If it’s not during competitions I might even join you. Just not this time.”

“Mmm, I wonder what drunk Yurio is like…”

I cringed. “Ask Beka. I don’t actually know.”

“I think I’ll leave it a surprise for later,” he said. He took off his shirt and laid back on the bed, gazing up at me.
I glanced at the clock. “Still have seven minutes.”

“You didn’t say I couldn’t get ready.” God, he was silly. But as he undid his pants and slowly slid everything—underwear and jeans together—down past his hips, I couldn’t help a sharp, audible intake of breath. He wore nothing but his glasses now, and he looked so vulnerable and wanting I thought I might not be able to make it.

Five more minutes. Damn.

He lazily stroked himself, watching me with those dark eyes and clearly trying to seduce me into giving up early. He slowly wet his lips, biting them a little, making them pink and shiny and so fucking kissable I almost leaned over right then.

Even when he so clearly wanted to be fucked, Yuuri Katsuki was still trying to take control.

I wasn’t going to lose.

I was going to make him come undone, relinquish his control and give everything to me, like he’d done to me twice now. I just had to wait.

Three minutes… two minutes… one minute…

He looked at the clock. “That was thirty minutes,” he informed me.

As if I didn’t know.

I ignored him and started removing my clothes slowly, one piece at a time, my back towards him. I could see his confused expression in the mirror.

“Come on, Yurio,” he whined. Good to know his resolve was just a little weaker than mine was.

Well, I wasn’t going to be cruel about it.

He sat up, and I climbed into his lap, leaning down to accept the kisses he’d tempted me with. The water had washed all but the slightest taste of beer out of his mouth, which I was a little grateful for. He freely explored my body with his hands while we kissed, massaging my back, grasping my ass, raking his fingers across my thighs. I buried my fingers in his fluffy, messy hair, our breath fogging up his glasses.

He made a sound of pleasure that I echoed, and I leaned my head back to give him the neck access he sought. Any thoughts of being in control flew out of my head. This was just us, no games, the chaos of two bodies coming together seeking mutual pleasure.

The alcohol made him less self-conscious, I could tell, and I loved it. He was confident but not overbearing, accepting pleasure as aggressively as he gave it. He didn’t resist as I pushed him onto his back and slid off to his side, looking down on him with affection.

He gazed up at me, a tiny, apprehensive smile on his flushed face. I captured his hand, placing kisses along his knuckles.

“Relax,” I urged, giving him his hand back. I reached over to the bedside table and opened the little bottle of lube, squeezing some out and warming it with my hand. I watched his face closely for any resistance, but he seemed to take my request to heart, lowering his eyes and breathing steadily. I lowered myself to his side, slid my slippery hand between his legs, and continued kissing him, keeping our lips locked as he jolted and whimpered at my probing.
“Please… Yurio…” he panted.

I loved this. I loved him. He was warm and accepting and cute and beautiful and sexy all at once, everything I’d ever dreamed he’d be and so much more. Deep, unnameable emotions swelled in my chest as I worked him open, almost overcoming my arousal. I shifted over, positioning myself between his legs, and wiped my messy hand on the towel before grabbing the condom I’d set aside.

I warmed more lube with my hand, slicked myself generously, and pushed his thighs apart. I gave him a questioning look that he answered with a nod, his bottom lip disappearing into his mouth in anticipation. I slowly, carefully, pushed myself in.

I’d only done this a handful of times before. My time with Beka didn’t even last a full year, and most of the time we were too lazy to do much but get each other off. When we fucked, it was usually him inside me, though it had nothing to do with the fact that he was broader and stronger. The first time I’d fucked him, he made the mistake of trying to practice the next day, and humiliated himself when he couldn’t work through the soreness in his ass. It wasn’t as much of a problem for me, since I was better at working through aches, so our positions were entirely for practical reasons. I still took the opportunity when I could, because I loved it, but I couldn’t lay claim to much experience in this area.

Even so, Yuuri didn’t seem to mind my going slow. He gritted his teeth as I entered, but once I was inside, he visibly relaxed.

“You okay?” I asked, because I needed the reassurance.

“Mm, yeah,” he said, his voice strained.

“Let me know if it’s too much, alright?” I knew it had been a while for him, and even before then, it didn’t seem like something he got very often. What a shame. He was so beautiful like this.

I caressed his face and pushed in a bit more before withdrawing a little. He had his eyes closed, no doubt concentrating on the pain and willing himself to relax. I remembered what it felt like. I’d gone in the first time wanting Beka to pound me, but he’d taken care of me instead, and I’d been grateful for it by the end. This could really hurt, even when both partners did everything right.

Yuuri’s body was so hot and tight around me, but I kept my patience, knowing the wait would pay off. His dick deflated, which wasn’t unexpected, but still a sign that I was right to go slow. I gave him soft touches, murmuring compliments and reassurances and other nonsense that let him know I was paying attention.

Eventually, I felt it. His body gave in, accepting me easily, and I began to move in a slow rhythm.

“Oh god…” he groaned, and I took that as a good sign. He covered his face with his arm, and I pushed it out of the way.

“Don’t hide, Yuuri. I want to see you.”

His eyes met mine, bright with a sheen of tears, and I drove into him in a way that made him throw his head back with a moan. Ah, this was perfect.

“So perfect. So beautiful. My Yuuri.”

I forgot everything else that happened today. The only thing in the world at that moment was us, joined together, slowly losing ourselves to pleasure. I didn’t want to let it end.

“Harder… please… go faster…” He panted out the request, and I willingly obliged, able to move
more easily. I was so close I had to actively resist my climax, but I knew I couldn’t hold out much longer. I grabbed his dripping dick and began to jerk him forcefully, determined to end this together. As soon as I heard him cry out I let go of my restraint, my entire body jolting hard with orgasm. Our bodies felt like they pulsed together, the moment so intense I couldn’t even open my eyes.

“Fuck,” I breathed out, carefully sliding out of him. He let out a tired groan, his chest painted with semen, one drop even making it to his chin. I wiped it off with my thumb and brought it to my mouth to lick it. He gifted me with a tired smile.

I cleaned him up with the same gentle care he’d given me yesterday, and we found our way under the sheets, still naked and cuddling together.

“I hope you enjoyed that,” I said against his shoulder.

“Every second,” he said sleepily. “I was right. You’re good at it.”

I kissed his sweet skin, hoping I would have the opportunity to get even better.

The next day saw us snowed-in. All my vague plans for romantic dates went out the window, but by the end of the day, I wouldn’t have had it any other way.

Instead of fumbling around for places to take Yuuri, my day became filled with room service, sex, and conversation. We showered together, ate breakfast, made love, napped, ordered lunch, and spoke at length about our potential life together in St. Petersburg. Yuuri told me about how he missed the city, but was also afraid of how it might affect him. Apparently when he returned to Hasetsu the first time, he’d been reminded of Viktor at every turn, and it was part of his motivation for taking that miserable job in another city.

“Do you think it would bother you too much?” I asked him.

“No,” he said. “It will probably be strange at first, to walk the same streets and see the same stores, and remember when I was—” He cut himself off. “…but I don’t think it will bother me. Not if you’re there with me.”

He was so cute. Why wasn’t he coming home with me tomorrow?

He tortured me for two hours that afternoon, the release so intense that I fell asleep as soon as my orgasm subsided, causing me to regretfully miss his. I liked his care and attention, and I enjoyed the intensity, but I think I overall preferred the more mutual approach to sex.

Too quickly, our day was over, and we had to pack. My flight was early, his later, so we parted ways at the hotel. Leaving him this time had been harder than the last, and I feared it would only get worse each time.

The wait to see him again was only made bearable by his regular phone calls. Whether we were horny or not, I enjoyed his voice being the last thing I heard each night after my long days of practice.

His birthday happened while we were apart. He seemed a little down at turning thirty, and I could tell he was really feeling our age difference that day. I wished I could be there for him, because I
wasn’t so great at comforting him over the phone, but I did my best to convince him that nine years wasn’t that long, and I didn’t care one way or the other about how old he was. None of his family really celebrated his birthday, aside from giving him a katsudon which I knew he’d been denying himself lately.

Some things just wouldn’t go away. He needed to live here, already.

Despite the cheery mood he put on, the longer we were apart, the more darkness I felt creeping back into his voice. It was subtle, but there were moments I could sense he really wasn’t doing fine, no matter how much he denied it. Perhaps he wasn’t even aware of it himself, but I couldn’t let it continue. I eventually convinced him to get out of Hasetsu and go live with Phichit again, which seemed to improve his mood, even if we couldn’t have phone sex anymore.

I counted down the days to the GPF for all the wrong reasons. Yakov and Lilia berated me for being distracted, but I couldn’t help it. It was hard to focus on my career when I knew Yuuri was hurting.

“He wouldn’t want you to do this to yourself,” Mila said out of the blue during one of our breaks.

“Who asked you?”

She drank heavily from her water bottle, then smirked at me. “You’ve always worn your feelings on your sleeve, Yuri. Anyone can tell how much it bothers you. But speaking as someone who’s dated a ton of athletes, you never want to feel like your relationship is holding them back. And Yuuri is definitely the type to be more sensitive to that sort of thing.”

“You don’t have to explain him to me,” I muttered. But she had given me something I hadn’t considered. If Yuuri thought that he was holding me back… God, he’d break up with me in an instant and hide somewhere, so I’d never get to see him again. Well, perhaps not that extreme. Depended on his mood, probably.

Still, I couldn’t let that happen. I threw myself back into practice, aiming for what I knew was my best. I pushed aside my worry for Yuuri—I had to believe that he’d be alright without me. I knew he could stand on his own, and it did him no service if I believed he needed me.

And finally, finally, it was time for the GPF. For once I didn’t have to endure a long flight beforehand—this year it was being held right here in St. Petersburg. Yakov wouldn’t let me go to the airport in the middle of the day, convincing me that I should take advantage of the lack of travel and get some extra practice in.

Almost the moment he arrived, I felt his eyes on me. It was a testament to my concentration that I didn’t immediately skate over to him, instead finishing my sequence and practicing two more jumps before getting off the ice.

“Yuuri…” I said, for lack of anything else to say. He pulled me into an embrace, which I didn’t hesitate to return, even though there were people around. I pulled back to look at him. He had dark circles under his eyes, and his hair seemed a little messier than usual. “How was your flight?”

He shrugged. “You know how it is.”

He didn’t look particularly happy. I hoped it was just because he was tired.

Yakov came up to us. “Take the rest of the day off, Yuri.”

I nodded. He turned to Yuuri.
“Katsuki. You’re welcome to stay with us while you’re here.”

Yuuri looked a little surprised. “Thank you, Coach Yakov.” He opened his mouth as if he wanted to say something else, but Yakov walked away.

“You alright?” I asked him.

“I just—I feel like I should apologize to him,” Yuuri said.

“I wouldn’t bother. He knows the circumstances. Come on. Let’s get something to eat and take it back to the house.”

He let me lead him to a bakery I loved, and I bought more piroshky than we could eat, munching on it as we took the long walk back to the house.

“I forget—did you ever come to Lilia’s house while you lived here?”

He shook his head.

“I thought so. I didn’t want Viktor anywhere near my room, and it wouldn’t have made sense to invite just you. Yakov and Lilia were still too weird to have dinner parties or anything, too, so they wouldn’t have invited you either…” I was thinking out loud at this point, but I couldn’t stand the silence between us. “Where’s your luggage?”

“Ooh, it’s with Phichit. He offered to take it to the hotel for me while I went to your rink.”

“You didn’t think you’d be staying with us?”

“I didn’t want to assume…”

I sighed impatiently. “Whatever. We can send someone to go get it later.”

“Don’t—don’t bother, I can—”

“No. You’re in my home, now, and I’m going to take care of you.” I smiled a little. “Please, let me do this. I don’t know when I’ll get to see you again, and I’ll be busy. I don’t want to spend a moment apart longer than we have to.”

He lowered his eyes shyly. I put my arm around his shoulders, and he leaned into me. It was enough to reassure me that things weren’t completely terrible between us, but I could tell we still needed to talk.

The house was mercifully warm after being out in the cold. Lilia must have come back early to turn on the heat, though she seemed to be holed away in her room, so I didn’t bother with greetings just now. She already knew that Yuuri would be staying with us, anyway.

I led him to my room and shut the door, then interrupted his curious looks by pushing him against the wall, my body driven by pent up desire as I pressed my tongue into his mouth. He stiffened in surprise, then relaxed, putting his arms around me and clinging as if he might fall.

He moaned into the kiss, and I pushed forward even harder, wanting him to feel just how much I needed this. I could feel his hardness pulsing against my thigh, and I grew too impatient to wait any more.

I lowered to my knees and undid his jeans, tugging them just enough to free his erection, then looked up for brief reassurance. He didn’t stop me, instead reaching behind my head to pull off the elastic
that held my ponytail together. The locks fell around my face, and I wondered what the practicality of it was—it was easier to give head when my hair was held back, after all—but when he started massaging my scalp with his fingers, I suddenly didn’t care one bit what got in the way.

And I engulfed him.

Unlike last time, it had been a while since he’d showered, and I relished in his natural, musky scent. I had no idea why that particular smell turned me on so much, but it pushed some button deep inside me, making my cock ache with need. It had been the same with Beka—I always insisted on sucking his cock before he showered, rather than after.

I undid my pants, planning on jerking myself at the same time, but Yuuri put a hand on my shoulder.

“No,” he said breathlessly. “Let me. After.”

I groaned around his shaft, wanting to touch myself, but I wasn’t going to say no to that offer. He gripped my hair a little tighter, and with a small cry he came, his hips bucking forward with orgasm. I happily lapped up his semen and stood, rubbing my knees a little.

“Bed,” I suggested, not wanting his knees to ache, too. I threw myself onto my unmade bed and lowered my pants while he caught his breath. He gazed at me lustfully as he crawled up, nudged my thighs apart, and made love to my dick in a way I had thoroughly missed. I was so excited it didn’t take me but a minute to flood his mouth, and he swallowed and collapsed, resting his head on my thigh like a pillow. I couldn’t help but laugh, and urged him up so I could hug him.

Cuddled up beside me, he fell asleep within minutes. I wasn’t tired enough to sleep, so I just watched him, his face relaxed in needful rest.
St. Petersburg was once a home to me. When I left, I thought I’d never see it again.

Yurio brought me back.

Even in the airport I was met with a deluge of memories, seeing places where Viktor and I once ate as we waited for our flights. The pain was momentary and fleeting, same as everything else that reminded me of him these days, but still present. Still hurting.

I had sent my luggage with Phichit while I went to meet Yurio at the rink. I’d intended to hide until his practice was over, but once I caught a glimpse of him skating, I couldn’t help but gravitate towards the sidelines to watch. I missed him so much. Watching his videos simply wasn’t the same as watching him skate in person. Some of the raw energy was missing, the excitement of watching something in the moment.

I honestly hadn’t expected to be invited to stay with them.

When I woke up after my embarrassingly needed nap, I was alone in the dark. My glasses were on a side table, and I was delirious enough to not quite remember where I was. Something warm pressed up against my leg and stirred when I turned over—perhaps I wasn’t as alone as I thought. I turned on the lamp to find myself greeted with a large, fluffy cat, its wide, dark eyes staring at me in silent assessment.

The door opened, making us both turn.

“Oh, you’re up,” Yurio said.

“What time is it?” I asked, sitting up groggily. The cat loped over to Yurio, who picked it up easily. I looked around for my phone, which was nowhere in sight.

As if reading my mind, Yurio reached into his pocket and tossed my phone onto the bed. “A bit after 8. You slept for about three hours. Phichit called, so I answered for you and went to go pick up your things. Hope that’s alright.”

“Ye-yeah. Thanks.” I rubbed at my eyes and checked my phone, seeing two missed calls and one that went through.

“Need anything?” he asked, cradling his cat over his shoulder. I could hear the purring even from across the room.

“Just—bathroom,” I said blearily. He pointed—apparently he had his own bathroom attached to his room.

When I finished, I followed the sounds to find Yurio in some sort of large living room, watching TV with his cat purring contentedly in his lap. I’d never seen him look so comfortable before, his normally tense edges relaxed away as he draped his long limbs over the sofa. Well, perhaps I had seen him like that before, but only in the onsen.

“What is this?” I asked, sitting next to them. The cat accepted a few scratches behind its ears before turning away from me.

“This is Katerina, or Katya,” he said. “I’ve had her for almost eight years now. Grandpa gave her to
me for my birthday when I complained about being homesick. Be careful—she’s kind of an asshole sometimes.”

I did normally prefer dogs, but Yurio having a cat really seemed to suit him.

“Did I never mention her?” he asked.

I shook my head. “Maybe once or twice, but I don’t think I ever asked…” I tried scratching her chin, and she promptly got up and bounded away. "S-sorry.” I wasn’t sure if I was apologizing to the cat, or Yurio.

He simply chuckled. “That’s a better reaction than she normally has to new people. Took her over a week to even tolerate being in the same room as Beka, and even now she doesn’t like him much.”

He scooted closer to me. “How are you feeling?”

“Good,” I said, leaning into him. “Thank you for letting me stay with you.”

He put his arm around me. “Thank Lilia for allowing it; it’s her house. How’s the Japanese Fireball doing?”

He used Minami’s newly coined nickname, one that his fans seemed to grab onto. “He’s doing well. His gold medal really motivated him. He and Phichit have been working together to tighten up his choreography.”

“And what about you?”

“…What about me?”

“What have you been doing?” He pulled away, tucking his legs under his body and turning to face me with interest.

“I—I’ve… already told you on the phone.”

He frowned. “No you didn’t. You always gave me a half-answer, like what you were eating that day, and then dodged the question, like you’re doing now.”

“I… well…”

“Please tell me you’ve been doing something,” Yurio said, sounding more concerned than anything. “Have you been skating, at least?”

“Of course,” I said. “Every day I could.”

He relaxed a little in relief. “Good. Did you give any more thought to my proposal?”

When he used that word, I couldn’t help the rush of blood that went to my cheeks. “I—I have. I’ve thought about it a lot. I can’t say for sure yet, but I want to…”

He smiled, and brushed my cheek with his knuckles. “I’m glad. Think about it while you’re here. Talk to Yakov and Lilia if you need to.” He didn’t need to say the words that his eyes told me —don’t disappear again.

I had no intention of disappearing. I just didn’t know how useful I would be as a coach or a choreographer if I was so prone to falling apart. And I wasn’t sure how well I could live in a city that still smelled of Viktor wherever I went. But only time would tell, I supposed.
I watched Yurio’s practice all next day, mesmerized by his repetitive movements, refraining from skating myself. It wasn’t as though I didn’t want to skate, but I didn’t want to be a distraction right before a major competition.

“Katsuki.”

I turned, and saw Lilia standing behind me. Immediately I stiffened, my posture straightening of its own accord. Even though I knew her harsh features hid a softer personality, I still couldn’t help but stand at attention when she was around. “Lilia. Hello. I—I haven’t yet thanked you for letting me stay in your home.”

“If it keeps him from whining at me like a child, it’s worth it,” she said, her eyes following Yurio as he skated by. “But it’s really no trouble. You’re welcome for as long as you like, though I think Yura might’ve told you that already.”

“Yeah, he did,” I said, letting my eyes drift back towards him.

“Have you considered what you want to do?” she asked. “I fear that quite a lot of our Yura’s future depends on what you choose to do with yourself.”

I looked up at her, surprised. “Eh? What do you mean?”

“He’s attached to you; that’s clear enough. He’s also reaching the point that he’s bored of being on top, much like Viktor was, I’m told. I believe that if you told him you were to stay in Japan, he would eventually join you there.” She sighed. “Forgive my selfishness, but I very much do not wish for that to happen. I had no affection for Viktor, but Yakov did, and it hurt him deeply when Viktor abandoned him for you. I fear it would be far more painful for the both of us if Yura did it as well.”

I blinked, surprised at this candidness. “Don’t worry—if I had to go back, I would make sure he couldn’t follow me.”

“That is not the answer anyone wants to hear,” she said coldly.

“I—d-don’t get me wrong, I’m not… that’s not my plan at all,” I said, flustered. “I do want to stay here. I want to… to do something that lets me stay with him while he continues his career. I’m just not sure I can.”

“You’re talented, Katsuki,” she said sharply, like she wanted to pierce my skull with that statement. “You’d make a fine choreographer with the proper training. Yura seems to think you could be a coach, as well, but I have my reservations about that.”

“I do too, to be honest,” I admitted. “I have no confidence in my ability to give someone else confidence. Not unless…”

“Not unless you happen to be in love with whomever you’re coaching?”

“Yes,” I said shamefully. “And I know too well how badly that can go.” It wasn’t an exact parallel, but Viktor and I became more or less each other’s coaches during our final season together.

“It’s true that entanglements complicate professional relationships more than one would like to admit,” she said with a distinct weight of experience. “That said, my reservations are less about your lack of coaching abilities, and more that you have a clear talent for choreography that should not be ignored.”

Coming from her, I knew that was distinctly high praise, and I flushed with pleasure. “I—I’m n-not
She ignored my stuttering objection, silencing me with a firm hand on my shoulder. “When one has had as long a career as I have, one likes to hope for a legacy to continue on after retirement. I’ve had many students in ballet that I would consider successful, and some will go on to teach their own students, but I’ve only had one skater. He’s successful, but he won’t continue any part of my legacy.”

“You don’t think so?” I asked.

“He’s very independent. He takes my advice and applies it his own way, often in ways I don’t expect.” She pressed her lips together in brief disapproval. “I don’t think he’d have the patience to ever be a coach or a choreographer, but there’s nothing wrong with that, and he may yet prove me wrong. But he’s a performer to his core, and I think in some ways, he always will be.”

“I think I see what you mean…” I let my eyes drift back to him. He kept glancing over at us, but it never broke his concentration for more than a second.

“You, on the other hand, would make a fine choreographer, or at the very least, an instructor. Your background is more comprehensive—Minako told me you started ballet as a young child?”

“I was around six, yes,” I said. “I wasn’t—the program wasn’t rigorous enough to put me on a professional route.”

“But it was a strong enough foundation for a skater, which is what she planned for you,” she said. “And you continued lessons up until your move to America, correct?”

“Yes,” I said. “I didn’t… I didn’t stop dancing in Detroit, but I couldn’t find a reputable ballet studio, so I took… other classes.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Yes, Katsuki, we’ve all heard the stories. Am I to assume you haven’t done much dancing since you left us the last time?”

“I’ve practiced a little, with Minako,” I said, rubbing my neck. “But only recently. I’m not in the best of shape for it.”

“You probably won’t be again, at your age,” she said bluntly. “But you don’t have to be. Your eyes will be far more important than your body. Does this seem like something you might want to pursue?”

“Yes, but I need to take care of some paperwork back home before I can come here to stay for any long period of time. It will take a while…”

She sighed again, impatiently. “Katsuki, do you even know who I am? You leave any travel issues to me. Just tell me when you reach a decision, and we’ll work it out. I’ll make whatever calls necessary to push you through quickly.”

“Eh? You—you don’t have to go through that trouble for me…”

“Good thing it’s not for you, then,” she said, the corner of her thin mouth twitching upwards a little as she watched Yurio skate by again.

I ducked my head, smiling. I was glad that this was all looking easier than I expected, though there was one thing that still bothered me.
But I had to be the one to handle it, and I had to do it alone.

The evening before the Grand Prix Final, Yurio took me out on what I’d consider to be our first real date. There had been vague plans for something back in Sapporo, but we’d been kept inside by the snowy weather. I hadn’t been too disappointed by the loss, considering what we ended up doing instead, but it did feel strange to be dating someone I hadn’t gone on a single date with. Tonight he remedied that, taking me to a warm family restaurant where he was clearly recognized and liked. It wasn’t too fancy, unlike most of the places Viktor had taken me, and I found I enjoyed the casual atmosphere. It helped me relax.

“I’m sorry everything’s in Russian,” he said sincerely. “If you need me to read you something, or order for you, I can do that.”

I felt a little awkward, but it was clear he was trying to take care of me. “Thanks.”

“If you come and stay, will you learn more of the language? I can teach you some, but it would probably be worth it to take a class.”

“Ye-yeah, I can learn. I actually meant to learn more when I was here last time, but I was so busy…”

He looked so excited that I knew I couldn’t back out of it. Not that I wanted to, but now I felt compelled to do everything I could to protect that smile. He started to go on about his Japanese studies, telling me how he always tried to get in a little practice each day, no matter how tired. He made me promise to help him, so that he might get even farther ahead in his classes than he already was.

It seemed even in academics, he was pretty competitive.

We walked back together, the cold not quite biting enough to be unbearable. I could tell by the way he kept looking at me that he was hoping for some confirmation on my decision, but I couldn’t give it to him. Not yet.

From his perspective, everything was already taken care of. He’d thought of every objection I might give, every obstacle that might stand in my way. He’d clearly been formulating plans for some time, waiting until everything was mostly in place before presenting me with enticing options that both kept me by his side and kept me engaged. But there was one thing he didn’t know about. One thing I had to do, before I could say yes to anything.

My phone buzzed in my pocket, and I stopped walking.

Yurio turned to me. “Something wrong?”

“I need to do something,” I said. “Will you go home and wait for me?”

Until this point, we’d been enjoying idle conversation, so this clearly came as an abrupt shock. “Where are you going? What do you need to do?”

I bit my lip. What could I tell him, so that he wouldn’t worry? “I need to… to see the old apartment again. Walk by it. To know if I can stay here comfortably.”
“Oh…” He seemed to relax a little, but still looked apprehensive. “Can’t I go with you?”

I shook my head. “Please. Just… not this time, alright?”

He took my hand, clasping it between his own. “Yuuri, it’s okay. Do… Do what you need to do. I’ll be waiting at home for you.” He glanced around, then leaned down to kiss me briefly, just a featherlight touch of lips. “Call me if anything happens, okay?”

I nodded, and he let me go. Just like that. I’d prepared myself to argue, to give any excuse I could. But he let me go. I felt terrible for lying to him, but I couldn’t risk worrying him too much before the GPF. If I could have, I would have waited until after. But this couldn’t wait.

I made sure he was long out of sight before I pulled out my phone, wandering towards Viktor’s old apartment.

*I’m here,* the text said.

*On my way now,* I messaged back.

My breath trembled as I approached the building, pressed the button, and waited to be let in. He didn’t say anything through the speaker, but the door buzzed open anyway. Even though it had been four years, my body carried me automatically up the stairs as if I’d just left yesterday. I didn’t knock.

Viktor stood in the middle of the floor, his coat and scarf loosened but still on, as if he’d just arrived. Or as if he couldn’t quite make himself comfortable. He looked at me, his eyes wide and apprehensive. My body moved forward of its own accord, and I fell into his embrace like I had so many times before. So many years ago.

Of course it wasn’t the same. Nothing would ever be the same between us, but for just those brief seconds, I let myself feel it.

“Yuuri.” I reluctantly pulled away to look up at him. His eyes were sad, begging for pity. I moved away.

“I’m sorry,” I said, and finally took a look around the apartment. It was exactly as I’d remembered it, just a bit emptier. “I’m still surprised you kept this place, all this time.”

“It was a thorn in my side for a while,” he admitted, running a hand through his hair. “It was the first place I’d ever owned, and I couldn’t bear to part with it. But I couldn’t bear to live in it, either. I considered renting it out, but it was just too much trouble.”


He laughed, and took off his coat, reaching out his arm for mine. “Be glad I had someone clean before we got here. I can’t imagine the dust and cobwebs.” He shuddered.

I shrugged off my coat as well, handing it to him before sitting on the couch. He sat beside me on the other end, his long fingers gripping his knees with nerves. I was glad I wasn’t the only one feeling anxious.

“So, how is Yurio?”

I assessed his expression, wondering what sort of answer he was after. He gave me a nervous, polite smile. “Good,” I said. “Still working hard. Still amazing.”
“Still in love with you?”

I nodded.

“Damn. I was hoping he’d gotten bored and moved on.” He laughed nervously at his terrible joke. “But I’m glad for you. Really. Or I…” He turned away.

“Or you want to be. I know, Vitya.” I reached over and touched his arm, hoping he would look at me again. “I felt the same way when I saw you happy.”

“I was never happy after you,” he muttered.

“Don’t be so dramatic,” I scolded. “You were happy. No one knows your smile like I do, and those smiles were genuine.”

“But it wasn’t the same, Yuuri,” he said, whining a little. “Nothing was the same after you left.”

“And nothing will ever be the same, Vitya. Even if I weren’t with Yurio, and we tried again, things wouldn’t be the same as they were. You know that, even if you won’t admit it to yourself.”

He sighed heavily. “I know. I wanted to forget you, forget everything, but I…”

“It’s not so easy, is it?” I leaned back on the couch, stretching a little to ease the tension. “For four years I pushed you out of my mind, but the moment I saw you again, even in just a photo, all the pain I’d pushed away just came flooding back all at once. Forgetting something like this… it doesn’t work. We left too much unfinished. I need to finish it before I can move on with my life.”

“Are you going forward with Yurio?”

“My life, Vitya. Everything, not just Yurio. I feel like the past is chaining me, keeping me slow and vulnerable, and I’m always afraid of when it will come back to hurt me again. We’ve spoken a lot on the phone, but it isn’t the same. I needed to see you, to know…” I hesitated.

He shifted towards me. “To know what?”

I took a deep breath. “That I could completely let you go. That I could see you and stop wondering ‘what if’. That I… That I could be close to you, and not ache with longing and guilt.”

He reached out to touch my shoulder. “And? Can you?”

I shook my head, tears pricking at my eyes. “It hurts. I don’t want it to. I still remember all the awful things I did to you, and I can’t forgive myself for them.”

He scooted closer and pulled me against him, rubbing my back soothingly. “It still amazes me that, after everything, you still blame yourself for what happened. Everything was stacked so high against you, yet you still think it’s your fault for allowing it to crush you. Nothing was your fault, Yuuri.”

“But I—”

He put his hand firmly over my mouth. “No. I’m not going to listen to it. Not a single person in this world blames you for any of it except yourself. Believe me. I even tried to blame you, to convince myself that you’d provoked me into saying those awful things to you, but I couldn’t. I knew it wasn’t true. I tried to convince myself that it was your carelessness that got you injured, but it wasn’t true. I tried to tell myself, oh, if he’d only just given in to sex, he would’ve felt better and we could have gotten through it together. But that wasn’t true, either. None of it was your fault.”
I tried to pull my head away from his hand so I could speak, but he held firm.

“I’m not letting you talk until you agree that this wasn’t your fault,” he said. I glared up at him. I had so many things to say, so many arguments. I was at fault. I’d been ungrateful. I’d been miserable, making no efforts to keep my misery from spreading. I had denied him sex, when I knew how important it was to him. So many things I could have done differently.

I struggled against him, but his hand held tight. He was always stronger than me, but almost never used his strength against me.

I did not want to think about how it turned me on a little.

I closed my eyes and sighed in a resigned way.

“Will you promise not to argue? If I take my hand away, will you say it’s not your fault?”

I looked at him incredulously, but eventually nodded. Slowly, he removed his hand.

“Say it,” he told me.

I pressed my lips together.

“Say it, Yuuri.”

“It wasn’t my fault,” I muttered quietly. I didn’t want to believe it.

“Again. Like you mean it.”

“It wasn’t my fault!” I cried, my voice cracking. I covered my own mouth at my sudden outburst.

Viktor looked at me with disbelief, then shook with silent laughter that quickly burst out of him in a giggling fit. I wanted to hit him.

“I hate you,” I said, turning my back to him.

“Good,” he said breathlessly. “I deserve it.” He put his chin on my shoulder, arms snaking around my middle. “I’m sorry, Yuuri. I know apologies don’t mean much at this point, but I am sorry you’re still hurting because of me. I’ll do anything you ask, if it will help you heal. Even if you decide you want me to go away and never see you again, I will.”

I closed my eyes, wondering how he could still smell the same after all these years. “I don’t want that.”

“What do you want, then?”

“I want…” I took a few slow breaths to calm my anxious heart. “I want you as my friend. I know I’m selfish to ask it. I know it can’t be easy for you to see me with Yurio when you still have feelings for me, and if it hurts you too much, I’ll understand. But I… They say when you lose someone you love, it leaves a hole in your heart that can’t ever quite be filled by anyone else. Other people can lessen the hollowness, but there will always be an empty hole there. I’ve had a Vitya-shaped hole in my heart for over four years, and while Yurio came and made it smaller, there’s still space for you there.”

He slowly withdrew, and I turned around to look at him. He leaned back, staring distantly at the ceiling. “Friends…” He said it as if he was tasting the word. “What would we do, as friends?”
“Well, we could go out for drinks or meals sometimes,” I said. “The three of us… or maybe just the two of us, if Yurio won’t get too jealous. We could talk on the phone. We could cheer Yurio on together. I’ll even let you take me shopping, if you want. I just…” I wanted him in my life again. I wanted to be normal around him again.

He looked so conflicted, his brows wrinkled in thought in an expression that would almost be comical, if I didn’t care so much about the answer.

“You want this, even though you know I’m still in love with you?”

“I think…” I wrung my hands together in my lap. “I think you might have an easier time getting over me, if you know I’m happy with someone else. You haven’t really seen us together much, or been around me…” I bit my lip, then forced myself to continue. “If you end up hating it, that’s okay. But at least we’ll know we tried.”

He smiled weakly. “It’s a bit optimistic to think that I could get over you. It’s been four years.”

“Four years of not seeing me. Not knowing where I am, what I look like… It’s different. Or I think it will be. I hope it will be.”

He closed his eyes, leaning back again. Seeing that exposed column of throat once drove me crazy—now I only felt a slight flicker of desire that was easily suppressed.

“I don’t know, Yuuri. You make it sound easy, but I get the feeling I won’t be happy seeing you two together at all…” He paused, hesitating on what he wanted to say next. “But the thought of never seeing you again, of going back to a world without you in it, I can’t even consider it right now. If friendship is what you’re offering, then I’ll accept friendship.”

The tension in my chest eased, quickly replaced by a bubble of happiness I couldn’t quite hold back. “You will?”

He touched my face. “For a smile like this? I’d do anything.” He leaned forward, like he was going to kiss me, and I was completely frozen in place, unable to pull away. He narrowed his eyes, and fell back. “You should go back. Did you tell Yurio where you were going?”

“Not exactly,” I admitted, ashamed. “I didn’t want to upset him before his competition.”

“This couldn’t have waited?”

“No,” I said flatly. “It couldn’t have.”

He smirked. “You know something’s important when even you can’t wait for it.”

I shoved him a little. “Stop. It was important that I saw you, so I wouldn’t be worrying about it my whole time here. Yurio would’ve noticed and tried to fix it, and he needs to be focused right now.”

“Yuuri,” he said sternly. “Tell him. Be honest. You’ll only make things worse if you’re not.” He stood up, grabbed my coat, and threw it at me. “Go do it right now.”

“E-eh? Wait, I—” He pulled me off the couch and shoved my coat onto my shoulders.

“Go.” He pushed me out the door. “Get out of here. Let me know how angry he gets, and then we’ll decide if we can be friends or not.” He closed the door swiftly behind me, and I heard the lock click into place.
I readjusted my coat and fastened it before leaving the building, wondering just what I’d say to Yurio. I didn’t want to upset him yet. I knew he wouldn’t like me talking to Viktor behind his back, but the thought of waiting even days to speak with him was agony.

I turned the corner, and someone tall put himself in my way. “E-excuse me,” I muttered in English, hoping he understood me. He didn’t move. I finally looked up, saw the loose blonde hair, and barely stifled a gasp. “I—I was just—”

He put his arm heavily around my shoulders and forced me to walk, the gesture more commanding than affectionate. “I know.”

“Really, I was just—”

“I know,” he gritted out. “Don’t say anything.”

The silence was stifling as we walked the long way back to Lilia’s house. I wondered what he was thinking, what specifically he was mad about, but I was too afraid to say anything. When we arrived at the house, he took me around to the side, entering the garage I hadn’t yet seen. He flipped the switch, illuminating a beautiful car, every inch of it gleaming with polish. Off to the side was a motorbike that looked almost brand new.

“Don’t touch anything,” he warned.

I hadn’t planned on it. I watched him stalk around to the open space on the other side of the garage, and I timidly followed, though he seemed to be pacing. I found a bare space of wall and leaned against it, feeling a little vulnerable.

“Can I—”

“Shht.” He cut me off. He stopped pacing and started jogging in place for a few minutes, then began to stretch. Not the stretches one would normally do for exercise, but the elaborate stretches for a ballet class. His pants really didn’t allow him to test the limits of his flexibility, though, and he seemed to grow more frustrated by that fact. Eventually he stopped moving, took a deep breath, and turned to me.

“Alright. You can talk now.” His expression was sour, but he did seem calmer.

“I spoke to Viktor.”

“I know. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I…I didn’t want to upset you,” I said.

“And I’m just supposed to be fine with the fact that you didn’t tell me?” he growled. “Yuuri, you’re a terrible liar. I knew as soon as you walked away you were going to see him. I just spent the last hour trying to figure out why you couldn’t trust me enough to tell me the truth.”

“I—I do trust you, I just—”

“You can’t hide this behind some guise of not wanting to hurt me or upset me. You know me. You didn’t trust me to understand.” He shook his head, not meeting my eyes. “You didn’t trust me to be okay with the fact that you needed to talk to him alone, in person, in the place you used to live.”

I felt so ashamed, I couldn’t look at him. “I did trust you to understand, I just didn’t want to bring it up yet. Not until I was more certain of what I wanted.”
“…And?”

I looked up at him. “And what?”

“Well, are you more certain now? Do you know what you want?” Beneath his anger, his eyes gave away a vulnerable fear. I wanted to touch him, to reassure him, but he had a distinctly unapproachable air around him right now.

“I want us to be friends,” I said, my voice far less confident than I needed it to be right then. His eyes widened. “Vi-Viktor and me, I mean. I wanted to let go of the past between us, and stay in each other’s lives. Like… Like you and Otabek do. I needed to see him in person to know whether or not we could handle something like that.”

His shoulders fell, and he visibly relaxed a little. “Really? That’s—that’s all?”

I was starting to think I’d clearly misread what he was upset about. I stepped towards him, but couldn’t bring myself close enough to touch him yet. “Yes, that’s all.”

He swallowed. “And do you—do you think that will happen?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe. It depends on his ability to see us together without hurting too much. And I’m trusting you to not make it harder for him on purpose.”

He glowered. “I’m not going to hold myself back for his precious feelings.”

“I don’t expect you to.” I took a small step closer, just close enough to reach out and lightly touch his arm. “I’m sorry for not telling you. This was the last big thing I had to do before I was able to make my final decision.”

He gaped. “Does that mean…”

I smiled warmly. “Barring any terrible roadblocks…”

His face screwed up, like he was in pain, but I knew he was trying not to cry. I pulled him into an embrace, so he wouldn’t have to hold back.

“Yuuri… It’s going to happen?” he asked against my shoulder, his voice cracking. “You’re going to stay with me?”

“Yes. I’ll have to go back to Hasetsu one more time to get my things, but—”

“F-fuck that,” he said between sobs. “It won’t be ‘one more time.’ We’re going back there every summer.”

I laughed a little. “Alright. But still, I can’t stay right away. I’ll need... probably a month.”

“A month?” he said incredulously, pulling away. “Two weeks.”

“Three,” I counteroffered.

“But you’ll miss Nationals,” he said, a hint of whining in his voice.

I raised an eyebrow. “I think you’ll be alright. There are things I need to do back home, people I need to talk things over with. I owe my parents a thorough explanation of everything that’s happened over the past four years. I want them to understand this time, so maybe…” I hesitated.
He looked at me intently, as if waiting for me to go on.

