If you can't take the heat...

by mtothedestiel

Summary

Stay tuned, coming up next it's Top Chef: International! Join thirteen chefs from around the globe as they battle it out for glory and prizes in the one and only New York City (and share all their innermost thoughts along the way!) Who will emerge victorious, and who will burn out?? Heartwarming triumphs, devastating eliminations, and even ~forbidden romance~ are all coming your way on this showstopping season of Top Chef!

Notes

Ahhh another new fic. This was inspired back when I was writing Vkusno! and I couldn’t help but feel how well the intensity of figure skating would translate to a competition like Top Chef. But cooking and skating are very different, and the results here might not be what you expect! I hope you stay tuned!

Just a note about format, this fic reads like a TV script, with staging in [brackets]. Empty brackets [] indicate a cut away to an interview, just like on Top Chef or the Office! If you enjoy it so far, I hope you'll subscribe! I'm excited to try something new and share it with my readers :DDD
Introductions

[Quick camera flashes over Times Square, the Statue of Liberty, and a Grand Central Station. The setting is New York City. A man emerges from the crowd at the train station carrying a single rolling suitcase. He turns and blows a kiss to someone off camera before stepping onto an escalator and out into the busy streets of the Big Apple. His stylishly cut silver hair glints in the early morning sunlight.]

[Cut to a close up interview. The man is extremely handsome, and well aware of it. He sits comfortably in a white chef’s jacket with the Top Chef logo inscribed on the sleeves.]

Chef Nikiforov: My name is Victor Nikiforov, I am originally from St. Petersburg, Russia. I’m the executive chef and co-owner of серебро и золото. I’ve never had much time to spend in America, so I’m looking forward to getting to know the food scene in New York. ...And to winning Top Chef, of course!

[The chef tosses a charming grin to the camera, but there’s something undeniably shark-like about it.]

Chef Nikiforov: [suddenly] Oh! [his smile immediately softens into something much more endearing and heart shaped] I almost forgot, all my dishes in the competition are dedicated in advance to my joy and inspiration, my beautiful husband! [blows a kiss to the camera] Love you, darling!

[Another contestant emerges from the crowd of Grand Central Station, this one much younger than Chef Nikiforov, with pale blonde hair and a leopard print sweatshirt. He scowls at the crowd before looking for a taxi.]

Chef Plisetsky: I’m Yuri Plisetsky. I’m from Moscow, I’m eighteen, and I’m the youngest chef ever to be nominated for a James Beard Award. I haven’t served as an executive chef yet, but once I win this crummy competition I’ll have the funds I need to start my own restaurant, and then nobody will tell me how to cook! It’ll be awesome!

[More contestants begin to appear, quicker than before. A fresh faced south asian man snaps a selfie in front of Times Square. A young woman with startling red hair emerges from a taxi. A tall, brash contestant signs autographs for a fan of his restaurant. A serious looking chef pulls his motorcycle into long term parking, the Chelsea pier in the distance.]

Chef Chulanont: Hi, I’m Phichit! [makes a victory sign at the camera] I’m a sous chef in Detroit Michigan, and originally from Bangkok, Thailand! I’m here to prove a Thai chef can party with the heavyweights of the food world.

Chef Babicheva: I’m Mila Babicheva, I’m a personal chef and caterer in St. Petersburg! I was the
head nutritionist for the 2016 Russian Summer Olympic team, so I know how to whip up healthy and delicious food for the world’s best athletes and the world’s best chefs.

Chef Leroy: I’m Jean Jacques Leroy, here to represent my restaurant, JJ Style, serving up fresh French Canadian cuisine in Montreal!

Chef Altin: Otabek Altin. Originally from Kazakhstan, but I’ve worked in restaurants in Canada and America since I was sixteen. I’d like to own my own restaurant someday, and bring culinary acclaim back to my home country.

[A plane contrail streaks across the New York City skyline, as several more contestants emerge from the arrivals gate at JFK airport]

Chef de la Iglesia: I’m Leo! I’m a new restauranteur in Southern California!

Chef Popovich: I’m from St. Petersburg, here to crush the competition with my expert recipes…and to recover from my broken heart [sobs].

Chef Yang: I’m Isabella Yang, I’m the executive chef and owner of my own restaurant in Vancouver, Canada!

Chef Ji: I’m Guang hong! I may be young, but I’m here to prove myself, and to show off my fearsome knife skills! [brandishes chef knife in a manner that is both adorable and terrifying]

[The last three contestants emerge from Grand Central Station.]

Chef Crispino: Hello, I’m Sara Crispino. I’m the executive chef of La Famiglia in Florence, Italy, which I co-own with my brother Michele. We inherited the restaurant from our parents when they retired, and I’m looking forward to winning Top Chef to prove we’re still a cutting edge restaurant on the international scene!

Chef Lee: I’m Seung-gil Lee. I’m from Seoul, South Korea, where I’m a sous chef.

[There is an awkward pause.]

Producer:...anything else you’d like to share?
Chef Lee: [staring flatly at the camera]...No.


[The final contestant shift nervously under the camera’s gaze, clearly uncomfortable in his first one on one interview. He has dark hair that falls over his glasses. Beneath the blue frames his eyes are a rich brown.]

Chef Katsuki: ….H-hello. I’m Kat–uh--I mean Yuuri Katsuki. I’m an executive chef and co-owner of Tokyo Amour in...well, in Tokyo, Japan. I’m very confident in the kitchen, but not so much in front of cameras. [laughs nervously] I’m mostly here because I didn’t want to let my husband down. [smiles fondly] I know he’s cheering for me, so despite my nerves I’m looking forward to a fierce competition!

[There is a swift and action packed montage of the season’s highlights to come, interspersed with the suave presence of Top Chef’s longtime host, food critic and restauranteur Christophe Giacometti. He’s dressed in a slick suit and posed in front of a shiny digital Top Chef logo.]

Christophe: After five seasons and three Emmys, we’re breaking new ground with the star studded first season of Top Chef: International!

[Fast cuts of international cities, the whipping on of chef aprons, and the mouth watering glimpse of world class ingredients.]

Christophe: We’ve sought out thirteen talented, ambitious, tantalizing chefs from across the globe, and brought them together in the one and only New York City to battle it out for prizes, acclaim, and bragging rights in our toughest season yet! Our globe trotting band of chefs will be pushed even to their impressive limits and sometimes [the flick of an eyebrow] beyond.

[Cut to the clash of knives in a steamy kitchen. Chef Babicheva, looking frazzled as she turns a delicate filet over a flaming burner. Chef Lee in tears, his teeth gritted as he sends off the last of his plates to the stern faced judges. Chef Katsuki and Chef Nikiforov shouting indecipherably before Katsuki storms out of the kitchen.]

Christophe: At stake: a showcase at the annual Food and Wine Classic in Aspen, a cover article in Food and Wine Magazine, one hundred thousand dollars furnished by the Glad family of products, and….the title of Top Chef.

[Christophe blows a kiss to the camera]

Christophe: Get ready, my darlings. This kitchen is about to get hot.

[cue theme music]
[The chefs meet up on the southern tip of Manhattan, where they all board the South Ferry bound for the historical Governor’s Island. It’s an informal meet and greet for the contestants, some of whom know each other from culinary programs and previous restaurants and some of whom are total strangers. Chefs Katsuki and Chulanont can be seen exchanging a friendly hug, while Chefs Nikiforov, Babicheva, and Popovich chat about their previous employment in their common home city of St. Petersburg. Making a point to be standoffish is Chef Plisetsky, though he seems to have found communal solitude with Chefs Altin and Lee. Across the deck, Chef Katsuki catches Chef Nikiforov’s eye and offers him a wave and a shy smile. Chef Nikiforov returns Chef Katsuki’s greeting with a sly wink. The atmosphere is friendly overall, but threaded through with the promise of heated competition to come.]

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Chef de la Iglesia: So we’re all on a ferry headed for Governor’s Island, and everybody is wondering the same thing: What’s about to happen?

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Chef Chulanont: [wearing designer sunglasses] I mean, sure I’m wondering about the first challenge, but equally important for anyone with any sense of fashion: Where is Christophe, and what is he wearing?? Inquiring Instagram experts need to know!

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Chef Lee: I’m not here to make friend’s with the other chefs, so this forced socialization is...uncomfortable. I’m ready for the real competition to begin.

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[It’s a short walk from the pier to a well kept lawn that stands in front of the brick facade of an American national landmark where their host, Christophe Giacometti is waiting. He is indeed dressed in an impeccably tailored seersucker suit, perfect for the early summer heat. Directly behind the host are several production screens which prevent the chefs from getting a glimpse of what challenge might await them.

Christophe: Good morning chefs! Welcome to Fort Jay, on the historic Governor’s Island! And of course to the crossroads of culture itself, New York City!

[The contestants return Christophe’s greeting, all trying and failing to see what waits behind the screens that block their view.]

Christophe: You are hardly our usual batch of contestants, so I don’t have to tell you the kind of determination it takes to succeed in a city like NYC. You all have studied, cooked, and even opened successful restaurants in bustling metropolises, not to mention crossing international borders to make your culinary dreams a reality. But I think I can make a strong argument that there’s nothing quite like the challenge of making it to the top of the food chain in the city that never sleeps. Are you ready for the toughest season of Top Chef yet? We aren’t planning on making it easy, and there are no prizes for second place, mes amis !]
[Cue Quickfire theme. There is the clash of knives, and a digital logo fills the screen momentarily before returning to Christophe and the contestants]

Christophe: There are thirteen chefs standing before me, but after tomorrow’s elimination challenge there will only be twelve, and no one wants to be the first chef to go home, wouldn’t you agree?

[A few cheers and grumbles of agreement are heard from the chefs. Chefs Plisetsky and Nikiforov look excited. Chef Katsuki and Ji look vaguely nauseous.]

Christophe: For one lucky chef, that fear will be assuaged right now, because it’s time for your first Quickfire challenge, and your first chance at immunity in the coming elimination! Here to decide that lucky winner, please welcome your favorite head judge: Legendary critic and chef Yakov Feltsman!

[The chefs applaud and crane their necks, both eager and fearful as Chef Yakov emerges from behind a production screen. The head judge wears a dour suit, but he looks over the group of contestants with a sharp eye, as if already identifying the potential among them.]

Yakov: Thank you for your welcome. I trust you will not disappoint me on your first challenge.

Christophe: Ah, yes, very intimidating, chef. Now, Yakov has developed a fitting first test for this season, a little tournament of sorts, in honor of, what else? The “Big Apple.” There will be three rounds of this Quickfire, the second and third of which will remain a mystery for now! But first....

[two more production screens are pulled aside to reveal long worktables. At each station there is a large bowl filled with apples.]

Yakov: [gruffly] Chefs, for the first round of this challenge, you must each peel fifteen apples, using a knife. No peelers. I expect thin skins, no rough cuts or gouges, and no injuries. This isn’t culinary school.

Chef Lee: [frowning] They want us to... peel apples.

Chef Leroy: [laughs] I thought this was Top Chef?! When do we start cooking?

Chef Ji: [eyes lighting up] I can do this!

Chef Chulanont: Hey, I’ve spent my time on the low end of the totem pole. I’m not too good for prep, and I’m ready to show off my skills with a paring knife! We don’t use peelers on the line in Detroit!

Chef Nikiforov: This is actually a deceptively difficult first challenge, I think. It requires the most fundamental of knife skills, but it also requires that we check our egos. A bigger problem for some than others, perhaps? [wink]
Yakov: When you think you are finished, I will inspect your work. If I find any flaws, you will have to continue peeling more apples until I am satisfied.

[Several contestants shift nervously.]

Christophe: The first six chefs to finish to Chef Yakov’s approval will move on to the second round of the competition and be one step closer to immunity! Places everyone!

[The chefs each choose a station where a bowl of crisp red and green apples are waiting, along with a sharp paring knife and a large measuring cup marked with red tape. A few chefs grumble about the menial nature of the first task, while other laugh and make friendly chatter, but Chefs Chulanont, Yang, and Crispino seem to have a competitive gleam in their eyes already. Chef Katsuki appears almost sedate as he rolls up his sleeves and waits for Christophe’s starting whistle.]

Christophe: Everyone at a station? [he raises the whistle to his lips] Ready, Set…

[The shrill sound of the whistle sets the chef contestants off on their first challenge. For the first thirty seconds there is only the soft thwick of knives slicing into fresh apples and some muttered cursing, before the viewer hears the first thunk of a peeled apple hitting the work table. It appears to be in front of Chef Chulanont’s station, but many more quickly follow until each chef has a growing pile of peeled fruit on the table and a growing pile of spiraled apple peels at their feet.]

Chef Yang: Check!

[At Chef Yang’s call all chefs must pause while Yakov inspects her table full of apples. After a long moment he gives a curt nod.]

Yakov: Good. You may step off the line.

[The whistle sounds again and the peeling continues for the remaining twelve chefs while Chef Yang awaits the next round of the challenge.]

Chefs Chulanont and Plisetsky: [at nearly the same time] Check!

[Yakov examines Chef Chulanont’s work and quickly offers a nod of approval to the beaming young chef. However the head judge frowns over Chef Plisetsky’s work station, removing three apples whose flesh has been too roughly removed. Chef Plisetsky scowls, but returns to his work at the next sound of the whistle, looking more determined than ever.]

Chef Katsuki: Check!

[A few chefs look surprised as the shy Chef Katsuki offers his fifteen perfectly peeled apples for Yakov’s inspection. He quickly receives the judge’s approval and joins Chefs Yang and Chulanont to watch the remaining chefs complete their task. The fast pace seems to be taking a toll on some of the chefs, including Chefs Nikiforov and Leroy, who can both be seen shaking out their wrists.]

Chef Nikiforov: [grinning rakishly as he peels his thirteenth apple] I’ll admit, it’s been a while.

Chef Leroy: [only on his eleventh] No kidding, eh? And who doesn’t use a peeler these days?

Chef Ji: Check!

Christophe: [after Yakov approves Chef Ji’s work] That’s only two spots left, my darlings! And my, my, I certainly see a lot of executive chefs still on the line.
Chef Lee: Check.
Chef Crispino: Check!

[Yakov inspects both chef’s apples and gives his nod to Christophe, who blows his whistle for the final time in the round. The chefs still on the line drop their knives, some wiping sweat from their brow and others stifling looks of disappointment, or in the case of Chef Plisetsky, rage. Chef Popovich looks as though he may burst into tears.]

Christophe: That’s it chefs! We have our victorious six! Please step back up to your workstations. Our remaining chefs, enjoy a kip on the picnic blanket of shame, and store up your energy for the elimination challenge where you will not be enjoying immunity.

[The eliminated chefs do as they’re told, sitting on a checkered picnic blanket to watch the rest of the challenge.]

Chef Nikiforov: [shrugs] I would have liked immunity, yes, but I’m happy to prove myself in the kitchen tomorrow. I’m still confident! [the shark smile returns]

Chef Plisetsky: Tch. I’m here to cook, not do busy work! I’ll show everyone my skills when I kick their ass in the elimination!

Chef de la Iglesia: I’m a little nervous, sure. Immunity would have been a big relief, since we don’t know what’s in store, and everybody here seems really on their game. [shaking his head] I guess I can just stay positive and give it my all!

[Chefs Ji, Lee, Crispino, Katsuki, Yang, and Chulanont take their places back at their stations, the rest cleared away.]

Yakov: For your next skills challenge, I would like you brunoise the apples you peeled. I trust you know what that means, and are capable of executing it.

[None of the chefs look completely clueless, though Chef Ji certainly looks more apprehensive than before]

Chef Katsuki: [shaking his head] Brunoise ...

Chef Lee: A “brunoise” is a very fine dice. It requires steady hands and a calculating eye. Too careful, and you’ll fall behind. Too fast, and you’ll have an uneven dice.

Chef Katsuki: [sighs] I can do it, but I won’t like it.
Chef Crispino: [looks at the camera and pointedly blows her hair out of her eyes]

Yakov: You must fill your measuring cup to the line before calling check for my inspection.

Christophe: The first three contestants to pass inspection will move on to the final round of this inaugural Quickfire! On your mark, chefs! Ready, Set…

[The whistle screeches again and the chefs are off. This time there’s much more consternation and deliberate action from the six contestants as they attempt to balance their speed with the perfect brunoise that will appease Yakov. It looks like Chef Ji’s hands are shaking as he cuts his apples into matchstick widths, and Chef Chulanont has to pause to swipe his hair out of his eyes.]

Chef de la Iglesia: Honestly, at this point I’m just hoping no one injures themselves.

Chef Chulanont: Check!

[Yakov examines Chef Chulanont’s measuring cup, but shakes his head.]

Yakov: Too coarse. Again.

Chef Lee: [seconds later] Check!

Yakov: [after a quick inspection] Perfect. We have our first finalist.

[Chef Lee steps off the line, dropping his knife from shaking hands despite his aloof expression]

Chef Ji: [awed] I swear that guy is like an apple dicing machine.

Chef Yang: Check!

[Yakov inspects and gives his approval, leaving only one spot left between Chefs Katsuki, Chulanont, Crispino, and Ji. It’s a frenzied thirty seconds before—]

Chef Katsuki: Check!

[Chef Katsuki wipes his brow with his half apron while Yakov examines his brunoise skills. The sun is getting higher overhead, bringing with it the heat of the day.]

Yakov: This is acceptable. You may step off the line.

[Chef Katsuki offers a brief smile and a short bow before joining Chefs Yang and Lee for the final round of the Quickfire.]
Chef Katsuki: [looking around] Wait...am I in the top three?

Chef Yang: [pumping her fist] I’m in the top three!

Chef Chulanont: [groans] All that sweat for no results. Ugh.

[Christophe and Yakov face the remaining three chefs, now at three remaining stations that have been cleared of apple debris and replaced with some basic pantry ingredients. The picnic blanket of Shame has grown slightly more populated.]

Christophe: So Chefs Yang, Lee, and Katsuki. Welcome to Phase three. We’re finally going to let you cook!

Yakov: You will have twenty minutes to prepare a dish featuring the apples you just prepared. The dish I prefer will result in immunity for the chef who served it.

Christophe: Under your stations you will find burners and additional tools. You may use any of the ingredients at your station, or in our Top Chef on the go pantry, but! Don’t lose sight of the key ingredient. This is your chance to make a first impression with Chef Yakov! Don’t waste it!

Chef Lee: [doing calculations in his head] Twenty minutes...is not a lot of time.

Christophe: Your time starts now! Good luck!

[All three chefs scramble in different directions. Chef Katsuki immediately heads for the cold section of the fresh ingredient pantry examining the seafood and muttering under his breath. Chef Lee appears to struggle briefly with his portable burner, while Chef Yang is already dicing apples at her station, her burner lit and heating some kind of oil in a pan. From the shade, the eliminated contestants watch and evaluate the quickly moving chefs...and each other.]

Chef Ji: Who’s looking like the toughest opponent so far? Oh, well...Yuuri, Seung-gil, and Isabella are at the top at the end of the first Quickfire, and that definitely counts for something. But a lot of the chefs that were eliminated first have pretty big reputations. I mean JJ, Victor, Sara...

Chef Plisetsky: [scoffing] Nikiforov acts like he’s God’s gift to the kitchen, but he’s practically a hasbeen already, with his stupid romantic restaurants. As for those guys up there? This was a talent show. I’ll let you know what I think when I see some real cooking happen.

Chef Chulanont: Well I’m a tough competitor, of course [wink] But I think we’ve got a lot to see from people yet. I know Victor is terrifyingly good at what he does, but sometimes being good at
running a kitchen doesn’t make you good at *Top Chef*, you know? Just like being quiet doesn’t mean you haven’t got the skills to be here. [whispers conspiratorially] That’s why my money’s on Yuuri for the finals.

Christophe: Ten minutes, chefs! Your time is halfway up!

[If possible the pace of the chefs increases. Chef Lee appears to have given up on his burner and is emulsifying a creamy dressing in a glass bowl. Chef Yang is searing pork while Chef Katsuki appears to have cooked scallops and is currently juliennning apple and celery. The second half of the round passes even more quickly than the first, and it only feels like moments before the chefs are placing their last garnishes on their plates and Christophe is calling time.]

Chef Katsuki: [looking over the other chef’s plates] Wow...

[The waiting chefs all listen intently as Yakov approaches the first dishes of the competition are presented to the head judge. First on the line is Chef Katsuki.]

Christophe: Chef! What have you whipped up for us today?

Chef Katsuki: [adjusting his glasses] I’ve prepared a julienne apple salad, topped with a seared scallop and dressed with a vinaigrette of apple juice and rice wine vinegar, with some a-additional seasoning, of course.

[Silently, Yakov and Christophe sample the elegantly presented dish. Yakov chews thoughtfully, before nodding and moving down the line.]

Christophe: Second in line, we have Chef Lee.

Chef Lee: I made jicama and apple slaw, with a chili vinaigrette and celery seed. [flatly] Please enjoy.

[Chef Lee is the only contestant who did not attempt to cook a protein, and this doesn’t go unnoticed by the head judge as he and Christophe taste the dish. With a curt thanks Yakov moves on to Chef Yang.]

Christophe: Last but not least, what are we looking at, chef?

Chef Yang: I’ve made a seared pork loin, with a ginger spiced apple compote.

[The final tasting is equally quick, and nonplussed. Chefs Yang and Katsuki glance at each other uneasily, probably hoping for more of a response from their primary judge in the competition, but none is forthcoming before the chefs are gathered back together, with the three finalists in front.]

Christophe: Well, Yakov, you’ve seen and you’ve tasted. Who fell below your expectations, and who surpassed them?

Yakov: Chef Lee, your salad was technically successful, but it was expected. You’ll need to stretch yourself as a chef if you plan to reach any higher than the middle of the pack.

[Chef Lee looks displeased, but he gives a curt nod as Yakov moves on.]

Yakov: Chef Yang, your pork was overcooked. [Chef Yang looks crestfallen] But you took more of a risk than the other competitors, and chose a more difficult protein given the time limit.
[Despite the critique, Chef Yang still looks hopeful.]

Yakov: Katsuki...your dish was satisfactory. The flavors were understated, but defined and interesting. ...I have no complaints.

[There is wide eyed muttering among several of the contestants as Chef Katsuki offers the gruff judge a polite bow and his thanks.]

Christophe: Well chef? Who is our first challenge winner?

Yakov: The winner is...Chef Katsuki.

[There’s a beat of silence, before Chef Katsuki’s eyes widen and the rest of the chefs break out into a polite round of applause, punctuated by a few whoops from Chefs Chulanont, Ji, and de la Iglesia.]

Christophe: Congratulations, Chef Katsuki! Immunity is yours!

[Chef Katsuki is very pink in the cheeks as he exchanges a sportsmanlike handshake with Chefs Lee and Yang. It seems he is not used to being the center of attention.]

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Chef Nikiforov: Chef Katsuki should be proud of himself. Winning the first Quickfire is very impressive, and a good omen for future challenges! [beaming] I can already tell he’s going to be my biggest competition as the show moves forward!

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Chef Lee: [frowning] I imagine it feels good to win, but it also paints a target on your back. We’ll see how Katsuki holds up under pressure.

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Chef Katsuki: [blows out a deep breath] Well...okay then.

[Chef Katsuki pushes his hair out of his eyes and offers the camera a lopsided grin.]

Chapter End Notes

Next, on Top Chef: International: Our chefs face their first elimination challenge! Who will shine, and who will be sent packing?
[Cue theme music as “Elimination challenge” flashes across the screen. Still on Governor’s Island, Christophe is alone once more in front of the contestants, ready to explain the next day’s challenge, this one with much higher stakes.]

Christophe: Chefs, you’ve been invited to the Top Chef kitchen from nearly a dozen different international locations, each with their own rich culinary traditions. To help you get to know one another, we’ve arranged a little icebreaker for your first elimination challenge. Each chef will be preparing a dish based on the home city of one of their fellow contestants, to be served at a dinner for our judges tomorrow night. You may do any research you like in order to decide on your dish, including interviewing your fellow chefs as you all move into the Top Chef apartments later today! Take this as an opportunity to get to know one another, and share your culinary expertise!

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Chef Plisetsky: [scowling] Ugh, share my recipes? Fat chance.

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Chef Ji: [starry eyed] Wow, I can’t believe I get to learn from all these great chefs! [frowning] There’s four Russian contestants though, which means if anyone who gets assigned St. Petersburg makes a mistake they’ll stand out big time! [fingers crossed] Oh, I hope I don’t get Russia.

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Christophe: In order to assign the international city you’ll be basing your dish on, we’ll be drawing knives, in traditional Top Chef fashion. But there’s a twist! What better way to welcome our international chefs to New York City than with a game of Yankee Swap?

[There is general confusion among the contestants, with the exception of Chef de la Iglesia, who groans immediately.]

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Chef de la Iglesia: [head in his hands] My abuelita made us play this at Christmas last year. I have three cousins who still won’t talk to me.

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Chef Chulanont: I’ve been working in the Midwest for a while now. Americans get up to all kinds of weird stuff at holidays. [shrugs] I’ve learned to just smile and bring a gift.

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Christophe: [still laughing at Chef de la Iglesia’s reaction] I see our Californian representative has guessed where this is going! For those of us less familiar with strange American game traditions, a summary of the rules, as provided to me by our producers just before we began taping this segment!

[From his breast pocket Christophe reveals a small printed piece of paper, as well as a pair of gold
wire framed glasses, which he puts on before reading aloud.]

Christophe: Our chefs will be invited in a random order to draw a knife, which will bear the home
city of one of their fellow contestants. The next chef will be permitted to either draw another knife at
random, or steal the knife drawn by the previous chef. Events will proceed until the final chef has
drawn or stolen a knife, and no knife may be stolen more than three times. Everybody still with me?

[Most of the chefs nod.]

Christophe: Chef Katsuki, as the winner of the Quickfire you get a special advantage! You will be
allowed to draw a knife last, and you will be free to steal any other chef’s pick.

[Several chefs glance at Chef Katsuki nervously, who seems to be surveying the knife block with
careful consideration.]

Christophe: And that’s it, darlings! Before we begin, you may attempt to secure your own home
city as your inspiration for this challenge, but be warned: there could be big risk in deciding to tread
familiar territory this early in the competition. Why not take a chance on a new cuisine, and get to
know your fellow contestants?

[Christophe is provided a velvet bag from which to draw the order of the contestants. All the chefs
watch nervously as the host makes a show of rustling through the names.]

Christophe: First to the block: Chef Lee!

[Chef Lee approaches the block of identical knives with an analytical eye.]

Chef Lee:[voiceover] It might seem like a disadvantage to choose so early in the game, but
mathematically I’ll actually have higher odds of getting the city I want, especially if I choose a city
that will be sought after by the other chefs but that I don’t want myself.

[After a second’s consideration Chef Lee draws a knife from the block with a dramatic
twang. He
holds up the knife, which is inscribed with “BEIJING, CHINA” in clear, blocky letters.]

Christophe: An excellent first choice! Going second…[a moment of rustling] Chef Popovich!

Chef Popovich: [voiceover] I admit Asian cuisines are a blindspot for me, but I also don’t want
Russia! It would remind me far too much of home, and of my Anya who has banished me from her
love in St. Petersburg.

[Chef Popovich wastes no time drawing knife from the block, uninterested in stealing Beijing from
Chef Lee, only to look despondent as he reveals the first of the three knives labeled ST.
PETERSBURG, RUSSIA.]

Christophe: Oh, too bad. But the game has only just begun!

[Christophe next draws Chefs Babicheva, de la Iglesia, and Leroy, who draw FLORENCE, ITALY,
MONTREAL, CANADA, and ALMATY, KAZAKHSTAN, respectively. Chef Nikiforov looks
unexpectedly pleased to draw HASETSU, KAZAKHSTAN. Chef Yang is the first to steal, taking one of the
ST. PETERSBURG’s from Chef Popovich.]

Christophe:[rubbing his hands together] Ohoho, now things are getting interesting!

Chef Yang: [shrugging] I’m here to challenge myself.
[Chef Popovich looks relieved and opts to draw another knife, only to deflate when he manages to draw a second ST. PETERSBURG.]

Christophe: [laughing] Bad luck chef, but there’s still time! Next, Chef Plisetsky!

Chef Plisetsky: [pointing at Chef Lee] I want Beijing.

[Chef Lee yields his knife without protest, drawing another knife to reveal BANGKOK, THAILAND. As before, the chef shows no outward response to his choice. Next are Chefs Crispino and Ji, who draw LOS ANGELES, USA, and MOSCOW, RUSSIA. Chef Altin steals BANGKOK from Chef Lee, who draws SEOUL, SOUTH KOREA with a strategic gleam in his eye. Chef Chulanont draws VANCOUVER, CANADA with a curious expression, which leaves only Chef Katsuki without an assigned city.]

Christophe: Well, Chef? There’s only one knife remaining in our block but all the other cities are still in play. You certainly have your pick.

[Chef Katsuki examines his fellow competitors thoughtfully, all of whom make various efforts to either conceal their knives or look strategically uninterested.]

Chef Katsuki: [chuckling nervously] I’ll admit, I’ve kind of lost track of how many Russias are on the board, but I know I want St. Petersburg. [he reaches out to Chef Popovich] Do you mind if I steal?

[Chef Popovich gives his knife up without complaint, yet again opting to draw a knife, this time the final one from the block. A few other chefs shift awkwardly, having kept up the count of exactly how many Russias were on the board, as the Chef Popovich draws the last knife only to reveal the third and final ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA.]

Christophe: [patting the distraught chef on the back] Alas, the cruel turns of Fate. Chin up, chef, at least you’re in your home territory! Just make sure to wow the judges tomorrow or face elimination!

[Christophe addresses the group, who all hold the name of their assigned cities with various levels of either satisfaction or uncertainty.]

Christophe: Very well, chefs! You have your assignments! Tomorrow you’ll cook and serve your creative, authentic, and elevated dishes to our judges in the Top Chef kitchen. From the top three dishes the judges will choose a winner. Sadly, that also means the bottom three dishes will be at risk for elimination. So bring your A game to this first challenge, and rest up tonight! You won’t be relaxing again until we’ve crowned a new Top Chef!

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[Cheerful transitional music plays over a montage of Manhattan, finally settling on the steel and glass facade of the high rise where the Top Chef apartments will be located. On the street outside several of the younger chefs shout and point at their fancy new digs. Chef Nikiforov tucks his designer sunglasses onto his head and gives an appreciative whistle.]

Chef Ji: [carrying a backpack on his shoulder] Come on, let’s see inside!

[On the thirtieth floor, the chefs open the door to their new apartment to exclamations of awe and excitement. The modern space is huge, to accommodate the thirteen contestants, with an open concept, hardwood floors, and floor to ceiling windows that give a view of the whole city. Multiple bedrooms open to reveal sets of bunkbeds, and the bathrooms have separate showers and soaker
tubs. The kitchen is all marble and stainless steel, with a full wine rack that Chefs Babicheva and Crispino begin to inspect eagerly.]

Chef Chulanont: Look at that view!

Chef Plisetski: [heading for one of the bedrooms] Dibs on a top bunk!

[Chefs Ji and de la Iglesia make similar cries of dibs, racing into the various bedrooms, while Chefs Leroy, Yang, and Popovich make themselves comfortable on the stylish living room furniture.]

Chef Leroy: [still wearing his own designer sunglasses] Now this is a crash pad fit for a King.

[The sun sets over New York, but the apartment is still lit up, everyone too excited for the next day’s challenge to fall asleep yet. A few chefs have paired off to discuss the cities they’ll be expected to honor with their dishes the next day. Chef Leroy eagerly chatters to Chef de la Iglesia, while Chef Sara shares some of her favorite dishes from home with Chef Babicheva over a glass of white wine. From somewhere Chef Chulanont has managed to procure a bottle of champagne, and he passes glasses around the huge dining room table to most of his fellow competitors, giving each a generous pour.]

Chef Chulanont: [toasting his fellow chefs with a full glass] Welcome to New York, baby!

[Outside, a balcony offers a stunning view of the Manhattan skyline. Chefs Nikiforov and Katsuki are standing at the railing, their shoulders almost touching. With their hands resting on the high balcony rail, it’s visible that they each wear a gold wedding ring. The metal glints in the warm light of the setting sun.]

Chef Nikiforov: [sighs] It’s beautiful.

Chef Katsuki: [softly] I’m so glad we’re here.

[Chef Katsuki glances back at the camera self-consciously and takes a noticeable step away from Chef Nikiforov.]

Chef Katsuki: [louder] So glad we’re all here. T-to compete, I mean.

[Chef Nikiforov looks taken aback, until he also spots the camera and his shoulders drop.]

Chef Nikiforov: Ah, yes, right. Should be a good fight.

[Chef Nikiforov yawns obviously, stretching his arms over his head.]

Chef Nikiforov: It’s been a long day, don’t you think? Best to turn in early before the first elimination, tomorrow. Not that we all have to worry about that.

[Chef Nikiforov elbows Chef Katsuki playfully, who only rolls his eyes.]

Chef Katsuki: Immunity or no, you know I’ll still be cooking to win.

Chef Nikiforov: I’m counting on it. [grinning] See you in the kitchen, chef.

[Chef Nikiforov steps away from the railing and returns to the light of the indoors. Chef Katsuki watches with a pleased expression long after he’s gone.]
[The next day, the chefs get their first glimpse of the Top Chef Kitchen. The commercial appliances gleam in the space, and a tile mosaic on one wall forms the Top Chef Logo in intricate orange and blue. On the left is a massive pantry full of both fresh and shelf friendly ingredients, on the right a huge room full of every kind of pot, pan and small appliance. On a long row of hooks at the door are thirteen white chef jackets, all inscribed with the contestant’s last name on the sleeve. The chef’s eagerly put on their jackets, and approach the kitchen proper, where Christophe is waiting in another suit. This time, he’s dressed for dinner in dapper navy blue.]

Christophe: Welcome chefs, to your new home kitchen! I hope you’re ready to compete!

[There is some applause from the chefs, but things are quieting down as everyone gets in the right headspace to execute their dishes.]

[Chef Chulanont: [wearing his sunglasses again] Yesterday was party time. Now [peeking over his glasses with a fiery glint in his eye] it’s cooking time.]

[Chef Ji: I’m really nervous going into today’s challenge. [rubbing the back of his neck] Chef Plisetsky did tell me about his favorite dish, but he didn’t share any of his recipes. Mila helped me though! I’m just going to do my best. I’m here to learn!]

[Christophe: You all know what you’re here to do, but before we get started, let’s meet your judges!]

[The three judges walk in. Yakov first, in another suit, followed by an elegant Asian woman in a chic violet dress and an unbelievably tall Italian with his long hair tied back in a ponytail over his brown suit.]

Christophe: Please allow me to present, the current Editor of Food and Wine Magazine, Minako Okukawa, and New York City restaurateur Celestino Cialdini. And of course, you all remember your head judge, chef and critic Yakov Feltsman.

[There is more polite applause as the judges offer the contestants their greetings. All three are powerhouses in the food world in their own right, with connections and opportunities and could further the career of any of the competing chefs.]

Minako: We’re looking forward to your cooking, chefs!

Celestino: We’re ready to be impressed!

[The judges exit as quickly as they came, stepping into an adjacent room where the chefs will serve their dishes.]

Christophe: Now, as you recall, you will have two hours to prepare your dishes, each inspired by an international city! in order to make sure the judges, and myself, get to enjoy each of your dishes hot and fresh, each chef will enter the kitchen on a five minute delay. We’ve already randomly selected the order and stepping into the kitchen first is....Chef Leroy! Chef, your time starts now!

Chef Leroy: Alright! Start number one, stay number one!

[Chef Leroy wastes no time, heading directly for the pantry to begin gathering the ingredients for his]
dish.]

Christophe: The rest of you will be notified when it’s your turn to start, don’t you worry! Until then, enjoy the wait, and good luck!

[Christophe vanishes to wait with the judges, leaving the chefs no choice but to sit and wait until five minutes pass and it’s Chef Lee’s turn to begin. Five minutes later it’s Chef de la Iglesia, followed by Chefs Plisetsky and Altin. The noise in the kitchen steadily builds as more contestants begin their dishes, until conversation can barely be heard over the swift *shing* of knives and the sound of igniting burners.]

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Chef Yang: I don’t like waiting, but I know I just have to stay calm. I feel good about my planned dish. Chef’s Nikiforov and Babicheva were very helpful last night when I was doing my research.

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[Chef Leroy turns a skewer of meat on a flaming grill. Chef Plisetsky tosses green beans and chilis in a wok nearly the size of his head.]

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Chef Katsuki: There’s a lot of nerves among the chefs, but I think we’re all excited to get in the kitchen and prove ourselves. I don’t know how my dish will turn out, but I like this challenge. Being from Japan, people make assumptions about the kind of food I cook, and while I love traditional Japanese cuisine, this is my chance to show that I can do more than that. I’ve trained in cities all over the world, and I have a lot of different skills to offer the judges!

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[Chef Lee shaves beef into paper thin slices. Chef Yang breaks down a small pile of potatoes and rutabegas.]

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Chef Ji: Ugh, I’m starting last! I wish I didn’t have to wait, now I’ll only be more nervous!

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[In the heat of the kitchen the clock seems to tick faster and faster. In no time at all Chef Leroy is putting the final touches on his plate as his last few seconds wind down.]

Chef Leroy: [raising his hands in the air as his buzzer goes off] And that’s how we do things JJ style!

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[One room over, the judges and Christophe are seated along one side of a rectangular table draped with a white table cloth. Behind them is the constant Top Chef Logo. First to reach the end of his time limit, Chef Leroy enters the room with his dish.]

Christophe: Welcome all, to our first judge’s table. First off, we’ll taste one of the more...esoteric cuisines of the evening. Chef Leroy, inspired by the culinary traditions of Almaty, Kazakhstan. JJ, please tell us about your dish.
Chef Leroy: I can’t say I’ve ever been to Almaty, but there’s no cuisine too tough for King JJ to master! Inspired by the flavors of Kazakhstan I have made a rice pilaf with caramelized onions and green peppers, along with a skewer of spice rubbed lamb. On the plate is a fresh yogurt sauce to keep things cool. Enjoy!

Celestino: I can’t say I’m an expert on this cooking style, but your lamb is well cooked and everything is very flavorful.

Minako: [clearly annoyed by Chef Leroy] I wish I could find something wrong with it…[reluctantly] but I can’t.

[Chef Leroy grins and departs for the kitchen.]

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Christophe: The first chef representing his home city tonight, Chef Seung-gil Lee.

Chef Lee: I made Bulgogi, it’s very popular as a Korean barbecue dish in Seoul. The beef is sliced thin and marinated, paired with rice and pickled vegetables after it’s grilled.

Yakov: As it was yesterday, chef, your knife work is impressive. However I think this was a very safe dish for you to choose. How does your cooking so far show us your potential?

Chef Lee: I don’t cook to please other people. I’m confident in the skills I have and I know my food is good.

[Chef Lee offers a nod to the judges and departs back to the kitchen. None of the judges look thrilled, but Chef Yakov looks particularly displeased.]

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[Chef de la Iglesia presents his plate to the judges. Framed by a swipe of red sauce his dish was shaped by a ring mold to make a tower that shows off colorful stripes of different cooked vegetables.]

Chef de la Iglesia: I drew Montreal, which is JJ’s home turf, and that guy loves to talk, but he also knows his stuff. So on his recommendation I’m doing my own twist on a dish called pate chinois. My version is vegetarian, so you’ll taste roasted eggplant, leeks, and sweet corn, topped with mashed sweet potatoes. The sauce is a chipotle ketchup.

Minako: Your eggplant is slightly overcooked, but your presentation is beautiful, chef.

Celestino: I agree. Also the sauce is well seasoned, though I can’t say I eat a lot of ketchup in this job!

Christophe: Thank you, chef! Back to the kitchen!

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[Next is Chef Plisetsky.]

Christophe: [as the other judges taste] Well Mr. Plisetsky, did you learn from any of your housemates in preparing this dish?

Chef Plisetsky: [scowling] No, I researched on my own to learn about Beijing cooking. I’ve made a crispy duck breast, with dry fried green beans. A few mandarin orange slices are meant to cut the
spice of the vegetables.

Minako: The green beans are spicy and delicious, and the duck is well cooked and crisp. My only complaint is I wish there were some kind of sauce on the plate, not just the mandarin orange salad garnish.

Yakov: I agree, it’s flavorful but too dry. If you had asked your fellow chefs their advice, you might have had a perfect dish.

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[Back in the kitchen more chefs are starting their dishes. Chef Katsuki is seasoning a cut of beef and Chef Nikiforov is cooking something sizzling in a cast iron skillet. Chef Plisetsky returns to the hot kitchen with a huff, choosing to stand silently in gap between the stove and the walk in cooler where Chef Altin is working on a spicy broth and grilling off marinated shrimp.]

Chef Altin: [after a length of silence] How did it go?

Chef Plisetsky: [watching Chef Altin stir his broth] Fine. They all know I’m the best, so they gave me a hard time over some stupid detail. I’ll be perfect next time and they’ll have to shut their fat faces.

[Chef Altin nods, offering Chef Plisetsky a clean spoon from his apron pocket.]

Chef Altin: Would you like to taste? I’m not sure I added enough lemon grass.

[Chef Plisetsky takes the spoon reluctantly, but when Chef Altin turns away to check his shrimp the younger chef quickly sneaks a taste of the bubbling broth. His eyes grow wide, and he stares at the back of his rival chef as if seeing him for the first time.]

Chef Altin: [turning back] How is it?

Chef Plisetsky: [hiding the spoon behind his back]...It’s alright. I guess. Enough lemon grass, but add more fish sauce.

[Chef Plisetsky scurries back to his own station with a scowl. Chef Altin continues to work, but his usual stone faced expression softens briefly into what could almost be called a smile.]

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[Back at the judge’s table, Chef Popovich explains his dish as the judges taste.]

Chef Popovich: I’ve made pelmeni, dumplings from my home city of St. Petersburg. I used to cook these frequently for my girlfriend, who broke my heart just before I left for this competition, so I tried to use my heartbreak to fuel my inspiration.

Minako: [wrinkling her nose] This is pretty under salted.

Celestino: The pasta is well cooked...but yes, very underseasoned.

[Yakov only stares stonily at the plate.]

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[The judges taste Chef Yang’s plate next, as she explains her ingredients inspired by St. Petersburg.]
Chef Yang: I’ve made a duo of smoked fish, salmon and trout, paired with creme fraiche and caviar. With the trout you have roasted root vegetables and the salmon chive and dill whipped potatoes.

Christophe: Chef Yakov, is that a smile I see?

Yakov: [not frowning] This reminds me of home.

[Yakov takes a second bite of Chef Yang’s dish while the other judges stare wide eyed. Chef Yang is beaming as she thanks the judges and retreats back to the kitchen.]

Chef Altin: My dish is Tom Yum Goong, a spicy shrimp soup popular in Bangkok.

Yakov: [slightly red faced] Hm, you’ve certainly managed a fragrant broth [coughs] And spicy.

Chef Altin: …the dish requires a lot of chillis.

Celestino: [grinning] You are a man of few words, chef, but your dish is loud enough for the both of you. In a good way!

Minako: [fanning herself] Yes, delicious. [to a producer off camera] Can we get some water please?

[All the chefs are now in the kitchen or have already been judged. Chef Nikiforov places his final garnish on his plate, while Chefs Katsuki and Chulanont are in the midst of their dishes and Chefs Babicheva, Crispino, and Ji are just getting started.]

Chef Katsuki: [adding brandy to his deglaze, which quickly flames up] Any results yet?

Chef Chulanont: [cracking the shell of a dungeoness crab] I haven’t heard much. Leo looks happy, Isabella made Yakov smile, and I think Georgi might be crying in the walk in freezer.

Chef Katsuki: [calmly tossing his pan of flaming mushrooms] Just another day in the kitchen, then?

Chef Chulanont: [grinning] You know it!

[The judges taste Chef Nikiforov’s dish, inspired by Hasetsu, Japan. On the plate is a delicately breaded bite of pork cutlet, drizzled with a rich ponzu sauce and paired with pickled baby bok choy.]

Minako: This is very good chef. Your balance of salt and acid is very delicately handled. A successful dish, to be sure.

Chef Nikiforov: Thank you, I cook it often at home for my husband.

Celestino: Oh? Is your husband Japanese? This is very authentic.

Chef Nikiforov: [with a cryptic smile] We’ve visited many times.

Chef Katsuki: I’ve made a deconstructed stroganoff, with slow cooked beef, crimini mushrooms and sweet onions. The gravy is flavored with brandy.
Minako: [chewing thoughtfully] Hm, this is very elegant, chef. Nicely done.

[The other judges agree and Chef Katsuki quickly returns to the kitchen, not looking too nervous.]

[In the kitchen Chef Crispino sauces her plate while Chef Babicheva pulls a tray of hot croutons from the oven.]

Chef Chulanont: I was inspired by Vancouver’s Cantonese influenced cuisine, so today I’ve made a trio of seafood dim sum!

[The judges sample Chef Chulanont’s fried squid, steamed crab dumplings, and spotted prawn spring rolls. Celestino looks impressed. Yakov never looks impressed.]

Celestino: This is a lot of cooking chef, you must have a lot of energy in the kitchen!

Minako: The flavors are a little too similar in the dumpling and the spring roll though. Be sure to include distinct variations if you’re going to shoot for three components.

Chef Chulanont: [saluting] Yes Ma’am!

Chef Ji: [looking at the judges nervously] Today I’ve made p-piroshki, in honor of Moscow. I’ve never heard of them before last night, so I hope you enjoy them!

[The judges cut into the two piroshki on the plate, letting out the steam of the warm filling. Yakov turns the plate, revealing the admittedly imperfect baking of the bread rolls.]

Yakov: Your rolls are uneven in size, which is why they did not bake properly. The inner dough is underdone. Your presentation is also lacking.

Celestino: The flavor is good though, and it’s certainly something to have attempted bread in only two hours.

Yakov: Hm…

Chef Crispino: Chef de la Iglesia told me about a new taco filling that’s popular in Los Angeles right now, so I’ve prepared for you a braised short rib with a spicy chimichurri sauce, I’ve paired it with a lightly dressed cilantro and mango salad and a few crispy tortilla strips.

Minako: [As the other judges continue to chew] Your short rib is a touch overdone, chef, but it’s a tasty dish.

Chef Crispino: Thank you.

Chef Babicheva: Inspired by Florence I’ve made a panzanella, or bread salad, with heirloom tomatoes, red onion, and kalamata olives in a balsamic vinaigrette.
Celestino: Ah, now this reminds me of home! A refreshing end to the night chef, thank you.

[With the last of the contestants judged, the heat in the kitchen is finally simmering down. Chefs de la Iglesia, Yang, and Chulanot pass a bottle of water between them where they’re seated against the cooler door. Through a rack of pots and pans, the viewer can see Chefs Nikiforov and Katsuki at an empty counter, tasting the leftovers of each other’s dishes.]

Chef Nikiforov: Wow, I was hoping someone with St. Petersburg would make stroganoff. It’s my favorite.

Chef Katsuki: [grinning as he takes a bite of pork cutlet] Hm, that’s funny. It’s my husband’s favorite too.

Chef Nikiforov: What a coincidence!

[Both chefs smile, like they’re sharing a secret.]

[A time lapse shot of the darkening New York City skyline fades into a room lined with shelves of extra ingredients. The twelve chefs wait on fold out chairs for Christophe to arrive and summon them to judges table. There is a general air of exhaustion after the dinner service, but also exhilaration and friendly chatter. Chefs Ji and de la Iglesia offer each other a fistbump, both proud of their dishes though the judging is still to come.]

Chef Babicheva: I guess this is the part where they remind us this is a competition, huh?

Chef Katsuki: [shaking his head ruefully] I’d forgotten what it was like to cook on a clock like that.

Chef Popovich: [head in his hands] I’m never cooking pelmeni again.

[All the chefs perk up as Christophe steps into the room.]

Christophe: Well done chefs! The judges all agreed, this was a tantalizing taste of the meals to come this season! That said, there of course still must be a winner...and a loser.

[A silent pause]

Christophe: First, the judges would like to speak with Chefs Yang, Nikiforov...and Altin.

[The three chefs file out, leaving the rest of their fellow contestants in the green room to wonder as to their fate. In the corner, Chef Chulanont appears to be comforting Chef Katsuki, who watched the three chefs leave with a particularly worried expression.]

Chef Chulanont: [quietly] Don’t worry, silly! They always call the top three first. He’s gonna be fine.

[Chefs Yang, Nikiforov, and Altin stand before the judge’s table.]

Yakov: Chefs, you are here because you challenged yourselves [pointed glance at Victor, who stares back innocently] Some more than others. The three of you represent our favorite dishes, and the most successful representations of your assigned cities. Congratulations.
Christophe: Chef Yang, you produced a simple, elegant duo that none of the judges could find flaw with. Plus you managed to make Yakov homesick. Well done!

[The judges laugh, even Yakov managing a gruff chuckle.]

Celestino: Chef Altin, you no doubt produced the spiciest dish of the night, for some perhaps slightly too spicy. But on Top Chef we appreciate boldness, and your dish had the refinement and the technique to match your fiery flavors.

Minako: Chef Nikiforov, you served a dish that shows your years of experience in the kitchen. Your flavors were understated compared to some in the group, but you’ve proven you’re still willing to move in new directions as a chef. We’re looking forward to you surprising us even more in future challenges.

Chef Nikiforov: I always do my best!

Christophe: [laughing] Well, I’ll leave it to our head judge to announce our first winner! Yakov, who is lucky number one?

Yakov: The winner of the first elimination challenge is….Chef Yang.

[The other chefs applaud politely while an ecstatic Chef Yang shakes the hands of the judges.]

Chef Nikiforov: Isabella deserved her win. It was a lovely dish, and the key to Yakov’s heart is definitely nostalgia. But this is just the first battle. I plan to win the war.

Chef Altin: [shrugging] Top three is pretty good. For now.

Chef Yang: [beaming] It feels good, yeah. I’m not going to let it go to my head though! Tomorrow is another day and another challenge.

Christophe: Congratulations Chef Yang, and to all three of you on your success in the first elimination challenge. We expect great things from you now! You’re free to go and celebrate your victory, but first, we’d like you to please send out Chefs Lee, Popovich, and Ji.

[The victorious Chef Yang leads her fellow chefs back to the green room, where hugs and congratulations are freely exchanged.]

Chef Chulanont: Who’s on the block?

Chef Nikiforov: [smile fading] They want to see Georgi, Seung-Gil...and Guang hong.

[The celebratory atmosphere quiets immediately, the bottom ranking chefs readying to meet their fate with the support of their fellow competitors. In short order the three stand before the judges.]

Minako: Unfortunately chefs, this elimination was all about challenging yourself. I don’t think it’s a surprise that two of you standing before us now cooked for you own native cities. If you were going to make your own familiar cuisine for us today, it had to be perfection, and frankly chefs: it wasn’t.
Chef Popovich, your dumplings were unimpressive. You told us they were inspired by heartbreak, but the dish lacked both passion and flavor.

Celestino: Chef Ji, you had the opposite problem. You stretched yourself as a chef to take on Moscow, and while you managed to cultivate rich flavors, your final dish was rough and inelegant. Your inexperience was your enemy today.

Yakov: Chef Lee, your dish was passable. However I requested your presence here in the bottom after your performance in the Quickfire this morning. This is now two challenges where you have failed to push yourself as a chef. Good technique is important, but inspiration is what wins Top Chef. If you cannot show us your cooking is not only proficient, but inspired, you will quickly find yourself packing your knives.

[Dramatic music delays the moment of revelation as Christophe looks at all three chefs with doe eyed sympathy.]

Christophe: The first eliminated contestant is….Chef Popovich. Georgi...please pack your knives and go.

[Chef Popovich looks genuinely shocked to hear he’s been eliminated, but he quickly schools his expression.]

Chef Popovich: I’m heartbroken all over again, I admit, but I’m grateful to have enjoyed this opportunity.

Yakov: Find your focus again, Georgi. Once you have reclaimed your passion, you will make a name for yourself in this world.

Christophe: Chefs Ji and Lee, that means you are safe, and will continue on Top Chef, but remember the judge’s feedback tonight.

[All three chefs thank the judges and return to the green room, where the rest of the chefs wait to hear the results.]

Chef Popovich: [finally tearing up] There were too many Russians in the kitchen. [laughing wetly] One of us had to go!

[Immediately Chefs Nikiforov and Babicheva offer their compatriot their condolences in Russian, while the rest of the contestants give the departing a handshake or an encouraging pat on the back. On the far side of the room, Chef Lee looks quietly furious, and Chef Ji talks animatedly with Chefs Chulanont and Katsuki, a bright grin on his face. Chef Altin offers Chef Yang a quiet congratulation on her win while Chef Plisetsky looks on in puzzlement.]

[Accepting a kleenex from the producer with a snuffle] Sadly, the judges are correct. You can’t cook with a broken heart, and I proved that today. But no fear! I will find love again, and then I will return to the restaurant world triumphant! This is not the last of Georgi Popovich!

[In the empty Top Chef kitchen, Chef Popovich, packs up his knife case. He leaves through the main doors, and the lights go out behind him.]
Producer: So. After today’s challenge, who do you think is the chef to watch?

Chef Leroy: Well Chef Yang won right? Winning is what matters in this kitchen, and right now she’s on top. I’m still the chef to beat, though! [boisterous laughter]

Chef Ji: I’m just so glad I made it through the first round! I can’t wait for what’s next!

Chef Plisetsky: Chef Altin. He can cook, and he’s not here to make a spectacle for the cameras like some of these idiots. [nodding to himself] I’ll be keeping an eye out for that guy.

Chef Katsuki: I’m just watching out for myself. But um…[blushing] Chef Nikiforov did some impressive cooking today.

Chef Chulanont: Watch the quiet ones. [tapping the side of his nose] They didn’t get here on their sparkling television personalities, you know? So they must have had some serious skills to make the cut. You can’t separate the talent from the showboats until somebody wins and somebody goes home. [grinning] I can’t wait for the next challenge!

Chapter End Notes

Well? Are you rooting for anyone yet?
[Morning in the Top Chef apartment. Several chefs vie for the bathroom, where Chef Leroy seems to be spending an inordinate amount of time on his hair. Out on the balcony, Chef Babicheva does stretches on a yoga mat, while Chef Lee moves through the forms of some kind of meditative martial art.]

Chef Lee: I’m...not sure how to feel about last night’s judging. I still see nothing wrong with what I cooked. But clearly the judges saw something lacking. [frowning] Perhaps I should be using a different strategy to win.

[In the kitchen, there is the sizzle of eggs and the beep of the coffee pot. Several chefs are chatting over breakfast. Chef Nikiforov joins them, a cup of coffee in his hands. He sets a second mug filled with steaming green tea on the table and subtly nudges it toward Chef Katsuki, who takes it without looking before blushing and offering Chef Nikiforov a quiet thanks. The chef only smiles and they tune in to the conversation, where Chef Chulanont is gesticulating wildly over his bowl of cereal. Eventually all the chefs are ready for the day, and they file out of the apartment with their knife bags over their shoulders.]

Chef Chulanont: Oh my god, what are they wearing. Did they go clubbing?? I’m dying. I want both their outfits.

Christophe: Goodmorning chefs!

[The chefs return Christophe’s greetings, all examining the usually dapper host curiously.]

Christophe: [indicating his sunglasses] I’ll bet you’re wondering what this is all about. I confess, Ms. Okukawa and I got a little carried away celebrating the success of your first elimination dinner last night!

Minako: [tucking her glasses on her head] This guy is a real lightweight, chefs.
Christophe: [wincing] Not so loud, please!

[There’s some laughter among the contestants.]

Christophe: Luckily, we all know the best cure for a hangover: a greasy breakfast! And look! We have a dozen talented chefs all more than capable of providing.

Minako: For your Quickfire challenge today, Christophe and I would like to try your hangover curing breakfast. But there’s a twist!

Christophe: My stomach is still feeling a little delicate after last night. So, in order to enjoy all of your dishes, we’d like you to make them one bite. That’s right! We’d like you to make a breakfast *amuse-bouche*.

Minako: We want to taste all the flavors that would normally take up a whole plate in one mouthful.

Christophe: You have thirty minutes, and your time starts now!

[The chefs head directly for the pantry, which has been stocked with typical breakfast items of all kinds. It’s a mad dash for the eggs, which prove a popular ingredient for the dishes to come.]

Chef Nikiforov: An *amuse-bouche* is a dish that is usually served at the start of the meal, and the purpose is to be able to enjoy it in a single bite. Even smaller than an appetizer, it’s meant to give a preview of the meal to come, and also demonstrate the culinary philosophy of the chef who makes it. Literally, the French means “to amuse the mouth”, or tease the palate, which I take great pleasure in. [sexy wink]

Chef Ji: Breakfast is tough, because we all come from such different backgrounds. Do the judges want to see a more American breakfast, or should I make what I like to have at home? Oh dear...

[Chef Babicheva is combining fruit, spinach, and yogurt in a blender. Chef Iglesia crushes corn flakes to serve as a breading for a fritter. Chef Crispino cuts brioche into thick cubes.]

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] In Italy we don’t eat a lot of eggs for breakfast. We have a lot of bread, and of course coffee! So I’ve decided to make a brioche french toast bite with an espresso syrup drizzle.

[Chefs Nikiforov, Plisetsky, and Yang all supervise bacon sizzling on the stove. Chef Katsuki uses a curious tool to ready the presentation of his dish.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I figured out this tool that will take the top off an egg. That way I can use the yolk but I can save the intact shell as the serving dish for my breakfast *amuse*.

[Chef Leroy puts something into a panini press, Chef Ji drops balls of dough into the deep fryer, and Chef Lee appears razor focused on mixing a perfect hollandaise sauce.]

Chef Lee: [voiceover] I want to show the judges that I am capable of more variation in my cooking, while still keeping up my technical perfection.
[After thirty minutes, time is up, and the chefs place their small plates, bowls, and tasting spoons at the front of their stations for Christophe and Minako to taste.]

Christophe: Wow, chefs, I’m feeling better already with all these beautiful *amuse-bouches* in front of me. Let’s begin on this end, shall we?

[First on the line is Chef Babicheva. Minako and Christophe sample her dish, a purple smoothie served in a shot glass.]

Chef Babicheva: I like to start my day fresh and healthy, so I made a black berry and spinach smoothie, with plain yogurt to make it creamy. There’s a little mint as well.

Minako: [lips slightly pursed] Did you put any extra sweetener in this?

Chef Babicheva: Just a drop of honey.

Christophe: Maybe it could have used a drop more, eh? It certainly is tart! Thank you, chef.

[The judges move on from the disappointed Chef Babicheva to Chef Ji, who offers a bite sized donut.]

Chef Ji: I did a lemon glaze to cut the fat of the fried dough. I like to make these at home in the mornings!

Minako: It’s certainly sweet enough, but your frying technique is good. It’s not greasy at all.

[Next are Chefs Yang, Nikiforov, and Plisetsky, whose egg dishes garner general approval from the judges and no major critiques. Following them is Chef Altin, whose fried egg with bacon and olive tapenade goes over well. Several of the chefs are mildly chastised for their dishes being more than one bite.]

Christophe: Next we have Chef Katsuki, and what a pretty dish this is!

Chef Katsuki: Served in an eggshell you have a version of the classic Japanese breakfast: rice, a bite of crispy fish, and a fried quail egg. I added some miso to blend with the egg yolk and make a sauce for the rice. On the top are a few shreds of quick pickled carrot.

Minako: [holding the little egg containing Chef Katsuki’s dish] This is a beautiful presentation. Even though it’s technically more than one bite, the eggshell portion still makes this a perfect *amuse-bouche*.

Christophe: It doesn’t hurt that it’s also delicious! Salty and rich.

Chef Katsuki: [smiling nervously] Thank you.

Christophe: [moving down the line with Minako] Next we have Chef Leroy!

[Christophe and Minako love Chef Leroy’s mini Monte Cristo, but unfortunately they find Chef Crispino’s breakfast brioche to be overly sweet. Chef Chulanont’s spicy chicken waffle bite fares slightly better, but Chef de la Iglesia’s corn flake crusted hushpuppy is overdone.]

Christophe: And finally we have Chef Lee. Chef, I hope you’ve surprised us today.

Chef Lee: I made eggs Benedict, so you have a poached quail egg and bacon on a toast circle, topped with hollandaise sauce. It’s...not a dish I have made before.
Minako: [chewing with approval] It may not be in your comfort zone, Seung-gil, but it is very good. You’re hollandaise is perfect, and so is your portion. It was the textbook *amuse-bouche*.

Christophe: It looks like you’ve taken the judge’s advice for the better! Well done, chef.

[With all the dishes tasted, Christophe and Minako stand before the chefs again.]

Christophe: [to Minako] So, how was breakfast?

Minako: Breakfast was great, but only a few chefs got breakfast *and* *amuse-bouche*.

Christophe: Well, let’s get the bad news over with. Who do you think missed the mark this morning?

Minako: Leo. Unfortunately, your fritter was overdone, and all we could taste was cornflakes.

[Chef de la Iglesia nods, but his shoulders slump.]

Chef de la Iglesia: Ugh, this is my first time on the bottom, which is not great. But I still don’t feel like I’ve gotten to show the judges what I can really do!

Minako: Mila. I appreciated your fresh take on breakfast, but the berries were too tart, and the spinach only made it worse. It was difficult to finish.

Christophe: Anyone else?

Minako: For the opposite reason, Sara. You’re brioche bite tasted like dessert, not breakfast. The dish needed either salt or acid to break up the sugar.

Christophe: Alright, now for the top three! Who cured your hangover in one bite?

Minako: JJ, your Monte Cristo was just the right balance of sweet and salty. I definitely could have eaten a full sized version of your breakfast sandwich.

Chef Leroy: [throwing up his signature double Js] Watch out! King JJ is building momentum!

Minako: Yuuri, you made us another creative dish that was both beautiful and satisfying. Your fish was cooked perfectly and the runny egg yolk was rich and savory. It’s hard to believe that much flavor could fit inside such a small package.

Christophe: And your last favorite?

Minako: Seung-gil. Your *amuse-bouche* was a perfect single bite, and you executed several difficult techniques to make a classic dish. Well done.

[Chef Katsuki looks pleasantly surprised again, and Chef Lee quietly satisfied. Several chefs are not]
Christophe: So who is the victor, and the winner of immunity in the coming elimination?

Minako: The winning breakfast is...Chef Katsuki’s.

[There is applause among the chefs, several of whom pat Chef Katsuki on the back, including Chefs Nikiforov and Chulanont.]

Chef Chulanont: Two in a row, buddy! That’s a streak!

Christophe: Congratulations *mon ami*, you’re safe from elimination. And you’re lucky, because it’s a doozy!

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Chef de la Iglesia: I don’t know what’s coming in the elimination, but I want to finally get to the front of the pack! Being in the middle won’t be enough for long.

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Chef Babicheva: [sighing] I guess can see why the judges preferred the richer food over my smoothie. I’m still hoping I’ll have the chance to prove my healthy eating can be just as exciting as a greasy breakfast!

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Chef Lee:[shrugging] I wanted to win, but I guess at least I know the judges liked this dish better than the previous challenges.

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Chef Crispino: [frowning] Yuuri has won two Quickfires in a row. He seems like a quiet person, but I think we’ll all have to watch out for him as the challenges get tougher.

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Chef Katsuki: [thoughtful] I suppose in theory you could make it all the way to the final just by winning Quickfires. And you would never have to worry about the pressure getting to you during the elimination challenge.

[Chef Katsuki’s eyes light up.]

Chef Katsuki: I think I just figured out my long term strategy.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: The elimination requires more of our chefs than just sharp kitchen skills! Can your favorite walk the walk AND talk the talk? Stay tuned to find out!
Minako: As many of you know, there are a lot of obstacles that stand before the international chef and success in America. Language barriers, cultural differences, unfamiliar ingredient markets and availability. While not all success stories have to cross borders, finding an international audience can expand your brand, sell your cookbooks, and bring a world of new customers into your restaurants.

Minako: One of the strategies that has brought success to many international chefs has been to use television to boost your profile with American audiences. Wolfgang Puck, Masaharu Morimoto, and Jacques Torres are just a few chefs who have become household names in the States and out thanks to their ability to turn great cooking into a television brand that audiences can both learn from and relate to despite their varied culinary traditions and cultural backgrounds.

Christophe: But getting a permanent tv gig right off the bat is not so easy darlings, take it from me. The chance to prove your star power comes quick as a flash, and it can vanish into smoke just as easily. You have to stay on your toes, give your best Hollywood smile, and cook like you’ll never have another chance. What am I talking about? Live TV demonstrations, of course! News segments, morning talk shows, and of course cooking shows, you never know when you might be invited to enjoy your moment in the spotlight, and you have to have quick, teachable recipes ready to show off your culinary philosophy.

Minako: Chefs, for your elimination challenge, you’ll prepare a two and a half minute cooking demo, suitable for live television.

Chef Altin: [looking uncomfortable] Live...

Chef Katsuki: [looking downright nauseous] ...television?

Minako: You’ll do all the prep ahead of time, as well as have cooking components ready to show the judges, and of course a final dish for us to taste. You’ll be timed, and trust me, we will cut you off, so be strategic in your presentation.

Christophe: To help us judge your performances, we have a special guest! This rising star has plenty of experience sharing his personality as he frontlines his Japanese pop group Hakada Squad, and he’s no stranger to trying new cuisines after traveling the globe on his recently concluded world tour. Please welcome international music sensation and aspiring foodie, Kenjirou Minami!

[Kenjirou enters the set. The young pop star has bright yellow hair with a shock of red in the front, and he’s dressed in a fashionable jacket and cool sneakers. He looks very excited to be participating in a real Top Chef challenge.]
Chef Chulanont: OMG the lead singer of *Hakada Squad* is here! I am so obsessed with their catchy music and their extreme cuteness, especially Minami-kun! How adorable is he?!

Chef Plisetsky: I have no idea who this is. But we have to make him like our food, so that’s what I’m gonna do.

Kenjirou: [cheerfully] Hi chefs! I’m used to singing for all kinds of audiences, who speak all different languages! When I do interviews and give performances, it’s not about being perfect, because that’s impossible. I just do my best and try to be myself, and that makes the fans happy. I hope you can all show me your best self on camera today! I’m looking forward to all your--

[Kenjirou freezes, his eyes going huge and he emits what can only be called a squeal.]

Kenjirou: Katsuki Yuuri!!!

[A few people jump at the sudden outburst when their guest judge finally notices the presence of his own personal idol.]

Kenjirou: [starry eyed] Katsuki-sensei, I had no idea you’d be here! Ohhh, I can’t wait to taste your dish you’re my favorite chef of all time!! I eat at your restaurant whenever I’m in Tokyo!

Chef Katsuki: Um...thank you?

Chef Nikiforov: Aw, Yuuri has a fan! So adorable!


Christophe: [laughing] It looks like Chef Katsuki has a head start, but remember chefs, at the end of this challenge, you want Kenjirou to be your new number one fan. So win his heart with your sparkling personality and your tasty cooking!

Minako: You’ll have thirty minutes to shop, and one hour to prepare your demonstration before you perform for Kenjirou, as Celestino, Yakov, and myself.

Christophe: [returning his sunglasses to his nose] To the grocery store, *mes amis*!

[Transition to Whole Foods, where various families doing their casual grocery shopping are interrupted by a sudden influx of Top Chef contestants on a mission. Chefs scatter through the high end grocery store, their two hundred dollar budget in hand and thirty minutes to get all the fresh ingredients they need for their cooking demo. Chef Lee heads for the dairy section, Chef Crispino and Leroy for eggs, and Chefs Plisetsky and Altin directly to the butcher. Chef Plisetsky appears to have his eye on a cut of skirt steak.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] I’m done being in the middle of the pack. It’s time to start winning, and
if that means selling my soul to the camera then I’ll make it happen. All that matters is the big prize.

Chef Altin: [voiceover as he selects his own beef, a chuck roast] English is my third language, and my accent is very strong, so talking and cooking at the same time...not always my strong suit. But almost everyone here has some kind of accent, since the point is to show chefs from different global cuisines. Chef Nikiforov and Crispino, especially, you can hear when they speak, but they use it to their advantage. [determined] I want to do the same, and show I am proud to sound Kazakh and I am a capable chef.

At the seafood case, the fishmonger weighs a package of sashimi grade tuna for Chef de la Iglesia, with Chef Chulanont and Chef Ji waiting in line.

Chef Chulanont: [eyeing Chef de la Iglesia’s choice] Do you have any more of that?

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover as the fishmonger unwraps a massive pink block of tuna] I’ve taught a few classes for culinary students in Detroit, so I’m feeling pretty confident in my presentation skills. This challenge is really about choosing the right dish. I’m doing a seared sesame tuna. I’m picking the best ingredients and not making things to complicated.

In the produce section Chef Nikiforov has a monopoly on beets, while Chef Katsuki goes for salad greens and Chef Babicheva is looking at multicolored carrots. Chef de la Iglesia is looking for something a little spicier to match with his tuna.

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover as he chooses between several varieties of hot pepper] In Cali we love our sushi, so I thought I would do a really simple tuna roll that a beginner could do at home. I still want to impress the judges though, so I’m adding a kick of southwestern spice to make it more interesting.

Chef Crispino: [calling out from the checkout line] Five minutes everybody!

The chefs hurry into line with their groceries. Last to check out is Mila, whose basket is overflowing with all manner of strange vegetables.

[Without much time to do their cook ahead work, the chefs spring into action back in the Top Chef Kitchen. Chefs Altin and Plisetsky immediately start on their meat selections, slicing and seasoning to get their beef ready for a crock pot and a marinade. Chef Nikiforov quickly slices beets to be roasted in the oven.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Two minutes will be gone in a flash, so simplicity is going to be the key to my dish today. I’m going to make a chilled beet soup. It’s easy to prep and it looks beautiful on camera. I want my cooking to be perfect, because I am not so confident in my perfect English at the same time. Fingers crossed!

Across the kitchen, Chef Lee appears to be working on something sweet, mixing a custard while Chef Crispino chops chives and watches curiously.

Chef Lee: [voiceover] I want to continue to show variation in my skills, so I decide to set myself apart from the other chefs and do a dessert. Creme brulee is a difficult dish to complete in the time limit, but I know if I calculate my steps perfectly then it isn’t impossible.

Chef Crispino: Seung-gil is doing a creme brulee in an hour? That’s one of the signature desserts at
my family’s restaurant. It takes time to bake, cool, and set. Speaking from experience, I just don’t see it happening.

[Chef Leroy feeds beef and veal into a sausage grinder to make his own burger patties. Chef Ji marinades shrimp while Chef de la Iglesia carefully slices a small orange pepper to spic up his sushi dish.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover] I’m one of the few chefs here who isn’t speaking English as a second, or even third language. I’m feeling confident about my spicy tuna roll, but if my performance isn’t at least above average I’ll be in a lot of trouble.

[Chef Katsuki whips up a vinaigrette while Chef Yang sears duck breast. Chef Chulanont begins to set up bowls of ingredients for his demo while Chef Babicheva is steaming golden cauliflower.]

Chef Babicheva: [voiceover] My pickled rainbow salad is really coming together, I’ve given plenty of cooking demos as a chef for Olympic athletes, so I’m feeling like this is finally my moment to shine!

[The hour of prep is up. Cut to a demo kitchen set, the Top Chef logo visible as always in the background. The small workstation is set up for the first chef, along with an intimidating timer displaying 2:30 in blocky digital numbers. The judges, including guest judge Kenjirou, are gathered around the small table, along with Chef Nikiforov, who was drawn randomly to be the first chef to present.]

Christophe: Welcome, judges, to our TV demo kitchen! A short reminder for the folks at home, our chefs will each have two and a half minutes to present and execute the dish of their choice! They’ll be judged on the quality of their food and their performance on camera! First up, we welcome Victor Nikiforov! Chef, you’re time starts now!

Chef Nikiforov: [confidently slicing up an avocado while precooked beets chill over ice] Thank you, Christophe! Now, in Russia we love our beets and we love our borscht, but I like to keep a few recipes around for when you are craving something cool in the warmer months. So today I will make for you a beet gazpacho, all with ingredients you can get at home, whether you are abroad or right here in America. It’s a little sweet, a little sour, and perfect for those short St. Petersburg summers. We’ll make it together, yes?

[After some more slicing and dicing Chef Nikiforov starts up the blender, swirling his ingredients into a startlingly vibrant magenta soup.]

Kenjirou: Wow, so pretty!!

[Chef Leroy finishes his demonstration, placing a nicely fried egg onto a burger with a chipotle mayo.]

Chef Leroy: And that’s how we do burgers, JJ Style!

[The chef throws up his signature hand sign just as the timer beeps.]
Chef Crispino: And the perfect topping for a classic omelette is of course a garnish of--

[The timer beeps, but Chef Crispino is still moving.]

Christophe: That’s time.

Chef Crispino: Thirty seconds, you said?

Christophe: No, chef, that’s time. Your time’s up, my dear.

Chef Crispino: [frazzled but still offering a smile] Oh, well, I guess no garnish then!

Chef Katsuki: [eyes fixed on his timer] I’m m-making a frisee salad, with a warm b-bacon dressing and a fried duck egg.

Kenjirou: Ooh, what’s frisee?

Chef Katsuki: [still not moving] It’s, um, a kind of endive.

Christophe: Your clock is running, chef.

Chef Katsuki: Oh! Right. Ok, first--

[The following two minutes are...excruciating. Chef Katsuki is clearly overwhelmed with the close up presence of the cameras and the judges. He drops knives, knocks over his bottle of oil onto his work station, and nearly elbows Kenjirou in the face trying to get the stubborn fried egg off his spatula. The judges try to ask him questions, but the chef only manages either stammering or curt, one word answers. Christophe has to mercifully call time. All Chef Katsuki has on the plate are undressed frisee greens and his fried egg. His bacon and warm vinaigrette are still cooking on the burner.]

Chef Katsuki: [taking off his glasses and wiping his eyes] I’m sorry. You can taste what I have, if you want.

[There is very little to taste, but the judges try a bite anyway.]

Yakov: Your egg white isn’t set. It’s very unpleasant to eat.

Kenjirou: [sadly] I wish I could have tasted the rest of your dish, chef.

[Chef Katsuki folds his arms over his chest and closes his eyes, shaking his head as the shreds of bacon begin to smoke where they still sizzle in the pan.]

Chef Babicheva: [pouring a golden dressing over a brightly colored salad] And once you’ve added our miso dressing and the quinoa, all that’s left to do is toss--whoops!

[Going for her salad tongs Chef Babicheva overreaches and instead the metal tongs fall to the floor with a clatter. There is a beat of awkward silence before the chef offers a winning smile and grabs another pair of tongs from her apron pocket.]

Chef Babicheva: And that’s why you always keep a backup! You never know when those clumsy moments in the kitchen will happen. [laughing] Now let’s get this salad tossed!
Chef Babicheva tosses and plates her salad, offering to the judges to taste.

Chef Babicheva: This is an easy dish to make for your guests, and it also lets you make an adventure out of exploring your produce section! You never know what new superfood is waiting to make your dinner more delicious and your lifestyle healthier!

Christophe: [munching on a mouthful of vegetables] A plated dish and still ten seconds left on the clock! Well done, chef.

Chef Altin begins his demonstration with his nearly finished dish already bubbling away in a crock pot. The chef is still his stoic self, but he clearly makes room for Kenjiro and the judges to see his progress and hear him speak.

Chef Altin: Today I will make slow-pot beef and broccoli, and share a few spices from my home pantry in Almaty. This is a good meal which requires only a few minutes of preparation ahead of time, perfect for the busy cook who needs to feed a crowd. We’ll begin with our beef.

Chef Plisetsky: [actually smiling] As long as you give your marinade time to work, you’ll have guaranteed delicious and tender skirt steak, perfect for a salad, a sandwich, or a taco, which I’ve made for you to taste right now!

Chef Plisetsky offers a skirt steak taco with quick pico de gallo to a thrilled Kenjiro. The judges look at each other in shock as the normally surly chef teaches the pop star about good marinades.

Chef Lee: [in the midst of his unfortunately flat demo] After preparing your water bath the ramekins go in the oven for twenty-five--

[The shrill beep of the timer interrupts the presentation.]

Christophe: That’s time chef.

Chef Lee: [pushing aside his messy demo tray to reveal a pre-plated dessert] I did make a sample ready to taste.

[The judges sample Chef Lee’s creme brulee. The sugar top cracks nicely, but once the judges taste the custard filling their faces fall. Kenjiro looks a little green as he tries to swallow his tiny spoonful.]

Kenjiro: [kindly]...I think your creme brulee might not be quite done.

Minako: [frowning] It’s definitely raw.

[Yakov is silent.]

Chef Lee: [wiping away angry tears] My calculations were off. I’m...disappointed.
Chef Ji: [shaking like a leaf but nearly finished with his demo] A-and then we add a squeeze of lime, and the shrimp skewers are ready for lunch!

[The timer beeps.]

Christophe: Just in the nick of time, chef!

[Chef Ji breathes a sigh of relief as the judges enjoy his grilled shrimp.]

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[Chef Yang runs over the buzzer, but managed to make a tasting plate ahead of time.]

Celestino: Your duck is perfectly cooked, chef. Delicious!

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Chef Chulanont: [plating his dish] And that’s how easy it is to sear tuna at home! Fresh, flavorful food doesn’t have to be hard, it can be for everyone to enjoy cooking and sharing!

[The timer beeps just as Chef Chulanont places his arugula garnish on the plate.]

Minako: Well timed, chef. You clearly have experience giving demos.

[Chef Chulanont beams as the judges enjoy his sesame crusted tuna.]

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Chef de la Iglesia: [finishing his demo] And there you have it! Spicy tuna roll, southwest style!

[Christophe immediately almost chokes, and Yakov’s eyes widen.]

Kenjiro: [squeaking as his eyes water] Um, this is really spicy. And I love spicy food, but wow.

Chef de la Iglesia: Ah, I thought maybe the habanero would be a little hot, but I wanted to do something different.

Minako: [coughing] Well, it’s different, but probably not in a way people at home are going to want to try.

[Yakov steps off camera, presumably to spit out the offensive bite of tuna. Kenjiro is not far behind, his face burning red.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [laughing uncomfortably] A little too spicy for TV, I guess, huh?

[None of the judges laugh.]

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[The judges enjoy a cold glass of water, while the chef contestants return to the familiar green room. There is a wide mix of emotions as the chefs congratulate and commiserate after their nerve-wracking performances. Back in the demo room, the judges deliberate.]

Christophe: [still sipping ice water] Now that I can feel my tongue again, how are we feeling about these performances? Anyone ready for their close up?

Minako: Victor was a highlight for me. He’s a morning show host’s dream. Handsome, a confident
demo, and even though he has one of the most challenging accents of any of the chefs he put the audience at ease right away without sounding too much like a tourism ad.

Yakov: His soup was a smart choice. It was accessible to an American audience, but still spoke to his experiences as a chef.

Kenjiro: It was my favorite dish! It was so colorful and tasty!

Celestino: Speaking of colorful, Mila’s rainbow salad was another success. Also a perfect demo. She could have been filming a pilot for her own show.

Yakov: Chef Babicheva handled herself well on camera. My only complaint is she prepared many of her ingredients in advance. There was very little cooking done in front of us. It felt more like a nutritional lecture.

Minako: Well at least it was an entertaining lecture. Her confidence was evident, even when she dropped the tongs off the counter. She managed to turn it into a funny, relatable moment.

Chef Babicheva: [laughing with Chef Crispino and Chef de la Iglesia while they await the judges deliberation] They fell right on the floor! I couldn’t believe it!

Chef de la Iglesia: I almost gave Yakov a heart attack. I guess I went too far with the hot peppers.

[Across the green room Chefs Chulanont and Nikiforov are trying to comfort a distraught Chef Katsuki. The chef hasn’t taken his face out of his hands since the end of the challenge.]

Christophe: So we have two confident Russians at the front of the pack. But let’s talk about the other side of the coin. If we’re talking about confidence issues...Chef Katsuki.

Celestino: [shaking his head] Whew, I’ll say. He opened his mouth and it just went downhill from there.

Minako: Yuuri does have immunity from the Quickfire, though.

Yakov: [solemnly] That is very fortunate for him.

[The other judges nod, while Kenjiro still looks crushed after Chef Katsuki’s poor performance.]

Celestino: Confidence isn’t everything, though. Chef de la Iglesia had a fine demo, but his dish was practically inedible. I can’t imagine your average tv host could stomach tuna that spicy.

Christophe: [pointing to himself] It was certainly too much for this tv host, and I can handle my heat.

Minako: Not to mention habaneros are a serious ingredient, not something you want a casual viewer experimenting with without training. Leo chose the wrong pepper, and it would have made big trouble for him if he’d really been on the air.

Celestino: Chef Crispino was a near miss. She didn’t quite finish, but most of her dish was on the plate and her omelette was perfectly cooked.

Christophe: The same for Chef Yang, I think. She didn’t finish, but a good dish and her personality
came through on camera.

Minako: Altin as well. He was reserved, as usual, but he made a visible effort not to close himself off, and his demonstration was accessible and easy to follow. Chef Ji, also. His shrimp were inoffensive, and he was clearly nervous but he got through the two minutes without any major crises.

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[In the green room Chefs Ji and Yang toast their water bottles, having escaped the live presentation relatively unscathed.]

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Celestino: Chef Leroy had a successful demo, I thought, and his food was good.

Minako: [rolling her eyes] He finished, but all that mugging for the camera? I wasn’t impressed. I want to hear about the food, not “King JJ”. I thought Phichit was much more genuine. He sparkled on camera, and he served a solid dish.

Celestino: You make a good point. I thought Chef Chulanont was very well suited to this challenge.

Christophe: Chef Plisetsky, perhaps, was another pleasant surprise, given our exposure so far to his, ah... bracing personality.

Kenjirou: [confused] I thought he was a lot of fun! He made me want to cook with him. Is that not what he’s normally like?

Celestino: [exchanging a humorous glance with the other judges] I guess Kenjirou’s reaction tells us all we need to know about Chef Plisetsky’s skills in front of the camera, eh?

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Chef Altin: You did good today.

Chef Plisetsky: [uncomfortable receiving a genuine compliment] Yeah well, it’s all bullshit, but I want to win so I’ll fake it, you know?

Chef Altin: [nodding] I wish I knew how to perform for the cameras like that.

[Chef Plisetsky fidgets awkwardly for a few minutes.]

Chef Plisetsky: Maybe I could give you a few tips. And uh...maybe you could show me how to make that soup you almost won with the other day? It was...really spicy. I liked it.

Chef Altin: [almost smiling] It’s a deal.

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Christophe: So we have a few favorites, a few weak performances, and plenty of moderate successes that don’t merit a reward or a slap on the wrist. Anyone else we really need to discuss?

Yakov: [sighing] Chef Lee.

[All four judges wince.]
Kenjirou: [in a small voice] I was worried his dish was gonna make me sick.

Minako: That was...an unfortunate choice of dish. Creme brulee in an hour? Not happening. And his performance didn’t make up for it at all.

Celestino: He did listen to us after last week. He challenged himself, and he tried to set himself apart from the other chefs.

Yakov: There’s setting yourself apart...and then there’s setting yourself up for failure.

[The other judges nod solemnly.]

Christophe: It sounds like we’re ready for judge’s table.

[The chefs wait in the green room until Christophe appears.]

Christophe: How are we feeling, chefs?

[The host is answered by a general groaning.]

Christophe: [laughing] Welcome to television, darlings. Anyways, the judges would first like to speak with Chefs Chulanont, Nikiforov, and Babicheva.

[Christophe steps out, followed by the three contestants. In short order they are standing before their three judges, plus Kenjirou.]

Christophe: Well, needless to say, congratulations! You had our top three favorite demonstrations today!

[All three chefs looks relieved and happy, especially Chefs Chulanont and Babicheva, who are enjoying their first time in the winner’s circle.]

Minako: Mila, you were a natural in front of the camera, and you chose a dish that represented your cooking philosophy well. Even when you made a mistake you handled it with grace, and it only served you better in the end.

Celestino: Phichit, you showed your experience as a teacher and your comfort demonstrating for an audience. We only wish there might have been one more component to really make your dish sparkle on camera like you did.

Yakov: Victor, you made a beautiful dish that was smartly chosen, and you gave a confident demo that would be very appealing to American audiences. You embraced your accent and your culture to share something of yourself with viewers. You also had a dynamic choreography to your demonstration, with just enough cooking to keep an audience interested.

Christophe: As our guest judge, Kenjirou, you get to pick the winner! Whose demo do you think would win the hearts of viewers world wide?

Kenjirou: [throwing up double “v” signs with his fingers] The victor is...Victor! Chef Nikiforov, congrats, you did awesome!

[Chef Nikiforov beams as he receives a hug from his fellow competitors and steps forward to shake hands with Kenjirou.]
Chef Nikiforov: [sounding “extra” Russian in his excitement] It feels great to win, and on such a tough challenge. [rubbing the back of his neck] I admit, I was a little more nervous than I let on. Anyways, this win is dedicated to my husband, who supported me getting more fluent in English to be ready for this show! [blows a kiss] Love you, darling!

Chef Katsuki: I know...well, I mean I’ve heard that Chef Nikiforov still um, feels self-conscious about his English sometimes, since he’s never lived in the States like some of the other competitors. [a secret smile] So, I guess I’m just glad that if anybody one this challenge, it was him, and I hope he feels more confident now, that his voice is perfect the way it is and he doesn’t have to change it for anyone.

The winning chefs return to the green room, where Chef Nikiforov received good spirited congratulations on his win. The chatter settles quickly waiting to hear the bottom three.

Chef Nikiforov: They want to see Leo, Seung-gil...and Yuuri.

[All the chefs look shocked, while Chef Nikiforov places a comforting hand on Chef Katsuki’s shoulder.]

Chef de la Iglesia: I’m confused. I mean, I can guess why I’m in the bottom, but they almost never call a chef on the carpet who has immunity...oh. [wince]...unless they really mess up. Ouch.

[The three chefs shuffle to the judge’s table, where a decision awaits.]

Yakov: Chefs, you represent the least successful demonstrations given today.

[Chefs Lee and de la Iglesia both look to Chef Katsuki, who is pale as a ghost.]

Christophe: Chef Katsuki, as you know you won immunity for this challenge, and so you can’t be eliminated. However, all three judges agreed, if you weren’t automatically safe, your performance today would certainly have put you on the chopping block, if not entirely at the bottom.

Minako: Chef, you allowed your discomfort to not only affect your on screen performance, but the quality of your final dish. You failed to finish your demonstration, and what you did manage to provide us to taste was severely undercooked.

Yakov: You’re mistakes could have been overlooked, if you had persevered through the demonstration. If you had owned up to your nerves, and even your errors, you might have still come across on camera as human and relatable. Other chefs had worse dishes than yours, and still escaped a bottom ranking.

Celestino: It should be a lesson to all the chefs today: In today’s world all the action can’t stay contained in the kitchen. Being a successful chef also means learning to present yourself to the public in a way that serves your brand and directs positive attention to your food. If you can’t find some kind of personality to give to the cameras, you’ll find your career hitting many barriers.
Minako: Chef Katsuki, you are safe, and so you may return to the waiting room. But know that in future challenges we’ll be expecting more from a chef of your caliber.


Phichit: [wincing] Yuuri and I were in culinary school together for a bit, and when the pressure gets to be too much he just kind of checks out. Unfortunately I think that’s what happened today. He gets into his own head and only sees the negatives.


Chef Plisetsky:[triumphant] I knew that guy was too good to be true. He can run a whole restaurant but he can’t do two minutes on camera? Pathetic.


[Chef Katsuki accepts the judge’s criticism silently, and goes to leave the room. Just before he exits, Kenjirou stands up at the judge’s table.]

Kenjirou: [determined] Don’t give up Katsuki-sensei! I still believe you’re the best chef in the world!

[After a brief hesitation, Chef Katsuki turns back, and offers Kenjirou a short bow.]

Chef Katsuki: I’m sorry I didn’t cook my best for you today, Minami-kun. [a small smile] Maybe if you’re in Tokyo after the competition you could come to my restaurant, and I’ll give you another demonstration to make up for it?

Kenjirou: [screaming with starry eyes again] Yes!! I would love that so much!! Thank you, sensei.

[Chef Katsuki exits, a few of the judges looking after him with expressions of respect after he was kind to the young Kenjirou. Things remain serious however, as Minako, Yakov, and Celestino must choose a chef to be eliminated from the remaining two.]

Minako: Leo, you had some success at the main requirement of today’s challenge: giving a live demonstration. However, being personable on camera won’t make up for an inedible dish, and unfortunately this is what you served us today. Introducing your audience to new flavors is your job. Burning your host’s mouth and putting viewers into a bad position with a potentially dangerous ingredient is not.

[Chef de la Iglesia looks bummed.]

Yakov: Chef Lee, in choosing the wrong dish you made success impossible today. You listened to us, and you tried to stretch yourself as a chef, but as a technical perfectionist you should have known that a complicated dessert like creme brulee was not going to be achievable within your limited time frame. Your demonstration was doomed to fail, and you didn’t show us any personality to make up for your failure.

[There is a beat of suspenseful silence.]

Christophe: Chef Lee...please pack your knives and go.

[Chef de la Iglesia doesn’t hide his sigh of relief as Chef Lee lets out a long slow breath before nodding his acceptance.]
Chef Lee: [to the judges] Thank you for the opportunity.

Yakov: You have many skills, chef. Today pushing your boundaries didn’t pay off, but it is the only way to move forward. You will be a better chef in the end for taking risks.

Chef Lee: [voiceover as he packs his knives in the empty kitchen] I lost today because I pushed myself too far in order to please other people. It won’t serve me well to cook only for myself or to cook only based on outside expectations. I have to find a balance in order to reach my true potential as a chef, and I wouldn’t have learned that without this experience.

[Chef Lee exits the Top Chef kitchen, and the lights go out.]

Night time in New York City. The moon is bright as things settle down in the apartment after a stressful day in the Top Chef Kitchen. Chefs Katsuki and Chulanont have taken a few kitchen chairs out onto the balcony to enjoy the evening weather when Chef Nikiforov joins them, three glasses and an open bottle of wine in his hands.

Chef Nikiforov: [indicating the wine] I thought we could all use a little something, hm?

Chef Chulanont: Oh my god, yes. What a day.

Chef Katsuki: [dryly] Tell me about it.

Chef Chulanont: Hey, what did I tell you? You’re still here because you won immunity, remember? Won, as in with your awesome cooking skills.

Chef Katsuki: [patting his friend on the shoulder] I know. ...Thanks Phichit.

[Chef Nikiforov drags up another chair, before pouring out a glass of white for each of them. Chef Katsuki raises his glass.]

Chef Katsuki: A toast to your win, Victor.

Chef Nikiforov: [frowning] Yuuri--

Chef Katsuki: No really, I’m not upset. You both did great today, and it wasn’t an easy challenge for anyone. You deserved to be at the top.

[The chefs clink their wine glasses and enjoy the sparkling white, Chefs Chulanont and Nikiforov exchanging an expression of relief at Chef Katsuki’s improved spirits.]

Chef Chulanont: And hey, tomorrow is another day! Who knows what they’re gonna throw at us next, right?


[Taking another sip out of his glass, Chef Katsuki rests his hand on Chef Nikiforov’s knee for a heartbeat, giving a quick squeeze before withdrawing. Both chefs blush while Chef Chulanont rolls his eyes fondly.]
Chef Katsuki: [looking tired, but hopeful] Today was rough, but I’m still here. We’ve just gotten started, really. And now I have something to prove.

[Chef Katsuki gives the camera a look of pure determination before the screen fades to black.]
[It’s a bright morning in the apartment as chefs prepare for another day on Top Chef. Energy seems to be high now that the dreaded live TV demo is over and another challenge is ahead. The chefs file out with their bags and head to the kitchen, splitting up between three silver SUVs.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover, seated between Chef Plisetsky and Chef Katsuki] Yesterday’s challenge felt more like a performance than a meal. I’m looking forward to getting back into the kitchen, and letting my food do the talking for me.

Chef Babicheva: [voiceover, seated between Chef Leroy and Chef Yang] It felt really good to place in the top after yesterday’s challenge. Today I’m ready to win!

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[Cue the Quickfire logo. Waiting for the chefs in the Top Chef kitchen are Christophe, looking dapper once again in a slim grey suit, along with Celestino.]

Christophe: Goodmorning chefs! You all recognize our guest today, New York restaurateur and pioneer of contemporary Italian cooking, as well as a regular judge here on Top Chef, Celestino Cialdini. Celestino is going to be keeping a close eye on you for the next two days, as he has a particular expertise that relates to our coming elimination challenge.

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Chef Yang: We’re all wondering what the challenge is, only because Celestino has made a name for himself in so many specialties. Italian food? Pasta making? Wine pairing? It could be practically anything.

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Celestino: My restaurant concept is Italian-American cuisine, but our philosophy whenever possible is farm-to-table. We use seasonal produce and local proteins, and we have a flourishing relationship with local farmers. For both the chef and the diner, there is no greater pleasure than simple food made from the freshest possible ingredients.

[Several chefs nod in agreement, and a few light up with excitement, including Chefs Babicheva, Yang, and Katsuki.]

Christophe: ...but that’s not what you’ll be cooking with this morning.

[Christophe pulls the cloth away to reveal a table full of canned, boxed, and dried pantry ingredients. Canned vegetables and meat, boxed rice and pasta, and packets of trail mix, there is not a fresh ingredient on the table. All of the chefs stare at the ingredients in mixed states of shock and horror.]

Christophe: Before we let you at our top notch, farm fresh ingredients, you’ll have to prove yourselves with these pantry staples. Make us something flavorful and surprising, and win immunity in tomorrow’s elimination challenge.

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Chef Plisetsky: Christophe reveals a pile of what is basically garbage. No chef in their right mind would ever willingly cook with any of it. Disgusting.

Chef Katsuki: [blowing out a sigh] This is the opposite of the farm-to-table challenge we were all hoping for. Still, I did my time in college, and I remember when these ingredients were pretty much all I could afford. You either got creative or you ate a lot of plain canned soup.

Chef Crispino: [horrified] No fresh food? I think the only canned vegetable I’ve ever touched in my life is tomato paste. I don’t know what I’m going to do with these ingredients.

Chef Chulanont: [grinning] Classical training only gets you so far once they take away your fancy ingredients, but turning a three dollar budget into something edible? That’s my wheelhouse. I was the Golden Ramen champion three years running at the Culinary Institute. They put a plaque with my face on it over the communal dorm microwave.

Chef Nikiforov: [beaming at the camera] I have no ideas whatsoever!

Celestino: [sternly] A great chef can bring the best out of any ingredient, and any budget. Check your egos at the door and show us what you can do!

Christophe: You’ll have thirty minutes to make us your best dish from these humble cans and boxes. Chefs, your time starts now!

[The chefs launch themselves at the table of pantry ingredients. It’s a frantic search as chefs read labels and try to identify the useful ingredients from the downright abysmal.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover] It’s a rush to the pantry, because there’s limited options and some ingredients are...less awful than others. People are pushing, throwing elbows...JJ grabs a can of artichokes right out of my hand! It’s a total bloodbath.

Chef Leroy: [voiceover] This is Top Chef, not Top Buddies! You’ve got to use all your advantages, and that includes your reach!

[Chef Leroy escapes triumphant with his artichokes, as well as dry crackers and mayonaisse in a jar. Chef Ji opts to feature canned peaches, while Chef Chulanont has embraced Velveeta, and canned baked beans. Chef Crispino darts away with anchovies, black olives, and cocktail onions.]

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] I can’t see how I’m going to cook anything with these options, so I grab the most familiar things I see, and I decide to do some kind of bruschetta with the bread they have for us to share.

[With time ticking away, the chefs begin to crack open cans and jars. Chef Nikiforov examines a jar of maraschino cherries while Chef de la Iglesia chops jarred jalapenos and Chef Yang slices a block of turkey spam. Chef Katsuki and Chef Chulanont start their cooking process at the sink.]
Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] The secret to making the best of canned vegetables is rinsing them. It still won’t taste like fresh, but it gets rid of a lot of the extra salt and gives me more control over my seasoning.

[Chef Plisetsky fries canned sardines with a sour look on his face, while Chef Babicheva wrinkles her nose over canned corn. Chef Altin is expressionless as he adds tahini to canned white beans to make a dip.]

Chef Babicheva: [voice over] I’m not sure who is going to win this Quickfire. Honestly I think we’re all just trying not to make anything so bad that we catch Celestino’s attention.

[The chefs all manage to plate their not so fresh ingredient based dishes before the final timer lets out a shrill beep. With mixed reactions, the chefs present their offerings to Christophe and Celestino. The first chef up is Chef Chulanont.]

Christophe: What have you got for us today, Phichit?

Chef Chulanont: [as the judges dig into his dish] The favorite last minute dinner of any student, soup and a grilled cheese! I used baked beans and spam in the soup, along with canned broth and then I went for the classic grilled cheese with Velveeta.

Celestino: [humming with approval] I remember this meal well! Well done, chef, you managed to wrangle the sweetness of those baked beans into submission.

[Next is Chef Nikiforov, who presents a fried waffle with cherry compote and cool whip topping.]

Christophe: [making a face] Hm...crunchy.

Celestino: I’ll say. And very sweet. Hm...thank you chef.

[The judges don’t object to Chef Ji’s grilled peaches with chipotle cream, or Chef Yang’s hot Turkey spam sandwich. Chef de la Iglesia raises a few eyebrows with his jalapeno and roasted red pepper instant mac and cheese, but that’s more of a reaction than Chef Crispino earns with her anchovy and olive bruschetta. Next is Chef Katsuki.]

Chef Katsuki: I’ve made a split pea soup, with some crispy spam and french fried onion.

Celestino: Hm, this has a nice creaminess.

Chef Katsuki: I added a touch of evaporated milk.

Celestino: [nodding] Not bad.

[Following Chef Katsuki is Chef Altin, who presents his tahini dip with toast points, and Chef Plisetsky who offers a crispy sardine with pearl onion and jarred green bean salad. After that is Chef Babicheva, who offers a spicy corn salad.]

Celestino: You’ve managed a nice acid here, chef.

Chef Babicheva: [rubbing the back of her neck] I managed to find some bottled lime juice. Gotta keep it fresh somehow!

[At the end of the line is Chef Leroy.]

Christophe: Chef?
Chef Leroy: For the challenge I’ve made a hot artichoke dip, with canned chicken that I managed to give a little more flavor on the grill. I topped it with a buttery cracker crust.

Celestino: [crunching on a toast point] Hm, adding the chicken gave this dish a little more substance than just a dip. It was a good choice.

[Christophe and Celestino stand before the gathered contestants once more.]

Christophe: Okay, Celestino, let’s start with the bad news. Who let these pantry items box them in?

Celestino: Sara. It seems like all you did is open some cans and add olive oil. I wish you had engaged a little more with the character of this challenge. Also Victor, your dish at least was nice to look at, but the flavor was very sweet and onenote. You didn’t do much to change what you were working with.

[Both chefs accept Celestino’s criticism with grace.]

Chef Nikiforov: [hands in the air] What can you do? As usual, I’ll go to the elimination without a safety net. No risk, no reward.

Christophe: Now for some favorites. Who embraced the spirit of the challenge?

Celestino: I though Yuuri did very well. Yuuri Katsuki, that is. I’m not sure how, but you managed to breathe some life into your pea soup, and your crispy spam was a welcome addition of salt.

Celestino: Second, the grilled cheese, from Phichit! Chef, that soup and sandwich brought me back to my own MacGyver days in culinary school. You didn’t have to hide the humble nature of your ingredients to make something satisfying.

Christophe: Any other hits?

Celestino: JJ, I thought your hot artichoke dip was very flavorful. Getting those cracker crumbs under the broiler really added good texture.

Chef Leroy: [grinning] There’s no challenge too tough for JJ!

Christophe: Well, who is our pantry champ, and guaranteed safe in the next challenge?

Celestino: The winning dish belongs to the chef who most enthusiastically embraced the...unorthodox nature of this challenge. That chef is...Chef Chulanont!

Christophe: Congrats, Phichit, you have immunity, and you’ll also have a huge advantage in the coming elimination challenge!

[The other chefs congratulate their cheerful competitor, Chef Katsuki giving his friend a hug and Chef de la Iglesia offering him a warm pat on the back.]
Chef Chulanont: [twin victory signs] Woohoo! Yeah, baby! That’s one for all the starving culinary students in Detroit!

Chef Plisetsky: [arms crossed] This was a gross challenge and I’m glad it’s over!

Chef Ji: Good for Phichit! I’m bummed I didn’t get immunity, but it’s cool to see one of the younger chefs win a challenge! Just because we haven’t opened our own restaurant yet doesn’t mean we aren’t a force to be reckoned with!

Chef Katsuki: [shaking his head ruefully] So much for my Quickfire streak. [deep breath] I’m going into my first elimination challenge without immunity.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, on Top Chef!: It's farm fresh face off! What will happen when allies are forced head to head? Can these chefs take it as good as they can dish it out?
Farm Fresh Face Off!: Part 2

[Flash to the “Elimination” logo. In the Top Chef kitchen, Christophe and Celestino stand before the chefs. In front of them is the dreaded knife block.]

Christophe: As promised, in this elimination challenge we’ll be going back to basics. But let’s find out more about what, and how you’ll be cooking for the judges tonight. Now that we have our Quickfire winner, I would like everyone except Phichit to please draw knives.

[One by one, the chefs approach the block, pulling a knife from the wooden case with a sching . Chef Nikiforov is first. His knife is labeled with LAMB in large blocky letters. Next is Chef Altin.]

Chef Altin: [looking at his knife curiously] Dairy?

Chef Yang: [looking pleased] Chicken.

Chef Plisetsky: Pork.

Chef Katsuki: [surprised] Lamb!

[There is a flutter among the chefs as they realize that there are more than one of each category. Some show enthusiasm at the prospect of a team challenge, others not so much.]

Chef Nikiforov: [beaming] The moment I see Yuuri and I have both drawn “lamb” I’m excited. He and I are two of the strongest competitors so far, so I know any dish we collaborate on will be unbeatable!

[Next, Chef Crispino pulls the first knife labeled VEGETABLES, followed by Chef Ji who pulls the second PORK, which left Chef Plisetsky looking none too pleased. Chef de la Iglesia pulls the other VEGETABLES and Chef Leroy pulls the twin to CHICKEN.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover as Chef Leroy declares his chicken skills to the group] If this challenge depends on us working in pairs, I’m worried. JJ is a good chef but he’s loud and tends to steamroll people when he doesn’t agree. I’m not sure how compatible we are in the kitchen.

[Last is Chef Babicheva, who pulls the final knife labeled DAIRY. Her brow is furrowed in thought as she returns to the group.]

Christophe: As you’ve probably noticed, our featured ingredients have been paired up! So, chefs, find your partners!

[Chef Plisetsky eyes Chef Ji skeptically as Chefs Crispino and de la Iglesia offer each other a friendly high five. Chef Yang reluctantly accepts Chef Leroy’s handshake while Chefs Babicheva and Altin size each other up consideringly. Chef Nikiforov tosses Chef Katsuki a heart shaped smile as he throws his arm around his shoulders in a friendly manner.]

Celestino: Well, you now know what farm fresh ingredient will be the star of your dish, and you know which of your competitors you’ll be cooking... against.
Christophe: [gleeful] That’s right! It’s a farm-to-table face off!

[A few contestants look relieved, but Chefs Nikiforov and Katsuki look to each other in horror.]

Celestino: Chefs, tonight I’ll be hosting a dinner for the judges and a few guests. Your dishes will be served head-to-head, and we’ll decide who has best featured the ingredient, and who has most deliciously embraced the farm-to-table philosophy.

Christophe: Be warned! Any chef who loses their face off will be up for elimination. Now, as for Chef Chulanont, I told you you would have a big advantage in this challenge, and here it is: You may choose to make a dish in any of the five categories, and since you have immunity your dish will only be eligible to win the challenge, not lose.

Chef Chulanont: [cheering] Alright!

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Chef Chulanont: [smug] I saw a few snooty faces when I won the canned goods Quickfire. But guess what? That little challenge had a big payoff! [thinking] Now what category do I want...

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Chef Chulanont: I’m gonna go with “Dairy” on this one, Christophe.

Christophe: There you have it! The dairy duo is now a menage a trois.

Chef Babicheva: [voiceover as Chef Chulanont joins her and Chef Altin] Ugh, I wish Phichit had chosen a different category. As it is I’m not happy with my assigned ingredient and now I’m facing off not one but two strong opponents!

Christophe: As you may have guessed, you will not be getting your ingredients for tonight’s dinner at Whole Foods market, so I’m afraid this is where I say au revoir, and entrust you to Celestino’s capable guidance. In order to find out where you’ll be cooking tonight and learn a little more about the care and keeping of your star ingredients, you’ll all be going on a little field trip. [blowing a kiss] Goodbye, my darlings! I’ll see you at dinner!

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[The chefs pile back into their silver SUVs, and they are soon on their way out of Manhattan.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] We head north, and after an hour of traffic we figure out we must be leaving the city! Everything is trees and rivers up here. It’s a nice break from all the concrete and steel in NYC.

Chef Ji: [voiceover] We’re all curious where we’re going. With all this talk about fresh ingredients, I’m guessing it’s some kind of farm, but what are we doing there?

[After about two hours in the car, the chefs disembark in front of a charming brick building surrounded by a state of the art complex of barns, paddocks, and greenhouses. As far as the eye can see in any direction are fields and pastures ripe with produce and grains. Waiting for the contestants in front of the brick welcome center is Celestino. His hair is tied back and in contrast with his professional suit he’s wearing a straw hat.]

Celestino: In the restaurant business we say the best way to get the freshest ingredients is to bribe the farmer, or in this case, be the farmer! Welcome, chefs, to Cialdini ranch!
Chef Katsuki: [voiceover as the chefs applaud their host] Celestino is really lucky to have such close access and supervision to his ingredients, while still being able to have his restaurants in one of the biggest food cities in the world. Not every chef has that kind of opportunity, but I think it’s one we’d all snap up in a heartbeat.

Celestino: I work in partnership with my farm managers to grow the produce, produce the dairy products, and raise the pork, chicken, and lamb that I use in both of my New York restaurants. The ranch also serves as an educational farm for colleges and high schools all over New York state to use to teach students about the importance of good farming practices and appreciation for the food they eat. I also have a bistro here, which is focused exclusively on cooking farm-to-table seasonal fare. Tonight you’ll have three hours in my bistro’s kitchen to prepare your dish for the judges to taste, as well as my farm managers, who I’ve invited to the dinner. They won’t be judging your dishes, but they do the hard work that keeps this farm running day to day, so show them your thanks with your cooking! Before you get into the kitchen, I’ve arranged a tour for each pair of chefs to get to know the farm and gain a new appreciation for what you’re cooking!

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[Chef Crispino and Chef de la Iglesia explore the produce available at Celestino’s farm. At the moment they’re knee deep in a field of tomatoes. The plants are flourishing, with broad sections of every breed from cherry to beefsteak hanging ripe and heavy on their vines.]

Chef Crispino: So beautiful! These are just like what we grow in our restaurant garden at home!

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover] Sara and I are just surrounded by all these amazing tomatoes, and I can’t help but start picking the green ones up off the ground. Being out here means we have access to the food that maybe isn’t the first thing you think of in a commercial supermarket. A chef is like a composer, and his ingredients are the notes in his score. With gorgeous produce like this I’m finally ready to show the judges the song in my heart.

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[In a large pen behind the barn Chefs Ji and Plisetsky get to know the pigs that eventually become the pork and bacon that they’ll cook with later.]

Chef Ji: [wide eyed] Wow! They’re so big!

Chef Plisetsky: [reaching over the fence to pet one of the huge pigs] Ha, they’re all bristly. That’s cool, I guess.

Chef Ji: [voiceover] I grew up in Beijing, so I’ve never really had the chance to see where my food comes from. This place is so cool!

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[Chefs Altin, Babicheva, and Chulanont meet some of the dairy cows that produce the milk Celestino’s farm cultivates into dozens of different cheeses. Chef Babicheva tries her hand at hand milking a cow with a farmer’s instruction.]

Chef Babicheva: Wow, this is harder than it looks!

Chef Altin: [voiceover] It’s important for chefs to understand where our ingredients come from, especially since many of us will find our success in urban centers. As cooks we have a relationship with the earth, and with nature. When that relationship is in harmony you can taste it on the plate.
Chef Chulanont: [giving a cow a good scratch between the ears] Aw, I wish I was allowed to have my phone, sweetheart. We’d take the best selfie ever!

[The chefs have a good time learning more about their featured ingredients. The chefs cooking dairy go on to tour the cheesemaking facilities, while Chefs Leroy and Yang spend some quality time in the chicken coop. In a fenced in yard near one of the barns, Chefs Katsuki and Nikiforov are learning how to bottle feed a lamb. Chef Nikiforov laughs as a bold young buck wrestles him for the bottle, while a younger lamb makes itself comfortable in Chef Katsuki’s lap, eagerly sniffing at his pockets for treats.]

Chef Katsuki:[voiceover] I’m having a lot of fun exploring the farm, but I’m also trying to keep in mind that this is a competition. I have to stay focused if I want to win and redeem myself after the disaster in the last elimination. Chef Nikiforov is my toughest competition. I want to prove I’m worthy of going head-to-head with him.

[The lamb bleats and licks Chef Katsuki’s chin, drawing a giggle out of the normally reserved chef. Chef Nikiforov’s eyes sparkle as he observes the cute interaction.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] It’s been a great opportunity to experience this environment with Chef Katsuki. He’s a chef I deeply respect for both his skills and his cooking philosophy. Getting to know him on Top Chef has already been a huge inspiration for me. I admit, I’m a bit of a fan. [laughs] That doesn’t mean that I won’t be cooking to win, though! We’re all here to do our best and stand out among a group of amazing chefs.

[With their tours completed the cooking begins. The chefs are shown to Celestino’s bistro kitchen, and his generous pantry, which is overflowing with all manner of farm fresh ingredients. In no time at all the contestants are making the best use of their three hours. Cuts of meat are butchered, vegetables are peeled and chopped, burners are set to blazing. Some ways into the cooking, Chef Chulanont appears to be working on an unusual cheese dish, while Chef Ji figures out a meat grinder and Chef Yang creates a rosemary rub for her resting chicken legs.]

Chef Chulanont: What’s your game plan, Guang-hong?

Chef Ji: I’m making a pork sausage! How about you?

Chef Chulanont: I’m grilling cheese!

Chef Ji: [confused] Do you mean a ‘grilled cheese’, like with bread?

Chef Chulanont: [cheerfully] Nope!

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] I have immunity, so I feel like this is my chance to make a risky dish. I may not win, but I can show the judges I’m a chef who thinks outside the box.

[At the stove Chef de la Iglesia supervises a cast iron skillet full of hot frying oil as Chef Leroy breaks down a chicken to add to a huge bubbling stock pot.]

Chef de la Iglesia: Are you making soup, Leroy? It’s eighty degrees out, and the judge’s table is set up outside.

Chef Leroy: [adding his chicken to the pot] Ha! It’s never too hot for chicken and sliders, especially
not my mom’s recipe.

Chef de la Iglesia: If you say so man...

[Across the kitchen, a two chefs are getting into the competitive spirit and enjoying some...unusual trash talking.]

Chef Nikiforov: [observing Chef Katsuki breaking down a leg of lamb as he halves brussel sprouts] Ooh, are you doing a roast, Yuuri?

Chef Katsuki: [shaking his head] I’m doing braised lamb shank.

Chef Nikiforov: Wow, what a surprising choice!

Chef Katsuki: [eyebrow raised] And you're doing a rack, right Victor? That's certainly...classic.

Chef Nikiforov: Classic for a reason! I take a lot of pride in picking out the best rack of lamb. My husband always has me choose because he says it’s his weak spot, isn’t that sweet?

[Chef Katsuki looks shocked for a moment before lighting up with a wicked grin.]

Chef Katsuki: [with an extra firm blow of his cleaver] Hm, I wouldn’t know. I almost always have to pick the best cuts myself, because my darling husband always oversleeps and misses the morning markets.

Chef Nikiforov: [sing song] Well my husband always over-salts his potatoes!

Chef Katsuki: And my husband uses leftover rosemary marinade as a scalp treatment to keep his hair from thinning and thinks I don’t know about it!

Chef Nikiforov: [with a gasp] You take that back!

Chef Plisetsky: [from a nearby workstation] Save it for the bedroom, freaks!

[Chefs Nikiforov and Katsuki’s eyes widen and they clam up, returning to their work in progress with pink cheeks. Meanwhile Chef Altin gives Chef Plisetsky a pointed nudge and a look of mild disapproval.]

Chef Plisetsky: What?? Do they really think we all don't know they’re m--

Chef Altin: [voice low] Let them keep it quiet if they want. It’s not our business.

Chef Plisetsky: [grumbling] ...fine. How are you feeling on this one?

Chef Altin: [shrugging] Alright I guess. It’s a little weird to be in one of the groups without a protein. I don’t have to worry about overcooking a roast, but...

Chef Plisetsky: [nodding] But then what do you do? Maybe doing meat is tougher cooking, but I think you have the harder job featuring your ingredient.

[Chef Altin nods, and the two chefs continue working, Chef Altin dicing tomatoes and Chef Plisetsky tying his pork roast.]

Chef Altin: [after some moments] I’m still gonna win though.

Chef Plisetsky: [almost smiling] Pfft. Against those guys? Sure. Against me? I’d like to see you try.
The sun is just beginning to set when the table is set for dinner. The judges sit together, accompanied by a few of Celestino’s farm employees to enjoy the seasonal fare the chefs have to offer tonight.

Christophe: Well, fingers crossed for some spectacular dishes, given the bounty the chefs had today to cook from.

Celestino: I’ll say. If you can’t make a good meal out of these ingredients, you have no business in the kitchen.

Christophe: With that in mind, let’s begin. For our first course, we have two opposing dishes featuring “vegetables”.

[Chefs de la Iglesia and Crispino introduce their dishes as waiters place plates in front of each of the diners.]

Chef de la Iglesia: For my starter I made fried green tomatoes, with a red onion and jalapeno salsa and a sprinkle of queso fresco.

Chef Crispino: I’ve made for you an eggplant and leek ravioli, with a fresh basil pesto and tomato Provençal.

[The judges sample both dishes. Chef Crispino’s pesto is a vibrant green on the plate. While Chef de la Iglesia’s dish isn’t so bright, one can hear the crunch of the judges fork breaking through the crispy crust of his tomatoes.]

Celestino: Hm, Sara your ravioli are nice and delicate, but unfortunately the pesto is really overwhelming them. It’s making the dish a little flat for me.

Minako: I agree. Also Leo by comparison I’m getting a great tomato flavor from your dish, and the saltiness of that little bit of cheese is only highlighting it. I also like that you really took advantage of being out here and used an unexpected ingredient.

Christophe: It sounds like we have a winner in mind, but judges? Your official votes?

Celestino: [nodding] I vote for Leo.

Minako: Me as well. I love this dish.

Yakov: [frowning] I’m already outvoted, but I think Sara’s excellent tomato provencial has been overlooked. It has a lovely caramelization. My vote is for Chef Crispino.

Christophe: So it wasn’t a runaway after all, but still Chef de la Iglesia has won the first round of our farm face off. I’m sorry Chef Crispino that does mean you’re at risk of being eliminated tonight.

Chef de la Iglesia: [smiling] I’m feeling really good. For the first time I feel like I really showed the judges who I am as a chef.