“Maybe I won’t feel so alone if I have to go back again.”

He frowned deeply, but nodded his understanding and put his arms around me. “Alright. Three weeks. If you’re not back in that time, I’m going there to get you.”

“That’s fair.”

He pulled away, eyes still red with tears. “I’m sorry I was so angry, I just—I was afraid you’d wanted to get back together with him. You’ve been sounding so sad on the phone lately, and I thought you were pulling away from me…”

I took his hand, stroking it a little with my thumb. “I should have told you the truth; I know that now. You had every right to be upset with me.”

He leaned down and kissed me, a bit more firmly than normal.

We parted, but I kept him close. “You’re still angry, aren’t you?”

“What? No, I’m—”

“You are,” I teased, and pitched my voice a little lower. “You’re jealous. You hate him. You hate that he saw me, and touched me, and spoke to me.”

Yurio’s eyes narrowed. “He touched you? How? Where?”

I reached up and gently brushed my fingertips against Yurio’s cheek. He bared his teeth, and for a second he looked like he’d bite.

The Ice Tiger of Russia.

He crowded around me, forcing me back against the wall. “Where else?”

I looked down, ashamed, and he grasped my chin firmly, forcing me to look at him. I felt a rush of arousal through my body at his strength.

“Where else?”

“He just held me a little,” I said, hoping he could see the game I was aiming for.

Yurio leaned in close, his breath hot on my neck. “If he touches you against your will, I’ll kill him.”

I pressed my hips against him, and he pushed back, pinning me more tightly against the wall. He grasped my hip possessively, his thumb digging in.

“He still wants me,” I said, choosing my words carefully. “He said he’d hoped you’d grown bored of me and moved on.”

“That bastard,” he growled, and attacked my neck. His lips made me gasp, and I fought against his grip to press myself against him. He held firm.

He gave a hard lick to my sensitive throat, and I shuddered out a moan. God, his mouth was heaven. “Fuck me,” I said breathlessly. “Let me know who I belong to.”

We couldn’t stay in the garage, as much as we wanted to, because neither of us carried the necessary
items. So we ended up rushing through the cold to the front door, and snuck through the halls to Yurio’s room. He kept a firm, controlling hand on my shoulder, clearly not wanting to break the physical connection between us, and once he locked his door, he had me against the wall again, returning to where we left off. Again I tried to buck up against him, but he held me down with one hand on my hip while he braced his weight with the other above my head. I was so aroused that I could hardly think, my senses consumed with him as he expressed his passion with his tongue. I melted in his grip, feeling everything about me yield to his pleasure. I’d never made love like this before.

He forcibly stripped my outer clothes and unfastened my pants, never quite letting go of me. His hand cupped my face, not gently, and two fingers slid down my cheek and into my mouth. I groaned, sucking obediently as I looked into those intense, darkened eyes. He removed his hand, pulled me against him, and slid those fingers down the back of my pants. I shivered at the intrusion. He gave me hard, punishing kisses as he probed against my hole, and my knees went so weak that I had to clutch his shoulders to keep from falling.

He made a grunting sound low in his throat, turned us around, and pushed me onto the bed. I kicked off my shoes and he wasted no time ripping my pants down and tossing them aside. Completely naked from the waist down, my cock throbbing against my belly, I felt deliciously exposed and vulnerable. He gripped my thighs, pushed my legs apart, and used that vicious tongue between my legs, teasing me relentlessly until I leaked. He slid up my body, gave me one more punishing kiss, and backed off. “Take off your shirt and turn around,” he commanded.

As I obeyed he began stripping himself, and once he was naked he went over to the dresser and pulled out a bottle of lube and a condom. He hoisted my hips up until I was on my hands and knees, and began working me open with his fingers, gently at first, quickly growing more forceful as my moans urged him on.

He withdrew and positioned himself behind me, his hot body pressing against my back. “You’re mine,” he whispered in my ear. “My beautiful Yuuri. All mine.” And after a brief moment of suit up, he thrust into me, making me cry out.

He stilled, as if afraid he’d hurt me. “More, Yurio,” I panted out. “Claim me. Make me yours.” He slowly drew back, and thrust again deeply, impaling me on his cock. The pain was sweet, my body so lost to the pleasure that I almost felt disconnected from it. He found a strong, punishing rhythm, his voice growling, grunting, and moaning with every thrust. His fingers gripped my hips so hard I knew they’d leave marks. I had never felt so thoroughly owned, possessed, or desired than I did just then. I begged for more, and he gave it to me.

His movements became erratic, and he let out an animal sound as he fell forward and bit into my shoulder. I cried out, unsure if it was in pain or pleasure or a beautiful symphony of the two. His hand reached beneath me and tightly grasped my aching dick, and I thrust against it, mindlessly chasing my own release. “Yurio… Yurio…” I panted, and my vision went dark as I let out a long cry, releasing all over the bed. I might’ve said his name again, but I was too far gone to know for sure. I collapsed onto the sheets, his body half-draping over mine as we both audibly caught our breath. I was too hot, so I flopped on my back, wincing a little at the pain in my shoulder.

“Yuuri…” He reached out to me, fingertips lightly brushing my chest. “Did I hurt you?” He looked so concerned beneath his exhaustion.

I smiled. “Just enough. That… That was the best sex I’ve ever had.”

He laughed breathlessly. “Really?”
“Really,” I said. “I’ve never done it like that before. You’re amazing.”

“I was—I was pissed off. I tried to stave it off in my usual way, but then you kept saying things that made it worse, and I just…”

“I did it on purpose,” I told him. “Couldn’t you tell?”

His eyes widened. “Oh.”

I brought his roaming hand up to my lips and kissed it. “Did you enjoy it?”

“I—I mean, yeah, I did. I kept feeling like I should stop, but you just… You were giving me so much, and I couldn’t help but take what I wanted. I kept expecting you to tell me it was too much.”

“I would have, but it wasn’t,” I said. “Do you feel better? Are you still angry?”

He blinked, as if thinking it through. “Not at all. I forgot what I was even mad about.”

I smiled, and turned my body towards him. He looked so beautiful, even with his hair lank and sweaty around his face.

“I don’t… I don’t like the way I am when I’m angry, though,” he said, lowering his eyes. “I’ve hurt people, even those I love. That’s why I was exercising, before. It helps if I release the tension before trying to confront it.”

“That’s good,” I said encouragingly. “Just know that I’ll offer you another way to release it, sometimes.”

He looked at me in disbelief. “How can you enjoy it so much? I felt… I felt like I was using you.”

“A part of me likes that,” I admitted. “I like being handled and taken that way. I trusted you not to go too far, and you didn’t.”

“Did you know this before?”

“Not conclusively,” I said. “Like I said… I’ve never done it like that before. I just had a feeling you’d get a bit more passionate if I made you angry, and I… I wanted to feel it.”

“Is that why you didn’t tell me about going to see Viktor?”

I laughed a little. “No. I didn’t think that far ahead; I just took the opportunity when I saw it.”

He frowned. “Now I feel like the used one.”

“Yurio…” I kissed his forehead. “I wasn’t trying to deceive you, or manipulate you. Much. Consider it one of our games, if it helps.”

His lips curled into a slow smile. “I’m not upset. How could I be? You just told me it was the best you’ve ever had.”

“And I won’t soon forget it,” I purred.

“Are you sure you’re alright? Let me at least look at your shoulder.” He leaned over and turned me a little. “It looks like it’s bruising. Are you okay with that?”

“I’m fine,” I assured him, though I was still grateful for his care.
“But you’re going back to the onsen…”

“Yeah,” I said, sitting up. “Everyone will probably know. But I don’t mind. I want to remember, and every time they look at me, I will.”

He scooted over and nuzzled my thigh. “You’re so crazy. I love you, Yuuri.”

I combed my fingers through his hair. “I love you too, Yurio.”
The GPF that year was intense. The clear frontrunners were Yurio, Otabek, and Minami, but after the Short Program, no one could predict who would come out on top. Yurio scored highest, but only by a narrow margin.

I admired his strength. His nerves never seemed to get to him, and he was able to go about his days as normally as I’d ever seen him. He kept a cool exterior to everyone except his closest friends, but even to me he didn’t show vulnerability. I couldn’t tell if it was pure confidence, or if he’d just found the perfect way to deal with any anxieties, but either way, I was awed by him.

He took gold the next day. Minami and Otabek stood on either side of him, sporting the silver and bronze, respectively. To my surprise, he embraced Minami, and said something that made Minami turn a bright red. When I asked later what he said, Yurio just smirked and said nothing.

After they left the podium, I asked Minami if we could speak alone. We found a relatively quiet area, and pulled a couple of chairs over to face each other.

“You look all serious,” Minami said. “What’s wrong, Yuuri-kun?”

I smiled, and reached over to brush my fingers along the silver medal that hung around his neck. “I’m very proud of you. This is the first time I’ve been able to witness someone else’s career so closely without competing myself, and I want to say it’s been wonderful. You’re a brilliant performer, and I know you’ll continue on to do really well.”

Minami’s eyes lowered. “Oh. You’re trying to say that you’re going to leave me, aren’t you?”

I tried to think of a gentler way to say it, but I couldn’t. “Yeah. I am. I’m sorry, Minami-kun.”

He shook his head. “It was an honor to have you by my side at all. A dream, almost. I always felt a little lost after you retired, so when you came back to the skating world to support me, it was the best thing I could hope for, short of you being my coach. Though I understand now why that was impossible.”

“Kanako’s good for you,” I said. “And I don’t think I’m fit to be a coach, just from what I understand about myself. But you know I’ll always support you, no matter where I am.”

Minami wiped at his eyes. “What will you do?”

“I’m going to move here and learn to be a choreographer with Lilia,” I said. The words felt truer every time I said them, and just a little scarier, too.

“Eh? Really?” His voice was soft with awe. “That’s so cool! If you… If you ever get the inspiration, I would be honored to commission you for a program, someday.”

He looked so shy, I couldn’t help but smile. “If I ever got the opportunity, I would be the one honored to work with you. I promised Yurio I’d help him develop another program for next season, but maybe sometime in the future…”

For a moment he seemed like he might burst with excitement, but in the end held himself back. “We don’t know where we’ll be then, but if it happens, I look forward to it. Depending on how I do at Worlds, I might ask Phichit to sign on with me again for another season. If… if he wants to.”
For some reason, Minami went beet-red at this notion, though it made no sense to me. Phichit seemed to enjoy himself this season—I couldn’t see why he wouldn’t want to give it another go, unless he received another opportunity to develop an ice show. I didn’t really know what to say, though, so I went with plain encouragement. “I know you’ll do great at Worlds. I’ll be cheering you on.”

Minami beamed at me and nodded. “I’ll give it my best!”

I had a dinner together that night with Minami, Phichit, Otabek and his wife Vira, Yakov, Lilia, and Yurio. While we were all gathered, I made the official announcement that I was returning to St. Petersburg to learn to be a choreographer. Everyone had known already, but I felt it needed to be said again to make it concrete in my mind.

I hoped I made the right choice, because it felt like there was no going back now.

After dinner we all went our separate ways, Yurio taking me in a direction that wasn’t back to Lilia’s house.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

He stopped walking, and thrust his chin forward. I followed the direction of the gesture, and saw someone waiting at the end of the block. My eyes widened.

“Why is he here?”

“I called him,” Yurio said, and kept going without saying anything else.

Viktor noticed us, and greeted us with his signature fake smile. It hurt a little to see.

“Congrats on your gold, Yurio,” Viktor said. “How many is that now?”

“If we’re just counting Worlds, GPF, and Olympics, that’s seven,” Yurio responded.

Viktor blinked at him, then turned his back. “…Shit.”

“One more and I beat you, old man,” Yurio taunted. “Not that I really care.”

“You’ve really had an amazing career,” I said. “Only twenty-one, and already close to surpassing Viktor.”

Yurio sighed heavily, then looked at Viktor. “Well? Where are you taking us?”

He pointed up ahead, to a place wedged in between two larger buildings. I recognized it immediately.

“What’s that?” Yurio asked.

“It’s a bar,” I said, wondering just what Viktor had planned for us. “I’ve been before.”

Yurio’s expression showed that he might have had second thoughts about calling Viktor.

Viktor, who had been a few steps ahead of us, turned and grinned. “I thought this occasion called for some celebrating. My treat.”

I glanced at Yurio, who returned my wary look. Viktor didn’t give us time to protest as he dragged us inside.
The bar was cozy, set up almost like a restaurant, with booths and tables and a warm atmosphere, quiet music flowing from somewhere. It was a little crowded, but we managed to grab a booth in a secluded corner just as it was vacated, and Viktor volunteered to get us drinks.

“When was the last time you got drunk?” I asked Yurio out of curiosity.

“Same time last year,” he said, though he didn’t look proud of it. “Beka had just proposed to his fiancée after the GPF, and I was being an asshole about it. Got drunk in my hotel and sent him a bunch of angry texts.”

“Were you by yourself?”

He shrugged. “Who else would have been there?”

I reached under the table and gave his hand a squeeze. Yurio’s eyes drifted over to the bar. “What do you think he’s doing?” I asked him.

“Trying to get you drunk, obviously,” Yurio muttered.

“But why?”

He gave me an incredulous look. “…You do remember what you’re like when you’re drunk, right?”

“Yes, but—why now? Why the both of us?”

He gaped at me, speechless for a moment. “You can’t really be this clueless.”

Was I missing something obvious? I wanted to ask, but Viktor came back before I could, three drinks in tow. Yurio growled something in Russian, which took Viktor by surprise, and made him laugh in a mocking way before saying something back.

I looked at them expectantly, but neither offered a translation.

“What will you do if you come back to St. Petersburg?” Yurio asked Viktor.

Viktor clearly hadn’t been expecting such a normal question. “Do? Why would I do anything?”

“Because you’re not as rich as you want to be,” Yurio said without skipping a beat. “Those clothes are at least a year old. Your haircut is different, like you couldn’t afford your old stylist. Your shoes are dirty, like you’ve been walking everywhere rather than taking a cab like you used to. You clearly haven’t had a manicure in a while, and you ordered yourself one of the cheapest drinks.” He took a heavy swallow of his drink. “Do I need to go on?”

Viktor gaped at him. “Who are you?”

I felt much the same way—I hadn’t noticed anything.

Yurio smirked. “I’m nothing—you’re just obvious. I imagine you were eager enough to come back here even without Yuuri. Cheaper to stay in a place you own rather than keep paying rent by yourself in Moscow. So what happened? Did Hugh run you dry?”

Viktor glared and turned away, sipping his beer and saying nothing.

Yurio laughed mercilessly. “Really? You let a guy like that eat up your money?”

Viktor was clearly trying to look angry, but I could see his expression straining a little. I put a hand
on Yurio’s arm. “Leave it alone,” I said quietly, and turned to Viktor. “What will you do, though?”

“Yakov wants to see you again,” Yurio offered, when it was clear Viktor didn’t have an answer. “He’s been looking for an assistant for next summer’s classes. I bet he could put you to use elsewhere, too.”

I was a bit surprised Yurio was offering to help in such a casual way, considering the clear animosity still between them. Viktor, too, seemed a bit wary of his offer. “Yakov told you this?”

“Not directly,” Yurio admitted. “But you know how he is. He misses you. For all that he’s been burned by depending on you over and over, I’d bet everything I have he still wants you around. And he’s been bitching about his need for an assistant for two years now. He told me I should fuck up more, so I’ll stop inspiring so many local kids to try skating.”

Viktor looked at him in disbelief, and I couldn’t help but laugh. I couldn’t imagine Yakov making a joke like that.

“I don’t know if I could do anything, but I’ll go see him,” Viktor said. “Not like I can avoid it, anyway.”

“Do you still skate?” I asked him.

“From time to time,” Viktor said. “I worked with Chris for a little while, helping him choreograph some exhibition programs. It’s been over a year since I did anything like that, though.”

“You really put together some of the best programs I ever did,” I said. “If you do choreography for the skaters here, I don’t think I’d be able to compete.”

“Your styles are completely different,” Yurio argued. “Besides, you’d be working under Lilia’s guidance at first, and she’s the best in the world.”

“Arguably,” Viktor put in.

Yurio’s cold stare could cut through glass. “Talk shit about Lilia and I’ll kick you in the face with my skates the next time you’re at the rink.”

“Guys, guys, calm down,” I said, just a little afraid of escalation. They didn’t argue, instead taking gulps of their respective drinks. I took one of my own, then swallowed back a nervous lump. “I… I know I’m probably the only one, but I’m really happy I’m going to live here again, with the both of you in my life. A year ago I thought I’d never see either of you again, so it’s just… It’s nice to be here. With you.”

Yurio squeezed my thigh, giving me a small smile. Viktor raised his glass. “I can drink to that,” he said. “To Yuuri’s triumphant return to St. Petersburg.”

Yurio raised his drink, too, and both he and Viktor drained their glasses. I couldn’t keep up with the Russians, only halfway finished with mine, but I felt no rush. The alcohol made me feel warm, slowly relaxing me.

Yurio got up to buy the next round, leaving Viktor and me alone.

“He’s grown up so much,” Viktor commented quietly. “He’s still a little shit, though.”

“Just to you,” I countered. “But I think you’ve earned it. You were responsible for driving me away, after all.”
The corner of Viktor’s mouth curled into a smile. “So you’re finally admitting it was my fault, then?”

I shrugged. It didn’t feel like an argument worth having right then.

“I’m glad, too, by the way,” Viktor said, eyes fixated on the table. “If I can’t have you to myself, I’m still grateful I’ll get to be your… friend. I felt so incredibly lost without you, that I just…”

Yurio came back with the drinks, sliding into the booth. “I heard that,” he said, taking another gulp before continuing. “I think I’ll rest a little easier if I just put this out there—I don’t particularly care what you two do without me.”

My eyes widened. “Yurio, you can’t mean—”

He held up a hand to stop me, though it wavered a little. The alcohol was clearly starting to take effect. “Hear me out, Yuuri. The way I see it, I have three options here. First is that I convince you to make Viktor go back to Moscow or Switzerland or wherever the fuck, and you go through your life with a piece missing. Second option is that I insist on being with the two of you whenever you’re together, which is not only petty and possessive as hell, it would be a huge pain in the ass for me. Third option is that I just learn not to give a fuck, because at the end of the day, you’re with me and I trust you to come back to me.”

I felt stunned, but I had to speak. “Yurio, I’m not going to—”

“I know you’re not going to cheat on me,” he said, his cheeks deeply flushed. “That’s not what this is about. This is about the fact that you two have a history, a connection—something that I might be jealous of but I also understand completely. You didn’t flinch at all when I told you about Beka, and I’m not going to hold you back if you want something similar with Viktor.”

“…Do I get a say in any of this?” Viktor asked.

“No,” Yurio snarled, and took another drink. “You had your chance and you blew it. Be happy you’re getting anything at all.”

I put my hand on Yurio’s shoulder. “Be fair, Yurio. He does get a say in this, as do I. I’m glad you’re so open about it, but I don’t want to do anything that might hurt you or bother you. It’s one thing to say you’re okay with something, but it’s another to feel it.”

“I—” Yurio closed his mouth, clearly thinking it through. “I get bothered by a lot of things. You know that, and you know how I deal with it. I think it would only hurt if you just one day decided not to come back to me, because you decided you liked him better.”

“That won’t happen,” I said.

“Then I don’t care what you do,” he said.

I leaned in close, my lips nearly brushing his ear. “I know you care at least a little,” I whispered. “But you can feel free to let me know how much you care at the end of the day.”

His beautiful eyes widened a little, and he gave me a brief look of disbelief before turning to Viktor with a slow, sinister smile growing on his face.

“You don’t have to do that with me here, you know,” Viktor said sulkily.

“I spent two years with you two rubbing your disgustingly romantic relationship in my face,” Yurio said. “You bring us here, you put alcohol in us, you live with the consequences, old man.” He
nudged my drink closer to me, and I obediently drained my glass.

I’d only had one drink, but it was a strong one, and I was beginning to feel the world soften at the edges a little. Yurio was warm beside me, and I felt an urge to be closer to him, but he nudged me back a little, keeping some space between us.

“So, one thing I don’t completely understand,” Yurio said, looking at Viktor, “was why you didn’t go back to Japan after you left here last time. You seemed to just wander aimlessly around Europe for four years before settling in Moscow with your gold digger boyfriend.”

Viktor slammed his drink down. “First of all, Hugh was not a gold digger. He had expensive tastes, that’s all. Secondly—if you’d said what I said, would you think you had a right to go back to him?”

“I’d at least try to find a way to apologize,” Yurio said. “From what I could tell, you didn’t contact him at all.”

I nodded to confirm.

“Well, to apologize I would have had to actually believe it was my fault,” Viktor said. “And that… Took me longer than I’d like to admit. I was with Hugh when I realized it.”

“Wait, wait, let me try to understand this,” Yurio said. “You didn’t go after Yuuri because you felt guilty for what you said, but you didn’t believe the breakup was your fault? How does that work?”

Viktor looked at me, and I realized that I understood it perfectly.

“He felt guilty for pushing me away, but everything else was still my fault, in his eyes,” I said. “Right?”

He nodded. “I was too busy trying to convince myself that things were better that way. I told myself if I saw you again, I would apologize, but I wouldn’t beg you to come back to me.”

“Man, you are such a dick,” Yurio said.

“If we want to talk about people being dicks, I’ve got some stories about Yuuri that might open your eyes a little,” Viktor said darkly. “Your katsudon is not as perfect as you think he is.”

I felt an intense heat of shame come over me—so much that I actually cowered a little. Viktor could certainly tell stories from our relationship that would paint me in a negative light—times when I was petty, times when I wasn’t paying close enough attention to Viktor’s feelings... We’d always worked out our issues through talking and sex, but I knew my track record as a partner wasn’t the greatest.

“I don’t need to hear anything; I know what Yuuri’s like,” Yurio said. “If I wanted someone who would coddle me all the time, I wouldn’t have chosen him. And if you don’t want to go home with a bloody nose, I’d ask that you not throw his mistakes and flaws in his face.”

“Tch. So violent.” Viktor drained his second drink. “Fine. I won’t bring it up if you stop painting me like the villain, here. Yuuri and I agree that while he wasn’t to blame, it was still a joint effort that led to our breakup.”

“I’ll paint you however I want,” Yurio said. “But if you’re pissed off at me, leave him out of it.”

I couldn’t tell if I was grateful for the defense or annoyed that they argued about me like I wasn’t there.
“Alright, alright,” Viktor gritted out. “I’m just—pissed off, okay? I shouldn’t have even come.”

“Why did you, then?” Yurio asked.

“‘Hey Viktor, want to get together after dinner? I’ll bring Yuuri.’” Viktor said it in a mockery of Yurio’s voice. I couldn’t help but laugh, though I stifled it at Yurio’s glare.

“You didn’t have to come,” Yurio said. “Especially not if it was just going to piss you off.”

“You piss me off. Yuuri’s fine. I thought you might balance each other out.”

I couldn’t follow. “Eh? What do you mean?”

Viktor flushed, but kept his gaze steadily on Yurio. “If you think I would take any pleasure in seeing that, you don’t know the first thing about me.”

I knew Viktor was lying. Viktor knew that I knew he was lying, because he shot me a look daring me to argue. Exhibitionism and voyeurism were definitely on his long list of kinks, and fairly high up on that list, if I remembered correctly. But I had no idea if the kink would override the pain of watching me with another man.

In any case, I kept my mouth shut. Whatever game he was playing with Yurio was not something I wanted to get in the middle of. Not with only a drink and a half in me, anyway.

More drinks were ordered, and the conversation turned to St. Petersburg, with Viktor asking Yurio whether or not certain people or places were still around. I couldn’t follow everything, and instead paid attention to Yurio while I worked through my second and third drinks. His cheeks were flushed and he spoke easily, as if he hadn’t just been arguing with Viktor moments before. He seemed relaxed, in a way I’d never seen him around Viktor before. It was refreshing.

When Viktor got up to go to the bathroom, I leaned heavily against Yurio, craving just a little attention.

“What’s wrong, Yuuri?” he asked me quietly, placing a kiss on the side of my head. “Getting bored already?”

“No,” I said, though honestly I was a little bored by their conversation.

“We can go soon, if you want,” he said. “I’m getting a little tired.”

“I’m not exactly tired, but I wouldn’t mind going someplace with a bed.” Wait. Did I say that out loud? I hadn’t meant to.

Judging by his widened eyes, I did. “Not even three drinks and you’re already drooling over me,” he said teasingly. “You’re a lightweight, Katsuki.”

“You’re just too easy to drool over,” I said. “But we can stay. I’m enjoying myself.”

Yurio let out a long exhale. “For what it’s worth, I am too. I think I can do this.”

“Do what?”

“Be around him and not want to punch his lights out,” he said. “At first I thought I couldn’t,
knowing what he said to you, but now…” He shrugged.

“Did you mean what you said earlier?” I asked. “About you not caring…”

He took a hefty gulp before answering. “I did. I would be a hypocrite if I barred you from being alone with him when I have no intention of giving up Beka. I realize it’s not quite the same, especially since Beka lives in Almaty and I only see him a handful of times each year, but there’s still a connection between us that I’m not going to cut. Whatever happened between you and Viktor, it’s clear you have a connection like that, too. If I told you never to see him again, you’d probably listen, but you’d be missing a piece. You’d be unsettled. It’s one thing if you choose it for yourself, but I’m not going to be the one that keeps you apart, even if I want you to myself.” He gave me a sly grin. “And if it bothers me, I’ll be sure let you know.”

“Okay,” I said agreeably. “Just remember—be honest with me.”

“Always, Yuuri,” he said, and kissed me long and slow, his tongue sliding in lazily and adding fuel to my already slow-burning arousal. I felt eyes on us, and without breaking the kiss I peeked to see Viktor watching us from a few feet away, his gaze a little dark. I winked at him, and eased away from Yurio.

Yurio followed my gaze, eyebrows twitching in slight annoyance. “Oh.”

Viktor ignored him and nodded towards me. “Another rum?”

“Alright,” I said, already feeling a little sluggish. “Last one. You want me any drunker, you have to take me somewhere not public first.”

Viktor laughed warmly before going to get it. It felt good to hear his laugh again.

I lost track of time for a while, talking with Yurio and Viktor about the nonsense we used to do around competitions to keep ourselves sane. I was a little warm and physically uncomfortable, but at the same time soaking in the hard-won relaxed atmosphere between us. I didn’t think about where this would go.

It took me by surprise, then, when Viktor suggested we go to his apartment. Yurio seemed agreeable enough, so I didn’t question it, but I couldn’t help but wonder if Viktor had a plan of some kind. Knowing what I knew about him, I knew he had to have something in mind, even if that something wasn’t fully-realized or even likely to happen. But the three of us stumbled out into the late night, hanging on each other as we traversed the three blocks to the apartment, hardly a care between us. It felt nice.

Viktor let us in, and Yurio immediately went to the bathroom. I took my opportunity to drag Viktor aside.

“What are you planning?” I asked bluntly, keeping my voice low.

His gaze was a little bleary, clouded by alcohol. “Nothing.” I gave him a disbelieving look, and he shrugged. “If something happens, though, I’m not going to stop it.”

“You old perv,” I said, not without affection. “You’re alright with this?”

He sighed theatrically. “I’ll take what I can get.” But his dark smile gave away that he was more than alright with whatever might happen, so I let the subject drop and went to the kitchen for some water.
Yurio came out of the bathroom just a little unsteady, and draped himself over me, his chest pressing against my back as he groaned out my name. I turned around to face him, leaning on the counter for support. “What do you want?”

His eyes, too, were a little clouded with drink, but it wasn’t enough to dull the usual sharpness of his gaze. “I’m hungry for katsudon,” he whispered. “Let me take you in the bathroom for a few minutes.”

I glanced over at Viktor, who was lounging on his sofa reading his phone. Or, more likely, pretending to. Yurio’s drunken whispers probably reached him easily. “I want you for more than a few minutes,” I countered.

“Then let’s go back,” Yurio said, clasping my hands and breathing heavily against my neck.

“It’s so far,” I complained.

“I’ll get a cab.”

“Let’s stay here,” I said, putting my first card on the table.

He pulled back, his eyes widened a little. “But Viktor’s here.”

“I know,” I said, watching his face closely. “He’d let us use his bedroom if I asked nicely.”

I could tell by his expression that Yurio’s horniness was fighting a hard battle with apprehension. “And we’d just—keep quiet?”

“I don’t think I could,” I said honestly. “Not with what I’m in the mood for, anyway.”

“Yuuri…”

It was time show my entire hand. I pitched my voice lower and brought my lips to his ear. “If you ever wanted him to know just how much I belong to you, this is your chance. We could tie him up in the corner and make him watch.”

Yurio’s breath hitched, clearly a little turned on by the suggestion. But he looked worried. “Isn’t that a little…cruel? In his own bedroom?”

“Just trust me to deal with him,” I said. “Are you interested?”

He pressed up against me, his cock hard and throbbing in his tight pants. “What do you think? I’d push you over this counter right now if I could.”

I tilted my head. “Why can’t you?”

“Good question.” He glanced again at Viktor, who’d given up on pretense and was watching us with slightly parted lips. Yurio turned back to me with a wicked grin, and promptly shoved his tongue into my mouth.

I lost myself to his kisses, sensation overcoming any intrusive thoughts that might’ve gotten in the way. I suddenly cared very little about where we were or why this was happening, because the only things in the world that mattered were Yurio’s tongue and the way his whole body pressed against me. His long-fingered hands reached behind me and gripped my ass, lifting me up until I was sitting on the cold stone of the kitchen island. I had to lean forward to reach his mouth, but he quickly shifted to my neck, and the deep, resonating pleasure that resulted made me throw my head back.
with a groan. I spared a look at Viktor, whose eyes were shining with eagerness at the display, and I had a fleeting moment where I considered inviting him over. I quickly pushed the thought away. Not this time.

Yurio fumbled with the button of my pants, and forcefully pulled them off alongside my underwear, leaving my skin naked against the cold counter. He leaned forward and attacked my aching dick with sloppy, drunken enthusiasm, and I leaned back with a languid moan. My pleasure was building too fast, and while I entertained the thought of just ending it right then, it seemed like such a waste. I pushed him away and caressed his face appreciatively before sliding off the counter.

“Did you bring anything?” I asked Yurio quietly.

“In my backpack,” he answered. “I’ve been carrying them around everywhere, just in case.”

I wouldn’t put it past Viktor to have the necessary items, but I didn’t want to ask him. “Good. Take the stuff in the bedroom and wait for me. I’ll just be a minute.”

Yurio was flushed all over, eager but still clearly apprehensive. I gave him a reassuring kiss and urged him on before going to where Viktor sat on the sofa. I mostly ignored the fact that I was naked from the waist down.

“You doing alright, Vitya?” I asked him.

“You’re still the sexiest man I’ve ever seen,” he purred. “I’d missed your voice so much.”

I rolled my eyes. “You Russians and your obsession with my voice. Well, do you have any requests?”

“I miss when you just knew what I wanted,” he pouted.

I held out my hand, and he rubbed his cheek against my palm, just like he used to. “We never did anything quite like this before,” I said. “I’m guessing you’re the more experienced in this sort of game, but I can probably guess what you’re after. Do you have ties here?”

“No, that’s all still in Moscow. But you did leave your old, ugly neckties here. I wanted to finally burn them, but I couldn’t bring myself to do more than look at your things.”

I bit my lip, considering. “Where are they?”

He pointed to a cardboard box in the corner. I opened it, and saw a small assortment of clothes and other things I’d left behind, including one of my medals. I found the offending ties easily enough and closed the box, pushing the rest of it from my mind. “Come on, then,” I said, putting my hand on the back of his neck. “Do you want a chair?”

Yurio gave me a confused look as I carried a wooden chair into the bedroom and pushed Viktor down onto it. “This one is going to watch,” I said silkily, binding his wrists to the arms of the chair. “He’s not allowed to touch himself, and he’s not allowed to speak. Feel free to say anything you want to him, though.”

Yurio didn’t quite seem to know what to do with himself, but he grinned as I tied the third tie around Viktor’s mouth. “I recognize that ugly tie. That’s a good use for it.”

I met Viktor’s eyes, looking for reassurance that this was alright. He gave me the slightest nod, then struggled a little against his bindings, testing them. He could get free if he wanted—the knots could be undone with one hand—but it was all about the illusion for him.
With Viktor set up against the wall, I turned back to Yurio, who was sitting on the edge of the bed, a bottle of lube and condom within reach. My dick had deflated a little at the inattention, but I knew it wouldn’t take much to get me going again. I climbed into Yurio’s lap, checking his face for reluctance, but he just seemed eager to get back to it. His hands were warm against my ass, and I bent down to rekindle my flame with a tongue-filled kiss.

Viktor’s eyes were a constant prickle in the back of my mind as I made love to Yurio, a tiny spark of awareness that made everything just a little more intense. Yurio wasn’t quite as vocal as usual, not quite as into it, so I took it upon myself to make him forget that Viktor was there. I removed his clothes and pushed him back onto the bed, and put my tongue to good use on all the areas I knew drove Yurio crazy. I was in no hurry, taking my time until Yurio was a babbling mess beneath me.

“Yuuri… please…” he begged. His beautiful face glistened with sweat. If it had been Viktor, I might have given him a couple more rounds of torture, but I couldn’t resist giving Yurio what he wanted when he asked for it so prettily. Still, I went slowly, lifting up and reaching around to prepare myself, showing them both how much I enjoyed it. Yurio closed his eyes for a moment, and I chanced a look at Viktor, who seemed to be in his usual aroused stupor, watching us with dark eyes, his knuckles white as he clenched the chair.

I slipped the condom on Yurio, which brought him back to awareness, and he gazed up at me with lust-filled eyes. I should have been talking more, but everything between the three of us felt so delicate that I didn’t want to risk saying the wrong thing. If this was the only chance I had at doing this with the two of them, I didn’t want to risk ruining it. Instead I made up for it with my moans of passion, holding back nothing as I slid down onto Yurio’s rigid, throbbing dick. It felt so good that I fell forward, losing my balance just a little, and Yurio grasped my hips to keep me from slipping off. He pushed in a little.

“Like that,” I said to him softly. “Harder.”

He gripped me tightly and thrust up, the angle hitting me almost perfectly. I adjusted my stance a little. “Again,” I told him. This was the first time we’d ever done it this way, and I could tell by the gleam in his eyes that he particularly liked it. I cried out loudly as he thrust once, twice, three times, hitting that perfect spot that made my insides scream. “Yes,” I hissed. “Just like that.”

Yurio didn’t last long. He grunted, his thrusts rapidly growing erratic as he came with a sound that was almost a sob. He kept thrusting a few more times for my benefit, but in the end he had to force me off, panting and sweating.

I stroked myself, too close to the edge for comfort. “What should I do?” I asked Yurio, hoping his awareness had returned enough to give instruction.

He seemed to think for a moment while he caught his breath, watching my hand slowly move up and down my shaft. “Do it on him,” he said, lazily gesturing to Viktor. “He likes it, doesn’t he?”

That was a bit of an understatement, but I wasn’t going to say so. Viktor perked up a little at Yurio’s words, his face completely flushed as I slid off the bed to stand in front of him. I brushed my knuckles against Viktor’s cheek, then grasped my cock and jerked myself languidly, making a show of it. I was so wound up it didn’t take long, my spurts landing messily on Viktor’s chin, neck, and shirt. Not my best work, I could admit, but not bad for it being unplanned.

“God, that was hot,” Yurio said unexpectedly as I leaned against the bed to regain my composure. “I can see why you like it.”

Viktor was straining against his bindings, biting at the tie in his mouth and clearly needing release.
“What should we do with him?” I asked, with a tone suggesting I didn’t care one way or another, even though I did.

“Hmm.” Yurio sat up. “What did you usually do?”

“If I were upset with him, I’d let him sit longer, stewing in his need for a while.” He looked at me reproachfully, and I winked at him. “If I took pity on him, I’d suck him off. Looks like it wouldn’t take much. Or we could just untie him and let him finish himself.” I turned to Yurio. “I’ll let you decide.”

Yurio seemed to think on it for a moment. “As much as I love seeing him suffer, I think he deserves a little credit for being a gracious host. Leave him tied, but you can suck him off if you want.”

If I were honest, that was the answer I’d hoped for, and the one I knew Viktor wanted the most. I gave Viktor a shy smile as I sank to my knees, unfastened his pants, and pulled them down to his ankles. He slid his hips forward in the chair to give me better access, and I turned to silently ask Yurio for one last reassurance. He nodded at me, his tired face watching with interest, and I put my tongue on Viktor’s weeping dick.

Viktor trembled violently as I sucked him down, and I put my hands firmly on his thighs to soothe him. How long had it been for him? Usually he wasn’t this wound up, not from such a relatively short session of play. He jerked against his restraints, sobs escaping his throat, and soon my mouth was flooded with his cum. I pulled away to swallow, licked up the last few drops, and rose unsteadily to my feet.

Yurio smiled at me tiredly and fell back against the pillows, looking relaxed and sated. Viktor slumped in his chair, breathing heavily, and I untied his wrists, rubbing gentle circles on the reddened skin. He gazed up at me, his blue eyes filled with such deep love that I felt a lump rise in my throat. I removed the tie around his mouth, and he smiled in a way that made me want to kiss him. Instead I backed away. “Go clean yourself up, Vitya. You’re filthy.”

He let out a laugh of disbelief and shakily stood, stumbling his way out of the room. I went back to Yurio, who was dozing. “Don’t sleep yet, or you’ll regret it in the morning.” I told him, patting his face.

“Just five minutes,” he murmured, rubbing against my hand.

“No,” I said firmly. “Sit up. I’ll bring you some water.”

Eventually we managed to get ourselves relatively cleaned up and hydrated, despite our collective exhaustion. Viktor found some old shirts and underwear for Yurio and me to borrow, since his apartment was too cold and drafty to carry on naked.

“You two can stay in here; I’ll sleep on the sofa,” Viktor offered once Yurio and I had curled up on the bed together. I thought it was a little unfair, and looked up at Yurio with pleading eyes.

He didn’t take long to reach a decision. “Get over here, old man. Your bed’s big enough.”

Reluctantly, Viktor walked around the bed and slid under the covers, staying as close to the edge as he could. I could tell he was wary and uncomfortable, despite everything that had just happened. I shivered at the slight chill his movements brought.

“Yuuri’s cold,” Yurio said tiredly, his eyes already closed. “Fix that.”

And then, after a moment’s hesitation, I was nestled warmly between the two men I loved most in
the world.

I felt like crying from happiness. But instead, I slept.
The first time I awoke, it was in an unfamiliar bed with a familiar dark head tucked under my chin. Dim fingers of orange light reached his drooling face where it rested on my chest, his breathing deep and steady in sleep. I was only vaguely aware of another presence next to us, and I closed my eyes again.

The second time I awoke, I was alone, the sheets and blanket tucked firmly around me, the light brighter than before. My head swam a little as I sat up, and my bladder ached fiercely the moment my bare feet touched the cold floor. I stumbled gracelessly across the apartment to the bathroom, barely registering that Viktor and Yuuri were in the kitchen.

Something smelled good.

As I waited for my bladder to empty itself, I remembered everything that happened last night, cringing a little. I’d been so horny that I hadn’t cared in the slightest that Viktor was there—in fact, a part of me liked that Viktor was there, watching me claim Yuuri with abandon. I’d even liked watching Yuuri take care of Viktor, because I’d told him to, and he’d obeyed me.