Chef Crispino: [annoyed] I can’t believe I lost to a fried green tomato.
Christophe: For our second course, we have a fowl face off! Chefs, please tell us what you’ve served us tonight.

Chef Leroy: From Quebec right to your farm, I decided to whip up chicken and sliders. What you have is a slow stewed chicken in a clear broth based on the classic carrots, onion, and celery, all from the produce grown here. The “sliders” as we call them at home are actually a homemade dumpling that I cooked in the broth.

Chef Yang: I decided to keep things simple with a lemon and rosemary roasted chicken drumstick. Alongside that you have crispy roasted potatoes and a fresh green salad with lemon juice and olive oil.

[The judges taste the two dishes. Viewers can almost hear the crispy skin on Chef Yang’s roast drumsticks. Unfortunately one can also see the steam rising off of Chef Leroy’s Quebecois stew, and more than one guest can be seen fanning themselves in the warm weather as they sample his dish.]

Celestino: JJ, your dish is good. I was pleasantly surprised by the depth of flavor in the broth and I liked that the veggies still had some bite. But I have to say on a warm evening like this, a hot stew doesn’t feel very seasonal!

Minako: On the other hand, I appreciated the complexity of JJ’s stew. Isabella, your chicken was cooked nicely, but it was almost too simple.

Celestino: I have to disagree. I thought Isabella showcased the ingredients. JJ showcased his own cooking.

Christophe: We’ll settle this debate with a vote. Judges? Who cooked your favorite chicken dish?

Celestino: Chef Yang has my vote.

Minako: I think JJ has the stronger dish.

Yakov: I agree...with Celestino. Chef Yang.

Christophe: Two out of three! Congratulations Isabella. JJ, better luck next time.

Chef Leroy: [unhappy] These judges just don’t appreciate the Leroy family recipes!

[Next is the third course, Chefs Plisetsky and Ji’s pork dishes.]

Chef Plisetsky: My dish is a seared pork loin, marinated in garlic and thyme, paired with a panzanella salad.

Chef Ji: I’ve made a sage pork sausage, which I grilled for you, and a new potato salad with some apples and a mustard vinaigrette.

[The judges take their time sampling the dishes, but their expressions are not impressed. Yakov is distinctly frowning. Chef Plisetsky fidgets uncertainly while Chef Ji looks downright worried.]
Christophe: Am I seeing more of a...mixed reaction to this round, judges?

Yakov: The purpose of this challenge was to showcase the pork. Chef Plisetsky, you showed your inexperience in removing the bone from your roast. It makes cooking time faster, yes, but it also removes flavor, which is evident in your final dish. Chef Ji, when faced with all the best cuts offered by the farmers, you chose to grind up your protein and make a sausage. I think you threw away a chance to do something spectacular, and instead settled for something ordinary.

[Celestino and Minako nod at Yakov’s gruff criticism.]

Christophe: Yakov makes an excellent point, but we do have to pick a winner of the two. Judges?

Celestino: I think Chef Plisetsky did better to highlight his pork loin so I’ll vote for his dish.

Minako: My vote is for Chef Ji. While I agree that the sausage was the wrong choice for this challenge, it was well executed and gave me more of the flavor of the ingredients.

Yakov: My vote... narrowly, is for Chef Plisetsky.

Christophe: There you have it! By the skin of your teeth, Chef Plisetsky, you are safe from elimination. Chef Ji, we’ll see you at judge’s table.

Chef Plisetsky: [scowling] I may have won, but it was close, and the judges didn’t love either of our dishes. Next time I’m going to prove once and for all that I’m the best chef here!

Chef Nikiforov: I’ve made a roast rack of lamb scented with garlic and rosemary, accompanied by crispy brussel sprouts which are just tossed in some good olive oil, salt, and a touch of lemon juice.

Chef Katsuki: I’ve prepared a braised lamb shank, with a jus made from the pan drippings. On the side you have balsamic glazed green beans.

[With introductions complete the judges dig into the two lamb dishes.]

Chef Katsuki: [voice over] No one cues us to leave, and I realize they’re going to taste the dishes and pick a winner right in front of us. I’m literally in hell.

Chef Nikiforov: [voice over] It’s nerve wracking, yes, but I can tell Yuuri and I have both put forward strong dishes. No matter who wins, I’m proud to stand by my cooking today.

Christophe: Judges, what are your thoughts?

Minako: You both cooked your lamb perfectly, though I think Victor’s method let more of the pure essence of the ingredient shine. On the other hand Yuuri your glazed green beans were pure poetry.

Celestino: Victor’s brussel sprouts as well, they had a delightful hint of acidity that only heightened the flavor of his roast. Two fantastic seasonal showcases.

Christophe: This has certainly been a high point of the evening thus far. Unfortunately we do have to pick a winner. Judges?
Yakov: It is close, but I think Chef Katsuki was just a touch heavy with his spice rub. I choose Victor’s dish.

Celestino: Well I like a little extra spice to bring out the flavor of the lamb. Yuuri has my vote.

Christophe: Minako?

Minako: [regretfully] I hate to break this tie...Two beautiful dishes, but if you held a gun to my head I would have to go with...Chef Nikiforov.

Christophe: Congratulations, Victor! Yuuri, I’m sorry to say despite your delicious dish that you are now at risk for elimination.

Chef Nikiforov: It feels great to win, but even better to cook against such a worthy competitor! I don’t think Yuuri has to worry about elimination tonight.

[The final round of the face-off is the three chefs who chose “dairy” as their featured ingredient.]

Chef Altin: I’ve prepared a savory basil ricotta cheesecake, topped with an heirloom tomato compote.

Chef Chulanont: For my dish you have a seared queso fresco, resting in a fresh tomatillo salsa and topped just with some onion and cilantro.

Chef Babicheva: I made a farro salad, with wilted spinach and shredded roast chicken. Featured in my dish is a goat cheese made here, which with I mixed with some lemon and olive oil to make a dressing.

Celestino: Well, this has certainly been the most creative course of the evening. Chef Chulanont, I’ve heard of this preparation for queso fresco but I’ll admit I’ve never tasted it. That bit of char from the grill really adds something to the saltiness of the cheese, and of course the salsa adds much needed acid. It’s a unique way to showcase the cheese, but a good one I think.

Minako: I would agree. I think the only thing I’m missing from Phichit’s dish is some kind of bread or cracker. Something with a little crunch. On the other hand, I think Otabek’s dish is very balanced, texturally. Plus that basil really sings in the cheese mixture without being too overpowering. The cheesecake itself is very complex. There’s just a hint of sweetness to balance the salt.

Yakov: I wish I could say the same for Chef Babicheva’s dish. I see very little dairy on the plate, but when I taste this farro the only thing that hits my tongue is goat cheese. Chef, did you cook your farro in stock?

Chef Babicheva: [brow furrowed] No, just water. I didn’t want the grain to be too salty.

Yakov: It would have better served the dish, I think. As of now your grain tastes like nothing, and spinach certainly doesn’t add anything.

Christophe: Some polarizing plates before us in the final course this evening, but who is the final winner?

Yakov: I prefer Chef Altin’s dish.
Celestino: Both were quite unique, but I’m voting for Chef Chulanont.

Minako: For the crunch of his breadcrumb crust, Otabek has my vote.

Christophe: Well done, Chef Altin, you are now eligible to win this challenge. And since Phichit does have immunity, I’m afraid that means Mila, you are going to be risking elimination tonight. Thank you, chefs, for an exciting final course.

Chef Babicheva: [arms crossed] I’m disappointed with the judge’s decision, obviously. I still don’t think the dish was bland, but there’s nothing I can do now except be ready for the final judge’s table.


[With the dinner complete the chefs pack up and say farewell to Cialdini ranch. It’s a quiet ride back into Manhattan, everyone tired out from travel and the intense cook off. There’s no time to rest yet, however. Judge’s table still awaits. The chefs file into the familiar waiting room, taking a seat among the stored dry ingredients while they wait for Christophe to appear. They don’t have to wait long.]

Christophe: [stepping into the green room] It’s been a tough battle, mes amis, but the judges are ready to pick a winner…and to send a chef home. First, from the face-off winners, the judges would like to see Victor, Leo, and Otabek.

[There’s some chatter among the contestants. This far into the competition they know the order of judges table, and the top three have just been chosen. Chef Yang looks a little disappointed to be omitted, while Chef Plisetsky only looks determined. Chefs Nikiforov, de la Iglesia, and Altin follow Christophe to stand before the judges.]

Christophe: Congratulations chefs! Of the five winners, you three were the judge’s favorites. Let’s hear what they have to say.

Celestino: Chef Altin, you gave us a refreshing take on the cheese course. Your savory cheesecake was fragrant and flavorful but at the end of the day there was no doubt what ingredient was meant to be the star. Well done.

Minako: Chef de la Iglesia, you showed us your connection to nature in your dish, and you embraced the seasonal component of the challenge. Using the green tomatoes set your dish apart, and your execution was great. It was a crispy, light, satisfying vegetarian dish.

Yakov: Victor, your lamb was a masterpiece. It was tender, perfectly roasted, and your accompaniment only heightened the savory flavors of your featured ingredient. Your showcase of your protein was expertly done.

Christophe: Celestino, since you hosted us today, I’ll give you the honor of announcing our winner. Which chef is our farm-to-table champion?

Celestino: For the showstopping dish of the night, the winner is…Chef Nikiforov.

Christophe: [as the other chefs and judges applaud politely] Two in a row! Congratulations, Victor!
I understand that Celestino has a bonus prize for you.

Celestino: As the winner of this challenge, your dish will be added to the seasonal menu of Cialdini’s Bistro for the month following the airing of this episode. With credit to you as the originating chef, of course!

Chef Nikiforov: [smiling] Thank you chef, it’s an honor.

Celestino: I’m honored to serve your dish in my restaurant. Well done!

Christophe: Well done to all the winning chefs, you are free to enjoy the rest of your evening. However, we are going to need to speak to some of your fellow competitors.

[The top three chefs return to the green room, where the other chefs are eager to hear the results.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [pointing to Chef Nikiforov] We’ve got a two-time champ!

[The contestants offer Chef Nikiforov their congratulations. He accepts slap on the back from Chef Chulanont and a rueful but good natured handshake from Chef Katsuki. Chefs Crispino and Yang exchange a sharp eyed glance even as they congratulate their fellow chef.]

Chef Crispino: I’m not surprised to see Victor win two challenges in a row. I doubt it will be his last either. He’s a big name in European food circles, and with the success of his restaurants...in any other season he would probably be judging the dishes, not cooking them.

Chef Yang: [determined] Victor is definitely the chef to beat right now, and I plan to.

Chef Altin: [to the other contestants once the cheering settles down] They want to see all the losing chefs, except Phichit.

[Five chefs leave the green room to stand before the judges, some looking much more nervous than others.]

Christophe: Chefs, you all lost your face-offs today. That said, some of you still had more successful dishes than others. Judges?

Celestino: Chef Katsuki, you served a remarkable dish tonight. Against any other chef you undoubtedly would have won. With that in mind you are safe tonight, and may return to the green room.

Chef Katsuki: Thank you, chef.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I’m not ashamed to have lost to Victor, but I am a very competitive person, and I’d be lying if I said it didn’t bother me that I missed out on victory by such a narrow margin. Next time we face off, I’ll be the winner for sure.

Yakov: Chef Crispino, your pesto was too strong, but you did embrace the seasonal nature of your ingredients, and your side dish was well executed. For this reason you are also safe.

[Chef Crispino exits, and now the three bottom chefs are left to squirm under the judge’s
Minako: Chefs, you are all in the bottom because you failed to understand the purpose of this challenge: showcase the best qualities of your assigned seasonal ingredient.

Yakov: Chef Ji, while your components were executed well, you ground a fine ingredient into sausage. While it was flavorful, it was a failure of creativity, and it shows compared to the winning dishes served tonight.

Minako: Mila, when we tasted your salad the only thing we could taste was goat cheese, and not in a good way. We wanted balance among the components in order to highlight your featured ingredient, instead we got a bland dish in which the dairy was somehow both missing and overwhelming.

Celestino: JJ, you made a successful dish, but you undermined it by ignoring the cues of the environment around you. A hot soup on a hot day isn’t seasonal. While your chicken and dumplings may be a farmhouse classic, a lighter dish would have better suited the challenge, and better highlighted your skills as a chef.

[A dramatic pause.]

Christophe: Chef Babicheva...please pack your knives and go.

Minako: Mila, this dish wasn’t a winner, but we know you have talent as a chef, and the personality to make a name for yourself in what is becoming a very public business. Find who you are in your cooking, and we know that we’ll see you again on the international scene. Good luck.

Chef Babicheva: Thank you. It’s been an honor to compete and I hope I get the opportunity to work with you all again soon.

Chef Ji: [looking disheartened] In the bottom again...I really need to step up my game.

Chef Leroy: Nobody puts JJ in the bottom two challenges in a row! Nothing is gonna stop me from winning next time around, so watch out!

[The bottom ranked chefs return to the green room.]

Chef Babicheva: [teary eyed, but holding her head high] Dasvidaniya, folks.

[Chef Babicheva is popular and the other chefs are sad to see her go. She accepts half a dozen hugs, including an especially affectionate hair ruffle from her fellow Russian Chef Nikiforov. Last to say goodbye are Chefs Crispino and Yang.]

Chef Crispino: [playfully scolding] And don’t lose my number! I expect to hear from you once I get my phone back.

Chef Babicheva: Not too soon though, right? You and Isabella have to go all the way to the end now, and represent all three of us.

Chef Yang: You know we will.
Chef Babicheva: I’ll be rooting for you!

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Chef Crispino: [bummed] Well, there goes our all female finale chances. I’m really going to miss Mila. She’s a great chef who didn’t really get the chance to show all her skills. I know we’ll be hearing more from her as a chef, and I know I’ll keep in touch with her as a friend!

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Chef Nikiforov: [shaking his head] Down to only two Russians already. Such a shame.

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Chef Babicheva: [voiceover as she packs her chef kit in the empty Top Chef Kitchen] I’m devastated. I really thought I had what it takes to make it to the final. [sigh] This isn’t the end though! I’ve made some great friends here on Top Chef, and I learned a lot about myself as a chef. I know I still have a lot to offer in the kitchen and out! Until next time!

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[Back at the apartment, the remaining chefs toast a glass of wine to their survival, and to moving forward in the competition.]

Chef Chulanont: Top ten, guys! Woohoo!

Chef Yang: Still a long way to go, though…

[The rest of the evening is friendly, but there’s an underlying tension to the chef’s relaxation. The competition is getting closer, and every cut from here on out is going to be a tough one. There’s no more hiding in the middle of the pack.]

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Chef Nikiforov: As always, I’m dedicating my winning dish today to my adorable, wonderful, talented husband! I love you, moy a ribka!

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Chef Katsuki: [laughing] He does what??

Producer: [offscreen] He always dedicates his dishes to his husband. It’s cute. Do you have any words for your husband after the events of today’s challenge?

Chef Katsuki: My husband? Sure. [looks into camera] Sweetheart, I love you, but if I was home you’d be sleeping on the couch tonight.

Producer:...

Chef Katsuki: ...He knows what he did.
[The sun is just barely rising in New York City. Early morning joggers hit the streets. Bagel shops and delis open their doors for their first wave of customers. The last of the late night crowd stumbles home still in their party clothes. In the Top Chef apartment, most of the contestants are still asleep when their rest is disturbed by a loud catchy pop tune coming from the outside balcony. Chefs Altin and Plisetsky emerge from the kitchen with coffee and cereal, both still looking sleep rumpled, to seek out the source of the noise. After some muffled grumbling one of the bedrooms open to reveal Chefs Yang, Crispino, and Nikiforov. A second bedroom opens to reveal a sleepy Chef Katsuki, but once he realizes they aren’t being awoken for some kind of official challenge, he promptly shuts the door again, presumably to catch a few more minutes of shut eye.]

Chef Yang: [yawning] It’s six in the morning. Who’s playing that music?

Chef Plisetsky: [rolling his eyes and pointing outside with his cereal spoon] Who else?

[On the apartment balcony, Chef Leroy is performing some kind of intense workout routine. Blaring from a speaker attached to his phone is a catchy song with very unique lyrics, which the chef sings along with, surprisingly chipper considering the early hour. From inside, Chefs Plisetsky and Altin observe while they attempt to eat a quiet breakfast. Chef Nikiforov rolls his eyes before disappearing back into the bedroom, his hair comically sleep mussed. Chefs Crispino and Yang admit defeat and make their way to the kitchen to take their own turn with the coffee maker.]

Chef Plisetsky: [irate] Does that idiot seriously have his own theme song?

Chef Crispino: Now that the group is getting smaller, certain chefs are taking on more of a… presence, in the house. Some in a good way, some [lips pursed] not so much.

Chef Nikiforov: [waving his hand dismissively] I do not care for this…[brow furrowing] what is his name again?

Producer: ...Chef Leroy?

Chef Nikiforov: Yes, yes, whoever. He is annoying and he is interrupting my beauty sleep with this egotistical music of his. [pointing to himself] I have plenty of ego for this house, thank you very much. There is no need for his also.

Chef Leroy: Ha! They’re just jealous of these beauties! [Chef Leroy flexes a toned bicep, pressing a kiss to the muscle] Besides, I’ve gotta get psyched up for the challenges today! Everybody knows I’m the best chef here, but I haven’t won one yet and I’m overdue.

Chef Katsuki: [blearily] I would just like for everyone in the house to get along...and let me sleep.
[Cut to the Top Chef kitchen as the chefs arrive, ready for their Quickfire challenge. Christophe is waiting alone today, wearing a flattering maroon shirt with an open collar and a fitted black vest. Despite his stylish appearance, the chefs eyes are on their workstations, which are set up much differently than normal.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover] We walk into the kitchen, and they’ve got the counters set up with these funny dividers. It almost looks like we’re going to be playing Jeopardy or something.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] All I can think is this looks uncomfortably like we’re going to be participating in some kind of Japanese game show.

Christophe: Welcome chefs! Please choose one of the ten stations we’ve set up on the counters. No peeking at your neighbors!

[The chefs line up at the sections along the counter. Each station is provided with a pen and a pad of paper, along with a row of tasting spoons. A few chefs are still looking confused, while others see the spoons and seem to have some idea of what’s coming. Chef Chulanont looks excited, while Chef Katsuki looks apprehensive.]

Christophe: Chefs, the next two days are going to be all about taste. For your Quickfire challenge, we’re interpreting that literally. It’s time to play Name That Ingredient!

[Christophe reveals a remote in his hand, pushing a button to play a silly game show theme.]

Christophe: The rules are simple: I will provide you with an unnamed sauce, which you will all have fifteen seconds to taste. At the end of that fifteen seconds you will have one minute to write down the ingredients that you can confidently identify. Then we’ll reveal your answers. Chefs that name the required number of correct ingredients--

[Christophe presses another button which plays a cheerful ding!]

Christophe:--will move on to round two! Chefs who fail to name enough ingredients, or name a wrong ingredient--

[This time Christophe plays an ugly buzz.]

Christophe: --will be out, and lost their chance to win immunity in the coming elimination. Everyone clear on the rules? Then let the games begin!

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Chef Ji: Ugh, this is just like my culinary school exams. At least they weren’t that long ago, I guess.

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Chef Nikiforov:[grinning] This seems like fun!

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Chef Plisetsky:[grinning sharply] I can do this!

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[Each chef receives a small dish of the first sauce. It’s golden in color, and gives off an immediate aroma of buttery shellfish with just a hint of bitterness.]

Christophe: [holding a stopwatch] You each have your first sauce, and for this round you will be required to correctly name six ingredients! Your fifteen seconds of tasting time start now.

[The ten chefs quickly dip their spoons into the mystery sauce before tasting, letting the sauce settle on their palates and reveal its secrets. A few chefs’ eyes light up right away, while a few take their time and several spoonfuls to try and identify the ingredients they will have to recite to Christophe]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I immediately taste sherry and crab, and I know it must be the broth for some kind of bouillabaisse, which I’m familiar with. I feel confident about naming six ingredients.

[At the fifteen second mark Christophe clicks his remote and the short game show theme plays once again.]

Christophe: Okay, chefs, spoons down! You will now have one minute to list your six required ingredients. Remember, a wrong ingredient means immediate disqualification! Your time starts now!

[The chefs drop their spoons and grab their pencils, writing down as many correct ingredients as they can confidently identify. The opaque partitions between them prevent any cheating.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover as he scribbles furiously] I’ll admit, I don’t know exactly what this sauce is, but I trust my tastebuds! I just have to use my head and think about the flavors.

[The chefs write, cross out, and write again. A few, like Chef Nikiforov, finish their list before time is up, but many, including Chef Katsuki, write right up to Christophe’s buzzer.]

Christophe: Pencils down! We’ll now reveal your answers and find out who is going on to round two! We’ll begin on this end, with Chef Katsuki. Chef, please tell us your ingredients.

Chef Katsuki: [revealing his short list] Um, carrot, onion, crab, lobster, leek--

[Christophe presses his remote, which gives an angry buzz.]

Christophe: [sympathetic] Oooh, I’m sorry chef, but there is no leek in this sauce. You may step away from the gaming area. Next!

Chef Chulanont: [confidently] Crab, lobster, fennel, carrot, garlic, and saffron.

[This time Christophe’s remote gives the more cheerful ding!]

Christophe: Correct! We have our first round two contestant. Next!

Chef de la Iglesia: Onion, crab, shrimp, lobster, garlic, …halibut?

[ Buzz! ]

Chef Yang: Onion, carrot, celery, shallot, crab and lobster.

[ Ding! ]

Chef Plisetsky: Onion, garlic, shallot, fennel, olive oil, and clam juice.

[ Ding! ]
Chef Altin: Crab, lobster, garlic, fennel, leek—

[Buzz!]

Chef Leroy: Crab, lobster, celery, carrot, haddock—

[Buzz!]

Chef Nikiforov: Onion, carrot, celery, shallot, white wine—

Christophe: [interrupting] Be more specific?

Chef Nikiforov: ... Sherry, and lobster.

[Ding!]

Chef Ji: Crab, lobster, clam juice, fennel, carrot, and onion.

[Ding!]

Chef Crispino: Sherry, olive oil, saffron, fennel, garlic, and onion.

[Ding!]

Christophe: Congratulations to our top six! I hope you enjoyed that crab and lobster bouillabaisse! You now move on to round two, where you will be required to name eight ingredients of this next sauce. Only the chefs who name eight correct ingredients will move on to our Sudden Death final round! Bring on the next sauce!

[The six remaining chefs, now spaced more evenly along the counter, are given their next dish of sauce, this time a vibrant and aromatic green.]

Christophe: You know the drill, fifteen seconds to taste starts now!

[Chefs dip in and taste the unknown sauce. Chef Chulanont’s eyes light up, while Chefs Crispino and Nikiforov now look less confident.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] The minute I taste this sauce I know exactly what it is. Third round here I come!

[Christophe’s game show jingle comes quicker than ever.]

Christophe: Okay, one minute on the clock! Name those eight ingredients...now!

[The chefs write furiously. With only one minute the challenge of thinking of the ingredients quickly is just as challenging as being able to identify the mystery ingredients at all.]

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] This is not a sauce I’m familiar with. I admit, I don’t think I’ll be winning immunity today.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Thai green curry is one of my favorites! Unfortunately it’s one of my favorites to eat out at other people’s restaurants. [laughing] I’ve never cooked it myself.

[Buzz!]

Christophe: Time’s up, chefs! Pencils down and reveal your list!
[Chef Chulanont looks pleased, but Chef Yang curses under her breath as she reveals her incomplete list.]

Christophe: We’ll start on the left, again. Phichit?

Chef Chulanont: [reading his list aloud with a grin] Lemongrass, coconut milk, thai chili, garlic, thai basil, fish sauce, kaffir lime leaves, and sugar.

[Ding!]

Christophe: Correct! You’ve made it to the final round. Next?

Chef Yang: [ruefully] Coconut milk, lemongrass, fish sauce, clove--

[Buzz!]

Chef Crispino: Coriander, coconut milk, serrano pepper--

[Buzz!]

Chef Ji: Coriander, shallot, cumin, lemongrass, thai chili, garlic, fish sauce, and thai basil.

[Ding!]

Chef Ji: [voiceover as he grins] All that studying for culinary school is paying off!

Chef Plisetsky: Coriander, kaffir lime, thai basil, thai chili, coconut milk, garlic, shallot, and fish sauce.

[Ding!]

Chef Nikiforov: Coconut milk, fish sauce, cumin, garlic, lemongrass, sugar, basil--

[ Buzz!]

Christophe: Sorry Victor, but we were looking for the specific licorice-y flavor of Thai basil. As for our remaining three contestants: congratulations! You are moving on to the Sudden Death final round! Please step forward, and bring your spoon with you.

[Chefs Chulanont, Plisetsky, and Ji come around to the front of the counter, where Christophe now has a third pot of mystery sauce. The lid is on, keeping smell and sight of the sauce a secret until the last possible moment.]

Christophe: Chefs, this round will work a little differently. You will still have your fifteen seconds to taste. However, you will not be writing down ingredients. Instead you will take turns naming the ingredients out loud, like the Americans do their spelling bees. If you name a wrong ingredient, you’re out! The last chef standing will win immunity, and a significant advantage in the coming elimination challenge. Are your spoons ready, chefs?

[All three contestants stand poised as Christophe toys with the lid of the sauce pot.]

Christophe: Your fifteen seconds start now!

[Christophe unveils the sauce, which is a thick reddish brown. It immediately gives off a rich, spicy aroma full of complex sweet and smoky notes.]
Chef Chulanont: [voiceover, eyes lighting up as he tastes] I know what this is, but it doesn’t help me! No two moles are the same, and they all have an ingredient list a mile long. This is gonna be tough.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover as he scowls] I know that it’s a mole, but this is a sauce I’ve never made myself. I’m going to have to go only off what I can taste.

Chef Ji: [voiceover] This wasn’t on my culinary school exams!

[ Buzz! ]

Christophe: That’s time! I hope that taste was illuminating because now we begin the final round! Starting with Chef Chulanont. Chef, name that ingredient.

Chef Chulanont: Ancho chilies.
Chef Plisetsky: Mexican chocolate.
Chef Ji: Tomato?

[Christophe nods, and indicates for Chef Chulanont to continue with the next round.]

Chef Chulanont: Garlic.
Chef Plisetsky: Cinnamon.
Chef Ji: Peanut butter.

[ Buzz! ]

Christophe: I’m sorry, Guang-hong that is incorrect. I’m afraid you’re out.

Chef Ji: [voiceover] Oooh I’m so annoyed that I knocked myself out. Still, it feels good to beat the other chefs and make it to the final round.

Christophe: Phichit, you can continue.

Chef Chulanont: Chipotles.
Chef Plisetsky: Raisin.
Chef Chulanont: Black peppercorn.
Chef Plisetsky: Anise seed.
Chef Chulanont: [less certain] ...clove.

[Christophe nods]

Chef Plisetsky: Sugar.
Chef Chulanont: ...Cayenne pepper?

[ Buzz! ]

Christophe: I’m sorry, Phichit, there is no cayenne pepper in this mole poblano. Yuri, if you can name one more correct ingredient, you will be the winner of this Quickfire.
[Chef Plisetsky stares at the sauce, a look of utter concentration on his face.]

Chef Plisetsky: ...sesame seed.

[Ding!]

Christophe: Correct! Congratulations Yuri Plisetsky, you are our Name That Ingredient champion!

[Christophe plays the game show theme one final time while the disqualified chefs clap and cheer where they were waiting just off camera.]

Christophe: You’ve won our grand prize, immunity! And a big advantage in the next elimination challenge. Well done, chef.

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Chef Chulanont: [pouting] Aw, I wanted to win two in a row. Oh well, I’ll just have to get it back next time!

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Chef Katsuki: It looks like my immunity streak is well and truly over. [sighs] It was nice while it lasted. [shrugging] I’ll just have to start winning elimination challenges now!

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Chef Plisetsky: [grinning] Yeah, it feels good to win! People want to underestimate me because I’m only eighteen, but I just proved them wrong. From here on out, I’m going all out. No more middle of the pack for me. It’s time to kick ass or go home! Bring it on, Top Chef!

Chapter End Notes

Next up, on Top Chef: Our chefs will work in teams to cater a party for a VIP who strikes fear into the hearts of even the coolest customers in the business. Who will meet her impossible standards, and who will disappoint? Stay tuned and find out!
[The “Elimination” logo flashes across the screen, then returns to the chefs and Christophe in the Top Chef Kitchen. Christophe now stands in front of a white game show board with three hidden doors. The board is decorated with flowers and draped ribbon. In his hand the host still holds his sound effects remote.]

Christophe: Chefs, for your elimination challenge, you’ll be catering for a very special guest, who’s preparing for a very special occasion. You’ll be divided into three teams, and each team will be responsible for one course of a dinner party to be held tomorrow evening. You will have a theme to guide your dishes, which is hidden behind these doors! Let’s reveal, shall we?

[With flourish, Christophe peels back the first door, to reveal the word PAST written in a gold, flourishing font. The second door reveals the word PRESENT, and the third a calligraphic FUTURE. With the three themes revealed, the handsome host presses a button on his remote and the Top Chef Kitchen is filled with a tinny rendition of “Here Comes the Bride.”]

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Chef de la Iglesia: [shaking his head] Oh, man. Christophe plays that song and the bottom drops out of my stomach. They’ve done weddings before on Top Chef and it never goes well. *Never*.

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Chef Katsuki: [eyes closed and fingers crossed] Please don’t be a wedding, *please* don’t be a wedding--

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Christophe: [laughing] I see the panic in your eyes, *mes amis*, and no, we are not going to make you cater a wedding! Instead, you will be catering a bridal shower for our illustrious guest judge and twenty guests.

[Several chefs breath an audible sigh of relief.]

Christophe: But who is our VIP guest? I promised that this week’s challenges would be all about taste, and this bridal shower will be a test of yours. You will be cooking for the undeniable tastemaker of European culinary circles for the last twenty years. She’s getting remarried to another well known restaurateur you’re all familiar with here on Top Chef.

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Chef Nikiforov: [brow furrowed] Wait, is he talking about--

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Chef Plisetsky: [pale as a ghost] Holy sh--

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Christophe: Please welcome the bride-to-be, world renowned food critic, chef, and all around
culinary icon, the woman we all both fear and love...Lilia Baranovskaya!

[Lilia Baranovskaya enters the Top Chef Kitchen, a stately woman in her late fifties dressed in a crisp white power suit with a deep plum blouse. Her hair is up in her iconic high bun. As she enters the kitchen several chefs pale. Chef Katsuki can be seen silently mouthing “Oh my God.” Even Chef Nikiforov has a nervous flush to his cheeks as the critic comes to stand beside Christophe.]

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] I heard that Lilia once gave a Michelin star restaurant a poor review, and they closed down that night.

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] My culinary instructors kept a framed picture of Lilia Baranovskaya in the front of every classroom, like she was the president or something. When chefs die, Lilia weighs their souls and decides whether or not their hollandaise sauce was good enough to grant them passage to the afterlife.

Chef Katsuki: [head in hands] I changed my mind. I’d rather cater a wedding.

Chef Ji: So Ms. Baranovskaya is the most respected food critic in all of Europe and she’s getting married to our head judge. No pressure, right?

Chef Nikiforov: I knew Lilia and Yakov were getting remarried. Of course! In Russian food circles theirs is a famous tale of love, haute cuisine, and many broken dishes. [starry eyed] Such passion! I’m so glad they’re getting back together. [frowning] But if we mess up this dinner, we will likely die. So there’s that.

Chef Plisetsky: I want Crispino, Altin...and Nikiforov.

[There is a murmur of surprise among the contestants as Chef Nikiforov joins Chef Plisetsky along with Chefs Altin and Crispino. Chef Plisetsky has done little to hide his disdain for Chef Nikiforov in the past, but with the challenge ahead, all bets are off.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Today we’re cooking to impress Lilia Baronovskaya. For that I need the
best French trained chef in Russia. And that’s me. But the second best is Victor. I don’t like him...but together we’re gonna be unbeatable.

Christophe: In addition, Chef Plisetsky, you may choose which of the three courses you wish to serve to the judges. Will it be Past, Present, or Future?

[Chef Nikiforov nudges Chef Plisetsky, as if to give his input, but the younger contestant speaks up before he has the chance.]

Chef Plisetsky: We’ll be Team Future.

Christophe: [surprised at the chef’s quick answer] Excellent! As you may have guessed, that means you will be cooking the third and final course of the dinner party! The remaining six chefs will draw knives to determine your teams and what course you will be preparing! Bring out the knife block!

[Chef Katsuki is the first chef to draw, pulling a knife labelled PAST from the block. Next is Chef Yang, who draws the first PRESENT, followed by Chef Ji who draws PRESENT as well. Chef de la Iglesia draws the next PAST. Chef Katsuki breathes a sigh of relief when Chef Chulanont draws the final PAST, leaving the last knife labelled PRESENT for Chef Leroy.]

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Chef Yang: [apprehensive] I realize it’s going to be me, Guang-hong, and JJ. They’re both talented, but Guang-hong is young, and JJ is...JJ.

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Chef Chulanont: I’m on the red team with Yuuri and Leo, which, yay! But Yuri Plisetsky is up to something. It doesn’t bode well for the rest of us for both the Russians to be on one team, and Sara and Otabek aren’t slouches either.

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Christophe: There you have it! You now know your teammates, and what course you will be cooking for Lilia’s shower tomorrow evening. Lilia, any advice for the chefs before you go?

Lilia: [sternly] My guests tomorrow evening will be my colleagues, some of the most powerful women in cuisine and culture in both Europe and America. Chefs, do not embarrass me.

Christophe: ...And with that encouragement, we say farewell, until tomorrow! Thank you Lilia!

[Lilia exits the Top Chef kitchen, leaving ten nervous chefs in her wake.]

Christophe: Chefs, in one hour you’ll head to Whole Foods market to buy your ingredients, and after that you’ll have two hours to prep for tomorrow’s dinner! Until then put your heads together and get to planning!

[Christophe exits, and the teams immediately gather in their clusters. Pen and paper are passed around as the chefs begin to build their dishes. Team Past is working closely, Chef Katsuki writing while Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia gesticulate, but the energy is high. The chefs on Team Future, meanwhile, look to Chef Plisetsky to explain his choices.]

Chef Nikiforov: Alright Yura. You chose your team, and you chose your course. I’m assuming you have an idea in mind.
[Chef Plisetsky nods. For once the young chef is deathly serious, and doesn’t even waste a scowl on Chef Nikiforov’s teasing diminutive.]

Chef Crispino: Well? Let’s hear it then.

Chef Plisetsky: I’m a classically trained pastry chef. ...We’re going to break the dessert curse.

[Chef Crispino is immediately skeptical, and Chef Altin keeps his expression reserved as usual. However, a competitive spark flares to life in Chef Nikiforov’s eye. He pulls a piece of paper and a pencil in front of him and immediately starts writing.]

Chef Nikiforov: Tell me the menu, Yura. Sara and Otabek, if you have any secret skills now is the time to share.

Chef Plisetsky: It’ll be a trio of French pastries. First, an orange scented macaron…

Chef Crispino: [enthusiasm growing] Oh! I know how to make a creme patisserie that tastes like champagne. That would be a perfect filling.

Chef Nikiforov: Great. Keep going...

[It appears Team Future is off to an ambitious start. Across the kitchen, Team Present is making their own strides.]

Chef Ji: Hm, “present” is a little harder than “past” or “future”, I think. Maybe something about reunions? Since Yakov and Lilia are getting married again?

Chef JJ: [scoffing] Yeah okay. Any ideas what you want to “reunite” on the plate?

Chef Ji: [deflating] Never mind, I guess.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] We’re off to a slow start. Like I feared, JJ is steamrolling a lot of ideas, and Guang-hong doesn’t have same experience we do, so he’s not quick enough to stand up for himself.

Chef Yang: [brightening] Okay, how about this? We do something wrapped in parchment. It’ll be an elegant presentation and it’s very traditional French, so Lilia will like it.

Chef Ji: [confused] Cooking in parchment?

Chef Yang: Right, like you make the little parcels and bake them, and then the guest opens them at the table. What’s the name again, JJ? In French?

Chef Leroy: Eh... En papillote? Hey, yeah, that’s classy! It’ll literally be a “present.”

Chef Ji: I like it!

Chef Yang: We can do chicken, since we’re the entree course. Butter and white wine, to keep it simple. What vegetables?

Chef Ji: Why don’t we just see what’s best when we shop? If it’s simple we should try and be seasonal, right?

Chef Leroy: Sounds good to me. Team Present is in it to win it! Time to head for Whole Foods!

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A short van ride and the Top Chef teams are let loose once more on the unsuspecting Whole Foods market. Chef Plisetsky heads directly for the baking supplies with Chef Altin in tow. Chef Crispino heads for dairy, and Chef Chulanont gives the seafood counter a thorough looking over.

Chef Chulanont: [calling out] Hey, Leo! I know we said lobster, but they have langoustine! What do you think?

[Chef de la Iglesia gives a big thumbs up from the produce section. Meanwhile Chef Katsuki takes his time in the wine department.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Our theme is “Past” so we took our inspiration from the combination of French and Russian cooking that first brought Lilia and Yakov together. I feel good about the technique of our dish, I just hope it’s imaginative enough for Lilia. She likes traditional methods, but just being old fashioned won’t impress her.

[At the butcher’s counter Chef Yang chooses chicken breasts, while in produce Chef Nikiforov carefully selects lemons, oranges and tangerines. Chef Ji examines the seasonal vegetable offerings uncertainly, and looks to Chef Leroy for advice.]

Chef Ji: [to Chef Leroy] I got the potatoes, but the green beans didn’t look that great. I was thinking spinach? Will that steam okay with our technique?

Chef Leroy: Yeah, spinach will be great! It’ll pair well with this herb rub I’m whipping up.

Chef Ji: [still uncertain] Maybe I should check with Isabella, just in case...

Chef Leroy: Hey, we’re two out of three, right? That’s a majority. Besides we’re almost out of time here. Bag it up and let’s go.

Chef Ji: [voiceover] I’m not sure about the vegetables we’re choosing, but I’m also not so familiar with this cooking method. I decide to trust JJ’s advice.

Chef Chulanont: [waiting with his bags by the register] Two minutes, guys!

[The chefs return to the Top Chef Kitchen, where they begin their preparations for the next day. Once at the banquet room where Lilia will be hosting her shower, each team will only have a limited time to fire and plate their dishes, so most of the work will be done tonight. The two hours has just begun, but Team Future is already of something of a frenzy, Chef Plisetsky shouting orders to his team as he whips a bowl of egg whites large enough to bathe a small child in.]

Chef Plisetsky: [testing the peaks of the egg whites] Beka, what’s our oven status?

Chef Altin: [shouting back] Preheating!

Chef Plisetsky: Line the trays for macarons. Then start greasing the tartlet pans.

Chef Altin: [almost smiling] Yes, chef.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover as he measures out different kinds of flour into six different mixing bowls] This plate is a huge gamble, but our plan is strong. We decided to run with citrus as a theme. The yellow, orange, and golden brown of our finished desserts will represent Yakov and Lilia’s “golden” future together. The timing will have to be absolutely perfect, or any one of our three desserts could be a disaster. I only hope Plisetsky has the stamina to see the dish through, as the
heaviest burden is certainly on his skill.

[On a nearby station, Chefs Chulanont and Katsuki are prepping trays of langoustine to steam, dressing the shellfish with halved lemons and herb bundles.]

Chef Chulanont: [whispering to Chef Katsuki] Do you see what Victor’s team is up to? I don’t know how they’re going to pull it off we only have an hour in the kitchen tomorrow.

Chef Katsuki: Focus on our dish, Phi. If I know Victor, then I know they’re planning to surprise us. If we don’t show up ready to win we’re in trouble.

Chef Chulanont: [noding] Still. All that baking [shudder]. Hey, Leo, how’s the dough coming?

[Chef de la Iglesia is supervising an industrial mixer, adding flour one spoonful at a time to the thickening pelmeni dough inside. He gives Chefs Chulanont and Katsuki a thumbs up.]

Chef de la Iglesia: It’s looking good! Should be ready to shape in...fifteen minutes?

Chef Katsuki: Right on time.

[Progress is being made across the kitchen, but the evening is not without it’s speedbumps.]

Chef Yang: [cutting carefully measured squares of creamy white parchment paper] Guang-hong, what veggies did you end up getting?

Chef Ji: I found some new potatoes, which I’m almost done prepping, and spinach.

Chef Yang: [pausing with a frown] Did you say spinach?

Chef Ji: [concerned] Y-yes? Should I not have? JJ said it would go well with his marinade.

[Chef Yang drops her scissors and calls out to Chef Leroy, who is spreading his butter and herb rub over a long line of thinly cut chicken breasts.]

Chef Yang: JJ, did you tell Guang-hong to buy spinach?

Chef Leroy: Huh? Yeah, he asked and I said it would be good with the dish, why?

Chef Yang: Spinach releases water when it steams! It’s going to make too much liquid in the packet.

Chef Leroy: What? No way! The extra liquid will help cook the potatoes, and keep the chicken moist. It’ll balance out in the oven.

Chef Yang: [doubtful] Are you sure? If it’s too wet it’ll be a disaster, and we won’t know until we serve it.

Chef Leroy: [laughing] Trust me, I’ve made this kind of thing a million times. Plus, the flavor is going to be amazing with my herb marinade. We’re gonna win this thing for sure.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Ugh, I’m still not feeling great, but it’s too late to change it. The only thing I can do is trust in my team and hope JJ isn’t barking up the wrong tree with this recipe.

[The evening winds on. Team Past cuts, fills, and folds a small mountain of Russian dumplings, while Team Future rotates a seemingly endless parade of baking trays in and out of the oven. Chefs Altin and Nikiforov tirelessly fan finished racks of macaron halves while Chef Crispino pops
finished lemon tarts carefully out of their trays and Chef Plisetsky rotates sheets of madeleines in the oven.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Our plating is insanely complex, so all the baking has to be done tonight. If anything goes wrong, we’re [beeped].

[Eventually the timer runs to zero, and it’s the end of the preparation portion of the evening. The chefs are chauffeured back to the apartment, where the stress of the day clearly still weighs on them.]

Chef Chulanont: [collapsing onto the couch between Chefs de la Iglesia and Ji] Ugh, I’m gonna be folding pelmeni in my sleep.

Chef de la Iglesia: Tell me about it. We got it done though.

[Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia share a beleaguered high five.]

Chef Ji: [worried] Sounds like you guys are getting along great. That must be nice.

Chef de la Iglesia: [concerned] Dude, what’s up? Are you having problems?

Chef Ji: [quickly] No! I mean, I don’t think so? Isabella just seems worried.

Chef Chulanont: What does JJ think?

Chef Ji: [frowning] He thinks everything is “awesome” and we’re going to win.

Chef de la Iglesia: Well that’s good, right?

Chef Ji: I guess. It just seems like a lot of what JJ thinks is awesome about the dish has to do with him. I’m worried that if anything goes wrong it’ll be because of me. I don’t want to let the team down.

[Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia trade an uncertain look over Chef Ji’s head.]

Chef Chulanont: I’m sure you guys will do great.

[Chef Yang and Chef Crispino share their concerns on the balcony, a bottle of wine between them.]

Chef Crispino: JJ sounds like a...how do they say it in the States? A “piece of work”.

Chef Yang: He’s something alright. [sigh] I’m hoping he’s not a real asshole when it counts, but by the time we find out it’ll be too late, you know?

[Chef Crispino offers a commiserative nod.]

Chef Yang: Anyways, how are things on Team Russia? It looked like Plisetsky was running an Olympic camp, the way he was timing those ovens.

Chef Crispino: [laughing] Yeah, and Victor encouraging it all. [shaking her head] I’m still not sure we’ll pull it off. Or something will go wrong tomorrow, you know? And Yuri is the one with immunity. Desserts never seem to end well on this show. You don’t know it’s right until they bite into it.

Chef Yang: I feel you there. I’m sending my dish out in a sealed envelope. It’s insanity.
Both chefs laugh, but there’s no telling what will come the following day.

[It’s time for the bridal shower. The teams bring their prepared ingredients to the banquet hall kitchen, and then wait their turn to fire and serve their dish to Lilia and the judges, as well as Lilia’s twenty friends and colleagues. First to enter the kitchen is Team Past. Only a few minutes into their cooking, they are joined by none other than Yakov, wearing his own navy blue chef’s coat. Chef Katsuki pauses in whipping his bechamel sauce, and Chef Chulanont nearly drops a tray of dumplings into the waiting boiling water.]

Chef Chulanont: Um, hi chef?

Yakov: [gruffly] Apparently, as the groom, I am not welcome to attend the bridal shower. So I will be judging your dishes from back here, and also making sure your courses go out on time. If any of you disappoint my Liliotchka you deal with me.

[All three chefs exchange a look of mild terror before returning to their tasks. After all, they do not want to earn Yakov’s ire.]

Chef Katsuki: [slightly pale] I can honestly say this is the scariest dinner party I’ve ever catered in my life.

[Team Past is a well-oiled machine, cooking their pasta and plating their twenty dishes to be served to the judges. In no time at all a small army of waiters are ready to serve the first course, and Chefs Katsuki, Chulanont, and de la Iglesia follow them into the dining room to present their dish. In the meantime, it’s Team Presents turn to fire their entree. With all their parcels ready to cook, it’s just a matter of turning on the oven and getting their chicken dish in the oven. Chef Ji has already lined up twenty pristine plates, ready to bear their parchment packages to the judges.]

Chef Yang: [watching nervously as Yakov samples Team Past’s dish from the front of the kitchen, a look of consideration on his face] Well boys, we’ve done all we can do.

[The first course is served to the judges and guests. Seated in the center of the table is Lilia, in an elegant dark green cocktail dress and diamond earrings. Seated around her are Minako, Celestino, and Christophe. The rest of the table is filled with Lilia’s friends and colleagues from the food world. Chef Katsuki’s eyes are large as he and his teammates stand at the head of the table to introduce their dish.]

Chef Chulanont: Good evening everyone! We’re honored to cook tonight to celebrate the coming reunion of Lilia and Yakov. Our theme for the first course of the evening was the Past, and so our starter is inspired by the fusion of Russian and French cuisine that brought Lilia and Yakov together.

Chef Katsuki: On your plate you have a langoustine pelmini and capers, with a tomato ragout. We used the shells of the langoustine to flavor a bechamel sauce. [bows] Please enjoy, and congratulations on your coming marriage.

[Much to the chefs relief, they are cued to leave before the guests dig into their appetizer. Feedback]
will have to wait for judge’s table.]

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[In the kitchen, Team Present finishes their dish and exits, making room for Team Future to fire their dessert. Chef Crispino is carefully assembling their delicate macarons, while Chef Nikiforov perfects a Grand Marnier syrup to top their madeleines. Chef Altin is unwrapping their trays of cooled tartlets when Chef Plisetsky suddenly curses.]

Chef Plisetsky: [frantically stirring a double boiler of dark chocolate] [Beep] --no! Oh [beep] it’s seizing. [beep] [beep]-ing [beep]!

Chef Altin: What’s happening?

Chef Plisetsky: Just look at it!

[Sure enough, the chocolate Chef Plisetsky had been preparing to garnish their tartlets has seized, the silky dark sauce turned to a grainy solid in the glass bowl.]

Chef Plisetsky: [tugging on his hair] There must have been water in the bowl from when we washed it, [beep] why wasn’t i more careful--

Chef Altin: Yuri--

Chef Plisetsky: [breathing too shallowly] It’s all my fault. I’m gonna fail--[beep]--I can’t--

Chef Altin: [shaking his friend by the shoulders] Yura! Look at me!

[Chef Plisetsky is startled out of his panic.]

Chef Altin: Breathe, alright? This is not the end. It’s just a garnish, and we can fix it.

Chef Plisetsky: Okay...okay. What did we bring? There’s no more chocolate.

Chef Altin: We have more Grand marnier, we have whipping cream, powdered sugar--

Chef Plisetsky: [thinking] Sugar….sugar! Yes!

Chef Altin: Tell me what to do.

Chef Plisetsky: Tell Victor and Sara to keep plating, then get a saucepan and start dissolving a cup and a half of sugar in water and a teaspoon of...

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[Unaware of Team Future’s ongoing crisis, Team Present introduces their entree to the table of judges and guests. On each plate is a charming paper packet tied with string.]

Chef Yang: Our team was inspired by the present, and so we’ve made a “present” for you: chicken and summer vegetables en papillote. Inside the parcel you’ll find an herbed chicken breast with new potatoes and spinach, with white wine and lemon butter.

Chef Ji: It’s been an honor to cook for you today!
Chefs Plisetsky, Nikiforov, Crispino, and Altin present their dish. In front of each guest is a long rectangular plate with three pristine bite sized desserts. Despite his near collapse, Chef Plisetsky managed to finish plating all of his tart au citron, complete with a small wreath of golden spun sugar to replace the failed piping chocolate.

Chef Nikiforov: We are team Future! To celebrate the golden years you and Yakov will enjoy together, we offer a trio of French citrus desserts.

Chef Plisetsky: On your left you’ll find an orange and cardamom madeleine, with a grand Marnier syrup. In the center you have a miniature tart au citron, with a spun sugar garnish, and finally on the right we’ve made a tangerine scented macaron, with champagne creme patisserie.

Chef Nikiforov: We hope you enjoy!

[With the completion of the dessert course, for better or for worse, dinner service is over. The chefs are herded back to the Top Chef Kitchen, where they await judge’s table. The overall state of the night is exhaustion. Chefs Leroy and Nikiforov look confident, as usual. Chefs Ji and Katsuki look worried, as usual. Chef Plisetsky is staring at the floor, his knees drawn up under his chin. It’s only a few minutes before Christophe appears.]

Christophe: The judges would like to see all three teams, please.

[It’s a bit of a wait as all ten contestants file in to face the judges. The three teams stand together, some more outwardly unified than others.]

Christophe: Judges, how do you rate this bridal shower fare?

Yakov: While there were some highs and lows, from where I stood in the kitchen all three teams were organized, and delivered their finished plates on time with a polished presentation.

Lilia: I would agree. Thank you all, for a pleasant meal. My colleagues were impressed, and I was...not disappointed.

Christophe: High praise from you, madame, to be sure. Let’s start with the first team perhaps. Lilia, how did you like Team Past’s starter course?

Lilia: Chefs, your appetizer...was adequate. Your marriage of French and Russian cuisine was elegant, and your pelmini delicate and well seasoned. I had no objections to the dish.

[Christophe nods to Lilia, her opinion given.]

Christophe: Eh, in case that glowing review wasn’t clear, Team Past, you are safe tonight. Well done, I suppose!

[All three members of Team Past breathe a huge sigh of relief, and even exchange hugs. Chef Chulanont appears to be near tears and Chef Katsuki offers Lilia a deep bow.]

Chef Katsuki: It was an honor to cook for you tonight. Thank you.

[Team Past leaves the judge’s table, to continue celebrating their survival in the green room.]

Chef Chulanont: [punch drunk] Lilia Baranovskaya called my dish “adequate”! [screams very
quietly] Write that on my flipping tombstone, kids!

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Chef Katsuki: [grinning lopsidedly] Congrats to the happy couple!

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Christophe: [laughing] Never has second place been so enthusiastically received! [sobering] But now comes the difficult part. Chefs, your two remaining teams made Lilia’s favorite, and least favorite dishes tonight. One of you will leave this room the winner, and one of you will be asked to pack your knives. First, we’ll have the good news.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] I know everything on our plate came out as perfect as I could make it. If we lose today, it’s because I just wasn’t good enough.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I’m feeling really apprehensive as they announce the winner. Despite JJ’s confidence, unless Team Future had big problems with their desserts I know my team is in trouble.

Christophe: Lilia? I’ll leave it to you to choose your favorite. Which team has earned your sought after seal of approval?

Lilia: The winning team...is Team Future.

[Team Future doesn’t hide their relief. Chef Crispino gives a cheer, while Chef Nikiforov wraps an arm around Chef Plisetsky’s shoulders and ruffles his hair in a brotherly fashion. Chef Plisetsky hisses like a cat, but once released he does share a more reserved high five with Chef Altin.]

Lilia: It is obvious at least one of you has had excellent training, to deliver three complex desserts with such impeccable quality.

Chef Nikiforov: It was all Chef Plisetsky! The whole course was his concept.

Chef Plisetsky: [beet red] I couldn’t have done it without the team.

Lilia: It sounds like they could not have done it without you. Your macaron was as light as air, your tartlet pastry was flaky and well baked. The Grand Marnier syrup was just the right touch of decadence on the madeleine.

Minako: It was a masterful plate, chefs. Given the slim margin of success with desserts here on Top Chef, I think you really pulled it off. The macaron, for me was a highlight.

Celestino: Yes, for me as well. And the total theme! It was charming, without being too cliche, and you illustrated it well. Each type of citrus was distinct, but there was total harmony on the plate.

Yakov: It is a future I hope I can look forward to.

Christophe: Lilia, as our guest judge you have the pleasure of announcing our challenge winner.

Lilia: For his beautiful pastry, the winner is Yuri Plisetsky.

Christophe: Congratulations, Yuri! You are the winner of this challenge. As such, Lilia has an extra gift for you.

[From her handbag, Lilia plucks a slim piece of cardstock, which she offers to Chef Plisetsky. The young chef accepts it with an unreadable expression.]
Lilia: [explaining] My card. Consider it good for one letter of reference from me towards any professional ambition of your choosing. Well done, chef.

[Team Future thanks the judges and returns to the green room, guiding the shell shocked Chef Plisetsky along the way. Team Past congratulations them, and stares in awe at Lilia’s gifted business card.]

Chef Chulanont: [softly] Holy shit. That’s like a golden ticket, Yuri. You did it!

Chef Nikiforov: Of course he did! We all believed in our star pastry chef!

Chef Plisetsky: Yeah, it’s pretty cool, I guess.

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Chef Crispino: I was worried Yuri would bite off more than he could chew and we’d be on the bottom, but I’m happy to stand corrected!

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Chef Altin: [shrugging] Yura said he could do it. I trusted him.

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Chef Nikiforov: The dessert curse is broken! [emphasizing his accent] It has been a great day for Team Russia.

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[Chef Plisetsky takes a seat beside Chef Altin, and promptly bursts into relieved tears. The other contestants look away from the normally bristly chef, giving him a moment, but secretly they are all relieved to see a softer side to Chef Plisetsky. Nearby Chef Nikiforov looks at his young teammate proudly, until Chef Katsuki nudges him with a soft smile.]

Chef Katsuki: [almost too low for the cameras] Let him be, Victor. We’ve all pushed ourselves beyond our limits.

[Chef Nikiforov offers Chef Katsuki a reassuring wink. Chef Plisetsky hides his blotchy tearstained expression against the shoulder of Chef Altin, who bears his friends emotions without complaint.]

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[Back at judge’s table, Team Present is facing the reality of ranking on the bottom, and facing Lilia’s formidable disapproval.]

Christophe: Chefs, I’m afraid that your chicken in parchment parcels were the judges least favorite dish tonight. Judges?

Yakov: The dish was conceptually flawed. The en papillote method is so simple, that choosing the wrong components can doom the process from the start, and that was what happened here today.

Celestino: On a slightly more positive note, who dressed the chicken?

Chef Leroy: That was me, chef. It was an herb butter that I make in my own restaurant.

Lilia: I thought the flavors were...acceptable, if a little expected. However it was unfortunately
diluted by the watery quality of the vegetables in the dish.

Minako: On that note, whose idea was it to bake the dish en papillote?

Chef Ji: Isabella was the one who suggested it, and we all thought it was a great idea. She kind of came up with the whole plan for the course. I was glad she stepped up!

Yakov: And who was responsible for the greens in the dish?

Chef Ji: [looking to Chef Leroy uncertainly] Oh, well, I guess I was the one who chose the spinach, but I asked--

Celestino: It threw off the seasoning of the whole dish, chef. Spinach releases a lot of water when it steams. Your sauce was weakened and if left the dish bland.

Yakov: Chef Yang, did you approve of Chef Ji’s choice?

Chef Yang: [arms crossed] We agreed as a team, chef. I knew the water was a risk--

Minako: Then why did you--

Chef Yang: But I [glancing at Chef Leroy] was under the impression that the extra liquid would make sure our protein cooked through, and stayed moist.

Lilia: While that is the case, it was still too much. Your spinach overcooked, and the sauce was runny, making the bottom of the parcel soggy and unappealing by the time it reached the table.

Celestino: I think there were some clear responsibilities on this team, and some not so clear, and maybe that’s the issue here. I’m hearing that JJ managed the chicken, Guang-hong was responsible for the vegetables, but what was your role in this dish, Isabella?

Chef Yang: I...I assembled the parcels, and I made the sauce that was meant to thicken with JJ’s herb rub.

Minako: So in a way, you held control over the whole dish.

[Chef Yang doesn’t reply, only bowing her head. Chef Ji is looking back and forth between his teammates in confusion, and Chef Leroy remains silent, his arms crossed over his chest.]

Lilia: I think we are going to need some time to consider this.

Christophe: [nodding] Chefs, we’ll call you back in when we’ve made a decision.

[Team Present leaves the judges to deliberate. In the green room the other teams are waiting to hear the news.]

Chef Yang: [just barely keeping her voice steady] They don’t know yet.

Chef Crispino: [shocked] They don’t know? What happened?

Chef Yang: [collapsing into a folding chair] The spinach was watery, and it threw off the seasoning. Guang-hong did the vegetables, but I was the team leader who didn’t control the dish enough. Apparently.

[Chef Ji is practically in tears between Chefs de la Iglesia and Chulanont, and Chef Yang is staring at the floor dejectedly.]
Chef Leroy: [crossing his arms behind his head] Whew, that was rough going. I think we all know who’s turn it is, though. Sorry Guang-hong, but no hard feelings, right?

[Chef Nikiforov crosses his arms in displeasure at the chef’s tactlessness, and Chef Plisetsky expression grows stormier despite his cheeks still being blotchy from crying.]

Chef Katsuki: [warning] JJ...

Chef Leroy: What? C’mon we all know it.

Chef Nikiforov: [coldly] Clearly, we don’t.

Chef Leroy: Hey, what’s your prob--

Chef Plisetsky: They aren’t going to cut Guang-hong, you idiot! There gonna cut Isabella!

[With Chef Plisetsky’s outburst the tension in the room rackets up to eleven. Chef Leroy looks to his fellow contestants to disagree, but none do.]

Chef Leroy: [genuinely shocked] What? But she’s been doing great. Guang-hong is the one who’s always in the bottom!

Chef Yang: [looking at Guang-hong in concern] Guys, don’t--

Chef Plisetsky: [to Chef Leroy] Yeah, so what? The whole dish was Yang’s idea, and I’ll bet one of you morons told the judges that.

Chef Ji: [distraught] I’m sorry! I didn’t want to get Isabella in trouble, I just thought she did a good job!

Chef de la Iglesia: Dude, it’s not your fault. [pointed glance at Chef Leroy]

Chef Plisetsky: This was a team challenge. You set Isabella up to be the leader, and the dish failed. But we all heard who insisted on keeping spinach in the dish, and it wasn’t her. I bet that didn’t come up, though, did it?

Chef Leroy: [uncertain] I...

[The tense exchange is interrupted by Christophe making his appearance.]

Christophe: [solemnly] We’re ready for you.

[The chefs of Team Present rise, and follow Christophe. Chef Yang gives Chef Ji an encouraging pat on the shoulder, leaving Chef Leroy to follow alone. It’s a short journey before the three chefs stand before the judges once more. All four judges wear stony expressions.]

Yakov: Chefs, as you know, you’re team had the weakest dish on the table tonight. There are multiple reasons that led to your ranking, but from where we stand the primary reason was a lack of leadership and coherency within your group.

[There’s a dramatic pause, before Christophe opens his mouth to deliver his signature line.]

Christophe: Chef--

Chef Leroy:[suddenly] Wait!
[The contestants and judges look to Chef Leroy in shock. The normally brazen chef looks deeply shaken.]

Chef Leroy: I’m sorry, please don’t send either of them home. Isabel--I mean, Chef Yang didn’t bring the team down, and neither did Guang-hong. It was me.

Yakov: [eyes narrowing] Explain yourself, chef.

Chef Leroy: The spinach made it to the plate because of me. My teammates tried to speak up but I thought I knew better. I was only thinking of how to make my components look better on the plate. I’m the reason the dish failed.

Minako: Chef Leroy...are you asking to be eliminated?

Chef Leroy: I’m saying Isabella was a good leader, and Guang-hong...I shouldn’t have pushed him around when he trusted my advice. So if it’s between me and them...yes.

[There’s a long pause. Chef Ji is actually in tears, and Chef Yang has pressed both hands to her mouth in shock. Eventually each of the four judges offers Christophe a nod.]

Christophe: [wide eyed] Alright then. For the first time in Top Chef history, by your own request, Chef Leroy...please pack your knives and go.

[Chef Leroy offers a silent bow and exits, with Chefs Yang and Ji close behind. The remaining chefs wait with baited breath to hear the results in the green room. Chef Leroy can’t seem to speak, dragging his hand over his mouth as he paces the length of the room before finally facing his fellow competitors.]

Chef Leroy: [grinning weakly] Well, I guess this is au revoir, yeah? Hit me up if any of you ever find yourselves in Montreal.

[There is a collective gasp as the chefs realize what must have transpired. Chef Plisetsky’s jaw drops, and Chef Nikiforov brow is furrowed in confusion. Chef Katsuki, on the other hand, looks almost proud. Chef Yang blinks back tears as she crosses the room first to pull Chef Leroy into a hug.]

Chef Yang: Thank you, JJ.

Chef Leroy: [laughing awkwardly and patting her back] Crisse, Yang, don’t thank me. I’m the one who messed things up.

Chef Yang: [stepping back] You did the right thing. That’s what counts to me.

Chef Leroy: [rubbing the back of his neck] Yeah, well, I couldn’t just let a fellow Canadian take the fall like that, you know?

Chef Yang: [laughing] We’re gonna miss you around here, JJ.

[Chef Plisetsky mouths a derisive “speak for yourself”, but a well timed elbow from Chef Altin prevents him from voicing his opinion aloud.]

Chef Leroy: Um, maybe next time I’m out west, I could swing by your restaurant. I hear it’s pretty great and I’d like to--you know, only if that’s okay--

Chef Yang: [smiling] I think that would be great.
[Redeemed, a few more chefs have kind words and well wishes for Chef Leroy before he exits the green room to pack his knives in the kitchen.]

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Chef Katsuki: Cooking is about more than just putting out good food by yourself. It’s about building a strong community in your kitchen. I think JJ learned something about that today, and hopefully he’ll prove a better chef for it in the long run.

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Chef Leroy: [voiceover as he packs up his chef kit] I know I talk a big game, and I know what people think about my confidence in the kitchen. But when it comes down to it, I only want to win because I’m the best, not because I let somebody else take a fall for me. Chef Yang would have gone home before she compromised her integrity. I think I have a lot to learn from a chef like her. [laughing shakily] This isn’t over though! I’ve got some soul searching to do, and then the King will return, better than ever!

[Chef Leroy exits the Top Chef Kitchen, flashing one final “JJ Style!” for the cameras before the lights go out.]

Chapter End Notes

Whew, this was a tough one folks. Thank you to everyone reading so far, and to all your lovely comments! Just a reminder if you are enjoying this story, please subscribe and share! I'm trying to keep up my quick posting pace, and all your encouragement is really inspiring!

Next up: All's fair in love and war...
[Morning in New York City. At the Top Chef apartment the contestants prepare for another long round of competition. The coffee machine beeps cheerfully as the sizzle of eggs and bacon emanates from the kitchen. A few chefs enjoy their coffee on the balcony before the heat of the day sets in. Others spend more time on their appearance. With Chef Leroy gone Chef Nikiforov has claimed the definitive title of “Most Time Spent Hogging the Bathroom in the Morning,” but Chef Katsuki manages to occupy a small bit of counter for his morning routine.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover as he runs a comb through his messy hair] It’s a bit quieter around the house with JJ gone, for sure. There’s still good energy, but we can definitely feel the net growing tighter. There’s no room for beginner mistakes. The last few days I’ve really been thinking of all the people I have supporting me. My friends, family, my husband. I feel like I haven’t really pushed myself yet. I don’t want to let them down by playing it too safe.

[Beside Chef Katsuki Chef Nikiforov completes the final step of a complex skincare routine, splashing water over his face before giving a contented sigh.]

Chef Nikiforov: [mussing Chef Katsuki’s freshly combed hair playfully] Time for another big day!

[The chefs arrive in the Top Chef Kitchen, and the Quickfire logo flashes across the screen. Waiting for them are Christophe and head judge Yakov.]

Christophe: Good morning, chefs! I hope you’re all ready for today’s challenge. Beside me I’m sure you all recognize your very soon to be married head judge, Yakov Feltsman!

Yakov: [nodding in acknowledgement] Good morning, chefs.

[The chefs congratulate Yakov with a hearty round of applause.]

Christophe: But before Yakov jets off to his destination wedding with his bride-to-be, there was one challenge he absolutely could not miss. That high risk, gut wrenching challenge that chefs and viewers alike look forward to every year, the one, the only...Restaurant Wars!

Chef Chulanont: [cheering] Yes! Every Top Chef contestant wants to make it to Restaurant Wars. This is a great opportunity to prove we have what it takes to bring a concept to life, especially for those of us who don’t have executive chef credits under our belts. Am I freaking out? Yeah. Am I excited? Double yeah!

Chef Yang: I have my own restaurant, and it took me nine months to open. So Restaurant Wars? It’s a pretty intimidating challenge.
Christophe: A big part of opening a restaurant is making a tasting in order to lure in a potential investor. Yakov is here today to play that investor. Chefs, for your Quickfire challenge you will make one dish that represents your restaurant concept. Yakov will choose the two concepts he would be most likely to invest in. The two contestants who win Yakov’s investment will be the chef-owners in our Restaurant War!

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover] I’m feeling pretty good about this challenge. I just opened my own restaurant in Los Angeles about a year ago, so creating a tasting plate is still pretty fresh for me.

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] Yes, I’m the executive chef of my family’s restaurant, so I feel confident going into Restaurant Wars, but I want to play this round smart. I know from seasons past that if the restaurant fails the head chef usually faces elimination. I’m not hung up on my ego. I’m happy to take a supportive role on this challenge and live to cook another day. My food is what I care about showing off on Top Chef.

Chef Ji: [voiceover] I let my teammates walk all over me last challenge. Whatever restaurant concept I end up cooking for, I’m going to make sure I’m in charge of my own cooking!

Christophe: However, there is a twist to this Restaurant War. Many of you have already gone through the trial by fire that is opening a restaurant, so in addition to following your palates, and your business sense, the judges are going to ask you to follow your hearts.

[Christophe pulls away the white table cloth to reveal a sandwich board inscribed with the words EROS, AGAPE, PRAGMA, PHILIA, MANIA, LUDUS, PHILAUTIA, and STORGE. A few chefs read the words in confusion, while others light up with excitement.]

Christophe: Chefs, for the first time ever, our Restaurant War is going to have a theme, and that theme is...Love!

Chef Plisetsky:[scowling] Love... is dumb. And so is this challenge! The whole point of Restaurant Wars is getting to come up with our own idea, not have a stupid theme.

Chef Nikiforov: [sighing with a hand over his heart] It’s like they designed this challenge just for me.

Christophe: Chefs, you’ll have thirty minutes to complete a dish to sell Yakov on your restaurant concept, which will be inspired by one of these eight Greek definitions of love. Cook your hearts out! Your time starts now!

[Immediately the chefs scatter between the fridge and the pantry. Pans are set to heat, proteins are broken down, and cutting boards are filled with colorful vegetables. Chef Katsuki startles a few chefs when he takes a mallet to a piece of chicken breast, filling the kitchen with a loud pounding. Chef Ji cubes up firm tofu while Chef de la Iglesia puts bright red bell peppers through a food processor.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover as he adds chopped carrot, leek, and celery to a pan of hot butter on the stove] Love as a restaurant concept could easily become cliche if the motivation behind it isn’t authentic. I know that any kind of romantic love is off the table if I want to impress the judges. While I’m open to it in the future…it’s not part of my life right now. I have to pull from a deeper place of love or my...
dish will come across hollow.

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] When I think of love I always think of family first. My brother and I are now co-owners of the restaurant my parents started. Every day we work to preserve their legacy, and also to bring our own ideas to the menu. It’s a careful balance, and our love for each other is what helps us keep it.

[Chef Katsuki can be seen carefully rolling his pounded chicken breast around some kind of stuffing while Chef Chulanont drops battered shrimp into a pan of bubbling oil. Chef Crispino stirs a fragrant pot of tomato sauce as Chef Nikiforov rapidly dices a bright piece of beef.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I love this challenge! I devote all my cooking to my husband, but this restaurant is particularly dedicated to our first meeting. [happy sigh] I’ll never forget when I first laid eyes on the beautiful man who would bring so much flavor and inspiration to my life.

Chef Kasuki: [voiceover as he sears his roast in a hot pan] I’m definitely thinking of my husband as I prepare my dish for the judges. Some might say we’re still in the honeymoon stage, since we’ve only been married for a few years, but I know our love is eternal. My restaurant concept isn’t very flashy, but it celebrates the joys of growing old together.

[Chef Plisetsky grills a steak over an open flame, while Chef Yang moves her salmon off the heat to rest. Chef Ji is tossing tofu and vegetables in a wok and Chef Altin pulls a sheet of golden brown puff pastry from the oven.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] I know what kind of restaurant I want to open, so I just chose the least lame kind of love I could think of and I’ll say what I have to to make the dish fit. I know the food is good, so whatever.

Chef Yang: [voiceover as she glazes a piece of salmon] I chose a less well known kind of love, because I want to show Yakov and Christophe something different! Being unique is a big part of starting a successful restaurant.

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[The buzzer goes off after thirty minutes, and each chef has their tasting plate ready at the front of their station. Christophe and Yakov make their way down the counter to taste each chef’s dish. The first is Chef Katsuki, who explains his dish as the judges dig in.]

Chef Katsuki: I was inspired by pragma, or enduring love, made me think of aged or preserved ingredients whose flavors only deepen and grow richer with time. My tasting dish is a chicken roulade, stuffed with a savory dried apricot stuffing and glazed with an aged whiskey sauce.

Yakov: Interesting. And your restaurant?

Chef Katsuki: Ingredient driven, seasonal fare accented by aged ingredients. Dry aged beef, liquors, cheeses and preserves. Simple cooking that allows the complexity of the ingredients to shine.

Christophe: Thank you, chef. Next we have Isabella.

Chef Yang: My dish is inspired by philautia, or healthy self love, so I’ve made a dish using ingredients with famous health benefits! What you have is a black vinegar and ginger glazed salmon on a bed of buckwheat soba, with fresh vegetables and a tahini dressing.

Christophe: [chewing] And how does this dish represent your restaurant concept?
Chef Yang: My concept would be contemporary cuisine that embraces non-western concepts of health, longevity, and detoxification. Guests eat well, and leave feeling well.

[Yakov makes no comment, but thanks Chef Yang before they move on to the next contestant.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Yakov really plays his reactions close to the chest. It’s so hard to get a read on him, and for such an important challenge!

Christophe: Leo, tell us about your restaurant.

Chef de la Iglesia: I was inspired by philia, or love between friends! My restaurant would be a coastal tapas bar, with small plates and contemporary cocktails perfect for friends out on the town.

Yakov: Hm. And your dish?

Chef de la Iglesia: I have a crispy fried shrimp fritter, with a sweet pepper jelly sauce. To pair I have a cucumber jalapeno spritzer.

Christophe: [sipping Chef de la Iglesia’s cocktail] Wow, that’s a bit on the sweet side. I feel like it’s missing a tequila chaser!

Chef de la Iglesia: [laughing nervously] I’m sure I could rustle some up for you.

[Christophe laughs before he and Yakov move on to Chef Plisetsky’s plate.]

Chef Plisetsky: I went with mania, obsessive love that leads to madness. I thought immediately of grilling, with hot flavors that put you at the risk of getting burned.

Christophe: Sounds dangerous. What have you cooked for us?

Chef Plisetsky: I’ve made a blackened steak, with a cajun spice rub and some fresh sugar snap peas.

Yakov: [chewing] Your steak is not evenly cooked, chef. The blackening spice masks it, but when you cut in you can see the inconsistency. With such a simple dish you need to wary of such errors.

[Chef Plisetsky scowls, but he nods before the judges move on.]

Chef Altin: I chose to build a dish around agape, or unconditional selfless love. My restaurant menu would be built around shared small plates and family style entrees, centering the diner’s experience around sharing and making new connections.

Christophe: Very nice, chef. Do tell us about your dish.

Chef Altin: My dish is a deconstructed chicken pot pie, with Kazakh seasoning that I learned in my mother’s kitchen. Instead of a traditional bake, which there wasn’t time for, I topped my filling with some crispy puff pastry.

[The judges dig into Chef Altin’s dish. The puff pastry breaks with an audible crisp, which earns a look of vague approval from Yakov. He says little else before he and Christophe move on to Chef Chulanont.]

Chef Chulanont: My dish is based on playful love, or ludus! To reference the flutter of new love I’ve made a crispy coconut butterfly shrimp, with a frothy pina colada dipping sauce. My restaurant would feature new Asian cuisine, for a perfect first date spot!

Yakov: [stoically cutting into a shrimp] Hm. These are nicely fried.
Christophe: Thanks, Phichit. Next we have Sara.

Chef Crispino: I decided to work with *storge*, or familial love. Inspired by the bond between a parent and child, I’ve made my mother’s spaghetti bolognese with a contemporary twist, choosing zucchini noodles instead of traditional pasta.

Yakov: And your restaurant?

Chef Crispino: It would be very similar to what I’m doing now. Contemporary Italian, honoring my parents legacy while still bringing something fresh to Florentine cooking.

Yakov: I see.

[Next is Chef Ji.]

Christophe: Well this is certainly a colorful plate. What inspired you today, Guang-hong?

Chef Ji: I also was inspired by *storge*, and celebrating the different generations in family. My grandfather was also a chef, so today I’ve made his recipe for homestyle tofu. My restaurant would be about preserving traditional recipes while also sharing contemporary Chinese cuisine.

Yakov: Hm...thank you, chef.

Christophe: Finally, we have Victor. Tell us about your restaurant.

Chef Nikiforov: The love that inspired my restaurant concept was *eros*. To me *eros* is sensuality and crackling tension, full of both pleasure and surprises. My restaurant would be full of contrasting textures and temperatures, with spicy flavor profiles that draw from multiple cuisines to serve up a menu that walks the razor’s edge of indulgence and adventure.

Christophe: Very novel, chef. And your dish for us today?

Chef Nikiforov: A beef tartare, with toasted pine nuts, pickled Asian pear, and a ginger soy dressing. It’s served over a spicy aioli with a watercress salad.

[Yakov says nothing as he samples the dish, but his eyebrows raise as he chews. Chef Nikiforov opts to take this as a compliment, and he’s smiling confidently as Christophe and Yakov face the gathered contestants.]

Christophe: Well, Yakov, let’s start with the bad news. Which restaurant concepts will you *not* be investing in?

Yakov: Chef Plisetsky. While I thought your restaurant concept had potential, your steak was not cooked properly. Were I really looking to invest, that would have certainly discouraged my faith in your abilities.

Chef Plisetsky: Ugh, why can’t I just stay on the top for once? I’m done making these stupid mistakes.

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Chef Plisetsky: Ugh, why can’t I just stay on the top for once? I’m done making these stupid mistakes.

[ ]

Yakov: The other two chefs who I thought were on the bottom were Chefs Ji and Crispino. Your ideas were very similar, and I didn’t find either very original. Chef Ji, your dish lacked interesting texture, and Chef Crispino I thought your sauce was underseasoned.
Chef Crispino: I admit I didn’t quite give this challenge my all, so I’m not surprised that my dish didn’t impress Yakov. Meanwhile, Guang-hong and Yuri are two of the youngest chefs still here, and I think the others are starting to notice. Guang-hong has been on the bottom a lot, and while Yuri Plisetsky might have won the last challenge, he’s still really inconsistent. I think they both need to watch out for beginner mistakes going into Restaurant Wars.

Christophe: Now for the decision our chefs are waiting for...who will be playing chef/owners, and therefore team leaders going into our Restaurant War?

Yakov: The first chef is one who created my favorite dish, and whose restaurant concept is one that I think is currently on the rise in the New York market. With the theme of *agape*, the first chef/owner is Chef Altin.

Christophe: Excellent! Congratulations Otabek, while we will have two chefs chosen to be team leaders, you are technically the winner of this challenge, which will give you a big advantage when we move on to the elimination round. Now, let’s hear Yakov’s other favorite.

Yakov: The second winner of this Quickfire is one who backed up their restaurant concept with their cooking. Their concept promised surprise, spice, and satisfaction, and their dish delivered. With the theme of *eros*, the second chef/owner is Chef Nikiforov. Chef, I hope you’re restaurant will deliver many more pleasant surprises.

[There is applause from the other chef contestants. Chefs Altin and Nikiforov both receive supportive pats on the back. Chef Nikiforov looks pleased. Chef Altin looks slightly more apprehensive.]

Christophe: There you have it, Victor and Otabek, in twenty-four hours you will both open a restaurant that does justice to your concepts, your cooking, and of course the esteemed palates of our judges. But be warned: opening your own restaurant means putting yourself on the line. That’s why for the first time this season, there will be no immunity awarded for winning this Quickfire. Quite literally, go big or go home, chefs!

Chef Katsuki: Whew. I’ve opened my own restaurant, but I’ll admit I’m glad not to be at the helm for this challenge. A chef stakes his whole reputation on the quality of his restaurant, and with only twenty-four hours...I’m stressed enough on Victor and Otabek’s behalf.

Chef Altin: I’ve never opened a restaurant. I’ve never been a head chef either. I admit I’m intimidated to be going head to head with Victor, whoever our teammates turn out to be. But...I’m confident in myself, and in what I want to accomplish for this challenge. There are going to be a lot of firsts for me in the next twenty-four hours. [a slight grin] I may be outmatched, but Nikiforov is going to have to fight me hard for this win.

Chef Nikiforov: [beaming] Eros vs Agape! It will be a poetic battle to the bitter end of dinner service! [tapping his chin thoughtfully] Now who do I want on my team…
[Chef Nikiforov winks at the camera, his grin turning sharp and the competitive fire back in his eyes.]

Chapter End Notes

Coming up next, on Top Chef: The Restaurant Wars are on! Who will Victor and Otabek pick for their teams, and how will they pull off a flawless restaurant in only 24 hours?!? It's Eros vs. Agape: The Horror!!!
Whew, sorry for the wait, guys, but this turned out to be a monster chapter. I hope you enjoy! Also, if you're just reading this fic and you're enjoying it, please subscribe! To everyone who's been commenting and reading so far, thank you! All your comments and encouragement are keeping me inspired.

[The “Elimination” logo flashes across the screen before returning to the Top Chef kitchen, where Christophe and Yakov explain the rules of the Restaurant War to the contestants. In front of the rest of the group stand Chefs Nikiforov and Altin, the former now wearing a red apron over their chef’s coat and the latter a blue one.

Christophe: So, to remind our viewers at home, for your elimination challenge you will work in two teams to open a restaurant in twenty-four hours. We will provide you with a kitchen and a blank dining space. You will be responsible for the decor, the front of house hospitality, and, obviously, the food. While additional flourishes are up to you, your menu must have an appetizer, an entree, and a dessert course, with two options for each course. You’ll be battling it out, not only for bragging rights, but also for a special prize for the individual challenge winner. With that in mind, we’ll let our chef/owners choose their teams. Otabek, as the winner of the Quickfire, you get to pick first. This also means you will have one additional chef on your team, which could prove a huge advantage to you in the coming challenge. Choose wisely!

Chef Altin: I choose Yuri Plisetsky.

[Chef Plisetsky grabs a blue apron and joins Chef Altin.]

Christophe: Victor, your first pick?

Chef Nikiforov: Yuuri Katsuki!

Christophe: [laughing] Okay, all the Yuri’s have been chosen! Who’s next?

Chef Altin: Sara.

Chef Nikiforov: Phichit.

Chef Altin: Isabella.

Chef Nikiforov: Leo.

Christophe: And that means Guang-hong, you’ll be the final member of Otabek’s Team Agape! Very good!

Chef Ji: [voiceover as he grabs a blue apron] It doesn’t feel great to be picked last, but I guess after I came in the bottom of the last challenge I shouldn’t be surprised. I’ll just have to prove myself today!

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I chose my team very carefully. First Yuuri, because he is the best chef here in addition to myself. After that I chose chefs who love spice and who bring surprise to their
Chef Altin: [voiceover] I chose Yuri and Isabella because they’re two of the strongest chefs, and I chose Sara because of her experience with family style dining. I’m not so sure about Guang-hong, but I’m glad to have the extra team member. I know he’s capable in the kitchen.

Christophe: Alright, chefs! Starting now you have thirty to meet with your team to solidify your restaurant concept and plan your menu. Be sure to decide on who will play executive chef and front of house. At the end of your hour the vans will be waiting to take you shopping! Half of your team will go to Pier One, where you will have five thousand dollars to spend on linens, cutlery, and decor. The remaining members of your team will have three thousand dollars at Restaurant Depot and Whole Foods Market to buy everything you need to serve a stellar three course meal to the judges and about one hundred diners. Yakov, any final advice for our speed demon restaurateurs?

Yakov: Know your strengths, and your weaknesses. Most importantly always know what’s going on in your kitchen.

Christophe: Good luck chefs! We’ll see you at dinner!

[Christophe and Yakov take their exit, while the chef contestants huddle up. In twenty-four hours their restaurants will be open for business, so there isn’t a moment to spare.]

Chef Chulanont: We start to talk out our restaurant concepts as a team, which since we have a theme is a lot easier than I’ve seen on past seasons. I’m psyched to be on Team Eros! I think Victor made smart choices picking our team. We’ve got a lot of restaurant experience between us, and we all bring a different spicy flavor profile. Our menu definitely won’t be one note.

Chef Plisetsky: I don’t care about Agape, but I wanted to be on Otabek’s team. We don’t need Victor, and we already kicked Katsuki, Phichit, and Leo’s butts in the wedding shower team challenge. This is gonna be a breeze.

Chef Crispino: To be honest, I was hoping to be on Victor’s team, but I get why Otabek chose me. He wants to do family style, and that’s where my experience lies. I know I will make a strong contribution to this team.

Chef Katsuki: I’m very happy to be on Victor’s team. Eros is...not a topic I like to discuss in public, but I know our translation to a dinner menu will be very elegant and exciting. I hope I can do my part for a victory!

[Team Eros is gathered around a counter. Chef Nikiforov is starting to write a menu with his three teammates.]

Chef Nikiforov: Okay, you all heard me. *Eros*. Sexy, spicy, surprising. It sounds like Otabek is pushing family style, so we’ll stay with top notch traditional service. I will be executive chef, unless anyone wants to voice an objection now.
Chef Chulanont: It’s your idea, you should be head chef.

Chef Katsuki: I agree. The kitchen is yours.

Chef de la Iglesia: You’ve got my vote, man.

Chef Nikiforov: Great. We have one dish, my tartare, which will be our beef entree. We need two starters, another entree, and two desserts, and we need to decide if we want to do any additional courses like an amuse bouche. Who has ideas?

Chef de la Iglesia: I’ve got a recipe for a flourless chocolate chipotle cake. Super dark, not too sweet.

Chef Nikiforov: I like it. Phichit? I know you like spice.

Chef Chulanont: Hm, I’ve got a garlic chili glaze that’s good on almost anything. Chicken, pork shoulder…

Chef Katsuki: What about duck? It’s a little less pedestrian than chicken but it would be a good contrast to the beef.

Chef Chulanont: Yeah, that could work for sure!

Chef Nikiforov: I like where this is going. Keep talking!

[Team Agape is also making good progress on their menu. But both teams are going to face uncertainty as they choose a chef to manage the dining room.]

Chef Altin:...And with Isabella’s short ribs we have a red meat as well as the chicken pot pie. For dessert there’s the fruit crisp and...tiramisu? Guang-hong, are you still confident on that as your dish?

Chef Ji: [nodding] Yep! I know I can do it. And I think a cold dessert will be nice to finish with.

Chef Altin: Alright, we’ll trust you with it. Since my dish is mostly make ahead I’ll expedite, which leave you free to finish off your short ribs on the grill, Isabella. Are you good with chef de cuisine?

Chef Yang: Sounds good to me.

Chef Crispino: My mussels will be steaming in batches, so I can be firing the dumpling appetizer as well. Isabella and I can find a rhythm.

Chef Altin: Good. So that leaves...front of house.

[There is a beat of silence, as neither of the remaining Team Agape chefs jump to volunteer.]

Chef Altin: ...Yuri?

Chef Plisetsky: [surprised] Uh, you want me to? I don’t have much front of house experience.

Chef Crispino: None of us do.

Chef Yang: Yeah, and if you’re doing a dessert you won’t have to be cooking all through service. You can do front and Guang-hong can be our sous chef.

Chef Plisetsky: [wrinkling his nose] Why doesn’t Guang-hong do front of house then? He’s cute
and all that.

Chef Ji: [hesitant] I could do it, I guess...

Chef Altin: [shaking his head] Yuri. I want it to be you.

[The rest of the team looks to Chef Altin, who rarely takes such a firm opinion on team challenges.]

Chef Altin: With one table we’re going to need less performance from the front of house and more timing. We can communicate without disrupting the flow of service, and I trust you to train the staff. If I’m expediting I want you in the dining room.

Chef Plisetsky: I’ll do it then, I guess.

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Chef Plisetsky: [shrugging] I’d rather be in the kitchen, obviously, but somebody’s gotta do front of house. If this is my job I’ll kick it in the ass like any other challenge.

[]

Chef Katsuki: The chefs who take on the biggest risk in Restaurant Wars are the executive chef, and the chef in the front of the house. Restaurants fail on their menu or they fail because the dining room is in chaos. If I were Victor I would want Phichit or Leo in the front. They have good energy and I think they could keep up with his expediting.

[]

Chef Nikiforov: So that’s me expediting, and Phichit as chef de cuisine, which leaves the front of house. With eros as our theme I think the choice is obvious, don’t you, Yuuri?

Chef Katsuki: [surprised] Oh, um I guess. If Phichit is firing our hot entree then I guess Leo would be the obvious--

[Chef Katsuki’s words die out as Chef Nikiforov shakes his head.]

Chef Nikiforov: No, Leo will be our sous chef.

Chef Katsuki: Leo...but that only leaves…

[Chef Katsuki’s expression shutters as Chef Nikiforov begins to nod.]

Chef Nikiforov: Yuuri--


Chef Nikiforov: You are perfect for the front. At Tokyo Amour --

Chef Katsuki:[voice rising] That’s different! How can you ask me to do this, after I bombed the live tv challenge?

Chef Chulanont: One challenge isn’t everything, Yuuri. I think you’d be great too.

Chef Katsuki: [ignoring his friend] I can’t perform for the judges and everyone saw! I could bring us all down.
Chef Nikiforov: [smiling] You won’t, Yuuri--

Chef Katsuki: [shouting] You don’t know that!

[Frustrated, Chef Katsuki leaves the table, walking away from the team and into the closed pantry. Concerned, Chef Chulanont rises to follow him, but Chef Nikiforov stops him with a hand on his shoulder.]

Chef Nikiforov: I’ll talk to him. Start our grocery list.

Chef Chulanont: [nodding] Don’t push him too hard, Victor.

Chef Nikiforov: Trust me. I know how hard to push.

[Chef Nikiforov steps into the pantry, where Chef Katsuki is pacing anxiously. Chef Nikiforov slides the door nearly closed. He and Chef Katsuki are only visible through a slim gap in the heavy door.]

Chef Nikiforov: You’ve run the front for plenty of real opening nights, Yuuri. Do you want to tell me what’s really going on?

Chef Katsuki: I won’t be the one who screws this up for us, Victor. We’ve worked too hard. It’s one thing for me to go home because I can’t keep it together--

Chef Nikiforov: [frowning] Yuu-chan--

Chef Katsuki: But I won’t put us both on the bottom. I won’t, I won’t--

[Chef Nikiforov silences Chef Katsuki’s objections with a finger to his lips. Just as quickly he slips his fingers under Chef Katsuki’s jaw, tipping his chin up to meet his eyes. The tension between them crackles.]

Chef Nikiforov: [almost too low for the cameras to pick up] Yuuri, I know you are the only one for this. Elegance, heat, sexuality, these things are who you are as a chef. You will show the judges the true meaning of Eros. I believe it with my whole heart.

Chef Katsuki: [less certain] But--

Chef Nikiforov: [smiling again] Who else could I run this restaurant with? You think I could trust Leo or Phichit to be my eyes and ears in the front like I can with you? There will never be anyone else, dorogoy. We will be unstoppable.

Chef Katsuki: [after a deep breath] ...Okay. I’ll do it.

Chef Nikiforov: [cheering] Yay!

[Chef Nikiforov sweeps Chef Katsuki into a tight hug, practically twirling the younger chef around the pantry. Chef Katsuki is red faced but grinning when Chef Nikiforov finally releases him.]

Chef Katsuki: [sternly] But I still want to cook something! Just in case it’s a disaster, I won’t go home without at least having my name on a dish.

Chef Nikiforov: Yes, yes, yes! I already have ideas for you! I’m so excited! Let’s tell the others.

Chef Katsuki: I hope you’re right about this...
[After a few more minutes spent on menu planning, it’s time for the teams to split up. Half will go to the bulk grocery Restaurant Depot, and the other half to Pier One Imports to get all the supplies for the dining room.]

Chef Nikiforov: [volunteering] I’ll go to Pier One and help choose the decor--

Chef Katsuki: [flipping through the photos they’ve been provided of their blank dining space] Absolutely not.

Chef Nikiforov: [pouting] But Yuuri~~

Chef Katsuki: You’re the executive chef, Victor. We need you at the restaurant depot. Phichit, you’re chef de cuisine, so you’ll go with Victor and Leo can come with me.

Chef de la Iglesia: [pumping his fist] Yes!

Chef Chulanont: Aw, I wanted to help decorate too!

Chef Katsuki: [dryly] I have photos of our old dorm that are hard evidence of why you shouldn’t be allowed to decorate anything that isn’t on a plate.

Chef Chulanont: Yeah, says the guy who thinks *crocs* are fashion forward.

Chef Nikiforov: [high fiving Chef Chulanont] Oooh burn!

Chef Katsuki: [sputtering] I don’t think--they’re *comfortable*!

[Across the room, Team Agape is sounding much more organized.]

Chef Altin: Isabella and Guang-hong will come with me to Restaurant Depot. Sara, you should go with Yuri. Remember our theme is hearth. Warm, family style, rich colors. Between the two of you I think it will balance out to the right look. Yuri, you have the photos?

Chef Plisetsky: Got ‘em. We’ll make this concrete dungeon into something tolerable.

Chef Crispino: We can handle it, chef.

[The chefs pile into their waiting vans and head out with their budgets in mind. First, Chefs Katsuki, de la Iglesia, Crispino and Plisetsky arrive at Pier One.]

Chef Katsuki: [unfurling a long list] Okay first things first, we need tea lights. Like a million of them.

Chef de la Iglesia: I’m on it.

Chef Katsuki: [calling after him] Unscented ones, Leo! [scratching his head] I guess that means I can start with linens.

[Another little ways away, Chef Plisetsky is already sorting through a catalogue of linen options.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Our design goals are to make the space warm and inviting, which is gonna be a challenge with white walls and concrete floors. Sara is picking out some area rugs, and we’ve decided to go with burgundy linens. It’s a risky choice, but the food will still look awesome on a white plate and the red will go a long way to warm up the room.

[Chef Crispino appears with a huge rug under one arm and a large column style candle in the other.]
Chef Crispino: We need candles, right? This is the only unscented kind they have except little tea lights.

Chef Plisetsky: How many are there?

Chef Crispino: Probably thirty?

Chef Plisetsky: [nodding] Get them all, before Katsuki finds them.

Chef Katsuki: [appearing from behind the linens shelf] We already got all the candles we need, Yura. Thanks for your concern, though!

[Chef Plisetsky hisses like a wet cat, much to Chef Katsuki’s amusement. It would appear Chef Nikiforov’s teasing diminutive has spread.]

Chef Katsuki: Also, Sara, I saw some lovely mosaic vases over there that would show off those candles nicely. They don’t work for our design but I thought for your hearth theme they might be nice.

Chef Plisetsky: [scowling] Mind your own business, Katsuki! We don’t need your help!

[Chef Katsuki grabs a stack of white napkins and vanishes from whence he came, still looking amused.]

Chef Plisetsky: [to Chef Crispino] Get the candles. ...And go check out those vases he was talking about.

[Chef Plisetsky moves on to stemware while Chef Katsuki settles on clean white linens for Team Eros’ tables.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Our design is pretty straightforward, because we want the busiest thing in the room to be the food on the plate. We can go with plain glass and silverware, which adds to the minimalist design and is friendly to our budget. The floors of the space are polished concrete which adds an industrial touch, so the rest of our decor will be sleek and modern, with just a few pops of color to give an impression of spice.

Chef de la Iglesia: [holding up a slim black vase that bears a splash of fiery orange and red glaze] What do you think, Yuuri?

Chef Katsuki: [offering a thumbs up] I like them! Grab twelve, then call Victor. Tell him I want white calla lilies. White only, okay?

[At the Restaurant Depot, both teams are filling pallets with all the product they can get from the bulk supply store. It looks like Chef Chulanont has found the duck breast he needs for his entree. Meanwhile Chef Nikiforov is on the phone with his teammates as he fills several crates with his wine selections for their menu.]

Chef Nikiforov: [on the phone] Yes, yes, I heard you. White Calla lilies. We’re still at the Depot but we’ll get them at Whole Foods. Also--Leo? Are you still there? Okay, also, they didn’t have mahi mahi so I got you red snapper for the ceviche. [pause] It was the freshest thing they had, yeah? Right, it’ll be fine it looks great. Okay, see you back at the house.

[Chef Chulanont comes around the aisle with his rolling pallet, now also carrying avocados and a
crate full of onions.

Chef Chulanont: Victor! I’ve been looking all over. Did you want tenderloin or eye round for the tartare?

Chef Nikiforov: Eye round, but don’t worry I’ll get it myself. I’m on my way to pick out the oysters for Yuuri anyway. Did you find good pears?

Chef Chulanont: Yup, asian pears for the tartare and the bosch looked the best for our dessert so I went with them.

Chef Nikiforov: Great. I’ll double back to protein and you move on to the spice list.

[A few aisles away, Chefs Altin and Yang are on a mission. Chef Altin checks off his list as Chef Yang identifies the ingredients on her pallet.]

Chef Altin: Proteins?

Chef Yang: Okay, we’ve got chicken, mussels, beef short ribs, and pork shoulder for the dumplings.

Chef Altin: Produce?

Chef Yang: Veggies, we have onions, carrots, celery, leeks, garlic, shallot, fresh peas, fennel, tomatoes, cabbage for the kimchi, scallions, blueberries and figs for the fruit crisp.


[Chef Altin hold out his hand for a high-five, which Chef Yang grants.]

Chef Altin: Otabek may not have much executive chef experience, but the guy can write a tight grocery list. If this challenge were for the team with the most efficient shopping methods, Team Agape would blow the competition out of the water.

[With all their shopping done, the chefs are only allowed to drop off their supplies in their blank restaurant spaces before it’s time to return to the Top Chef apartment to get some much needed rest. The contestants won’t be allowed to start the preparations for tomorrow’s dinner service until the morning. Team Agape and Team Eros both use their evening time to eat a quick dinner and work the kinks out of their plans for the next day. Chef Otabek and his team have taken up the living room, and Chef Nikiforov and Team Eros are in the kitchen. Team Agape is enjoying an after dinner snack of mussels stewed in a chorizo and tomato wine sauce, which is an appetizer Chef Crispino wanted to test before the challenge tomorrow. The dish is a success, or at least the mussels are disappearing quickly.]

Chef Ji: [picking a plump mussel from a shell with his fork] This is so good Sara! The judges are gonna love it!

Chef Altin: [Not looking unhappy] The garlic is nice.

Chef Crispino: Anything I should adjust? I want it to be perfect.

Chef Yang: Hm...is there red pepper flake in this? [Chef Crispino nods] I think you can afford to
bump that up a little. Team Eros may be doing spice, but that doesn’t mean we aren’t allowed, right?

[Chefs Crispino and Yang laugh.]

Chef Ji: Aw, looks like we’ve got them all already. They were so yummy…

Chef Crispino: Nothing left to do but clean up, I suppose.

Chef Plisetsky: [getting up from his seat] I’ve got it.

[Chef Plisetsky carries the serving dish into the hallway, where Chef Nikiforov has just stepped out of his bedroom with an empty glass. Through the door behind him one can see a small fleet of calla lilies which he must have been watering. The two chefs nearly bump into each other.]

Chef Nikiforov: Oh, sorry Yuri. I wasn’t paying attention.

Chef Plisetsky: Hmph.

Chef Nikiforov: That certainly smells good. Something for tomorrow?

Chef Plisetsky: Yeah, not that it’s any of your business. Our appetizers are gonna be kick ass.

Chef Nikiforov: [lightly] I’m sure they will. My team is more focused on our main course, but it’s important to make sure your starters are strong too!

Chef Plisetsky: [bristling] Our entrees are awesome! Otabek and Isabella are making great dishes--

Chef Nikiforov: But I’m feeling really confident in our desserts, I think they’re going to be our strongest course.

Chef Plisetsky: I’m making dessert for our team so you know better than anyone that they’re gonna be perfect.

Chef Nikiforov: And we’re really refining our eros concept--

Chef Plisetsky: --which is cliche as hell. Our concept is up and coming, Yakov even said so--

Chef Nikiforov: And Yuuri, of course, is going to be our shining star in the dining room--

Chef Plisetsky: Katsuki won’t do you any good when he’s freaking out tomorrow instead of running tickets.

Chef Nikiforov: [frowning] ...You don’t know anything about Chef Katsuki, or how he runs his front of house. In fact I think it’s safe to say he has a great deal more experience at it than you.

Chef Plisetsky: [under his breath] More like more experience having panic attacks.

[Chef Nikiforov goes very still, and his eyes lose their warmth. Chef Plisetsky even seems to realize their competitive teasing has entered more dangerous territory, but he plants his feet, expression defiant.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voice low] I am trying to be patient with you, Yura, because you are young. But you will not speak about my Yuuri that way.

Chef Plisetsky: [defensively] Apparently he’s not your Yuuri, or can’t you even keep that stupid charade up properly?
Chef Nikiforov: [ignoring Chef Plisetsky’s pointed words] He’s my front of house, and my teammate. He’s a chef who represents my restaurant, however temporary, and when you speak ill of him you speak ill of me.

Chef Plisetsky: [hissing] Katsuki is gonna choke tomorrow, and you’ll see the proof at judge’s table.

[Chef Nikiforov’s eyes flash, his hand twitching at his side. Fortunately whatever was about to pass is interrupted when Chef Katsuki himself pokes his head into the hallway.]

Chef Katsuki: Victor? What are you doing out here? We’re waiting on you to go over the final menu. [noticing Chef Plisetsky] Oh, hi Yuri. Let’s both do our best in the front tomorrow, yeah? I’m sure you’re as nervous as I am, and I’ve been through this before!

[Chef Nikiforov grins triumphantly at Chef Plisetsky. The young chef clearly doesn’t know what to do with Chef Katsuki’s genuine well wishing, despite his teasing at the store earlier.]

Chef Katsuki: [looking back to Chef Nikiforov] Are you coming, Victor?

Chef Nikiforov: [offering Chef Katsuki a cheerful smile] Of course! I’ll be right in.

[Chef Katsuki nods, and vanishes back into the kitchen, leaving Chefs Nikiforov and Plisetsky alone in the hall once more. Chef Plisetsky’s harsh words have lost their sharp edge in the face of Chef Katsuki’s kindness.]

Chef Nikiforov: I can take that dish. Save you the trip.

Chef Plisetsky: [grumbling, his eyes on the floor] Yeah, sure. Thanks.

Chef Nikiforov: May the best chefs win, tomorrow, Yura.

Chef Plisetsky: ...We’re gonna, old man.

[Chef Plisetsky flees to his team in the living room. Chef Nikiforov watches him leave before tossing his hair and following Chef Katsuki into the kitchen. He takes his place at the head of the table where the rest of Team Eros is waiting with their recipes for the next day.]

Chef Katsuki: Is everything alright?

Chef Nikiforov: [waving his hand] Of course. You know Yura, so competitive. I think you’ve got him really intimidated, Yuuri.

Chef Katsuki: [laughing] I bet.

Chef Chulanont: Hey, don’t sell yourself short. You’ve opened two restaurants all on your own.

Chef Katsuki: Sure, but only one of them stayed open.

Chef Chulanont: That’s still one more restaurant than Plisetsky has run. You’ve got the edge on Restaurant Wars, is all I’m saying.

Chef Katsuki: We’ll see, I guess.

Chef Nikiforov: That we will. Now, what did I miss?

Chef de la Iglesia: We think we have a name to go with our concept. It’s...well it’s pretty straightforward.
Chef Nikiforov: Lay it on me.

[Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia both look to Chef Katsuki.]

Chef Katsuki: We like... Restaurant Eros.

Chef Nikiforov: [beaming] It’s perfect.

[With both teams fine tuning their menus and settling on names for their restaurants, the moon rises and sets over New York City. Tomorrow promises to be another long day.]

[It’s late morning in New York. With six hours until their restaurants open for business, both teams are finally allowed into their blank restaurant spaces. Chefs Plisetsky and Katsuki get started right away in their respective dining rooms, tearing plastic off of uniform tables and chairs and unpacking crates of dishes. Meanwhile, each in their own kitchens, the remaining chefs get started on the long list of preparations. Both head chefs have a distinct style in the kitchen.]

Chef Nikiforov: Okay, we have six hours to service. In two hours I want to see mis en place done for our duck, the ceviche, and the steak tartare. Call out if you finish early, I assure you I will have a new list ready when you do. Ready?

Chefs de la Iglesia and Chulanont: Yes chef!

Chef Nikiforov: Then let’s show the judges why Team Eros is destined for victory!

[Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia trade high fives with their head chef before scurrying to complete the mountain of prep necessary for a full restaurant dinner service. Chef Nikiforov begins the various components of his steak tartare entree, first by peeling a small mountain of asian pears and setting pine nuts to toast in a hot pan. Chef Chulanont begins breaking down his duck for his entree.]

Chef Nikiforov: [hearing the slam of a meat cleaver] I am trusting those portions are going to be flawless, Phichit!

Chef Chulanont: You know it!

Chef Nikiforov: Show me the first ten when you have them!

Chef Chulanont: Sure thing, chef!

Chef Nikiforov: [tossing his pine nuts over the flaming burner] I am a very...hands on executive chef. Combined with my accent I have been told I sound like a Soviet hockey coach in the kitchen. This is fine with me. Other chefs are counting on me for leadership. My high standards are not a criticism of them, but rather to show that they can count on me to bring us higher as a team, because I only accept the best.

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover as he lays out perfectly butchered duck breasts on a waiting tray] Going into our six hours I’m feeling great. Yeah, Victor is bossy as hell in the kitchen, but that’s fine with me. The stakes are high on this challenge. We’re here to win, not hold a kumbaya circle. Dealing with Extra Russian™ Victor is a small price to pay for the confidence of knowing nothing is leaving this kitchen that isn’t a winning dish.

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover as he filets a side of red snapper] Wow, Victor’s energy is more intense
than I expected. I know we have a lot to get done, but this isn’t how I would run my kitchen. I’m just gonna do my best to keep up and not let anything harsh my good vibes.

[Across the hall in their own kitchen, Team Agape is off to a less decisive start. Chef Altin unpacks the root vegetables for his pot pie entree and sets a large pot of water to boil. He’s getting started on peeling potatoes when Chef Ji gets his attention.]

Chef Ji: Um, chef? Is there anywhere in particular you’d like me to start?

[Chef Altin looks up, and realizes that Chefs Yang and Crispino are also looking for him to decide as to how they should progress.]

Chef Altin: Oh. Um, everybody has their own dish to prep, yeah? Start there, and check in with me if you don’t have something to do.

[Team Agape separates to their own corners of the kitchen, Chefs Crispino and Yang exchanging a glance before they go.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover as he drops peeled and cubed potatoes into his boiling water] I named myself executive chef mostly because it’s my restaurant concept and because my entree is easiest to fire and plate, so I’ll have more energy to spare for expediting. I wasn’t expecting my teammates to look to me immediately like that, given that Isabella and Sara are usually in charge of their own kitchens. If they’re looking for a traditional kitchen hierarchy, I’m not sure how much I have to give. All I can do is communicate and trust my teammates to do their part.

[Chef Ji has gotten a good start on his dessert, which will need a few hours in the fridge to set up. He’s already brewed coffee and is working on his custard, whipping a mixture of heavy cream and mascarpone in a large bowl. Chef Ji tastes his mixture, and makes a face]

Chef Ji: [to himself] That’s not sweet enough at all, but I added the right amount, I’m sure of it! Hm...

Chef Ji: [voiceover as he adds more sugar to his bowl of heavy cream] I’m glad Otabek is letting us all do our thing! Usually my head chef is always breathing down my neck, it makes me so nervous! Today I can just make my dish the way I want it, and my team trusts me to get it done.

[Not all of Team Agape shares Chef Ji’s sentiment. Across the kitchen, Chef Yang is trimming her shortribs. She has two dishes to prep for, so she works quickly on the beef.]

Chef Crispino: [to Chef Yang] Mis en place for my mussel appetizer is going to take about ten minutes, since I can’t cook them until right before service. Do you need help?

Chef Yang: If you want to do a chiffon on that cabbage it would be a big help. The sooner we can get that in the brine the better.

Chef Crispino: You got it. I can start the grind on the pork as well, if you want to focus on the short ribs.

Chef Yang: Sounds like a plan. Thanks Sara.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Otabek seems focused on his own dish as we get into our six hours of prep. That’s all well and good, but the executive chef has to have his eye on the whole menu. Sara and I have the experience to manage ourselves, but keeping track of the details, like which dishes need the most work and which can wait until right before service, could make or break us once the pressure really sets in.
Chef Plisetsky: Last night we chose Agape House as the name of our restaurant. It was Beka’s idea. Since we’re serving our dishes family style, I had the idea to push all our tables together. Instead of twenty separate tables that seat two or four, we’re going to have three tables that seat twelve. It makes seating more challenging, since I’ll have to arrange all the reservations to sit together, but hopefully it’ll force people to get to know each other, and they’ll all be filled with the spirit of agape, or whatever. [rubbing the back of his neck] If the guests hate it and don’t play along we’re totally screwed and I’ll probably go home, but the team liked the idea so we’re gonna go big or go home.

[His tables in order, Chef Plisetsky rolls out the first of the richly patterned area rugs in the entrance way. Burgundy tablecloths are quick to follow. In Restaurant Eros’ dining room, Chef Katsuki is going for a more traditional layout. The chef begins with the walls rather than his linens, installing a series of shallow black shelves that will hold tealight candles during service. Waiting in the corner of the room are the calla lilies, still pristine from the day before and now all set in their striking black vases. Time is going quickly, and Chef Katsuki still has a series of paintings to hang on the walls before he can begin to arrange all his place settings.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover as he levels the first of several paintings] I’m plenty worried about what’s going on out front, so I trust my team to have things in order in the kitchen. I’m just worried about Victor. He’s taking on a dish in every course, and he’s expediting service. If any of us are in danger of overstretcing, it’s him.

[Chef de la Iglesia pokes his head in from the door to the kitchen.]

Chef de la Iglesia: Hey, Yuuri! It’s looking good in here!

Chef Katsuki: Ha, thanks Leo. Everything alright in the back?

Chef de la Iglesia: Yeah, Victor’s keeping us on track. We’re about at the halfway mark, so Victor asked me to check in and see what your plans were for your sorbet.

Chef Katsuki: I’m making good progress. I’m just going to hang these and then I’ll come in and start the mix. Make sure the ice cream machine is on for me?

Chef de la Iglesia: You got it.

[Chef de la Iglesia scurries back to the kitchen while Yuuri hangs his painting, only to find that it’s crooked. With a sigh the chef takes the painting down and starts his measuring again.]

Chef Katsuki: [under his breath as he shakes his head] I hope I can do this.

[In House Agape’s kitchen, things are heating up. Chef Altin is opening up a little, joining Chefs Ji and Crispino in folding up the small mountain of potstickers that will be fried for their first appetizer. Chef Plisetsky has taken a break from the front to put together his dessert, filling several large ceramic casseroles with a rich fig and blueberry mixture that will eventually be baked into a family style crisp. Chef Ji’s tiramisu is setting up in the refrigerator in long narrow tureens, ready to be turned out for presentation. Despite the elegant look of the dish, the young chef is feeling less than...
confident as he assists his teammates with the remaining work.]

Chef Ji: [voiceover] I’m worried my tiramisu might be too sweet. I realized after I added more sugar that I hadn’t scraped the bowl properly, so when I tasted it fully mixed it was really sugary. I’m hoping the bitterness of the espresso will be enough to balance the dish, but I won’t know until the diners make their judgement. Until then I’m just going to make myself really useful as a sous chef to my team.

Chef Ji: Otabek, should I check on the kimchi after this?

Chef Altin: Yeah, then see if Yuri needs help with the oven. He’ll need to get back to the front soon.

Chef Ji: Yes, chef!

[In Restaurant Eros’ kitchen, Chef Katsuki has already come and gone, his sorbet mixture turning in the ice cream machine and a shallot mignonette chilling the in the fridge. With Chef Nikiforov keeping up his aggressive schedule Chef de la Iglesia’s ceviche is ready for service, and his chili chocolate cake is in the oven. Chef Chulanont’s duck is ready to fire and he’s finishing up his sauce. With two hours left on the clock Chef Nikiforov has finished his tartare and is poaching pears in batches.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] We have one less person on our team, so it’s my job as executive chef to make sure that isn’t apparent in our menu or our kitchen timing. So far everyone is working well together, and we’ve spread out our dishes among the chefs so that no one person is responsible for a whole course. With that said, we’re still only three people in the kitchen, and since Yuuri is only doing the amuse and a palate cleanser at the end it’s a lot of components for us to manage.

Chef Nikiforov: Leo! Do you have free hands?

Chef de la Iglesia: Sure. What do you need?

Chef Nikiforov: Start a batch of whipped cream with a teaspoon of almost extract.

Chef de la Iglesia: You got it!

Chef Chulanont: I’m good with the ginger glaze, Victor. Should I start the citronette for the asparagus?

Chef Nikiforov: Yes, thank you! Let me taste it when you’re done.

Chef Chulanont: Will do!

Chef Nikiforov: It’s going to be tight, but I think we’re going to make it!

[In the hallway between the dining room and the kitchen, Chef Katsuki is crouched on the ground, leaning his head back against the wall and counting softly to ten. From a gap in the doorway the camera can get a glimpse of the dining room dressed in cool grey and crisp white with elegant black accents. In the cool hallway, Chef Katsuki takes a slow, deep breath.]

Chef Katsuki: ...Okay. Home stretch. Don’t let him down.

[Not wasting anymore time, Chef Katsuki continues into the kitchen, accepting the cheerful greetings of his busy teammates before setting himself up a station with a crate of oysters and several empty trays of ice. Wearing a teflon glove, Chef Kastuki picks up a sharp knife and gets to work.]
Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] The dining room is in order, so I spend the last hour before my staff shows up and I have to be out front shucking the oysters for my amuse bouche. I was waiting til the last moment so they would be as fresh as possible. It’s a challenging, but methodical task, and I admit I find it really...cathartic. I thought I might be panicking at this point, but shucking fifty oysters actually helps me center myself right before I have to hit the floor.

Chef Chulanont: Yuuri, do you need a hand?

Chef Katuski: [smiling softly as he snap the shell off an oyster] Nope.

Chef Chulanont: Okay then.

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] I can tell Yuuri has his head in a certain zone, but it’s not his “Oh god everything is ruined and it’s all my fault” zone, so at this point we just have to let him be. There’s plenty to do but I think all in all we’re in pretty good shape to start service.

[Time winds down and Chef Katsuki finishes shucking his oysters. Each team is assigned three waiters who will assist the chef in the front of house. They listen carefully, dressed in pressed black dress shirts, as Chef Katsuki and Plisetsky explain their respective order tickets, place settings, and service procedure. In the kitchen, prep work is being completed down to the last moment. Chef de la Iglesia pulls a piping hot series of chocolate cakes from the oven while Chef Nikiforov rolls a mountain of asparagus in thin slices of prosciutto. Chef Yang fills tray after tray with potstickers just waiting for a hot pan while Chef Crispino finally puts her mussels on to steam in their chorizo white wine broth. With only minutes before service begins, the chefs gather themselves for the challenge to come. Chefs Plisetsky and Katsuki slip out to change out of their chef jackets while their staff put the finishing touches on the dining rooms.]

Chef Nikiforov: [to Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia] There is nothing in our way. We follow the plan.

Chef Altin: [to Chefs Yang, Crispino, and Ji] We can do this, together.

[It’s time for Restaurant Wars.]

[The first diners arrive in their formal evening attire, stepping into a foyer to receive blank comment cards before parting ways, choosing one of the two restaurant options. Several choose to dine with Team Eros, entering the dining room where flickering votive candles line the walls, illuminating tastefully hung art. The paintings are abstract, bold strokes of black acrylic giving a teasing glimpse of bright color hidden underneath. Small round tables bear crisp white linens, with the perfume of a single calla lily in a narrow vase giving an intimate air to the modern space. Waiting to greet his guests is Chef Katsuki. He’s dressed in a slim cut suit, black on black with an open collar. His messy hair is pushed back in a stylish coif, giving him a sensual elegance that usually is only visible in his cooking. The flickering candlelight flatters his complexion and makes his eyes glow behind the blue edged frame of his glasses.]

Chef Katsuki: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to Restaurant Eros. I’m Chef Yuuri Katsuki and it will be my pleasure to be your host this evening.

[Chef Katsuki leads the first guests to their table, explaining his team’s restaurant concept in a pleasant murmur and pouring the first wine selection of the evening as the diners look over their menu. Only the sharpest eye would catch the slight tremble in the chef’s hand as he pours the sparkling white that will accompany the diner’s first course.]
Chef Katsuki: [writing down the guest’s choice for their appetizer] I’ll have that out for you in just a moment. In the meantime if I can make your evening more enjoyable please don’t hesitate to get my attention.

[After seating a few tables Chef Katsuki slips down the short hallway to the kitchen to meet Chef Nikiforov at the expediting window. He endures a few hoots and whistles from Chefs de la Iglesia and Chulanont once they catch sight of his suit. Chef Nikiforov on the other hand, appears to be struck speechless.]

Chef Nikiforov: [cheeks flushed] Yuuri... wow...you...

Chef Katsuki: [coy] Do you think I look eros enough, Victor?

[Chef Nikiforov can only gape, and nod. Chef Katsuki reaches over the expediting counter to rest two fingers under Chef Nikiforov’s chin, drawing him close.]

Chef Katsuki: Good. Cause I have news for you...

Chef Nikiforov: [swallowing] ...yes?

Chef Katsuki: [seductively] The first two tables have been seated.

[Chef Katsuki thrusts the two order tickets in Chef Nikiforov’s face.]

Chef Katsuki: Three ceviche, one asparagus. I’ll serve the amuse myself. [tapping Chef Nikiforov under the chin, where his mouth had been hanging open] Keep your head in the game, chef.