God, how embarrassing.

I washed my face with plain water, cringing at the awful state of my hair. Sweat and sleep hadn’t been kind to it, turning it into a stringy, tangled mess, and I’d have to wash it to get it back to any presentable form. If it were just Yuuri there, I wouldn’t mind so much, but knowing I had to face Viktor looking like this put me on edge. I vaguely considered showering, but I was too hungry for that, and it was too cold to deal with damp hair. Steeling myself with a deep breath, I left the bathroom.

“Good morning, Yurio!” Yuuri greeted, a little too cheerfully as he took a pan of eggs off the stove. His eyes scrutinized me. Did I really look that bad?

“Breakfast,” Viktor announced, poking sausages around his frying pan. A huge stack of pancakes waited next to the stove, and I salivated at the sight. “Yuuri, could you put out plates?”

“Just a moment, Vitya,” Yuuri said, carefully setting his pan down on a trivet. He came over and urged me into the bedroom, easing the door almost shut behind us.

“Yuuri, what’s—”

“Are you doing alright?” he asked me, clearly worried and ashamed. “Do you… remember everything?”

“I wasn’t that drunk, Yuuri. And neither were you.” I considered him for a moment, then realized what was wrong. “Oh. You think I’m regretting what happened?”

He lowered his eyes. “…Are you?”

I sat on the bed. “No. Not really. It’s weird as hell to think about it completely sober, but I remember thoroughly enjoying myself. You’re—kind of amazing, to tell the truth.”

“Wha-what do you mean by that?” The way he flushed with embarrassment was so cute. So at odds with the way he’d flushed last night.
“You clearly have more sexual energy than I can handle on my own,” I said with a smirk. “You’re like an incubus.”

“An incu—what? Why do you think I’m like an incubus?”

“Your powers of seduction are legendary, Yuuri.” I fingered a wrinkle in the sheet. “Last night made me realize just how powerful you can be. You led the whole thing, but somehow made me feel like I was in charge.”

“And you… like that?”

“I loved it,” I said emphatically. “I don’t think I would have agreed to it without the alcohol, but God, I am so glad I did.”

He sighed heavily with relief. “Oh good. I was so… I thought I’d coerced you into something you’d definitely regret. I thought I’d taken advantage of you.”

“You didn’t. I agreed to everything, remember? You would have known if I was too drunk.” I reached out, inviting him into my embrace.

He came willingly, his chest warm against my face. “Maybe, but… You know how anxious I can get.”

“I know too well,” I said with an exasperated sigh. “Thank you for checking, though.”

“So is this… Would you want to ever do this again?” he asked reluctantly.

“Maybe. Let’s talk more after you come back and get settled. I have the feeling I’ll want you to myself for a while after that, but I won’t rule out the possibility of sharing you again. Turns out that Viktor’s a lot less annoying when he’s tied up and can’t speak.”

Yuuri laughed a little, and pulled away. He went to the wardrobe and brought out a stack of clothes. “Viktor set these aside for you, in case you didn’t want to wear yesterday’s clothes. They’re pretty plain, but I didn’t know how you’d feel about wearing his stuff…”

Yesterday I would have rejected the idea like vomit. Today, though… “Thanks. This apartment’s too damn cold to walk around without pants.”

 Yuuri smiled radiantly, and planted a sweet kiss on my forehead. “Alright, come get breakfast before it gets cold.”

I’d never had a more relaxed morning in my life. It was due mostly to Yuuri looking happier and more content than I’d ever seen him, but Viktor’s mood helped, too. He was happy, but not in an annoying way, and a far cry from the deep misery he’d worn on his shoulders the past few times I’d seen him. He actually seemed grateful towards me. Such a strange feeling.

It felt too early that we had to leave, but Yuuri’s flight was scheduled for that evening, and he needed to pack up his things and get to the airport. Yakov drove us without my even asking. I sat with Yuuri in the back seat, watching the city lights pass us by, suddenly realizing that this was probably the last time I’d have to say goodbye to him for a long time. I held onto that realization like a comforting blanket. The three weeks we’d spend apart would be excruciating, but knowing that he was coming to stay at the end made it seem far more bearable.

To my surprise, Yakov took Yuuri aside and spoke to him for a good five minutes. Yuuri seemed embarrassed but agreeable, and wouldn’t tell me anything that Yakov said to him when I approached
to say my goodbyes.

I kissed him slowly, my lips lingering a bit long for public, but I wanted to memorize the feeling. “Come back to me,” I told him.

“Soon,” he said. He took my hand in his, and brought it to his lips in a disgustingly romantic gesture. Awful. I was probably completely red from forehead to neck.

He turned to leave, and I had to stop myself from trying to follow him. I watched him as long as I could, until he was completely out of sight.

When I got back to the house, I locked myself in my room, prepared to mope like I had the last three times we’d parted. But I didn’t feel quite like moping. I was buzzing with a strange energy, and before I understood what I was doing, I texted Otabek.

Yuri: Is it a good time to call?

My phone rang not two minutes later. “Beka. Are you back in Almaty?”

“We had an early flight. Is something wrong?”

I had to think for a moment. “Not really. I mean, Yuuri just left, and I won’t see him again for a while.”

“I’m sorry. At least he’s coming back to stay next time, right?”

“That’s the plan,” I said. “But I’m alright. I just… I did something crazy last night.”

“A threesome?”

“…How the fuck did you know?”

“…I was joking. Yura, what the hell—”

“I know, I know. But we were a little drunk, and—”

“Oh. Shit, no wonder. You get stupidly horny when you’re drunk.”

“…I didn’t know that until last night. Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I thought you knew. You don’t remember any of the drunken sex we had that year?”

“I mean, I remember the sex… most of it, maybe… But I thought that was just because you were there and drunk with me.”

“No. I mean, yes, but you go a little overboard with alcohol in you. I seriously thought you knew.”

“Last time I got drunk I sent you angry texts for having the audacity to propose to your long-time girlfriend. I thought alcohol just made me angry.”

“Oh, no. Those texts didn’t come off as angry to me. You sounded frustrated more than anything. Don’t you remember the one saying that if Vira sucked at giving head you’d still take care of me?”

“…Fuck.”

“A threesome, huh? Katsuki and Nikiforov?”
“…Shut up. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

He chuckled. “Why did you call me then?”

“I—goddammit, Beka.” My head felt like it would boil over any second.

“Calm down. I’m not making fun of you. I am a little curious, though. I thought you hated Viktor.”

“I did. I still do, a little. But he was there, and Yuuri said he might want to watch, so… Gah, I didn’t know what I was doing.”

“Are you saying you regret it?”

“…N-no. No, not at all. I might’ve even… liked it more than I expected to. I don’t really know how to feel about it, exactly, but I don’t regret it.”

“Was it Katsuki’s idea?”

“Probably? I don’t know. It all happened so naturally that it almost felt like they’d both planned it. But I don’t think that’s the case.”

“Maybe it’s because they know each other well enough to know what the other wanted?”

“That seems more likely. Either way, it was… pretty hot.”

“How involved were you? Were you watching them, or…?”

“Oh. Erm…” I hesitated, then remembered who I was talking to. I could tell Beka anything. “At first it was just me and Yuuri, with Viktor watching. Yuuri tied him to a chair and gagged him, but after I finished, I told him to play with Viktor a little. And it was hot. Yuuri kind of steered the whole thing, but he left the decisions up to me.”

“So you weren’t doing anything to Nikiforov directly?”

“Nah. Just watching. I wasn’t really interested in doing anything with him.”

“But you didn’t mind that Katsuki did?”

“Well, I mean—it wasn’t anything new to them. They apparently did weird shit like this all the time, though I think this might’ve been Yuuri’s first three-way. It seems like he would have told me if there’d been anyone else. Not that I care much.”

“Yeah, but… I don’t know, I guess I just expected you to be more possessive. You were constantly prickly when I’d go out with Vira, or even talk about her sometimes.”

“It’s not the same, but honestly… I thought it would bother me more, too. Maybe it was the alcohol, or the fact that I’d just fucked, but it really didn’t bother me. Or maybe…”

“Maybe what?”

“Maybe it was because he asked me to make the decisions. He gave me the option to say no, and I didn’t.”

“That’s hardly surprising. Of course he would leave the decisions up to you—you were the one most likely to have objections.”
“Yeah, I understand why he did it, but I still think… Maybe that’s why I was okay with it. He left me plenty of room to say no and not make it awkward. Which made it easier to say yes. Maybe. I don’t know. It’s so weird, Beka.”

“But you sound happy talking about it. It can’t be that bad, can it?”

“It’s not bad at all. I just never… This isn’t quite how I imagined it would be.”

“Is being with Katsuki something you could have predicted, though? You always talked about how surprising he could be. As long as you’re both happy, it doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Oh, Beka, you always know the right thing to say.”

“…Did you really need to talk to me? Are you sure you didn’t just want to brag?”

“Why the hell would I brag about this? It’s so weird.”

“I dunno, sounds pretty hot to me.”

“Are you looking for an invite?” I teased.

“Hell no. Vira would kill me. Besides, Katsuki and Nikiforov sound like they’re a bit too much for me. I’m fine just living vicariously through your vague descriptions.”

“Perv. How are you two, by the way?”

“We’re fine. Vira’s asleep. I’m out on the balcony enjoying the weather.”

“I has to be freezing there.”

“It’s perfect.”

Beka was always naturally warm, and liked the cold weather. I could tolerate it about as well as any Russian, but he would walk out in the middle of winter without much more than his leather jacket. “Crazy bastard.”

“Says the one who had a threesome last night.”

I spent a while longer talking to Beka, mostly gushing about Yuuri’s return, until he was making it clear that he was getting sleepy himself. I let him go sometime around midnight, but stayed awake for a while longer, replaying last night’s events in my head and wondering if it might happen again.

The thought of it gave me a thrill I couldn’t quite describe. I guess that meant I was into it, even without alcohol.

A few days later I got a call from Viktor that I forgot to return. He’d called during practice, and I dismissed the reminder with the intent to call him back later that day, but never did. The next day he showed up at the rink, and spent a long time talking with Yakov. When I took a break for lunch, though, he joined me at my table.

“What do you want?” I asked, because I had to. I wasn’t going to suddenly start being nice to him. I couldn’t quite bring myself to look him in the eye, though.

“We need to talk,” he said.

I gestured for him to sit across from me. “What about? Should Yuuri be involved?”
“Just you and me, for now,” he said. He was having trouble meeting my eyes, too. I’d never felt so awkward around him before. “We need to discuss what happened the other night.”

My immediate thought was to shut it down and leave, because I really didn’t want to talk about it without Yuuri. But he’d said we needed to talk about it, and I couldn’t deny that fact, no matter how much we both didn’t want to. “…Alright.”

“How drunk would you say you were, that night? Scale of one to ten, one being completely sober, ten being unable to understand what’s going on or on the verge of passing out.”

I thought for a moment. “Maybe a six at most, at first… Probably more like a three or four by the end. I was pretty fucking aware of what was going on and what I was doing.”

“Did Yuuri coerce you into anything? Try to convince you to do something you initially weren’t comfortable with?” He spoke with almost clinical passivity, no emotion coming through in his voice.

“No. I was nervous, but I agreed to everything easily enough.”

I chanced a look at him, and he gave me a vague smile. “Did you wake up with any immediate regrets?”

“Not at all.” I couldn’t help it; I smiled back. “Did you?”

He leaned back, regarding me carefully. “I woke up next to the man I love. Hard to regret anything that brought me there. But, for what it’s worth, I enjoyed myself. And I know Yuuri did, which is arguably more important.”

It was infinitely more important to me, but I thought it might be just a little too rude to say so.

“What I need from you,” he went on, “are your boundaries. That is, assuming, you want to do it again someday.”

**Boundaries.** That word Yuuri used the night we’d confessed to each other. I understood now what he meant, but I still didn’t have an answer. “Do I have to answer now?”

“They don’t have to be concrete; you can change them at any time. But I want you to think about what is too far for you. Which actions are forbidden. Yuuri seems determined to hand you the reins, so I want to make sure you understand what that means.”

I looked down at my neglected lunch. “Maybe you should explain it. I never completely understood your relationship with Yuuri, and I’ve been afraid to ask too many questions.”

He hesitated, then sighed resignedly. “You can probably guess a little from what you’ve seen, but to put it plainly, I prefer to be completely at Yuuri’s mercy. In turn, he seems to enjoy letting you make the decisions, so you can see where that places me.”

“If you think I was in charge, you weren’t paying close enough attention.”

“Oh, don’t worry—I know exactly who was steering that ship.” He pushed his hair away from his face in a clearly nervous gesture. “But he’s deferring to you, essentially putting me at your mercy. And I don’t know how I feel about that. He’s your partner—I understand that—but this arrangement makes me a bit more vulnerable than I’m completely comfortable with.”

“I don’t think Yuuri would suggest anything he knew you didn’t want. But that seems like something you should talk about with him, rather than me.”
“We all three need to talk, when he comes back,” Viktor said. “But mostly I just wanted to know where you stand, and let you know where I stand. I’m going to be honest—you being okay with this is not what I expected.”

“You and me both, old man.”

His brows twitched a little in annoyance.

“But it makes Yuuri happy, and I think it’s pretty hot, so why not?”

“Why not, indeed?” He lowered his gaze, his hands clasped together on the table. “I never wanted to share Yuuri. Chris asked to join us more than once, and I could tell Yuuri wouldn’t mind, but I thought we were perfect the way we were. We didn’t need anyone else, even if just for an occasional night of fun.”

“So you don’t like that you have to share him now?”

“He’s not mine to share,” Viktor said. “It doesn’t matter how I feel about that. But what was made clear to me the other night was how much Yuuri enjoyed himself. Now, part of it might have just been that you and I were in the same room without getting at each other’s throats, but I wasn’t imagining it, was I? He’s really suited to it, isn’t he?”

Viktor actually sounded uncertain, asking for reassurance. I didn’t quite know how to respond. “It certainly seems like it, doesn’t it?”

“I’d never seen him like that before,” Viktor said. “And I guess what I’m getting at is that, maybe, we could turn this into a more concrete arrangement. Something beyond just slightly drunken whims. I think Yuuri would like that.”

“He probably would,” I agreed. “But we’d all have to be okay with it, and frankly, I don’t quite know how I feel about it, yet. You don’t seem to, either.”

Viktor nodded resignedly. “That’s true.”

“Do you hate me?” I asked bluntly.

He thought on it for a moment before answering. “A little, and for all the wrong reasons. I hate that you did everything I was too cowardly to do. I hate that you replaced me in Yuuri’s heart.”

“I didn’t replace you at all. If I did, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. Yuuri still loves you, and I think he always will.”

“But he won’t be with me, because of you.”

“He won’t be with you because you screwed up and broke his heart,” I countered. “Maybe he would have given you a second chance if I weren’t around, that’s possible. But would you have ever even spoken to him again if I didn’t bring him within your reach? We don’t know, and we won’t ever know. I don’t care if you hate me, but at least hate me for something that makes sense.”

“…Can I hate you for being beautiful?”

“Gross.”

He laughed. “Honestly, though, Yuuri adores you, and I think that’s enough to make me hate you. But that’s just my ugly jealousy, and something I’m still getting used to. I would think the bigger
I ate a little of my food, chewing to stall for time while I worked out exactly how to express what I felt. I swallowed, took a drink, and exhaled slowly. “I’ve never liked you. If it wasn’t your grating, fake personality, it was your fame and success, and your shadow casting increasingly unfair expectations on me. It was also the fact that Yuuri looked up to you and loved you, when I felt like you did nothing to earn it. And then, as if monopolizing him weren’t enough, you drove him out of Russia and away from the skating world, then disappeared yourself, like the rest of us didn’t matter at all. So yes, I didn’t like you, and I still don’t. But Yuuri does.”

“And what does that matter, if you can’t stand me?”

I gestured between us. “Does this look like I can’t stand you? If it weren’t for Yuuri, I wouldn’t give you the time of day, but I’m making an effort, and so are you. We have a common goal here—we both want Yuuri to be happy. The more I see him, the more I’m convinced that he won’t be completely happy unless you’re in his life, and for that reason I’m willing to put aside my dislike of you. And if that involves weird, kinky sex with you there, then whatever. We’ll try it.”

Viktor sighed. “It just feels hard to trust that sentiment from the person who so eagerly jumped on Yuuri the moment I was out of the picture.”

“…‘Eagerly jumped on’—” I gritted my teeth, willing myself not to yell. “Four years, Viktor. I gave you four years to go after him, and you did nothing. Four years of him stewing in that dark, miserable little excuse for an apartment, doing the stupid boring job that he didn’t care about. I waited at first because I didn’t think he’d take me seriously. I kept waiting because I thought you were just trying to get your shit together before you tried again. But then you didn’t. You found that stupid idiot boyfriend and gave up on Yuuri for good, so what the fuck should I have done? I couldn’t even tell him the truth at first, because I was so afraid of making the same mistakes you did. I waited months to confess to him, until I was sure he could stand on his own without leaning on me. I did not eagerly jump on him.”

Viktor narrowed his eyes. “So you’re saying you didn’t want him for yourself all that time?”

I breathed heavily, trying my best to control my anger. I could sense a heavy practice session after this. “I. Wanted. Him. To. Be. Happy. Is that really so hard to understand? I never wanted you two to break up. I didn’t ask for him to be miserable so I could go drag him out of his loneliness. If you had worked out your problems and stayed together this entire time, I’d have been fine with it. I’d be babysitting your stupid adopted kid by now. But Yuuri didn’t want to give you a second chance. He fell in love with me, and I’m going to do everything I can to make sure he stays happy, because that’s the only thing I ever wanted for him. And if that happiness includes you, then whatever. I’ll throw away my petty feelings against you, because they’re far less important than the things that make him happy.”

Viktor sat there stunned and speechless, and I couldn’t handle it anymore. I threw away the rest of my mostly-uneaten lunch, and stormed out of the break room and back onto the rink. How could he possibly think—no. Breathe, Yuri. He’s not worth it. Just breathe, and skate.

Thankfully, he wasn’t there when practice ended. Yakov had to practically drag me off the ice at closing time, because I still hadn’t worked through all my anger. I wanted to run home, but he forced me into their car and drove me to a restaurant so I would eat more than I’d had at lunch. Both Yakov and Lilia knew better than to try to force me to talk about it, and while I wasn’t really in a state to admit it, I was grateful for their understanding.

I spent my evening bitching to Beka, and only just managed to calm myself down in time to take my
nightly call from Yuuri. It was short, since he was busy that day, but just hearing his voice helped to erase the last of the storming emotions in my heart.

Two days later, Viktor showed up to practice again, but spent all his time with Yakov, and ignored me. I didn’t quite want to punch him whenever I saw his face, which I supposed was an improvement, but I still had no desire to talk to him.

I was a little pissed to hear that he’d be traveling with us to Sochi for Nationals, but at that point it didn’t really surprise me. Yakov was clearly training him to be some sort of assistant, or possibly teaching him how to be a proper coach. Viktor kept his distance from me, even during the competition, and I was getting better and better at ignoring him. We had a celebratory dinner for Mila and myself, as we both took gold again, and Viktor mostly kept to himself the entire time. It wasn’t really like him to be so reserved, but I hadn’t seen him in company like this in years. Perhaps loneliness sobered him.

I hated to admit it, but seeing him so distant at dinner made a part of me want to reach out to him. I thought of how Yuuri would react if he saw Viktor looking and acting this way, and knew he’d do his best to cheer Viktor up if he could. I thought about calling Yuuri and asking him to give Viktor a call, but Yuuri wouldn’t be awake for hours at least.

I felt so conflicted I couldn’t even ask Beka for advice. I wasn’t even sure I could explain to him why I wanted to do this, when I still felt angry over Viktor’s baseless assumptions about me.

Before I could talk myself out of it, I texted Viktor to meet me in the lobby of our hotel. He didn’t reply, so I thought he might’ve ignored me, but a few minutes later he emerged from the elevator. Good, he’d thought to wear his coat.

“Let’s go for a walk,” I said as he approached me, a questioning look in his eyes. Shrugging indifferently, he followed me outside.

I couldn’t really think of what to say, so we walked in silence for a while. The night was cold, but still, the streets quiet at this hour.

“Does Yuuri ever call you?” I asked him.

“Does he not tell you?”

“I don’t ask,” I said. “I don’t need to know everything he does with you. I just wanted to know if you’ve talked to him.”

“We had a short conversation the day after he went back,” Viktor said. “Since then, nothing.”

“I see.” Well, that answered that. “Have you tried calling him yourself?”

He let out an annoyed breath. “What is this about, Yurio?”

I hesitated. “I’m just curious.”

“I’m guessing he calls you regularly?”

“Every night, when he gets up for his run. But that’s—I’m not trying to brag about it.”

He laughed shortly. “Right.”

“Viktor—”
“No. You deserve to gloat. I was unfair to you with what I said—turns out you’re a better partner than I could ever be, and you clearly deserve him more than I do.”

The pain in his voice was so apparent that it almost hurt to listen to. “I don’t want to brag.”

“I deserve it—I intentionally pushed our relationship in your face, after all, back when we were together. I would have no trouble bragging to you now, if I were in a position to do so.”

“I don’t care if you think you deserve it or not,” I said, fighting back annoyance. “I’m not bragging to you. I’m asking if you’ve talked to him because you look like you need to, that’s all.”

“Where do you get that impression?”

“Just looking at you. You’re miserable. You’re distant. You’re acting like you did after Yuuri left you—like you lost everything.” I didn’t realize the connection until I’d said it aloud, but once the words were out of my mouth, I knew how true they were. “You don’t expect him to want you in his life again.”

He wouldn’t look at me as we walked, but I could tell he was working up a response. “I don’t deserve to get involved with you two. I would only complicate things.”

“Well, yeah,” I conceded. “But you do that anyway. You’d have to be pretty far away to avoid that.”

“Maybe that’s where I should be, then.”

I stopped walking. “No. Don’t do that to Yuuri.”

He stopped too, but he still wouldn’t look at me. “It’s for the best, Yurio.”

“Says who? Just you? Excuse me if I don’t trust your judgment on what’s best for him.”

He whirled around. “I’m terrible for him! I’ll do nothing but hurt him, and hurt you in the process. Neither of you deserve that. If only you knew the thoughts I had when I was alone with him…”

“I don’t care! You think leaving will be any better for him? You can want him all you want, but as long as you keep him happy, I don’t give a shit!” I pressed my hand to my mouth, holding back a sudden sob that took me by surprise. I swallowed back my emotions, trying to keep them from my voice. “I might have his heart, Viktor, but it’s always been clear that you have his soul, and he has yours. To keep you apart would be the cruelest thing I could do to him. And you leaving again would be the cruelest thing you could do to yourself.”

Viktor stumbled over to a nearby bench and sat heavily, covering his face with his hands while his shoulders shook. I hated getting emotional in public, but I was always a weakling when it came to hiding my emotions. I fell next to him, hugging myself while trying to process what I felt.

“I can’t help but want him,” Viktor said, his voice weak. “I can’t see myself ever not wanting him. It wouldn’t be fair to you to continue to be around him, because I’ll always want him for myself.”

“You can want him. Yuuri should be surrounded by people who want him, because he deserves to be wanted.”

He laughed incredulously. “Don’t you get jealous at anything?”

“Not when it comes to you and him. Not anymore.” I let out a slow breath. “I’ve let an important relationship get ruined by jealousy once before, and I never want it to happen again. Maybe a part of
me would prefer it if I was the only one Yuuri wanted and needed, but I know that’s not who he is. It
would be a waste of time wishing for it. Instead I’m just going to wish for the only thing I’ve ever
wanted all along.”

“…His happiness.”

I smiled a little. “You do listen to me. I was starting to wonder.”

Viktor wiped at his eyes and turned to me. “You know I won’t hold back. If he approaches me, I
won’t be able to resist him.”

“If he does, that’s his decision,” I said soberly. “If he decides he likes you best, and doesn’t need me,
then I’ll let him go. I won’t be happy about it, but I’ll be able to go forward knowing that he’s happy,
which is enough.”

Viktor went quiet for a moment, staring into the distance at nothing. “You and I both know he won’t
do that,” he finally said. “It’s just wishful thinking on my part. He clearly loves you.”

“And he loves you,” I told him. “Maybe not the same way he used to, but he won’t cut you out of
his life unless you force your way out of it, and for all of our sakes—don’t do that. It’s not worth
whatever noble sacrifice you think you’re making. If it ends up not working out, or we think
something is a strain on our relationship, we’ll talk about it then.” I kicked at the ground a little. “And
if you get Yakov’s hopes up again only to abandon him, I’ll hunt you down and kill you.”

Viktor shook with held-back laughter, or maybe sobs—I couldn’t really tell. Before I realized what
was happening, he had his arms around me, pulling me against him, his chin resting on my shoulder.
My instinct was to push him away, but he held tight. “Thank you, Yurio. I kept thinking that I
needed someone like Yuuri in my life again to balance me, but maybe I just really needed someone
like you to tell me the truth.”

I relaxed, and he pulled away. “Maybe if you’d listened to my advice in the first place, none of this
would have ever happened.”

He tilted his head. “Advice? What advice?”

“I tried to tell you what Yuuri needed after his injury. I told you to stop giving him flowers and get
him out of that apartment, but you wouldn’t listen.”

He laughed a little. “I thought you were just trying to interfere and make things worse. You know
getting out was the last thing Yuuri wanted.”

“But he needed it,” I said bitterly. “He needed to stop feeling like an invalid, and everything you
were doing was just making it worse.”

Viktor sighed. “I know. In hindsight, I was way too petty. You weren’t the only one who tried to
give me advice that I ignored—Yakov told me to send Yuuri to your house to recover, so he
wouldn’t be alone all the time.”

I hadn’t considered that. “That would have helped.”

“I know that now. At the time I hated everyone else for thinking they knew what was best for him. If
only I’d realized then that I was the one hurting him the most…”

Guilt was etched so deeply into the lines of his face that before I realized it, I’d put a hand on his
arm, wishing I could siphon some of it away. I’d always wondered if he understood what he’d done
wrong, but now I could plainly see that there was no way he could have ignored it all this time. He’d probably spent over four years going over every mistake he’d made, wishing he’d done things differently. I could understand how that felt, to a point.

“Do you think you would be happier with an arrangement like this?” I asked him. “Or would it just remind you too much of how he’s not with you anymore?”

He looked at me with suspicion. “Do you actually care?”

I shrugged. He had to know I cared at least a little, if only for Yuuri’s sake.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t think there’s a simple answer. The other night was amazing. When I woke up next to him, I thought I was still dreaming, but then we were making breakfast together, like we used to…” He closed his eyes as if in pain. “But I could just as easily see myself growing resentful and jealous, putting ugly stains on your beautiful relationship. That’s why I think it would be better to leave.”

“If our relationship can’t withstand your jealousy, then maybe we don’t deserve to stay together.”

His head whipped around. “Yurio—”

I shook my head, shoving my hands in my pockets. “Here’s where I stand, Viktor. You complicate our relationship. You’re going to complicate it whether you’re here or halfway across the world, because as long as you’re alive, Yuuri will be thinking of you. I’ve made it my goal to do everything I can to keep Yuuri happy, and right now, that happiness includes you. It might take a while to determine how much you should be included, but we won’t ever know if you run away now. So stay here. He comes back soon, and I want us both to be there to welcome him.”

Viktor leaned back, not saying anything for a moment, clearly thinking. “I’m not sure how you do it,” he finally said.

“What?”

“Put aside so much of yourself for the sake of others. I know you hate me, and yet you seriously suggest things like this.”

I narrowed my eyes. “I don’t hate you; you just never allowed me to like you. You teased me and taunted me at every turn. Everyone else thought I was just a petulant child when I’d reject your ‘kindness’, but it’s only because I saw through your fake smiles. You never liked me, and I just returned the sentiment. The only way I could ever like you was when I’d try to see you from Yuuri’s perspective. You were good to him, and good for him, at least up until the end. I might’ve hated you for hurting him, but as long as he loves you and forgives you, I can’t hate you anymore.”

“I’ll admit I teased you too much,” Viktor said. “You were a child to me, then. I gave you a hard time because I thought you needed to get over your childhood crush.” He laughed shortly. “Little did I know that just a handful of years later you’d be the one putting me in my place.” He turned to me and brushed his gloved hand against my cheek. “You’ve grown up into a beautiful man, Yurio, with a beautiful heart to match. It’s so easy to see why Yuuri fell for you. It hurts so much to admit it, but he’s far better off with you than he ever was with me.”

“But it doesn’t have to just be me,” I said. “You should be there too, as long as he wants you.”

Viktor smiled weakly and withdrew a little, tears pricking his eyes. “You make it so hard for me to say no. I feel like I should just go away and disappear, because I don’t deserve to even be near Yuuri anymore. But you tell me that he loves me, and needs me, and there’s no way I can ignore that. I
can’t convince myself that he’s better off without me.”

I lightly punched his arm. “Good. Because he’s not. Come on, I’m cold. Let’s go back to the hotel.”
I could hear my own heart pounding as I stepped off the plane in St. Petersburg. Weaving my way through the crowds, I rushed to baggage claim, my yearning a deep ache in my chest. I could think of little else on the final leg of my flight, the short trip from Moscow not offering enough time to sleep again.

I walked through the checkpoint, and immediately scanned the crowd of strangers, looking for that familiar pale hair. I didn’t see him. I wandered around for a few minutes, wondering if he might have had trouble getting here, or if he—

“Yuuri!”

I turned. It wasn’t the voice I expected, but it was one I was relieved to hear nonetheless. I smiled and ran towards him. “Viktor!” I glanced around. “Where’s Yurio?”

It was subtle, but I could see the tiny movement where his genuine smile fell into a fake one. It broke my heart a little. “He had an exam that he’d completely forgotten about and asked me to come get you instead. I hope that’s alright.”

“Of course it is,” I said, nudging him with my shoulder. “It’s good to see you. You look better than I last saw you.” It was true. His eyes sparkled when he looked at me, like they used to when we were together. I wondered if something changed. Had he found someone?

“You do, too,” Viktor said, poking my middle. “Like you’ve been eating well.”

“Don’t tease me,” I pouted.

He laughed. “Don’t you need to get your luggage?”

We found my bag easily, and left for the parking lot. Viktor stopped at a car I recognized as Yakov’s, and put the luggage in the trunk for me.

“Did you send the rest of your things by mail?” he asked me.

“Er, no. This is all I have.”

“Really? Everything fits in this little luggage?”

It wasn’t little, but I knew how big some of Viktor’s suitcases were. “It was everything important enough to take.” Suddenly remembering, I opened my bag and pulled out a small wrapped package.

“Before we go, I want to give you this. I’m sorry I missed your birthday. It’s… It’s not much, just a sentimental thing. You don’t have to do anything with it if you don’t like it.”

He tore open the paper with a curious frown as I wrung my hands together nervously.

“This is…”

“Yuuko-chan found it in her photos and I asked if I could get it printed and framed. Do you recognize it? It’s from the night before we flew out to China, that first year.” It was a photo from the onsen. Viktor had fallen asleep with Makkachin after eating, and I sat next to them, looking at Viktor with a decidedly loving expression. I wasn’t even aware that Yuuko-chan had taken the photo, but when I asked her if she had any of Viktor and me together, she showed me that one, and I couldn’t
Viktor put his hand to his mouth, tears spilling out of his eyes. “Makkachin…”

Makkachin had died about half a year before my injury. It wasn’t unexpected, as seventeen years was a long time for a dog to live, but we had mourned the loss together. Makkachin was one of the best dogs I’d ever known.

Viktor hugged me, openly sobbing into my shoulder.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I didn’t really want it to make you sad…”

“Thank you,” he said, sniffing a little as he pulled away. “I love it, Yuuri. I don’t have enough photos of the three of us together.” He carefully stowed it in the car and got inside, gesturing for me to do the same.

“Did you do anything to celebrate your birthday?” I asked once I’d buckled in.

“I stayed at home and watched some of my favorite movies,” he said, but gave me a reassuring smile. “I didn’t really feel like celebrating. Wanted to save my energy for your return. And really, having you back here is a better present than I could ever ask for.”

I flushed, his affectionate voice settling over me like a warm blanket.

It was a few minutes on the road before he spoke again. He sounded a little nervous. “Did… did Yurio mention me at all in your phone calls?”

“No reason,” he said, clearly lying.

“Oh, there was one time,” I said, suddenly remembering. “He asked if I’d called you at all, and I said no, aside from that one time after my flight home. But he didn’t say why he’d asked. Did something happen?”

“Not really,” he said with a frustrated sigh.

“Viktor…”

“We’ll talk about it later.” He said it with such finality that I couldn’t bring myself to argue. Instead I sat in nervous silence all the way home, wanting to see Yurio again, but wanting to nap almost as much.

Viktor didn’t take me to Yurio’s house, instead pulling into the parking lot of his apartment. “Why are we here?” I asked.

“Dinner.” Viktor tapped something on his phone, grabbed his photo and a paper bag from the back seat, and got out of the car. “You can leave your luggage here; we’ll take it later.”

I let him lead me up to his apartment, but started to feel something was off. Why were we eating dinner here? Was he planning on ordering in? He opened the door, and I was greeted by the delicious smell of baking bread. The whole apartment glittered with candles in every corner, and several covered dishes were laid out on a cloth-covered table.

I barely had time to react when a tall body collided with me, nearly knocking me over before pulling
me tightly against him.

“Welcome home, Yuuri,” Yurio said into my shoulder, then pulled away to look at me. “Was your flight alright?”

“Same as always,” I said, feeling in a daze. “What’s all this?”

“I wanted to make you your favorites,” he said, keeping one arm around me as he turned to gesture to the table. “Sorry I couldn’t be at the airport. I messed up the pelmeni and had to remake them, so it threw my timing all off. I just pulled the piroshky out of the oven when Viktor told me you were on your way up.”

“I didn’t know you could cook,” I said, stunned at the array of foods.

“I’m not that great—and I don’t usually have time,” he said modestly. “But Grandpa taught me a lot of the basics.”

I kissed him on the cheek. “Well, everything at least smells delicious.”

“Sit, sit,” he urged, pulling out a chair for me. “Viktor, did you get the wine?”

He pulled it out of the paper bag he’d taken from his car, and popped it open, pouring three glasses while Yurio bustled around the kitchen setting more things on the table. Yurio seemed to be brimming with energy, his eyes alight with determination as he finished preparing the feast.

Finally he removed his apron and settled across from me, Viktor taking the chair adjacent to us.

“Eat,” Yurio commanded, and we did. His food was delicious in a simple way, clearly prepared with care. Viktor seemed skeptical at first, but once he tried one of Yurio’s katsudon piroshky, he was plainly in love.

“Why have I never tried one of these before?” Viktor asked.

“Because they’re Grandpa’s special recipe, and I never wanted to share with you,” Yurio said simply. “Yuuri’s the only one who ever got to taste them before, so be grateful you’re included now.”

Something had changed between them in the time I was gone, but I couldn’t quite articulate what it was. The air between them just seemed easier somehow.

When I was stuffed to the brim with Yurio’s delicious food, I sat back, drinking in the warm atmosphere. Except there was something a little off. Viktor and Yurio kept glancing at each other, like they were communicating something I wasn’t in on. Yurio refilled my wineglass.

“Yuuri, there’s something I want to discuss,” Yurio said. “Something I couldn’t bring myself to talk about much over the phone.”

Viktor stood to leave, but Yurio gestured him to stop. “Stay here, Viktor. This involves all of us, so all of us should talk about it.”

“But I need to go to the bathroom,” Viktor whined, and Yurio sighed.

“Fine, go. It’s better if I start without you anyway.”

Viktor hobbled across the apartment to the bathroom and shut the door.
“What’s this about?” I asked, taking another sip of wine.

“A proposal.”

I nearly inhaled my wine, throwing myself into a coughing fit. “Wh-what? Yurio—”

“Not a marriage proposal,” he said hastily. “A—different kind. Viktor and I talked a lot while you were gone, discussing what we wanted and what we were comfortable with, in regards to you. So I guess I should start by asking how you would feel about our relationship being a little more…” He trailed off, looking aside.

My coughing finally died down enough for me to speak. “A little more what?”

He met my eyes. “Open.”

“Open?”

He nodded. “Keep in mind this isn’t me asking you to break up or otherwise change what you and I have. If you don’t want any part of this, I don’t mind keeping things the way they were.”

I still didn’t quite understand. “Is this about the threesome?”

“It’s related, but it’s not the whole thing,” Yurio said. He was trembling now, not quite looking at me, so I reached over and gave his hand a reassuring touch. He smiled and seemed to relax a little. “It’s mostly I was thinking about how good you and Viktor are together. I used to envy your relationship as it was, so silly and happy and yet completely sincere and strong. You two did amazing things together, and while I can’t say I felt it as much as you two did, your breaking up hurt me in ways I can’t easily describe. Even my crush on you couldn’t have made me wish you’d break up. And I guess… Seeing you together again, I realized how easy it was for me to accept. You belong together. And that’s not to say I don’t want you—because I really, really do—but I like seeing you two together, too. You once told me after I got off the phone with Beka that he brightened me, and I think I see that when you’re with Viktor.”

“But you brighten me, too, Yurio,” I said, my voice a little heavier than I expected.

“I’m glad for that.” He lifted his hand and laced our fingers together. “But you deserve all the happiness you can squeeze from the world, and I want you to know that I’m alright with it if you want to be with both of us.”

“I would never ask that,” I said incredulously. “I don’t need more than you.”

“I know you would never ask.” His voice was calm. “But I’m offering. It’s not about need, or even about sex. It’s about you deserving to be close to the people who love you.”

I still couldn’t quite believe what I was hearing. “But won’t you get jealous if I spend time alone with Viktor?”

He looked down at our clasped hands, and squeezed a little. The bathroom door opened slowly, and I could hear Viktor’s steps as he approached the table again, but my eyes were glued to Yurio. “Viktor and I talked a long time about this. We went back and forth on what our priorities were, what we wanted and what we couldn’t handle, to determine whether or not this would even be possible. But what we decided was that, no matter what, we wanted whatever was best for you.”

Warm hands clasped my shoulders, and looked up to see Viktor smiling down at me.
“You don’t have to answer right away,” Yurio said. “Nothing has to be decided tonight, and anything decided can be taken back whenever you want. I just wanted to open the subject with you, and see if it was something you’d be interested in.”

I looked back and forth from one to the other, waiting for someone to tell me it was all a joke. “You’re serious?”

“Completely,” Viktor said. “We wouldn’t joke about this, Yuuri.”

Bewildered and a little overwhelmed, I stood up, pulling away from both of them. “I— I don’t know what to say. You’re both okay with this?”

“I wouldn’t have proposed it if we weren’t,” Yurio said, getting up. “It took a while to reach an understanding, but I think we could do it, if it’s something you might want.”

A painful thought occurred to me. “You’re not suggesting this because you think I’ll cheat on you, are you?”

Yurio laughed warmly, and put his hand on my arm. “No. I never once thought that. Nor did I think Viktor would ever cross that line, even if you gave him the chance.” He gave Viktor a look that dared him to argue.

Viktor didn’t take the bait. “This was entirely Yurio’s idea. He approached me about it when he saw that I was thinking of leaving.”

“What? Why were you thinking of leaving?” Just the thought of it pierced me to my core. I didn’t want him even considering that.

“I tried to convince myself it would be for the best, but Yurio convinced me otherwise,” Viktor said. “And that’s not to say that I’ll leave if you say no to… this. I’m not going anywhere unless you tell me to.”