Chef Nikiforov: [grinning] Yes, chef.

[Chef Katsuki flits behind the counter to grab two waiting plates of oysters before returning to the dining room. Chef Nikiforov blatantly watches him leave before shaking himself and returning his focus to his kitchen.]

Chef Nikiforov: [calling out] First tickets are in! Three ceviche, one asparagus! Time for rock and roll, boys!

[At House Agape, Chef Plisetsky is handling his first wave of diners, skillfully arranging the groups of three and four to fill his long banquet style tables. The dining room is washed in warm tones of red, gold and brown, aided by the deep burgundy linens and rich rugs on the floor. Tall pillar candles in glittering mosaic vases give the room a sense of homeliness. In place of paintings on the wall the room is decorated by antique window box frames in rich dark wood that complements the chairs and tables.]

Chef Plisetsky: [passing a slim paper menu out as servers pour water and wine] Welcome, everyone. Our restaurant concept is inspired by agape, selfless platonic love. In the spirit of agape, we invite you to share a table with your fellow diners and enjoy a more communal food experience. Our first course will be served in just a few minutes.

[Chef Plisetsky continues to fill his remaining tables as servers begin to fill their tickets and the kitchen begins firing their tapas style appetizers. A few guests are more reserved regarding the communal seating, but once the wine starts flowing so does conversation, and several parties begin to get to know one another, much to Chef Plisetsky’s relief.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Holy [beep], it’s actually working! They’re talking to each other!
[In no time at all both restaurants have seated a rush of customers, and dishes begin to fly out of the kitchen. About a half an hour into service, the judges make their appearance. Led by Christophe in a snappy black dinner jacket with silk lapels, Yakov, Minako and Celestino have decided Team Eros will be the first restaurant put to the test. Chef Katsuki is waiting to greet them at the door.]

Chef Katsuki: Welcome to *Restaurant Eros*, I’m so glad you could join us tonight.

Christophe: My my, chef, you certainly clean up nicely.

Chef Katsuki: Thank you, Christophe. If you’ll follow me, we have your table waiting.

[Chef Katsuki leads the judges to their table, exchanging a brief signal with a waiter, who scurries into the kitchen. Chef Katsuki gracefully pulls out a chair for Minako before passing around a menu for the judges.]

Chef Katsuki: Your dining experience tonight is inspired by *eros*, erotic love. We hope to entice you with a surprising and sensual range of global flavors, with an emphasis on spice and temperature contrasts.

Minako: Very intriguing chef. You can tell the kitchen we’d like to try two of everything.

[Chef Katsuki nods as the waiter he signaled appears with an elegant tray of four chilled raw oysters and a delicate pink sauce.]

Chef Katsuki: To whet your appetite, I have a little *amuse bouche*, which I’ve prepared for you myself. It’s an oyster on the half shell, topped with a sparkling wine mignonette.

Christophe: Thank you, Chef Katsuki.

Chef Katsuki: Please enjoy. Your first course will be out shortly.

[Chef Katsuki steps away, stopping to check in at a few tables before stepping into the kitchen. The judges enjoy the fresh oyster while they wait for their first course.]

Celestino: [pleased] Mm, that has a lovely bubble to it.

Christophe: I have to agree. Chef Katsuki has certainly *amused my bouche*.

Minako: We haven’t been here two minutes and I think Chef Katsuki has already surprised us all. He’s *magnetic* in the dining room. All the guests are enchanted, you can feel it. And his dish is an exciting start.

Yakov: His front of house is a strong start for Chef Nikiforov’s concept. We’ll see how the meal progresses.

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Guest: The oysters were so good! It was spicy and the sparkling wine tickled my tastebuds. I can’t wait to try the rest of the menu.

Guest: [fanning herself] The *host* has me excited to try the rest of the menu. I’d try anything he wanted to serve me, if you catch my drift.

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Chef Katsuki: [in the kitchen] The judges are in! Two of everything, check in with me before you
send out the courses.

Chef Nikiforov: Two of everything, got it. Are you feeling okay out there?

Chef Katsuki: [smiling] Actually...yeah.

Chef Nikiforov: Good. [turning to shout] Two of each, first course! Phichit when those plates go I want the judge’s duck on the grill. No gaps!

Chef Chulanont: Yes chef!

Chef Nikiforov: [to Chef Katsuki] I knew you could do it, Yuuri. Keep it up.

[Chef Katsuki nods, eyes shining before he returns to the dining room.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] The dining room is filling up, but the rush feels good. I was worried I’d feel out of place, like the television challenge, but I actually feel like I’m back in my element. This is just like my restaurant at home. All I have to do is trust Victor. And that’s the easiest thing in the world.

[In the kitchen, plating appetizers should be quick work with only one cooked dish.]

Chef Nikiforov: [sprinkling thyme over a row of finished asparagus appetizers] Leo, we made that ceviche ahead on purpose! I shouldn’t be waiting on it!

Chef de la Iglesia: [frantically wiping the edges of his bowls] Yes chef!

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover] Service hits us all at once, and by the time the judges are seated my hands are shaking like crazy while I’m trying to plate. I can tell I’m slowing things down, but I do my best to get my head in the game and get up to speed.

[The plates hit the expediting counter, and are picked up quickly by the black clad waitstaff, who follow Chef Katsuki to the judges table. In an elegant wave the servers place the dishes in front of the judges.]

Chef Katsuki: For your first course tonight we have two appetizers. In front of Christophe and Celestino you have a pancetta wrapped asparagus, kissed on the grill and topped with thyme and a cimtronette dressing. In front of Yakov and Minako a classic ceviche, featuring citrus cured red snapper, serrano chilies, fresh lime and cilantro.

Christophe: Thank you, chef.

[Chef Katsuki slips away to circle the dining room as the judges dig in. First is the asparagus. The prosciutto makes a pleasing crackle as it’s cut through.]

Christophe: This asparagus is a real treat. Salty, savory, and the *zing* of that mustard citrus sauce is a lovely tease. How are you liking the ceviche, Minako?

Minako: It’s...nice. Good spice, a nice balance with the avocado and the citrus, the fish is delicate. Nothing to complain about, but I’m not sure it’s anything special.

Celestino: It’s well chilled, which I appreciate. That also tells me that the kitchen is moving dishes off the counter quickly.

Yakov: Hm...
Guest: [wrinkling his nose] I thought the ceviche was boring. I mean, as far as fish dishes go it’s hardly groundbreaking.

Guest: Aw, I liked it. The asparagus was better though. That mustard citrus sauce was sexy!

[In the kitchen, Chef Chulanont has just finished plating his duck for the judges while Chef Katsuki waits by the expediting window for the judge’s entrees. Victor is adding the garnishes to his two steak tartares when the sound of shattering ceramic breaks the hum of activity in the kitchen like a gunshot. No one is hurt, but Chef de la Iglesia has knocked a portion of ceviche off the counter. The plate and it’s contents are in pieces on the floor. A waiter steps in to sweep up the mess, but Chef de la Iglesia seems frozen in place.]

Chef Katsuki: [craning his neck over the counter] Victor? What’s going on?

Chef Nikiforov: [to Chef Katsuki] I can handle it. [to Chef de la Iglesia] Chef?

Chef de la Iglesia: Sorry. S-sorry I--

Chef Nikiforov: [quickly reading the situation] Leo. Take a walk.

Chef de la Iglesia: No, Victor, I’m good, I can--

Chef Nikiforov: Chef. [pointing] Walk in freezer. Close the door, count to thirty, get it together. Then I want you to walk back into my kitchen and be ready to plate the best two desserts of your life. Do you understand me?

Chef de la Iglesia: Y-yes.

Chef Nikiforov: What?

Chef de la Iglesia: [more firmly] Yes. I can do this. I’ll be right back.

Chef Nikiforov: Good. Go.

[Chef de la Iglesia steps out. Chef Nikiforov grabs a clean dish and a new ceviche, a perfect replica of the others waiting beside it. He adds the appetizers to the expediting window to go out to the waiting guests before returning to his tartare. With a final sprinkle of salt the tartare goes to the window, where Phichit’s duck is already waiting to go out.]

Chef Katsuki: [grabbing two plates] Are we good?

Chef Nikiforov: [nodding] We’re good.

Chef Katsuki: Okay. Wish me luck.

Chef Nikiforov: You don’t even need it.

[It’s a short walk back to the dining room with a waiter in tow. In the walk in freezer, Chef de la Iglesia takes a deep breath, blowing it out in a cloud of steam.]

Chef Katsuki: [setting an intricately plated entree in front of Minako] Allow me to present your second course this evening. In front of Minako and Celestino you have a Asian spiced grilled duck
breast in a ginger chili glaze, with a sweet potato puree. Christophe and Yakov have a beef tartare, with toasted pine nuts, pickled asian pear, and a ginger soy dressing. It’s served on a spicy aioli with a watercress salad.

[After filling the judge’s glasses with a glossy red wine, Chef Katsuki steps away to allow the judges to sample his team’s dishes.]

Minako: Wow, the duck is spicy.

Yakov: Too spicy, in my opinion.

Minako: Not in mine. I love it. It’s perfectly cooked and that heat really puts a fire in your belly. We need that momentum in this menu. Plus the sweet potato puree gives it balance, and a little something to stick to your ribs, though it’s still very fresh.

Christophe: How do you like the beef? This is the dish that earned Chef Nikiforov a chef/owner role in the Quickfire challenge yesterday morning.

Celestino: It’s very well seasoned. My only complaint would be that for me, a tartare is more of an appetizer than an entree.

Yakov: Yes, especially in comparison to the duck, it doesn’t seem quite as substantial.

Minako: I’m not sure I agree. The contrast of hot and cold dishes is keeping the energy high as we move through the courses. I think it’s a clever interpretation of the theme, and the beef was certainly flavorful enough to keep on par with a hot entree.

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Guest: I love the duck. It’s my favorite dish of the night. I love the sweet spice it was a great surprise!

Guest: I liked the beef tartare. It was unusually I’ve never had a tartare like it, with the pickled pear. I thought it was a good match with the duck they were different but they had just enough in common to make it interesting to taste both.

Guest: I’m not so sure about that tartare. I felt like I should be eating it with crackers at a cocktail party, not as my main course in a restaurant.

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[Chef de la Iglesia is back on the line. With Chef Nikiforov plating his poached pears nearby he pours a blanket of velvety chocolate ganache over two perfect slices of cake.]

Chef Nikiforov: [keeping an eye on his teammate] Gorgeous, Leo. I’ve got a good feeling about this course.

Chef de la Iglesia: Me too.

[After a final dusting of cinnamon on their respective desserts the two chefs exchange a fist bump. There are still plenty of guests to serve tonight, but the final dishes for the judges are complete. The desserts are passed to the waiters on the other side of the counter and they head to the dining room where Chef Katsuki is waiting. There’s no time for rest, as the tickets continue to line up at the expediting window.]
Chef Nikiforov: [slapping several tickets onto the counter] Okay, that’s the judges served, but our night isn’t over yet! I need three duck for table four, and one of each app at table six!

Chef de la Iglesia and Chulanont: Yes chef!

Chef de la Iglesia: [plating ceviche, his hands steady] Whew, it’s been a tough night, but Victor has really kept us on track. He might not run the kitchen the way I would, but when I got into trouble he didn’t let me sink. Whatever the outcome of the challenge, I’m really proud to be on Team Eros tonight.

[In the dining room, Chef Katsuki presents the team’s two desserts.]

Chef Katsuki: Chefs and judges, it’s been a pleasure serving you tonight. For your final course we offer two desserts. For Christophe and Yakov, a flourless chocolate chipotle cake with a spicy ganache. And for Minako and Celestino, a champagne and honey poached pear, with a sauce made from the reduced poaching liquid and an almond whipped cream.

[From a small tureen Chef Katsuki pours the sauce for the poached pears himself before stepping back.]

Chef Katsuki: Please enjoy.

[The judges waste no time cutting into the two desserts. The pear is fork tender, and the chocolate cake moist and decadent.]

Minako: This poached pear is fabulous.

Celestino: Mm the champagne has a nice finish on the palate. A lovely little chef’s dessert, I would say. No complicated pastry, but all the nicer for it. How are you liking the chocolate cake, Christophe?

Christophe: Not to be crass, but I think this cake is the dessert equivalent of a well earned post-coital cigarette. Smoke, heat, indulgence. I can’t stop eating it.

Yakov: I might not use such, uh, colorful phrasing, but I also like this dessert. It’s not too sweet, and the portion size is well chosen. It’s rich without becoming overwhelming.

Minako: [smiling] A high note ending on a strong menu. Team Eros is going to be a tough act to follow.

Celestino: I have to agree.

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Guest: The poached pear is amazing. The dry champagne with the sweetness of the whipped cream. It was my favorite dish tonight!

Guest: I liked the cake too! Most of the dishes were good, but this cake I’m going to be thinking about for a long time.

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[The judges dessert plates are nearly scraped clean. As the waitstaff clears their dishes, Chef Katsuki appears one final time, this time with a slim tray bearing four elegant tasting spoons.]

Chef Katsuki: Thank you for dining with us at Restaurant Eros. Just to cleanse your palate before
you move on, I have a taste of cinnamon sorbet with some orange zest.

Christophe: My, my, chef, you’ve certainly thought of everything.

Chef Katsuki: [offering a short bow and a smile] I hope you all have a pleasant rest of your evening.

Minako: Thank you, Yuuri.

[After they enjoy Chef Katsuki’s cinnamon sorbet, the judges depart, bound for House Agape and their second dinner. Chef Katsuki makes a few rounds of the dining room, checking in with guests before stepping into the kitchen. Chef Nikiforov has just placed several entrees in the hands of their capable waitstaff. Chef Katsuki leans against the expediting window, offering Chef Nikiforov a lopsided smile. Chef Nikiforov vanishes for a moment, returning with a glass of cold water, which Chef Katsuki accepts gratefully.]

Chef Nikiforov: The judges are gone?

Chef Katsuki: [wiping his mouth] Yup.

Chef Nikiforov: How do you feel?

Chef Katsuki: [shrugging] They seemed happy? We won’t know until we know.

Chef Nikiforov: And we’ve got a whole dinner service until then.

Chef Katsuki: [toasting his water glass] We’ll give it everything we’ve got.

Chef Nikiforov: [smiling] Let’s do it.

[The judges arrive at the entrance to House Agape’s dining room. Chef Plisetsky is refilling water glasses, but notices their presence just in time, handing his pitcher off to a passing waiter and heading for the front entrance.]

Chef Plisetsky: Welcome to House Agape.

Christophe: Thank you, chef. It certainly looking warm and homey in here.

Chef Plisetsky: [doing his best to smile] Thanks. We have a great dinner planned for you tonight. If you’ll follow me, I have your seats waiting

[Four seats are waiting at the end of one of the communal tables. Chef Plisetsky introduces the restaurant concept as a waiter pours water for the judges.]

Chef Plisetsky: We’ll have a selection of appetizers out for the table in just a few minutes.

Christophe: Thank you, Yuri. We’ll get to know our neighbors while we wait.

[Chef Plisetsky heads for the kitchen as the judges speak briefly with the people sitting with them at the table.]

Minako: Well, this is certainly an interesting setup.

Christophe: Otabek’s concept did promise a communal dining experience. I guess this is one way to go about it. But are the guests responding?

Celestino: [looking around at the other tables with meals in progress] I’d say it’s going pretty well.
Yakov: This is maybe not how I’d choose to eat a meal, but it appears to be effective. Certainly the atmosphere is very comfortable.

Christophe: We’ll see how our agape experience progresses.

Yakov: Indeed.

[In the kitchen, Chef Plisetsky drops off the tickets for the judge’s table.]

Chef Altin: The judges?

Chef Plisetsky: [nodding] Table three.

Chef Altin: Okay. We serve them like we would any other customers.

Chef Plisetsky: Right.

[The two exchange a fistbump through the expediting window before Chef Altin starts calling orders to his team.]

Chef Altin: I need three potstickers and three mussels!

Chef Yang: I hear you!

Chef Crispino: Three mussels, coming up! Guang-hong, are you free?

Chef Ji: Yup! I’ve got your dishes!

[Chef Ji sets out the large serving dishes their shared appetizers will be served in, waiting with garnishes as Chefs Yang and Crispino fire their respective proteins. With family style serving the dishes take more time to plate, but the chefs have less dishes total. In a few minutes two long trays of potstickers and two generous bowls of mussels in broth are waiting on the expediting counter. Chef Plisetsky wastes no time getting the appetizers out to the judge’s table. The waiters serve the whole table of twelve at once, spacing the dishes evenly along the burgundy tablecloth. In front of each diner a small plate is provided as well as silverware. Chef Plisetsky introduces the dishes for the table, standing at the judges’ end so they can hear most clearly.]

Chef Plisetsky: We have two dishes for our first course. On the platter you have pork potstickers, accompanied by pickled vegetables and a soy and miso sauce. In the bowl are mussels stewed in a white wine, tomato, and chorizo broth. Please enjoy.

[The judges sample the appetizers along with their fellow diners. The restaurant guests appear to be talking to one another, sharing the opinion of the food and getting to know one another.]

Christophe: [spooning a ladleful of mussels onto his plate] I guess it’s serve yourself around here. Can I get you some mussels, Minako?

Minako: [holding out here plate] Yes please. What do you think of the potstickers, Yakov?

Yakov and Celestino have used the provided chopsticks to serve themselves crispy potstickers.

Celestino: [chewing] Mm. Great texture. The chef really got that crunchy sear that you look for in a good potsticker.

Yakov: There is a lot of developed flavors, as well. It is a simple dish in theory, but the complexity elevates it. Not to mention it’s well suited to the theme. A homestyle dish perfect for sharing with an
Minako: The mussels are good as well. This flavor profile has Chef Crispino’s hand all over it, and it’s a solid dish. The mussels are plump and juicy, and the broth is well seasoned.

Celestino: I agree. I do wish the mussels had a little something to lighten them up. The pickled vegetables did a lot to bring brightness and acid to the dumplings. The mussels were a little heavy by comparison.

Christophe: I feel like we’re already drawing a comparison with Team Eros here, thinking on their hot and cold appetizers. Team Agape is aiming for a warmer environment, but maybe things are a little too warm?

Minako: We’ll have to see how the meal progresses.

Guests: We love the mussels! I love shellfish, and I never have the nerve to cook it at home. These are so flavorful!

Guests: I wish we had too bowls of them. [fanning self] I could use some more water too, though. It’s a little warm in here, even with the AC on!

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I’m still worried that our team isn’t working together as tightly as we could be. Otabek is doing his best, and we’re helping each other, but it still feels a little like it’s every man for himself. When you run your kitchen that way something is bound to fall through the cracks.

[With a final drizzle of sauce, Chef Yang’s short ribs are ready for the judges. Her three serving platters hit the expediting counter, where Chef Altin’s pot pies are already waiting.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I’ve done my bit for the team tonight. I’m proud to put my name on both of my dishes, and on our restaurant concept. With the judges served I only have to worry about supporting the team through the rest of service.

[Chef Plisetsky leads his waitstaff into the dining room and returns to the judges’ table where he introduces the second course.]

Chef Plisetsky: For your entree tonight, we invite you to share a Kazakh spiced chicken pot pie, with roasted root vegetables and a puff pastry crust, and beef short ribs, braised in red wine and thyme on a bed of polenta. Enjoy.

[Chef Plisetsky goes to check in with the other tables, leaving the judges to split up the portions of the family style dishes.]

Christophe: I have to say, this pot pie is a little more difficult to serve than the appetizer course.

Minako: [humming] Mm, it’s delicious though. This is Otabek’s dish?

Christophe: Mhm. He was technically the winner of the Quickfire.

Yakov: I liked the dish then and I still like it now. Deep flavors, and unexpected.

Christophe: Some strong dishes coming out of Agape House’s kitchen tonight. How are you liking the shortribs?
Celestino: Fantastic. Fall off the bone tender. The red wine sauce is delicious.

Minako: [taking a taste for herself] Mm. Yes. And that polenta is perfectly cooked. I’m willing to bet my life this is Chef Yang’s dish.

Celestino: Well I don’t know if she’s saved the team but she’s definitely saved herself. Isabella isn’t going anywhere tonight.

Minako: [nodding] This is a great dish. Definitely the best entree, if not the single best dish of the night.

Christophe: Better than Team Eros’ duck?

Minako: I think so, yes. We’ve had a great run of dishes so far from both teams. I think our winner is going to come down to service and dessert.

Christophe: We’ll find out about dessert shortly, but how about service? What do we think of our young Chef Plisetsky.

Minako: [pursing her lips] Well…he’s not doing anything wrong …

Celestino: But Chef Katsuki.

Minako: [nodding] Chef Katsuki.

Christophe: [laughing] Is there anything more to say, really?

[Across the dining room, Chef Plisetsky also seems aware of his shortcomings in the front of house, as minor as they may be.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] The guests seem happy, wine and water glasses are full, the food is coming out on time. Everything is going fine, but fine isn’t good enough to win, and I can’t help feeling like I should be doing more, somehow.

Chef Plisetsky: [to the judges] How is everything? Can I get anything for you?

Christophe: I think we’re doing fine, Yuri, thanks for checking in.

Chef Plisetsky: No problem.

[Chef Plisetsky returns to the expediting window, where Chef Altin is finishing entrees for their second table.]

Chef Altin: Where are we at?

Chef Plisetsky: The judges are working through the second course. You can start Guang-hong on desserts. Table two is ready for entrees as soon as you can get a server.

[Chef Altin calls out “service!” and in moments a pair of servers appear to carry the finished entrees out into the dining room.]

Chef Altin: How do you think it’s going?

Chef Plisetsky: [pasting on a grin] Are you kidding? They’re loving it. We’re totally gonna kick Eros’ ass.
[Chef Altin offers a thumbs up, and returns to the line. Chef Plisetsky’s grin shrinks as he’s left to wait at the expediting counter.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Agape is Beka’s concept, and he’s making it real through our menu, but I’m not sure I’m adding to it in my service. ...Maybe I just don’t fully understand this kind of love.

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Guest: I’d order these short ribs again in a heartbeat. They are so tender and just a little hint of spice. Big thumbs up!

Guest: I like the pot pie too. I wish this restaurant was going to be open for more than one night.

[Chef Plisetsky appears refilling both guest’s wine glasses.]

Chef Plisetsky: I hope you’re enjoying everything?

Guest: We are, thank you!

Chef Plisetsky: Glad to hear it.

Guest: [after Chef Plisetsky vanishes into the kitchen] The host is...well he’s definitely doing his best.

Guest: Yeah, you can tell he’s really young. I think with some more experience he could be a little more relaxed. He’s been working hard though, which I think we all can appreciate.

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[In the kitchen Chef Ji has taken on plating both his tiramisu and Chef Plisetsky’s crisp. A touch of powdered sugar and fresh mint give an elegant touch to the presentation before they receive Chef Altin’s approval and Chef Plisetsky sees the dishes into the dining room.]

Christophe: My, I’m getting full. What final delight do you have for us tonight, chef?

Chef Plisetsky: For our final course we have a pair of desserts. On your left, I’ve made a fig and blueberry fruit crisp with thyme and a light goat cheese yogurt sauce. On the right, you have a classic Tiramisu.

Christophe: Thank you, Yuuri.

[Chef Plisetsky vanishes so the table can enjoy their dessert. The judges serve each other a healthy portion of crisp and a neat slice of the tiramisu.]

Minako: [sampling the crisp] Well, we have another strong dessert from Chef Plisetsky. Beautiful texture on that topping, and not too sweet. I never would have thought to put blueberry and fig together, but somehow it works.

Yakov: I think this dessert is a good fit with the menu, if again it is another somewhat heavy dish. The thyme has a good presence, which cuts some of the sweetness of the baked figs.

Christophe: I personally am a fan of chefs experimenting with herbs in sweet dishes, so this is a win for me. How is the tiramisu? It certainly looks lovely.

[Celestino tries the tiramisu and immediately makes a face.]
Christophe: I’m going to guess that wasn’t a positive response, Celestino.

Celestino: [sipping his water] Eugh, I’m afraid not. Proceed with caution.

[Christophe and Minako each take a smaller spoonful than their fellow judge, but their reactions are similar.]

Christophe: That’s...unbelievably sweet.

Minako: Sweet enough to make my teeth chatter. That custard is practically frosting.

Celestino: The first real disappointment of the night, I think. What a shame.

Minako: Everything else was so consistent, I’m really left wondering how this made it out of the kitchen.

[Chef Plisetsky comes to check in.]

Chef Plisetsky: How is everything? Can I get anything for anyone?

Christophe: [holding up his empty glass] I think perhaps a water refill, thank you, chef. I think we all need something to break up some of this sugar.

[Chef Plisetsky frowns, but he does his best to school his expression as he reads the table and sees the barely touched dessert.]

Chef Plisetsky: Of course.

[Chef Plisetsky scurries back to the kitchen with Christophe’s empty water glass. Chef Altin immediately notices the frown on his teammate’s face.]

Chef Altin: What’s up?

Chef Plisetsky: [refilling Christophe’s glass from a pitcher on the counter] There’s something wrong with the tiramisu. The judges all pulled faces when they tasted it.

[All four chefs in the kitchen pause when they hear Chef Plisetsky’s declaration. Chef Ji in particular looks worried.]

Chef Altin: [frowning] Are you sure?

Chef Plisetsky: [nodding] I thought Celestino was gonna hurl. Did you think anything was weird about it?

Chef Altin: [sighing] It looked fine. ...But I never tasted it.

Chef Plisetsky: [beep] Well, you better taste it now.

[Chef Plisetsky returns to the dining room, leaving Chef Altin to deal with the problem of Chef Ji’s tiramisu. The head chef immediately grabs a tasting spoon and takes a sample off the edge of one of the remaining desserts. Chef Altin’s stony silence is all the verdict the rest of Team Agape needs.]

Chef Ji: [crestfallen] I’m sorry, I thought it was okay--

Chef Yang: What do we do?
Chef Altin: We keep going. There’s only one more table, we’ll just give them the crisp. There’s plenty of guests who weren’t served the tiramisu, we can still win this. Chef Ji, keep assisting with plating. We need all of the rest of our dishes to be perfect.

[The other chefs accept his call, though Chef Ji still looks disheartened.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover] We don’t know how Team Eros did. I’m disappointed in myself, but I can’t let it break my focus now. I won’t fall apart when my team is counting on me. Even with one bad dish, we made a strong showing tonight.

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] Chef Ji’s dessert not working out makes me very nervous. He was so confident, but we all should have checked in with him more. Ugh, at least I can feel good about the dish I contributed.

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Guest: God, this crisp, I just can’t stop eating it. The tiramisu though… [makes a face] honestly it was kind of gross.

Guest: I didn’t think it was so bad.

Guest: That’s because you have bizarre sweet tooth, honey. It was way too much. I couldn’t finish it. I wish I had more fig crisp instead!

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Christophe: [sipping the last of his wine] Well, judges, I think we have a lot to talk about. Both teams hit some high notes, but who hit the highest, and does it make up for the lows?

Celestino: We have our work cut out for us at judge’s table tonight.

Christophe: Shall we?

[Chef Plisetsky appears to offer the judges a goodbye before they depart and leave House Agape to finish their dinner service. With the judges fed both teams can shift their focus to satisfying their remaining diners. Both restaurants are busy, but almost two hours into the night there are no more new customers arriving. First the appetizer, then entree, then the dessert stations fall silent as the final dishes head for the dining room. With the kitchen at Restaurant Eros gearing up for cleanup, Chef Nikiforov finds a moment to slip into the dining room for the first time. He pauses to greet a few customers, taking in the elegant decor and the sensual atmosphere with a beaming smile.]

Chef Nikiforov: [shaking a guests hand] Lovely to meet you. I hope you enjoyed your meal tonight.

Guest: Oh yes, everything was delicious. We loved the poached pears!

Chef Nikiforov: Thank you, I’m so glad. And everyone is having a good time out here?

Guest: It’s been wonderful. The host is um…[blushing] he’s doing a great job.

Chef Nikiforov: [eyes following Chef Katsuki as the chef circles the dining room, pulling out chairs and pouring wine] He is amazing. Such eros, yes?

Guest: Definitely. [sighing] I wonder if he’s single.

Chef Nikiforov: [laughing a hair too easily] I’m afraid not. He’s definitely spoken for.
Chef Nikiforov: Yuuri is a vision on the floor. He is the very embodiment of eros, and his presence is bringing our dishes to new heights, I just know it. His every movement is warm, hospitable, but also fluid and sexy. [sighing under his breath] So sexy...

Producer: ...You remember that Chef Katsuki is married, right? And so are you?

[Chef Nikiforov’s brow furrows in confusion before smoothing out as he laughs.]

Chef Nikiforov: Oh yes, I’m very aware. [eyes flashing] I haven’t forgotten for a moment.

[It’s a late night for the chefs as they finally find themselves in the green room, awaiting judges’ table. The chefs are exhausted, and a little disoriented after the whirlwind experience of Restaurant Wars.]

Chef Chulanont: [laughing] God, I could sleep for days, but I still feel like I have more duck to grill.

Chef de la Iglesia: Tell me about it. I’m gonna be plating ceviche in my dreams tonight.

[Chef Katsuki appears tired, but he’s looking at Chef Nikiforov in concern. The other chef is slumped in his chair, a bottle of water clutched in his hand.]

Chef Katsuki: Are you alright?

Chef Nikiforov: [grinning as he drains his water bottle] I’m fine. I just don’t have the stamina you do, that’s all.

Chef Katsuki: You did amazing tonight, Victor.

Chef Nikiforov: [resting his hand on Chef Katsuki’s knee] You too. I couldn’t take my eyes off you.

[A blush graces Chef Katsuki’s cheek, but his response is cut off by the appearance of Christophe. The moment of judgement has arrived.]

Christophe: Chefs, we’re ready for you. Let me just say on behalf of the judges, that we all agreed this has been one of the most successful Restaurant Wars in the history of the show. Both teams produced some impressive dishes, and both chef/owners executed cohesive and effective concepts. With that said, the first team the judges would like to see...is Team Eros.

[Chef Katsuki gives a huge sigh of relief as the members of Team Eros realize Christophe’s implication. Chefs Chulanont and Katsuki exchange an excited hug before all four chefs follow the host into the judging room, leaving Team Agape to wait their turn.]

Chef Plisetsky: [grumbling] Well, I guess we know who won.

Chef Ji: [uncertainly] Maybe they reversed it? Christophe didn’t say for sure.

Chef Plisetsky: [scoffing] Whatever makes you feel better.

Chef Altin: [warning] Yura. [to the other chefs] I stand by the work we did. Win or lose, I’ll be proud to stand with all of you at judges table.
[Chefs Yang and Crispino nod solemnly. Chef Plisetsky and Chef Ji still look unhappy.]

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[The chefs of Team Eros stand before the judges. Christophe is the first to offer his congratulations.]

Christophe: Well, chefs, in case you haven’t figured it out, Restaurant Eros was winning restaurant tonight. By a slim margin, both the judges and the diner’s comment cards showed a preference for your menu, your concept, and your front of house experience.

[The younger chefs can’t help but cheer. Chef Nikiforov wraps a proud arm briefly around Chef Katsuki’s shoulders as Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia high five. After their long twenty four hours of hard work victory is certainly sweet.]

Christophe: While your restaurant was triumphant tonight, there can only be one chef named as the challenge winner. Judges, your thoughts?

Celestino: Chefs, your menu tantalized us with spice and richness, always teasing while still building to a well developed and satisfying meal. While some of us feel you might have done with a little more bulk to some of your dishes, you gave us an impressive depth of flavor without weighing the guest down with heavy proteins.

Minako: Yes, you gave us an energetic *eros*, in your food, but also in your front of house. Chef Katsuki, you were an elegant, confident presence in the dining room. Your persona was poised, and tasteful, but you projected an allure that embodied your restaurant’s concept and made every diner eager to sample the food you served. You also made the *amuse bouche*, correct?

Chef Katsuki: Yes, as well as the cinnamon sorbet at the end. I wanted to contribute to the menu, so Victor, Chef Nikiforov came up with the idea that I would open and close the meal in the culinary sense as well as handling hospitality.

Minako: It was a smart decision. It really gave something extra to the experience. Victor, you took on the executive chef role?

Chef Nikiforov: I did. I had the most experience among the group, so I took a more directive position. However the menu was a true collaboration. Chef Chulanont brought the duck dish, and Chef de la Iglesia shared his recipes for both the ceviche and the chocolate chili dessert.

Celestino: The chili cake was our favorite dessert of the night, so well done there, Leo.

Chef de la Iglesia: [beaming] Thanks.

Minako: Phichit, we appreciated the fierce heat of your spice rub. Your duck was well cooked, and we appreciated your consistency. It was a solid dish that really added to the restaurant concept.

Chef Chulanont: Awesome!

Celestino: [to Chef Nikiforov] My only complaint for you, chef would be the steak tartare. I still think it would have been better suited as an appetizer--

Minako: Though not *all* of us agree--

Celestino: *That* being said, what impressed me the more than any single item on the menu was the smooth running of your kitchen. You do have more restaurant experience than most of your fellow contestants, and you certainly showed that experience to your best advantage today. The
communication between you and Chef Katsuki was practically telepathic. There was a real chemistry on this team, and it showed in the diner’s experience.

Chef Nikiforov: Thank you. I’m unbelievably proud of our performance today, especially Chef Katsuki. He took on quite a burden for the team, and we owe our edge to him, I think.

Christophe: [smiling] I think the judges agree with your sentiments, chef.

Yakov: [nodding] While you served an elegant and impressive array of dishes tonight, your theme was realized thanks to the presentation at the front of house. With that in mind, Chef Katsuki, you are the winner of Restaurant Wars.

[Chef Katsuki covers his mouth with his hands, shocked to be named the winner. His teammates clap and cheer, all proud of their fellow chef. The judges smile to see the reserved chef nearly in tears.]

Chef Katsuki: [eyes wet] Wow. Wow. Thank you. I-I’m so happy to have performed well, and to have worked with these amazing chefs. I really can’t believe it, thank you.

Christophe: As promised, we have a special prize for you--

[From under the table, Christophe reveals a huge bottle of wine.]

Christophe: A lovely 2009 Clos Mogador, from the Catalan region of Spain, and with it, an all expenses paid three day chef’s tour of Barcelona, for you and one guest. Congratulations, Chef Katsuki!

Chef Katsuki: [accepting the gift] Thank you so much! [cradling the bottle] I think this is going to be gone in the next couple of hours.

Christophe: [laughing] Well, we won’t keep you from your celebrating. However, we do have to ask that you send back the chefs of Agape House.

[With Chef Katsuki and his prize bottle of wine bringing up the rear, Chef Nikiforov and his team return to the green room.]

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Chef Katsuki: [grinning] I still can’t believe it. I never doubted my team, but to win Restaurant Wars...wow. No matter what happens for the rest of the competition, I know I belong here, and I can compete with and against the best. [holding up his prize bottle of wine] And this? I’m taking my husband on a second honeymoon. [to the camera] Darling, I love you. Thank you for believing in me.

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[Back in the green room, Team Eros is ready to celebrate. But first they have to share their news with Team Agape.]

Chef Nikiforov: [proudly resting his hand on Chef Katsuki’s back] Our winner.

Chef Yang: Congratulations, Yuuri. I know you were nervous.

Chef Katsuki: Thank you. The judges said it was close between the two teams. ...But they do want to see you all now.
[The air is solemn as Chefs Altin, Plisetsky, Yang, Crispino, and Ji file out of the green room and take their turn to face the judges.]

Christophe: Chefs, for the most part you performed well tonight. *House Agape*’s concept of communal dining was risky, but you pulled it off. Your kitchen also served some of the best dishes of the night. However, at the end of the day there can only be one winner, and it was not your team. Judges?

Celestino: Chef Plisetsky, you made another delicious dessert for us, and your service at the front of house was pretty good. You greeted us, you checked in, you had a clear communication with your head chef. However, in comparison to *Restaurant Eros*, there was just...something missing.

[Chef Plisetsky nods, unusually reserved as he accepts the judge’s criticism.]

Christophe: Who made the short rib dish?

Chef Yang: I did, chef.

Christophe: We thought so. Among the judges, it was the favorite entree of the night. In fact your entree course was superior to the other team’s, by our vote and by the guest comment cards. Chef Otabek, I assume you made the pot pie?

Chef Altin: Yes.

Celestino: We loved the twist on a traditional family classic. The spice was a welcome addition.

Minako: On the other hand, both of those entrees were very heavy. The whole menu in fact. Guys, it’s summer in New York. Air conditioning or no, when your diners step in from the hot weather a whole menu of rich, heavy food can become overwhelming. Was that a part of your conversation at all?

Chef Crispino: Well...it came up, but it was suggested that doing a cold dessert would solve the problem.

Minako: Ah. Unfortunately I think that decision cost you more than it helped.

Yakov: Dessert was your diner’s final impression of your restaurant before they filled out their comment cards. Both desserts needed to be delicious, and serve as a reminder of your total concept. Your fruit crisp was successful in this regard, the tiramisu was not.

Minako: Who made the tiramisu?

Chef Ji: I-I did.

Minako: Chef, that dish was cloyingly sweet. Instead of espresso and mascarpone, the only thing that hit my tongue was sugar.

Chef Ji: [crestfallen] Oh. I guess I knew it was a little sweet, but I thought a cold dish would still lighten it up compared to the rest of the food.

Celestino: I love tiramisu, but this one was...difficult to eat. And after such a heavy menu...being chilled wasn’t enough. I think it really impacted the feedback on your comment cards.

Yakov: Chef Altin, did you taste the dish before it went out?

Chef Altin: [crossing his arms] No. It was the only dish I didn’t manage to taste before service.
Yakov: As head chef, it’s your job to know your menu inside and out. Nothing should leave your kitchen that you aren’t willing to stake your reputation on. Two desserts were not required. Had you, [looking at the rest of the team] or any of you tasted your teammate’s dish it need not have been served.

Chef Crispino: It was Guang-hong’s only dish!

Yakov: But it did not serve your menu. In fact it detracted from it. Removing it might have changed the results tonight. Such decisions are never easy, but that is the purpose of the executive chef. Chef Altin, as the executive chef it isn’t enough to complete your own dish. It was your responsibility to make sure your whole team succeeded.

[Chef Altin nods.]

Yakov: Chefs Crispino and Yang, the same criticism applies to you. You served us strong individual dishes, but you allowed your teammates to flounder. If Chef Altin was not fit to be executive chef, you could have stepped in. If Chef Ji was straying in his recipe, you could have guided him back on course.

Minako: Chef Ji, this doesn’t mean you’re off the hook. Your teammates executed their dishes, some more than one. You were responsible for a single cold dish, and you failed to produce a dessert that could serve your restaurant’s concept. While your teammates could have supported you more, they also should have been able to trust you to pull your weight. Your mistake was a basic one, chef, and it betrayed your inexperience. Unfortunately at this point we have to begin to question your readiness for the level of competition we expect on Top Chef.

[Chef Ji nods, his eyes brimming with tears.]

Christophe: Chefs, I think the judges could use some time to deliberate. We’ll call you in when we’ve made a decision.

[It’s a sober group of chefs who return to the green room to await the judges’ verdict. Chef Katsuki has already opened his wine, which Team Eros is enjoying a first taste of in plastic party cups. The chef is quick to offer Team Agape a drink to settle their nerves, but none of the chefs can stomach the rich red wine with their fates hanging in the balance.]

Chef Yang: [waving the cup away with a weary smile] Save me some for later, yeah?

Chef Katsuki: Of course.

[Chef Plisetsky has collapsed into a folding chair beside Chef Altin, his head in his hands. Chef Altin is stone faced, but the tightness around his eyes betrays his disappointment in himself.]

Chef Altin:[voiceover] Team Eros may have won on their service, but we lost because of a bad dessert. That loss falls on Guang-hong’s shoulders, and on mine. I can only await the judges’ decision.

Chef Crispino:[voiceover] I like Guang-hong, but I think it’s clear that he should be going home. Otabek made a strong dish and he did well expediting even though he has no executive chef experience! I think if they were to eliminate Otabek it would be wrong.

Chef Ji: [voiceover] I just wanted to have control of my own dish, and show my team I could be assertive and pull my own weight. [sniffle] I still feel like I haven’t gotten to show the judges what I
can do as a chef, and I hope they give me another chance.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] We’re all waiting to hear what’s worse: allowing a bad dish to be served, or making the bad dish in the first place?

Chef Plisetsky: [to Chef Altin] I’m sorry.

Chef Altin: [murmured] What are you talking about?

Chef Plisetsky: Katsuki beat me in the front of house. I-I didn’t do your concept justice and I--

Chef Altin: Hey.

Chef Plisetsky: …

Chef Altin: If we had to open another restaurant tomorrow, you’d still be the first chef I’d want on my team.

Chef Plisetsky: [shocked] ...Yeah?

[Chef Altin nods.]

Chef Plisetsky: Oh. Well...same to you.

Chef Altin: Cool.

[Further conversation is cut off by Christophe’s reappearance.]

Christophe: We’ve made our decision. Team Agape, if you’ll return to the judges’ table.

[Without further ado, the chefs leave the green room, taking the well wishes of Team Eros with them. The judges await.]

Yakov: Chef Altin, you made a strong dish, and you managed your dinner service well. However, at the end of the day you failed to ensure the success of your team, and the restaurant lost because of it. When the restaurant fails, the chef/owner has failed.

Minako: Chef Ji, you clearly held a sous chef role in this challenge, and the one dish you were responsible for was a failure. This is unfortunately becoming a pattern for you, and the judges are starting to question your maturity as a chef.

[The pause before Christophe’s announcement is the most painful yet.]

Christophe: Guang-hong...please pack your knives and go.

[Chef Altin is wide eyed, clearly surprised to have survived elimination. There is a moment of shocked silence before a tearstained Chef Ji offers the judges a watery smile and a short bow.]

Chef Ji: Thank you for this opportunity. I’m going to keep working hard, and become an even better chef!

Minako: Good luck Guang-hong. It’s been a pleasure to taste your food.

Chef Ji: [waving] Thank you!

[It’s a teary goodbye as the chefs return to the green room.]
Chef Ji: I guess this is goodbye for now…

Chef de la Iglesia: [pulling his friend into a hug] Dude, no!

Chef Ji: [offering a wet laugh] It’s okay, really. I’m gonna keep studying, and we’ll all hang out again soon, I promise!

[Chef Ji is well liked by his competitors, and it’s a long series of hugs before the young chef gives one final wave and leaves the competition behind.]

Chef Ji: [voiceover as he packs his knives] Top Chef has shown me that I still have a lot of growing to do as a chef. But I learned so much while I was here, and I made some great friends! I know we’ll all cross paths again in the restaurant world and out!

[The moon is high over the balcony of the Top Chef apartment. Chef Katsuki’s prize bottle of wine is being generously shared. Chefs Yang and Crispino have already changed into their pajamas and are relaxing in the living room with their glasses. On the balcony, Chefs Altin and Plisetsky finally wind down after a long day. Despite the sadness of Chef Ji being sent home, the air is still ripe with relief and celebration. Chef Altin laughs softly at something said by Chef Plisetsky, reaching over to ruffle the younger chef’s long blonde hair.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Yeah, well, maybe we didn’t win. But we did awesome. And I might have, you know, learned some shit. About what it takes, and the kind of person I would want to run a business with for real. So yeah. Worth it, I guess.

[Team Eros is enjoying their victory in the kitchen, the remnants of a late dinner spread out on the table. Chefs de la Iglesia and Chulanont are talking animatedly, but Chefs Nikiforov has fallen silent, his gaze dragging slowly over Chef Katsuki, who has abandoned his black dinner jacket and rolled up his sleeves. Chef Katsuki has a becoming flush on his cheeks from the wine, and his carefully styled hair is starting to fall into his eyes once more. He catches Chef Nikiforov’s eye, and a silent exchange takes place. Chef Nikiforov places his empty wine glass on the table.]

Chef Nikiforov: I think it’s time I turned in for the night. It’s been a pleasure, chefs.

[With enthusiastic goodnights from Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia, Chef Nikiforov makes his retreat, throwing one last heated look over his shoulder before the door to his bedroom closes with a soft click.]

Chef Katsuki: [setting down his own glass after a few beats of silence] You guys enjoy. I have to--um--I mean--

Chef Chulanont: [eyes dancing] Just go , Yuuri.

[With a shaky nod, Chef Katsuki rises from the table, an urgency to his gait as he makes his way down the hall. The chef steps into the bedroom, and there is a flash of silver hair before the bedroom door closes with a slam. There’s the soft thud of a body being pressed to the door, followed a few minutes later by the distinct sound of a man dropping to his knees. After the barely audible sound of a zipper being pulled, silence, followed by a long, low moan that could only have been made by Chef Katsuki. Any further activities are unknown as Chef Chulanont conveniently turns on a very loud pop album in the kitchen while he and Chef de la Iglesia celebrate their victory.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [laughing at their fellow chef’s antics] Dude .
Chef Chulanont: Dude. [toasting his wine glass] Here’s to *eros*. 

[The two chefs clink their wine glasses as the moon begins to set outside the balcony windows.]
Keep your Cool!: Part 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[It’s still early in the Top Chef apartment when the door to Chef Nikiforov’s bedroom cracks open. Out slips Chef Katsuki, still in most of his formal clothes from the night before. With a nervous glance down the hallway the chef scurries into his own bedroom. Chefs Yang and Crispino observe Chef Katsuki’s attempt at subtlety from the kitchen, exchanging a humorous glance over their coffees.]

[Producer: Any thoughts on what’s going on between Chefs Nikiforov and Katsuki?]

Chef Chulanont: [innocently] I have no idea what you’re talking about. Are they not getting along? They work so well together in the kitchen!

Chef Altin: [arms crossed with a blank expression] I’m not here to discuss other chef’s personal lives.

Chef Crispino: [looks into the camera with one eyebrow raised]

Chef Katsuki: [beet red] N-no comment!

Chef Nikiforov: [convincingly indignant given his obvious sex hair] I’m not sure what you’re implying, but I can assure you I spent all night thinking of my beloved husband. Who, by the way, is the sexiest man to ever live, and who I will count myself lucky to make love to every night for the rest of our lives as soon as I’ve won this competition and we can be reunited.

[With the morning sun pouring in the high apartment windows, most of the chefs are up and ready for the day’s challenge. Last to emerge from his room is Chef Nikiforov, who stumbles blearily to the bathroom. Eventually he emerges dressed as the chefs are gathering their bags to head out to the Top Chef Kitchen. He falls into line after a detour to the kitchen, where he can be seen shaking out two ibuprofen.]

Chef de la Iglesia: Dude, you okay?

Chef Nikiforov: [laughing off the chef’s concern] Just a little too much red wine last night. You know how it is.

[The chef contestants file out of the apartment. Near the end of the line is Chef Katsuki, followed closely by Chef Nikiforov. Before the door closes one can just glimpse Chef Nikiforov’s hand pressed to the small of Chef Katsuki’s back.]
[Waiting in the Top Chef Kitchen today is Christophe, in another eclectic set up. The handsome host is reclining on a beach chair, complete with rainbow beach umbrella, in a pair of bright tropical swim trunks and a snug tank top. Relaxing in a chic terry romper and a sunhat in her own lounge chair is the chefs guest judge for the round.]

Christophe: [fanning himself] Chefs...the city summer is well and truly upon us. The sweltering heat and stagnant air make even turning on the stove practically unbearable. What we need is something cool to whet our palates. And who better to introduce a chilly challenge than my companion today? She’s the mastermind behind Triple Joy, the organic frozen yogurt brand taking America by storm, and she’s just opened her first location, Ice Castle, in New York City to rave review. Please welcome chef and entrepreneur Yuuko Nishigori!

Yuuko: Hello chefs! I hope you can help us cool off today!

[The chefs greet their guest judge with polite applause.]

Chef de la Iglesia: I love Triple Joy! It’s really hot in California right now, to go and get a frozen yogurt with all the different toppings. Still Yuuko Nishigori isn’t like the other guest judges we’ve had. I can tell we’re in for an interesting round.

Chef Yang: I think after Restaurant Wars, whatever they have coming at is going to be tough. Whether or not we won, running a restaurant was in all of our comfort zones. Doing something out of the usual food world now we’re going to have to really stay on our toes.

Christophe: Chefs, for your Quickfire challenge today you’ll make us a chilled savory dish. You’ll have thirty minutes to make us a flavorful, dynamic, and refreshing plate that won’t weigh us down in the hot weather.

Yuuko: Good luck! Your time starts now!

[It’s a race to the cooler as the chefs aim for the ingredients they need for their chilly dishes. The competition is particularly fierce over proteins, as the options for meat and fish that can be safely cooked and cooled in the time allowed are limited. Tuna, steak, and shrimp are quickly snapped up by savvy chefs.]

Chef Yang: [shredding a head of red cabbage with a pan of water on the stove set to simmer] I was first to the fridge, so I got the prawns I wanted! I already have a dish in mind. It’s one I serve at my restaurant at home, so I’m feeling confident.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover as he gathers a stack of ingredients beside a clean white block of tofu] I know tofu would be an intimidating ingredient for some of the other chefs here, so I take advantage of my background and grab it. I learned in the last challenge to trust my experience and skillset to guide me.

Chef Chulanont: [voice over as he heads to his station with an armful of colorful vegetables] I didn’t manage to snag the protein I wanted, so I’ve decided to go vegetarian for my dish! I’m hoping my boldness will be rewarded by the judges.
Chef Nikiforov was fortunate enough to get tuna as his protein. The chef begins to thinly slice his fish for a carpaccio, but it’s plain to see his hands are shaking, and there is a fine line of sweat gathering at his brow.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I wake up this morning, I have a headache, and a little upset stomach, but I’m thinking it’s just a hangover, yes? I celebrated our Restaurant War victory a little too much, but I am a professional and I’ll shake it off after some aspirin.

[He tastes a shred of tuna to test the seasoning, and he wrinkles his nose in displeasure. He catches Chef Katsuki passing by and offers him a taste.]

Chef Nikiforov: [quietly] Does that taste off to you? Like it’s spoiled?

Chef Katsuki: [thoughtful] It seems fine to me. [concern, as he takes in Chef Nikiforov’s clammy complexion] Are you alright?

[Chef Nikiforov nods and offers Chef Katsuki a reassuring grin before returning to his dish. His expression falls as soon as the other chef continues on his way.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I realize quickly the aspirin isn’t working, and my sense of taste is all wrong. I start to think this may be more than just a wine headache. ...This could be big trouble.

[Chef Nikiforov carries on as the clock winds down, the kitchen a whirlwind around him. Chef Plisetsky peels and chops cucumber before tossing the slices into a blender. Chef de la Iglesia sears a flank steak on the grill. Chef Crispino appears to have taken on a particularly ambitious dish for this quickfire, as she is currently working on a fresh pasta dough.]

Chef Plisetsky: [to Chef Crispino] Are you nuts? Our time’s half over!

Chef Crispino: You work on your dish, and I will work on mine, okay, little Yuri?

Chef Plisetsky: [doubtful] Good luck.

Chef Crispino: [voiceover as she feeds her dough into a pasta machine] I am making a simple tortellini salad, with olive oil and fresh herbs. To make pasta in thirty minutes is a challenge, yes, but we are the final eight, after all. Now is not the time for timidity.

[Chef Crispino uses a cutter to mark out exactly enough tortellini on her flat sheet of dough before she begins folding it around a ball of ricotta cheese with intimidating speed. Meanwhile Chef Chulanont has shredded a stack of veggies and is blanching off his own pasta, a wide rice noodle. Chef Altin is peeling a series of hardboiled eggs. Chef Katsuki pulls the contents over a bowl sitting on a tray of ice.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I think the toughest part of this Quickfire for most of us is going to be making sure our dishes are actually cold when the judges taste them. Either you do a raw dish, and risk it being too simple, or you cook and hope that you can chill everything in time.

[The sound of the freezer door opening and closing sets a rhythm that drives the chefs through the remaining few minutes of the challenge. With a tasting plate at the head of each station when the buzzer goes off, Christophe and Yuuko are ready to sample the chef’s refreshing fare.]

Christophe: We’ll begin with Otabek. Chef, what have you prepared for us?

Chef Altin: My dish is a riff off the deviled egg. The egg is softboiled, and the filling is actually a savory frozen custard with goat cheese and toasted pine nuts.
Yuuko: [chewing] Wow, it’s certainly cold enough! Very creative, chef.

[Next Chef Yang explains her dish as Christophe and Yuuko take a bite of her shrimp dish.]

Chef Yang: I made a quick pickled red cabbage, somewhere between a kimchi and a sauerkraut, and on top a shrimp poached with lemongrass and chili.

Yuuko: That’s a beautiful poach on the shrimp.

Chef Yang: Thank you.

Christophe: Next, we have Yuri P.

Chef Plisetsky: I made a cucumber gazpacho with watercress, lemongrass, and feta cheese.

Christophe: [as Yuuko sips her spoonful] It’s certainly a nice dish to look at.

Yuuko: Mm.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] This judge is tougher than I thought. She hardly even reacts to my dish, and I know it was good!

[Next to have his dish sampled is Chef de la Iglesia.]

Chef de la Iglesia: I made a wedge salad with some rare filet. Instead of a traditional dressing I used the jus from the beef to make a vinaigrette with blue cheese and walnuts.

Yuuko: Very creative, chef.

Christophe: Yuuri K, what have you made for us?

Chef Katsuki: My dish is a chilled dashi, with some quickly blanched asparagus and a bite of silken tofu. It’s a version of a dish we eat at home in the summer.

Yuuko: [chewing] Mm, this does remind me of home!

[Christophe and Yuuko move on to Chef Chulanont. Chef Katsuki wears a relieved smile.]

Chef Chulanont: My dish is vegetarian! I made a rice noodle salad with cucumber, carrot, celery, and Thai basil in a coconut lime dressing.

Yuuko: [as Christophe slurps a bite of noodles] Very refreshing, chef.

Christophe: Victor, what have you made us?

Chef Nikiforov: My dish is a simple tuna carpaccio, sprinkled with some hot oil, to cook it just slightly. On the side is a microgreen salad.

[Yuuko tries the dish, but offers little comment before she and Christophe move on to the final dish, made by Chef Crispino.]

Chef Crispino: I made a tortellini salad, with olives and a simple oil and vinegar dressing.

Yuuko: [making a face as she bites into one of the tortellini] Oh dear, I guess this isn’t quite cold yet. Your pasta is very nicely made though.

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] I managed to make and cook my pasta, but it was still warm when I had
to serve it. Damn!

[All the dishes tasted, the contestants await Yuuko’s judgement.]

Christophe: So, Yuuko, let’s start with the bad news. Which of the chef’s chilly dishes left you cold?

Yuuko: Chef Crispino, I’m afraid you’re only in the bottom on a technicality. I thought your tortellini salad was delicious, but we did ask for a cold dish. While making your own fresh pasta was admirable, thirty minutes really didn’t allow for your salad to be properly chilled.

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] That’s not unexpected, but at least I made a dish that tastes good. For any other challenge I would have been in the top, I know it!

Christophe: Others?

Yuuko: Chef de la Iglesia, for the opposite reason. Your steak was a little overcooked, and chilling your sauce made it kind of sticky and unappealing. It was more like eating leftovers than a dish that was meant to be served cold. Lastly...Chef Nikiforov. Your dish was cold, and it looked beautiful, but the flavor didn’t measure up. I’m afraid it was just plain underseasoned.

[There is a murmur of surprise among the other contestants and Chef Nikiforov is placed in the bottom. This is the first traditional cooking challenge in which the chef has not ranked high, if not at the top.]

Christophe: Chefs, you’ll have a chance to redeem yourselves in the elimination challenge. Now, Yuuko, which of our chefs’ cold dishes really lit your fire?

Yuuko: Chef Yang, your pickled cabbage was cool, crunchy and full of flavor. Count in that perfectly poached shrimp and the dish was a real treat. Also Chef Katsuki, your asparagus had a lovely bite, and your dashi was really well developed considering the time limit. It gave your tofu great flavor!

Christophe: Anyone else?

Yuuko: Chef Chulanont. Your noodles were icy cold, and the fresh herbs alongside the shredded veggies really brought out the fragrance of your coconut lime dressing. Great job.

Christophe: So who is our Quickfire winner, and the last chef to earn immunity this season?

Yuuko: For texture, flavor, and temperature, the winner is...Chef Yang!

Christophe: Congrats, Isabella. You will be safe from elimination in the coming challenge!

Chef Yang: [grinning] I’ll still be cooking to win!

Christophe: We look forward to it.

Chef Yang: It feels great to be on top again, and to have immunity. I’m done being in the bottom, whether on a technicality or not. It’s time to start building momentum toward the finale.

Chef Plisetsky: [crossing his arms] Being in the middle is useless. I better be back on top in the elimination challenge.
Chef Nikiforov: [haggard] Whatever is happening to me, this challenge just proved that until I’m feeling better, I can’t trust my palate. [shaking his head] This is going to be an interesting elimination round.

Chapter End Notes

Next up, on Top Chef!: And usual challenge pulls all of our chefs out of their comfort zones, but who will keep their cool, and whose fever will have them running hot??
[The “Elimination” banner flashes across the screen before returning to the Top Chef Kitchen, where Christophe and Yuuko are ready to reveal the chef’s next challenge.]

Christophe: As you all know, your previous elimination challenge had things heating up in the kitchen, so for today’s elimination we’re going to continue to cool things down with one of Yuuko Nishigori’s personal favorites.

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Chef Yang: Um…

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Chef Katsuki: [nervous] Oh boy…

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Chef Plisetsky: You’ve got to me kidding me.

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Yuuko: Chefs, for your next elimination challenge, we’d like you to make us your best ice cream!

[The chefs can’t hide their various expressions of surprise, excitement, or dismay.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I just knew this was going to be a non-traditional challenge. [laughing] They always do something weird after Restaurant Wars and it’s always a nightmare.