I looked to the both of them, their passive, nervous smiles doing odd things to my heart. Could I love both of them? That was a silly question, considering I already did, but this felt different somehow.

“I’ll have to think about it more,” I admitted. “Threesomes are one thing, but a full relationship with two people…”

Yurio came closer and pressed a kiss into my cheek. “Take all the time you need. It probably wasn’t the best time to spring all this on you, considering you just got here, but we wanted to let you know it was a possibility.”

Viktor reached out and brushed a strand of hair from my forehead. “I’m going to go out and buy us some dessert. We’re probably too full to eat it, but I feel I should get out of here for a little while.”

Yurio nodded, and Viktor grabbed his coat and left. I let myself be gathered into Yurio’s warm, strong arms. His hair smelled like cooking.

“What are you thinking about, Yuuri?” he asked softly. “Talk to me. Was this an awful idea?”

“No, not at all,” I said. “It was the sweetest thing in the world. I’m just… still trying to process how I feel about all of it. I love you so much that it sometimes feels like my heart might burst open just from looking at you. But I’ve always felt that lingering love for Viktor, and I felt guilty that I couldn’t push it back, even after all this time.”
“But you don’t have to push it back,” he said. “Love him, if that’s what you want.”

I knew I wanted to. The only thing that worried me was how to act on it. I wasn’t sure how far I could stretch myself between them.

“I’ll be more honest with you than I was with him,” Yurio said. “I’m not confident in my abilities to be the best partner for you, at least not yet. I’m not a romantic person—things like dates and gifts are always a struggle for me. I’m at the height of my career, and you know what that entails. The stress, the fatigue—there will be days I’ll go home not wanting to see another person, not even you. In the weeks before competitions, sometimes I can hardly muster the energy to masturbate in the shower, much less do anything more strenuous. I don’t want to neglect you, but I can’t neglect my career, either.”

“You know none of those things would matter enough to make me leave you,” I said. “And how can you say you’re not romantic when you made this beautiful candlelit dinner for me?”

“This was all Viktor’s idea. Well, except the cooking, I guess—he wanted to get take-out, and I thought that wasn’t good enough.” He pulled away and rubbed the back of his neck. “I know none of what I said would be a deal-breaker for you, but I still think you deserve those things in your life. You love them.”

“I love you,” I reminded him. “You were the one that came and rescued me. You brought color back into my life. I know your career is important, and I would never, ever want to keep you from doing your best. I look forward to working with you and cheering you on. I don’t need to be romanced to want to be with you. If I make this decision, it won’t be because I feel you’re neglecting me, or not being a good partner.”

“I know,” he said, and kissed me slowly. He let out a soft sigh when we parted. “I never once doubted how you felt about me. If I’m being absolutely honest here—and do not tell him I said this—I proposed this as much for Viktor as for you. I think, for him, being around you without being allowed to love you is painful. He needs to be able to love you, and I think you deserve all the love in the world. Even if it doesn’t all come from me.”

His words warmed my heart as much as the wine warmed my head. “But what about you and Viktor? You’re not… you don’t want to be with each other, do you?”

He made a retching sound. “God, no. Absolutely not. We talked through our differences so we don’t really hate each other anymore, but I have no interest in him romantically. Sexually is just—whatever, really, I don’t care how we play. But I would never want to date him.” He shuddered.

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Alright, then. I think… I think I’m open to the idea. I just don’t quite know how it will work.”

“We’ll ease into it,” he said, leading me to the couch and pulling me down beside him. “I figure it would be best if you and I had some time to rekindle our relationship, since we’ve been apart for three weeks and didn’t get a whole lot of time together before that. But after my vacation is over, you and Viktor could start dating again. I’m not saying you shouldn’t see each other until then, but I want priority for a while. I missed you.”

I kissed him in reassurance. “I missed you too. I like this plan. It gives us all time to get used to the idea, I suppose. But one thing that bothers me a little…”

“Yes?”
“We’re all really recognizable. People will notice if I’m out on dates with both of you at different times. Won’t they talk?”

Yurio’s shoulders slumped. “Viktor posed a similar question. I don’t really have an answer I like, aside from just telling them to fuck off. His idea was a little more reasonable, but it’s not ideal.”

“What was that?”

“Since I’m not as comfortable with public displays of affection, the official, public truth would be that you two were back together. If anyone saw us out together, we could brush it off as just being good friends.”

He sounded a little strained. “Are you alright with that?”

He shrugged. “If I’m honest, it’d be a little relieving. I always preferred to keep my private life private. My fans were too nosy when it came to Beka. If the world thinks you’re with Viktor, maybe they’ll let me hug you in public without asking a million questions about our relationship. But I don’t know if you’d be okay with that.”

“Does having a public relationship bother you that much?” I asked.

“It makes me uncomfortable,” he said. “The closer we got to having a public relationship, the more anxious I got about it. I could deal with it if I had to, but I don’t particularly like the idea of it.”

“Then maybe I’ll be alright with this solution,” I said, taking his hand. “I never really cared one way or the other what the world thought of us. Do you care if the world thinks that I’m with Viktor, though?”

“I know you’re with me, and that’s all I care about,” he said, leaning into me. “Let him get all the photos and questions. What about your family and friends, though? Will they understand?”

I hadn’t considered that. “I can probably give them an explanation. They might not understand completely, but I think they’ll still support me as long as they see I’m happy.”

“You’d better let me explain it to your sister, or she might kill you for cheating on me,” Yurio said with a laugh.

“…I’ll just avoid my sister. She might still kill me, even with your explanation.”

Yurio groaned, stretching out on the couch as he leaned more heavily on me. “I want to go back to Hasetsu.” He rubbed his head against my chest, snuggling like a cat. “You still smell like the onsen. Let’s go back after Worlds, alright?”

“Of course. Should we take Viktor, too, or just make it about us?”

“He can come,” Yurio said easily, to my surprise. “He hasn’t been in five years.”

I was so warm and content lounging on the couch that I must have dozed, because the next thing I knew I was being jolted awake by the distantly familiar sound of keys in the door. It brought back a rush of memories I would have rather forgotten, of lying in bed waiting for Viktor to come home. Luckily Yurio’s sleepy presence brought me out of them almost immediately.

“You’re sleeping already?” Viktor asked incredulously, a large bakery box on his palm. “You’re not going to force me to clean up everything, are you?”
“I cooked, you clean up,” Yurio said groggily, but he got up anyway and began clearing the table. I went to help too, starting on the dishes, and before long I had Viktor beside me, rinsing and drying what I washed. Yurio put away the leftover food before going to the bathroom, leaving me alone with Viktor.

“What did you buy?” I asked to break the silence.

“Just a cake. It’s alright if you don’t want any, though; I know you’ll probably want to sleep after your flight. Though it seems you already took a little nap.”

“…Yeah. Um. About the open relationship thing…”

Viktor’s hands stilled. “You don’t have to answer now. We sprung it on you too quickly.”

“Would it be okay if I told you my answer was yes?”

He gave me a long, searching stare. “Really?”

I smiled and nodded, and was rewarded with an enthusiastic hug. He peppered kisses all over my face and hair.


“I’m so happy, Yuuri,” he said, nuzzling my cheek. His face was wet with tears. “I never thought I’d—I’d get the chance to—to—” He sniffed, and suddenly he was completely crying, covering his face with his hands.

“Vitya…” I gathered him in my arms and rubbed his back, even though my hands were wet from washing. Yurio came out of the bathroom, and I gave him a helpless look. He shook his head ruefully, and came over to join the hug, putting his long arms around both of us.

“You’re a mess, Viktor,” he said. But Viktor only cried harder. Yurio sighed. “Well I was considering going home, but I don’t think we can do that now, can we Yuuri?”

“We can’t leave him like this,” I agreed, sharing a smile with him. Viktor made a strangled sound, and put his arms around both of us, tightly pulling us against him while tears fell heavily down his cheeks.

Eventually, we managed to get the kitchen cleaned up, and I completely ran out of energy. Viktor brought my luggage up, and I was told to go to bed early. Settling into Viktor’s bed, I fell asleep to Yurio and Viktor’s soft, conversational voices speaking Russian, wishing I could understand them.
“…He said yes.”

“Yes, you’ve said that five times already.” I refilled my wineglass and pulled a chair into the living room, settling across from Viktor. He was such a disheveled mess that I didn’t want to risk sitting too close to him. The apartment was still mostly lit by flickering candles and dim lights, neither of us bothering to put them out yet. “You knew he would.”

“But I didn’t.” He grabbed one of the pillows on the couch and hugged it close to his chest. “I really didn’t think he’d want to. You two were already so perfect together.”

“We’re not perfect,” I said. “We’ve never been perfect. There hasn’t been time for perfect, because we’ve been flying around so much with hardly a day to ourselves. You two were perfect, until the accident.”

He shook his head. “Some moments, definitely, but we had our share of arguments and cold shoulders. I’m still not entirely sure I was able to do right by him when it came to his anxiety, and I definitely didn’t know what to do about his depression.”

“I don’t think there’s an easy answer,” I said. “But you were trying to make him happy, when what he really needed was to be understood. He needed someone to acknowledge his misery without being affected by it.”

“Sounds like something you would’ve been good at,” he said.

“I do regret not trying more,” I admitted. “I put too much faith in you. But there’s no sense in worrying about it now.”

Viktor smiled, pressing his chin into the pillow. “Yeah. We have him back.”

“Gross. You’re acting like an overexcited teenager. Exactly how old are you now? Forty?”

He glared at me. “I’m only four years older than your precious Yuuri.”

“Ancient. And unlike you, he doesn’t look a day over twenty-five.”

He hurled the pillow at me, and I had to jump out of my chair to dodge it. “Hey! Wineglass!”

He sighed. “Am I too old for something like this? I feel like I should be settling down with a partner.”

“You tried that,” I reminded him. “You couldn’t get settled because you still wanted Yuuri. Now you have him back.”

“Too bad I have to share him,” he muttered with a pout.

He was too far away to kick directly, so I kicked his couch. “Shut up. If you’re not okay with this arrangement, get out now. I won’t put up with you if you’re just going to make it harder on everyone.”

He gave me a bewildered look. “I was joking.”

“You don’t get to joke about it. Not now. This is the time we should be figuring out how and if
things will work, and if you can’t be serious about it, we won’t know what the real problems are. If you’re going to get jealous, just give up now.”

“I’m already jealous,” he said with blunt honesty. “I was used to having Yuuri all to myself. But I do understand that I can’t let my jealousy get in the way, and the moment I treat you as my enemy is the moment things will fall apart.”

“Maybe you’ll get used to it,” I said. “It might be easier to endure seeing us together when you know that you get to love him just as much as I do. And with the way things are arranged, you might not even have to see us together that much.”

He tilted his head curiously. “What do you mean?”

“He liked your idea, about you two being the public couple.”

He frowned. “Yurio, I wasn’t serious when I suggested that.”

“I was. I don’t want a public relationship right now. I especially don’t want idiot reporters further comparing me to you by talking about my taste in men. I’ve managed to avoid it so far, considering how little I’ve done publically with Yuuri, but I think if you two are seen together, it will bury the rumors about us for good.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Is that why you’re so into this? You want to use me so you don’t have to go public with him?”

“Of course not,” I said flippantly. “It’s a bonus. If Yuuri had said no, I would have had no issue with being public. But this way I don’t have to.” I drained my glass, and went to pour another.

“Trying to get drunk?”

I shrugged. “It’s good wine. Want any?”

He hesitated. “Alright.”

I handed him a glass and returned to my chair, already feeling a little lightheaded as I sat down. “I know how it looks. I feel like a fucking coward for not wanting to deal with people’s questions.”

“You’re not a coward,” he said. “You just want to keep your public life separate from your private. It’s not uncommon.”

“You never bothered.”

“I didn’t feel like I had much of a private life to hide, at least not until Yuuri.”

I raised an eyebrow. “What about Giacometti?”

“What about him?”

“Didn’t you have something going on with him when you were younger?”

He leaned back, staring distantly at the ceiling. “With Chris… We were just friends. Still are, really. We helped each other come to terms with our sexualities, though it never quite felt like we were in a relationship. It wasn’t so much of a private life as it was us having private conversations and encounters from time to time. Everyone knew we were friends, and that’s all we really were, at least on an emotional level. So it never really felt like hiding, no matter what we did together.”
Something he said rang just a little too familiar. “Did he feel the same way as you? Did he only ever want to be a friend?”

“He had a crush on me when he was younger, but we decided it was better to remain friends.”

I had my doubts that decision was completely mutual, but I didn’t want to say it out loud. “How is he doing now?”

The corner of Viktor’s mouth twitched. “I’m surprised you care.”

“I don’t, really,” I said, hiding my embarrassment with another gulp of wine. “Just curious.”

“He lives with his long-term partner, and they’re happy together. I stayed with them for a few months a couple of years ago, and we had an arrangement not entirely unlike this one, though it was mostly just sexual. It was always that way with Chris when I visited—I could count on them to stave off loneliness for a while, but it was never anything lasting.”

“Why not?”

He gave me an assessing look. “Because there wasn’t any real love there. Well, they loved each other plenty, but it was always made clear that I was the outsider. The plaything. The toy. And as much as I got off to it, its novelty wore thin as the weeks went on. It would get to the point where I felt lonelier with them than when I was actually alone. So I moved on.”

The wine in me made me take far more interest than I would have otherwise. I actually empathized with him, though I had no idea how to begin expressing it. It also gave me a better idea as to what he needed from this relationship with us—Yuu’s initial proposal of just including him in bedroom activities was, as I’d thought, not the greatest idea.

“What sort of things did you do?” my stupid mouth asked.

His eyes widened a fraction. “Why?”

“Because I don’t understand you,” I admitted. I must have been drunker than I realized. “I don’t quite get what it is that gets you… going.” I felt stupid, but I was far too interested in the answer to take back my question.

He spent a long time thinking about it, draining his wine glass in the process, as if he needed the extra alcohol to breach this subject. “Alright. Maybe there’s a chance you’ll understand. I think it’s reasonable to say that you win a lot, right?”

I didn’t follow the train of thought, but I went along with it. “Sure.”

“And I did, too. I poured myself into winning, into surprising people. People liked me because I was good, and I was good because of the hard work I put in, but also because I was lucky. I had all the right opportunities, and I won’t deny I used them well, but I was still lucky. Winning made me feel powerful, but I also felt like people liked me for things that didn’t really belong to me.” He took a deep breath, as if steadying himself. “What I realized I craved, in the deepest, depraved parts of my mind, was for someone to take it all away. Temporarily, of course, but for just a while I wanted to not be the winner. To not be the one everyone claimed to love. I wanted to be stripped down until there was nothing left but the shrunken man I felt I actually was, exposed and vulnerable without my medals or my talent to protect me. I thought I was sick for wanting those things.

“Chris helped show me I wasn’t sick. We did simple things, ties and blindfolds and the like. Things that took away my power and gave the responsibility to someone else. The effect was immediate. It
felt like I could breathe again.”

Something in my mind didn’t make sense. “But then why did you work so hard to get with Yuuri? He was clearly your fan, and someone who liked you for the things you wanted taken away.”

He got up, and poured himself another glass of wine. “Ah, but you’re forgetting when we first truly met. That banquet.”

For all that it was seven years ago, I could never, ever forget that night, so I didn’t know what he was getting at. “What am I forgetting, exactly?”

“He led me in a dance. I, Viktor Nikiforov, the man who had just taken gold at the GPF, got pulled into a dance by the one who came in last. All because when Yuuri’s filters are down, he takes charge. Goes after what he wants. During that beautiful dance, there was no barrier between us, and for the first time I felt what it might be like to be close to someone who didn’t put me on an impossibly high pedestal. Of course once I saw him again I quickly realized how wrongly I’d judged the whole thing, but it was worth it to bring it out of him again. He’s the best partner I’ll probably ever have.”

“He really does it for you, then?” I asked as he sat back down.

“He had no problem accepting me for who I was, when we finally got to that point. And you know that voice—when Yuuri gets sensual, I want to do anything to please him. He was always open, and asked questions, and always made sure I was taken care of, and I… I never felt more loved in my life.” His eyes turned a little glassy in the candlelight. “It hurt so much when I lost him. I still can’t believe I have him back.”

“I know what you mean. About the voice, that is,” I clarified. “And for what it’s worth, I guess I can understand why you like the things you do, even if I don’t feel the same way. I hate feeling helpless. If I don’t feel like I have some sort of control over a situation, I can’t be comfortable.”

He laughed a little. “That’s probably why you and I never got along.”

“No, we didn’t get along because you were a jerk and didn’t take me seriously. But whatever. You never really answered my question. About what sort of things you did with Chris and his partner.”

He let out a slow breath. “Do you really want to know?”

Somehow, despite the slight unease in my stomach, I did. I nodded.

He still didn’t talk for a while, his eyes gazing distantly at the blank TV screen, idly sipping his wine while he gathered whatever words he needed. “To start off, Chris and his partner don’t really have the same sort of dynamic that Yuuri and I did. They were open to kink and games, but for the most part they were pretty equal in their roles, and it worked for them. So if you throw someone like me into the mix, who wants to be controlled, it can create an interesting hierarchy. Chris’s partner didn’t really have any affection for me beyond friendship, so he’d either direct Chris, or leave the whole thing up to him while he watched.”

He paused, and I was growing impatient. “That’s all fine, but what did you do?”

Viktor smiled vaguely. “I let myself get tied up and treated like an object. Chris would tease me, degrade me, use me—essentially just do whatever he wanted with my body, short of fucking me, because that’s where I usually draw the line. Sometimes I’d be tied up and forced to watch them, like I did with you and Yuuri. And in case it wasn’t clear, I really like to be teased, no matter if it’s with physical touches, or sounds and visuals.”
“And Yuuri has a talent for it,” I said, my insides warming at the memory of our first time.

“How do you think he cultivated that talent?” Viktor asked with a smirk. “But yes, he enjoys those games the most—or at least he did. His tastes look like they might’ve changed a bit with you in the mix. He very clearly enjoys getting fucked by you.”

I shifted my legs, my pants getting just a little uncomfortable. “He seems to enjoy both, still. Which I guess works out well for us.”

“Indeed.” Viktor’s eyes traveled downward, and there was no real way to hide my arousal. All I could do was own up to it, and try to ignore it.

“Do you need some help with that?” he asked after a moment.

“What? N-no, it’s fine. I don’t need anything.” I thought I’d be safe, drinking with only Viktor around, but the subject had aroused me anyway. Which was my own fault, really.

He leaned forward, elbow on his knee with his chin resting in his palm, looking at me with a glint in his eyes. “Are you sure? I can make it quick and painless, and you don’t have to do anything.”

I looked at him warily. “Why are you tempting me?”

He shrugged. “You just look like you could use it. If you’re not interested, feel free to use the bathroom. Or do it right there. I don’t care.”

I involuntarily shuddered at the thought of masturbation right there with him watching. I wasn’t sure if it was a good feeling, or an awful one, but it made my heartbeat louder regardless. “Do you actually want to? Or are you just offering to be polite?”

He laughed. “You think I offer blowjobs out of politeness? Of course I want to. You’re a beautiful man, and I haven’t sucked a cock in a while. I didn’t think it would be too weird to offer, considering what we’ve already seen of each other, but I’ll understand if it’s too intimate for you.”

“It’s not, I just…” My eyes drifted over to the bedroom door, which was open just a small crack.

“If you’re afraid about what Yuuri will think, I wouldn’t worry. He’d only regret missing the show.”

I wasn’t all that worried, to be honest, but I did wonder how he might react. My hand subconsciously went to my crotch, squeezing through the fabric to ease the tension. It didn’t help. “Alright,” I resigned. “You’d better be at least decent at this.”

“Oh, kitten, I’m much better than decent.” His wicked smile made my stomach curl with arousal, which was confusing, but I had just enough alcohol in me to not care too much. “Take off your pants and come here. That floor is too rough on the knees.” He clearly spoke from experience.

While he refilled his wine, he had me sit against the corner of the couch, one leg up, my angry erection exposed and twitching against my stomach, begging for attention. Viktor got on his belly between my legs, his fingertips brushing the skin of my thighs almost reverently. I felt like I should be nervous, or mildly repulsed, but all I could feel was the deep itch of anticipation.

He didn’t keep me waiting. There was no teasing—he curled his slick, wet tongue around the shaft, then engulfed it, making my whole body seize with a sudden jolt of pleasure. He grasped my hips to keep me still.

“Oh fuck,” I breathed. He kept his bobbing shallow but consistent, then worked his way down,
sucking hard as he slowly pulled back up. I might’ve been in a slightly drunken, aroused stupor, but I was pretty sure I’d never had a blowjob quite like this before. It just felt so precise, like his only goal was to get me off with minimal effort. It felt amazing, but a little cold, too.

Soon I was too far gone to think clearly, a heat rapidly gathering in my abdomen. “I’m—close—” I warned him, but he ignored me, still working that mechanical rhythm. I stifled my moans with the back of my hand, and my body seized with orgasm, fighting against Viktor’s punishing grip. He lingered just long enough to make sure I was finished, then released me, immediately grabbing his wineglass to swish some wine around his mouth.

I lay there for a few moments, catching my breath and watching him pointedly not look at me. His cheeks were appropriately flushed, but he didn’t look satisfied at all, like he hadn’t enjoyed anything about what he just did. It annoyed me. “If you were going to hate it, you didn’t have to offer,” I told him.

“I didn’t hate it,” he muttered, though his tone made it sound like a lie.

I nudged him with my foot. “Then what’s wrong? You want me to reciprocate? I’ll need a few minutes to recover, but I can do it.”

“No. I don’t want it right now.” He still wasn’t looking at me.

I didn’t really know what to do. The easy atmosphere we’d carefully built between us that evening was gone, replaced by this strange, cold tension. I had no idea what made it change, but I didn’t believe it was my fault. Something else was on his mind. He threw back the rest of his wine and stood up. “Are you staying here tonight? If you didn’t bring clothes, I’ve got extras in the dresser.”

“Don’t worry—I brought my own this time.” I knew it was a possibility we’d end up staying, so I’d brought a backpack with anything I’d need from home.

“You can go to bed, then. I’m going out for a while.” He grabbed his coat and scarf, and put them on with jerky, precise movements.

“I hope you’re not driving,” I said.

He gestured to where he’d left the keys on the counter, still not meeting my eyes. “For a walk.”

“Oh. Okay.” I looked aside. “Thanks for—” But he was out the door, shutting it with a definitive click. I got up sluggishly and stumbled over to my backpack, pulling out the clothes I’d brought to sleep in. As I slipped on my underwear, I noticed some slight red marks along my hips. Interesting. His grip hadn’t felt that hard, but maybe the intensity of the pleasure had masked it. Either way, I wasn’t exactly bothered. I finished getting ready in the bathroom, blew out the candles, and quietly eased the bedroom door open.

“Nnn… Vitya…” Yuuri muttered in his sleep, making me stop in my tracks. Shaking my head at myself, I walked around and crawled into bed from the opposite side, pulling a pillow over and sliding close to Yuuri. He turned around and snuggled against my chest, still asleep as far as I could tell. “Yurio,” he mumbled, and his lips curled into a vague smile. I put an arm around him, and fell easily into sleep.

I still wasn’t quite used to waking up with someone beside me.
I definitely wasn’t used to that person being Viktor.

He wasn’t too close, but he’d pulled most of the blanket to his side, scrunching it up and clutching it tightly. Yuuri wasn’t with us, and it only took a moment for my groggy mind to realize he probably woke up long before I did, considering how early he’d fallen asleep.

I was about to get out of bed when I heard a whimpering sound, and turned to see Viktor in the fetal position, tears in the corner of his eyes. Taking pity, I reached over and gently shook him, making him flinch violently and cry out. A second later he stilled, breathing heavily, his eyes fluttering open.

“Awake?” I asked.

“I—yeah.” He slowly sat up. “Where’s Yuuri?”

“Don’t know; haven’t looked yet. Bad dream?”

“What? Oh.” He wiped at his eyes. “It was nothing. Listen, about last night—”

“Don’t speak Russian; I haven’t been able to study yet.” Yuuri came in and crawled onto the bed between us, giving us each a kiss on the cheek. “Good morning.”

I quickly hid my disappointment that he’d interrupted Viktor. “Good morning. How long have you been up?”

“Only an hour and a half,” Yuuri said. “You two were sleeping so well I didn’t want to wake you. I just got back from my run.”

I put my arm around him and pulled him close, smelling the cold air and sweat on his skin. “Mm, you sure have. You should let me blow you.”

He stiffened. “E-eh? Why this, all of a sudden?”

“Because you smell amazing,” I murmured against his neck. “Please?”

He glanced at Viktor just a little warily. “Alright.”

“Viktor can take over the top half, if he wants,” I said, sliding down the bed and grasping at Yuuri’s track pants. “I assume he knows what you like.”

They exchanged a meaningful look, and Yuuri let Viktor remove his glasses and shirt before laying back on the bed.

“I feel ambushed,” Yuuri said as I positioned myself between his legs. “Did you two really just wake up?”

“Mmm.” I put my nose to his crotch and inhaled deeply. His heavy musk made my blood hum. His cock was slowly awakening to the moment, and I helped it along with a few long licks. I glanced up and saw Viktor slowly running his fingertips along the lines of Yuuri’s neck, the two of them sharing a look of deep familiarity and love. I swallowed back a little bubble of jealousy, and went to work.

I was too horny to draw it out for long. I did tease him a little, but his writhing and moans fueled my passion, and I was soon devouring him hungrily. I realized I was nowhere near as precise or as practiced as Viktor, but if Yuuri’s reactions were anything to go by, my lack of skill didn’t matter. Though, he did have Viktor sucking and kneading his nipples, so I couldn’t take all the credit for his
throes of passion.

Yuuri’s cries came to a crescendo, and my efforts were rewarded with a generous mouthful of cum. I swallowed it and sat back to admire his form, completely flushed and covered in a sheen of sweat that glistened in the morning sunlight. When he opened his eyes again, he looked at me expectantly.

“What now?” Yuuri asked.

I looked to Viktor, whose face was just as anticipatory, and sighed inwardly. “What do you want to see, Yuuri?”

He thought for a moment, looking at us each with hooded eyes. “Viktor.” He came to attention so quickly one might think Yuuri his drill sergeant rather than his partner. “Take care of Yurio. Get behind him, so I can see both of your faces.”

Viktor complied without saying anything, coming to kneel behind me. Actually, it didn’t escape my notice that he hadn’t said anything at all since Yuuri came into the room. Was this part of their strange relationship? I felt his warmth behind me, his hands easing down the elastic bands of my pants and underwear.

“Go soft on his nipples—he’s more sensitive than me,” Yuuri said. He watched us with a deliciously lustful gaze, his arms propping his head up to a good angle. I felt exposed, but not helpless. It was actually pretty hot.

Viktor’s hand was warm and soft against my cock, his grip teasingly light at first. His other hand fished under my shirt, lifting up the hem and finding my nipple. I leaned back into him, unsure how long I could support myself.

“Wait—stop,” Yuuri said. Viktor’s hands immediately left my body, and he must have sat back, because his warmth was gone. “Yurio, what are those marks?”

I followed his gaze down to my hips. “Oh. Heh. Well, last night, we—”

“Did Viktor do that to you?” He asked, his voice concerned. He leaned forward for a closer look, touching my hip softly.

“Yes, but it’s alright.”

Yuuri gave me an assessing stare. “You’re sure?”


He looked behind me at Viktor, but I had no idea what sort of look they communicated, because I couldn’t twist far enough to see. My impression was that they would talk about it later. “Alright,” Yuuri said, and returned to his position on the bed. “Continue, then.”

I’d flagged a little at the interruption, but Viktor was quick to bring me back. I could admit that he was good at this, though his touch still felt a little impersonal. I pushed my hips back against him, hoping to find evidence of his arousal, but he apparently wasn’t having it, keeping space between us. I didn’t want to give up that easily. I reached behind him, groping for his backside, and pushed our bodies together. He grunted in surprise, the first sound I’d heard him make. I could feel his erection pushing up against my ass, so I rutted against it, hoping to turn this a little more mutual. He stilled for a second, until I saw Yuuri’s very slight nod, then he pushed back. He put a hand on my hip to hold me steady, and I put my weight back against him, resting my neck on his shoulder. He pressed into me with the same rhythm he was using on my cock, and I quickly lost myself to the pleasure of it.
Yuuri watched us with a decidedly lustful gaze, his bottom lip disappearing into his mouth and his spent cock twitching back to life. I let my body slacken, leaning back until I was nearly draped over Viktor, completely at his mercy. He pushed my pants farther down, as far as they’d go with my knees spread as they were, and he slid my shirt over my head. I moaned with abandon, letting Yuuri know how much I enjoyed putting on this show for him. And, I supposed, letting Viktor know he was doing a good job as well.

The pressure of arousal reached its peak, and I came, holding nothing back as I jerked against Viktor’s grip, my semen oozing all over his fist. I fell forward, gasping with the unexpected intensity of it. Viktor released me and backed away, and I collapsed onto my belly.

Yuuri sat up a little further, and I pillowed my head on the softness of his thigh, nuzzling him affectionately. He put his fingertips through my hair, petting gently. “Viktor, come here.”

I watched as Viktor almost timidly went up to straddle Yuuri’s chest, putting his tented crotch within reach. Yuuri freed his cock with one hand, and I closed my eyes to the sound of him finishing Viktor. It wasn’t that I didn’t like the idea of watching, but rather that I was too tired and sated to take much interest. Yuuri’s hand squeezed my hair, and I opened my eyes just a little, watching his semi-hard dick twitch in response to his actions. I couldn’t articulate why, but that little sign of enjoyment made me happy.

Viktor cried out his orgasm, and it was all over. He fell to Yuuri’s other side and the three of us snuggled close, Yuuri nestled between us. I was so content and relaxed that I thought I might fall asleep again.

“So what happened after I went to sleep last night?” Yuuri asked, his tone strict, like he wouldn’t take any answer but the full truth.

“I drank too much,” I admitted. “I got horny, and Viktor offered to take care of me.”

“He did?” Yuuri asked, eyebrows raised as he turned to Viktor. Viktor pressed his face into Yuuri’s chest, almost like he was ashamed. He nodded.

“Is that a problem?” I asked, not really understanding either of their reactions.

“No at all,” Yuuri said. “I’m just surprised he offered. What’s more surprising, though, are the marks he left.” He patted Viktor. “Vitya, you can talk. Why were you rough with Yurio?”

He slowly lifted his head, and gave me a pitifully sad look. “I just felt like it. I’m sorry, Yurio.”

“Is that why you were weird last night?” I asked. “You weren’t that rough—I didn’t mind.”

“What do you mean, weird?” Yuuri asked.

I looked at Viktor, giving him the floor to explain. “It wasn’t that, exactly,” he said. “I left because I needed some time to think about it. I’ve never wanted to be rough before. Yuuri would ask, and I couldn’t do it with him. But even after walking around for an hour, I couldn’t figure out why it was different with you.”

“I have to say, I thought you were just pretending with Yurio just now—I thought you might’ve planned it for my benefit, the way you were all possessive.”

Viktor shook his head, his cheeks oddly flushed. “That was all his doing. I just—got into it, I suppose.”
“It was incredibly sexy,” Yuuri said, almost shyly. “I wouldn’t mind seeing more of it someday.”

Viktor and I exchanged a look that was part challenging, part searching. I shrugged. “He’s good at what he does. I’m fine with letting him rough me up a little, if that’s what you want to see.”

Yuuri reached over and touched Viktor’s face. “What about you, Vitya?”

He looked aside. “I’m still in disbelief this is actually happening. Two beautiful men willfully sharing a bed with me, asking me what I want... I feel like I’m going to wake up at any moment.”

It wasn’t the first time, but I still felt a little odd when Viktor called me beautiful. Usually I ignored comments like that unless they were from someone I cared about, like Yuuri or Beka, but from him I felt strangely flattered. Perhaps it was because he had no obligation to find me beautiful, or admit it out loud if he did.

“But I need to figure this out first, I think, before I can commit to anything,” Viktor went on. “I don’t know why he’s different. I don’t want it to be potentially harmful to what we’re working towards.”

“That’s more than fair,” Yuuri said. He leaned back and stretched. “Thank you for all of that. I admit that I was worried that last time was just a drunken fluke. Having you both together sober makes me believe we might be able to pull this off, after all.”

Though I felt like going back to sleep, we all untangled ourselves and got our day started.

“Did you ever figure out what you’d do for a job here?” Yuuri asked Viktor over our breakfast of leftovers.

“He’s been working as Yakov’s dog for the past couple of weeks,” I said.

“Not his dog,” Viktor said. “More or less his assistant.”

“He makes you get his coffee every morning,” I countered.

Viktor glared. “He doesn’t make me; I offered to be polite, since I stop by the café anyway.”

I hadn’t known that. “Oh. You should get me a drink, too.”

He ignored me turned back to Yuuri. “He’s essentially catching me up on all his work, and gives me small jobs here and there. His summer class was already full, but with me around, he thinks we can take on five or so more students from the waitlist. So I suppose I’m helping for now, and we’ll see where it takes me.”

“I see,” Yuuri said. “I imagine I’ll go through something similar with Lilia. She mentioned having me help with her younger ballet classes, mostly sitting in and watching.”

“And she’s threatening you with private lessons of your own,” I added. “Be prepared—she’s not going to go easy on you.”

“I’ve already done what I can to prepare,” Yuuri said, unfazed. “Minako-sensei did her best with the weeks I had, and I think I’m alright to get back into it. It won’t be easy, but I’ve never expected it to be.”

I couldn’t help smiling. The more I watched him, the more I saw of his old self shining through.

Yuuri and I went back to Lilia’s house that day, where he spent little time unpacking his very few possessions. It made the huge room look pathetically empty. While he was in the bathroom, I snuck
in a few of my old plush cats, just so he’d have something to decorate the room.

I had Yuuri to myself for all of three days, until he came down with a nasty cold. Deeming my health the most important, he decided it best to stay with Viktor. While I wrestled with the romantic thoughts of taking care of him, I really didn’t want to get myself sick, especially since Beka was coming to visit the next week, so I let him go without complaining too hard. It just didn’t really feel fair.

But all things considered, I was still pretty happy.
It had felt like everywhere I went, the seagulls were mocking me.

My only respite were Switzerland and Moscow, those beautiful, insulated places I’d found a glimmer of love, but it seemed everywhere else I ended up, the seagulls found me and laughed. Or maybe it was a cry for help, a nagging call to get me to go where I should have been.

No matter what they meant, they always tortured me.

It wasn’t their fault they reminded me of Hasetsu—of the glimmering beaches in summer, of the sweet smell of salt in the breeze. Of days spent with Yuuri, the man I loved more than anything in the world. The treasure of my life that I’d thrown away like a piece of garbage.

No, it wasn’t their fault that their cries made me feel like scum on the bottom of a shoe. The blame lay solely on myself, and the mistakes I’d made in a fit of anger and despair. Mistakes I couldn’t own up to, or apologize for, until the damage was long done. He’d moved on, and it was my own fault that I was going to end up alone.

But as I heard the muffled cries of a passing flock of seagulls through the window, I noticed they didn’t sound so mocking, anymore. They were only birds, after all. They still brought with them echoes of Hasetsu, but there was no pain at that sound anymore. In fact, it sounded a little hopeful.

As I lowered my book and looked across to the bed, I knew exactly why that sound didn’t hurt anymore. Against all expectations, Yuuri lay there, sleeping as peacefully as if the last five years never happened. I found myself compelled to stand up and brush a strand of hair out of his forehead. It wasn’t the hair that bothered me—I just wanted any excuse to touch him to remind myself that he was real, and this was actually happening.

Yurio, in an effort to force me to understand how much damage I’d done, had explained to me just how close we came to losing Yuuri. Just the thought of it, just Yurio’s calm words, had shattered my heart. I never before realized how much I could effect a person who wasn’t myself. Yurio had described a Yuuri that I couldn’t imagine existing, one so lifeless that he was barely living in any sense of the word. The Yuuri I had known was full of such color and life, no matter what he’d been feeling. To know that he was hurting so deeply as to cut himself off from everything that might hurt him anymore, even the things he lived for, left me feeling like the worst person in the world.

I was forgiven, but I still didn’t feel like I deserved it. I didn’t deserve any of this, really.

Yuuri stirred beneath my fingertips, but he didn’t wake up. I hadn’t realized I was still touching him, but I was glad to notice his fever had gone down. I went back to my chair and sat, picking up my book but not even pretending to read anymore.

I had so many things that I wanted to say to him, but hadn’t yet found the time or right opportunity to say. I wasn’t even sure how much of it I could put to words. I was so grateful to have him in my life again that I could hardly process the fact that I was allowed to love him. That, even though he’d found someone else, he still wanted to love me as well.

He woke up coughing, but as I went to prepare him a glass of water, he fell back asleep before I could give it to him. Poor Yuuri. He didn’t get sick often, but when he did, it always seemed to hit him hard.

I kept expecting all of this to shatter. It had only been a week since Yuuri agreed to this crazy
arrangement, and I braced myself for the moment he decided it was all an awful idea, realizing that he really didn’t want anything to do with me anymore. It was what I deserved, after all.

But when he smiled at me, as shyly and as lovingly as he used to, I couldn’t see any traces of my doubt reflected in him. He knew what he wanted, and I was apparently part of it. And if I ignored my doubts, if I ignored the part of me that said I didn’t deserve this, it somehow felt right. I belonged with him, even if he didn’t solely belong to me, and I was quickly realizing how little it mattered that he wasn’t mine alone. Yurio loved him. Yurio made him happy. Yurio knew what he needed when he needed it, and did everything he could to make it happen.

I hated it. I hated how good he was. I hated that I couldn’t hate him at all, because of all the things he’d done to save Yuuri. I hated that I was even starting to like him myself, in a way I found confusing and a little terrifying. Not only had he accepted my kinks without batting an eye, he allowed me to do things to him that I never before felt the desire to do to anyone. He scratched an itch I hadn’t even known was there to begin with, and it would take more exploration to figure out exactly what it meant.

But there would be time for that later.

Yuuri stirred and slowly woke up late into the afternoon. His breathing seemed a little clearer than earlier, at least.

“Vitya?” he called, his voice almost too dry to hear. I stood and went to him immediately, glass of water in hand.

“Sit up and drink,” I told him gently.

He slowly obeyed. “What time is it? Shouldn’t you be at work?”

“Yakov sent me home,” I said. “Told me I was too distracted.”

“You worry too much about me,” he admonished. I couldn’t argue with that, though he was always worth the worry to me.

“Do you think you could eat? You haven’t had anything since last night.”

He nodded, and I went to the kitchen and ladled out a bowl of soup. It had been left warming on the stove all day, just in case. I put it on the little tray I’d bought the first time Yuuri got sick in St. Petersburg, and carried it to bed.

He smiled as I placed it in front of him. “That was fast. It smells amazing.” He carefully took a sip. “Did you make this?”

“Yurio sent it home with me this morning.”

“Oh. That makes more sense.”

I glowered down at him, but I couldn’t be angry. He grinned cheekily and kept eating. “Have you tasted this? It’s really good.”

“Yurio said if I ate even a spoonful before you’d eaten all you wanted, he’d kill me in my sleep,” I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. “I admit it was tempting after smelling it, but no soup means that much to me.”

He looked at me with a surprisingly sad expression. “He shouldn’t say things like that. I’ll make sure
to talk to him and—"

I shook my head. “Don’t. I know he doesn’t mean it. It was just his way of saying that he made it specifically for you, and I understood that. There’s no venom in it—it’s just how we communicate.”

He looked skeptical as he ate another spoonful. I patted his leg. “Come on, Yuuri—it isn’t anything new, and it’s nothing to worry about. We can speak civilly when we’re talking about important things. Don’t worry about our banter.”

He seemed unconvinced, but didn’t argue any more about it. He ate the entire bowl, took some medicine, and went back to sleep. No opportunities to talk there.

I went out for a walk, despite the slight drizzle. Even after all these years, I still expected to see Makkachin bounding around my feet, happy to tug me around our favorite spots. Today the pain was a little heavier, remembering the times that Yuuri had happily come with us. Sometimes I was convinced that dog had loved him more than me.

As I walked the streets around my apartment, I spotted a familiar figure down the street. I considered keeping quiet and turning around, because I wasn’t all that interested in seeing him right now, but I knew where he was likely headed. I couldn’t avoid him forever.

“Yurio!” I called, and caught up to him.

He turned, and gifted me with a scowl. “Why aren’t you at home?”

“Yuuri fell back asleep, so I stepped out for a few minutes,” I gritted out. I didn’t feel I owed him an explanation, but where Yuuri was concerned, I had to tell the truth.

“Did he eat?”

“He ate your soup.”

“Good.”

We were walking side-by-side, though I didn’t know where we were headed. He turned a corner that wasn’t toward the apartment. “Did you end practice early?”

“I’m still technically on vacation,” he said. “So Yakov lets me leave when I want.”

“You still practice during vacation?”

“I feel like shit if I stop for more than a couple of days,” he said. “You know how it is.”

I did know, but it still surprised me to see him so diligent. He used to hate practicing, cutting corners whenever he could, taking entire days off whenever he was allowed, except in the weeks before a major competition. I expected him to be taking it more easily.

He sighed. “I know what you’re thinking, and the truth is I wouldn’t have gone in for more than a couple of hours if Yuuri weren’t sick, unless he wanted to skate too. This cold threw off all my plans, so it was either stay at home bored, or practice.”

“What sort of plans did you have?”

“I was going to spend all my time with him until Beka came to visit, have the two of them meet, then let him spend time with you while I went with Beka.” I opened my mouth, but he interrupted me. “Don’t. I know what you’re going to say, and it’s not like that. I’m not passing him around like a
bottle of vodka—we’d already agreed to those plans, he just hadn’t had the chance to tell you before he got sick.”

How had he known what I was going to say? I wasn’t sure how I felt about this new, super-perceptive Yurio. “When does Otabek get here, then?”

“Two days. I need to find something to do while I wait, otherwise my vacation will feel completely wasted. Well, not completely wasted,” he added with a knowing smirk at me. “It started off alright, at least.”

I felt my face grow warm at the reminder. I quickly changed the subject. “Where are you going now? I thought you’d want to see Yuuri.”

“Not if he’s sleeping,” he said, stopping to peer into a bakery window. “I’ll stop by tomorrow to see if he’s feeling better. Unless you’d rather I didn’t.”

“You can come by whenever you want,” I said, a little touched at the consideration. I’d fully expected him to barge into my apartment whenever he felt like it, but he kept surprising me with how much he’d grown up.

“I’ll text ahead so you can tell me if it’s a bad time, like if he’s sleeping or if you’re… busy.”

“I appreciate it,” I said. “Though if we’re busy, I probably won’t be in any capacity to respond.”

He narrowed his eyes at me. “Then I’ll take your silence as answer enough.” He straightened. “I’m going in here.”

I could tell it was my cue to leave him alone. “I should go back and check on Yuuri.”

He nodded, and that was all. I went back to the apartment in a thoughtful mood, wondering why he still set my teeth on edge, despite the fact that we’d managed to get along civilly for weeks now. If it wasn’t his attitude that bothered me, what was it? It didn’t feel like jealousy.

As I’d expected, Yuuri was still asleep when I returned home. He continued to sleep as I ate dinner, and after a brief deliberation I decided to go to bed early, crawling in beside him. I decided I didn’t really mind if he got me sick—I couldn’t stand looking at him for so long without being close to him.

When I woke up, I was alone. By the pink light glowing through the window I could tell it was barely dawn, and the apartment was dark and silent. The sheets where Yuuri had been sleeping were cold to the touch. I got up, and found Yuuri sitting silently on the couch, hugging his knees to his chest while he stared at nothing.

“Yuuri?”

He turned. “Oh. Did I wake you? I was trying to be quiet.”

“You didn’t wake me,” I assured him. I went over and put my hand to his forehead. No fever. “How are you feeling?”

“A bit better today, I think,” he said. His nose was still stuffed up, but he did look somewhat better. “I just couldn’t sleep anymore.”

“Do you want anything? There’s still some soup left.”

He smiled weakly, and rested his chin on his arms. “Maybe a little later.” He went quiet.
“Something on your mind?” I asked, sitting next to him and hoping he would talk to me. We hadn’t really had a good chance to talk since he’d arrived.

“Yeah, but… I don’t know.”

I waited. Sometimes Yuuri would talk if I urged him, but other times I knew he just needed to find the right words himself.

“Do you think I’m selfish?”

“I think in some ways we’re all selfish,” I said. “What specifically do you mean?”

“I feel selfish for wanting both of you. Or rather, for having both of you at once. I feel like a terrible, selfish person.”

I put my hand on his shoulder, feeling a little disappointed in myself that I hadn’t anticipated this. “No one thinks you’re terrible, Yuuri. We both love you.”

“Is it really enough for you, though? Knowing that I’m… split in half like this?”

“Do you really think you’re split in half?” I asked him. “Do you feel like you’re only giving half of yourself to me or Yurio?”

“I don’t… know. I don’t know if I’m doing this right.” He pressed his face into his arms.

“Yuuri, you’ve done nothing wrong. You haven’t even been here two weeks yet. Don’t punish yourself for something that hasn’t happened.”

He sniffed. “I’m so scared, Vitya. I’m terrified I’m going to screw up and end up hurting someone. You two are the most important people in the world to me right now, and I just… I keep imagining what would happen if I messed up.”

I took a deep breath to calm myself in the emotional onslaught. It wouldn’t help if I got upset now. “Stop imagining that. It’s not going to happen. You’re not going to screw up, and even if you do, it won’t be the end of the world. None of us have experience with this sort of thing, so we all have to figure it out as we go. As long as we’re honest with each other, we’ll be alright.”

He looked up at me with glassy eyes. “You think so?”

I tugged at his hand, capturing it between my own. “I promise you, I’ll do everything I can to hold this together.” I felt my own resolve strengthen as I said each word. “The number one thing Yurio wants is to see you happy, and the number one thing I want is to be able to love you. We know you, Yuuri. We know you don’t want to hurt either of us, and if a misunderstanding occurs, we’ll talk it through. It’s not all going to fall apart from one mistake, especially not an imaginary one. You’re not selfish for wanting both of us—at least, not any more selfish than I am for wanting to be with you.”

He smiled a little, and I felt the tension in my chest ease. “I guess the only selfless one here is Yurio.”

“He is annoyingly self-sacrificial,” I muttered. “But trust me, even he can be selfish sometimes. Don’t go into this trying to be perfect for everyone.” I brought his hand to my lips and kissed it. “Just be yourself. That’s all anyone is asking of you.”

He uncurled from his ball and leaned against my chest. “I missed you, Vitya. I thought with Yurio, I could ignore it, but being allowed to want you again has made me realize just how much I missed you. Part of me keeps refusing to believe that this is real, that I can actually do this.”
“I feel the exact same way,” I admitted, releasing his hand and putting my arms around him. “Except for me, I’ve always known exactly how much I missed you. I think it will take a while for my heart to settle and actually believe it’s all true.”

“It would help if we could catch up properly,” he said softly. “I wish I weren’t sick.”

“You didn’t get enough with Yurio?” I teased.

“It’s not about ‘enough,’” he said. “It’s two completely different things in my mind. What I do with him is nothing like what I do with you. I tried to at first, because it was all I knew, but…”

“He likes different things,” I finished for him. “You two made that pretty obvious.”

“It’s not just about the sex, though,” Yuuri went on. “It’s about feeling connected, and I haven’t really gotten to do that with you yet. Which is probably why this all still feels like this nebulous thing… like a dream.”

“Don’t worry—we have all the time in the world. And you know I can be patient.” He shivered at the way I said that word, one of our favorites. “As soon as you’re better, I’m all yours to do with what you will.”

“What would you like first, Vitya?” he asked, his voice soft and seductive despite his cold. “I hope you haven’t been neglected too much.”

He pet my hair gently, a ripple of comfort worming through my limbs. “I haven’t been too neglected,” I admitted. “Hugh was accommodating, and before him Chris took care of me from time to time. Neither of them could even approach your abilities, though. As for what I would like…” My eyes drifted towards the open door of the bedroom, where the locked trunk sat within viewing range. “My ropes haven’t been touched since you left.”

He drew back a little, a sheepish look on his face. “I don’t know if I remember how to do everything…”

“It will come back to you,” I said, drawing him back against me. “We can take it slow, and you can relearn. Please. I’ll beg for it in any way you need me to.”

“Oh, I expect you to do a bit more than beg,” Yuuri purred, and it was my turn to shudder with arousal. This talk was dangerous, but oddly comforting, like settling into an old home you thought you’d never see again.

Yuuri withdrew, and smiled warmly. “I should probably eat.”

“You sit tight, then. I’ll heat up Yurio’s soup.”

I expected a protest, but he leaned back against the couch and nodded. “Thank you.”

When had Yuuri learned to be taken care of? He used to be so stubborn about it. Was this Yurio’s effect? Or was he really feeling that awful?

I went through my morning routine while the soup heated on the stove. Yuuri remained on the couch, quietly thoughtful, though without the lines of distress like before. I wondered what he was thinking about. When I brought him his bowl of soup, I decided to ask him.

“Oh. Everything, I guess.”
I sat down and turned my whole body toward him, resting my face on my palm, coffee mug warm in my other hand. “Everything?”

“Nothing in particular, really,” he amended, though it sounded a bit like a lie. “Just—well, I was wondering how you felt about Yurio?”

“How I feel about him?”

Yuuri nodded.

I took a sip of coffee, choosing my words carefully. “It’s complicated, I suppose. I can’t give a truthful answer because I don’t know the truth of it myself. Honestly, I find him irritating because of it.”

It clearly wasn’t the right word to use, as Yuuri looked crestfallen down into his bowl.

“It’s not bad,” I hastily said. “I don’t hate him. He’s only irritating because I can’t figure out how I feel about him. Some moments I like him and admire him, and others I find myself terribly on edge.”

“What about that night I came back?” he asked. “The one where you…”

“Well…” I trailed off, turning away a little. “That’s part of the problem, I think. I don’t know what I was feeling that night. He asked me questions I’d never expected to hear—it was like he wanted to understand me.”

“That’s because he does,” Yuuri said, as if it were obvious. “He’s curious about things he doesn’t understand. He wants to know the people around him. That’s why he notices things. Did he give you a hard time about your preferences? Did he insult you?”

“I expected him to, but he didn’t,” I said. “He just listened. Hardly offered any commentary, but I didn’t get the impression he was repulsed by anything he heard.”

“What did you tell him?”

“Just the basic things,” I said. “I didn’t think he’d want to hear the dirty specifics, though now I’m not so sure I should have held back.”

“He’ll find out eventually,” Yuuri said. “I’m not going to hide anything from him, and I don’t know if you should, either.”

I withdrew a little. “I’m not going to bare all my secrets to him, Yuuri. I’m in this for you, not him.”

He reached out to me, concern in his eyes. “That’s not what I meant. I just meant you shouldn’t hide who you are around him. I’ve seen the way you close yourself off sometimes, and I don’t think it’s good for us. It’s definitely not good for you.”

I flinched out of his touch, a strange panic rising in my throat. “I don’t want to.”

His brows came together. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not with him. It’s hard enough knowing that you know everything about me, and you’ll tell him whatever he wants to know. I don’t know him the way I know you.”

Yuuri lowered his eyes. “You don’t trust him.”

“I didn’t say that.”
“But that’s what you meant,” he said darkly. “You don’t trust him, and you don’t trust me to not reveal your secrets to him.”

“You said you wouldn’t lie to him.”

“And I won’t. But I’m not going to tell him everything. I don’t even think he’d ask, but even if he did—I’d just say that he’d have to ask you if he really wanted to know. I don’t even know what you’re trying to hide, but I wouldn’t tell him your secrets.”

Yuuri looked genuinely hurt, and I suddenly regretted my reaction. But I couldn’t deny that the whole thing made me uneasy. Where was this panic coming from? Why did it matter so much?

“What are you afraid of him knowing?” Yuuri asked, his tone gentler. My face must have betrayed my worries.

“I—” I opened my mouth, thinking I had the answer, but I was suddenly unsure. “I don’t know,” I admitted, because I wanted help.

Yuuri frowned and reached for me again, and this time I didn’t pull away. “I can’t imagine anything that you’d want to hide from him. You’re a beautiful person, Vitya.”

It had been so long since anyone had said that to me in the way Yuuri meant. I’d been called beautiful by countless people in my lifetime, so much that the compliment meant little on its own. Hugh had called me beautiful often, too. But from Yuuri, I knew it meant a deeper beauty than what I displayed to the world. He called me beautiful when I was at my most vulnerable, stripped bare and restrained and begging. That side of me that only he knew the real extent of—he cherished it and called it beautiful, because it was a part of me. That was something no one else ever really understood.

Was that what I was afraid of? That Yurio could learn everything and not understand? What did it matter to me what he thought?

Yuuri tugged on my sleeve. “Talk to me, Vitya. You’re thinking too much and not saying anything.”

I gave him a weak smile. “I wish I knew exactly what it was. I’m trying to figure it out.”

“Why Yurio bothers you so much?”

I nodded. “And what I’m afraid of. Because I feel it, but I don’t know where it’s coming from. He confuses me.”

“Do you think it might have something to do with the way you treated him before we broke up?”

I thought about it. “I don’t know. I don’t think so. I didn’t think about him that much when we were together, to be honest. He was always there, but…”

“We weren’t really all that close,” Yuuri finished. “What about the other night, when you left marks on him?”

That moment had been a thorn in my side since it happened, something I’d pushed out of my mind because I couldn’t understand it. “I didn’t mean to do that.”

“But he didn’t mind it. He told me later that you weren’t even that forceful; you just held him down to keep him still. Apparently you were so good that he lost control.”
I met his eyes, looking for the joke. “He said that?”

“He was reluctant to admit it, but yes. Though he kept making sure to remind me that he had been drinking, which apparently makes him hornier than usual.” Yuuri rubbed the back of his head. “I have a hard time understanding how you feel about each other, which is why I asked in the first place. For the record, Yurio’s answers haven’t been any clearer than yours.”

I blinked, stunned. “Really?”

Yuuri nodded. “I… I’ll probably get in trouble for saying this, but I think he has some affection for you, even if he’ll never say it out loud. I thought maybe you’d felt similarly, and you might be less stubborn about admitting it. But that doesn’t seem to be the case, does it?”

I sighed. “I don’t know, Yuuri. Maybe a part of me likes him. Maybe I’m afraid because I can’t understand it. Or maybe I just can’t handle the thought of feeling vulnerable to him.”

“Don’t be afraid, Vitya,” he said, brushing his knuckles against my cheek affectionately. “You won’t be vulnerable to him if you don’t want to be. It’s like you said—you’re with me, not him, and if it’s too much to handle thinking about him, we don’t have to. I only wanted to understand what was going on between you.”

“I understand,” I said, leaning into his touch. “I wish I had an answer. I need to have an answer someday, if only for my own peace of mind. I think it might just take time.” His reassurances were still soothing, though, and I found myself relaxing.

“I think we’ll have plenty,” he said. I really hoped so.
Viktor

It took Yuuri three more days to recover completely. The last two he’d sent me off to work, claiming he was well enough to take care of himself, though I’d made him promise to call me if he needed anything he couldn’t find in the house. Yakov kept me busy enough that I wasn’t constantly thinking about him, but I still wished he’d called at least once, just so I could feel like he needed me.

On my way home on the third day, however, he did call, though it wasn’t because he needed me to take care of him.

“Vitya.” His voice was low and breathy. For a moment I was afraid his fever had returned, though he hadn’t had one for days.

“Yuuri, what’s wrong?”

“Are you still at the rink?”

“I’m on my way home now. Did you need me to pick up something?”

“…”

“Yuuri?”

“Where’s the key to your chest? It’s not in the old hiding place.”

Once the implications hit me, I stopped in my tracks with a jolt of arousal. “It’s on the shelf in the living room, behind the picture you gave me for my birthday.” I heard a shuffling sound.

“Mm, alright. Thanks. Come home soon.”

“I—I’ll be right there!” It was hard to keep my voice steady. He didn’t hang up right away, and I could hear his breathing through the phone. He gave a long, soft moan that pierced me like an arrow, and I cursed under my breath at the fact that I was still several blocks away from home. I wasn’t worried about anyone noticing—my coat would hide my arousal easily—but I wanted to be there. I needed to be near him. I needed to see him, to feel him—his voice brought forth days of anticipation that curled around me like a vice. Why wasn’t I there already?

We never hung up the phone, his quiet noises making me rush as fast as I could without breaking out into a dead run. They seemed a little distant, like he’d put the phone down while he did something else with his hands. I burned to know what waited for me up those stairs.

I somehow made it home without dying. I fumbled with my keys, my hands shaking so much in my eagerness to get inside. The door finally swung open.

“Vitya. You kept me waiting.”

His voice made me want to fall to my knees right then and there. He’d called from the bedroom, and I hastily dropped my things onto the counter and tore off my coat and scarf. A button popped off and fell to the floor. I ignored it.

When I saw the sight waiting for me in the bedroom, I did fall to my knees in worship. He lounged back on the bed, wearing clothing I hadn’t seen in years. They were a set of leathers I’d once jokingly commented on in a catalogue, but he’d seen through my sarcastic comments to the genuine
interest I had. At the time I didn’t think he’d go for it, but a few weeks later he’d surprised me by wearing them in bed. His chest was barely covered by the small black vest, and he’d donned a pair of black, fingerless gloves to match. The tight little shorts had a zipper that went down much farther than usual, a convenience I definitely remembered using on more than one occasion. Fishnets covered his muscled thighs, and he’d completed the look with a pair of knee-high stiletto boots. I had no idea where they’d come from, but I wasn’t about to ask just then.

In his hands he caressed loops of thin red rope, and my mouth hung open in a pant. It had been so, so long. I hadn’t trusted anyone else enough to even attempt this, and even with Yuuri it hadn’t been a regular activity. Shibari—or kinbaku, as Yuuri called it—required time, patience, care, and skill, and Yuuri had learned it specifically as a gift to me. It was one of the many reasons my other lovers had paled in comparison to him.

I went silent. Unless Yuuri wanted me to, I found it more comforting to not speak.

“Take off your clothes, Vitya,” he said sensually, running the rope through his fingers. “Slowly.”

I stood and did as I was told, my gaze occasionally flickering to his face to see his reactions. He was slightly flushed, his hair pushed back from his forehead, and he watched me with heavy eyelids.

When I got down to my underwear, I hesitated, but he nodded me on. Completely naked, I gravitated towards his outstretched hand, rubbing my cheek against his palm.

“My Vitya,” he said affectionately. He picked up a length of black cloth and pressed it to my eyes, tying it firmly behind my head. I felt his fingertips against my right palm, and I grabbed on to the handkerchief he offered. This was my flag, my surrender, if I needed to let him know it was too much. I clutched it tightly, and let Yuuri steer me onto the sheets, goosebumps raising on my skin.

He worked slowly and steadily, beginning with the rope in my mouth and weaving it down my chest. I bit down on it, fighting back an instinctive urge to panic as he worked his way around to bind my arms. My body wanted to struggle and fight, but this required such precision and care that I had to be completely submissive while Yuuri completed his work. I felt every inch of rope as it pressed into my skin, the position he put me in intentionally uncomfortable but not unbearable, his soft murmurings anchoring me to the moment.

After what seemed like an eternity, the movement stopped, and Yuuri’s hands left me. I tested the bindings, finding my limbs completely immobile with no hope of escape. Panic overcame me. I clutched hard at my handkerchief as I fought against the ropes, feeling utterly helpless, blind, and lost. I didn’t know where Yuuri was, as my heart pounded so loudly in my ears to drown out any sound he made. I struggled and whimpered and slowly, slowly, I withdrew into myself.

I couldn’t think of anything. I was somewhere else, that beautiful dark place where only I existed, and nothing could hurt me. I was stripped down to nothing, my own name not enough to hold myself together. The only thing in my mind was his name, echoing softly and endlessly, near and far, surrounding me like a blanket. Love could only begin to describe the way I felt for him in that moment. He consumed me in a way I didn’t understand. He was my everything.

I wasn’t aware of crying, but the fabric around my eyes became wet, and some drops snaked around my nose and down my cheeks. The sensation made me come back into myself, and I slowly reacquainted myself with the discomfort in my body. I had no idea how long I’d been there. Unable to really speak, I gently let go of the handkerchief, and immediately I felt the ropes around my legs loosen. Yuuri made short work of the rest of them, and carefully guided my stiff limbs to unfurl them, massaging each muscle methodically. When all the ropes were gone he turned me onto my back, and I felt his fingertips brush against my lips sensually.
I could have removed the blindfold whenever I wanted, but I chose to leave it on as he rubbed lotion into just about every inch of my skin. He crooned endlessly, complimenting me and making small sounds of pleasure as he touched me. I was only mildly aroused, more from the intimacy than any physical sexual pleasure, and my mind was in no state for anything further just then.

When he finished with the lotion, I heard him leave the room for a moment, and I removed the blindfold. The clock on the nightstand told me hours had passed. The room was lit by a single lamp I hadn’t noticed him turning on, but through the shaded window I could see the darkness outside. It felt like waking up after a long nap. My body had red marks all over, the angriest at my joints where I had fought the hardest. The aches were trivial, and the marks would fade. What would linger far longer was the calm in my mind, the echoes of that beautiful place away from the world.

I heard Yuuri’s return before I saw him, those absurd boots clopping against the hardwood floors as he crossed the apartment. I felt mildly disappointed that I’d worn the blindfold and hadn’t enjoyed his outfit as much as it deserved, but the fact that he was willing to wear it at all, specifically for me, was a gift enough. Perhaps I’d coax him back into it some other time, when I’d get to worship him more.

He presented me with a water bottle, guiding the conveniently long straw to my mouth as I struggled to sit up a little. My body was just a little sluggish in the aftermath, but I was infinitely grateful for the water.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Good,” I said, sinking back down into the mattress. He pushed a pillow under my head, and methodically checked my body again. “Thank you.”

He smiled and patted my cheek. “I figured I should make up for all the distress I’ve caused you the past few days.”

At that moment, I couldn’t even remember what he was talking about, but I believed him enough not to argue. I couldn’t think of anything stressful right then.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“Please,” I said, wanting to feel him close to me. It was considerate of him to ask, though, since sometimes I did prefer to be left alone for a little while. He carefully slid into the bed next to me, the length of his thigh pressing against mine.

I knew Yuuri didn’t completely understand why I wanted this. The fact that he went through the effort to give it to me anyway made me love him all the more. How could I have ever given him up? How could I have ever taken him for granted? I soaked in his quiet presence, tired and sated and so very, deeply in love.

Our quiet reverie was interrupted by a series of vibrations coming from the bedside table.

“Ah, sorry,” Yuuri said. “I thought I muted that.”

I reached around and grabbed the phone, seeing Yurio’s texts in the notifications. I tried Yuuri’s old phone password as he looked on, waiting for protest. He didn’t. Apparently his password was still the same, as his phone unlocked with one attempt.

Yurio: Are you feeling better yet?

Yurio: Think you’ll be up for a late dinner with me and Beka?
With a brief glance at Yuuri, I turned on the camera, and shot a quick photo of his lower half, careful to leave most of my nakedness out of it.

“Hey! What are you—ah Vitya don’t!”

I sent it before he could grab the phone from me. He stopped struggling and covered his face in embarrassment, but I saw his eyes peeking through the space between his fingers in anticipation of a response. It took a long two minutes from when he saw the image to when he finally responded.

Yurio: I

Yurio: guess you’re busy?

Yurio: or were busy

Yurio: um

Yurio: does that mean you’re better?

Yurio: are those boots Viktor’s?

“Where did those boots come from?” I finally asked as Yuuri snatched his phone back.

“I bought them online.” Yuuri tapped out a response, but made little effort to hide it. “In Hasetsu.”

“What for?”

“I just wanted them,” he said simply. He finished his response and looked up at me sheepishly. “Do you hate them?”

“Not at all,” I said honestly, reaching over to caress his side reassuringly. “They suit you. I just hadn’t expected it.” I tugged on his arm, vying for a better view of his conversation. If he’d really wanted to keep it private I wouldn’t have tried, but he seemed like he almost wanted me to see.

Yuuri: I’m feeling better, yes

Yuuri: and the boots are mine

Yurio: oh

Yurio: that’s good

Yurio: so dinner?

Yurio: we were thinking of heading over there in about half an hour

Yuuri looked to me, and I shrugged. “I don’t mind dinner. I can’t promise anything else, though.”

“Don’t worry, I won’t be asking for anything more,” he said, and kissed my cheek. He tapped out another response to Yurio, and I closed my eyes, soaking in his warmth.

It felt like it took all the energy I had just to get dressed and set my hair to rights. Yuuri changed out of his amazing outfit and stored it away in my locked chest, pushing aside some items to make room for his boots.
“Are you going to take those with you when you go back to Yurio’s?” I asked out of curiosity.

“I don’t know,” he admitted, looking embarrassed. “I don’t know what all he likes, yet. It’s probably better to save it for later, when we know more of what we enjoy together. So far it’s mostly just been…”

“Fucking?” I asked bluntly.

He sighed. “Yes, but also… straightforward. I’m not used to it being so direct and passionate.”

I swallowed back a sudden lump of uncertainty. “And you… like that better?”

He glared at me. “It’s not the same, Vitya. I can’t compare you two at all, and it hurts that you’d even ask.” His face softened. “I love what we do together. You’re so beautiful, and the way you put all your trust in me just feels so… amazing. I’m not used to feeling so strong and powerful in my day-to-day life. It’s exhilarating. With Yurio, it’s a different feeling altogether, just as amazing, but completely different. It’s almost like fighting, sometimes.”

“Fighting?” I didn’t really understand.

“Fighting or… or dancing, maybe? We give and take, push and pull, to see who might give in first. Sometimes I feel like his equal. Sometimes I want him to take me, other times he clearly wants me to win. We don’t talk about it very much, but we’ve learned to communicate with our bodies what we want. We’re still learning, but it’s different. Passionate.”

I understood what he meant, but contrasting emotions battled in my mind. I forced back the jealousy, reminding myself of what had just happened and how much Yuuri loved me. A stranger part of me felt aroused and curious, wanting to be a fly on the wall to watch them. Then I realized that probably wouldn’t be as impossible as I first thought. As my mind traveled in that direction, I thought of how much I wanted to see Yuuri win one of these “dances,” and I shook my head to clear away the thoughts.

“Viktor? What’s wrong?”

I debated on telling him the truth, but there was little time left to discuss it. I shook my head. “Nothing. We can talk more later.”

He looked at me with a worried expression. “I’ve upset you.”

I brought forth the warmest smile I could give. “I’m fine, I promise. You just gave me a lot to think about, and there’s not much time.” I leaned over and kissed his forehead. “Later.”

Dinner turned out to be a quiet, comfortable affair, with Yuuri and Yurio doing most of the talking. Even though it hadn’t been very long since they’d seen each other, they still clearly missed each other, their eyes practically oozing their love. I knew without asking that I’d have to let Yuuri go back soon. I wasn’t quite used to watching Yuuri flirt with another man, so I had to check out of the conversation every so often to keep myself from getting too upset. I couldn’t watch Yurio. The way I felt when I looked at him still nagged at me, and it wasn’t the time to try and figure it out. So, instead, I watched Otabek.

He was a generally quiet man, a good counterpart to Yurio’s natural energy. His face was rather severe and intense, but still handsome, if one liked strong jaws and clean haircuts. He didn’t notice my eyes on him because of how intensely he focused on Yurio. I’d heard a little about their relationship from Yuuri, but it was hard to grasp until I saw it with my own eyes. Yurio seemed to lean on Otabek as a support pillar, both physically and emotionally, and did so even as he was
laughing and talking with Yuuri. They were close—closer than any friendship I’d seen in a long time—and I couldn’t help but feel a little defensive that Yurio felt like he needed more than Yuuri in his life. Yuuri was all I would ever need.

But the more I thought about that, the less it felt like a good thing.

After dinner, I witnessed something that really cemented how strange this all was. We’d walked with Yurio and Otabek around the corner, where Otabek’s motorcycle was parked. Not many were around, the short stretch of road empty of people with only a few cars passing by. Yuuri had been holding onto my hand as Yurio perched himself behind Otabek on the motorcycle.

“You get two more days,” Yurio said, looking pointedly at me, but then turning to Yuuri. “Lilia wants you to recover as much as possible, then come back to the house to get started on work. She’s not going to start you off easy, so rest up as much as you can.”

Yuuri nodded in acknowledgement, and—still holding my hand—stepped forward and gave Yurio a long, gentle kiss, one that would have fooled no one about the true nature of their relationship. Yurio’s stunned face turned red, and he cleared his throat as he put on his helmet. “Two days,” he reminded me, and clung to Otabek as they took off.

I had seen them kiss before, but it was usually in the context of sex, which occupied a different space in my mind. This was actual love, as plain as a sunrise. My chest ached with the bittersweet beauty of it, especially when Yuuri turned and smiled at me, his expression still full of love. I couldn’t demand more than this from him. I didn’t deserve more than this.

I wasn’t sure I even wanted more than this.

“Something’s wrong,” Yuuri said, handing me a drink. I sniffed, and was surprised to find whisky. He sat down beside me with a small drink of his own, settling in for a talk. We’d been at home for almost an hour by then, Yuuri tending to various chores while I sat quietly on the couch with my thoughts.

When I didn’t respond right away, he went on. “You seemed a little down lately. Did the ropes help at all?”

“It was all amazing,” I said. “I just—I might be thinking too much. I’m sorry to worry you.”

He stared at me for a moment, reaching over to idly touch my hair. “Tell me what’s wrong, Vitya. I don’t want to ignore your feelings. Not again.”

I looked down, still unsure what to say.

“Is it Yurio? Does he still bother you?”

“Yes,” I said, feeling the truth slip out of me before I could stop myself. “I don’t know why. It bothers me that I don’t know why.”

“Do you hate him? Do you hate that I’m with him?”

“No, not at all!” I cried. “I can’t hate anything that makes you so happy. He… he confuses me.” I
took a swallow of the whisky. “I just can’t pin down how I feel about him.”

“How would you feel about him if I weren’t around?” he asked. “If you’d decided to come back to Moscow on your own to work with Yakov, how would you regard him?”

That was an interesting approach, and I had to think about it for a moment. “Putting aside that he’d probably still hate me, I don’t know that I would notice him that much. I mean, professionally he’s one of the greatest skaters, but he doesn’t impress me on an emotional level. He feels too immature. He improved this last season, but I get the impression that was because he skated for you.”

“What about aside from skating, though?”

“Aside from skating, what else is there?” I asked bluntly. “He’s the top. His life is skating. His personality is skating. His heart is skating. I was there, once, and I know how hollow it is if you take away the skating.”

“But he’s more than skating, just like you were,” Yuuri said. “He takes classes just because he wants to learn. He’s curious. He’s observant and self-conscious and probably the most self-aware person I know. He gets angry easily, but takes steps to deal with it so he doesn’t hurt anyone. He cooks. He loves cats.” He sighed. “The more I’ve gotten to know him, the more I fall in love. I don’t expect you to ever feel the same, but I thought maybe if you looked past the fact that he’s my lover, you might see something to like.”

I closed my eyes to the sudden ache in my chest. “I already said I don’t hate him.”

“What about aside from skating, though?”

I paused. “I don’t think ‘like’ is a word I can use here. Because the truth is, I might like him, but something in my heart won’t let me think about it that way. My heart is telling me I should be jealous, no matter how many times I tell myself I can’t be. I don’t want to be jealous. I want to love you, and love that he makes you happy. I want to be grateful to have you again. But I can’t, and I don’t know why.”

“It’s okay if you’re jealous, Vitya,” he said gently.

“No it’s not.”

“It is.” He rubbed my shoulder. “I didn’t expect you to be okay with everything from the very beginning. In fact, I knew you wouldn’t be, because you and I have always been a little possessive of one another. We used to make grand declarations of love on international television, because we wanted everyone to know that we belonged to each other. I’m not worried about your jealousy, because you know it’s happening. You know where it comes from. What worries me is that you’re going to wear yourself down worrying about it. You can’t relax.”

“How can this work if I’m jealous?”

He shifted, and sipped at his drink. “It won’t work forever if you can’t deal with it. But your jealousy won’t tear Yurio and me apart—it will tear you apart from us. If you truly can’t be happy with the fact that I’m with Yurio, then things won’t last very long. But I think you can overcome it, if you want to. It will probably take some time, but if you really want to try, we’ll do whatever it takes.”

“I do want to try,” I said with conviction. “I want to like him.”

“Then we’ll spend more time together,” Yuuri said. “The three of us. We’re already planning on going to Hasetsu after Worlds, but we can do things before then, too. I was going to ask about
inviting him to stay with us the night before I go back to Lilia’s house.”

“Our last night?” I could admit, I was a little hurt.

“Only if you’re alright with it,” Yuuri said hastily. “It’s been a while, and I was thinking it might help you sort out your feelings. But I’ll understand if you’d rather be selfish with me. I’ll let you make the decision.”

“I don’t want to give up my time with you,” I said firmly. “Not our last night… our last morning…”

Yuuri sipped at his drink, his eyes drifting away from me. “I understand. Though you shouldn’t think of it as our ‘last’ anything. I’ll be back. I imagine I’ll be staying here more in the coming months, when Yurio starts to run himself ragged preparing for Worlds.”

He seemed a little withdrawn, which was unfair. He left the decision up to me—what gave him the right to be upset by that decision? I put down my glass. “Yuuri.”

He turned back towards me, startled by my tone. “What?”

“Why do you want to invite him over? Do you want to see him that badly that you want to cut our time short?”

“That’s not it at all!” he cried, making it clear I’d misunderstood. “Like I said—I thought having him here again might help you sort through how you feel. You’re different around him. You treat him in a way I’ve never seen you treat anyone else, and I can’t tell if it’s because you’re mad, or if it’s something else. I was reminded today of how much you’ve dealt with your emotional problems through sex over the years, and thought maybe another opportunity to do so might help. I know Yurio will be willing, since it will be his last day of vacation, Otabek will have left, and we haven’t been together for over a week now. But if you’d rather not give up your alone time with me, like I said, I understand.”

A part of me still thought he only wanted to see Yurio again because he missed him, but I pushed that thought aside. “And what would happen if we invited him over?”

Yuuri gave me a disbelieving look. “We would eat dinner and have sex? What else?”

“What sort of sex, though?”

“Whatever you want,” he said. “Whatever you think might help. We could tie you up and let you watch, or you could be more active… Yurio seemed to like what you did to him before. Or you could let him tie you up—”

“Not that,” I said immediately. “Definitely not that.”

“Why not?” Yuuri pressed, clearly sensing something there.

“I—” I had to think for a moment. “I don’t want him to. I don’t want him with that sort of power over me.”

“Would you prefer to have that sort of power over him?” Yuuri asked. “Not that I’m sure he’d go for it, but it might help if we knew you wanted to.”

Memories came to mind, of him wriggling beneath my grip as I blew him, and of his body rutting against mine, practically begging for my touch. “Maybe,” I admitted, and I felt something strange unfurl in my chest. I’d never wanted anything like that before, not with any of my previous partners,
and especially not with Yuuri. I wanted to belong to Yuuri, to be his slave in the bedroom. I’d only ever wanted to be played with. Sometimes Yuuri requested something a little more mutual, and while I could accommodate him from time to time, nothing made my blood hum like when I submitted to him.

But Yurio… The thought of punishing him, biting him, possessing him… It wasn’t unpleasant. I wouldn’t say no if it were asked of me. I had approached him with indifference when Yuuri asked me to take care of him, but the way he yielded to me… I enjoyed it far more than I expected. The realization stuck into me like a needle, piercing open a part of me I hadn’t even known existed.

“Maybe?” Yuuri asked, breaking through my thoughts.

I nodded, grabbing my glass and draining it. The alcohol burned through me, helping me relax. “I don’t hate the idea.”

“I thought that might be it,” he said, touching me affectionately. “I’d never seen you that way before. I thought you might’ve just been performing for my sake, but the more I considered it, the more it seemed unlike you.”

Now that I had said it out loud, it felt like the truth. “I don’t want to hurt him, though.”

“I didn’t think you did. It seems more like you want to punish him for stealing me away.”

I gaped at him, appalled. He held up his hand.

“You know I don’t mean it exactly like that. But you once told me your sexual urges reflect your basest primal desires… and what is jealousy if not a result of primal desire? You wanted me to claim you and possess you because you were tired of the world thinking you were perfect. What if you want to claim him because you’re tired of him being perfect for me?”

I squeezed my eyes shut. “I don’t want to believe I could feel that way.”

“But what if you do? It’s not bad, Viktor. You’re not bad for feeling this way, because I know you don’t want to hurt him. But if we can unravel the way you feel about him, maybe it will be easier to handle all of this.”

I leaned on him, because I really didn’t know what else to do. He set down his glass and held me close, rubbing gentle circles on my back. “It will be alright, Vitya,” he said soothingly, his voice as gentle and soft as a blanket. “We’ll figure it out together. Do you want me to open the possibility with Yurio? I can be as vague or specific as you like.”

My instinct was to say no. I didn’t want him to know anything. I was frightened of what he’d think, because Yurio deserved better than my shameful desires.

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” Yuuri said, surprisingly perceptive. “Yurio is more understanding than you give him credit for. If you want to do things to him at my direction, he’ll probably be glad to let you. One thing I’ve noticed about him is that he loves to put on a show for me. He likes me to watch him perform, whether that’s on the ice or in the bedroom, and he really gets into whatever he’s doing.”

I remembered his draping body, his sounds as I pushed up against him and jerked him with my hand. I’d thought at the time that it was all for Yuuri, but no one could pretend to enjoy themselves that much. I remembered too the way he’d flushed at the suggestion of him masturbating in front of me. I’d meant it as a tease with just a hint of truth, but it was clear he’d actually considered it.
For someone who was terrified of public displays of affection, he clearly didn’t mind the idea of being watched in private.

“Maybe,” was all I managed. I didn’t want to think about it anymore. It was all too confusing and new to handle, and I wasn’t even sure I had the right grasp of it.

“We can talk more about it later,” Yuuri resigned, still holding me. “Thank you for being honest with me. I’m trying to do better by you this time around, and I’m not sure how good a job I’m doing.”

“You’re fine,” I assured him, pressing my lips to his neck. “I’m sorry to distress you so much. I want this to work.”

“Then we’ll make it work,” Yuuri said. “Whatever it takes.”
“No. Absolutely not.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t want to,” I said firmly.

“But last time—"

“I’m not going to make excuses for what I do when I’m horny. Maybe in the right context, I’ll do almost anything. But I don’t like the idea, Yuuri, and I’m not going to agree to it without talking about it first.”

“Then can we talk about it?”

“Maybe.” I clutched at my jacket, sitting on the edge of the bed. “I want to hear it from him, though. If he wants to do that sort of thing, he needs to grow up and ask me himself.”