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] They’ve done ice cream challenges on the show before, and it’s always a toss up who’s gonna come out on top, cause it’s dessert, but not pastry, you know? Plisetsky doesn’t necessarily have this one in the bag. It’s all about flavor and texture, which is something we should all be good at.

Christophe: Of course, for chefs of your caliber, we have to make things a little more involved.

Yuuko: Part of my challenge in creating flavors for Triple Joy frozen yogurt is finding a balance, between kid friendly favorites and more well, adult options. All my flavors have to please my palate and my six year old triplets!

Christophe: We won’t ask you to do Yuuko’s job for her, but we are going to ask you to make two flavors. One will be tailored to a grown up palate, and the other for a child. They don’t have to relate to one another, but they do have to be delicious.

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Chef Plisetsky: Okay, so we make one ice cream that a human being could actually eat, and one that’s nothing but sugar. Got it.
Christophe: Tomorrow, Yuuko and I along with your judges will host an ice cream social in New York’s beautiful Central Park for about one hundred families, or about three hundred guests, ranging from age six to sixty. You will serve your icecreams, and your customers will vote on their favorite. There will be separate voting for the grown ups and the kids who enjoy your frozen treats, which the judges will take into serious consideration in their decisions, so don’t discount any of your customer’s palates, no matter how... elementary.

Yuuko: The winning chef’s ice cream flavors will be a featured Flavor of the Month at Triple Joy franchises nationwide!

Christophe: And of course, the chef whose flavor is the audience and the judges’ least favorite will face elimination.

Victor: [voiceover] Just talking about ice cream is making me queasy. I have to overcome this stomach bug, or I don’t know how I will survive this challenge.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I’m feeling really glad that I won immunity in the Quickfire. These unusual challenges have been known to send heavyweights home. With only eight of us left, there’s no room for errors.

Christophe: You’ll each be provided with your own Kitchenaid ice cream maker to help you with your task, which starts today. You’ll shop, and have four hours in the kitchen to mix and make your ice cream. Tomorrow you’ll only have thirty minutes to set up shop in Central Park, and it’s going to be a scorcher, so don’t forget your sunscreen!

Yuuko: Good luck! We’ll see you tomorrow!

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[It’s a different kind of trip to Whole Foods Market as the chefs flock to the dairy, baking, and produce aisles. In the produce, Chef Altin has filled his basket with cartons of strawberries and he’s currently bagging up long stalks of fresh rhubarb. Chef de la Iglesia appears to be going for a non-traditional ice cream as he grabs armfuls of fresh rhubarb. Despite only having thirty minutes, Chef Katsuki appears to be taking his time as he looks through his fruit options.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] For my ice cream flavors, I’m looking for inspiration from nature. Just because it’s an unusual challenge doesn’t mean I’m going to abandon my cooking philosophy. I find these beautiful white peaches, and the recipe comes together for my parent friendly option. Now for my kid friendly recipe…

[Chef Katsuki’s gaze falls on a full stand of purple sweet potatoes, and his eyes light up. Elsewhere, several chefs have converged on the bulk nuts and candy aisle. Chef Yang has a monopoly on bittersweet chocolate chips, and Chef Nikiforov appears to be measuring out scoops of rainbow sprinkles. Chef Crispino is filling a bag with pistachios for a very traditional ice cream flavor.]

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] I see other chefs going for really unusual flavors, but my strategy is to do something more familiar, and make it all from scratch. So my adult flavor will be spumoni, or a neapolitan of chocolate, strawberry, and pistachio ice creams. It is classic, yes, but it will be the best my diners have ever had.

[Chefs Plisetsky and Chulanont appear to have some similar ideas, as they both emerge from the coffee and tea aisle.]

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Chef Chulanont: For my kid ice cream, I’m using flavors from a sweet treat that I liked best as a kid: Thai iced tea! I think it will be unique and cool to look at without scaring any picky eaters away. For my adult flavor I decide to keep up the Asian caffeine theme [laughing], so I get the ingredients for a Vietnamese coffee. It’s very on trend in the States right now, so fingers crossed!

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Chef Plisetsky: I’m going back to Russia for my flavors. For the parents, black tea with a jam swirl, like we drink it in Moscow. For kids, I’m making a bird’s milk cake, which is an iconic Russian dessert that sounds disgusting but is actually just chocolate and homemade marshmallow. [rolling his eyes] I find kids to be very loud and annoying, so I am planning to give them something sticky to keep their mouths shut.

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Chef Nikiforov: [tapping his index finger on his chin] I think the only reason Chef Plisetsky isn’t excited to work with children is because he is still a child himself. [laughing] For my icecream, I am going with recipes that I am sure of, since my illness is throwing off my sense of taste. For the adults, a lemon-lavender frozen custard that I serve in my restaurant in St. Petersburg. For the little ones, I am going to make a classic vanilla, with rainbow sprinkles. It is a risk to make something so simple, but I don’t trust my taste buds to make anything more complicated.

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[The chefs return to the Top Chef kitchen, where they have four hours to cook, mix, and churn their raw ingredients into two delicious ice cream flavors. There is a small fleet of pans set on the stove right away, as most of the chefs prepare to cook some variation of the custard base that will serve as the vehicle for their other flavors. The only exception seems to be Chef Katsuki, who has decided to make both of his ice creams with coconut milk instead of regular dairy. The chef is peeling and slicing a small mountain of bright purple sweet potatoes.]

Chef Katsuki: [placing his sliced potatoes in an industrial steamer] Hopefully this won’t turn out disgusting, right?

Chef Chulanont: [blending a bright red blend of brewed tea and spices] With you making it? I doubt it. Besides, what kid doesn’t want to eat something purple?

Chef Katsuki: [laughing] I guess we’ve cornered the market on crazy colors, huh.

Chef Chulanont: You say that like it was an accident. Kids in the city are cultured, man. They’re gonna be able to see and smell my Thai tea ice cream from a mile away!

Chef Katsuki: [nodding] A winning strategy.

[On the stove, Chef Crispino has the largest pot of custard base bubbling away, as she has to make four different ice creams to achieve both her spumoni ice cream and the cannoli crunch ice cream she has planned for her kids flavor. Keeping a close eye on her custard, the chef is also working to crush a large quantity of pistachios, using a rolling pin that sends startling bangs through the kitchen. Beside her, Chef Yang is breaking up pretzels, albeit in a much quieter manner.]

Chef Yang: [to Chef Crispino] I guess it’s “bite off more than you can chew” day for you, eh?

Chef Crispino: [laughing] Yes, it would seem I didn’t think this through. If it works out, I’ll be in the top for sure! If not, I will go home having proved what a hard worker I am. What are you working on?
Chef Yang: For the kids, I’m making a maple pretzel swirl. It should be salty sweet, with a nice crunch. For the grown ups I’m going to do an all organic mint chip. No peppermint extract, just the fresh herb and some bittersweet chocolate shards.

Chef Crispino: [hitting her pistachios with her rolling pin once more] Sounds refreshing.

Chef Yang: Fingers crossed.

[At another station, Chef Plisetsky and Chef Altin are both making a form of jam, the former a simple razzberry to swirl through his Russian tea ice cream, and the latter a compote which will be blended with his custard base to make a not too sweet strawberry rhubarb ice cream.]

Chef Altin: How are you going to make the tea flavor strong enough?

Chef Plisetsky: I already brewed it into the milk before I added it to the custard. I think it’s good. You can taste it if you want.

Chef Altin: I’m sure it’s fine. What’s your other flavor?

Chef Plisetsky: Bird’s milk cake, but I’m just calling it chocolate marshmallow with graham cracker for the Americans. Yakov will recognize it when he tastes it and that’s all that matters.

Chef Altin: I’m doing a bittersweet chocolate. I’m not sure if it will be sweet enough for what kids are used to, but I’d rather do okay with the voting and impress the judges.

Chef Plisetsky: [nodding] Good strategy. [checking the time] [beep] I need to start my marshmallow.

[The first chef to set his KitchenAid ice cream maker churning is Chef Nikiforov, whose simple vanilla required only a few teaspoons of extract before it was ready to go from custard to frozen treat. Chef de la Iglesia side eyes the other chef’s simple flavor as he mashes a large bowl of avocado.]

Chef de la Iglesia: Are you adding something to that after it’s churned, dude?

Chef Nikiforov: [wiping his brow] Yes! Rainbow sprinkles! I know the little ones will love the colors.

Chef de la Iglesia: Will the judges like it though?

Chef Nikiforov: Who can say? Maybe they will appreciate the simplicity.

[Someone starts banging their rolling pin on the counter again, presumably to crush an ingredient for their ice cream, and the noise has Chef Nikiforov wincing, his face pale.]

Chef Nikiforov: Ah, if you’ll excuse me.

[Chef Nikiforov slips into the tool pantry, sliding the door most of the way closed behind him. Through a slim gap the camera can just glimpse the chef slumped against one of the heavy duty metal shelves, running his hand through his hair with a beleaguered sigh. The next chef to come in happens to be Chef Katsuki, looking for a pan to blanch his peaches.]

Chef Katsuki: ...Victor?

Chef Nikiforov: [startled] Oh, Yuuri! I was just looking for a zester, haha. I must have spaced out.

Chef Katsuki: [voice barely audible] If you aren’t feeling well--
Chef Nikiforov: It’s nothing, I promise. I just need a good night’s sleep. I’ve worked the line in much worse condition than this.

Chef Katsuki: ...if you say so.

Chef Nikiforov: [patting Chef Katsuki’s back reassuringly] I do. Now... where is that zester?

[One by one, the ice cream makers start their churning as the the chefs set their first flavors to freeze and continue on to their second. After blanching his peaches, Chef Katsuki makes a beautiful puree, which has been tinted a delicate pink with the addition of rose wine. Chef Chulanont fills the kitchen with the rich smell of coffee and cardomum as he brews the components of his Vietnamese coffee ice cream. Still working on her spumoni, Chef Crispino still finds time to whip up a chocolate chip cannoli filling with mascarpone and ricotta cheeses.]

Chef Crispino: Wow, it smells amazing in here!

[Chef Nikiforov is making progress on his second flavor, carefully measuring culinary lavender into a spice grinder. When he sets the processor on it throws the powerful herbal scent into the air.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I’m still finding my senses are a little off, so I’m just following my recipe and hoping that the lavender I purchased today will be consistent with what I’ve used before in St. Petersburg. If it’s much weaker I’m afraid the judges won’t be able to taste it at all.

[With almost three hours of their time gone, many of the chefs are ready to start getting their churned and almost frozen ice creams into the freezer. They scoop and spoon their icecreams from their Kitchen Aid ice cream makers into metal half gallon containers. Some chefs take advantage of this time to layer in additional taste and texture, like Chef Yang, who is sprinkling in crunchy pretzels and a ribbon of maple syrup caramel as she fills her container. Other chefs, like Chef Nikiforov, have already blended all their flavorings into their ice creams. Eventually, the freezer is filled with carefully labelled pans of ice cream from each of the chefs to set up overnight. Last in is Chef Crispino, who manages to get her tubs of spumoni ice cream into the freezer just before time runs out.]

Chef Crispino: [high fiving her fellow chefs as the buzzer sounds] Whew! We made it!

[The glow of late night city lights gives a neon glow to the Top Chef apartment as the chefs unwind after an intense day in the kitchen. Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia are making dinner to share with Chefs Crispino and Yang in the kitchen, while Chefs Altin and Plisetsky stretch out in the living room, pressing cold cans of soda to their heads. With the rising summer temperatures all the chefs are grateful for the apartments steady air conditioning, especially after working in front of a hot stove all day. Down the hall, Chef Katsuki emerges from Chef Nikiforov’s bedroom, this time fully dressed. In his hands the chef has two mugs of tea. One nearly empty and one hardly touched. He looks worried as he joins the other chefs in the kitchen.]

Chef Chulanont: [stirring a large pot of noodles] How’s he doing?

Chef Katsuki: He’s asleep. I couldn’t really get him to eat anything, though. I can tell he’s feeling a lot worse than he’s letting on.

Chef Chulanont: [nodding] Victor’s tough. He’ll pull through like always.

Chef de la Iglesia: [laying out basil, lime and bean sprouts on a large tray] We’ll save him some soup!
Chef Yang: Besides, we’ve all worked sick before. A good night’s sleep might turn him right around.

Chef Katsuki: I hope you’re right.

[After their late dinner all the chefs get ready for bed themselves, and soon the apartment is quiet, with only the glow of city lights and the moon overhead to cast some light. All is quiet, except in the bedroom Chef Nikiforov shares with a few of his fellow competitors. The chef tosses and turns until the early hours of the morning.]

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[It is a bright and sunny day in Central Park when the chefs arrive just before lunchtime to set up their ice cream stands. With the beautiful weather comes the New York City heat, and many of the chefs are already sweating as they transfer their ice creams from their coolers to the mobile cold cases they’ve been provided for the challenge.]

Chef Plisetksy: [dropping the last of his ice creams into their designated grooves with a grunt] Holy [beep] it’s hot. It’s gotta be fifty celsius out here. [to Chefs Yang and Crispino] Have either of you got an extra hair tie?

[Eventually the production staff comes around to set up a colorful beach umbrella over each of the chef’s stations. It blocks out the worst of the sun, but does little to diffuse the heat. Chef Chulanont is fanning himself as he sets up his station with the tasting spoons and sample size ice cream cones they’ve been provided to serve their guests.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] Listen, I’m Thai. I can take the heat. But it is seriously hot as hell out here. And all of us in our chef jackets too...they better start this social soon, or we’re all gonna be melted.

Chef Chulanont: [wiping his brow] Everybody stay hydrated!

[At his station Chef Nikiforov takes a long swig of water from a reusable bottle. The chefs to their best to set up within the allotted thirty minutes, all the while noticing the steady trickle of families beginning to gather just outside the colorful streamers that cordon the ice cream tasting off from the rest of the park. The eight chefs are arranged in a semi circle around a cluster of small picnic tables. Prominently placed are the voting boxes, where guests will return the feedback forms they are currently being handed by production assistance. The chefs need their ice creams to be the ones their customers name as their favorite, or they could be in trouble tonight at judges’ table. At the thirty minute mark, a buzzer sounds, and Christophe appears, along with the rest of the judges and Yuuko Nishigori. He gives the chefs a cheeky wink before addressing the crowd.]

Christophe: Hello everyone! Who’s ready for some ice cream?

[The hosts words are met with a resounding cheer from the crowd of parents and children. The atmosphere today is certainly high energy compared to a more traditional challenge.]

Christophe: Wonderful! Now, we invite you to taste all of our chef’s ice cream flavors, and give us your feedback on the comment cards you’ve just received. Remember, these chefs are the best of the best, so don’t be afraid to tell us what you really think!

[A few of the chefs glance at each other nervously.]

Christophe: With that, it’s time to taste! Everyone, step on up!
[Just like that, the chefs are swamped. Christophe hardly has time to pick up the larger tasting cups for the judges before every ice cream stand is surrounded by enthusiastic customers of all ages. Accustomed to the intensity of a restaurant kitchen, most of the chefs manage to keep up their smiles as they serve up their mini scoops of ice cream, but a few need a short period of adjustment.]

Chef Plisetsky: Whoa, whoa, hold on! You gotta let me scoop before I can serve!

Mom: [to her three rowdy sons] Boys, behave yourselves! We’re here to have fun, so mind your manners!

[With parent intervention, Chef Plisetsky manages to hand out three cones of his bird’s milk cake ice cream, and one tasting spoon of his tea and jam swirl to the boy’s mother.]

Kid 1: Hey, marshmallow! Awesome!

Kid 2: [crunching on a bite of graham cracker] It’s just like a s’more!

Chef Plisetsky: I don’t know what that is, but I’m glad you like it. Now go try everyone else’s, but don’t forget to vote for me, yeah?

Mom: [already herding her children on to the next stand] Thank you! Your tea ice cream was, um, very interesting!

[Chef Altin is keeping up his usual stoic demeanor, which seems to be oddly appealing to the single mothers in line at his stand with their kids.]

Mom 1: Wow, your strawberry rhubarb flavor is so...tart and refreshing.

Chef Altin: Thank you. I hope you’ll vote for me.

Mom 2: Oh, we certainly will. Right kids?

Kid 1: [licking their own dark chocolate cone in mild dissatisfaction] Hm…

[The judges have staked out one of the center picnic tables to give them good sight of the action, and to get started on a little ice cream tasting of their own. The chefs have provided a larger cup of their ice cream flavors for the judges to share and critique. First in line are Chef Plisetsky’s Russian tea with jam, and his bird’s milk cake icecream. A few of the judges aren’t quite sure what to make of Chef Plisetsky’s grown up tea flavor.]

Yuuko: [pursing her lips] I mean, all the components are good separately, but I’m not sure I get this flavor. Who puts tea and jam together? I think customers at Triple Joy would be as confused as I am.

Celestino: I agree. There’s great black tea flavor, but the razzberry jam is an odd choice.

Yakov: I think I would have to argue an international difference on this point. In St. Petersburg this is the only proper way to have tea. Unfortunately for the audience here, maybe it was not the right choice.

Christophe: What about Yuri’s kid friendly flavor? It tastes like a good s’more to me.

Minako: His marshmallow is very good, and I appreciate the crunchy textural element of leaving the graham cracker in a rough crumb. I have a feeling Chef Plisetsky’s young audience will appreciate
Yakov: I think both his flavors are delicious, but I can admit I am not being fully impartial. It's very difficult to get good bird’s milk cake in the States.

[Second in line is Chef Altin.]

Christophe: Now, we have Otabek, who has made a strawberry rhubarb custard, and a dark chocolate ice cream.

Yuuko: I have to start with this dark chocolate. It looks right up my alley.

Celestino: [tasting] Hm, that is intense. In a good way, for me.

Yuuko: Wow, yes! I love that little bite. It’s not too sweet at all. Unbelievably rich, but still creamy.

Minako: The strawberry rhubarb is nice as well. A well known flavor combination, but an original ice cream flavor, I think. There are nice pieces of fruit throughout, so you never quite take the same bite twice.

Christophe: Two interesting recipes from our strong and silent Chef Altin, but I’ll ask this question: Which of these was meant for children?

Yuuko: [frowning] Oh dear. I honestly couldn’t guess. I’m not sure either one is really a good fit. They both seem like adult options to me. The chocolate is just too dark.

Yakov: That might be an issue when it comes time to count the votes.

[Chef Yang is an early popular choice for the younger customers, with her maple pretzel swirl. She and Chef Crispino are keeping up friendly chatter as they serve next to each other in the line.]

Kid: [as Chef Yang hands her a cone] Thank you!

Chef Yang: You’re welcome, kiddo. [calling out to Chef Crispino] How’s it going?

Chef Crispino: [smiling as she hands a parent their own sample cone] No complaints so far!

Parent: I’ll say! Spumoni is my favorite, and this is the best I’ve ever had!

Chef Crispino: Thank you, I’m glad you’re enjoying it! [calling back to Chef Yang] How are things with you?

Chef Yang: [laughing] Pretty good! It’s a good day for ice cream, I just wish I was a little less sweaty.

Chef Crispino: I can certainly agree with you there.

[Chef Yang’s sweat is paying off, as customers offer their positive feedback, at their picnic table, the judges offer their own discerning opinions.]

Minako: [tasting Chef Yang’s kid option, maple pretzel] Now I’ll be shocked if this isn’t a hit with
the kids.

Yuuko: Me too. It’s salty, sweet, crunchy. That’s a winner in my book.

Yakov: I think Chef Yang was smart in making this recipe. It’s unique, but almost universally appealing.

Christophe: Next we have Isabella’s parent friendly organic mint with dark chocolate pieces.

Celestino: [tasting] Mm, this one is a little lackluster, in my opinion. All the right ingredients are there, it’s just a little plain.

Yuuko: I was hoping it would have a bolder flavor as well, since it looks so pretty and vibrant!

Minako: Certainly not a failure, But I do wish that mint flavor were stronger. Still, not a bad showing altogether.

[The rest of the judges nod in agreement. Next, they sample Chef Crispino’s ice cream offerings, starting with her chocolate chip cannoli swirl.]

Christophe: Well, I love cannoli, so this flavor is a winner for me.

Yuuko: I like it too. The texture is nice and smooth.

Minako: The flavor is very delicate but I can definitely taste that filing. And it’s something different that I think children can still enjoy.

Celestino: [indicating the cannoli flavor] This, I can agree, is nothing to complain about, but you must all try the spumoni.

Minako: [taking a spoonful] Good?

Celestino: Like nothing you’ve ever had. Make sure you get to taste the pistachio.

[The judges taste, and all their eyes light up.]

Yuuko: Wow, I’ve never had spumoni like this. Sara clearly knows what she’s doing.

Minako: It’s real pistachio. The chocolate and the strawberry are good too, but that is an impressive depth.

Celestino: I think we’re so used to the fake version that a real pistachio ice cream is hard to believe. And Chef Crispino has made an excellent one.

Yakov: There is a lot of work in this flavor as well. To achieve her neapolitan Chef Crispino had to make three times the flavors as the rest of the competitors. [humming as he takes another spoonful]...Impressive.

[At his station, Chef Chulanont has just handed to bright red-orange cones to a pair of twins who are at the social with their mom.]

Chef Chulanont: Here you go!

Mom: [enjoying her own sample] What does it taste like? Does it remind you of anything?
Kid 1: [eyes lighting up] Thai iced tea!

Kid 2: [licking her own sample cone] Just like our favorite cafe by our apartment!

Mom: The girls aren’t into coffee yet, so this is exactly what we order. You couldn’t have picked two more perfect flavors! And great job on this coffee, it’s just the pick me up I needed!

Chef Chulanont: I’m glad you like it!

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Christophe: First from Phichit, his grown up Vietnamese coffee ice cream.

Minako: [tasting] Well, this is certainly something I could enjoy while I watch my late night programs.

Yuuko: I love that he didn’t make the coffee base too sweet. When you get a spoonful with that condensed milk swirl it’s a perfect balance.

Celestino: It may be Vietnamese coffee, but as an Italian espresso enthusiast, I love it. And is that a hint of cardamom on the finish?

Yakov: [nodding] A surprisingly mature coffee offering from Chef Chulanont. Like Chef Crispino’s pistachio, it has a surprising depth of flavor with few ingredients.

Minako: And what did he serve up for the kids?

Celestino: Can’t you guess by the color?

Minako: [tasting] Oh! I should have guessed. Wow, that’s as good as any real Thai iced tea I’ve ever had. It works so well I can’t believe I’ve never had it before.

Yuuko: I could definitely see both of Phichit’s flavors being offered side by side in any of my stores. They complement each other, they’re on trend flavors, and they tell us something about who he is as a chef.

Celestino: [nodding] Another great success.

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[Chef Nikiforov passes out samples of his ice cream to a child and her two parents. The chef tries to keep up his personable demeanor, but it is plain to see he still isn’t feeling his best. His face is drawn and pale, with only a high flush on his cheeks where he’s gotten too much sun.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I’m giving it my best, but I would be lying if I said I was able to catch most of my guest’s feedback. At this point I just want the children to have a good time, and to lay down somewhere dark and cool.

Mom: [to her husband, out of Chef Nikiforov’s earshot] I wish I liked this one better, but it kind of tastes like potpourri.

Kid: [to Victor] Vanilla is my favorite! Thank you!

[Chef Nikiforov manages to offer the child a tired smile. Meanwhile, the judges offer their own opinions on the chef’s frozen treats.]
Christophe: Lemon lavender frozen custard? Supposedly this is something Victor serves at his restaurant.

Minako: [wrinkling her nose after she tastes] I doubt he serves it like this. Chef Nikiforov went way too heavy with his lavender.

Yuuko: Oh dear, you’re right. It’s like eating a frozen spoonful of laundry detergent.

Christophe: Not exactly what we’ve come to expect from him, is it? How about his vanilla with sprinkles? Is there redemption coming from his younger customers.

Yakov: [clearly irritated] It’s... fine. There’s nothing remarkable about it.

Celestino: I can imagine it will be a hit, but I think I can guess what Yakov is thinking. This flavor is almost unforgivably safe.

Minako: We’ve come to expect much more from a chef like Victor. This is not his finest hour.

Christophe: Well, on to the final round of samples.

[Chef Nikiforov isn’t the only chef whose flavors are proving challenging to some of his customers’ palates. Next to his station Chef de la Iglesia is trying to sell one young customer on his own childhood favorite.]

Kid: I’m not sure I like cherries, dad.

Dad 1: Why don’t you give it a try? If you don’t care for it your papa loves cherries, so I’m sure he’ll finish it for you.

[Sure enough, when the kid tastes Chef de la Iglesia’s cherry and chocolate icecream, he makes a face, offering the spoon to one of his dads with a shake of his head.]

Dad 2: [laughing] More for me I guess! [trying the ice cream] Hey, that’s pretty good! I love the big pieces of fresh cherry, you never get that in the supermarket brands.

Dad 1: Too bad that isn’t your grown up flavor.

Chef de la Iglesia: Oh, right! For you two I have a taste of avocado ice cream with toasted coconut!

[Chef de la Iglesia hands over two spoons of his greyish green icecream.]

Dad 1: [wrinkling his nose] Oh, wow. That’s um...interesting.

Dad 2: [diplomatically] I’ve definitely never had anything like it before, so points for creativity!

Chef de la Iglesia: Thank you! I hope you vote for me!

[At a picnic table, the judges also sample Chef de la Iglesia’s ice cream offerings.]

Christophe: First from Leo, we have a cherry ice cream with chocolate shavings.

Yuuko: [humming around her spoon] I love the intensity of that cherry flavor.
Celestino: I like it as well, though I can’t help but wonder if this isn’t sweet enough for children.

Minako: That’s a good point. I like how the bitter chocolate interacts with the tart cherries, but it’s not necessarily what I would make for this audience.

Yuuko: Also the large pieces of cherry might not appeal. They’re a little icy when you chew them.

Christophe: For the parents, we have an avocado ice cream with toasted coconut.

Celestino: Well, this color is certainly unattractive.

Minako: I’m guessing Leo’s avocado’s oxidized. That’s disappointing.

Yakov: What’s disappointing is this texture. I’m not sure if it was under pureed, or if the avocados weren’t properly ripened, but there’s nothing creamy about this.

Yuuko: Mm, very grainy. Between that and the color, I know this wouldn’t appeal much to my customers.

[While Chef de la Iglesia’s risky avocado ice cream appears to be getting a mixed response, another chef’s unusual ingredient choices seem to be paying off. Chef Katsuki’s booth is surrounded by enthusiastic customers of all ages.]

Kid: [eyes round] Why is it purple?

Chef Katsuki: I used purple sweet potatoes.

Kid: [doubtful] Purple potatoes?

Chef Katsuki: Yup! Would you like to try it?

[With his young customer’s reluctant agreement Chef Katsuki serves up his sweet potato ice cream, along with a second tasting of his white peach sorbet for the kid’s mom.]

Kid: [licking a bright purple cone] It’s so weird! I love it!

Mom: Wow, this is good! I love that it’s not too sweet, and so pretty!

Chef Katsuki: Thank you! [to the kid, whose cone is almost gone] Thanks for trying something new with me!

[Chef Katsuki actually receives a sticky high five from his customer, the ultimate sign of eight year old approval. He continues to serve his waiting line of diners with a soft smile despite the heat.]

Chef Katsuki: Working with the kids today…[blushing] my husband and I have been talking lately, really seriously, about adopting. Today has been weird, and loud, but it’s also been a lot of fun. I don’t know if I won or lost, but after this challenge I’m more certain than ever that I’m ready to start a family with the love of my life.

[At the judges’ picnic table, they seem to agree with Chef Katsuki’s customers.]
Yuuko: [tasting the chefs white peach sorbet] Wow, I could eat this all day. How lovely.

Celestino: That is a treat. And so refreshing after all the other dairy ice creams.

Yakov: I like that this matches up with what we know of Katsuki as a chef. Elegant, simple, taking the best advantage of his ingredients. An unusual choice, but successful nonetheless.

Christophe: What do we think of Chef Katsuki’s sweet potato ice cream?

Minako: This one I don’t quite know what to make of. It has a lovely texture, and color. I just can’t decide if I actually like the taste of it.

Yuuko: That’s so funny, I love it! My customers are always looking for something new to try, I think something like this might be a surprise hit.

Celestino: [laughing] I like it too, actually. It has a complex sweetness [seeing Yakov’s face] But I can see we’re going to be divided on this flavor.

Yakov: I am...confused by this flavor. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t work. Also, I can see from looking around that the children are enjoying it.

Yuuko: [taking another spoonful] That’s what matters at the end of the day.

Christophe: Well, judges, I think we have plenty to talk about at judges’ table tonight. What do you say we leave the chefs to the last of their customers and get out of this heat?

Yakov: Hear hear.

[With the judges finished tasting, the rest of the ice cream social takes on more of a fun atmosphere. The picnic tables fill up with families of all kinds, and customers return to their favorite chefs for seconds. Chef Crispino nearly scrapes her containers clean, and Chef Katsuki finds himself with a cult following of ten year olds who love his sweet and strange sweet potato ice cream. As the afternoon winds down the pile of empty water bottles grows larger as the chefs try to stay cool in the summer heat. Unfortunately, at least one of the chefs was too busy with his customers to stay hydrated. Only a few remaining guests are sampling the chef’s frozen treats when there is a sudden crash from Chef Nikiforov’s station. The chef appears to have fallen, knocking over his tray of sample spoons in the process.]

Chef de la Iglesia: Woah, dude, are you okay?

[Chef Nikiforov doesn’t respond, drawing concern from his fellow competitors. Nearest are Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia, who immediately drop their scoops to check on their friend, who appears to be unconscious behind his station.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [calling out to the crew] Hey, can we get someone from medical over here? He’s not coming to!

Chef Katsuki: [rushing from his own station] Victor!

Chef Chulanont: He doesn’t look hurt, I think he might have fainted.

[Chef Katsuki drops to his knees, resisting the urge to shake his fallen competitor, instead he places a careful hand just above Chef Nikiforov’s mouth and nose and waits before almost collapsing in
relief, his hand clutched over his heart.]

Chef Katsuki: [voice rough] He’s breathing. Oh my god, he’s breathing.

[Chefs Chulanont and de la Iglesia are moved out the way as a member of the set’s medical staff reaches them. In the meantime Chef Katsuki has pulled a clean dishcloth from his apron, folding it to place under Chef Nikiforov’s head.]

Medic: [dropping to one knee beside Chef Katsuki] I saw Chef Nikiforov faint on the tape. Is there anything going on with him besides the heat?

Chef Katsuki: He hasn’t been feeling well since yesterday. He said it was nothing but I could tell he was lying.

Medic: [checking Chef Nikiforov’s heartbeat] Can you describe any of his symptoms?

Chef Katsuki: Headache, nausea. He said his sense of taste was all wrong.

[Chef Katsuki’s description is interrupted by Chef Nikiforov coming to. There is a furrow between the chef’s brows as he groans lowly, his eyes blinking open. Chef Nikiforov’s first reactions is confusion, looking anxiously at the crown of chefs and production staff around him. Chef Katsuki stills him with a hand on his wrist.]


Victor: [blearily] ...Yuu-chan? What happened?

[Chef Katsuki replies in Japanese, speaking in a low, soothing tone. Whatever he says appears to calm Chef Nikiforov, and he nods before dropping his head back onto the towel. The medic continues to evaluate him, asking him to take deep breaths and gently pinching the skin on the back of one of his hands.]

Chef Nikiforov: [still disoriented] T-the challenge--

Medic: It looks like you just fainted from the heat, but I’m concerned about your level of dehydration. I really have to recommend that you get to a hospital as soon as possible.

Chef Nikiforov: [brow furrowed] But--

[Chef Katsuki says something low and stern that the cameras don’t pick up, but Chef Nikiforov nods stiffly, despite his frown. It’s a flurry of activity at that point, with guests being ushered off set in order to prevent any confusion. The remaining chefs hover anxiously as the sound of sirens cut through the previously cheerful air of the park. Chef Nikiforov lets out a low groan of pain at the shrill noise. Taking a fall has only worsened his migraine.]

Medic: [wincing] Sorry, but when you passed out we had to call an ambulance. It’s part of the network’s liability policy.

Chef Nikiforov: [mumbles something under his breath that sounds a lot like “ugh, how embarrassing.”]

[It’s only a few minutes before the ambulance arrives, pulling onto a narrow stretch of pavement near
the challenge area. A producer is on set now to hand over a folder of paperwork that must be Chef Nikiforov’s medical information, as the medic attempts to help Chef Nikiforov to his feet. The chef tries to stand on his own, but he sways dangerously before an EMT catches him, guiding him into the bed of the emergency vehicle where a stretcher is waiting, Chef Katsuki only a few steps behind. The paramedics appear to try and block Chef Katsuki from following them into the ambulance, but he says something too low for the camera’s to pick up, and after checking a clipboard they nod and let him in. As the ambulance pulls away the remaining five chefs corner the producer in charge.]

Chef Plisetsky: Hey! No one’s telling us [beep]! What’s going on?

[Several chefs voice their similar questions, concern for Chef Nikiforov written clearly on their features.]

Producer: Everyone, everyone! Please. [quiet] Chef Nikiforov is suffering from the symptoms of severe dehydration, likely a side effect of his stomach bug that was exacerbated by the heat. He’s being taken to the hospital for an IV, and a precautionary screening for a head injury after his fall. We don’t think he hit his head, but you can’t be too careful. We have no doubt he’ll be back on his feet in a few hours, at most.

Chef Plisetsky: Yeah? And what happens then? He’s not here for judging, and neither is Katsuki.

Producer: [nervously] Well...if Chef Nikiforov’s health prevents him and Chef Katsuki from returning to set in time for judge’s table, they’ll most likely be asked to withdraw from the competition.

[The atmosphere immediately turns mutinous.]

Chef Plisetsky: [scowling] Like hell they will. Beka! Let’s go!

[Chef Plisetsky strides over to his station to slam the lids of his coolers shut and grab his chef kit. Clearly amused, Chef Altin follows suit before they both start heading for the entrance to the park, much to the confusion of their fellow competitors.]

Chef Chulanont: Hey, where are you guys going?

Chef Plisetsky: Where do you think? We’re gonna go wait with Katsuki at the hospital. If they want to cut them for missing judge’s table they’re gonna have to cut us too.

Chef Chulanont: Hey, yeah! Hang on a sec, I’m coming too!

Chef de la Iglesia: Same!

[Chefs Yang and Crispino exchange a brief glance before they too are throwing down their ice cream scoops and grabbing their bags.]

Chef Yang: Don’t leave without us!

Chef Chulanont: Alright! Chef solidarity! [throwing two victory signs at the cameras] Peace out boys! You know where to find us!

[The cameras try to follow, but they only get as far as the edge of Central Park, where the contestants can be seen piling into a taxi van, all still in their chef jackets.]

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When the crew finally catches up to their wayward chef contestants, they’re thoroughly encamped in the waiting room of the hospital where Chef Nikiforov is currently being treated. They’ve mostly abandoned their sweaty chef jackets, and are waiting impatiently for any news from Chefs Katsuki or Nikiforov. Chefs Chulanont, Yang and Crispino are doing their best to distract themselves with a dog eared stack of out of date magazines, while Chef Plisetsky paces and Chef Altin sits in a state of stoic serenity. It’s still a few minutes more before the waiting room door opens to reveal a frazzled and tired Chef Katsuki. His chef coat is still hanging off his shoulders as he sighs, dragging a hand through his disheveled hair.

Chef Chulanont: [tossing his magazine literally into the air] Yuuri!

Chef Katsuki snaps out of his fugue state as he takes in the room full of familiar faces.

Chef Katsuki: Oh! You’re…all here.

Chef Chulanont: Of course we are, silly, we’re your friends. How’s Victor?

Once he overcomes his surprise at finding the entire cast of Top Chef in the hospital waiting room, Chef Katsuki relaxes, and offers them all a reassuring smile.

Chef Katsuki: Victor’s going to be fine. He’s finishing up a line of fluids, but he’s already looking and feeling much better. They aren’t even going to keep him overnight.

The chefs cheer, hugging Chef Katsuki and expressing their relief until a nurse comes in to shush them for their rowdiness. Then they get Chef Katsuki sat down with a glass of water. Despite being in good health himself the chef is looking a little worn from his impromptu journey accompanying Chef Nikiforov to the hospital.

Chef Crispino: What happened? It seemed like he just fainted out of nowhere!

Chef Katsuki: It was just a viral stomach bug that’s been going around, they think. Between losing his appetite and working all day in the sun, Victor just got dehydrated really fast. It was scary for a few minutes, but he just needed a big dose of fluids. I swear, about five minutes after they gave him the IV he was already perking up.

The air in the room practically decompresses as the chefs breathe a sigh of relief.

Chef Katsuki: What are you all doing here, though? Did the producers say what was going to happen with the challenge?

Chef Plisetsky: [expression stormy] Yeah, they said--

[Chef Plisetsky’s retelling is interrupted by the arrival of Christophe. The host steps into the drab waiting room in his flawless summerweight suit, looking over the chefs as if they were children about to be chastised.]

Christophe: [one eyebrow piqued] Well, I’m sure you all think you’re very clever.

[The staredown between the host and his contestants is tense, and it’s the harried Chef Katsuki who breaks first.]

Chef Katsuki: I’m sorry, Christophe, I’m sure Victor didn’t mean to make such a big scene. We didn’t know everyone would follow us to the hospital--

Christophe: Yuuri, please, no one is actually in trouble. While all your antics were certainly unusual
the challenge was all but over anyway.

Chef Katsuki: [nervously] But Victor is still getting treated. And he had to leave the set. What’s going to happen?

Christophe: [sighing] Well, I admit, typically if a chef is ill enough to be removed from a challenge, they would be asked to withdraw--

[Several of the contestants start shouting at once.]

Chef Crispino: That’s so unfair he finished the challenge just like the rest of us!

Chef Plisetsky: You can’t kick Nikiforov out, I still have to kick his ass and prove I’m the best chef in Russia!

Chef Chulanont: Victor and Yuuri are two of the best chefs here, and if you send them home on a technicality --

Christophe: [hands up] Everyone! Everyone please! If you’ll just let me finish.

[The chefs fall silent.]

Christophe: Thank you. Now, normally, if a chef is ill enough to be removed from a challenge, they would be asked to withdraw. However, since Victor doesn’t pose a threat of foodborne illness and his doctors have cleared him to return after he finishes his IV, he will be allowed to continue on in the competition. We are happy to postpone judges’ table for a few hours to give you all time to return to set.

[The contestants cheer, relieved that their friend’s health won’t pose a risk to his place on Top Chef.]

Christophe: However, there still will be an elimination tonight. Victor’s health will not prevent him from competing, but he is just as vulnerable of going home for his cooking as every other chef here. On that note…we have finished tallying your guest responses from today’s ice cream challenge.

[From his jacket pocket Christophe reveals a printed list while the chefs glance at each other nervously. In the rush to the hospital their challenge had been all but forgotten, but there is still a competition winner and loser to be decided.]

Christophe: The judges will be deciding the top and bottom ranking chefs tonight based on an average of the results from both the children and the adult’s responses, as well as their own opinion of your ice cream flavors. I’ll let you look the results over in the meantime. [handing the list to Chef Yang] Your official transportation is waiting outside to return you to the Top Chef Kitchen whenever they release Victor. Until then, mes amis, au revoir, and I’ll see you all at judges’ table.

[The sense of relief felt in the hospital waiting room evaporates as Chef Yang examines the list she was handed.]

Chef Yang: Well, congrats to Yuuri! White peach and rose got the most grown up votes!

Chef Plisetsky: Well? Who else? Of the adult list. No matter what they say, I think they’re gonna care about the parents votes, not the kids.

Chef Yang: Sara got second with her spumoni, and it looks like I got third. Otabek, your strawberry rhubarb got fifth. I guess it wasn’t a total disaster after all!
Chef Chulanont: Where am I? Let me see!

[Chef Yang hands over the list. The chefs group around Chef Chulanont as he announces everyone’s rankings.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [reading over Chef Chulanont’s shoulder] [beep] my avocado is on the bottom. No one voted for it. My kid flavor didn’t do great either...

Chef Plisetsky: [grumbling] Ugh, sixth place, and I made my jam from scratch! No one here appreciates Russian culture.

Chef Chulanont: Wow, Victor’s vanilla with sprinkles was the number one kid flavor! Guess we should have known, huh? What kid doesn’t like vanilla?

Chef Yang: I’m sure he’ll be relieved to hear that.

Chef Chulanont: [grinning] Yeah! And his lemon-lavender for the parents…[grin shrinking] Oh.

[At his friend’s concern Chef Katsuki grabs the list. He spends too long scanning the page before his eyes finally find Chef Nikiforov’s name and his face falls.]

Chef Katsuki: Victor... he’s at the bottom. He tied with Leo for zero votes.

[At that exact moment, the door to the waiting room swings open and Chef Nikiforov emerges, his chef jacket and knife kit over his shoulder and a cotton ball taped up over the back of his left hand. He looks tired and rumpled, but his sickly pallor is all but gone.]

Chef Nikiforov: Well? [looking around at his solemn faced competitors] What did I miss?

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[It’s a celebratory reunion with a much improved Chef Nikiforov, but the dark cloud of judges’ table still hangs overhead as the chefs are ferried back to the Top Chef Kitchen. With the announcement of the customer voting results, chefs can more or less guess their fates tonight, and despite feeling better it’s a somber Chef Nikiforov who leads the chefs into the familiar waiting room. Chef de la Iglesia is feeling equally discouraged, given his enthusiasm for his experimental recipes.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [sinking into a folding chair] God, going home for ice cream. [laughing] What the hell. [to Chef Nikiforov] At least we kicked ass in Restaurant Wars, right?

[Chef Nikiforov offers the younger chef a commiseratory fist bump.]

Chef Nikiforov: We both gave it our all [sighing] Even though I did not have as much all to give this time.

Chef Yang: You were sick enough to go to the hospital. No one here thinks less of you for your performance today, Victor.

[All the chefs voice their agreement, and Chef Nikiforov smiles.]

Chef Nikiforov: Thank you, really. And thank you for coming to wait with me and Yuuri. If you all hadn’t left the challenge I likely would have been asked to withdraw. So, if I remain here after tonight it will be thanks to all of you.

Chef Altin: [shrugging] It was Yuri’s idea.
Chef Nikiforov looks at Chef Plisetsky in surprise.

Chef Plisetsky: [scowling] Yeah, well, I want to beat you fair and square, not because of a stupid technicality.

Chef Nikiforov: [smiling softly] Well. Thank you. I hope we get the chance to go head to head, Yura.

[The chefs are interrupted by the appearance of Christophe.]

Christophe: Welcome back to set, everyone. And Victor, glad to see you looking better.

Chef Nikiforov: I’m feeling much better. Thank you, Christophe.

Christophe: Good to hear. Now for the task at hand. The judges would like to see Phichit, Yuuri K., and Sara.

[The chefs follow Christophe into the judges’ room. Chef Chulanont giving Chef Katsuki an excited nudge as they line up beside Chef Crispino. Ready to offer their decisions are Yakov, Celestino, Minako, and the guest judge Yuuko, along with Christophe.]

Christophe: Well, chefs...congratulations! You had our favorite ice creams of the day.

[Chef Katsuki manages a smile, and Chefs Crispino and Chulanont exchange a triumphant high-five.]

Christophe: Judges? What do you have to say to our top ice cream makers?

Yuuko: I think all three of you did a great job, for very different reasons. But across the board you gave us ice creams and sorbets that had beautiful texture and flavor, and you made it a great day at the ice cream social in Central Park, so well done.

Minako: Phichit, we loved that your two ice creams had a theme, and not one of us had to guess either of the flavors. You took two iconic drinks and translated them perfectly to a frozen dessert. Your Thai iced tea ice cream in particular was a real pleasure to eat. I know it was a hit with some of the younger guests today.

Yakov: Sara, you really made four icecreams today, given the neapolitan presentation of your spumoni, and your hard work was more than worth it. Your recipes were simple, in theory, but your execution is what impressed us in the tasting. Your pistachio ice cream, in particular, was I think a revelation for several of us who are used to the kind of synthetic almond flavor of the usual supermarket options. There was such a depth and clarity of pistachio taste and texture. None of your other flavors left us with anything to complain about. A classic flavor like spumoni could have been cliche and pedestrian, but today we experienced it like it was brand new. Well done.

Celestino: Yuuri, you took big risks today in opting for two dairy free icecreams, but I think they both paid off. Your white peach sorbet would be sophisticated enough for any restaurant, and that dry finish of rose wine had us and the parents at the social raving. Your purple sweet potato ice cream was a little more polarizing, but it was bright and flavorful, and it turned out to be a dark horse favorite among the little ones. Just like with adult palates, sometimes offering children something new and adventurous can be a lot of fun, and I think you proved that today.

Christophe: Well done, chefs. Yuuko, as our guest judge today, you get to announce the winner!

Yuuko: The winner today, whose flavors will be featured at Triple Joy stores nationwide, is the chef
who took on the heaviest workload, and gave us a classic flavor combination like we’ve never seen it before. The winner is...Sara!

[This is Chef Crispino’s first elimination win, but the chef keeps her cool, accepting hugs of congratulations from Chefs Chulanont and Katsuki before offering the judges a polite bow and a smile.]

Chef Crispino: Thank you. This challenge was a lot of fun.

Christophe: Congratulations, chef.


Chef Crispino: [shouting] Yes! Yes, yes, yes! It feels great to win, and to have my hard work and my flavors appreciated. I made my own food today, and reflected who I am as an Italian chef! I’m feeling very proud to have my first elimination win, but I’m going to keep on winning from here on out, just watch!

[The door to the green room opens to reveal the top ranked chefs returned from judges’ table. Chefs Chulanont and Katsuki bowing gallantly to indicate Chef Crispino as the winner of the challenge. The other chefs applaud politely, and Chef Yang offers a cheer for her female compatriot before the room grows quiet, and Chef Chulanont clear his throat.]

Chef Chulanont: They say they’d like to see Leo, and Victor.

Chef Plisetsky: [confused] Only two?

Chef Altin: [too quiet for the other chefs to hear] They’re the only two who got no votes on one of their flavors.

Chef de la Iglesia: [sighing] Well, time to face the music. Victor?

[Chef Nikiforov nods to acknowledge the summons, but before he goes, he catches Chef Katsuki by the arm and bends down to whisper something in his ear. Chef Katsuki’s eyes widen, and glisten with unshed tears, but he squeezes Chef Nikiforov’s arm and offers him a firm nod before the Russian chef follows Chef de la Iglesia into the judging room. As soon as the door closes Chef Katsuki drops his head into his hands.]

Chef Katsuki: He couldn’t taste. He had to to serve two dishes and he couldn’t even taste them properly.

Chef Chulanont: [rubbing Chef Katsuki’s back] It’s up to the judges now.

[Chefs Nikiforov and de la Iglesia face the now solemn faced judges.]

Celestino: Victor, on behalf of the judges let me say how relieved we are that you’re back on your feet.

Chef Nikiforov: Thank you.

Celestino: Of course, whatever happens behind the scenes, we can only judge on what is put in front of us. So while we respect your resilience in completing your dishes today, we will be evaluating
your food as if this were any other challenge.

Chef Nikiforov: [head held high] I would ask for nothing less.

Christophe: Victor, and Leo, your ice cream flavors have earned you the lowest ranking after today’s challenge. None of the customers today named either of your grown up ice cream flavors as their favorite.

Minako: Chefs, I’m afraid the two of you represent both the consequences of playing it safe, and the dangers of taking a culinary risk that doesn’t pay off.

Yakov: Victor, I must admit you disappointed us today. Your lemon lavender ice cream was unusual, but you admit that the dish was well within your comfort zone. You fell into the trap of following your recipe instead of trusting your palate, and we only tasted soapy, overpowering lavender instead of a delicate and balanced dessert. And while your vanilla ice cream was popular with the children, it was *just* vanilla, nothing remarkable or new about it. I’m not convinced that such a simple flavor should redeem your failures today, no matter what the popular vote may have revealed.

Celestino: Leo, you gambled today on a non-dairy ice cream, and unlike a few other chefs today your risk did not end in reward. We’re not sure what went wrong with your avocado ice cream, but instead of a rich and creamy treat, we got a grainy and oxidized mess. Sadly it was unappealing to the eye and to the palate. Your cherry and chocolate ice cream didn’t fare much better. While your recipe might have drawn on *your* childhood favorites, your young customers didn’t agree. They found the large pieces of cherry unappealing, and overall they thought it was too tart.

Minako: We’ve seen much stronger dishes from both of you, and we know what you served us today isn’t an accurate measure of what you have to offer us in the kitchen, but someone has to go home tonight.

[The moment of suspense is more painful than ever, as chefs who have become friends and colleagues prepare to say goodbye to another member of their ranks.]

Christophe: Leo...please pack your knives and go.

[Chef Nikiforov’s shoulders slump in relief. Chef de la Iglesia blinks at the floor for a moment before nodding resolutely.]

Chef de la Iglesia: [to the judges] Um, wow, I didn’t expect this, but, um, I always say that my food is like the music of my heart. I’m thankful that I had the chance to share my food with you, and to have this amazing experience. Thank you all so much.

Christophe: Best of luck, Leo. It’s been a pleasure eating your food.

[Chef de la Iglesia is clearly emotional as he and Chef Nikiforov return to the green room, but he manages to offer his fellow chefs a cheerful grin as they swamp him with hugs and tearful goodbyes. Amid the noise of Chef de la Iglesia’s farewell, Chef Katsuki can’t contain the look of relief he exchanges with Chef Nikiforov, but he quickly schools his expression.]

Chef de la Iglesia: It’s been great, guys, really. Come hang if you’re ever in LA.

Chef de la Iglesia: [voiceover as he packs his knives in the Top Chef Kitchen] I’m bummed to go out on a non traditional challenge, but I stand by the dishes I put out today. I always put myself out there with my food, and I’m not gonna give that up no matter what. I have an endless supply of songs just waiting to hit the plate!
Producer: You were almost taken out of the running twice today. How are you feeling?

Chef Nikiforov: I’m grateful. Incredibly grateful, to live to cook another day in this competition. The judges do not have to worry. Tonight, I am going to focus on my health, and tomorrow I will be back in the kitchen stronger than ever! There is no stomach bug strong enough to defeat Victor Nikiforov!

Chef Chulanont: Wow, so much for cooling things off today, huh? [fanning self] I could hardly take the suspense. And who knows what they’ll hit us with next!

With only seven chefs remaining, the Top Chef apartment is starting to feel a little quiet. Still, it’s a cheerful albeit late evening as the chefs make dinner and unwind. Extra appreciative of the downtime is Chef Nikiforov. Despite feeling better the chef is still opting to take it easy, and is dressed for bed when Chef Katsuki joins him in his room. This time the door is decidedly left open.

Chef Katsuki: [offering Chef Nikiforov a steaming plate] Isabella made curry, I mean, if you’re feeling up to something so rich--

Chef Nikiforov: [taking the plate] Thank you, Yuuri. Would you believe I’m starving? I haven’t really eaten anything since yesterday morning.

Chef Katsuki: [smiling as Chef Nikiforov digs into the plate of food enthusiastically] You must be feeling better.

Chef Nikiforov: I really am. [dryly] A short hospital stay will do that for you, I guess.

Chef Katsuki: We’re all just glad it wasn’t something worse.

Chef Nikiforov: Pshh, forget dehydration, I was worried about the judges. I thought Yakov was going to send me back to culinary school when I gave him plain vanilla.

Chef Katsuki: We all should have done the same thing, if we really wanted to make the kids happy. I think the judges’ were just jealous that you broke the ten-year-old encryption.

Chef Nikiforov: [laughing] Of course, I have the secret knowledge of appealing to a child’s palate. It will come in handy should we--[glancing at the camera capturing their conversation]--ah, that is, should my husband and I ever have a child of our own.

Chef Katsuki: [blushing] Oh. Well, I’m sure when your husband sees this episode, it will make him realize of how excited he is to raise a family with you someday. ...How he hopes that day will come very soon.

[Chef Nikiforov’s eyes are damp when he grabs Chef Katsuki’s hand where it rests on the edge of the bed.]

Chef Nikiforov: He can’t possibly be more hopeful than I am. [laughing wetly before glancing at the
cameras again] Sorry, I think maybe I'm still a little feverish.

Chef Katsuki: You should rest. Phichit said he was making tea, I'll get you a cup.

Chef Nikiforov: Thank you, Yuuri.

[Chef Katsuki squeezes Chef Nikiforov’s hand before letting go, and leaving the chef to his rest. The city lights glow outside the window as Chef Nikiforov finally enjoys a good night’s sleep.]

Chapter End Notes

Just a general note: I am not a medical professional, so please excuse any errors in that regard. Thanks for reading everyone!
Diet and Exercise: Part 1

Chapter Notes

Ok LITERALLY, I can't tell you all how sorry I am that this story took a yearlong hiatus. I promise it was not on purpose, and I do have the remainder of this fic planned out. Let's just say grad school is a bitch and I hope you all didn't cancel your subscriptions. Thank you all for your comments over the course of the year. Seeing that people were still interested in this story was so encouraging! You are all Top Chefs in my book! now enjoy, and as always, share and subscribe if you enjoy these YOI AU antics :)))

Previously on Top Chef: Thirteen chefs gathered from every corner of the globe to compete for prizes and prestige in the one and only New York City! One by one, our talented contestants have fallen in the face of inexperience, unconventional challenges, and the overwhelming pressure of Top Chef. Still standing at the halfway mark, we have Chef Yuuri Katsuki of Japan. After stumbling early on the live television challenge, Chef Katsuki proved his place at the front of the pack with a sultry winning performance in Restaurant Wars. Chef Phichit Chulanont, a sous chef from Bangkok Thailand, has held his own among a pack of executive chefs with his bold flavors and impressive knife skills. Chef Isabella Yang of Vancouver Canada hit the ground running, winning the first elimination of the season with elegant, ingredient forward cooking. Chef Yuri Plisetsky of Moscow, the youngest chef of the group, has kept his competitors on their toes with his unexpected expertise in pastry. Chef Sara Crispino has proven her place as the heir to a Florentine restaurant dynasty with her ambitious twists on traditional flavors. Chef Otabek Altin of Kazakhstan belies a strong silent exterior with intense heat in his dishes and fierce competition in the kitchen. Finally, Victor Nikiforov, the much lauded chef from St. Petersburg, dominated the competition until a health scare nearly had him packing his knives. Seven chefs remain to fight it out for a place in the Top Chef finale round in Lisbon, Portugal! Who will make it to the end, and who will buckle under the pressure? Tune in this week to find out!

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[Morning in the Top Chef apartment. The sun is just rising over the city skyline in earnest, but most of the chefs are still asleep, or getting ready in a leisurely manner. However, Chefs Chulanont and Katsuki are awake and already dressed for the day. They have commandeered the kitchen for an important task: giving Chef Nikiforov a clean bill of health.]

Chef Nikiforov: [sitting at the kitchen table, Chef Chulanont’s bare wrist pressed to his forehead] I appreciate this but I’m feeling much better compared to yesterday. I think the IV fluids really—

Chef Katsuki: [ignoring Chef Nikiforov] Well?

Chef Chulanont: [removing his wrist] Congrats, chef. Your fever is broken. Time for phase two.

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Chef Katsuki: In culinary school Phichit and I came up with a system to test if we were too sick to work the line. It combines modern medicine, food sanitation law, and necessary palate checks to make sure we didn’t get kicked out of our practicals for spreading foodborne illness or messing up recipes because we couldn’t taste.

Chef Chulanont: The Chulanont-Katsuki Too Sick to Work Test™ is the proven standard for making sure you never upchuck during your Moist Heat Cooking Methods final because it turns out the smell of lobster triggers your gag reflex when you have a hundred and three degree fever. [looks into camera]... not that that happened to me.

Chef Chulanont: Test number two: breakfast!

[Chef Katsuki places a steaming bowl in front of Chef Nikiforov. It’s a basic Japanese breakfast favorite, hot rice with an egg cracked on top.]

Chef Chulanont: Chef, you will have fifteen minutes to eat this bowl of food, and then a thirty minute wait to prove that eating a small, protein rich meal will not make you puke. Soy sauce and furikake are available but not mandatory. Do you understand the challenge before you?

Chef Nikiforov: Yes, but really, this isn’t necessary—

Chef Katsuki: [placing a bottle of soy sauce on the table sternly] Victor, eat your rice.

[Chef Nikiforov raises one eyebrow dryly at Chef Katsuki, but he obediently begins eating the hot breakfast dish.]

Chef Nikiforov: [shrugging] Believe me, I am feeling much better, but I know I worried my Yu—my fellow contestants when I fainted during the ice cream challenge. So if this makes my friends more able to focus on their own cooking today, I can do their little tests.

[Having finished his rice and waiting the allotted time with no ill effect, Chef Nikiforov faces the daunting final phase of the Chulanont-Katsuki Too Sick to Work Test™. With the rest of the chefs now awake and observing Chef Chulanont places a dish with three sashimi size pieces of salmon before Chef Nikiforov.]

Chef Chulanont: Chef, using any method you choose, please rank these three salmon candidates in order of freshness. Be as specific as possible.

[Clearly amused, Chef Nikiforov nonetheless examines the three bites of fish. First, he visually examines the plate, then carefully picks up each piece of fish to smell it. The first and second cause no offense to his palate, but the third…]

Chef Nikiforov: [making a disgusted face] Ugh, the third piece is at least two days old. The second is from yesterday morning. And the first…

[Chef Nikiforov tastes a sliver of the first and freshest piece of salmon.]
Chef Nikiforov: ...Five hours since it left the market.

Chef Chulanont: Correct! [to the other chefs] He’s ready for action!

[The rest of the chef contestants give a hearty cheer.]

Chef Nikiforov: I am very glad my palate is back in working order. If I lose this competition, I want it to be because I was beaten by a better chef, not because I couldn’t taste my own food. Today is a new day and I intend to conquer the kitchen!

[Cue the Quickfire Challenge logo. The seven remaining chefs stand at their stations in the Top Chef Kitchen. Facing them is not their usual host, but Minako Okukawa, editor of Food and Wine magazine, standing in front of a table covered in a drop cloth to hide its contents. In an apparent homage to the absent Christophe, Minako is dressed in a sharp tailored suit, complete with a tie and polished wingtip shoes.]

Chef Chulanont: OMG I wish I had my phone so bad I could cry. This is fashion history happening right before my eyes. Thank god this is all being preserved for television.

Sara: That suit...[cheeks pink] I am too gay for this.

Minako: Good morning chefs! In case you haven’t guessed, I’m going to be playing host this morning. [straightening her slim black tie] I tried to dress the part, at least.

[The chefs respond with enthusiasm, and some confusion. Minako offers no explanation for Christophe’s absence, but moves right on to the morning’s challenge.]

Minako: We have an opulent elimination challenge planned today, but first, we want to see how your palates fare when we make you tighten your belts.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] “Tighten our belts”? I am not familiar with this idiom.

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] Right away, I’m either thinking this is going to be about healthy eating, or being low budget. I hope it’s the diet challenge. Cooking healthy by American standards is easy.

Minako: To make your dishes today, you won’t have access to anything in the Top Chef pantry except for salt and pepper. Instead, you’ll choose your ingredients from this table, provided by Whole Foods. [grabbing the drop cloth] Let’s see what you’ll be cooking with today.

[Minako pulls aside the cloth to reveal a table full of surprisingly unsurprising ingredients. Spread across the table are high quality proteins, fruits, and vegetables. Fresh cartons of eggs, sit next to a row of bottles containing coconut, olive, and avocado oil. The chefs murmur among themselves, uncertain as to the theme of the Quickfire.]
Chef Chulanont: So at first I’m confused. There’s lots of red meat, some great seafood, plenty of high end produce. All of these ingredients are plenty expensive and not necessarily particularly healthy. But then…

[Chef Chulanont taps his temple with a wink]

Chef Chulanont: I start to think about what isn’t there.

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Chef Yang: Lots of protein and veggies, no grains or dairy? [grinning] We’re cooking Paleo.

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Minako: For those of you who haven’t guessed, you’ll all be making a dish today based on the Paleo Diet. Paleo is a high protein, low fat, low carbohydrate diet which draws its guidelines from a preagricultural way of life. That means no processed sugars, no beans, pasta, or rice, and no dairy of any kind.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] No dairy??! I’m Russian, for [beep]’s sake!

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Hm…that doesn’t sound so bad, really. Except for the no rice part. That’s dumb.

Minako: To judge how well you can keep your dishes trim and tasty, join me in welcoming your guest judge for this round, food critic, television host, and former Olympic athlete…Christophe Giacometti!

[The chef contestants laugh and applaud as Christophe makes his entrance at last. Their usual host is dressed to suit his role in a Swiss Olympic tracksuit bearing the logo of the 2012 London Games.]

Christophe: Good morning, chefs! Did you miss me?

[This garners another round of applause.]

Christophe: [bowing] Thank you, thank you, you’re too kind. Now, on to the challenge! Before I was the vivacious culinary TV personality you all know and love, I was a professional gymnast and a model. Finding delicious and nutritious ways to stick to an athlete’s diet inspired my first food blog which led me to the career I enjoy today. When I’m not enjoying the perks of a fine dining meal, I still stick to Paleo to keep in training shape.

Minako: Chefs, you will have forty-five minutes to cook a dish according to the rules of the Paleo diet. But remember, just because Paleo encourages you to eat like a caveman doesn’t mean your plate should look like it! We’ll be judging the refinement of your dishes as well as the cookery. Also, since we’re halfway through the competition….immunity is no longer up for grabs.

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Chef Crispino: [sighing] Well it was nice while it lasted...

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Chef Katsuki: [horrified]
Minako: Instead, the winner of the Quickfire challenge will receive an advantage in the coming elimination.

Christophe: Good luck! Your Whole Foods Paleo challenge starts right now!

[The chefs scramble for the ingredients table, snatching up proteins and puzzling over some of the unusual oils and starches. Chef Katsuki is the first back to his station with ground pork and zucchini. Chef Nikiforov has also chosen pork, going for pork chops as well as delicate slices of pancetta.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] This is definitely more of a challenge for chefs who are French trained, like me and Yuri. All of my most basic sauces involve butter or dairy of some kind. However, a great chef should be able to cook by any rules and come up with something delicious.

[Chef Yang appears to be ignoring the proteins section of the table in favor of the spice rack, balancing several yams in her arms while Chef Chulanont raids the fresh veggies. Chef Crispino is breaking down a young chicken at her station as several peaches blanche in ice water beside her station. Chef Plisetsky appears indecisive, but eventually brings a carton of figs back to his cutting board along with turkey breasts. Meanwhile Chef Altin is standing still by the ingredients table, studying a box of tapioca starch.]

Chef Altin: I have this chef strategy, where if I don’t know how to use something, I look at the back of the package and read the instructions. ...It’s served me well so far.

[The first sizzle of a hot pan hits the kitchen as Chef Plisetsky starts cooking off some diced onion.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] I hate this. I just want to cook the way I know! This makes me feel like an idiot, having to figure out how to saute onions with no butter. Weird challenges I can handle, but why should I change for somebody’s stupid diet?

[Quick to follow Chef Plisetsky, Chef Crispino is working on browning some chicken in a heavy cast iron skillet. While her protein sizzles away, the chef peels her blanched peaches. Chef Yang appears to be making good progress as well. Having peeled her yams in record time she chops them into evenly sized chunks tosses the in some coconut oil before spreading them out on a sheet pan bound for the convection oven.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I love this challenge! I have plenty of Paleo friendly dishes on the menu at my restaurant. I know my soup is going to be a winner, as long as my yams roast in time to get a good caramelized flavor.

[Nearby Chef Altin is generously seasoning some ground beef with cumin, cinnamon, and paprika. Chef Katsuki is whipping some zucchini through his mandolin at an alarming pace, a ground pork filling of some kind waiting in a steel mixing bowl. Back at the ingredients table, Chef Chulanont is making a tricky decision. At his station a colorful array of peppers and onions have been julienne sliced.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] At first this challenge seems easy to some, but you forget how reliant you are on certain ingredients until they’re gone. I’m trying to do a stir fry, and there’s no regular vegetable oil. You can’t just switch things like oil around willy nilly. It affects the flavor, and fats have different smoke points. Olive oil in a stir fry would burn in a heartbeat.

Christophe: Twenty minutes, chefs! Show us some gold medal cooking!
With less than half their time remaining, the pace doubles in the kitchen. The sound of oven doors slamming is a percussive rhythm in the kitchen as several chefs have chosen to roast, bake, and broil in order to bring out the most flavor in their dishes. One of the few chefs not using the oven is Chef Nikiforov, who is supervising two large frying pans on the stove as his pork chops cook and he sautes shredded brussels sprouts with garlic and pancetta.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I am pleased with how my dish is coming, especially since I can actually taste it today! [laughs] I am just following the most basic rules of cooking I know. Always leave meat on the bone for the most flavor, and always take advantage of bacon grease, or in this case, pancetta grease!

Beside Chef Nikiforov, Chef Katsuki is in the process of wrapping a strange kind of dumpling. Instead of a pasta wrapper, the chef is using the zucchini he sliced only minutes ago. He lays the wide, flat slices out on his cutting board in a kind of asterisk shape before scooping his filling into the middle and folding the whole package up.

Chef Nikiforov: [tossing his brussels sprouts] That’s so pretty, Yuuri! They look like flowers all laid out like that!

Chef Katsuki: [laughing] Hopefully they taste good, too. This is definitely an experiment for me.

The last ten minutes of the challenge are a waiting game for Chefs Plisetsky, Yang, Crispino, and Altin as they all watch their ovens until the last possible moment to make sure their proteins don’t hit the judge’s plates undercooked. Chef Yang is the first out, running for the industrial blender where the rest of her soup ingredients are waiting for her roasted yams. Back on the cooktop Chef Chulanont is tossing his beef and veggie mixture over a flaming wok while Chef Katsuki pulls the lid off a steam filled saute pan to let his dumplings crisp in the final minutes before plating. With only two minutes to go oven doors fly open as the chefs rush to plate their dishes with the fine dining touches that Christophe and Minako have demanded.

Chef Crispino: [voice over as she slices her roasted chicken breast] I can tell my plating is going to be a little rough around the edges this time, but the chicken is cooked exactly the way I wanted it, and the flavors are good.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I’m feeling good about this soup. The yams are creamy without adding any dairy, and the roasted macadamia nut garnish is going to give it that bit of texture that will put me on top.

Chef Altin: [voiceover] I’m barely making it onto the plate. I don’t even have time to taste my sauce. That’s the worst risk a chef can take.

The buzzer sounds just as Chef Crispino manages to toss her fresh basil leaves onto her plates.

Minako: Times up, chefs! Knives down, hands up!

With all dishes plated, the judges start on the far end of the chef’s stations with Chef Crispino.

Minako: What have you made for Christophe today, Sara?

Chef Crispino: My dish is roasted chicken breast with basil and peaches.

Christophe: [chewing] Hm... an original combination. Maybe a little last minute on the plating, though?

Chef Crispino: [shrugging] I spent my time as wisely as I could.
Minako: Thank you, chef. Next we have Chef Altin. Otabek?

Chef Altin: I made a moroccan style beef meatball cooked slow in a crushed tomato and olive sauce with fresh herbs.

Christophe: [slicing into a meatball before tasting] Very tender. Hm…

[Next on the line is Chef Chulanont]

Chef Chulanont: I chose a dish I didn’t have to alter much to fit the challenge: sticky beef stir fry! The sauce is honey, garlic, and ginger, with coconut aminos to replace the soy.

Christophe: [sampling the dish] Mm, I make stir fry quite a bit. It’s a popular Paleo choice.

Chef Chulanont: Um…that’s good, right?

Christophe: [with a teasing grin] Thank you, chef.

Minako: Next is Yuuri K.

Chef Katsuki: My dish is a play on a Paleo dumpling. It’s something I’ve been thinking of as a gluten free option for my restaurant. The filling is spiced cabbage and pork, and the wrapper is a flat zucchini noodle.

Christophe: [examining the little dumpling parcels] Charming, chef, I’ve never seen anything like them. Let’s see how they taste!

[After taking a bite and revealing nothing the judges move on to Chef Yang.]

Chef Yang: Today I’ve made a dish that’s vegan as well as Paleo. It’s a turmeric roasted yam and macadamia nut soup.

Minako: [as Christophe tastes the soup] Aiming for extra credit, chef?

Isabella: [smiling] I’m used to all kinds of diet preferences at my restaurant.

Christophe: Thank you, Isabella. Victor, what have you made for me today?

Chef Nikiforov: Today I tried keeping to what I know. On the dish you have a duo of pork, in a manner of speaking. On the left you have a pork chop with a dijon herb dressing and a simple jous, and on the right I’ve sauteed some shredded brussels sprouts with a generous helping of crispy pancetta.

Christophe: [grinning as he cuts into the massive porkchop] I think this portion is a little “cave-man” for the challenge, chef. But [chewing] the seasoning is excellent. It’s good to see you’ve made a full recovery, Victor.

Chef Nikiforov: Thank you.

Minako: And finally, we have Yuuri P. Chef Plisetsky, tell us about your dish.

Chef Plisetsky: I seared and roasted a turkey breast stuffed with fig and sweet potato.

Christophe: [cutting into the turkey] How did you like cooking Paleo, chef?

Chef Plisetsky: I think cooking without butter is dumb.
[Christophe laughs at the young chef’s bold attitude.]

Christophe: I appreciate your honesty, Yuri. Thank you for your dish, regardless.

[Chef Plisetsky scowls as Christophe and Minako face the chefs.]

Minako: So, Chris, how did our chefs do on with their Paleo dishes?

Christophe: *C’est magnifique*! Often Paleo eating can be a slab of meat and a salad, so I was happy to see so many original creations! With all that protein and healthy fat, I feel ready for the 2020 Games!

Minako: Before you start doing backflips, why don’t we hear about some of the *less* successful dishes.

Christophe: [sobering] Ah, right. The first dish on the bottom...is Chef Altin. It’s so difficult to keep up variety when you’re keeping a diet, so I loved the idea of your Moroccan flavors, but I’m afraid something just didn’t come together in the tagine. The tomato sauce was far too acidic for my palate.

[Chef Altin accepts his place on the bottom with a solemn nod of his head, a slight furrow in his brow the only sign of his unhappiness.]

Christophe: And the second dish belongs to Chef Yang.

[Chef Yang is clearly surprised, as are a few other chefs. This is supposedly right in her wheelhouse.]

Christophe: Chef, your flavors were delicious, but the soup overall had an odd texture that was a bit off putting. I’m not sure if it was your yams, or if the whole mixture just needed a few more seconds in the blender.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Damn! This one was mine to win! I’m going to have to get it together for the elimination challenge and prove I’m the chef to beat!

Minako: Now for the good news. Christophe, which chefs wowed with their high end low-carb offerings?

Christophe: The two Yuris! Chef Katsuki, your charming dumplings were full of flavor, and somehow you managed to get that great potsticker texture on the bottom of a zucchini noodle. Great job. And Chef Plisetsky, whatever your feelings about cooking sans dairy, your stuffed turkey breast was rich and delicious. I certainly wasn’t missing any butter in that dish.

Minako: Anyone else?

Christophe: Chef Crispino. Your chicken was like velvet, and the herb flavor packed into your dish did amazing things to those peaches. Very original, and very delicious.

Minako: Alright, as our “guest judge,” Christophe now has the honor of announcing the Quickfire winner, who will receive a big advantage in the coming elimination!

Christophe: The winner is...Chef Katsuki!

[The other chefs applaud and pat Chef Katsuki on the back. As usual the quiet chef looks surprised at his victory.]

Christophe: Well done, Yuuri. I hope I see that dish on the menu at your restaurant soon.
Chef Katsuki: [offering a short bow and a smile] Thank you!

Chef Crispino: It’s always good to be in the top, but I was so close! My sloppy plate is all that kept me from the win. [tugging her hair in frustration] Ugh…

Chef Nikiforov: [beaming at the camera] Yuuri made a beautiful dish, I am glad he is the winner! As for me, I am just happy to be tasting my food again. Watch out chefs, Nikiforov is back in the game!

Chef Altin: [expression stern] I feel….hm. I think I have yet to set myself apart in this competition. In the next challenge, I’m changing that. [firm nod]
Diet and Exercise: Part 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

[Fresh from the Quickfire challenge, the contestants wait to hear about their next challenge from their host, Christophe.]

Christophe: Chefs, I’m sure you’re all eager to hear about tomorrow’s elimination.

[There are several murmurs of agreement. Chef Nikiforov looks particularly eager, while Chefs Altin and Crispino are serious and focused.]

Christophe: And you will, soon. But first, we have places to be and some very important people waiting for us! I’ll make a quick change, and meet you all at the theatre! Ta ta!

[Dismissed, the chefs hang up their chef coats and pile into the usual silver SUVs that await them outside the Top Chef Kitchen. With traffic, the drive takes about a half-hour, which is plenty of time for the chefs to speculate as to the nature of their coming challenge.]

Chef Plisetsky: [leaning up from the backseat to talk with Chefs Altin and Yang] Christophe definitely said ‘theatre’.

Chef Crispino: Maybe we are going to Broadway?

Chef Plisetsky: [starry eyed] Maybe we’ll get to cook for the cast of Cats.

[In the other car, the conversation has devolved similarly.]

Chef Nikiforov: [dramatically] What if we are going to the opera?? Oh, Yuuri it would be so romantic.

[Chef Nikiforov leans in to Chef Katsuki with an exaggerated kissy face, which Chef Katsuki laughs at, pushing Chef Nikiforov away with a nervous glance at the camera.]

Chef Yang: So our best guesses are Broadway or opera.

Chef Chulanont: [thoughtful] I don’t know...there’s always a theme to the challenges. They’re either alike or opposite. And for the Quickfire we had to cook diet.

Chef Katsuki: We had to cook diet for an athlete, which is a certain thing, too.

Chef Yang: So if the challenge is like the Quickfire...what athletes work in a theatre?

[There are several seconds of silence.]

Chef Nikiforov: [brightening] Oh! I know! It’s the b—

[At that exact moment the cars come to a stop, and the chefs step out onto the sidewalk in front of the David H. Koch Theatre at Lincoln Center. A massive image of a ballerina en pointe hangs above the entrance.]

Chef Nikiforov: [last out of the car] --allet. [looking up at their location before grinning at his fellow chefs] See? I told you!
[The chefs are ushered through the doors and into a massive theatre complete with red velvet chairs and gold trimmed curtains. The chefs take a seat in the front row, right in front of the orchestra pit. Just as the last contestant sits down, the lights dim, and classical music begins to play as the curtains part.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] This is so exciting! I’ve always loved the ballet. I keep meaning to take my husband on a date to see the Bolshoi, but we’re always at our restaurant in the evenings.

[A ballerina emerges from the wings, her spring green dress fluttering around her as she gives a twirl and a graceful leap across the stage. She offers a smile and a curtsy to the chefs before stepping back to stand under a banner labeled Persephone. Next are a man and a woman, dressed in flaming red and gold with the ballerina wearing an intricate feather headdress. Her partner lifts her into the air and drops her into a low dip.]


[One by one, the stage fills with members of the ballet company, emerging in ones and twos to give a tidbit from various performances in the company’s repertory before stepping below a banner labeled with the title of their show. Some are easily recognized, and there are a few gasps when the famous Black Swan does her famous series of fouettes from Swan Lake. Others are less famous, but equally beautiful. A small troupe of fairies dance to A Midsummer Night’s Dream, a knight in silver armor gives a peek of Don Quixote, and a ballerina draped in gold beads and shimmering veils represents Salome.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] This is unbelievable. The costumes, the music. And not to mention the dancers. These are some of the best in the world, and I can’t believe they would dance just for us, even for a few minutes.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] It’s...pretty cool. I guess.

[After the final quartet of dancers emerge and take their place under the banner labeled The Four Seasons, the music fades and the chefs are greeted by a familiar face on stage. Christophe has changed from his Olympic gear to something more appropriate for the ballet: black tie. He steps out to center stage carrying a knife block.]

Christophe: Hello chefs! How did you like that performance?

[The chefs give the dancers a thorough round of applause, some cheers and whistles thrown in for good measure. With a flash of knives, the Elimination logo flashes across the screen.]

Christophe: As you may have guessed, for your elimination challenge, you’ll be cooking for the amazing athletes and artists that star in the productions of the New York City Ballet. To celebrate the end of their successful season, twelve principal dancers and soloists of this year’s program will come together to enjoy a sumptuous seven-course dinner party.

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] [sighs happily] Even though I won the ice cream challenge, I’ll admit it’s a relief to get back to regular cooking. A dinner party for twelve sounds lovely.

Christophe: Each of you will be responsible for one course of the meal. To be clear, the dinner does not have to be progressive, so first course, no need to keep things light, and there’s no expectation that the chef who serves the final course will make dessert. Now, for the fun part...

[Christophe gestures behind him, where the dancers stand under the appropriate banners.]

Christophe: Each of you will be using one of these timeless ballets to inspire your dish. Chef
Katsuki, as winner of the Quickfire challenge, you will get to choose which ballet you will base your course on. The rest of you will, of course, draw knives. So everyone get up here!

[There’s some shuffling as the chefs are led to a hidden set of stairs that allow them to join Christophe and the ballet company on stage.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] Wow, up close these costumes are even more detailed than I thought. It’s also really obvious what amazing shape these dancers are in.

Christophe: Yuuri K., have you considered which ballet is for you?

[Chef Katsuki nods, a spark in his eye as he surveys his options.]

Chef Katsuki: I choose Persephone.

Christophe: [pulling the appropriately labeled knife from the block] An excellent choice to be sure. Come and claim your knife, chef.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover as he takes the knife from Christophe] I’m really glad I got this advantage. The minute I heard the challenge I knew I wanted one of the seasonal ballets, and Persephone is full of the beautiful contrasts.

Christophe: [offering the knife block] Who’s next?

[Chef Nikiforov steps forward eagerly, and draws The Firebird, which he seems enthused about. Next Chef Yang pulls A Midsummer Night’s Dream, and Chef Altin draws Don Quixote.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover] I’m happy with my choice. Spanish flavors are definitely something I can use to impress the judges.

[Chef Plisetsky is next, and he appears perplexed when he draws Salome. Chef Chulanont is happy to receive The Four Seasons, but Chef Crispino looks less excited when she draws the last knife labeled Swan Lake.]

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] I’m concerned about getting Swan Lake. I’m going to have to be very careful to avoid cliche, since the ballet is so recognizable.

Christophe: Chefs, inspired by these timeless ballets, you’ll each cook a dish for a dinner party to be held at the Lincoln Ristorante for twelve members of the New York City Ballet Company and your panel of judges. At the end of the night, the diner’s favorite course will be the winner of this challenge, and their least favorite dishes will be up for elimination.

Christophe: Oh, and there’s one more thing...

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Chef Plisetsky: [rolling his eyes] Ugh, here we go.

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Chef Altin: [shrugging] I had a feeling it wouldn’t be that easy.

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Christophe: There are a few dietary restrictions among your future diners. Since the point of the dinner party is to honor their achievements, I’m sure it will be no trouble for you to accommodate
them, right?

[The chefs trepidation is obvious, but they wait to hear what the restrictions on their dishes will be. At Christophe’s signal, the danseur from the Firebird breaks his pose and waves hello.]

Danseur: [smiling] Hi, I’m Antoni, and I have peanut allergies, so no nuts please!

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Well, that’s not so bad.

[Next is the ballerina portraying Salome.]

Ballerina: Hello, chefs! I’m Daphne, and I’m gluten intolerant. I can’t wait to taste what you cook for us!

[The danseur from Don Quixote steps forward in his glittering armor and gives a bow.]

Danseur: Hi chefs, I’m Haru, and I’m afraid I’m allergic to cow dairy. Thank you for accommodating us!

[The final ballerina to step forward is the prima from the Black Swan.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] So no nuts? No problem. No wheat and no dairy and still one more restriction to come? Ok, I am now having a bad feeling about this.

Prima: Hello chefs. My name is Sasha, and I am...vegetarian. I don’t eat meat fish or eggs.

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Chef Crispino: [pale] Oh dear god.

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Chef Plisetsky: [irate] What the hell can we cook???

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Christophe: So, like I said, chefs. Tomorrow night your guests will be expecting a luxurious, indulgent, gluten free, nut free, completely vegetarian seven courses with no milk, cheese, or butter that comes from cows. You’ll have tonight to research your ballets and develop your dishes, and tomorrow bright and early you’ll shop at Whole Foods before returning here to the Lincoln Ristorante kitchen where you’ll have three hours to cook! Good luck, and have fun!

[With a final round of applause for the dancers, the shell shocked chefs return to their provided transportation. After a long ride across Manhattan in afternoon traffic, they are safely delivered home to the Top Chef Apartment, where they are each provided with a pamphlet that details the story and history of their assigned ballets. A few bottles of wine are consumed as the chefs attempt to reconcile themselves with the new reality of this challenge. Some chefs, like Chef Altin and Crispino, opt to seek out the privacy of their rooms to research and think on their dishes. Several others gather in the living room to commiserate.]

Chef Chulanont: [on the sofa] So basically, we’re cooking vegan and gluten free.

Chef Katsuki: I suppose technically we could use sheep or goats cheese, if they have it. So it’s not totally vegan at least. But that basically leaves produce and seasonings.

Chef Chulanont: And rice, thank god. Well, I got the Four Seasons and you nabbed Persephone,
which are good for vegetarian dishes. We aren’t as bad off as some.

[Both chefs look to the floor, where Chef Nikiforov collapsed dramatically several minutes before. The chef gives a long, drawn out groan of despair, his forearm covering his eyes as though he can’t bear to look at the world.]

Chef Nikiforov: How do I cook the Firebird with no poultry??

[Chef Nikiforov rolls onto his stomach and whines. Chef Chulanont glances at Chef Katsuki with concern.]

Chef Katsuki: [rolling his eyes] Trust me, he’ll be fine.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I have no doubt Victor will pull through this challenge, but I’ll admit I’m happier than ever with my choice. Persephone was the goddess of spring, so I was honestly thinking of doing a vegetarian dish anyway.

[In the peace and quiet of their bedroom, Chefs Altin and Plisetsky each try and come up with a gameplan.]

Chef Plisetsky: [writing something down on a notepad] Is couscous gluten free?

Chef Altin: [flipping through his research pamphlet] Hm…

Chef Plisetsky: [scribbling out a line] No, you’re right.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] I was like ‘What the [beep]?’ when I pulled Salome, but now that we’re cooking with all these crazy restrictions I think I might have gotten lucky. Since the story is actually from the Old Testament, I’m thinking about doing an Israeli dish, and plenty of those are vegan or gluten free already.

Chef Altin: [voice over] Don Quixote is a story that’s closely tied to Spanish culture, which is full of bold, developed flavors that I can relate to. The hard part is avoiding meat and keeping the depth. I’ll have to make smart choices at Whole Foods and my seasoning will have to be perfect.

[The sun sets, and with as much planning done as possible before they hit the grocery store in the morning, the chefs decide to unwind a little. As part of their research materials the chefs have been provided a playlist of the main themes of their ballets. The cork is popped on a fresh bottle of wine as the first strings of The Firebird play out.]

Chef Nikiforov: [slightly tipsy and extra Russian] Stravinski, my hero!

[Chef Crispino does a playful pirouette in the free space of the living room, stepping out of the turn with a giggle.]

Chef Crispino: [to Chef Yang] You ever take ballet as a kid, Isabella?

Chef Yang: [laughing] No way! I was a track and field girl. [to the rest of the chefs] Any of you guys?

Chef Chulanont: [grinning] I know someone who did.

[Chefs Chulanont and Nikiforov both look at Chef Katsuki gleefully as the music transitions into the serene notes of Swan Lake.]

Chef Katsuki: [horrified] Phichit! You promised you wouldn’t tell!
Chef Nikiforov: [still in Russian] Yuuurotchka, please? You look so beautiful when you dance.

Chef Plisetsky: What are they talking about?

Chef Crispino: Oh, Yuuri, you danced? You have to show us!

Chef Katsuki: [embarrassed, but already putting down his wine glass] Really, guys, I wasn’t very good. I just took the classes because the teacher was a family friend.

Chef Chulanont: Don’t be modest, Yuuri, you took ten years of ballet! Just show them that bit you did for me when we got drunk the night before your graduation.

Chef Nikiforov: [already clapping] Oh, I love that! Yes, show us, Yuu-chan!

[After a little more prodding and cheering from his fellow competitors, Chef Katsuki agrees to give a demonstration. He kicks off his shoes and takes his place on the living room carpet in his socks and comfortable sweatpants.]

Chef Katsuki: [laughing a little] I hope I’m still flexible enough for this.

[The chefs encouraging hoots are cut off when Stravinsky’s *Persephone* theme comes on over the speakers and Chef Katsuki extends his leg into a beautiful arabesque before leaping across the living room floor. He stumbles with a laugh as he nearly collides with Chef Nikiforov on the couch, but recovers his balance and rises up on the balls of his feet to do a series of fouettes before offering his chefs a deep and playful bow. With the exception of Chefs Chulanont and Nikiforov, the rest of the chefs are clearly shocked by the shy Chef Katsuki’s performance, and burst into applause. Even the reserved Chef Altin claps politely.]

Chef Yang: Holy [beep]! Amazing, Yuuri.

Chef Crispino: Bravo!

Chef Plisetsky: [standing up] Hey, that [beep] was cool! Show me how to do that stuff!

[The young chef’s demand gets a laugh from Chef Katsuki, and the rest of the evening is spent on slightly drunken ballet lessons. When the chefs finally decide it’s time for bed, Chef Plisetsky can do a simple pirouette without stumbling, and he shows off his skill to Chef Altin as they change for bed. Down the hall, Chef Nikiforov can be seen wrapping his arm around Chef Katsuki’s shoulders and kissing his temple before they part for their separate rooms.]

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[Morning arrives and the chefs are let loose at Whole Foods Market where they will each have three hundred dollars to purchase everything they need for their vegan, gluten free dishes. For possibly the first time this season, there is no race to the protein counter, though Chefs Nikiforov and Crispino do spend a few seconds staring longingly at the poultry section.]

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Chef Nikiforov: Yesterday, I was feeling discouraged. How to cook the Firebird with no bird? However, after last night, I really listen to the music, and I find new inspiration! I will make feast for the eyes, and for the tongue!

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Chef Crispino: The energy is high after all the fun last night, but I’m still feeling insecure about my dish. At least since I can’t use any meat I won’t be tempted to put a bird on the plate and call it Swan Lake. This challenge is really making us all think outside the box!

[The produce section is the place to be on this shopping trip. Chef Plisetsky has cornered the market on tomatoes, while Chef Crispino looks excited by her find of black trumpet mushrooms. Chef Katsuki’s cart is particularly fragrant with his choices of fresh herbs. He weighs several pomegranates in his hand as Chef Chulanont grabs four season’s worth of carrots for his dish. Chef Altin considers the merits of fresh artichokes to join the mushrooms and onions already in his cart.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover] I’ve decided to make a paella, and I’m going to need a lot of richness to make up for the lack of shellfish that usually fill up this dish.

[After bagging up his artichokes, Chef Altin makes his way to the grains and cereals, where several other chefs are also considering their gluten free options. Chef Yang doesn’t hesitate to grab rice before rushing off to the herb section, while Chef Katsuki takes his time selecting yellow split peas and lentils.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I’m planning a duo of soups, to really show a sense of transition between the seasons, and Persephone’s journey from Earth to the Underworld and back. I want to show contrast, but also continuity between the two parts of my dish.

Chef Yang: Five minutes everyone!

[At the very edge of the protein section, Chef Nikiforov appears to be the only chef who will attempt a tofu component to his dish. Several packages of firm tofu join the carrots and beets already in his cart.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I may be the Russian chef, but I am very comfortable cooking with Asian staples like tofu thanks to time spent with my husband’s family! I’m hoping a nice seared tofu steak will give my dish some needed meatiness.

[With grocery bags in hand the chefs are chauffeured to the Lincoln Ristorante, the where they will serve their dinner party in a private dining room. The chefs adapt quickly to the unfamiliar kitchen, unpacking their knives and locating the cutting boards, pots and pans necessary to start their mise en place. A rainbow of vegetables are soon spread across the various workstations. Chefs Altin and Katsuki have some complicated work ahead of them, breaking down artichokes and pomegranates, respectively. Chef Crispino washes mushrooms, and Chef Nikiforov wastes no time pressing his tofu, removing the extra moisture from the package in order to prepare his protein for a marinade.]

Chef Crispino: [still cleaning her velvet black trumpet mushrooms] What’s you plan, Isabella?

Chef Yang: [snapping off the woody stems of a mountain of asparagus] I’m making risotto. I know it will be rich and creamy without any dairy. Plus, I managed to find edible violets! We use them all the time at home and they give a really delicate floral flavor. How about you? [grinning] Did I see polenta in your bag?

Chef Crispino: When things get weird, stick to what you know. White polenta should be a pretty background for these trumpet mushrooms. I want the diners to see the black and the white swan the minute they see the dish.

[Across the kitchen, the vegetable peeler is the tool of the hour. Chef Plisetsky takes the purple skins
off several large eggplant, while Chef Nikiforov whips his way through a pile of carrots, producing a pile of bright orange ribbons. Chef Chulanont peels his own variety of carrots, but he keeps his whole, just removing the unappealing outer skins.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] My dish is inspired by the *Four Seasons*. Trying to represent a whole changing year could get complicated! So my strategy to keep the dish focused is to limit my ingredients. I’ll be doing four variations on the carrot, my favorite year round vegetable.

[The kitchen heats up as burners light up and the chefs begin the down and dirty cooking of their dishes. Chef Katsuki has two large stock pots bubbling on the stove, while Chef Altin blisters a dry frying pan full of padrón peppers. Chef Nikiforov uses a heavy cast iron weight to press his tofu steaks down firmly onto a hot grill pan.]

Chef Nikiforov: [wiping sweat from his brow] Ninety minutes to service!

[Chefs Crispino and Yang are side by side again, this time over wide deep saute pans. Both chefs are showing off their muscles as they whip and stir their labor intensive starches.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover as she methodically whisks her developing rice and stock mixture] I’m excited and nervous about this risotto. They have such a bad reputation on Top Chef, but so far everything is coming together perfectly. I hate to use vegetable stock instead of chicken, but I added a healthy splash of prosecco at the start. It should keep things light and add another dimension of flavor.

Chef Crispino: [mixing her polenta] The texture of my polenta is turning out exactly as I hoped. At this rate, it’s going to hit the judge’s tongues like velvet.

[From across the kitchen, there’s a sudden shout, and the clatter of a pan hitting the floor. The chefs all turn to find Chef Altin clutching his hand to his chest, and his paella pan and it’s contents scattered across the mat in front of him.]

Chef Altin: [face drawn in pain] Damn.

Chef Plisetsky: Beka, what happened?

Chef Altin: [waving off his friend with his good hand] I’m alright. Just a burn. I grabbed the wrong end of the pan. Dumb mistake.

Chef Plisetsky: Is your dish—

Chef Altin: [shaking his head] I just lost some onions and garlic. I can start again.

Chef Nikiforov: Should we get a medic?

Chef Altin: I’m fine. Just everybody...get back to your own dishes.

[At the producers insistence, Chef Altin is seen by a medic, who judges the burn not to be serious. After a few minutes of ice and some over the counter pain medication, the chef returns to the line to begin his paella components again.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover] I’m glad it wasn’t a more serious injury, but I’m still frustrated by my mistake. I’ve lost crucial time, and every minute my paella isn’t in the oven is a higher risk that it could come out underdone.

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover as he tosses julienned carrots in a dark glaze on the stove] Whew,
halfway through the competition, the cracks are starting to show and even the heavyweights are getting tired. With Victor’s scare during the ice cream challenge, and now Otabek, we all need to be extra careful. The kitchen is a dangerous place and you can get seriously hurt.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover as he stirs his stewing tomato sauce] Dumb Beka. I want to win this competition by beating the best, and he’s the best! I can’t worry about him getting sent home because he can’t tell which side of the pan is hot! [worried grumbling]

Chef Yang: [laying out shallow white bowls on the expediting counter] Fifteen minutes everyone!

[The chefs have a lot of plating to do, and not much time, with sixteen diners eagerly awaiting their offerings. Chef Chulanont begins his intricate four part plating, beginning with autumn roasted rainbow carrots. Chef Katsuki has sixteen bowls and a cutting board full of fresh chopped herbs awaiting his two soups, while Chef Altin waits to pull his paella out of the oven at the last possible moment. Chef Yang begins plating her risotto, but she isn’t as happy as she was at the halfway mark. Her risotto has seized up, the texture turning thick and pasty.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover as she frowns] I don’t know what happened, but I’m no happy with how this plate looks. [sigh] At least the flavors of my dish are delicate and ethereal.

[In the dining room, the judges have arrived, along with the twelve primas, danseurs, and soloists that will be enjoying the chefs food tonight. Everyone is dressed in elegant cocktail finery. Christophe welcomes the ballet company members with a champagne toast.]

Christophe: Thank you everyone, for joining us tonight. Here’s to a wonderful season at the NYCB, and hopefully a delicious meal to come!

[In the kitchen, the chefs scramble to the last possible moment. The buzzer sounds, and the waitstaff arrives to take away the first course. Taking off his messy apron, Chef Chulanont prepares to follow his dish out and greet their diners.]

Chef Chulanont: [grinning nervously] Wish me luck, everyone!

[Chef Chulanont steps into the dining room as the servers set down the last plate. The murmur of the dancers and judges can be heard as they take in his detailed presentation.]

Christophe: Welcome, Phichit. You likely remember the people at this table from their lovely performances yesterday afternoon, and of course our judges, Minako Okukawa, Celestino Cialdini, and Yakov Fletsman.

Chef Chulanont: [Offering a quick bow] Hi, everyone. It’s a pleasure to serve you tonight!

Christophe: [smiling] Hopefully the pleasure will be ours. Please tell us what you’ve prepared, and which ballet inspired your cooking.

Chef Chulanont: I drew *The Four Seasons*, which immediately made me think of seasonal cooking. So I’ve prepared four variations on my favorite year round vegetable, the carrot. Each variation honors the cooking styles of a particular time of year. Starting on your left, you have a raw carrot and snow pea salad with a ginger vinaigrette. Moving clockwise to summer I grilled kimchi style pickled carrots, followed by honey and chili glazed roasted rainbow carrots. Finally for winter I made a creamy carrot soup with tarragon and sage. Please enjoy.

Christophe: Thank you, chef. We’ll certainly be getting our serving of vitamin A this evening!

[None of the chefs will get to hear their diner’s thoughts until later that night at judge’s table, so Chef
Chulanont returns to the kitchen without knowing his fate. Meanwhile the table digs into his dish.

Minako: Hm...there are some very original preparations on this plate. The grilled carrots are an unexpected treat.

Celestino: I agree, though some of the components are less original. The carrot soup is fine, but not unexpected. Still, I admire Phichit’s ambition in pursuing what is essentially four different dishes to honor his ballet.

Christophe: What do our guests of honor think?

Haru: I think Chef Chulanont did a great job representing the four seasons, and everything tastes delicious!

Sasha: He did show us four seasons, but I wish maybe there was some different color on the plate. This is a lot of orange.

[A few others nod in agreement before the next course is brought out. This dish belongs to Chef Plisetsky.]

Chef Plisetsky: My dish is based on Salome, which I’ll admit I didn’t know anything about.

[This garners a friendly laugh from the table.]

Chef Plisetsky: But once I did my research, I decided to choose a dish based on Israeli cuisine, which fits the show and is often vegan and gluten free without any major adjustments. So please enjoy Mediterranean shakshuka, eggplant poached in a spicy tomato and green pepper sauce, with a sprinkle of firm goat’s cheese.

Christophe: [after Chef Plisetsky leaves] Wow, this dish certainly has a kick!

Celestino: A delicious kick! And the eggplant is very rich. A good replacement for the poached eggs one associates with a traditional shakshuka.

Yakov: I think Plisetsky chose his dish well. It harkens to the ballet, and it doesn’t feel like he made any substitutions in order to meet the restrictions of the challenge. My only complaint is that the sauce is a little acidic for me, but the cheese goes a long way to help it.

Antoni: I’ll admit, usually vegetarian dishes leave me still hungry, but I could definitely be satisfied after a big bowl of Chef Plisetsky’s dish!

Christophe: I’m only hearing glowing reviews! On to the next course.

[Plates and silverware are exchanged, and Chef Crispino is next to greet the judges. Her plate is a swirl of white, crowned in a wing of elegant black mushrooms.]

Christophe: Chef, tell us about your ballet experience. [grinning] Based on this lovely presentation, I think I can guess which famous classic you were assigned.

Chef Crispino: I found Swan Lake to be a challenging source of inspiration, because it is so well known. But I hope I have provided an original interpretation. I’ve prepared a white polenta, with roasted black trumpet mushrooms. The sauce is made from the dripping of the roasting pan.

[With a bow, Chef Crispino makes her exit and the diners try her dish.]

Celestino: [frowning slightly] Well...the polenta is certainly beautifully cooked.
Yakov: And tastes like wallpaper paste. It’s very underseasoned.

Daphne: I’ll admit I was looking forward to the polenta, since I don’t get to enjoy a lot of grains, and it’s...not so delicious. But the mushrooms are great! I’ve never had them before.

Minako: The mushrooms are excellent, and go a long way to replacing a protein. But overall, it’s an uneven plate.

Christophe: Maybe Sara focused too much on dazzling our eyes and not enough on dazzling our palates.

[Chef Katsuki presents his dish next.]

Chef Katsuki: I wanted to represent *Persephone* by exploring the contrast between spring and winter, and Persephone’s role as Goddess of Spring and the Queen of the Underworld. So I’ve prepared a duo of soups. On your left is a connsome of chickpeas, lemon, and pomegranate, and on your left is a Persian inspired bean soup with split peas, lentils, and barley, also with pomegranate seeds. Fresh mint, parsley, and green onion connect the two halves of my dish, along with the tart sweetness of the raw pomegranate seeds. Thank you.


Celestino: I have to agree. This connsome is a masterpiece. Chef Katsuki reminding us once again that he is the absolute master of subtlety among these chefs. And what a beautiful plate! It truly tells the story of *Persephone* .

Yakov: [frowning] The clear broth is...excellent. However I am not as convinced by the pomegranate in the heavier soup. I think the tartness is out of place with the richness of the beans and lentils.

Christophe: Where does the rest of the table fall on Chef Katsuki’s offerings?

Sasha: I am wowed, for sure. The taste and presentation is exactly the kind of fine dining experience that as a vegetarian I rarely get to enjoy.

Daphne: I think both soups are good, but as I eat back and forth, I do think the Underworld side of the plate starts to overwhelm the more delicate flavors of the Spring side.

Christophe: The plate is a delicate balancing act to be sure.

[Following Chef Katsuki is Chef Nikiforov, who offers another illustratively presented plate.]

Chef Nikiforov: [smiling] You are right! Inspired by Stravinsky’s bold composition, today I have prepared for you spicy marinated tofu, seared on a fire hot grill. The tofu steak is nested in a bed of carrot and beet, dressed in a curry sauce. I hope it is reminding you all of the red and gold plumage of the Firebird!

[Chef Nikiforov takes his leave as the diners and judges dig in.]

Christophe: Victor’s choice of slicing technique on his salad certainly harkens to fiery feathers, but how did the taste measure up? Judges?

Celestino: I think Victor, like Sara, had one of the more difficult ballets to represent given the dietary
restrictions of this challenge. However I think he certainly rose to the occasion with this dish, giving plenty of spicy flavors to match the beauty of his presentation.

Minako: The salad for me is well seasoned but nothing out of the ordinary. On the other hand, I love the taste and texture of Chef Nikiforov’s tofu. That would make a great vegan entree option in any restaurant.

Haru: I agree that the salad does more for the look of the dish than the taste, but I also think the tofu is delicious. I rarely put the effort into cooking it at home, exactly because I can never make it as rich as what Chef Nikiforov has presented here.

Yakov: I have to disagree on the salad. I think the beets give a needed sweetness to the dish.

Christophe: All things to discuss at judge’s table. Next, we’ll hear from Chef Yang.

[Chef Nikiforov’s fiery plate is replaced by Chef Yang’s delicate floral composition.]

Christophe: Isabella, please tell us about your dish.

Chef Yang: I was inspired by *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. To capture the dreamy, ethereal feeling of the ballet, I’ve prepared an asparagus risotto, flavored with prosecco and garnished with edible violets. Please enjoy.

Minako: [after Chef Yang leaves the dining room] Well just by looking at it you can see a major issue with this dish: Chef Yang’s risotto has seized.

Celestino: [dripping a globby spoonful onto his plate] I’ll admit this is a particular pet peeve of mine. A properly cooked risotto is meant to spread on the plate. Isabella’s clearly had to be scooped out of her pot.

Yakov: That being said, she has successfully achieved a very delicate flavor. I expected the violets to just be for show, but you can actually taste them in the dish. I think they complement the prosecco flavor well.

Minako: Her asparagus is very nice also. The dish has the ethereal notes that Isabella was aiming for, without being underseasoned.

Celestino: I just wish the texture of her rice was as elegant as the taste.

Sasha: I think the chef did a beautiful job representing the magic and mystery of her ballet. I have certainly had worse risottos in my life.

Christophe: Lots to think on tonight. Only one course to go!

[Chef Altin enters the dining room as his dish is placed in front of the judges. On each plate is a perfect slice of paella, complete with a browned crispy crust on the bottom.]

Christophe: Last but certainly not least, Otabek! Please tell us about your ballet and the dish you’ve prepared.

Chef Altin: My ballet was *Don Quixote*, based on the famous Spanish novel, so I made for you a national dish of Spain, paella. In place of seafood I chose to use artichokes, shiitake mushrooms, and bell pepper with the traditional base of crispy saffron rice. As a garnish I’ve included a traditional Spanish tapas, *pimientos de padrón*, or blistered padrón peppers with olive oil.
Chef Altin departs, and the diners dig in. The elegant air of the dinner is quickly interrupted by satisfied groans.

Antoni: Oh my god, I want to eat this forever.

Daphne: It’s so rich and spicy. Mm….

Christophe: [chuckling] The immediate response to Chef Altin’s cooking seems favorable. Judges?

Celestino: I have to agree with our guests. Otabek’s bold style is a match made in heaven with Spanish cuisine. And the texture.

[Celestino flips over his portion to tap the crispy bottom with his fork.]

Celestino: That is the sound you want from a good paella. Add that up with the buttery artichoke hearts and the burned heat of the pepper garnish and you’ve got a winner in my book.

Minako: Chef Altin has really overcome some challenges with this dish. It’s rice based, which is a smart choice, but what do we associate with paella? Shrimp, chorizo. Rich meat and seafood. But whatever he’s done to these vegetables, I’m not missing a thing. And I like how it resonates with the source material. This dish has captured a sense of risk and adventure.

Christophe: Well, certainly a strong finish to a wonderful dinner party. [raising his wine glass] Cheers, everyone, to dinner, to the ballet, and to the judge’s table to come.

[The glasses clink as the dinner comes to an end. After a long night of cooking and cleanup, the chefs find themselves back in the stew room at the Top Chef kitchen, awaiting the judges deliberation. Water is passed around, and Chef Altin claims an ice pack from the walk-in to keep on his burnt hand now that the cooking is done for the day.]

Chef Nikiforov: [toasting his water bottle] Break a leg, everybody. We did the best we could with the nearly impossible.

Chef Chulanont: [shaking his head] I hope I never have to cook carrots again.

Chef Plisetsky: The first thing I’m doing back at the house is cooking the biggest steak I can find.

Chef Nikiforov: [dreamily] With herb butter.

Chef Crispino: I’ll make pasta. As much gluten as possible.

[The chefs laugh until Christophe makes his appearance.]

Christophe: Good evening chefs. We’d like to see Yuuri K., Yuri P., Otabek, and Victor.

[Chefs Katsuki, Plisetsky, Altin, and Nikiforov follow Christophe to the judges, leaving Chefs Yang, Crispino, and Chulanont behind in the stew room.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] I was feeling really good about what I served tonight, so I’m surprised to be in the bottom. Bummer!

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Whew! Given the problems I was having with my dish only one day ago, I don’t even care who wins. I am just relieved to be in the top four.

[The chefs stand before the stern faced judges, awaiting the news of how their dishes fared.]
Christophe: Chefs, we asked you to prepare a sumptuous feast while accommodating your diners' wide variety of dietary restrictions. [pause] ...And as you may have guessed, you were all exceptionally successful! Congratulations you four had our favorite dishes of the night!

Chef Plissetsky: [punching the air] Hell yeah!

[Chef Nikiforov And Chef Katsuki share a quick professional embrace while Chef Altin offers a small smile as he accepts Chef Plissetsky's enthusiastic fist bump.]

Christophe: Judges?

Yakov: Chef Plissetsky, we thought your shakshuka was an excellent interpretation of your ballet, and a smart choice of dish given the nature of the challenge. Despite your inflexible attitude, you’ve shown us through your cooking that you are capable of looking to other cultures for inspiration and successfully accommodating your diners with a delicious and satisfying plate.

Minako: Chef Katsuki, you are a master of what you do and your chickpea lemon connsome was a reminder of that today. Every sip was a revelation of herb flavor, perfectly suited to represent the goddess of spring. Some of us felt your earther soup was a little overpowering in comparison, but it was well executed and gave a lovely cohesive narrative with your use of the pomegranate.

Celestino: Chef Altin, I think you have found your calling in Spanish cuisine! Just like many adaptations of Don Quixote, you risked cliche in choosing such an iconic Spanish dish. However, your execution was flawless, and your choice of artichokes as the starring vegetable gave the dish both richness and much needed acid. Every diner cleaned their plates tonight. Well done.

Yakov: Finally, Chef Nikiforov. You also reminded us that your might as a chef doesn’t only come from your traditional training, but from your ability to adapt to new cuisines and cultures as you encounter them. Your tofu steak was the most successful protein replacement of the night, and you brought us both the look and taste of The Firebird. Your salad was a touch underdressed, but the colors were stunning on the plate.

Christophe: This round of the competition I played both judge and host, so the privilege of announcing the winner falls to me. For his perfect marriage of a foreign national dish to his own style, not to mention sixteen clean plates, the winner of our ballet dinner party challenge is...Chef Altin! Congratulations Otabek!

[Chef Altin keeps his arms crossed as the other chefs jostle and congratulate him, but even the stoic Kazakh chef can’t keep a smile off his face as he earns his long awaited victory.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover] With this challenge I set out to set myself apart in the judge’s eyes, and I’m happy that I succeeded despite some setbacks in the kitchen. Just over halfway through I’ve gained a reputation as the dark horse challenger to the front runners like Katsuki and Nikiforov. I plan to embrace that reputation from here on out.

Christophe: [laughing] Chef Altin, as the winner of this challenge, you also win two year long passes to the coming season at the New York City Ballet, and a five thousand dollar airline credit to cover your travel courtesy of Aeroflot. Congratulations chef, and to the rest of you! You are all safe, and may return to the stew room. We only ask that you send out your three colleagues.

[The celebratory air soberes as Chef Altin claims his tickets and the chefs return to the waiting room. At this stage in the competition every elimination is a blow to the contestants, who now consider each other colleagues and friends.]
Chef Nikiforov: [Stepping aside to congratulate Chef Altin] Our winner!

Chef Yang: [smiling despite her nerves] Wow, Otabek, your first win! Congrats.

Chef Altin: [slightly uncomfortable] Thanks. ...the judges would like to see all three of you.

Chef Crispino: [standing] Time to face the music.

[Chefs Yang and Crispino leave the stew room, followed by Chef Chulanont after he gives Chef Katsuki a quick but tight hug. Once the chefs leave, Chef Katsuki sits close to Chef Nikiforov, looking nervous.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I hate to see any of these chefs go home, but Phichit is my best friend. I know who I want to see come back safe tonight.

[Standing before the judges, the celebratory air has dissipated. Chef Chulanont shifts nervously, while Chef Yang keeps her hands folded politely behind her back and Chef Crispino holds her head high.]

Christophe: Chefs, today we asked you to stretch your palates and your technique by providing a gluten free vegetarian meal with no traditional dairy or nuts. Unfortunately some of you were more successful than others and you three had our least favorite dishes tonight. Judges?

Yakov: Chef Chulanont, your dish was a pleasant enough start to the meal. However, at the end of the night we had to agree that your carrot preparations, while impressive in their scope, lacked the body of some of your competitors. We enjoyed how your techniques told the story of the four seasons, but it ate like four side dishes, not an entree.

Minako: Chef Yang, I imagine you might know why you’re here.

Chef Yang: [nodding] I stand by the flavors and concept of my dish, but I wasn’t happy with the final texture of my risotto.

Celestino: There is nothing more disappointing than expecting a beautiful plate of velvety rice, and instead receiving a sticky plate of goo. That being said, I have to agree with you, chef. The flavors of your dish did come through. There was a delicate floral aroma to the dish that brought out the magic of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. It was a shame the look and feel couldn’t match the taste.

Yakov: Chef Crispino, could you please tell us about how you made your polenta? Did you use stock?

Chef Crispino: I found certified gluten free vegetable stock while we were shopping, and I used that as the liquid. I was very happy with the texture of the polenta in the final dish.

Minako: The texture *was* flawless, and your presentation was beautiful and dramatic. We all immediately recognized the Black Swan on our plates. Unfortunately there wasn’t a bold flavor to match the bold look of your dish. The polenta was bland, to say the least.

Celestino: I think the restrictions of the challenge may have done in your dish, chef. Traditional polenta would be made with chicken stock, then butter and cheese, all ingredients with a high salt content. Without them, I’m afraid you underestimated how much extra seasoning the dish would require.

Chef Crispino: [firm but respectful] I kept the polenta delicate in order to support the mushrooms, which were quite rich. I stand by what I presented tonight.
Christophe: We can certainly respect that. All three of you have proven yourselves in this competition, but unfortunately one of you will be leaving us.

[A dramatic pause.]

Christophe: Phichit...while we wish your dish had been a little “meatier” so to speak, we admire your ambition in making four successful preparations. You’re safe tonight.

Chef Chulanont: [bowing] Thank you.

[Chef Chulanont leaves judges table, clutching his chest dramatically as soon as he’s out of sight.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] When he said my name like that I thought I was a goner for sure! Don’t do that to me, Christophe!

[That only leaves Chefs Crispino and Yang before the judges.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] There goes our all female finale…I’m not feeling at all safe right now. It could easily be either one of us.

Chef Crispino: [voiceover] I disagree with the judge’s decision tonight, but Isabella and I have both shown our colleagues what we are made of.

[Another dramatic pause. Christophe knows how to draw out the tension.]

Christophe:...Chef Crispino. Please pack your knives and go.

[Chef Crispino nods, resigned, and offers the judges a bow.]

Chef Crispino: Thank you for this opportunity.

Christophe: It’s been a pleasure to taste your cooking, chef. Good luck to you.

[In the stew room, the winning chefs wait to hear the judge’s verdict. Chef Crispino and Yang return, both clearly emotional.]

Chef Crispino: [shrugging] I guess I won’t be making pasta for us tonight after all. Sorry, guys.

[The chefs show their dismay and support, offering Chef Crispino hugs and best wishes.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] I’m glad to be safe, but it’s a bummer to see Sara leave us. She was hardcore in the kitchen!

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I have nothing but respect for Chef Crispino, but I do think the judges made the right choice tonight. I think Chef Yang has much more to show us, and the coming challenges will prove it.

[Last to say goodbye is Chef Yang, who gives Chef Crispino a tearful hug.]

Chef Crispino: Hey, none of that! You have to win for all of us now!

Chef Yang: [laughing] You know I will!

Chef Crispino: [waving goodbye] Ciao, everyone! Good luck!

[]
Chef Crispino: [packing her knives] I respect the judges decision, but I still stand by my dish tonight. I came here to prove that I belong among world class chefs, and my parent’s restaurant is more than just a bygone hand me down. I know that I have proven that to my competitors, and the world. I can’t wait to return to Florence, and work with my brother to bring our business to the top of contemporary Italian cuisine.

[Back at the Top Chef apartment, the dancing energy has carried through from the night before after the promised steak dinner. This time the chefs forego ballet in favor of more contemporary music playing on Chef Altin’s phone. Five chefs congregate on the outside balcony to enjoy the cool evening and the good energy of another challenge completed.]

Chef Plisetsky: These are your remixes? That’s so cool!

Chef Altin: [still cheerful after his win] Yeah. I...used to DJ in some clubs in Almaty.

[A drink or two loosens everyone up, and the younger chefs show off their best club moves while Chefs Nikiforov and Katsuki dance together. Chef Katsuki laughs as Chef Nikiforov guides him through a playful spin before pulling him back a little closer than is strictly friendly. Inside, Chef Yang has the living room to herself, sipping on a glass of white wine with a sigh as the other chefs have enjoy themselves.]

Chef Yang: It sucked to be in the bottom, but I’m also really sad to see Sara go. Having spent so long as the only two women in the competition, I considered her a friend as well as an amazing chef. Now I’m the last woman standing, and I feel a bit on the outside. The other chefs seem to have found their close groups, and I’m the last of mine.

[The other chefs also pause in their fun, calling out “Yeah” and “C’mon Isabella!”]. Chef Yang hesitates, but eventually smiles and goes out to join her fellow competitors. They welcome her into their dance circle as the sun sets on another day of Top Chef.]

Chef Yang: [with a small smile] Or maybe I’m not out of friends here, after all. We’ll see what the rest of the competition brings!

Chapter End Notes

Things are getting heated in this competition! Tune in next time to see the chefs get liquored up! And as always, if you’re enjoying this story please like, share, and subscribe! Your comments and support are so inspiring!

A/N: Hey all, just fyi I made a tiny edit to this chapter. I forgot that since Phichit is
younger than Yuuri, they wouldn't have graduated from culinary school at the same time.
[Morning in the Top Chef apartment. The competitive energy is high, but last night’s elimination is a sober reminder of the contestant’s vulnerability as they near the end of their time in New York. Chefs Katsuki and Chulanont, still sleep rumpled, toast their coffee cups as they watch the sun rise over the balcony.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] You forget how easy it is to go from the top to the bottom on Top Chef. Sara won the ice cream challenge, and then last night she went home, just like that. None of us are safe, and little details are going to make the difference between winning the title and packing our knives.

Chef Katsuki: [still looking out the window] Let’s do our best today, yeah?

Chef Chulanont: [grinning] Always. [offering a fist bump] You, me, and Victor fighting it out in the finale. We’re gonna make it happen.

[Chef Katsuki smiles, and reciprocates his friend’s fist bump. However when Chef Chulanont leaves to get ready for the day, Chef Katsuki’s expression sobers.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] This late in the competition, talent isn’t always enough. At some point it’s going to be our experience that gets us through the tough spots, and some of the chefs here have a lot more experience than others.

[Chef Katsuki quietly sips his coffee until it’s almost time to head out.]

[The real day begins as the Quickfire logo flashes across the screen. The six remaining contestants face Christophe in the Top Chef kitchen. Today their host is leaning against a dark mahogany bartop, which appears to have been installed in the midst of the workroom overnight. The bar is well stocked with every imaginable type of alcohol, as well as a small fleet of miniature tasting glasses.]

Christophe: Good morning everyone!

[The chefs offer Christophe their enthusiastic greetings.]

Christophe: Mes amis, I woke up this morning with a craving for a nice cocktail. And you know what they say...it’s five o’clock somewhere.

[...]

Chef Chulanont: I can guess right away we’re going to be doing a pairing challenge, and I’m excited!