“He’s having a hard time figuring out what he wants. I’m just trying to help things along.”

“Stop coddling him. He’s a grown man.”

“Yurio…”

“I mean it, Yuuri. I’m not going to do anything for him if he can’t ask for it.”

“…Okay. I’ll tell him. Will you still come over?”

“Yes. But he’s buying dinner.”

Yuuri sighed. “Alright. I’ll see you tonight, then.”


“What about them?”

“…Will you wear them again?”

“Maybe,” he said, pitching his voice lower. “I’ll see if I’m in the mood.”

I wanted to groan. “Alright. We’ll talk more tonight. Love you.”

“Love you, too.”

I tossed my phone to the side and fell onto my back, sighing with exasperation. I’d disturbed Katya, but she merely shifted over a few inches and curled up again.

“What should I do?” I asked her, scratching behind her ears. She grumbled in annoyance, squeezing her eyes shut tighter. “I’m not doing this for him. I don’t want to do anything just for him.”

“Just for who?”

Beka’s voice made me jump. I sat up. “Done packing?”
“You know that never takes me very long,” he said, coming over to sit on the bed. Katya, who still didn’t want him near her, got up and ran out of the room. “What’s wrong? You’re worrying.”

“I’m not worrying,” I said, hugging my middle.

“Well, something’s bothering you.”

He waited for me to speak, because he knew I would. “It’s complicated.”

“So it involves Yuuri and Viktor?”

I narrowed my eyes at him. He raised an eyebrow, and I resigned. “Yes.” I’d spent the first day of his visit explaining how everything had changed, and while he seemed to have his reservations, he eventually concluded that he didn’t mind as long as I was happy. “I don’t really know how to explain it, and I’m not really sure how much I should say. Some of it’s private. But I guess the simplified version is that Yuuri wants me to do something for Viktor, and I don’t want to.”

“So don’t do it,” Beka said. “Why is that complicated?”

“Because… I might actually want to,” I admitted. “I’m not sure yet. I probably won’t know for sure until it happens, but I don’t like that he’s having Yuuri ask me in his stead. If he wants something, he should ask me directly. Is that wrong to ask?”

“No, but with your history, I’m not surprised he had Yuuri ask you.” He put his arm around my shoulders. “Is this about your hot three-way sex?”

“No,” I lied. He knew I lied.

“Well, whatever it is, it has you red as borsht.” He kissed the side of my head. “I think you know what to do. Don’t let them coax you into something you don’t want, but don’t deny yourself because of your pride. You and Nikiforov seem to get along better than the last time I saw you.”

“It’s not as good as it could be, and it’s mostly my fault,” I said. “I feel weird about him. I spent so many years loathing him, but now… It’s strange. I don’t hate him. I might actually like him, but I can’t get past the weird feeling.”

“Like him?”

“Not… I mean as a person, not romantically. I mean, I don’t think he’s ugly or anything, but I’m not attracted to him.”

“Not at all?” Beka asked. “Not even I’m immune to him, and I think we both know how specific my tastes are when it comes to men.”

I sighed angrily. “Okay, yes, he’s attractive. He doesn’t hold a candle to you or Yuuri, but fine, I’ll admit that I don’t mind looking at him.”

“Shh Yura, I’m only teasing,” he soothed.

“He and Yuuri look good together,” I said. “I got so used to seeing it before that it doesn’t bother me at all now. And I love how happy Yuuri has been, even though he’s been sick. He’s like a completely different person than the one I hunted down last April, or even the one who left us four years ago. But even though Yuuri loves him, Viktor still makes me feel weird, and I don’t know why.”
“Maybe it has to do with the way you feel about him outside Yuuri,” Beka suggested. “You two spent some time together before Yuuri got here, didn’t you? How did that go?”

“It was mostly to talk,” I said. “We kept our distance, but he opened up to me a little, which was nice. Helped me understand how he felt about the whole thing with Yuuri and me. And really… I didn’t like that I was hurting him.”

“You cared about him,” he said.

“I—” I wanted to deny it, but since this was Beka, there would have been no point. “Yeah, I guess. I sorta empathized. I knew how it felt to fuck up with someone you love, and he’d been living with that guilt all this time. And every time he looked at me, I could tell he was reminded of just how much he’d fucked up.”

“Why is that?”

“Because I was a jerk and wouldn’t let him forget it. I gave him a really hard time about how much he’d hurt Yuuri, and how much he’d continued hurting him by never apologizing or reaching out. I—I was really angry with him.”

“Well I know that much.”

My shoulders slumped. “But I regret it. He was already miserable, and I’d made him more miserable, and…” I shook my head. “But that’s done now. We fixed it. Probably. It’s still weird.”

“ Weird how? Does he upset you?”

“I just don’t know how I feel about him,” I said. “I tried to talk to Yuuri about it once, but I couldn’t figure it out well enough to explain it. The farthest I got was that I don’t hate him, he doesn’t make me irrationally angry, and I’m not jealous. I guess now I can say I care about him, but I don’t know what that means in the context of our… relationship thing.”

“I would think it might be a natural feeling to care about someone that Yuuri loves, when you love him as much as you do,” Beka said. “I don’t know why that would be weird.”

“That’s not the whole thing. There’s something there that I can’t describe, other than say it’s a weird feeling.”

“You can’t describe it because it’s private, or because you just don’t know?”

I shifted, pulling my legs beneath me. “I don’t know.”

We sat in silence for a moment, because I knew Beka was thinking of some sage advice and I didn’t want to interrupt him. I wasn’t sure what else I could even say.

“Do you think that maybe if you do that thing he’s requesting, you might be able to better understand that feeling?”

It took me a second to parse what he was asking. “I won’t know unless I agree to it,” I said. “And even then, it might not help. But I’m still not going to let him ask through Yuuri like he’s afraid of my answer. He should ask me directly, or not bother at all.”

“Why is it so important that he ask you himself?”

I raised my chin. “Because I’m my own person. I don’t belong to Yuuri, in the same way Yuuri
doesn’t belong to me. If Viktor wants me to do something for him, I’m not going to do it as a favor to Yuuri. I’ll do it because I want to do it for him, or not at all.”

“Do you think you would?”

“Would what?”

“Do it for him. If he asked.”

I felt my cheeks redden. “Probably. What he’s asking isn’t so different from what we’ve done before, and I trust him, and I know Yuuri wants it…”

“Sounds to me like you’re letting your pride get in the way.”

“So what if I am? Is it so wrong to expect him to treat me like a person and not just ‘Yuuri’s other lover’?”

“Maybe he has other reasons for not asking you directly. Maybe he’s afraid of overstepping because he’s unsure how you feel about him. Maybe he’s afraid of messing something up. Maybe he’s afraid you’ll get angry and yell at him, because—like you said—you’re capable of hurting him.”

I pushed away from him, getting off the bed. “Tch. What do you know about it, anyway?”

“Only what you tell me, Yura,” he said, warm laughter in his voice. “And I know you. You want whatever this is. It’s not unreasonable to want him to ask you directly, but don’t let it stop you from what you really want.”

He was right. I knew he was right, but I didn’t want to admit it.

I saw him off to the airport that afternoon, feeling a little empty as he left. I always felt like a piece of me was walking away whenever we parted. Even though I knew I would see him again before long, it always took a period of adjusting to remember that he wasn’t right there for me to talk to anymore. As we drove back to the house, I sent him my traditional text.

Me: **Safe flight, Beka. Love you always.**

Beka: **Love you too. See you again soon.**

My heart settled a little at his reply. I’d always wondered if one day he would decide that those words were too intimate for us, that there were easier, more casual ways of saying goodbye that suited us better. But he never changed. After he got a girlfriend, after he got engaged, after I didn’t show up to Viktor’s wedding, after he’d been married a while… always the same. Never afraid to say it.

Normally after Beka left I would spend the rest of the day listening to loud music to drown out the quiet he left behind, but this time I had other plans, apparently. I showed up to Viktor’s apartment not in the greatest of moods, wondering if this was all a big mistake. It soured me more to see him answer the door rather than Yuuri, even though I’d texted Yuuri ahead to let him know I was on my way.

Viktor didn’t say anything as he held the door open and stood aside, letting me in.

“Where’s Yuuri?” I asked. The bathroom was empty, and he didn’t seem to be in the bedroom.

“I sent him off on an errand. Apparently we need to talk.”

I froze. “Now?”
“If you’d rather go home, go ahead. I’m not going to ask you to stay against your will.” He wouldn’t look me in the eye, his mouth curved into a tight frown. He looked more nervous than me, and I guess he had every right to be.

“I’m not going home,” I said, jutting out my chin. I put my backpack down on the counter. “Let’s talk, then.”

He gestured to his couch. “Sit.”

I did, and he perched on the arm farthest away from me, coffee mug clutched in his hands. He drank and swallowed as slowly as possible without looking absurd, clearly trying to buy time. I folded my arms and waited.

Eventually my patience ran out. “What do you want from me?”

“If I knew that, this wouldn’t be so hard.” He squeezed his eyes shut, rubbing them with his fingers as if nursing a headache. “The truth is, Yurio, I don’t know how I feel about you. Whatever it is, it’s completely foreign to me, and I don’t know if I hate you or love you or want to fuck you.”

I stared in disbelief. “I feel the same way about you. I was just talking to Beka about how I couldn’t describe it, and… wait, you want to fuck me?” My voice cracked. Yuuri had told me that Viktor never really liked to fuck or be fucked, so to hear it out of the blue like this startled me.

He looked away, clearly ashamed. “I don’t know. I don’t know what I want from you and I can’t—it’s nagging me and I can’t get away from it. Especially not when Yuuri keeps trying to fix it like it’s a problem.”

“If it’s bothering you that much, then it is a problem,” I said. “Are you just confused about what you want to do with me in bed? Because that’s easily fixed. All we need is Yuuri, a bit of alcohol, and a long night.”

“Really?”

“I mean, it might not solve everything, but maybe it will give you a better idea what you want.”

“And you’re okay with that?” He looked entirely skeptical.

I shrugged. “If you’re up-front about what you want, then sure. I’ll let you know if I don’t want anything, but I’ve pretty much given up trying to predict what will turn me on, especially when it comes to you.”

He smiled. I couldn’t recall him smiling this way around just me before. “You don’t have any shame, do you?” It wasn’t an accusation. If anything, he sounded impressed, or maybe envious.

“What’s there to be ashamed of? Sex isn’t that big a deal.”

His smile faded. I suddenly remembered what he said about his preferences, and living with shame at the beginning. My comment suddenly seemed insensitive. “I’m sorry.” The words were out of me before I could stop them.

He gave me a strange look. “Why?”

“I—I just know it’s easy for me to say, since I’m inexperienced,” I stammered. “It was never a big deal because before Yuuri I only ever did it with my best friend, and I know for you it’s way more complicated and important, and sometimes I say things without thinking them all the way through,
and you had a harder time with it—"

His barking laughter cut off my rambling, and I felt more embarrassed than I had in a long time. But his laughter lightened the mood significantly, until I felt like I hadn’t made such a huge misstep after all.

“I don’t know why I was so afraid of your answer,” he said, wiping at his eyes. “I should have known you’d have such an easy response. You take something that I toil and worry over and make it simple, then make me feel stupid for seeing it any other way.”

I couldn’t tell if he was complimenting me or not, so to be safe I glared at him.

“You’re a treasure, Yurio,” he said, and it seemed almost like genuine affection.

“You’re an idiot.”

“Probably,” he said with an annoying smile on his face. He slid down from the arm of the couch onto the cushion, and set his coffee cup down on the table. “Yuuri said he’d wear his boots again tonight if you agreed to stay.”

Well, I hadn’t been planning on leaving, but now almost nothing could make me leave. “Is that so? When will he be back?”

“When I tell him. Should I text him?”

“Unless there’s anything else you wanted to talk about first?”

Viktor shook his head and pulled out his phone. “Maybe another time. I’m hungry, and it’s not that important just now.”

As I watched him tap out a message, I thought of something else. “What’s the story behind those boots, anyway?”

Viktor shrugged. “All Yuuri said was that he bought them because he wanted them. You like them?”

I flushed. “I mean… yeah. They’re different. They…”

“Suit him,” we said together.

We shared a smile, and I lowered my eyes. “I’m still not used to thinking about sex in all these different ways. The whole power dynamics, and the kink, and the playing…”

“Is it too much for you?” he asked, clear concern in his voice.

“I thought it might be, but so far I’m alright. You both do a pretty good job of making it easy to understand, and I never really feel pressured to do anything. I don’t really feel left out, either, which is what I was afraid of at first. I thought since you two were so used to each other, you’d get lost in your own thing and I’d just be a third wheel.”

“Yuuri would never let that happen,” Viktor said. “He’s the most attentive partner I’ve ever had. He’ll always make sure you’re taken care of, even at the expense of his own enjoyment.”

“I’m starting to get that,” I said.

Viktor pressed his lips together, like he was hesitating on saying something. I gave him a look, urging him to get on with it. “Can I ask you how far you’re willing to go?” His voice trembled. I’d
never seen him look so nervous.

“How far…? I’m not sure what you mean. Give me something specific.”

He met my eyes. “Could I fuck you?”

“If you wear a condom.”

“How are you with pain, or marks?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I can handle marks, so long as they’re not anywhere obvious where Yakov or Lilia would see. Pain is new territory to me. I’ve bitten Yuuri more than once, but he has yet to return the favor. I can probably handle it since my tolerance is pretty high, but I’ll let you know if it’s too much.”

He seemed to be filing my remarks away in his mind, looking down thoughtfully. Just what all did he want to do to me? What had he been imagining?

“Are you comfortable… being that way with me?”

“Being what way?” I asked. “Be specific. Yuuri would scold you for trying to talk about this in vague terms.”

He smiled sheepishly. “I still have trouble with it, even after all these years. I mean you being submissive to me. Yielding to me.”

I frowned. “Well I’m not quite ready to be tied up and gagged, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“No, no—I just mean, are you comfortable with me having that sort of power over you? Commanding your body, and the like.”

“Oh.” I thought for a moment. “Sure, I guess. As long as Yuuri likes what he sees. If he objects to anything, I’m stopping.”

“That’s more than fair,” he said, and I could almost feel the excitement radiating off of him. It was weird that I wasn’t annoyed by it. I felt a little strange, but not in a bad way.

When Yuuri came back we all went to dinner at a nearby place, the mood lighter than I’d ever felt between the three of us. The weird feeling was gone, replaced by something a little more pleasant, even if I didn’t fully understand what it meant. Viktor even let me sit next to Yuuri without complaint.

We returned to the apartment full and buzzed, and Viktor made cocktails while we talked about work. The alcohol flowed up to my head, leaving me pleasantly warm and horny. Yuuri and Viktor grew more affectionate, and for a while I just watched them laugh and kiss, my pants growing tighter by the moment. Viktor whispered something to Yuuri, and suddenly they surrounded me, kissing my cheeks, loosening my hair, removing my jacket and guiding me over to the couch. I was pulled back against Viktor while Yuuri manipulated my legs, loosening my pants and pulling them off completely. It felt almost like they’d planned this.

“Wait,” I said, suddenly remembering something. Immediately Viktor’s grip loosened, and Yuuri halted, making eye contact with me. “I have a request.”

“What is it?” Yuuri asked.
“I don’t know if this is a thing you do or not, but if we’re going to talk, I want Viktor to talk, too. It’s weird to have him touch me and be silent.”

Yuuri met Viktor’s eyes behind me, a wicked smile on his face. “What do you say, Vitya?”

“I think I can handle that,” Viktor murmured, in a low tone of voice I hadn’t heard before. Shit. It was kind of hot. Their hands roamed all over my body, and I closed my eyes, feeling nothing but their electrifying touch on my skin. My shirt was tugged off. My underwear came off too. Yuuri left, Viktor shifted around, and before I realized what was happening, a blindfold was tied around my eyes.

“Don’t panic,” Yuuri said, his voice practically dripping into my ear. “Just relax and feel.”

Relaxing wasn’t exactly an option right then, but I did my best. I felt Yuuri leave, and a moment later someone’s hands touched my thighs, stroking slowly, parting them, breathing in. I was almost positive it was Viktor, but I didn’t care at all who it was when their tongue wormed its way around my balls. It was so intense I couldn’t stay still, until punishing hands grasped my hips and held me down.

Definitely Viktor.

He wasn’t as great at the slow teasing as Yuuri was. He felt impatient and erratic, putting his mouth wherever he wanted without warning, but that made it all the more interesting when I couldn’t see. I had no idea where I’d feel him next, and that anticipation made every sensation a little sharper. When I felt his hot, wet mouth around my cock, a long moan escaped me.

“I said tease him, Vitya,” Yuuri’s voice called from somewhere far away, probably the bedroom.

He released my cock, and I felt lips on my thigh. “Sorry,” he murmured quietly to me. “I couldn’t help myself.”

“You don’t have to apologize to me,” I said. “I’m not the one you’re answering to.”

He laughed a little, and released me. “Aren’t you ready yet?” he called.

“So impatient,” Yuuri complained. “Almost.”

Viktor stood, and tugged the blindfold off my head. “You’ll want to see this.” I slowly got to my feet. A moment later Yuuri appeared in the doorway, dressed in a way that would have made me hard on sight if I weren’t already raging. His torso was “covered” by a thin black vest that only barely concealed his nipples. He wore a tiny pair of black leather shorts with an absurd zipper that seemed to go all the way to the back, and fishnets that covered his thick, beautiful thighs. But those boots. Those boots made me weak, and I wasn’t even about to try and figure out why. The stiletto heels made him almost as tall as Viktor and me, and when he leaned against the doorframe, regarding us with a smoky gaze, I wanted to fall at his feet.


I’d never seen a man shed his clothes so quickly, the garments on the floor before I’d even crossed the living room into the bedroom. Yuuri settled in the center of the bed, and I crawled up in a daze, rubbing my cheek reverently along the boots. Viktor hesitated nearby, waiting for instructions.

“Yurio,” Yuuri said, and I lifted my head. “I think you owe Vitya a favor.”

I looked over to Viktor, who smiled darkly at me and climbed onto the bed. I went to him, hesitant
on what I should do, until he grabbed my head and shoved it down near his cock. The force was startling, but I didn’t hate it. I inhaled his scent, recently showered but still a little musky, and released my breath with a shudder.

I was a little fascinated at how neatly trimmed Viktor kept his pubic area, just as cared for as the rest of him. Despite his years of retirement, he had kept his body in decent shape, losing some of his muscle definition but keeping everything trim. I realized I had no idea how, and found myself actually wanting to ask him.

I shoved those strange thoughts aside, and went to work. Viktor was easy to read, reacting well to nearly everything I did, which made the whole thing thoroughly enjoyable. I found a particularly sensitive spot on his inner left thigh, and took great pleasure in running my tongue and lips along that area. Fingers twined into my loose hair, and I glanced up to see Yuuri watching us with heavy lids, his hand stroking my hair encouragingly. I hadn’t noticed his fingerless gloves until now.

I felt myself slipping back into that lustful daze that was becoming to be a familiar part of sex with the two of them. I had no idea how long I teased Viktor; I only knew that when Yuuri directed me to stop, I downed half a water bottle as Yuuri helped a panting Viktor do the same.

After our brief break, Yuuri returned to his laid-back position against the pillows, watching us and saying nothing. Viktor gave me a look I couldn’t interpret, and before I knew what was happening, I was on my back, his tongue probing deeply into my mouth. My instinct was to fight back against the intrusion, but all I could manage was a grip on his shoulders before I melted beneath him with a groan. His body was caging me in, and I submitted to his punishing kiss, my body electrified and begging for touch.

He pulled away, and I almost whimpered at the loss. His look was assessing, and I tried to arrange my face in a way that would communicate to him that I wanted more. The back of my mind reeled with the thought that I was wanting another kiss from Viktor Nikiforov, but the rest of my mind had trouble caring. I was just about to grab him and pull him back down when he sat back, turning to Yuuri.

“What would you like to see, Yuuri?” Viktor asked him. “He clearly needs something.”

“Mmm,” Yuuri thought. “You look so good together like that, but I’m feeling a little left out. Yurio, would you let me prepare you?”

I felt like I would let almost anything happen, so long as it was asked like that. “Of course.”

“What am I supposed to do?” Viktor whined.

“Watch,” Yuuri said, reaching for the bottle and cloth on the bedside table. “Yurio, come here.”

Once Viktor freed me I did as I was told, letting Yuuri pull me into a position I never thought I’d find myself in. He was still propped up against the pillows, and he’d made me turn around, pulling my hips to be level with this face. With a hand on the small of my back he pushed me forward, until I rested my weight on my elbows and knees. I was sweating at the exposure and the thought of where this was heading. The only thing I was certain of was that I wanted this.

I yelped as Yuuri’s warm tongue pressed against my ass, far more sensitive than I realized. My body trembled as he went to work, and I lowered my head, my cheek pressing against his boot. I looked up and caught Viktor’s eyes on me, and in a moment of inspiration I ran my tongue along the shiny leather. I was a little disgusted with myself, but I also thoroughly enjoyed the look on Viktor’s face, like he was jealous and aroused at the same time. Yuuri hadn’t even noticed.
Viktor was visibly impatient, trembling as he struggled to hold himself back away from us. I wondered if this was why he preferred to be restrained.

Yuuri switched to fingers, the cold lube making me shiver and groan. My body screamed for more, but I kept as still as I could. I lowered my head, panting, ready to put words to my begging when Viktor’s hand reached under my chin and lifted my head. I couldn’t read the look in his face. His eyes were strangely serious and intense, his lips pressed together in a slight frown.

“P-please,” I begged, unable to take it anymore. The word was directed to Yuuri, but my eyes pleaded with Viktor.

Yuuri removed his fingers and guided me off of him, and tossed a condom to Viktor. He put it on with surprisingly deft fingers, then grabbed me by the shoulders and forced me onto my back. Taking a position between my legs, he grabbed the bottle of lube, slicked himself thoroughly, and shoved himself inside me.

It started more slowly than I expected. He trembled with what seemed like nerves, his fingers digging into my thighs. I relaxed for him the best I could, but it was clear he struggled. I knew from Yuuri that he hadn’t done this more than a few times, and despite everything, I really wanted to make it good for him. He moved a little, but it wasn’t enough. I pulled him down by the shoulders, sucking on his collarbone in a way I knew he liked. He cried out with surprise, and I felt his rigid muscles relax a little beneath my hands.

He thrust forward, and I didn’t hold back my voice as he did it again and again. There wasn’t much technique to speak of, but my body didn’t care, as overeager and sensitive as I was. I glanced over and saw Yuuri watching us, his zipper undone with his erection in his hand. I fell into a feverish stupor, our joined bodies the only thing in my awareness. I felt a growing sense of heat in my abdomen, building steadily with every movement. Viktor’s voice fell deep and ragged, and as his thrusts grew even more sporadic, my body seized up and my vision went dark. Through my climax I could hear Viktor cry out, and I yelped as I felt a sudden pain in my left shoulder.

He bit me.

For a moment we were both still, Viktor’s sweaty body stiflingly hot on top of me. As I returned to lucidity I could hear Yuuri making soft sounds of pleasure, and turned my head just in time to watch his hips lift in orgasm, heavy white spurts decorating his vest and skin as he moaned languidly. In that moment, I was convinced I’d never seen anything more beautiful in my life. Viktor rolled off of me, still breathing heavily, and I sluggishly crawled over to Yuuri. I reverently began to lick at his mess, enjoying the way he shivered under my tongue.

“Yurio’s so filthy,” Viktor commented, his voice a little hoarse. “He was licking your boots when you weren’t looking.”

“Nnn, he’s very good,” Yuuri murmured.

Exhausted, I gave one last lick and collapsed between them, my own body covered in sweat and cum. I did feel filthy, but in a good way. I felt used and sated, and surrounded by something that felt like love.

Yuuri sat up first, going to the bathroom and returning with a warm, wet cloth. “Vitya, go clean up,” he urged with a slap on Viktor’s butt, and started to gently clean my skin. When Viktor disappeared in the bathroom, Yuuri spoke quietly to me. “How are you feeling? Was it good?”

“It was good,” I said, and Yuuri visibly relaxed. “He’s not as graceful as I expected.”
“He doesn’t really have much experience,” Yuuri said. “He’s not used to this side of himself, and I’m sure it feels a little awkward. It felt awkward for me too, at first, tying him up and degrading him. But you’re alright with this? You enjoy yielding to him?”

“I enjoy it about as much as everything else we’ve done,” I said honestly. “I can’t see myself wanting it every time, but I think it’s easy enough to get me into the right state of mind.”

“A little alcohol and some teasing go a long way with you, it seems,” he said, eyes sparkling in the lamplight. He gently ran a finger across my shoulder. “Does it hurt?”

“Only as much as you’d expect,” I said. Yuuri moved the cloth down my body, wiping the tip of my dick before sliding lower, cleaning up some of the lube left behind. I shuddered at the cold dampness.

He stopped wiping and looked aside. “Did you…”

“Hm?”

“Did you mind him kissing you? Of everything we talked about, I thought you might hate that the most, but…”

“I liked it,” I admitted, because there was no sense in trying to hide it. “I don’t know how I would feel about making out with him out of the blue, but in that context… It was hot.”

“He’s a good kisser,” Yuuri agreed. “The first time I—”

“Are you talking about me?” Viktor asked, cheerfully strolling back into the bedroom. He flopped onto the bed near me, and Yuuri glared.

“We were complimenting you, but since you interrupted, you don’t get to hear any of it.”

“What? That’s so cruel,” Viktor pouted. He nuzzled my hair with his nose. “Didn’t I do well, Yurio?”

“No, you suck,” I teased. “The worst. Where’d all that talent for eros go?”

He glared at me, and when I turned back to Yuuri, he bit my ear. It wasn’t very hard, and it didn’t hurt, but I still yelped in surprise. “Get off me, you animal!”

“That’s not what you were saying ten minutes ago,” Viktor growled in that low voice of his.

“Shut up.”

Yuuri laughed and fell down next to me, curling against my side. “I’m so glad you two are getting along. My two favorite people in the world sharing a bed with me…Ah, I’m in heaven.”

His contentment was catching, and I couldn’t help but smile. Viktor crowded my other side, reaching over to touch Yuuri’s arm affectionately.

Of all that happened, it was this moment I enjoyed the most, and the one I knew would stick with me for a long time. This quiet happiness between the three of us, the mutual love and physical affection we shared the greatest feeling in the world. I felt safe there—satisfied and cared-for in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time. I wanted to protect them, protect this, from all the hardships that waited for us in the future. I would do whatever it took to keep them together and happy.

And, most importantly, at my side.
The weather wasn’t quite right for this, but of course, the Russians didn’t care. They ran along the beach and stripped down to their swimsuits, Viktor almost going too far and removing all his clothes until Yurio noticed and stopped him.

“We’re not at the onsen!” he yelled.

I sat watching them, comfortable enough in the warm sun, but I knew the water would be far too cold. That didn’t stop Viktor and Yurio from diving in, Yurio yelping at first and then dragging Viktor down with him. They splashed each other and swam as if they didn’t have a care in the world. In that moment, they probably didn’t.

I thought it would be difficult, juggling a relationship with both of them. I thought that surely we had enough emotional instability between the three of us to cause huge problems, what with Yurio’s anger, Viktor’s melodrama, and my own insecurities. But also between the three of us, we found enough love and support and care to keep us going. It had only been a few months, but it didn’t feel as fragile anymore. Viktor and Yurio got along well—not quite as lovers, but as good friends with similar interests who happened to share a bed sometimes. They fought and argued occasionally, but without any real thorns. Sometimes I teased them for sounding like an old married couple. They hated that, but I stood by my assessment.

We’d discussed coming back to Hasetsu in the summer, but since Yurio was the one celebrating yet another victory at Worlds, he chose our earlier plan, which was to come back in April to see the cherry blossoms. We’d almost missed them, having just two days before a sudden rainstorm took them away, but we managed to get some pictures together before they were mostly gone.

Most of the difficulty of our relationship actually came from outside. How does one explain something like this to friends and family? We told my sister first, who yelled at me and called me a greedy pervert until Yurio stepped in to appease her. He wouldn’t tell me what he whispered in her ear, but she begrudgingly accepted us in the end. We told Yuuko next, who seemed a little confused but supportive all the same. She agreed not to tell the triplets until they were older, as we didn’t want the secret to be widely known, especially not in the middle of Yurio’s career.

I didn’t tell my parents anything. I told myself I wouldn’t lie if they asked, but they didn’t seem too likely to ask such a personal thing, especially not when they could see I was happy with my life. I did talk to them thoroughly about my career, even though it was clear they still didn’t quite understand everything. Some things never changed, really.

Viktor had a long talk with Minako-sensei one night without telling us, and the next morning, she knew everything, even some things I would have rather kept private. But Viktor assured me she wasn’t surprised by anything she’d heard, even going so far to say that she had her suspicions about my bedroom inclinations for a long time. I didn’t ask what she meant specifically. I didn’t want to know what she knew.

The more people who learned our secret, the more exposed I felt, and the less comfortable I was at home. It didn’t matter that everyone was largely supportive and glad we were happy—I couldn’t shake the feeling that they were all secretly disappointed in me or thought I was irredeemably strange. I tried to hide my apprehension from Yurio and Viktor, but within a day of me realizing how I felt, Yurio knew. He knew exactly what I was feeling without even asking, and took me on a long walk to talk through how he dealt with feelings of unease from exposure. It didn’t fix everything, but knowing that there was someone always near me who knew my precise feelings was enough to stave
off the worst of my anxiety, so that perhaps I could enjoy the rest of our vacation.

Which allowed me to come to the beach today and watch my two greatest loves fighting in the frigid water. They were wrestling, each of them trying to exert their strength to dunk the other one, and while a small part of me wished I could join in, I was perfectly content with my view. Yurio was more slippery, able to get out of Viktor’s grip most of the time, but Viktor proved cleverer in the end, diving under the water and making Yurio lose his footing. They laughed like boys, and shouted things that my limited Russian studies could tell me were insults. Eventually they raced, swimming parallel to the shoreline, and I lost sight of them for a moment before they swam back. I didn’t know who won, but they were both grinning as they got out of the water.

“You’re not cold?” I asked as Yurio dried off.

“A little,” he said. “But the sun feels nice.”

“Want me to dry your hair for you?” I offered.

Yurio plopped down in the sand, handing me his towel.

“You didn’t offer to dry my hair,” Viktor whined.

“You don’t have any hair to dry,” Yurio countered.

We sat together peacefully, Yurio checking his phone while I dried his hair and Viktor watching a family walk by with their dog.

“I miss Makkachin,” he said suddenly. I turned to look at him, startled. He almost never mentioned Makkachin these days.

“Maybe you should get another dog,” Yurio suggested.

I cringed. Viktor was really sensitive about Makkachin, and I knew he hated suggestions like that. Sometimes even just a casual mention of the dog made him go quiet.

“Maybe it’s time,” he said softly, looking off in the distance. He turned to me. “What do you think, Yuuri?”

“I—I don’t know,” I said. “If a dog would make you happy…”

“But I’m already happy,” he said. “I originally got Makkachin because I was lonely, and I’m not now. But I still want a dog, I think. Is that selfish of me?”

“As long as you take care of it, the dog won’t care if you got it for selfish reasons or not,” Yurio said. “Dogs just want food, love, and attention. As long as you give it what it needs, it doesn’t matter why you got it.”

Viktor went quiet and thoughtful again, no doubt thinking it all through. My mind went in a different direction, applying what Yurio said to our situation. I still struggled with the idea that I was selfish for having this, for wanting both of them, but the feeling had faded gradually over time. Mostly, I just accepted that it didn’t matter as long as we were all happy, but every now and then I wondered.

Maybe that’s why the exposure bothered me so much. It wasn’t just that I was afraid of people judging us, but also because every explanation I gave reminded me of how selfish and indulgent I would look to the world.
“What kind of dog should I get?” Viktor asked no one in particular, pulling out his phone. “Poodles are so smart and loving… But there are so many good dogs out there.”

“Didn’t you have a poodle too, Yuuri?” Yurio asked. “Yuuko mentioned it, and I saw the shrine in your parents’ house.”

“I did,” I said. “He died right before you and I met the first time. When I tanked at the GPF.”

Yurio turned around to face me. “Is that why you fell so hard? Your Short Program was beautiful that year, but that Free Skate…”

I was surprised he didn’t know. I thought Yuuko would have told him. “That was part of it. Mostly I just self-destructed under the pressure of doing well in the Short Program.”

“You were second after the SP, if I recall,” Viktor said. “I remember thinking ‘ah, this person is my fan’ when I saw you skate. It annoyed me a little at the time, but I felt sorry for you after you screwed up your FS. Then you snubbed me when I asked if you wanted a photo.”

Yurio grinned at me. “You did? I don’t remember that.”

“You were there,” I reminded him. “Getting chewed out by Yakov, if I recall. I was disappointed. I’d worked so hard to be on the same ice as Viktor, and I thought he just saw me as another fan.”

“You were just another fan to me,” Viktor said. “A talented one, of course, but still a fan. I thought you’d like a photo.”

“I did regret it a little, not taking my chance to get closer to you,” I admitted. “But I still had my pride.”

“You certainly took your chance later, at the banquet,” Yurio said slyly. Viktor smiled.

“I wish I remembered it,” I said. I actually did remember bits and pieces, but not enough to call it a fond memory. I mostly remembered the intense headache I had the next morning.

“Ah, that banquet was so much fun. I fell in love with you, just a little, that night,” Viktor said, taking my hand and clasping it between his. “I’ll bet Yurio did, too.”

“Hell no,” he said firmly. “Yuuri was disgusting that night. Sweaty and lewd and hanging off of you. Back then I only cared about his skating.”

“I don’t know, you seemed to have fun trying to keep up with him,” Viktor said. “And you were taking a ton of pictures when he was on that pole with Chris.”

“That was for future blackmail,” Yurio said stubbornly. “I just… never needed to use it.”

Yurio was blushing, and I couldn’t help but laugh. “It’s okay, Yurio,” I said soothingly. “I know you didn’t understand how you felt back then. I don’t think any of us did. Imagine, if we could go back in time and tell our past selves how we end up in seven years…”

“I wouldn’t believe a word of it,” Yurio said. “Especially not with him in the mix. I’d berate my future self for being so stupid.”

“I don’t think I’d believe it, either,” Viktor said. “Seven years ago I was a very different person.”

“I was, too,” I agreed. “Back then I couldn’t even imagine finding one love, much less two. I can hardly believe it now.”
“You better believe it, because I’m not giving this up for anything,” Yurio said, leaning against me. Viktort surrounded us both with a gentle hug.

The next day we went into Ice Castle for practice, and as I walked through the front doors I was immediately thwacked in the head with a backpack.

“Ow.” When I righted my glasses, I was met with a very angry scowl from none other than Phichit Chulanont. “Ph—Phichit-kun!”

Tears formed in the corner of his eyes. “How could you, Yuuri? How could you come back to Japan without telling us?”

“I—I didn’t know you were still here,” I said honestly.

“Because you never call, you never text—I haven’t even heard from you since January, not even seeing you at Worlds! I only knew you were here because Yuuko texted Minami. What the hell have you been doing?”

“Well…” I glanced at my companions, looking for any sort of help.

“Don’t look at me,” Yurio said. “I told Beka on my own the moment I saw him. You’re on your own.”

“I’ve been texting Chris regularly for months now,” Viktor said, laughter in his voice. “You can do this, Yuuri.”

Phichit looked at the three of us, eyes widening as he must’ve realized the truth. “Yuuri, are you—”

I hastily covered his mouth with my hands. “Not here,” I said, glancing around at the other guests. I pulled Phichit into one of the back rooms used only by staff, and closed the door firmly.

His scowl was gone, replaced by barely-contained excitement. “Is it true, then? Is this really happening? Are you back with Viktor?”

“Ye-yes,” I said.

“What about Yurio?” He’d clearly been in Japan long enough to pick up the nickname. “Did you break his heart?”

“N-no.”

“Oh. Did he break yours? Or was it just a mutual decision?” He grabbed my shoulders and started shaking me. “Are you doing okay? Tell me everything!”

“Phichit-kun, calm down,” I pleaded, taking his arms from my shoulders so the shaking would stop. “The truth is, Yurio and I didn’t break up. I’m—I’m with both of them, now.”

His mouth fell open, and he took a step back. “Who are you? What did you do with Yuuri?”

I couldn’t help but smile. “I’m the same as I ever was. Well—happier, I guess. We’re all happy together.”

“I can’t believe it,” Phichit said softly. He hit me playfully on the shoulder. “Yuuri, you dog!”

I grinned. “Please keep it quiet—the public story will just be that Viktor and I are together again. We’re only telling a few people the real truth.”
"I’m honored you’d consider me one of the few," Phichit said with a formal bow. "But seriously—how? How did it happen? How does it work? Do they actually like each other?"

I spent the better part of half an hour fielding his questions, answering what I could and refusing on a few of the more personal ones. Even though Phichit lived for gossip, I knew he would keep our secret safe.

"I’m still mad at you for not calling me," Phichit pouted when he’d finally run out of questions.

"You know how bad I am at these things," I said. "I’m sorry, though. There’s not really an excuse."

"What were you doing at Worlds? Minami and I kept looking for you, but we only ever saw Yurio and his coaches."

"Oh, er—truthfully, I wasn’t feeling too well. Too many people. Yurio forbid me from going down to the rink if I wasn’t feeling well, so Viktor stayed with me while we watched the competition from the hotel."

"I guess I owe Minami an apology, then," Phichit said, patting me sympathetically. "He swore to me he saw Viktor walking around, but I thought there was no way he’d be there unless you were there too. But were you alright? Crowds didn’t really bother you that much before, I thought."

"It was a lot of things all happening at once," I explained. "First, our flight was delayed by a few hours. Then a child was crying and screaming the whole way, so I couldn’t sleep on the plane. I forgot to eat, and got dizzy on the way to the hotel. Then the hotel was full of so many people that I had to sit while Viktor and Yurio checked us in. Everything was just too much. I was so miserable, too, because it should have been all about Yurio, and instead they were focused on me."

"I’m sure Yurio knew you were cheering him on. He did take gold, after all."

I laughed. "Yurio doesn’t need me to take gold. He doesn’t need me for anything—he just sticks around because he likes me for some reason."

"Well, you’re worth liking," Phichit said. "I’m happy for you, Yuuri."

I smiled. "Thank you."

We spent the rest of the afternoon taking over the rink, Phichit working with Minami, and Viktor and I working through the preliminary choreography for Yurio’s new programs. Yurio had agreed to work with both of us when I proposed the idea, since I was far too out of practice to be confident in my abilities. As it turned out, Viktor had many ideas from watching Yurio over the years, and was eager to help develop a new program for him. Yurio was less enthused, but when it came to his work, he was remarkably restrained and respectful towards Viktor. Yurio had his own ideas, and I gave my input when I could, and the programs were coming together rather smoothly considering our three different personalities.

That night, the five of us went to the onsen, with Minami and Phichit accepting our invitation to stay overnight. After our baths, Viktor, Yurio, and Phichit went out to find a convenience store, while I invited Minami to stay and talk for a while. I took him to some benches just outside, because it was really a beautiful night. The cherry tree we sat under had just a few petals stubbornly clinging to the branches, each strong breeze loosening a few more.

"You’ve been quiet tonight," I observed.

He stiffened. "Oh, th-that’s just because you’re all speaking so much English. I’ve studied enough
with Phichit that I can follow along, but finding the opportunity to say things is a little…”

“I’m sorry,” I said sincerely. “I forgot you didn’t have as much experience as the rest of us.”

He waved away my apology. “Phichit said that you had something to tell me—what is it? I hope it’s
good news.”

“It might be good news,” I said, looking down at my clasped hands. It was always hard to find the
exact words.

“Are you and Viktor back together?” Minami asked. “I—s-sorry for jumping to conclusions, but
that’s what it looked like.”

“Yes…and, well…” I fidgeted, hesitating, but decided it would just be easier if said it. “I’m still with
Yurio, too. The three of us are…together.”

“Eh, really?” I couldn’t quite read his reaction. It seemed almost sad, yet happy for me at the same
time. “Do you all live together?”

“I spend time with both of them individually, but sometimes we stay together at Viktor’s apartment,”
I said.

“But don’t they get—get jealous?”

“Sometimes,” I admitted. “I have to be careful to make sure I don’t upset anyone, but so far it hasn’t
been too difficult. We all get along well now. Viktor sometimes likes to have me to himself, and
Yurio sometimes likes time alone to focus on himself, so it works out well. So far we haven’t had
any problems that couldn’t be fixed with talking it out.”

“It sounds so…” Minami hesitated. “Mature. I don’t think I could handle something like that.”

“I don’t think most people would want to,” I said honestly. “But it works for us, I suppose. I’m
sometimes overwhelmed by how well it works, because I keep expecting things to be more difficult
than they are. But I also know Yurio and Viktor worked hard to make this happen, and I’m grateful
every day for it. I couldn’t imagine my life now without one or the other.”

Minami shot me a smile. “It sounds nice. You’re not looking for more members of your harem, are
you? Because I would join in a heartbeat.”

The question startled me, but I could tell he was joking. “I’m out of room for more,” I said with a
laugh.

He lowered his eyes. “I used to have a crush on you, you know.”

“I didn’t know that,” I said, a little surprised. “But sometimes it’s hard to tell the difference between
admiration from a fan and romantic interest.” Sometimes it’s hard for the fan to tell the difference, I
thought to myself.

“I gave up on you after I first saw you with Viktor at that regional competition,” he said. “So it
wasn’t ever really more than a crush, though I still idolized you for a while, as I’m sure you saw.
Everyone kept telling me the decisions I was making were wrong, and I got really frustrated. It felt
like they were saying I wasn’t good enough to try and be you. It wasn’t until you and Phichit came
that I came to believe them and understand that they just wanted to help me. But I still didn’t know
who I was. Last season was the best of my career, but I’m not sure I deserve any credit for it. It was
all you, and Phichit, and coach Kanako.”
“I watched you perform, Minami, and that was all you. Phichit helped bring it out of you, but all the skills, the energy, the smiles—everything was you.”

“You—you think so?”

I ruffled his hair. “I know so. And it feels like you’re just getting started. You signed on Phichit again for next season, didn’t you?”

He nodded. “I felt bad, though, because I know he wanted to go back home and work on children’s shows there.”

“I know Phichit, and he only does what he really wants,” I said. “So if he said yes, that means he really wants to keep working with you. I’m sure you’ll put together something great. Yurio needs more serious rivals to keep him going.”

“I’m going to beat him,” Minami promised. “Next competition I see him, I’m going to win.”

I leaned in, lowering my voice. “Between you and me, Yurio could stand to lose a little more often. I hope you do win.”

He laughed. “I’ll do my best. I feel better with Phichit at my side. Although…” His expression sobered. “I wonder how it’s all going to work out.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well…” He rubbed the back of his neck. “The truth is, I—I think I might like him. But I have no idea how he feels about me, and I’m afraid if I ask him, it might make things difficult between us. I don’t even know if it’s a possibility. I’ve never seen him take interest in anyone. Do you know if he even likes men?”

“Mm, that’s a hard question to answer,” I said. “When we practiced together in Detroit, he didn’t take much interest in anyone, although he did have some celebrities he idolized, and he surrounded himself with female friends. But I never got the impression he was attracted to them that way—I think he wanted to be like them more than be with them. He has an eye for beauty like no one else, no matter the gender, but I’ve never seen him pursue anyone. I think, if you’re comfortable enough with the idea he might reject you, you should ask him outright. I don’t think he’d lie to you.”

“Is anyone ever comfortable with rejection?” Minami asked with a nervous laugh. “But I know you’re right. The sooner I deal with this, the better off I’ll be. I can’t go through a season worrying and wondering.”

“What do you like about him?” I asked, curious. As someone who used to live with him, I never really found myself attracted to him. Then again, my mind was too focused on skating and Viktor to notice much else.

“Lots of things,” Minami said. He started swinging his feet back and forth, his eyes on the ground. “He’s really talented. I’ve never worked with a choreographer I felt like I really understood before him. And I know he understands me, too. He sees things about me that I don’t realize myself. Sometimes he comes off as flighty and not serious, but when it’s important, he really gets things done. It makes me want to give him my absolute best.”

“A lot of those things just make it seem like you have a good professional relationship,” I pointed out.

His legs stopped swinging, and he looked up at me. “He’s beautiful, Yuuri-kun. He’s like a prince. I
find myself wanting to do nice things for him, like take him out to dinner or give him gifts. Sometimes I can get away with things like that, but it feels like if I do too much, he’ll know.”

“So talk to him,” I suggested. “Put it out in the open. In every relationship I’ve had, romantic or otherwise, honesty has only ever helped. I didn’t always think that was true. I kept so much inside, because I hated people getting too close, thinking they could never understand everything. But people respond well to honesty, and I think even if he’s not interested in you that way, you can still be friends and work together.”

“I’m probably going to get rejected,” Minami said with a sigh. “He hasn’t shown any interest in me.”

“If he rejects you, it won’t be because you’re a bad person,” I assured him. “But who knows? Maybe he likes you, too, or is at least willing to give it a chance. One thing I’ll say, though, that I just remembered—he likes getting flowers.”

“Really? I thought everyone got tired of them, because we always got so many.”

“That’s true for a lot of us, but Phichit still loves them. He always kept what he thought were the most beautiful bouquets in our room. He’d even fly home with armfuls of them, sometimes. I don’t know if it’s something you’ll want to do right away, but I’m sure he’d appreciate any flowers you give him.”

“I hadn’t thought of that before,” he said. “Now I’m sad you didn’t tell me sooner. I could have picked up one of the bouquets after my performance at Worlds and given it to him. That would have been so romantic.”

“Mm… He probably would have liked it, but I’d say make sure he’s interested before doing any public gestures.”

“Ah, you’re probably right,” Minami said, a little disappointed. We heard voices nearby. “I think they’re back. Thank you, Yuuri-kun. I’m going to take your advice and talk to him tonight.”

“Good luck.”

He grinned, and went to greet the group. He asked Phichit to go on a walk with him, and they went off together alone. Viktor and Yurio joined me on the bench.

“What did you buy?” I asked Yurio, who carried a bag.

“Pudding,” he said. “There’s some for you, too, if you want it.”

“Maybe a little later,” I said.

“What were you doing out here with Minami?” Viktor asked.

“Talking. I told him about the three of us, then gave him some relationship advice.”

“Relationship advice?” Yurio asked in disbelief. “From you? The poor guy.”

I nudged him in the shoulder. “Jerk.”

“Really, maybe I should go after him and make sure you didn’t accidentally lead him down the path to heartbreak,” Viktor said.

“You guys are awful.” I folded my arms stubbornly. “I’m sleeping in my room tonight. You can sleep together without me.”
Yurio laughed, and leaned into me. “You know we’re just teasing, Yuuri.”

“…You know, that might not be the worst punishment,” Viktor said thoughtfully.

“Shut up old man!” Yurio growled at him. “I don’t want to sleep with just you!”

Viktor laughed, prompting Yurio to get up and threaten him in Russian. I had to smile, watching a few spare petals fall in the nighttime breeze. Being with them like this felt so simple and happy that it almost made me uneasy to enjoy it.

But I knew it was mine to enjoy.
"Where’s Yuuri?"

"Lilia dragged him off early this morning to observe one of her classes," Yurio said, lacing his skates. "He said to just work with you today on the Free Skate. I guess that means you actually have something for me this time?"

I’d been promising him something good for his Free Skate for a couple of weeks now, and while it was true I had something, I wasn’t quite sure it was ready to be shown. But if I kept trying for perfection, he’d never get to practice. "Yes. Let me just…" I plugged my phone into the sound system, loaded up the song, and skated out onto the ice. Yurio watched me curiously.

"Press play," I told him. The music started, a soft piano melody.

"The hell is this?" I heard him mutter. But I waited, and when the guitar started, I began to move.

It was a fast-paced, heavy song with more than a few lyrics I’d had to edit out. The song was from a Russian band, but sung in English, and while I would have never chosen anything like that for my career, I thought it was well-suited to a skating program. I gave it a fast and powerful step sequence and high-energy choreography, the jumps were well-timed to impactful parts of the song, and by the end of even my simplified demonstration, I felt a little winded.

I caught my breath and looked at Yurio, whose expression was unreadable.

"What made you choose that song?" he asked.

"You," I said simply. "I’m making a program for you, aren’t I? I thought it would suit you. Do you hate it?"

"I haven’t done anything like it in years," he said, not meeting my eyes.

I skated closer to him. "I know. Lilia has pushed you in a different direction, one that better uses your talents and scores well with the judges. Ballet has featured in every competition performance you’ve done since your senior debut, but the few times I’ve seen you do an exhibition program, you favored something more modern."

"The choreography was never good for competition," he said. "Lilia wasn’t willing to help me, and I never wanted to waste Yakov’s time with exhibition skates."

I rested my arms and chin on the wall, watching him carefully. "You’ve leaned heavily on them over the years, and it’s clear it’s worked for you, at least as far as your awards go. But do you love it as much? Do you feel like you can put your entire being into these programs?"

"When I’m at my best, yes," Yurio said confidently. "But… I slip a little more each time. The only program of the past three years I could feel consistently good about was my Primavera from this last season."

"The one you did for Yuuri?"

He nodded, still not looking at me. "Because I did it for him. I was able to draw on my feelings for him, and even though they changed a little each time I performed, it was enough to feel like I was at my best."
“But when was the last time you didn’t have to have an external inspiration to feel confident?”

He frowned at me. “I don’t remember.”

I pushed off the wall, beckoning him to follow me. “Now, keep in mind it’s still early enough that we can scrap this piece if you don’t like it. I’d be willing to start over and work with a song you chose, if you thought it would make for a better program.”

“But it wouldn’t be as good, since it didn’t inspire you,” Yurio said. He removed his guards and stepped onto the ice. “Let’s start from that opening.”

Since the first time I worked with him on Agape, I always thought Yurio was a good student. He genuinely tried his best no matter how difficult the challenge, and despite his temperament, he’d learned to keep a calm head when something frustrated him. He’d been a quick study even then, able to memorize and mimic the basic steps without much instruction. Where he’d had trouble before was overcoming the difficulty of the steps enough to draw out his inner feelings and energy, but I knew from watching his recent performances that it wasn’t so difficult for him anymore.

He never came out and said that he liked my choice of music or the choreography, but I could tell he enjoyed it by how comfortable he was with asking questions and making amendments. He wasn’t blindly following my instruction—he genuinely wanted to make it his own, and the fact that I could tell this from the first day meant that I was probably doing something right.

“You’ll want to talk over with Yakov how you want to arrange your jumps and spins,” I said when we’d stopped for a break.

“I always do,” he said before greedily downing some water. I caught myself staring at his long throat, and had to shake myself free from the memories it evoked.

He might’ve noticed.

“Where is Yakov, anyway?” I asked before he could comment.

“He’s doing some work on his summer classes.” He tilted his head. “I thought you’d know that, since you’re supposed to be helping out.”

“I won’t be needed until they’ve started,” I said. It was probably true. Yakov hadn’t mentioned anything about helping him plan today. Then again, I’d been busy working on Yurio’s program for the past week, and hadn’t found much time to talk to my former coach.

When Yurio seemed open to the idea of doing a program choreographed by me next season, I immediately jumped at the opportunity. Though I hadn’t been involved with him directly since his Senior Division debut, I’d followed his career closely, and over the years had some ideas of potential programs for him. I’d since forgotten most of them, as there was never any reason to turn them into something more than an idea, but I had a good sense for his style and what worked well for his body type. I had to give credit to Yakov and Lilia for really making him shine, as he’d clearly captivated the skating world, but I always felt he could be a little better. A little more unique. A little more himself on the ice.

I could admit to myself that my enthusiasm was at least partially owed to the change in our relationship. It wasn’t that we simply shared a lover, though that too was part of it. But ever since the three of us spent time together in Hasetsu, I felt a growing fondness for Yurio that I couldn’t ignore. I had yet to figure out the full extent of it, but there were moments in Japan when I could feel the warmth of his smile like sunshine on my skin. He had a talent for putting me at ease without trying or
even realizing he was doing it, and it was an odd joy to spend time with him whether Yuuri was with us or not.

It also didn’t escape my notice how much we had in common, just from knowing the pressure of being one of the top figure skaters in Russia. Greatness was expected at every turn, and any moment of weakness would be commented upon relentlessly. Yurio managed to avoid most of the more invasive media simply by maintaining a cool, standoffish air, but the pressure was still there. I myself used to avoid it by taking on a flighty personality and flirting with everyone. It wasn’t ideal, but we had to do what worked.

And as much as I hated it, he made the right decision by stepping out of our relationship in the public view. There were simply too many eyes on him, and not even I would be comfortable with that many peoples’ judgments weighing down on us. Yuuri and I being together was expected, and having an affectionate friendship with Yurio was nothing new for us. It seemed unfair to him, though, having to be on guard when he was with Yuuri in public. He was in love with Yuuri just as much as I was, and to have to hold that back must have been painful sometimes.

“What are you doing?” he snapped at me.

I blinked. What was I doing? I had my phone in my hand, poised like I was using it, but my mind had wandered off and the screen had gone blank. I pressed the button and unlocked my phone. Oh right, I’d been looking at dogs.

“Did you decide on one yet?” Yurio asked, leaning over to look. “Yuuri said you’d had it narrowed down to about three.”

“Two, actually,” I said, noticing the status change on the one I’d been looking at. “Seems one of them just got adopted.”

“Oh.” He frowned at me. “I’m sorry.”

I shook my head. “It’s fine. I’m glad they’re finding homes. It just means I can’t drag my feet about this forever, or I’ll have to start over.”

“So you’re going with a poodle again?”

“This one here is a mix, but essentially, yes.” I couldn’t deny that I loved poodles. I knew I would never be able to replace Makkachin, but I fell instantly in love with about every brown poodle I looked at online. Yuuri told me to follow my heart, and that’s what I did. “You should come with us, this afternoon.”

“Come where?”

“To the shelter. I’m scheduled to see the dogs today.”

Yurio stepped back. “W-why? This is your dog, not mine.”

I straightened, regarding him thoughtfully. “This is our dog, Yurio. Whether you claim it or not isn’t important, but I’m not going to get a dog you don’t get along with. We’re all part of each other’s lives, now, and I think you should have a say in what I bring into the mix.”

He narrowed his eyes at me, then turned away with a huff. “Fine. But I’m going to the bakery after practice.”

“I’ll buy you a piroshky,” I teased as he stomped back onto the ice.
Yuuri joined us after lunch, looking grateful to be out of classes. I couldn’t get over how drastically different he was, these days. His eyes sparkled every time he greeted us, and smiles came so easily to his face. Of course, being Yuuri, he still had his bad days of self-doubt and anxiety, but they didn’t seem to drag him down as much as they used to.

I couldn’t deny that I had Yurio to thank for that.

Despite my best efforts, I was never able to provide exactly what Yuuri needed. I spent too much of our relationship trying to gloss over my shortcomings rather than working on them, and everything bit me hard in the end when Yuuri fell too far for me to help him dig his way out. I understood now why everything happened the way it did, and when Yuuri came back into my life, I promised myself I would do everything it took to make sure it never happened again.

But with Yurio around, it seemed I didn’t have much to do in that regard. Yuuri’s instinct now seemed to be to lean on Yurio when he was feeling down, which I couldn’t blame him for at all, even if it made me feel rather useless. Yurio was simply better at helping him. At Worlds, he’d taken some of the burden and guilt from Yuuri’s shoulders, forcing him to focus on feeling better. At Hasetsu, he talked Yuuri through some anxiety that I hadn’t even known was there. And this was all on top of the fact that he’d dragged Yuuri out of a four-year depression by himself.

Yuuri was a treasure. I was convinced that his perceptiveness and blunt honesty were the reason this whole thing worked as well as it did, and I never forgot that he was the reason I was brought into this at all. I owed so much of my happiness to him that I couldn’t hold a single trace of hatred or jealousy towards him anymore. And in the space left behind, some other feelings had grown that I still didn’t quite know how to deal with.

“Bakery first,” Yurio reminded me as we were changing in the locker room.

“Eh? Why the bakery?” Yuuri asked. “You’re coming with us, Yurio?”

“He said I should, but I’m starving, so bakery first.” Yurio zipped up his hoodie and shoved things into his bag. He was tense, but I didn’t really know why. He went off towards the bathroom. Maybe that was why.

“You really convinced him to come?” Yuuri asked me quietly.

“Was I not supposed to?”

Yuuri shook his head. “It’s not that. It’s just… it felt like whenever I brought up the dog around him, he got really moody, like he didn’t like the idea. I thought about inviting him myself, or asking his opinion, but…”

“Mm, maybe he doesn’t care for dogs that much?”

“Maybe,” Yuuri said, sounding unconvinced. “Whatever it is, thank you for convincing him to come.” He gave me a soft kiss on the cheek. “I’ll be staying with you next week, I think.”

“Really? Why?”

“You’ll need help getting the dog settled,” he said.

“And if we don’t get a dog?”

“Then I’ll stay anyway, because I want to,” he said, leaning into me. “Don’t worry, though. I plan on leaving Yurio satisfied enough to last the whole week.”
“Will you, now?” I asked in a low voice, putting my arms around him. “Does he know?”

“Not yet, but I’ll warn him soon.” Yuuri nuzzled my neck. “I would invite you to help, but I feel like I haven’t had a good, long session with just him in a while.”

“Could we invite him over later in the week, then? Perhaps Friday?”

Yuuri pulled back, giving me a look. “Sometimes I wonder if you’re more into him than me, these days,” he said, his smile teasing.

“Nonsense. I wouldn’t give you up for anything in the world.” I sighed. “But I have to admit, he does make things more interesting. I always enjoy having him there.”

“He enjoys you, too. I’m sure he’ll say yes if we ask him.”

Yurio emerged a moment later, giving us a bored look. “Let’s go.”

I’d known about Yurio’s favorite bakery for years, but it wasn’t until very recently that I learned why it was such a frequent stop for him. At least twice a week for the past eleven years, Yurio would come here to buy piroshky after practice. Yakov apparently started taking him here whenever Yurio’s grandfather called, because Yurio would get homesick and want to taste piroshky. Even after his grandfather had passed on several years ago, Yurio kept the tradition going. Yakov and Yurio never told me anything about it—I had to hear it from Yuuri after he scolded me for teasing Yurio about coming here so often.

It struck me just then how little Yurio shared of himself with me. I supposed it was only fair, considering how little he cared for me before, but I hoped it would change, at least a little.

Yurio chatted with the staff, who all seemed to know him by name, and put in an order before gesturing to me.

“Did you want anything, Yuuri?” I asked.

Yuuri shook his head.

“He can’t have any snacks right now,” Yurio informed me, talking around a mouthful of piroshky. “Lilia’s got him on a diet.”

I raised my eyebrows. “A diet? What for?” Yuuri was a little softer around the middle, but he hadn’t put on much weight by any means. It seemed excessive to ask him to go on a diet.

“She wants me in shape for a recital I’m helping with…” Yuuri said, suddenly shy. “It’s only for a few weeks.”

“A recital?” I asked excitedly. “Are you going to dance on stage?”

“Maybe a little…” he admitted, turning red. “But I’m mostly there to help with lifts.”

“You have to let me know when it is!” I told him. “I’ll be there in the front—”

“Oi, shut up and pay for my piroshky!” Yurio growled at me.

After we left the bakery, I pressed Yuuri for more details, but he wouldn’t tell me much. He claimed not to know exactly when it was, though by the way he hesitated, I had a feeling he might have been lying. Oh well. I would find out eventually, even if I had to beg Yakov.
As soon as we got to the shelter, I felt a weight of responsibility settle over my shoulders. I’d decided on getting a dog weeks ago, while we were still in Hasetsu, but this was the moment where that decision became concrete. For a long time I’d felt simply eager, but now I was nervous. How would I know which dog was the right one? Both of the poodles seemed perfect.

“Ah, Mr. Nikiforov—I was just about to call you,” the worker said as I greeted her. She seemed nervous. “Azhur was just taken an hour ago.”

“Oh.” Azhur was the one that always seemed so happy in his pictures. “I hope he went to a good home.”

“They had two little children who fell in love instantly,” she explained. “But we’ve still got Kashmir, if you’d like to see him.”

She led us down a row of large cages, stopping at one towards the end. Kashmir greeted us immediately, his tail wagging wildly as the worker stepped in to attach his leash. She grabbed one of the toys from the cage, and led the dog out to us.

“He’s a little older than Azhur, but he’s friendly,” she explained as Yuuri knelt down.

“He looks just like Makkachin,” Yuuri said, petting him. And like Makkachin, Kashmir got so excited that he nearly tackled Yuuri to the ground.

But I felt a little odd, watching it. Something wasn’t right. He looked just a little too much like Makkachin for me to feel comfortable. But he seemed so instantly in love with Yuuri, and he was the last poodle left at any of the shelters nearby. I could say no, and just wait until the next time a poodle came in. But as Yuuri started playing tug of war with Kashmir, I knew I would have trouble saying no.

I turned to Yurio, hoping he would have some opinion that would sway me, but he wasn’t near me.

“Yurio?” I called. He was farther back in the row, squatting in front of a cage.

“Oh—sorry,” he said, standing up as I approached. “I was just…”

I couldn’t tell what breed the dog in the cage was, but anyone could see it wasn’t very happy to be there. Dark eyes peered up at us, but she didn’t even raise her head in interest. She remained coiled up in the back of her cage. The sign said her name was Krasa. Shorter than the poodle, but thicker and fluffier, she had long white fur that looked in need of good grooming, and short, pointy ears.

Yurio turned away from her reluctantly, walking towards where Yuuri was still playing with Kashmir. He said something teasing to Yuuri, but I wasn’t paying attention. For some reason I couldn’t look away from Krasa.

“She’s been here a while,” the worker said, approaching me. “People overlook her because she doesn’t really get any enthusiasm for visitors, but she’s really a sweet dog.”

“How did she end up here?” I asked.

“Someone found her abandoned on the beach. She was in really bad shape at first, and we had to shave her down to get rid of all the matted fur and insects. Her tail had been broken, and some of it had to be removed.” The worker knelt down, and slowly the dog got up to approach her outstretched hand. “She’s not aggressive or anything, just shy, and she’s not as playful as the other animals. I try to tell people that they might like her if they ever wanted a cat they could take on walks.”
“A cat, huh…” I said thoughtfully. “How long has she been waiting to be adopted?”

“About a year and a half,” the worker said sadly. “It’s a shame, really. All the staff here love her, but she really deserves to be in a more comfortable home. Somewhere quieter.”

“What about Kashmir? How long has he been here?”

“Oh, he was cleared for adoption a week ago. Handsome guys like him don’t stay long, though, so if you’re attached, you should take him with you today.”

I looked over to Kashmir, who seemed to be trying his best to get a good lick of Yurio’s face, while Yuuri tried to get him interested in his toy again. I thought of that happy dog waiting at home, alone, for hours each day while we all were at work. Having to be put in a kennel when we all went to competitions. I remembered how guilty I felt, pushing Makkachin off on others at the height of my career. I had a more flexible schedule now, but dogs like that really deserved big yards and plenty of walks. Krasa probably wouldn’t mind staying in a quiet house most of the day.

Yuuri told me to follow my heart, I reminded myself.

“Yuuri,” I said, walking back towards them. “I don’t think Kashmir is the right fit for me.”

“Oh.” Yuuri smiled at the dog. “That’s alright. This guy will do well just about anywhere, I think. Did you have another dog in mind? Or did you want to wait for another poodle?”

I looked to the worker. “Could we meet Krasa?”

I did my best to ignore the stunned look Yurio gave me, but I could feel my cheeks get a little hot.

Krasa was smaller than I realized, now that I got to see her up close. She sniffed my hand thoroughly, and took a step back from Yuuri when he approached too quickly. Yurio had the right idea to carefully reach out his hand, patting her gently between the ears, and was rewarded with a gentle lick to his fingers. What was left of her little poofy tail wagged a little.

“She seems to like you,” the worker said, beaming. “Would she be living with all three of you, or…?”

“Just me,” I said. “But they’re close friends of mine, so they get a say, too.” I pushed away the sudden thought that I wouldn’t mind us all living together, someday.

“I will say she’s not the best with children,” the worker warned. “So if any of you have kids…”

“No children,” I assured her. “Does she like walks?”

“As well as any dog. She’s curious, but wary. She also doesn’t mind other animals, so long as they leave her alone. Not very vocal, either, from what we can tell. Probably a good dog for someone who lives in an apartment.”

“She sounds perfect for you, Vitya,” Yuuri said.

“Can I take her for a walk?” I asked the worker. “Just to be sure.”

“Absolutely. We have a small park behind the building we use. Take as long as you need.”

I left Yuuri and Yurio behind, letting Krasa lead me around the little park. I knew that Yurio liked her. I knew that Yuuri would probably get along with her, since he did well with dogs in general. But I had to know if she could be my dog, first and foremost, before I took her home.
I watched as she sniffed at a stick, but when I picked it up, she lost interest in it. Not the most playful of dogs, but I was alright with that. At my age I didn’t think I’d have the energy to keep up with another dog like Makkachin, as much as I would hate to admit it. Krasa sniffed and sniffed and sniffed, occasionally looking up to me as if waiting for my disapproval or impatience.

“Krasa,” I tried, and she immediately stood at attention, looking up at me. I reached down and patted her on the head, letting her know I approved. She went back to her curious sniffing.

It wasn’t love at first sight, but I did honestly like her. If I could work with her a bit, learn her personality better, we might be good friends.

When I returned to where Yuuri and Yurio waited for me, I saw Yurio’s face light up as the dog voluntarily approached him, sniffing at his outstretched hands. That was love at first sight, if I’d ever seen it before.

“What do you think, Mr. Nikiforov?” the worker asked me.

“I think I’m taking her home with me,” I said. Yurio gaped at me, clearly speechless. “I have a good, quiet home for her, and I think it would be a shame to send her back to the cage now that she’s evidently made a friend.”

The worker smiled at me, and took the lead from my hand. “Well, let’s get all the paperwork done, then.”

On the way home, Yurio asked if he could take the leash for a while, and I was so surprised at his shy request that I handed it over without saying anything. Even Krasa seemed happier with him behind her.

“That was really sweet of you,” Yuuri said quietly to me. “You could tell he really liked her.”

“I like her, too,” I said, watching them. “But seeing them together made me remember why I’m doing this. I didn’t want a dog just for company—I wanted to expand my family. I wanted to give back some of this happiness to someone who might need it, and Krasa needed it.” Yurio had looked like he really wanted to help her himself, but he would probably be incredibly reluctant to get another pet, considering how busy his life would be for the foreseeable future.

“You have such a kind heart, Vitya,” Yuuri said affectionately. “I’m really glad you see Yurio as part of your family.”

I smiled. “Me too.”
“Come on,” I urged. “He’ll be waiting for us.”

“He’s probably still changing,” Viktor said. “Don’t worry so much.”

I clutched the bouquet of flowers close to my chest as we wove around the obstacles backstage. The place was covered with people, both those working, and parents looking to claim their children after the performance.

“Yuuri!” Viktor spotted him before I did. He was still in his leotard, helping some of the crew move a heavy set piece. I waited with my flowers while Viktor went to help, and together they pushed the thing aside.

“Thanks for helping,” Yuuri told Viktor. “Oh! Are those for me?”

I held them out, not really sure what to say.

“You were beautiful, Yuuri,” Viktor said as Yuuri accepted the flowers. Dammit. I should have said something like that.

He inhaled the scent. “They’re lovely, thank you. I didn’t do much, though.”

“I wanted to see more of you,” Viktor whined. “When will you do a solo performance?”

“Eeh? I d-don’t think that will ever happen.”

“Why not?” Viktor asked. “It’s not much different than skating…”

“I’m not a dancer, though,” Yuuri reminded him. “I’m not confident in my abilities at all. I’m not great with jumps anymore, either, as you know.”

Viktor took his hand. “But Yuuri, you’re so beautiful…”

“Leave him alone,” I told Viktor, then turned to Yuuri. “Do you think you’ll be ready to leave soon?”

“Actually, I think it might be a while,” he said sheepishly. “I told Lilia I’d help clean up, and then I’ll have to change… You two should probably just go home without me.”

“We can wait for you,” I said. “I don’t mind at all. We’ll just be sitting over there.” I gestured to some benches off to the side.

“Alright,” he said, handing me back his bouquet. “Thank you. I’ll try not to take too long.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Viktor said.

For a while we had a good view of Yuuri from our bench as he bustled around herding children and retrieving set pieces, but eventually he disappeared somewhere on the other side of the stage.

“Do you think we could convince Yuuri to wear that leotard in private?” Viktor mused.

“That’s part of the point,” he said. “Yuuri likes to be restrained in that way. Though mostly I just think he’s sexy.”

I could easily agree with that. “Did you get any good pictures?”

“Maybe some,” Viktor said. “It was hard, though. The kids kept blocking him.”

“Make sure you send any good ones to me.”

To be honest, I thought Yuuri was good enough to have his own recital, but I knew he wouldn’t want to. It was one thing to perform for a competition, or in an exhibition with a bunch of other skaters, but it was another thing entirely to perform a solo dance recital. They were usually far more intimate settings, unless you were a well-known professional, and I could probably count on one hand the number of people Yuuri might invite to such an event. It seemed useless to hope for.

Then again, Yuuri had surprised me before by challenging me to a dance-off, so maybe he wasn’t so easy to predict, after all.

“Yurio.”

I turned to Viktor.

“I wanted to run an idea by you. It’s alright if you don’t like it—just tell me exactly how you feel about it.”

Oh no. Viktor was turning serious again. That usually meant he wanted to change something, and while his ideas usually weren’t terrible, they always made me think harder than I wanted to about everything. I liked things the way they were. We were all happy enough, and I didn’t want to think about a major change.

“I’m considering buying a house,” he said. “Not far from where I currently live, because I want to stay close to the rink, not to mention you and Yuuri.”

It didn’t escape my notice that he included me. He was including me a lot lately, and I didn’t quite know how I felt about it.

But a house?

“Why do you need a house? Your apartment is big enough.”

“Need is a strong word for it,” Viktor said. “But I want more bedrooms.”

I had a sinking feeling I knew where this was going, but I had to ask. “Why?”

He turned to me. “So the three of us could live together. It’s not—I realize it’s soon. But it’s something I’ve been thinking about lately, and I wanted to see if it sounded insane.”

“It is insane, Viktor. You’re talking about the three of us living together. Part of the reason this works so well is that we all have our own space.” Or rather, that I did. Yuuri probably wouldn’t have any issues living with Viktor, but I needed a place to get away from everyone else now and then. My room had been my sanctuary through some of the toughest moments of my life, and I couldn’t stand the thought of not having it.

“You wouldn’t have to live there right away,” Viktor said. “You’d just have your own room to stay,
when you wanted it. In case we… had a night together, and you would rather sleep alone. Or just with Yuuri.”

“So you’re saying you want a house to… better accommodate me?”

“Something like that.”

Panic. I felt panicked. “You’re fucking insane.”

“Why? Do you hate it?”

“It’s not about hating it, it’s that you’re—this is such a big thing to handle something so small.” My fingers gripped the flower stems so tightly the plastic around them crackled. I took a deep breath to force myself to relax, but it didn’t help. “Why are you doing this? Why do you care so much?”

“Yurio, calm down,” he said firmly. Somehow, his stern voice worked on me, and the tension eased a little. “This is just an idea. I haven’t done anything, and I won’t do anything unless you say it’s alright. I haven’t even told Yuuri yet.”

I didn’t really know why the idea upset me so much, but I didn’t feel right about it. It felt like far too much.

“Another added benefit is having a place for you and Yuuri to be together that isn’t shared with your coaches,” he went on. “Yakov and Lilia might prefer that.”

“Did they say anything like that?” I asked, suddenly embarrassed by the thought of them being uncomfortable.

He shook his head. “I just imagine they might find it somewhat awkward, even if all they have is an inkling what’s going on. I mean, you’re both adults, and they have at least a little knowledge of your relationship. Even if you’re careful, they have to know what’s happening under their roof.”

“Lilia doesn’t have a problem with it,” I insisted. “And my room is far away from hers. You can’t hear anything across the house.”

He smiled vaguely. “If you’re comfortable where you are, I’m not trying to convince you to leave. All I’m saying is, you’d have a space with guaranteed privacy with Yuuri, whenever you wanted it.” He let out a sigh. “But you’re probably right—it’s not a good idea right now.”

We sat in awkward silence for a while. I didn’t know what to think. Did he really want to live with me? Or was it all just a ploy to get to see Yuuri more often? Yuuri had been splitting his time fairly evenly between us, with a few overlapping days here and there, so I didn’t think he’d have any reason to feel neglected. In fact, I could recall a handful of days Viktor had even declined to join us, claiming he was still recovering from the last time.

So if it wasn’t that, why would he go through so much trouble?

It nagged at me so much that even Yuuri noticed there was something on my mind after we got home that night. We’d intended to have a night together, the three of us, but when Viktor saw how tired Yuuri was, he claimed he was too tired, and sent us on our way. No one seemed all that disappointed, though I wondered what was going through Viktor’s mind.

When I got out of the shower that night, Yuuri was waiting for me on the bed.

“You don’t have to,” I said. “You should go on to sleep.”
“I wanted to talk to you. You’ve seemed kind of down since the recital.” He gestured for me to sit in the desk chair he’d pulled close to my bed, and once I did he started carefully brushing my long, damp hair. “Is it something you can share with me?”

I leaned back, relaxing at his touch. “It’s nothing, really. Just something Viktor said.”

“I should have guessed,” he said teasingly. “Viktor seems to be awfully good at getting inside your head, lately.”

“I just don’t understand him,” I complained. “First there was the dog thing, and now he’s saying he wants to buy a house.”

Yuuri’s hands stilled. “He said that?”

I wondered if it was meant to be a secret. Oh well. Viktor shouldn’t keep things like this from Yuuri. “I don’t know how serious he was, but he said he wanted to run the idea by me first. To see if it was crazy or not. Which it totally fucking is.”

Yuuri kept brushing. “Did he say why he wanted to buy a house?”

“He wants us to live together eventually,” I said. “But before that, he said he wanted to give me my own space for when we have our nights together. In case I wanted to sleep by myself.”

“You do want that sometimes,” Yuuri reminded me. “Viktor does, too. Sounds like he’s just being considerate.”

“But to buy a whole fucking house just for that? It’s crazy!”

“Shh,” Yuuri soothed. “Maybe it sounds crazy right now, but Viktor has been spending a lot of time thinking ahead lately. If he gathered the courage to actually ask you, that means he’s probably had it in his head for a while, and has spent a lot of time working out whether or not it’s possible.”

“But why ask me first and not you?”

“Because he probably knows me well enough to know how I’d feel about it.”

“And how do you feel about it?”

He paused for a moment. “I think it would be nice to live together. Lilia’s been very gracious to let me stay here, but in some ways I do miss having a place that belonged to me.”

“That room belongs to you,” I argued. “It’s completely yours. You could change whatever you wanted.”

“Mm, it’s not the same, though,” he said. “I think no matter how long I lived here, I would still feel like a guest.”

“So you’re saying… It doesn’t feel like home to you?”

“Something like that,” he said.

“What about when you stay with Viktor?”

“It’s a bit different there, since I’ve lived there with him before…” He seemed to be choosing his words carefully. “I don’t feel so much like a guest there, but it still doesn’t quite feel like a home to me, either.”
“How would it be different if Viktor bought a house?” I asked.

“Because there’d be a place for you there,” he said. “This isn’t to say that I’m unhappy with the way things are, but I won’t deny that it would make me really happy if we all lived together someday. It would be far too selfish for me to even ask, though, because I know this is your home, and you probably have reservations about living with Viktor. I would never want to pressure you into moving, and I think Viktor might feel the same. He likely just asked you to get your feelings on the whole thing, and now that you’ve given them, he’ll probably give up on the idea for now.”

“Oh.” I didn’t think my reaction would make it so… final. Viktor could do what he wanted, really. He didn’t need my input to make decisions like that.

Yuuri switched to the hair dryer, and I let the noise drown out my thoughts for a while. When he finished, though, I felt like I might’ve made a mistake with my immediate reaction.

“Don’t let it bother you,” Yuuri said, and kissed me gently. “I’m going to bed.”

I nodded, and he left. It was easier said than done, though, because as I lay in the middle of my bed, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. Living with Viktor—no, living with Yuuri and Viktor—didn’t seem like such an awful thing on the surface. I wasn’t exactly eager to leave Lilia’s house, but I could see the appeal of living with the two of them. Waking up, sharing meals, watching TV, talking until bedtime, going to work together—none of it sounded all that bad, not to mention I’d be living with Krása, too. Something else was bothering me. Something made my heart beat wildly at the idea, a bubble of panic in my chest that I couldn’t find the origin of.

It was the same sort of uneasy feeling I got whenever Viktor went out of his way to do anything kind for me, but this time was far more potent and terrifying. I wanted to run away from it. I needed to deal with it.

My instinct was to call Beka, but I knew he’d reach the same conclusion. If I couldn’t work it out on my own, I needed to confront the feeling head on. And that meant talking to Viktor.

I put it off for a few days, hoping it might go away. But every time I saw him at the rink, whether he was working with me or not, I felt a nagging reminder in the back of my mind. I could ignore it in the moment, but it was annoying, and it began to grate on me until it was all I could think about during quiet moments. Yuuri didn’t seem to notice, busy as he was these days, and I felt it was for the best. This wasn’t something he could help with, anyway.

I couldn’t gather the courage to ask him during practice. But I knew I would go crazy if I put it off any longer, so I sent him a text after I bought my piroshky that evening. Yuuri was working late with Lilia, so he wouldn’t miss me for dinner.

Viktor invited me over, and I hesitated a few minutes before I went over there. Didn’t want to seem too eager.

He smiled in greeting, but it was a tentative smile. “Hey.”

“Hi. Sorry if I’m bothering you,” I muttered. A ball of white fur moved out of the corner of my eye, and I crouched down to pet Krása. “Hello to you too, beauty.” Properly bathed and groomed, she had fluffy, snowy white fur, and Viktor had outfitted her with an expensive collar made of purple leather. It seemed to be an accepted fact that she liked me best, but Viktor took care of her like he loved her.

“It’s not a bother,” Viktor assured me, and I stepped aside so he could close the door. “I wasn’t
“doing anything else tonight.”

“What do you even do for dinner when you’re not with us?”

“Take-out, mostly,” he said, going over to the kitchen. “Sometimes I’ll throw together salads if I feel I’ve been eating too heavily. Drink?”

“Something non-alcoholic, if you can,” I said.

“Not that sort of night, I guess?” he said teasingly. He made me some ice water.

“If it just loosened my tongue like it does for you, I’d say pour away. I just don’t like that it loosens other parts of me, too.”

“That’s fair.” He leaned on the counter, trying to look relaxed, but sort of failing miserably. He was too stiff. I wondered why I made him so nervous. “So what did you need to talk to me about in private? Is something wrong with Yuuri?”

I shook my head. “He’s fine. Working late, but he seems happy enough to do it. This is about what we talked about the other night. The house thing.”

“It was a stupid idea,” he said, looking at the floor. “I shouldn’t have even mentioned it.”

“It wasn’t a stupid idea,” I said. “I overreacted. I panicked, and I don’t entirely know why. It’s—it’s been bothering me, so I wanted to talk about it more.”

He pushed off the counter. “Alright. Sit.” He gestured over to the couch, and joined me there, turning towards me with his arm draping on the back. He wasn’t too close, but also not as far away as he could be. I swallowed nervously.

“What’s your biggest objection to the house idea?” he asked me. “Is it that you’ll be living with me?”

“No,” I said honestly. “That doesn’t—I don’t mind the idea of that so much. I see you so often anyway that it wouldn’t bother me at all. I think… I searched for the right words. “I think it’s just the thought of you going to such lengths just to make things easier on me. It makes me feel… weird.”

“ Weird how?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I felt something similar when you adopted Krasa instead of the poodle. Or when you first showed me the choreography you came up with just for me.”

“So what you’re saying is… You’re uncomfortable with me doing nice things for you?”

“I guess, maybe.” When he put it like that, it made me feel miserable.

“Why? Do you hate me still?”

“No, not at all!” I cried. How could he even ask that question, after everything?

He reached out, fingertips just barely touching my shoulder. “Then you don’t mind me, you just don’t like that I care for you?”

“I…” Something painful rose in my chest. “I don’t think that’s it, either. I don’t understand you. I don’t understand why you want to do these things for me. I was so horrible to you. I said so many awful things that I knew hurt you and I never really apologized. I’m the reason you can’t be with Yuuri alone. I don’t… I don’t deserve you being so nice to me. I feel like you should be the one
hating *me.*” There it was. That was it. I wished the realization were more relieving, but it really just made me feel worse. Tears pricked at my eyes, and I tried my best to blink them away, but a few loosened and fell down my cheeks.

Viktor gently pried the water glass from my hands and set it on the table before pulling me against him. He was warm, and had a familiar scent I hadn’t realized I’d grown used to.

“Yurio, I don’t think you realize how much I owe you,” he said softly, his cheek pressing against my hair. “Yuuri wouldn’t be in my life now, if it weren’t for you. Without you I wouldn’t even be thinking about a home, because there wouldn’t be anyone in my life I’d want to share it with. You never told me anything that wasn’t the truth, and even though it was painful, I deserved to hear it.”

His arms tightened around me. “If I can do these small things for you, it still won’t be enough to make up for how much I owe you for saving Yuuri. How much I owe you for saving *me.*” He kissed the side of my head, and pulled away. His expression was soft and affectionate. “But even if I didn’t owe you, you’re worth caring about on your own. If it really bothers you that I do nice things for you, then I’ll be more considerate in the future, but please don’t feel guilty about accepting them.”

I wiped at my face, embarrassed that I was still crying. “I’m sorry for overreacting. It’s not that I don’t want you to do nice things, I just…” I trailed off, not really sure what I wanted to say.

“I understand,” he said. He tucked a loose strand of hair behind my ear. “It feels odd accepting things you don’t think you deserve. But you deserve more than I can give you, Yurio, and you shouldn’t feel bad about that. The things I do are often for selfish reasons, anyway, even if it’s just out of my own desire to see you smile.”

I laughed a little. “Don’t get all sentimental about it.”

He poked my arm. “Don’t cry about your feelings if you don’t want me to get sentimental.”

“I’m done now,” I assured him. The uneasy feeling wasn’t entirely gone, but his words had filled me with a pleasant warmth, and his hug had been more comforting than I expected. Everything felt just a little better, like a weight had been lifted.

With my words, though, Viktor seemed to withdraw back into himself, his arms hugging his middle. “I’m glad I could help,” he said stiffly. What happened? Did I do something wrong?

“What’s wrong?” I asked, since there was no sense in holding back after my embarrassing display.

“What? Nothing.” He was convincing nobody, not even himself. He wouldn’t even look at me.

“Viktor, I just watched your mood change. Either tell me what’s wrong, or I’ll spend however long it takes to pry it out of you.”

He just hugged himself tighter, squeezing his eyes shut.

I wasn’t going to stand for this. I did something to hurt him, and I wouldn’t be able to rest until I figured out what it was. “Viktor…” I warned, but he ignored me. I leaned on him, but got no response, so I grabbed his arms and pulled them away from his body. He fought against me, but I had the advantage just then, able to pin him down onto his back. I loomed over him, pressing him down so he couldn’t get free. “Tell me what’s bothering you, and I’ll let you go,” I said.

He opened his eyes, and they turned wide with fear. Why was he afraid? We wrestled all the time. He wriggled his right arm free, his hand went behind my head, and before I realized what was happening, he was kissing me. My instinct was to melt into it, to yield to him like I did in bed, but the different context caught up to me, and my body stiffened of its own accord.
He pushed me away violently and scrambled to sit up, breathing heavily. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m sorry I’m—”

“Shut up!” I growled. “Just—shut up and tell me why.”

He hunched his shoulders in a gesture that might’ve been a shrug, not meeting my eyes. “Why do you want to kiss Yuuri?”

“Because I lo—oh. Oh.” I blinked. Was that… “Really?”

“I don’t know,” he said.

“Viktor, look at me,” I said, leaning in closer. He turned towards me, but huddled back, clearly afraid. I had no idea how to soothe him. I didn’t know if I wanted to soothe him, but I had to know the truth. “Why did you kiss me like that?”

“Because I… wanted to.”

“But you also didn’t want to, or you wouldn’t have pushed me away like that.”

“I don’t… want to force my feelings on you,” he said, trembling. “I’m so sorry, Yurio.”

“So you acknowledge there are feelings,” I said, tasting the idea. If it were true, it made sense. I’d felt it before, in the way he looked at me sometimes. It was weird, but I never really hated it, even though sometimes I felt like I should have, just on principal.

“I tried to ignore them, but it’s difficult when I see you every day,” he said. “And I never know when to hold back, or when it’s alright to just…” He brushed his knuckles against my cheek. “I am sorry. It’s not as big a deal as I’m making it, but I was supposed to be comforting you, and at the end all I could think about was…”

“What?”

“Kissing you.” His cheeks were flushed, and he lowered his eyes shyly.

“Why is it such a big deal? We kiss all the time.”

“In bed. Only in bed, and only when Yuuri’s around. Don’t pretend this isn’t different just because we’ve kissed before.”

“I know it’s different,” I said, sitting back and folding my arms. “I’m just not sure why it’s a big deal. Why shouldn’t we kiss sometimes?”

“Because you and I aren’t in a relationship like that,” he said, looking at me like I was an idiot. “And how the hell am I supposed to know what you are or aren’t okay with?”

“You ask me, you dipshit. I can’t read your mind, and I don’t expect you to read mine. We can talk about this. We’re adults.”

He narrowed his eyes. “How can I know you won’t explode and throw your phone at me, or kick me in the back with your skate?”

“Hey, fuck you, I haven’t done that in a long time.” Krasà jumped up onto the couch, quietly begging to be petted. I obliged, and she settled down into my lap. “Really, Viktor, I thought we’d moved past this. I’m not going to explode with anger at you anymore, not unless you do something really stupid like hurt Yuuri. I’ve been getting better. It’s been a long time since I’ve felt like I hated
“Saying you don’t hate me isn’t the same as saying I can kiss you,” he said.

“Sure, if you ignore everything I said before that,” I said.

“Spell it out for me like I’m an idiot, then.”

I grinned. “You mean spell it out because you are an idiot? Okay. You have feelings for me, beyond the friendship we’ve developed out of being in a relationship with Yuuri. I don’t know the extent, and by the looks of it you don’t either, but you know they exist.” I paused, and he nodded. “I don’t think it’s a big deal if you want to kiss me, since we’ve done it before and we’ll do it again. I won’t tolerate excessive affection like Yuuri does, but I think you know me well enough to not try it.”

He tilted his head. “But none of that tells me how you feel about all of this.”

A laugh bubbled out of me. “The whole reason I came over tonight was because I couldn’t figure out that I was feeling guilty and ashamed about you. I can’t even begin to process how I feel about this because it’s completely new territory. I’ll run at it headfirst until I figure it out, though, so don’t feel like you have to be cautious with me. I’ll always let you know when I don’t like something.”

“You were the one that warned me to be careful,” Viktor pointed out.

“Yeah, back when things were new and we weren’t sure this would work out. I mostly said that so we’d keep things out in the open, rather than bottling them up inside to deal with on our own. What you were doing just then was trying to hold back for my sake, and failing miserably.” I sighed. “I don’t want you to be afraid of me, Viktor. I don’t want you to hold back your feelings out of fear of hurting me, or getting hurt yourself. It’s safe to say at this point that I won’t be pushed away easily, so be honest with me. And more importantly, be honest with Yuuri. I get the feeling he doesn’t know anything about this, and he probably should.”

“He knows a little,” Viktor said. “But you’re right. You’re right about all of it, damn you, and I’ll never understand how you of all people came to be the adult in this relationship.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.” I plucked at Krasa’s ears a little, feeling self-conscious. “Yakov always said I was forced to grow up too fast, being pulled away from my family at such a young age. I didn’t trust many people, so I learned to be perceptive to find out who I could trust. But I’ve always had problems identifying my feelings. My immediate reaction to everything was usually anger, no matter if I was uncomfortable or upset or hurt. Lilia helped me work through my anger, but I still can’t always control it, and it especially bothers me when I can’t figure out why I’m upset. I hate feeling stuck.”

“Which is why you came to me tonight,” he concluded for me. “I understand, and I’m glad you did. I apparently had some feelings of my own I needed to confront.”

“Did I help, at least?”

“You always do,” he said, smiling warmly. “You have this way of looking at the world that’s so different and—clear. You simplify things. I have a tendency to overthink when I’m uncertain.”

“Yuuri is the same way,” I said. “But when Yuuri’s certain of something, he grabs hold of it and claims it. You just make it look inevitable and natural, like you expected it all along, which always pissed me off.”

“I’m not entirely sure what you mean, but it’s probably true,” he said with a laugh.
“Mm, think about it like this. The year you and Yuuri first got together, things were really uncertain for a while, right?” He nodded, and I kept going. “Neither of you were all that clear or honest, though you flirted with the idea for a long time. And then when you were finally certain and had established that you were in a relationship, you acted like you had planned it that way all along. Like it was just the natural conclusion of everything, even though any number of things could have gone wrong and forced you two apart.”

“And that pissed you off?”

“Fuck yeah it pissed me off. I knew the truth. You weren’t perfect soulmates, but you acted like it, and everyone talked about you like you were.” I lowered my gaze. “But you were happy—Yuuri was happy, so I couldn’t be too upset.”

“So tell me how Yuuri is different.” He actually seemed interested.

“Yuuri’s uncertainty is legendary. When he’s nervous, he’s really nervous, and it consumes his whole self, body and mind. But on the flipside, when he’s certain of something, he oozes confidence. It’s not false confidence, either—you can tell he truly believes in whatever he’s doing. Anyone could see that on the ice during his career, but you and I can see it easily in the bedroom, too.”

“When Yuuri’s on, he’s really on,” Viktor agreed.

I nodded. “I love that about him.”

“Me too.”

We sat in thoughtful silence for a little while, letting the whole conversation sink in. Viktor had feelings for me. The thought didn’t bother me like I might have expected. Part of me felt like I might have known about it for a while, but I simply hadn’t been able to put it to words, or affix it to anything concrete in my mind. Ever since we’d spent time together in Hasetsu, I became a little more aware of his lingering eyes on me. At the time I’d brushed it off, thinking it was just his momentary horniness, but over the weeks we worked together on my programs I’d still noticed, and simply attributed it to our growing friendship.

But if this was beyond friendship… I didn’t know how to feel about it. Granted, I wasn’t even sure we could call it friendship to begin with, considering all we’d done together, not to mention that we happily shared a partner. Our relationship was too strange for such an easy label, the same way “friendship” didn’t really describe my feelings for Beka.

What would change, because of these new feelings? Viktor wanted to kiss me… Did he want anything else? I wasn’t exactly thrilled with the idea of having sex with him without Yuuri there, but I wasn’t sure if that was because I didn’t want to, or because we didn’t yet know Yuuri’s feelings on it. If I had his permission, would I like it more?

It wasn’t worth thinking about right now. I didn’t even know if he wanted that, and I couldn’t convince myself to ask.

How did I feel about Viktor, then? Did I return his feelings? I didn’t know. The way I regarded him had morphed and changed so much over the past half a year that it was hard to pin anything down. I knew I didn’t hate him at all. I knew I liked him as a person, and enjoyed spending time with him on occasion. He was easy to talk to, these days, and working with him was more fun than working with Lilia or Yakov, since I had a little more freedom to make my own decisions. But the lines between friendship and lover were already so blurred that I couldn’t tell one feeling from the other. Did it ultimately matter, if we were going to spend our lives together, anyway?
Maybe it didn’t.

Krasa got up to go examine her food bowl, so I took advantage of her absence to slide closer to Viktor. I leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder.

“What are you—”

“Shh. I’m trying something.” For a moment I just breathed him in, wrapping myself in his familiar scent. He must’ve showered after work, because now that I wasn’t crying, I could smell the herbal scent of soap heavily on his neck. I’d smelled it on Yuuri enough times to recognize it, not to mention I’d showered with it a few times myself, and it carried all the implications of a night spent here. It was a comforting scent, if nothing else.

He shifted, tentatively putting his arms around me, and I relaxed into him. This was nice. I could sleep like this, under the right circumstances.

He gently pulled the elastic band out of my hair, loosening the locks, his fingers massaging my scalp the way Yuuri often did. Had Yuuri told him how much I loved it, or did he just guess? It didn’t matter—it felt so good that a small moan escaped me. I nuzzled his neck in appreciation, and was rewarded with a slight shiver that reminded me how sensitive he was there.

I pulled away, my hands on his shoulders, wondering how it would feel to just kiss him. Without the heat of arousal, without the expectation for more—just lips touching lips in affection. The way I kissed Yuuri before bed. His eyes flickered to my lips, and I knew he anticipated it. My heart fluttered with nerves in a way I hadn’t felt in years, since my first time kissing Beka. So much uncertainty for something I’d technically done many times before. All I had to do was lean in, just a little closer, and—

My phone buzzed loudly in my pocket, completely ruining the moment. Viktor smiled, but I saw a little disappointment in his eyes. Frustrated, I pulled out my phone, but it all drained away when I saw who it was. “It’s Yuuri.”

“Answer it,” Viktor said. “Invite him over, if he’s hungry. We can order in.”

I pushed the button. “Yuuri.”

“Yurio, sorry I was working so late. Where are you? You’re not at home, are you?”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m at Viktor’s.”

“Viktor’s? Why?”

“I needed to talk to him about something. He says to come over if you’re hungry, and we’ll order something.”

“Mm, food sounds good, but I’m so tired. Would we be spending the night?”

I looked to Viktor to see if he’d overheard, and he shrugged.

“We can spend the night, but I don’t think we’re up for much other than food and sleep.”

“Good. I’m not either. Tell Viktor to order my usual, whatever you decide to go with. I’ll be over in a few.”

“Wait—can you grab my backpack? The one in my closet?”
“Your overnight bag? Sure. Anything else?”

“That’s all, thanks. See you soon.”

“Bye.”

I hung up, realizing only after I’d put my phone down that I was shaking. Why?

“Are you alright?” Viktor asked, tucking my hair behind my ears.

“Why do I feel guilty?” I asked, my voice coming out quieter than I’d meant it.

“Don’t,” Viktor said, pulling me back down into his arms. I settled there like it was a natural gesture for us. “There’s nothing to feel guilty about. We’ll talk to Yuuri when he gets here, but I already know he’ll be alright with this.”

“You do? How?”

“Because he’s dreamed of us growing closer since the beginning. I thought it was impossible, so I never even humored him, but over time I felt things change between us, and I think Yuuri noticed, too. I just never really knew how you would feel about it all. I can’t tell you how ecstatic he would get when you and I played together in bed. He would talk about it excitedly with me the next time he and I were alone, offering commentary and asking endless questions. He’s even teased me for liking you more than him.”

I pulled away, looking at his face. “You don’t, do you?”

“Of course not,” he said, laughing, and urged me back down. “I’m fond of you, though. It’s different than the way I feel about Yuuri, but I care about you more than I thought I could. I used to be selfish with my love, wanting to dedicate myself wholly to one person, and you changed that part of me like you changed so much else in my life.”

“Dedicate yourself… But you said your last boyfriend wasn’t exclusive.”

“He wasn’t, but I was,” Viktor said. “I hated it, but I understood that I couldn’t give him everything he claimed to need. He wanted to fuck someone, and I wouldn’t allow it very often, so he found someone else to scratch that itch.”

“What? That’s stupid,” I spat. “You deserve so much better than that idiot.”

He breathed out a laugh. “At the time, I didn’t think so. I thought Hugh was what I deserved. But I used him just about as much as he used me, so I wasn’t entirely innocent.”

“Still. You don’t deserve to be treated that way.”

“I understand that now,” he said, planting a kiss on the top of my head. “Thanks to you and Yuuri, I’ll never go back to a relationship like that. But having you two in my life is the best thing that ever happened to me, so holding the rest of the world to that standard wouldn’t be fair. You carry my heart and soul, the both of you, and I’m yours until the end.”

Hearing his confession I almost felt like crying again, but instead, I kissed him. I hardly thought about it. My emotions drove me to act on impulse, but once I did it, I couldn’t muster any regrets. The kiss was soft at first, tentative but warm, and it stayed that way for a while. My hands brushed his chest, his fingers tangled in my hair, and I parted my lips just enough to let him in. He didn’t devour me like he did when I was beneath him in bed. He nibbled at my lips and teased with his
tongue, taking his time about going further.

Arousal kindled in my belly, but it lacked urgency, and without the pressure to escalate, it actually felt pleasant. I stopped thinking, any intrusive thought that came to mind drifting out of my head as quickly as it appeared. All I knew was Viktor, the smell and taste of him dominating my senses, and at the barest squeeze of my hair, I submitted to his lead. I opened up for him and he explored, slowly, dancing with my tongue in a teasing way. I pushed back only when he eased off, and he groaned in appreciation.

He pulled away with heavy breaths, but kept his mouth close, planting kisses along my jaw and cheeks, tilting my head so he could reach my temples. These kisses didn’t feel hungry. They felt… cherishing. Appreciative. He nudged me until I leaned back against the other side of the couch, my body in such a pliant stupor that I hardly realized I was moving. He kissed my lips again, just a bit more forceful this time, encouraging me to open up. These felt a bit more heated, and I began to wonder if he was considering anything further.

We heard a scraping sound outside the door, and I froze.

“Shh. Don’t move,” Viktor whispered. “I want to see his reaction.” He pressed his lips to mine in a mockery of his earlier kisses.

“I hope you ordered food already, because I’m starv—” I heard Yuuri drop his bags. “—ing. What are you doing?”

“Kissing,” Viktor said simply, planting one more on my lips before rising. “Sorry we didn’t order anything, we got distracted.”

Yuuri narrowed his eyes at Viktor. “Clearly. Has Yurio been drinking?”

“Completely sober,” I declared, sitting up with some difficulty. I’d gotten far too relaxed. I pushed some hair out of my face, and searched around for my hair tie, eventually finding it on Viktor’s wrist. I pried it off and worked on setting my hair to rights.

“I’ll order some food,” Viktor said, going to the kitchen with his phone in hand.

Yuuri came and stood behind me. “I’ll do it,” he said, putting his fingers in my hair and smoothing it back. “I thought you said you came to talk to him.”

“I did.” I insisted. “And we talked.”

“You also told me you two weren’t up for anything else tonight.”

I yawned. “I’m not.”

“Then why did I walk in to find you two making out on the couch?” He didn’t sound mad—more amused, than anything, but I couldn’t tell how he really felt when I couldn’t see his face. “Your hair’s been so ravished I need a comb.”

“There’s one in my overnight bag,” I said. “Front pocket. And we were just kissing. Nothing else.”

“Is that something you two do now?” he asked, procuring my comb. “Just kiss for the fun of it?”

“Maybe? I dunno, it just started today. Ow.” He pulled at a nasty tangle. “Is it a bad thing?”

“No. Unexpected, perhaps. A little strange to walk in on, certainly. But bad, no. Not at all.”
“You don’t hate that we…” I didn’t quite know how to finish that sentence. It felt like so much more than kissing.

“You and Viktor have danced around each other for so long, I’m just glad you two finally…” He seemed to search for the right word. “…worked it out. Do you love him?”

“It’s not the same as with you,” I insisted. “But maybe… something like it. I don’t know. It’s new, and it’s a little frightening, but I don’t want to run away from it.”

“That’s a much different answer than I expected from you,” he said, leaning forward and planting a kiss on the top of my head. “It makes me happy that you two are getting along so well.”

“It’s because of you,” I insisted. “None of this would have happened without you.”

“I know,” Yuuri said. “But if something does happen without me…”

I flushed at the implication. “Yeah?”

He leaned in close. “Just give me the details afterward.”

I sucked in a breath, his voice arousing me almost as much as the kissing had.

He laughed lightly. “Sorry. So what were you talking about before you started kissing?”

I gritted my teeth as he found another tangle. “I came to try and figure out why I was so freaked out by the house idea.”

“And did you figure it out?”

“More or less,” I said. “Viktor! I hear you in there ordering Thai food! You better not forget to add my fried tofu!”

I turned just in time to see him make a fist with his thumb between his index and middle finger, glaring at me. I stuck my tongue out at him in response, and was satisfied to hear him add my tofu to the order.

“So do you like the idea?” Yuuri asked. “Of the three of us living together?”

“Maybe,” I admitted. “I need to think about it more, but the idea doesn’t make me panic anymore. It makes sense.”

“Take all the time you need,” Yuuri said.

“Food will be here in twenty minutes,” Viktor announced, plopping down in front of me on the other side of the couch.

“It could have been here by now if you’d ordered after I called,” Yuuri complained. “I hardly ate any lunch today.”

“Sounds like you made the wrong decision,” Viktor said.

“Yeah, I should have known better than to expect you to order right away after inviting me over for food,” he said dryly. “And I’m guessing Yurio ate his usual piroshky after practice, otherwise he’d be grumbling, too.”

Well, he wasn’t wrong. I winced as he found another tangle.
“And exactly what did you do to this poor hair, Viktor? I’ve only ever seen it this bad after he’s slept for hours.”

“Really? I didn’t feel like I did anything crazy… I just roughed it around like I do to your hair sometimes.”

I could almost feel the cold stare Yuuri was giving Viktor, and couldn’t help but grin at Viktor’s fearful look.

“I shouldn’t do that?” Viktor asked sheepishly.

“You used to have long hair,” Yuuri reminded him. “Didn’t it tangle easily?”

“That was so long ago,” Viktor said. “But yes, Yakov used to complain about having to detangle it all the time. You’d think he would’ve been happy that I’d cut it, but he seemed more disappointed than most people.”

“He probably liked fussing with your hair, since it got you to sit down for more than a minute,” I teased.

Viktor groaned. “Has Yakov been telling old stories about me?”

“He’s been telling me stories about you ever since you left,” I said. “I think it was his way to deal with the fact that you’d just disappeared without a real explanation. Needless to say, I know everything. Even that thing that happened at the China cup when you were nineteen.”

“Oh? What thing?” Yuuri asked. “I don’t know about this.”

Viktor went beet red, and covered his face. “Oh no. Please please please please don’t tell him, Yurio.”

I looked up at Yuuri, who gave me a pleading look.

“I don’t remember all the details,” I said, which was a lie. “But it involved Yakov finding Viktor in a compromising position in his hotel room, which I presume was aided by one Christophe Giacometti, though Yakov doesn’t know that part.”

Viktor met my eyes, silently begging not to say any more than that, and I didn’t. The full story was actually far more embarrassing, and kind of sad. It involved a ruined costume and a missed flight, and a very scared Yakov wondering what had happened to his star skater. I’d only heard the story because Yakov had been drinking at home one night after Viktor had left, and I’d stayed up to keep him company.

In hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have mentioned it, but I think I managed to keep the harm to a minimum. Yuuri pressed for more details, but I kept my mouth shut.

Yuuri finished detangling my hair just in time for our food to arrive. While we ate, a thought occurred to me that stuck in my mind and grew the longer it held there. If this was what it would be like to live with Yuuri and Viktor, then I would be alright with that.

Krasa looked up at me, begging for scraps, until I “accidentally” dropped a piece of chicken on the ground. Oops. So clumsy.

I would be more than alright with it, actually. This felt like a family. An unconventional one, to say the least, but still a family. Surrounded by people I wanted to see happy, people I wanted to protect
and love. And if this was what waited for me in the future, then I couldn’t complain. I had it pretty
good.

Several months later

“In here, Beka,” I called. “It’s this one!”

“Of course,” Beka huffed, setting down the heavy stack of boxes on the floor. “I should have known
it’d be the one farthest away from the front door.”

“Who said you had to carry that much? We could have made a few more trips.”

He ignored my comment as he put the boxes down and looked around. “It already looks like you live
here.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Well, they got a few things ready for me just after they’d moved in,
like the bedding and furniture and stuff. And I’ve already stayed over a couple of times, so a handful
of things got left behind.”

“It looks nice. Smaller than your room at Lilia’s, though.”

“It’s not a bad size,” I said, opening the closet. Some of my clothes had already ended up in here,
clean and neatly hung up. Yuuri had probably done it. “I’ll miss having my bathroom right there, but
that’s just me being spoiled.”

“You’re still pretty spoiled,” he teased, putting his arm around me. “Where are your lovers,
anyway?”

“Grocery shopping. I was hoping to surprise them.”

“You didn’t tell them you were moving in today?”

I shook my head, and perched on the edge of my bed. “It’s not a big deal, though. They said I can
move in whenever I want.”

Beka sat next to me. “Why have you been dragging your feet, then? It’s been a few weeks, hasn’t
it?”

“I wasn’t entirely sure I was ready, for a while,” I said. “I told you about the thing with Katya,
right?”

“That your cat was too much of an asshole to Krasa to bring over? Yeah.”

“I felt awful about leaving her behind, even though Lilia said she didn’t mind taking care of her. I
thought maybe it was a sign that I was making a huge mistake, and I couldn’t shake that fear for a
while. Plus, I was reluctant to leave Yakov and Lilia behind.”

“How did your coaches react to you finally leaving their nest?”

“Yakov was… Yakov. It’s hard to tell exactly what he thinks, because he usually hides it behind his
gruff-old-man exterior. He couldn’t really say that he outright supported my decision, but he didn’t
protest, so I took that as a good sign. Lilia was supportive to a point. She likes that I’m growing more independent, but she feels like Yuuri and Viktor will be a bad influence and spoil me.”

“Won’t they?”

I laughed. “Probably. But they won’t let me slack when it comes to skating. They both know what it takes to get to the top, and they know how much I want to stay there. It’s kind of amazing how much they haven’t changed—Yuuri still doesn’t tire, and Viktor is still merciless about detail.”

“I have to say, I’m really looking forward to your programs this season,” Beka said, covering my hand with his. “I mean, I always do, but I feel like this year will be special for you.”

I smiled. “I feel like it will be, too.”

It had taken a while to gather the courage to finally tell Beka about my feelings for Viktor. I still didn’t entirely understand them—at this point I wasn’t sure I ever would—but Beka had supported me all the same, reminding me that I should do what makes me happiest. Loving Viktor as well as Yuuri made me happiest, so that’s what I did.

Viktor had showed me the house he wanted just a couple of weeks after I’d agreed to consider moving in with them. I fell in love instantly. It was fairly close to everything that mattered, but in a neighborhood that made it feel secluded from the busy parts of the city. It had plenty of open space, but didn’t feel too big for the three of us and a dog. It had seemed ridiculously expensive to me, but when Viktor revealed to me just how much money he’d saved in investments, I learned he wasn’t exactly in over his head. He could afford it on his own, if he wanted.

But I didn’t let him. I had money of my own that I almost never spent. The biggest thing I’d ever bought was Beka’s motorcycle, and it had been a few years since then. I gave Viktor enough to cover half the down payment, and agreed to pay half the mortgage each month. My name went on the deed alongside his, which felt a little strange, but made practical sense.

Yuuri hadn’t been exactly comfortable with the idea of Viktor and me paying for the house on our own, so to compromise we let him cover the utilities out of the income Lilia and I paid him. We agreed to buy our own food or take turns ordering in, and in the end, it all seemed to work out.

Viktor and Yuuri had moved in as soon as the house was ready, but I had taken my time about it. I helped them pick out paint colors and furniture, but I hadn’t felt quite ready to call this place my home. Lilia’s house had been my home for seven years, and I’d never once felt like I was unwelcome there. I had gone through some of the toughest moments of my life in that house. I’d fallen love with Beka in that house. I’d had some of the best sex of my life in that house. Katya, my oldest friend, lived in that house.

But it was ultimately that line of thinking that got me to finally decide to move here permanently. Lilia’s house wasn’t going anywhere—she loved it, and told me often enough that she would die there when the time came. She had let me know after we’d bought our new house that there would always be a place for me with her if I needed it. I hoped I didn’t need it. I wanted things to work out in this new home, with two of the three people I loved most in the world.

Beka and I made fairly short work of my boxes. I hadn’t brought very much with me—just my clothes, electronics, and a few keepsakes I wanted to display, including some photos I’d had printed and framed. All of my medals stayed in Lilia’s trophy case where they belonged. My cat plushes I’d mostly packed up or given away, except the very first one I remembered picking up, which had a permanent spot next to my bed. I’d adorned it with the preserved flower crown I’d gotten the day after Yuuri and I confessed to each other, which looked absurd as now the cat had two pairs of ears.
But it made me smile, so I’d kept it that way.

Everything else stayed at Lilia’s, to be sorted through at a later date.

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay for dinner?” I asked Beka as he went to Lilia’s borrowed car.

“I expect they’ll be wanting to give you a proper welcome, once you surprise them,” he said. He kissed my cheek. “We’ll do dinner tomorrow, I promise.”

“Alright,” I conceded, knowing he was probably right. “Thank you for helping me move.”

“You know I’m always glad to help, Yura.” He held up his hand in a wave, got in the car, and left.

I went back inside, unsure of what to do. The house felt too empty with just me in it. Krasa was outside, so I let her in and replaced her water, just for something to do. I prepared a glass of water for myself, then wandered around the house to see what all they’d changed since the last time I’d been here.

The three bedrooms were all about the same as I remembered. The master bedroom, which was in effect Viktor’s and Yuuri’s room, had a huge bed in the center, even bigger than Viktor’s old one. We’d chosen the mattress together, confusing a handful of store employees in the process. The memory made me smile. This was the room that Yuuri and Viktor stored all their things in, sharing a closet and a bathroom like they used to. As they were moving in Viktor expressed fears that it would look like they were the “main” couple and I was the guest, but I shrugged it off. I understood it was entirely for practical reasons. I didn’t feel left out, having my own space—it was comforting to know it was always there.

The other bedroom was the guest room, but also the room where Yuuri or Viktor could sleep alone if they wanted. I couldn’t see it happening, but Yuuri told me of times when he and Viktor had fought and one of them stubbornly slept on the couch. I hoped they wouldn’t fight, but I braced myself for the possibility, because that sort of thing happened on occasion.

I had no doubt in my mind we could pull this off, though. Whatever weaknesses one of us had, another had the strengths to make up for it. Where I was angry, Yuuri was patient. Where Viktor was dramatic, I was practical. Where Yuuri was anxious, Viktor and I were assuring and confident. The sum of us together was far stronger than any of us alone, and that conviction had only grown stronger in the months we’d been together.

And we loved each other, all of us. Feelings varied and fluctuated between us, but it was all love, pure and plain.

I heard sounds at the front door, and lingered in the hallway to listen.

“Krasa? Who let you in?” Yuuri asked. “You didn’t chew your way through the door, did you?”

“Yurio must be here,” Viktor said excitedly. “Yurio!”

“Yurio didn’t say he’d be here,” Yuuri pointed out, sounding a little farther away. He must’ve gone to the kitchen. “He said he’d be with Otabek this week, remember?”

“Maybe they’re both here,” Viktor said. “Yurio! Yurio!”

Shit, his voice was getting louder. I couldn’t hide any longer. “Shut up!” I called back. “You’re too loud!”
“Viktor poked his head into the hallway. “There you are. Is Otabek with you?”

“He left a little while ago,” I said, going into the kitchen.

“Oh, you are here!” Yuuri said happily. “Usually you say when you’re coming over. Did you come over for dinner?”

“If that’s alright,” I said.

“How come you didn’t invite Otabek?” Viktor asked. “He could have stayed in the guest room.”

I didn’t really know how to answer that question without giving away the whole thing, so I figured I should just say it. I took a deep breath. “I moved in today.”

They both froze, their jaws hanging open. Viktor was the first to unfreeze. “Really?”

I nodded, my face growing hot with embarrassment. “I wanted—I wanted to surprise you.”

Viktor sniffed and put his arms around me. “Yuriooo,” he cried, drawing out my name. “You finally came home to us.”

“Welcome home, Yurio,” Yuuri said, putting down his groceries to join in hugging me.

I thought about protesting, but the emotions were catching, and all I could do was stand there and try to hold back tears while they smothered me with hugs. Viktor started to pepper kisses on my cheek. “Alright, that’s enough,” I said, freeing myself from them. I wiped at my eyes. “I’m home.”

“How does it feel?” Viktor asked, keeping an arm around me while Yuuri went back to the groceries.

“Weird,” I said honestly. “But good. I want to be here, after all.”

“I’m glad you’re here, but I wish I’d known before we went shopping,” Yuuri said. “We didn’t buy nearly enough food for three for the week.”

“You’re already sounding like a homemaker,” I teased. “I’ll buy my own food, don’t worry. Oh, and I owe Beka a dinner tomorrow. You two should come along.”

“Of course,” Viktor said, nuzzling my neck. “Anything you want.”

I was enjoying his affection a little too much, so I gently pushed him away.

“Forgive him,” Yuuri said. “I teased him a little this morning, and I’ve been forcing him to be patient all day.”

I turned to Viktor, interested. “Is that so?”

Viktor’s cheeks flushed as he nodded, looking both ashamed and pleased at once.

“Sounds like you two had a fun night planned,” I said.

“You know it’ll be twice as fun with you around,” Viktor said. “Or three times as fun. Maybe four times…”

“Viktor,” Yuuri called in a mock-sweet voice. “Could you come over here and start preparing these vegetables?”
Viktor drifted over to Yuuri, muttering to himself as he started opening pea pods. “Definitely at least four times more fun,” he declared. “Could be more under the right circumstances.”

I had to laugh. “You’re insane.”

He winked at me. “And you’re fun.”

I turned to Yuuri. “Is he always like this when you…?”

“This is a tame version, actually,” Yuuri said. He had opened a package of raw pork and was laying out cutlets onto the cutting board. “He’s holding back for your sake, I think. Excuse me for a second.” I watched as he covered the pork with plastic wrap, took out a mallet, and started mercilessly beating it flat. The sound was so loud I had to soothe Krasa, eventually letting her go back outside to get away from the noise.

“What are you making, anyway?” I asked once the beating stopped.

“Can’t you tell?” Yuuri asked.

I had an inkling. “ Anything I can do?”

“Can you chop onions without crying your eyes out like Viktor does?”

I went to the cupboard and pulled out a piece of bread, sticking it in my mouth as I sliced the onion. It was an old trick grandfather had taught me, and it kept most of the gas away from my eyes. I worked alongside Viktor as Yuuri continued preparing the chicken, then the oil.

“Viktor, check if the rice is done, and you can set out the side dishes,” Yuuri instructed. “Yurio, hand me the onions.”

It wasn’t much longer before our dining table was set with numerous little cold vegetable dishes, and three large katsudon.

Once we’d sat down, Viktor immediately started to dig in, but I hesitated. “Were you really planning on having katsudon tonight?” I asked Yuuri.

“I’ve kept the ingredients on hand, just in case,” he said. “Using them and replacing them before they go bad, of course, but I’ve been ready to make katsudon for you since the moment we moved in.”

I felt a pang of guilt. “I’m sorry for taking so long about it.”

“No, Yurio,” Yuuri said. “Don’t apologize for that. You needed to come on your own time, and we understood that.”

“You should have come sooner,” Viktor said. “I’ve been waiting so long to taste Yuuri’s katsudon.”

“Viktor,” Yuuri scolded. “You know it’s better to be patient.”

I couldn’t help but laugh at Viktor’s pleading look to Yuuri. I finally dug in to my bowl, the taste flooding my mind with warm memories from years ago. Memories from a time before Viktor and Yuuri were together, before Yuuri’s injury, before I’d grown up, before we had any notion that things would turn out this way.

I cleaned out my bowl, and sat back with a sigh. I couldn’t have asked for a better meal to welcome me home.
Yuuri had leaned over and was whispering to Viktor about something. Eventually Viktor nodded, and Yuuri got up to clear the table.

“I’ll do that,” I protested.

“You can help clean up later,” Yuuri said as he stacked dishes by the sink. “But first, we have something to give you. Viktor.”

Viktor got up and left, returning a moment later with a black, rectangular box. He set it in front of me and sat down. I waited until Yuuri had taken his place back at the table before touching it.

“What is this?” I asked them. It looked like a fancy box, like something that might contain jewelry.

“It’s something we wanted to give you for a while, but like the katsudon, we wanted to wait until you were here,” Yuuri said. “Open it, and I’ll explain.”

I did, and found three gold rings nestled in velvet inside. I picked up the one in the middle.

“Rings?” I choked out.


“The middle one is yours,” Yuuri said. “The other two are the ones I bought in Barcelona, our old ones. We haven’t worn them in years, so we got them polished and engraved, and had a third one made to be identical. We don’t have to wear them if you don’t want us to. If you think it’s too soon, or too obvious.”

“Fuck that, I’m wearing it,” I said, my voice heavy with emotion. I slid it onto the ring finger of my right hand. It fit nearly perfectly. I didn’t question how they knew my ring size.

With a smile on his face, Yuuri reached for the box and pulled out his ring before sliding the box over to Viktor.

I held out my hand to look at it, but I couldn’t look for long, as my vision became blurred with tears. They fell in earnest, sliding down my cheeks and landing on our table. I couldn’t stop them. “Thank you,” I said in a strangled voice.

I heard Viktor sniff, and he got up to wrap his arms around me. “We love you, Yurio. Never forget that.”

Yuuri got up too, his arm snaking around my middle. “Welcome home, Yurio.”

My name is Yuri Plisetsky. I’m 22 years old, and still the top male figure skater representing Russia. I’m an Olympic gold medalist, but no gold is more precious to me than the ring I now wear around my finger. It represents something that I never thought I would find, a rare sort of love you almost never hear about.

And I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

The End

Chapter End Notes
Thank you so much for reading! This started out as a challenge to myself to create a Yuuri x Yurio story, but in the end I simply couldn't leave Viktor out. I needed a happy ending to help combat some of the things going on in my life.

I fully intend to continue pieces of this story. I have a prequel from Otabek's perspective planned, as well as a continuation of the Minami and Phichit story. I might also do small continuations/events involving the main three, but nothing novel-length like this one.

This being my first fic posted to ao3, I'm a little nervous, but if my story makes just one person happy, it will have been worth it to me. I hope you enjoyed it!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!