[...]

Chef Katsuki: Pairing food with cocktails is a bit of a trend in the States right now, as opposed to wine or beer pairings. It sounds like fun, but I’m glad it’s not an elimination challenge. [laughing nervously] I don’t drink a lot of hard liquor...
Christophe: Unfortunately, I don’t know anything about mixing drinks, so I’ve brought in an expert! Please welcome our guest judge for this challenge, world renowned mixologist and owner of Anastasis cocktail bar right here in New York, Emil Nekola!

[The chefs applaud politely as Emil joins them in the kitchen. The relatively young mixologist sports a well trimmed goatee, and a stylish blue leather jacket.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I recall a few visits to Emil’s first bar back when he was still based in Prague. The man knows his way around a cocktail shaker, this is for certain. I’m looking forward to tasting his drinks again!

Emil: Hello chefs! I’m looking forward to tasting your food, but first let me mix you some drinks!

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I like this Quickfire so far!

Chef Katsuki: [voice over] I hope Emil isn’t too generous with his portions.[nervous laughter] My older sister always warned me about mixing liquors.

[The chefs are invited to gather around the bar, where Emil wastes no time in shedding his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. He lays out his measuring glasses and shakers with the same skill and concentration as a chef laying out his knives.]

Chef Katsuki: I’ve never bartended myself, but making proper drinks is an exact science, just like cooking or baking. Anyone can make a so so gin and tonic, but a real cocktail experience should be a perfect balance of flavors and temperature.

Emil: I invent new drinks all the time, but I couldn’t be so adventurous if I didn’t know the fundamentals, and that’s what I’d like to share with you all today. First up, a classic martini.

[Emil narrates his methods for the benefit of the chefs, pouring one part gin and one part dry vermouth into his shaker with ice before reaching for a long cocktail spoon and stirring vigorously.]

Emil: [grinning] Contrary to what James Bond would have you believe, you should never shake a martini. It roughs up the ice and makes the final drink too watery. [tapping his spoon on the side of the shaker] and voila! Just add olives.

[After a skilled pour, each of the chefs is welcome to claim a small tasting glass and sip Emil’s martini. The chefs munch on their olives while Emil moves on to his second drink, the margarita.]

Emil: It’s a tragedy that most restaurant margarita’s come from a mix, since they’re the simplest thing in the world to make. There is some debate about the proper proportions, but I prefer a three-two-one ratio of tequila, triple sec orange liqueur, and fresh lime juice. Perfect after a hot summer day!

[The chefs receive another small tasting glass, this time with a salt rim.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] These little glasses are so cute! And the drinks are good too.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I’m really struck by the saline qualities of the margarita. I went to culinary school in the states, so I’m used to a much less refined version of this drink. It’s not my usual flavor
profile, but I’m getting inspired!

Emil: [stirring the contents of his shaker again] Next up, the Moscow Mule! Sorry I didn’t bring any copper mugs.

[That gets a laugh out of the chefs as Emil pours them each a taste of the vodka and ginger beer cocktail.]

Emil: Now for another American classic, the Manhattan. Two parts rye, one part sweet vermouth, and two dashes of angostura bitters. Give it a quick shake and…

[Emil pours out six glasses, and the chefs taste again.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover] Part of the risk of pairing mixed drinks with food is that liquor can burn out your palate. Even so, the smokey taste of the Manhattan stands out to me. I like that it isn’t citrus based in its profile.

Emil: Next up is one of my favorite vintage drinks, which you don’t see as often as you used to, the Sazerac. This drink is rye based, but it has just a touch of the green fairy.

[Emil demonstrates a technique known as an absinthe “rinse”, carefully swirling a tiny amount of absinthe around the inside of six tasting glasses before pouring in his mixture of rye, bitters, and simple syrup.]

Emil: [flaming some delicate shreds of orange peel] Diners tend to be a bit leery of absinthe, but I promise this drink will not cause hallucinations! The absinthe rinse just gives a lovely anise aroma. The orange peel garnish gives a little smoke and perfume. Enjoy!

Chef Nikiforov: [sipping the deep red drink, cheerfully sober] Delicious! Save me a full sized one of those for after the challenge!

Chef Katsuki: [a little pink in the cheeks] Wow, these are...strong.

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Chef Chulanont: Victor is usually giggling after his second glass of red wine, but man, it turns out the guy can hold his liquor! Yuuri on the other hand…

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Chef Yang: [laughing] It’s pretty obvious which of us skipped breakfast today! I’m barely feeling it, but even a few sips each of seven cocktails is a lot on an empty stomach.

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Emil: Last but not least, the perfect drink to take the edge off the morning after, or a great anytime cocktail for those who like things on the savory side: the bloody mary!

[Making this cocktail is more like making brunch, as Emil mixes tomato juice with vodka, horseradish, worcestershire sauce, and a small collection of savory spices.]

Emil: [pouring the chefs final cocktail sample] Crazy garnishes are really popular for bloody mary’s right now, but my favorite is just a fresh sprig of parsley. The drink is supposed to go with food, not be food!

[The contestants enjoy their final drink, the savory bloody mary a good contrast to the previous...]
samples. Chef Chulanont’s eyes light up when he tastes his.

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] When I’m drinking for fun, I like a G and T, the sweeter the better. But as a chef, I’m loving the acid of the bloody mary. I think I know what my dish is going to be!

Christophe: [raising his own properly sized martini glass in a toast] Let’s give Emil a hand, for all those wonderful drinks!

[The chefs applaud, and Emil gives a theatrical bow before putting his jacket back on and joining Christophe by the front of the bar.]

Christophe: Now that we’ve got you all loosened up, who’s ready to start cooking?

Chef Katsuki: [with a nervous laugh] Um, can I get a glass of water first?

Chef Altin: [swaying a little] ...Me too, please.

Emil: [chuckling] Maybe that’s a good idea for everyone. We don’t want any clumsiness in the kitchen!

[Each of the chefs enjoy a large glass of water, which goes a long way to help sober up some of the tipsier contestants.]

Chef Altin:[voiceover] My family is Muslim, so while I indulge occasionally, I’ll admit I probably don’t have the same tolerance for alcohol as some of my competitors. ...not that I’ll allow it to affect my performance today.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I was feeling fine, but drinking extra water never hurts! Staying hydrated is the key to a flawless complexion!

Emil: At Anastasis, my place is behind the bar, but I love working with chefs to develop the perfect small plates to accompany my drinks. A good food and cocktail pairing should leave the diner wanting more of both!

Christophe: Chefs, for your Quickfire challenge, Emil and I would like you to come up with an elegant appetizer to complement one of Emil’s alcoholic creations. You’ll have twenty minutes to execute your dishes and access to all of the ingredients in the Top Chef pantry.

Emil: The winning dish will be featured on my bartop menu at Anastasis!

[...] Chef Chulanont: Getting your name on the menu at a place like Anastasis is a big opportunity. Unlike some of the chefs here like Victor and Yuuri, I don’t have my own restaurant. I definitely want to break out on my own someday, and that means getting my food out to the world!

[...] Chef Katsuki: There aren’t any restrictions ingredient wise on this challenge, but twenty minutes isn’t much time. We’ll all have to be smart in choosing our dishes if we want to finish in time.

[...] Christophe: Use your time wisely, chefs! Your cocktail Quickfire starts now!

[The chefs race to the pantry as their paltry twenty minutes begins to wind down. This late in the
competition no one is playing it safe, but it's clear a few chefs will be pushing their time to the absolute limits as Chef Yang puts a small pot of sushi rice on the stove and Chef Plisetsky unfolds a thawed sheet of puff pastry.]

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Chef Yang: I've decided to cook a dish to match the Moscow Mule! I think a twist on the california roll will be the perfect thing to make the judges crave the refreshing ginger in the drink.

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Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover as he punches out a series of small puff pastry rounds] I've got to get these in the oven yesterday if I want them to be done in time, but my savory cheese pastries will be a good contrast to the sweet smokiness of the Serazac.

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[Some chefs are playing it safer with time. Chef Altin dresses pork belly in a simple spice rub before searing it on a hot grill. Chef Nikiforov whips a compound butter in his countertop mixer, adding a pile of fresh chives and dill. A side of smoked salmon waits on his cutting board.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] A classic drink deserves a classic dish! I am making a salmon and dill canape to bring out the briney qualities of Emil’s martini.

[In a flash, ten minutes have passed. Chef Plisetsky is anxiously staring into his oven, while Chef Altin shreds cabbage and carrots on his mandolin. At his station Chef Nikiforov meticulously slices his smoked salmon while nearby Chef Chulanont is cracking open the claws of a boiled lobster, a finished vinaigrette and several cleaned endive stalks waiting. Chef Katsuki is scooping his hard boiled eggs out of their ice bath and peeling off their shells.]

Chef Chulanont: [grinning] I never thought I’d see a deviled egg from Katsuki Yuuri!

Chef Katsuki: [scooping out his eggs to leave the clean egg whites on a tray] Ha, this definitely isn’t my usual style, but it’s nice to try something different. How are you feeling?

Chef Chulanont: [looking over his station] ...pretty good. This lobster salad is missing something, though, and I just can’t put my finger on it.

Chef Katsuki: [thoughtful] Do you mind if I taste?

Chef Chulanont: Of course not!

[Chef Katsuki pulls a clean tasting spoon from his apron and samples Chef Chulanont’s vinaigrette. He looks again at Chef Chulanont’s waiting lobster and a curious expression takes over his face.]

Chef Katsuki: Hm...do you remember that crab shack we used to hang out at the summer we worked on Lake Huron?

Chef Chulanont: [eyes lighting up] Hey, yeah! This is a lot like their lobster rolls. It must have been in the back of my mind. Good times, eh?

Chef Katsuki: [smiling] You know it.

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Chef Chulanont: Yuuri gets me thinking of these really unique lobster rolls we used to eat together,
and I remember the secret ingredient was fresh green peas! I know they’re going to highlight the sweetness of the lobster. It’s exactly what I need to complement the acidity of a bloody mary.

[Chef Chulanont races back into the pantry to get his peas, the clock winding down. Chef Katsuki returns to his own dish, combining his egg yolks with smoked paprika and cool greek yogurt to make his deviled egg filling. Neither notice Chef Nikiforov, who overheard their brief exchange. The chef’s expression is perturbed as he watches Chef Katsuki’s back, but his attention returns quickly to the task at hand as his baguette rounds begin to burn where they’ve been toasting in a dry pan. Elsewhere, with only a few minutes to spare, Chef Yang is finally able to begin assembling her sushi roll. Chef Plisetsky is still waiting by the oven, his plates laid out on his station and his foot tapping as a scowl graces his face.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] It’s tight, but my sticky rice came out perfect!

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] [beep]ing profiteroles in twenty minutes, what was I thinking?!

[Thankfully, when the buzzer goes off every chef has managed to get two complete plates on their station to present to the judges. Provided by Emil, each chef’s dish is accompanied by two more tasting sized cocktails. The judges will not only be evaluating the execution of the dishes, but how well they pair with the chef’s chosen drink. First to present is Chef Plisetsky.]

Christophe: Yuri P. taking advantage of your pastry knowledge, I see! Tell us about what you’ve baked.

Chef Plisetsky: I chose the Serazac as my cocktail, and made a play on a traditional French bar food, the Gougere. What you have is a savory puff pastry sandwich cookie. It’s filled with Gruyere cheese and some fresh chive.

Christophe: [munching] A classy step up from your usual grilled cheese, wouldn’t you say, Emil?

Emil: [sipping his cocktail after taking a bite] Hm...they’re well baked, given the time. Thank you chef.

Christophe: Next down the line we have Chef Nikiforov. Victor, tell us which cocktail inspired your appetizer.

Chef Nikiforov: I went with the martini! To pair I’ve made a smoked salmon toast with a dill compound butter.

Emil: [with a laugh] That sounds like the kind of hors d'oeuvre my great aunt would make.

Chef Nikiforov: [still confident] I like to think of it as vintage.

[Christophe and Emil taste Chef Nikiforov’s appetizer before moving on. Chef Katsuki presents next.]

Chef Katsuki: I wanted to try something different to complement the bright citrus tang of a margarita, so I’ve prepared a deviled egg. The filling is made with greek yogurt instead of mayo, with sun dried tomato and paprika. For some texture on top there’s some crispy fried shallot.

Emil: [chewing] I’m so relieved you didn’t make us nachos! Thanks for a taste of something different, chef.
Christophe: Let’s hear from Chef Yang.

Chef Yang: I chose the Moscow Mule as my drink. I liked how the ginger brought acid, but also heat to the taste. To go with I’ve made my style of california roll, with fresh crab and some lightly ponzu glazed avocado, with cucumber for crunch.

[The judges seem to enjoy Chef Yang’s sushi appetizer.]

Emil: I forget how much mediocre sushi I’ve had until I’m presented with a good one. I can’t forget the drink though.

[Emil’s expression turns thoughtful as he sips the Moscow Mule that accompanies Chef Yang’s dish.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Emil’s a friendly guy, but I don’t think any of us can get a read on what he’s really thinking!

Christophe: Chef Chulanont! What have you made for Emil and I today?

Chef Chulanont: To complement the heat and acid of the bloody mary, I’ve made a cool lobster and endive salad. The dressing is mayo free, to keep the lobster front and center, with some fresh peas to add some sweetness.

Emil: [crunching] Serving this on an endive is a good choice for high end bar food. No utensils needed!

Christophe: Lobster is always a winner in my book. Thanks, Phichit. Last but not least, we have Chef Altin. Otabek, which cocktail intrigued you?

Chef Altin: I wanted to draw out the smoke of the Manhattan, and cut the sweetness, so I’ve made a crispy pork belly slider. It’s topped with quick pickled cabbage.

[Christophe and Emil try Chef Altin’s appetizer size burgers, sipping the paired Manhattan thoughtfully. They give nothing away before returning to the front of the bar to address the contestants.]

Christophe: Well, Emil. That was certainly a new standard of bar food for me.

Emil: I’ll say! All of your appetizers have me itching to get behind the bar to invent some new drinks! That said, I think some of the dishes complemented your chosen cocktails better than others.

Christophe: Why don’t we start with the chef’s whose pairings weren’t quite a match made in heaven?

Emil: [less cheerful] The first dish belongs to Chef Plisetsky. Yuri, I loved that you dared to bake in that short time limit, and the puff pastry was perfectly golden brown. Unfortunately once I tasted it with the cocktail I’m afraid your choice of cheese clashed with the bitters in the Sarazac, big time.

Chef Plisetksky: [scowling as he crosses his arms] Bah, my dish was great! What does this guy know? He just makes drinks for socialites.

Emil: And Isabella. Chef Yang, your dish is in the bottom for the opposite reason. I loved your fresh
take on the California roll, but the alcohol in the Mule just obliterated your delicate flavors. Some spice might have given it more of a fighting chance.

Chef Yang: [irritated] Ugh, I’ve been in the bottom three challenges in a row. This is officially a funk, which I do not have time for this late in the competition.

Christophe: Now for the happier news. Which pairings made you hungry and thirsty for more?

Emil: First off, Victor! At first I thought your dish was old fashioned, but after tasting the pairing I’m happy to say I was wrong. Your compound butter and smoked salmon was exactly the kind of richness to soak up the alcohol of a martini, and all those herbs were so fresh! The taste is modern, but with that old school charm perfect for an old school drink.

Chef Nikiforov: [satisfied] Thank you.

Chef Nikiforov: [coolly] I am glad to be in the top, but hopefully that is the last time a judge ever compares my cooking to their great aunt.

Emil: Chef Katsuki was also one of my favorites. Mexican food is wonderful, but it was so refreshing to see you take a different direction. The smokiness of your deviled egg was a perfect contrast to the margarita, and a new twist on a well known American favorite.

Chef Katsuki: Of course I wanted to win, but if it wasn’t me I’m glad it was Phichit! He made a great dish, and being on a New York menu will be a big boost to him after the competition is over!

Chef Chulanont: It feels great to take this one! I’m proud to be the Thai chef, but I can cook more than just Asian flavors. Today I proved that to the judges for sure! I’ve made it to the top six, and this win is motivating me to make it all the way!
Chef Chulanont offers the camera twin victory signs.

Chef Nikiforov: [distracted] ...Hm? Oh, yes, I’m very happy for Phichit. He certainly made an excellent dish. How will the standings change moving forward? We’ll see what the next challenge brings, I suppose.

Chapter End Notes

More booze and fierce competition coming up next!
Thanks for reading, everyone! Laptop crises slowed me down, but nothing can stop Top Chef on Ice! I hope you'll stay tuned for some fierce competition in Lisbon!

[To the sound of clashing knives, the “Elimination” logo flashes across the screen. Returning to the Top Chef Kitchen, the chefs again face Christophe and the temporarily installed bar. The mixology implements utilized in the Quickfire have been cleared away, along with the various bottles of liquor. In their place, there are now several bottles of deep red wine, and shelves of delicately stemmed glasses. Featured on the bar top are three bottles of Cabernet Sauvignon, each with a distinct label.]

Christophe: As you may have guessed, both of our challenges this round will follow theme of pairing food with alcohol. Wine pairing will likely be a familiar practice to most of you. But don’t get to comfortable, mes amis! This challenge is going to be tough, and for good reason: this is the final elimination challenge before we leave New York.

[There a ripple of excitement from the chefs.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] We all knew this day was coming, but now that the end is near the pressure is really on!

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] Yes! Top five here I come! Tell us where we’re going!

Christophe: I hope you all put your best foot forward in the coming challenge, because the five remaining chefs will be competing in the finale rounds in...Lisbon, Portugal!

Chef Nikiforov: Wow, amazing! I’ve never been to Lisbon, but it is one of the great medieval cities of Europe. They have an amazing culinary tradition, and an up and coming contemporary dining scene!

Chef Katsuki: Lisbon isn’t the first city you think of when going to Europe, which I’m willing to guess was an intentional choice. None of us will have an advantage there, and we’ll be challenged with a new cuisine! Their cooking has a lot of North African influences thanks to the long period Muslim rule in the Middle Ages.

Chef Plisetsky: [arms crossed] I don’t care where we go, as long as I’m winning! ...it might be cool to see some castles though.

Christophe: So, now that you’re feeling motivated, let’s hear about tomorrow’s challenge, and learn about some of these excellent wines! Please welcome your guest judge, sommelier, restaurateur, and
philanthropist Josef Karpisek!

[Josef joins Christophe and the chefs in the Top Chef Kitchen. He is a stout older man wearing a crisp black suit and a purple shirt with an open collar. His glasses have chic red frames. He and Christophe greet each other with a friendly hug. It is clear the Top Chef host and the guest judge know each other outside of the competition.]

Christophe: So glad you could join us for this challenge, Josef.

Josef: Thank you, it’s great to be here. [addressing the chefs] At my restaurants wine is not only an accompaniment to a meal, but one half of a beautiful duet of food and drink. Now that I have found success, I use my knowledge to give back to the community.

Christophe: You have just such an opportunity planned for tomorrow night.

Joseph: [nodding] That I do. Tomorrow night, I’ll be hosting the fifth annual “Cow and Cabernet” charity gala to benefit Meals on Wheels, a service which delivers essential nutrition to the elderly and homebound. In our past Cow and Cabernet events we’ve succeeded in raising almost a quarter of a million dollars for this worthy cause.

[This earns a polite round of applause from the chefs.]

Christophe: Chefs, this year you will be assisting Josef in fundraising for this admirable charity. For your elimination challenge, you will each prepare a dish to pair with a Cabernet Sauvignon. And of course, as the name suggests, your dish must feature cow, or as we would call it in polite company, beef, as it’s featured ingredient. “Cow and Cabernet” is not a seated dinner, so your dish will have to be appropriate for your mobile diners and luxurious enough to make them want to open their checkbooks! You’ll have to prepare a tasting style dish for one hundred and fifty guests.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Cook red meat and impress some fancy diners? This is my kind of challenge!

Chef Yang: [voiceover] This challenge is a big deal, since we’ll be finding out who moves on to Lisbon, but it’s also a big responsibility! It’s an honor to use our cooking to support those in need.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] The objective might seem simple, but a hundred and fifty plates is a lot, and we’re all on our own. This is our first gala style challenge, and those are always full of surprises!

Christophe: Now, let’s see what delightful selections you’ll be complementing with your dishes! Josef?

[It’s Josef’s turn to step behind the bar, producing a professional corkscrew from his jacket pocket.]

Josef: [reaching for the first bottle of wine] Every year at Cow and Cabernet, we highlight three Cabernet Sauvignon wines from across the globe, to teach our diners about the breadth and depth of taste available from a single type of grape. [popping the cork] This first bottle is from La Forge Estate in Languedoc-roussillon in the Bordeaux region of France.

[Josef pours out a small portion into six glasses and walks the chefs through the many steps of a proper wine tasting. First, the wine is swirled in the glass, so the color and clarity can be observed. The alcohol level is also revealed by how thickly the droplets cling to the sides of the glass after swirling. Next, the chefs smell the wine, taking in the bouquet and getting a first impression of the flavor.]

Josef: This what we would call an “Old World” Cabernet, originating in Bordeaux, which is where
the Cabernet grape was originally developed. “New World” Cabernet tends to be more fruit forward, while French Cabernet such as this will be earthier. The aroma of this particular 2013 La Forge Estate has intense notes of red pepper and tobacco, with a vanilla undertone. Now, we taste.

[The chefs sip, careful to roll the wine over their palates before swallowing.]

Josef: Would anyone care to make some observations? There are no wrong answers, [laughing] except that there definitely are. But what hits your palate first?

Chef Yang: [thinking] Definitely cherries, and the vanilla carries through from the aroma.

Josef: Very good!

Chef Chulanont: The finish is...spicy?

Josef: [smiling] You are correct as well. That’s the minerality of French growing soil coming through.

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] I don’t have as much experience with wine as some of the more well-traveled chefs here, but this challenge isn’t about being an expert, it’s about learning, and trusting my senses!

Josef: [uncorking a second bottle] Next, I’ll have you try a California Cabernet, to really taste the contrast in flavor and texture when we move from France to the Americas. This is a 2014 vintage from Pine Ridge in Napa Valley.

[The chefs cleanse their palates with some water as Josef pours the next glasses and hands them out.]

Chef Nikiforov: [swirling his glass before inhaling deeply] Wow, you can really smell the blackberry.

Chef Katsuki: [agreeing] And...plum? This is really fruit forward compared to the first sample.

Josef: That’s the California style. Those stewed berry and stone fruit flavors coming through are what we would call ‘jammy,’ as opposed to the leather and tobacco that comes through in the Bordeaux Cabernets. But do pay attention on the taste, this particular bottle has some wonderful herbal subtleties.

Chef Plisetsky: [frowning as he sips] All I taste is blackberries, or maybe....[pauses] is that mint?

Chef Altin: And white pepper. The oak is really present as well.

Josef: Yes, well done. That oak, as well as the tannins which hit the back of the palate, give the wine “structure”. Without them red wine would taste very flat and one dimensional.

[The third and final wine Josef pours is a 2012 Calcu Cabernet Sauvignon.]

Josef: [passing out glasses of the opaque red wine] This is from one of my favorite winemakers in Chile. France and California are definitely the major producers of Cab, but Chile, South Africa, and even Australia have put themselves on the map for their unique takes. This vintage is particularly dark and complex.

[The chefs take in the aroma of the Calcu, which is dominated by black cherry and dark chocolate.]

Chef Yang: [after taking a sip] Oooh, that’s tart!
Josef: Indeed, this particular Cabernet is somewhat “crunchy” or high in acid. It comes across as tangy or tart on the palate. But the finish is all red fruit, with a hint of spice.

Chef Nikiforov: The taste of this one is staying with me. A...how would you say...a “long” finish?

Josef: That’s correct. Some Cabernets will stay on the palate for much longer, which is something to consider when conceptualizing your dishes. The taste of the wine will likely stick around as the diners taste your dishes.

Chef Altin: [voiceover] This challenge is deceptively simple. It really depends on the chef knowing their palate. Even though they all come from the same grape, these wines are very distinct, especially to an expert like Josef. I can tell the judge’s criteria are going to be tough.

[With the tasting complete, Christophe takes over the reins once more.]

Christophe: Thank you, Josef, for sharing your expertise with us. These big bodied red wines will be sure to inspire some dishes worthy of big donations. [to the chefs] However, now that the fun is over, I’m sure you’ve all noticed that we’ve only tasted three bottles of Cabernet, and there are six of you.

Chef Altin: [with a sigh] Here comes the twist.

Chef Plisetsky: [actually praying] Please don’t be a team challenge, please don’t be a team challenge…

Christophe: [producing a knife block from behind the bar] It’s time to draw knives.

[Chef Chulanont draws first, revealing a bright green blade. Next is Chef Nikiforov, who draws blue, and Chef Katsuki, who is surprised to draw a second green.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] Oh boy. I’m seriously hoping this is a pair up challenge, otherwise I’m going head to head with one of the strongest chefs here, and my best friend! [exaggerated whine] It’s too much drama!

[Chef Altin draws the first red knife, and Chef Yang immediately draws the second one. Chef Plisetsky is scowling as he pulls the second blue knife.]

Christophe: If you would all please stand next to the chef with your matching blades.

[Chefs Chulanont And Katsuki pair up, along with an uncertain looking Chef Altin and Chef Yang. Chef Nikiforov looks amused to be standing next to Chef Plisetsky. The older chef ruffles his younger competitor’s hair, laughing when Chef Plisetsky hisses like a cat.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] This better be head to head! I’ve been waiting all competition to kick this old man’s [beep]!

Christophe: I hope you drew wisely, because the chef standing next to you is the chef you will be cooking...against. This is a Cow and Cabernet face-off!
Chef Yang: Ugh, I don’t know how to feel. I was uncertain about collaborating with Otabek, but he’s been on a hot streak lately, so I’m not thrilled about competing against him either.

Chef Nikiforov: [condescending] I know little Yura has been very excited to go head to head with me. I hope he is bringing his A-game, because I certainly will be. [shark-like smile]

Chef Katsuki: [reluctant but determined] I hate to go against Phichit, but at the end of the day we’re both here to make it to the final. I won’t lose another face-off challenge!

Christophe: At the gala tomorrow night you’ll be set up in paired stations, each featuring one of these three Cabernets. The guests will be given one red, one blue, and one green ballot which they will use to vote for their favorite dish at each station. The chef with the most votes in their ballot box will be the winner of the face-off, with a chance to win the challenge and a guaranteed place in the final round in Lisbon! Unfortunately the three chefs who lose their face-off will be in danger of elimination.

Josef: I hope the spirit of competition inspires you all to make a winning dish! Every delicious bite counts toward making this fundraiser a success, and providing life saving meals to those who might otherwise go without.

Christophe: [nodding] With that noble objective in mind, let’s find out which wine you’ll be cooking with! Chef Chulanont, as the winner of the Quickfire you may choose which wine you prefer on behalf of yourself and Chef Katsuki. The other two teams will flip a coin to determine their bottles.

Chef Chulanont: Okay, this is a big advantage, and a big decision. My first thought is to snag the California Cabernet, because it’s going to be the easiest to pair with, and the other chefs are all going to want it. But in the end I have to go with the wine that makes me the most excited to cook!

Chef Chulanont: Yuuri and I will have the Calcu, please Chris.

Christophe: Excellent choice. [pulling two sealed bottles from behind the bar] Come and claim your wine, gentlemen.

Chef Katsuki: [accepting the bottle of Calcu] I think Phichit’s made an interesting choice, and probably not the one I would have made. I think I’m going to let the product lead my dish this time around.

[True to his word, Christophe pulls out a prop coin bearing the two remaining vineyard labels on each side.]

Christophe: Next, we’ll flip. Blue team, whichever wine lands face up will be yours.

[Christophe flips the coin, and Chefs Nikiforov and Plisetsky are assigned the Pine Ridge Cabernet.]
They both receive their bottles thoughtfully.]

Christophe: Isabella and Otabek, that means you’ll be pairing with the lovely Bordeaux Cabernet from La Forge Estate.

[Chefs Yang and Altin claim their bottles with mixed expressions.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Damn, I was hoping to get the Napa Cabernet. Oh well, I’m going to do my best to bring out the fruity depths of this one!

Chef Altin: [voiceover] I can work with this. I’m looking forward to challenging my diners by pairing something unexpected with this French wine.

Christophe: There we go, all paired up! Tomorrow you’ll each have five hundred dollars to shop at Whole Foods, then return here to the Top Chef kitchen for three hours of prep. After that it’s off to Midtown Terrace for the big event, where you’ll only have the catering style implements of your stations to do any further cooking, so use your time wisely!

Josef: Good luck chefs! I look forward to tasting your dishes, and another successful Cow and Cabernet gala.

Christophe: Don’t indulge to much tonight, mes amis! Tomorrow is sure to be a busy day!

[Evening in the Top Chef apartment. For once the chefs have decided to abstain from any further drinking, given the alcohol soaked nature of their challenges that day. Instead the six remaining contenders have gathered around the kitchen, where Chefs Chulanont, Plisetsky and Altin have surprisingly joined forces to make a quick dinner favored by restaurant workers of all kinds in the States: grilled cheese sandwiches.]

Chef Altin: [flipping two well browned sandwiches from the hot pan onto a waiting plate] Order up.

[Chef Plisetsky uses his chef’s knife to cut the grilled cheese into triangles before sliding the plate down the table where the remaining chefs quickly snatch them up. Chef Chulanont puts two more assembled sandwiches in Chef Altin’s pan and the cycle begins anew.]

Chef Yang: [sipping from a large bottle of seltzer] Ugh, I don’t want to drink for a week. Mixing all that liquor dried me out.

Chef Katsuki: Tell me about it. [pulling apart two gooey halves of a grilled cheese sandwich, he offers half to Chef Nikiforov] Victor? They put tomato in this one, your favorite.

Chef Nikiforov: [looking away] Hm? Oh, yes, thank you.

[Chef Katsuki doesn’t notice Chef Nikiforov’s pensive mood, biting into his own half of grilled cheese with gusto.]

Chef Katsuki: [groaning appreciatively] Ugh, living in Tokyo I forget how good cheese is sometimes. [to the chefs cooking] These are amazing guys, thanks for cooking.

Chef Chulanont: [cheerfully] I’m not called the Grilled Cheese King of Detroit for nothing!

[Chef Altin merely offers a dry salute with his spatula before flipping the next sandwiches onto Chef
Plisetsky’s plate. The young chef decides to keep these two for himself, offering Chef Altin a silent thumbs up as he takes a large bite out of the gooey grilled cheese.]

Chef Katsuki: I’ll handle clean up, so don’t wash any dishes.

Chef Chulanont: You bet!

[Once dinner is over most of the chefs make it an early night, secreting themselves away to their rooms to work on their dishes for the next day. Given the head-to-head nature of tomorrow’s elimination, the chefs are a little more tight lipped than usual about their plans. True to his word, Chef Katsuki takes on dish washing duty, so he’s alone in the kitchen when Chef Nikiforov decides to finally approach his fellow competitor with something on his mind.]

Chef Nikiforov: [leaning against the counter as Chef Katsuki washes dishes] So. That was an interesting comment I heard you make to Phichit during the Quickfire this morning.

Chef Katsuki: [absently] Hm? What comment was that?

Chef Nikiforov: Lobster rolls on Lake Huron. And right before Phichit made a change to his dish. Exactly the right time for...what is the American idiom?...A trip down memory lane?

[Chef Katsuki pauses. Looking up he notices the slight expression of disapproval on Chef Nikiforov’s face.]

Chef Katsuki: [slowly] Do you have an opinion you’d like to share, chef?

Chef Nikiforov: You mean on you feeding your friend a recipe?

Chef Katsuki: [annoyed] I did not—

Chef Nikiforov: You may as well have.

Chef Katsuki: [picks up a dishcloth and begins drying some waiting plates]...I didn’t break any rules. Phichit deserved the win. That prize means more to him than you or me.

Chef Nikiforov: This isn’t about rules. You are lucky Phichit does not see what you did. How would he feel about his prize then, knowing you didn’t believe in him to win it on his own?

Chef Katsuki: [brow furrowing] It wasn’t like that. Friends help each other sometimes, that’s all.

Chef Nikiforov: [eyes narrowing] Phichit will be giving his all in the kitchen tomorrow. Will you do the same, or will it be more ‘friends helping friends’?

[Chef Katsuki slams a dry plate into the dishrack harder than necessary. Chef Nikiforov’s eyes widen, and he realizes he may have gone too far.]

Chef Katsuki: I’m here to win, Victor, and don’t you dare question that. I have pushed myself to put foreword my best possible dish for every challenge, and yes, this one time, I made sure my best friend made his best dish too. Disagree if you want but do not suggest that I am putting everything we—

[Despite his anger Chef Katsuki still cuts himself off, glancing at the camera.]

Chef Katsuki: [slightly deflated] —that I have worked for in jeopardy. Just...don’t.

Chef Nikiforov: [concerned] Anata —
Chef Katsuki: [scowling] Don’t you anata me right now. I’m going to bed. I have an important challenge to win tomorrow.

[Throwing down the dish towel, Chef Katsuki leaves the kitchen. A few moments later the slamming of a bedroom door can be heard. Chef Nikiforov only sighs, and picks up the dishes where Chef Katsuki left off.]

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[Morning in the Top Chef Apartment. It’s a bustle to get ready as the chefs prepare for their last challenge in New York. Chef Yang repeats her shopping list under her breath as she towel dries her hair. Chefs Altin and Plisetsky furtively compare notes as they finish a box of cereal between the two of them. Chef Katsuki, fully dressed, leaves his room to find Chef Nikiforov waiting in the kitchen with his hair still mussed, two steaming mugs of green tea in his hands. Expression apologetic, Chef Nikiforov offers a cup to Chef Katsuki.]

Chef Nikiforov: I’ve forgotten how to make only one cup.

[With a sigh, Chef Katsuki approaches, and accepts the steaming mug.]

Chef Katsuki: [quietly] Thank you.

Chef Nikiforov: Always. [pause] Yuuri, I wanted to say—

Chef Katsuki: [cutting him off] Victor, can we just…[another sigh] can we just be professional today? I really need to focus on this challenge, and so do you.

Chef Nikiforov: [crestfallen] Oh. Okay. Of course. ....Good luck, then.

Chef Katsuki: [softening slightly] You too.

[Chef Nikiforov seems somewhat heartened by Chef Katsuki’s response to his peace offering, but his exit to prepare for the day is still a little awkward. This does not go unnoticed by his fellow chefs.]

Chef Chulanont: [eyebrows raised] Everything okay, Yuuri?

Chef Katsuki: [checking over his knife kit, tea in hand] Yup. Definitely. [hesitant] May the best chef win today, yeah?

Chef Chulanont: [cheering up] Yeah! [determined] I’m going to do my best to beat you, but also if we make badass dishes, they’ll have to send us both to the final anyway!

Chef Katsuki: [making an effort to smile] Sounds like a plan, Phi.

Chef Yang: [slinging her knife bag over her shoulder] Time to go, guys!

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[It’s a bloodthirsty race to the butcher’s counter as the chefs are released into Whole Foods with five hundred dollars and thirty minutes to shop. Chefs Chulanont, Plisetsky, and Yang literally run, not disguising their efforts to be first in line and get their choice cut.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover as he not so subtly attempts to trip Chef Plisetsky] We all have to cook with beef, and we have one hundred and fifty guests waiting for us. This is Whole Foods, not Restaurant Depot, so there isn’t going to be enough of any one cut for chefs to double up. If I want to make sure I can get skirt steak I have to get there first!
Despite the younger chefs’ shenanigans, they arrive to find Chef Katsuki already in conversation with the butcher.

Chef Plisetsky: [skidding to a stop, out of breath] Mother[beep]

Chef Chulanont: [shocked] Yuuri, what the hell? How did you beat us?

Chef Katsuki: [sheepish] I cut through frozen foods. It’s three seconds shorter than the main aisle. [turning back to the butcher, who asks him a quick question] Yes, please, fifteen pounds of the Wagyu beef.

[Chefs Yang and Plisetsky groan audibly as Chef Katsuki buys up all of the best quality steak available.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Damn Katsuki and his stamina! Now I’m going to have to rework my recipe with a different cut.

[Chefs Yang and Plisetsky groan audibly as Chef Katsuki buys up all of the best quality steak available.]

Chef Yang: Ugh, I’m not surprised Yuuri snapped up the Wagyu, or that several of us had planned to use it! Basically it’s beef from a very carefully regulated strain of cattle originating in Japan. It’s considered a delicacy for its tenderness and flavor, and it’s extremely well marbled. All that fat turns into flavor in the right chef’s hands.

Chef Katsuki: [shrugging] Honestly, I’m glad I got there first, but I don’t really see what the fuss is about. The quality of most Wagyu in the States is nothing close to the kind of product I could get at home in Tokyo. I just needed the marbling quality to best suit my braising recipe. It’s a bit of a risk, spending so much of my budget on an expensive ingredient, but this is Cow and Cabernet. I want the steak to be the absolute focus of the dish.

[After a bit of grumbling and some thrown elbows, Chef Yang is the next to reach the counter after Chef Katsuki, settling on beef tenderloin for her roast. Chef Plisetsky chooses a handsome cut of flat iron steak, and Chef Chulanont is perfectly content with his selection of flank steak.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover as he places his white paper wrapped steaks into his cart] All that running, and I still got exactly what I wanted even though three chefs beat me! I could have taken my time like Victor and Otabek.

[Indeed, Chefs Nikiforov and Altin opted for a more dignified approach to the meat counter, Chef Altin even stopping in the spice aisle on the way.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover] My beef dish isn’t going to involve “steak” the way I can tell the other chefs are, so the cut of meat isn’t as important. As usual, I’m going to focus on winning by layering flavors to make the best pairing with the wine.

Chef Nikiforov: [approaching the butcher’s counter at a leisurely pace] Hello! Do you have any good brisket?

Butcher: I’ll have to look in the back.

Chef Nikiforov: Take your time!
Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I had the feeling that none of my competitors would think of doing brisket, as it normally takes hours to cook to tenderness. However, I know a method using the pressure cooker taught to me by the first chef I worked under after my culinary training. I know the boldness of the Napa Cabernet will stand up well to the richness of the brisket.

[Chef Altin approaches as the butcher is wrapping up Chef Nikiforov’s brisket. He surveys the remaining beef selections carefully.]

Chef Nikiforov: [conversationally] Quite the rush, yes? It would seem the prime cuts have all been claimed.

Chef Altin: [shrugging] We’ll see. [to the butcher] Can I get twenty pounds of chuck roast, please?

[Now that all the chefs have decided on a protein, the produce section is the next destination. Several chefs choose popular roasting and braising vegetables like carrots, onions, and potatoes, although Chef Chulanont appears to be filling his cart with rainbow chard before heading over to claim several heads of garlic. Likewise, Chef Katsuki has opted for another unusual veggie: the radish.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] It looks like Phichit and I are both thinking along the same lines, choosing to include a more bitter element in our dishes. One of the basics of wine pairing is keeping like with like. Since we have the more acidic Chilean wine, including a veggie with some edge like radishes will soften the bitterness of both, and bring forward the cherry and spice of the Cabernet.

[Chefs Altin and Yang also appear to be on the same page, opting to include sweeter elements in their dishes to pair with the Bordeaux Cabernet.]

Chef Yang: [Selecting the best cartons of blackberries] I love to experiment with fruit in savory dishes. I know a blackberry sauce will contrast beautifully with my tenderloin, just like the earthy aroma of the La Forge contrasts with the dark cherry that hits the palate.

Chef Nikiforov: Five minutes, everyone!

[All six chefs make it to the checkout line in time. Cutting is close is Chef Plisetsky, who races over from the refrigerated section just in time with several cartons of eggs in his cart.]

Chef Nikiforov: My, my, Yuri. What are you up to?

Chef Plisetsky: [slamming two bags of carrots down on the conveyor belt] None of your business, old man!

Chef Nikiforov: [raising his hands innocently] Alright, I will not be snooping. May the best chef win.

Chef Plisetsky: [growling] I’m going to!

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[The chefs are provided with a large commercial kitchen space at Midtown Terrace, where the Cow and Cabernet Gala will be held in only a few short hours.]

Chef Yang: [setting down her knife kit on a clear stretch of counter space] Another day, another unfamiliar kitchen.

Chef Nikiforov: [hefting his grocery bags onto a nearby station] Tell me about it. I feel like every stove in America has different dials.
Chef Plisetsky: [immediately diving into the small appliances pantry] Dibs on a food processor!

[With only three hours until service, most of the chefs are focused on their protein, as any slow cooking methods such as braising or roasting are going to take up most of the time. The trash bins are soon filled with white butcher paper as the chefs trim, season, and seat their beef in preparation for a long spell in the oven, or in Chef Nikiforov’s case, the pressure cooker.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover as he pats his sides of brisket down with paper towels] Even though the pressure cooker will do most of the work, searing is an essential portion of this recipe! You want to have dry, seasoned meat in a very hot pan for only a few minutes on each side. It browns the outside and seals in all the flavor and juice!

[Chef Nikiforov is the first to get his beef into a pan, followed by Chef Katsuki and Chef Yang. Chef Altin caramelizes onions in two heavy Le Creuset Dutch ovens before adding his cubed chuck roast to brown.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I’m so curious what Otabek is up to! The most expensive cut doesn’t always been the best tasting dish, but he’s taking a big risk using an ingredient as humble as chuck roast for this high end event.

[Only two chefs appear to be waiting to cook their steak in favor of treating their vegetables first. Chef Chulanont is breaking down his plethora of rainbow chard, separating the leaves from their woody stems and preparing to add them to a massive sauté pan where several dozen cloves of garlic are sizzling away.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] Whew, this is a lot of greens, but chard cooks down to nothing, and I want to make sure I have plenty of filling for the stuffed flank steak I have planned.

Chef Yang: [breathing deeply] That garlic smells amazing!

Chef Chulanont: [laughing] I know, right? I wish I could get that in a candle.

[Chef Plisetsky is attempting a very unusual side dish to go with his planned flat iron steak. The chef is currently transferring several pounds of carrots, chopped into even rounds, from his cutting board into a large pot of simmering water. Waiting nearby along with an industrial food processor are eggs, milk, sharp cheddar cheese, and flour.]

Chef Katsuki: [spotting baking powder on Chef Plisetsky’s station] Yuri, are you making a soufflé?

Chef Plisetsky: [still furiously chopping more carrots] ...Maybe. Did you see any mini ramekins in the pantry?

Chef Katsuki: [clearly surprised] Um, I’m going to get a roasting pan, I’ll take a look for you.

Chef Plisetsky: ...thanks.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Yuri’s making a bold choice, doing soufflés, but I’m not sure it’s a smart one. It’s certainly an elegant concept, but there are too many variables. The slightest thing can cause a fluffy soufflé to collapse into a curdled mess, and we have a long way to go before our food reaches our diners.

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Chef Yang: I think it’s pretty clear at this point in everyone’s dishes who has experience cooking for these kinds of events and who doesn’t. This is our first catering style challenge, and keeping your
dish consistent over the course of one hundred and fifty diners can be tough if you’ve chosen the wrong dish. Yuri P. is definitely crazy attempting soufflé, but there are a few others making odd choices. Upstairs we’ll be depending on warming trays and heat lamps to keep our components hot while we plate for the guests, and that can affect the taste and look of a dish. I think the chefs with the best odds right now are Victor, with his brisket, and Otabek. Both of them are making what are essentially stewed dishes whose flavor is only going to become more heightened as the night goes on, as opposed to any of the chefs depending on keeping their steaks a perfectly medium rare.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover as he seals his sides of brisket into three pressure cookers] I have served out of plenty of chafing dishes in my day. You need a nice sauced protein that will stay moist, and a stable side that won’t begin looking sad after a half hour on the line. For me, that means potatoes!

[With his pressure cooking underway Chef Nikiforov shifts his attention to a bag of Russet potatoes. After a good scrubbing, the potatoes are sliced into delicate slivers on a razor sharp mandolin. Nearby, Chef Plisetsky has blended his carrots and various baking ingredients into a smooth batter, and is spooning the bright orange mixture into a small fleet of ramekins waiting on a wide baking tray.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Yeah, yeah, I can see the other chefs giving me funny looks, but I’m not an idiot. This version of souffle is a lot more stable than the traditional method. They’ll hold up just fine...I hope.

[For about ten minutes the kitchen is filled with the sounds of enthusiastic hammering as Chef Chulanont takes a mallet to his steak, preparing to roll his stuffed roast. Chef Katsuki is next to get his Wagyu beef into the oven to begin braising, followed closely by Chef Yang whose tenderloin and root vegetable roast is going to need an hour and a half in the oven. Chef Chulanont finally gets his tenderized flank steaks stuffed and tied. After a quick sear on the grill they also find their place in a foil covered roasting pan and into the oven.]

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] Yes! My dish is coming out exactly as I planned. I can’t wait to slice into my steak and see all that amazing rainbow chard inside.

Chef Katsuki: Ninety minutes before we’re due upstairs!

[Chef Altin is the last to cover his pot, having seasoned his developing curry with garlic, coriander, tumeric, and ginger before adding a slew of bright red beets and a gallon of beef stock. His dish will need to simmer on medium heat for most the remaining time. Plenty of other chefs are also caught in a nerve-wracking waiting game as they wait to reveal the fate of their roasts. Chef Nikiforov makes a concerted effort not to hover over his pressure cookers, instead focusing on fanning out his thin slices of potato into a casserole dish. Likewise Chef Katsuki has his own side dish to worry about instead of his braising beef. The chef is working on a brown butter sauce to go with his roasted radishes.]

Chef Katsuki: [swirling butter in a pan as it turns golden and nutty] As always, I’m seeking balance in my dish. My warm radish salad will be the perfect acid to accompany the richness of my Wagyu braise, while the butter sauce will make sure there isn’t too much contrast in my plate. Radishes are “spicy” in a sense, but not in the way that chilis are spicy. That kind of heat is the opposite of what I would want to pair with a sharp red wine like the Culcu.

Chef Nikiforov: [passing by] Ah, beautiful, Yuuri. Brown butter radishes?

Chef Katsuki: [strangely shy] Yes. Like I learned that time in Moscow. You’re doing your brisket like Daniel taught you?
Chef Nikiforov: Of course. [laughing] I just hope none of the American diners tonight are expecting barbecue.

Chef Katsuki: I’m sure they’ll prefer yours once they taste it.

[The two chefs are standing close together, but break apart when Chef Yang slides between them with a bubbling dish and a warning call of “hot behind!”.]

Chef Nikiforov: [still smiling at a more professional distance] Davai, chef.


[Chef Nikiforov finally has his potatoes au gratin going in the oven, covered in a heavy cream sauce and Gruyere cheese. Chef Yang is working on a savory blackberry coulis to complement her red wine braised beef. Chef Plisetsky, with his souffles in the oven has just finished whipping up a compound herb butter and is only now turning to his flat iron steak with only a quarter of his time remaining. He cuts his steaks into tasting appropriate sizes, drying all one hundred and fifty portions before sprinkling them liberally with salt and pepper.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Most of the other chefs are working with larger cuts of meat, so they’ll be able to carve and serve upstairs instead of doing all their portions now, but I need that burnt caramel edge of a fresh seared steak to give texture to my dish. Nikiforov may be annoying, but he’s not a total loser in the kitchen, so I know his stupid brisket is probably going to be tender as hell. The only way to beat that is for my dish to be perfect. Nothing is better than a perfect medium-rare steak.

[In the final grind of the challenge, the kitchen gets quiet, until a slew of Russian curses interrupts the intense silence. All the chefs look to Chef Plisetsky, but to everyone’s surprise it is Chef Nikiforov who seems to have lost control of his temper.]

Chef Nikiforov: [nearly slamming his heavy casserole dish onto his workstation] Пиздец!

[Chef Nikiforov’s gratin is, to put it mildly, burned.]

Chef Chulanont: [poking his head out from behind a caterer’s rack] Everybody okay?

Chef Katsuki: [concerned] Victor, are you hurt?

Chef Nikiforov: [running his hand through his hair in frustration] I am fine. My potatoes, less so.

[Chef Nikiforov seems to notice the rest of the chefs staring, and impossibly, seems almost embarrassed.]

Chef Nikiforov: [tossing his hair] But it will be fine, of course! These things happen! Everyone as you were!

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Holy [beep]! That’s a big mistake for this late in the game, and from Victor of all people! Still, Yuri is gambling big with his souffle, so Victor could still come out on top for sure.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Pfft, that means nothing. Nikiforov didn’t get where he is today by throwing in the towel over some burned potatoes. My dish still has to be perfect.

[The other chefs disperse, leaving the Russian powerhouse to triage his side dish.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Okay, this is certainly...setback. However, once I do a little digging I
see what the problem is. *Gratin* is meant to bake until the potatoes are cooked, then turn on the broiler for the last five minutes to crisp the savory streusel topping. And yet, I have somehow misread the dials on the oven, and managed to turn on the broiler and oven all at once. It is...frustrating. But not unsavable! The *gratin* is burned on the surface yes, but underneath things are coming along fine!

[True to his word, Chef Nikiforov succeeds in removing the worst of the burned cheese to reveal mostly unscarred potatoes and cream sauce. The chef wastes no time in grating more Gruyere to top the casserole.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I have just enough left over product to make another topping, and all I can do is put it back in the oven. Time spent fixing the problem is lost cooking time. I don’t think the *gratin* is going to be as crisp as I would like, but I must move on to my brisket if I’m going to make service.

[Time is winding down quickly, and the chefs must not only finish the components of their dishes but pack everything onto the tall steel carts that will carry their food up the elevator to the terrace event venue. It takes a surplus of aluminum foil and saran wrap to keep everything hot for their diners. Last to get their cart in the elevator is Chef Nikiforov, who waits to the last possible moment to pull his gratin from the oven. He slides his cart into the elevator besides Chef Plisetsky’s, subtly attempting to peek down at his fellow Russian’s souffles, which appear to be perfectly set in their mini ramekins.]

Chef Nikiforov: [conversationally] Did it seem very humid out earlier today? I would hate for any delicate baked dishes to suffer from too much moisture in the air.

Chef Plisetsky: [looking uncharacteristically nervous] In your dreams, geezer.

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[Upstairs, an elegant terrace awaits, decorated with untold string lights and summer plants. Guests are already mingling, with multiple bars set up to distribute the three selected Cabernets of the evening. Along the opposite side of a plethora of stylish outdoor furniture are three stations awaiting the Top Chef contestants, one red, one blue, and one green. It’s a stark reminder that not only do the chefs have to provide a great dish to make it to the top, they have to beat one of their competitors head-to-head. They only have a half hour to set up and be ready to serve the one hundred and fifty guests eager to try their dishes. Chefs Katsuki and Chulanont set up at the green station.]

Chef Chulanont: [wiping his brow] Nothing like getting ready to serve a hundred and fifty people while they all watch, huh?

Chef Katsuki: [laughing nervously] Tell me about it.

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Chef Katsuki: It’s a basically a whole new challenge now that we’re upstairs. We’ve got all this perfectly cooked meat, and only table top burners and heat lamps to keep it warm without drying it out. I’m really happy with the texture of my beef right now, but if my sauce over reduces it’s going to throw the whole dish out of whack.

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[At the red station, Chefs Yang and Altin are enjoying a mostly silent setup, though the energy is more focused than antagonistic. Chef Yang has begun slicing her tenderloin, revealing a juicy pink
center, while Chef Altin pulls the lid off of his dutch ovens. The deep red curry has thickened nicely. Chef Altin tastes his dish and actually smiles. He offers a silent thumbs up to Chef Plisetsky who is setting up at the neighboring blue station. The younger chef returns the thumbs up, though his expression is a bit strained as he carefully monitors his miniature souffles where they’re keeping warm in a water bath.

Chef Plisetsky: [a bit louder than necessary] Can we start soon, or are they just going to talk all night?

Chef Nikiforov: [carefully slicing his brisket on the other side of the blue station] Now, now, Yuri, some of us would like to use our full thirty minutes, if you don’t mind.

[The last few minutes of preparation time wind down as the judges arrive, dressed in cocktail party attire. Christophe is wearing a festive bow tie patterned with cow spots, and Minako is wearing a lovely ivory sheath dress. Yakov is of course wearing his usual dour suit. Josef meets the judges at the bar after delivering a short welcome speech to the gathered partygoers.]

Christophe: [raising his glass] Here’s to a great evening, for a great cause.

Celestino: Hear, hear.

Minako: It looks like the event is a great success already, Josef, and we haven’t even had the food yet.

Josef: [looking pleased] Yes, I’m feeling very confident about our fundraising goals this year. But we are here to eat, yes? Let’s begin!

[At Josef’s signal the chefs are suddenly inundated with party guests, all hungry and holding the chef’s fate in their hands in the form of their red, green, and blue voting ballots. The chefs put out plate after plastic crystal plate at their stations only to have them snapped up just as quickly by their eager diners. Amidst the first wave of chaos, the judges make their first stop at the blue station.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] I see the judges coming, and it’s a huge relief. My dish is holding up well, but I wouldn’t want to be the diner who gets one of these souffles at the end of the night. Right now everything is perfect and that’s what I want to serve to the judges.

Christophe: Team Russia, how goes your evening so far?

Chef Nikiforov: [grinning as he rapidly sets out five new plates] Just getting started!

Christophe: While we sip on this lovely Pine Ridge Cabernet, why don’t you both tell us about the dishes you’ve made to pair with it.

Chef Nikiforov: To meet the robust Napa Cabernet Sauvignon, I’ve made meat and potatoes! Before you is a Kosher style brisket in a jus gravy, paired with very un-Kosher potatoes au gratin, with Gruyere cheese and fresh herbs to highlight this particularly fruit forward red.

Chef Plisetsky: I’ve made a seared flat iron steak with an herb butter, and a carrot souffle. The sweet and savory elements of the souffle are intended to bring out the stone fruit and blackberry in the Pine Ridge.

Christophe: Thank you both, we’re certainly looking forward to sampling these dishes.

[The judges make for a nearby cocktail table on which to rest their plates and wine glasses, leaving Chefs Nikiforov and Plisetsky to continue serving their guests.]
Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] My potatoes were a near disaster, but I couldn’t be happier with how my brisket came out. I know I have a fighting chance, especially since the judges’ aren’t the only opinions that matter. Whether I am in the top or bottom depends on the diners, and my dish is much more stable than Yuri’s. We’ll see how the night progresses.

Christophe: Well, shall we begin with Victor’s dish?

[The judges cut into Chef Nikiforov’s beef brisket with herb potatoes au gratin, alternating bites with thoughtful sips of the Pine Ridge Cabernet.]

Josef: Well, this brisket would make my Bubbe green with envy, that is for certain.

Celestino: Mm, fork tender, perfectly juicy. The fat has rendered beautifully. It’s not a beef dish I would think to pair with Cabernet, but the Pine Ridge stands up well to the richness.

Josef: Indeed, I find it very complimentary, particularly once you also taste the scalloped potatoes. There’s just a hint of sweetness in the cream sauce that brings out the body of this particular bottle.

Yakov: As far as the pairing, I would say it is a success, however there is something lacking in this dish for me.

Minako: [nodding] I think it’s texture. An au gratin preparation is meant to have an almost burned cheese topping to give some chew and crunch, and I think Victor’s could have used another few minutes under the broiler. Despite that, I’m getting a strange, almost burned aftertaste on the back of my palate that isn’t flattering to the Cabernet.

Yakov: I would have to agree.

Christophe: So an excellent brisket and a shaky au gratin. Will it be enough to beat Chef Plisetsky’s steak and carrot souffle?

Minako: [spoon in hand] Let’s find out.

Celestino: [examining a bite of Chef Plisetsky’s fluffy souffle] I’m still shocked, but I can’t find a single thing wrong with the texture of this side.

Josef: Far from anything wrong with it, I think it’s delicious! A lovely little souffle, and it really does highlight the stewed plum and blackberry of the wine. Meanwhile, his steak is a nice medium rare, and the garlic heat of his herb butter pulls some of the subtle peppery qualities that are hidden in the Napa Cabernet.

Minako: I do think this is an incredibly well rounded dish, and it brings out the complexities of the wine in a way that Chef Nikiforov’s dish doesn’t for me. I also think Chef Plisetsky got very lucky with several major components of this dish. I think the more experienced chefs here would have known better than to make souffle for a catering event, or try to keep steak medium rare under a heat lamp.

Christophe: [shrugging] With great risk comes great reward in Chef Plisetsky’s case tonight.

Yakov: I do wish Plisetsky had done something to unite the two elements on his plate. I have good steak, and a good souffle, but it does feel like two separate dishes to me in a way. I would have liked to see a sauce of some kind to bring them together.

Josef: Is not the Cabernet a kind of unifier though? If I were to eat this dish alone I would agree, but I think with the wine all three components come together and heighten each other.
Yakov: Hm…

Christophe: A strong start to the night from the blue station, but we still have plenty of cow to eat before judges’ table. Shall we move on to the next wine selection?

[At the red station, Chefs Yang and Altin have settled well into a plating rhythm now that the initial rush of diners has calmed into a more of a steady trickle. Chef Altin is frying naan croutons *a la minute*, while Chef Yang focuses her energy on highlighting her deep violet blackberry sauce with her plating.]

Guest: [to Chef Yang] Wow, this looks so gorgeous! I can’t wait to taste!

Chef Yang: [passing off several plates] Thanks, I hope you’ll vote for me!

Chef Altin: [voiceover] I’m feeling confident in my dish, but Isabella is putting out a strong plate as well. The diners are responding well to us both, that’s all I know.

Christophe: [approaching with the rest of the judges] Next up, pairing with the lovely Bordeaux Cabernet from La Forge Estate, we have Chef Altin and Chef Yang. Chefs, what have you made for us tonight?

Chef Altin: [grating fresh lemon zest over his five small portions] My dish is a beef and beet curry, spiced with coriander and turmeric, with a fried naan crouton. Please enjoy.

Chef Yang: To bring out the vanilla and cherries of the Bordeaux Cabernet I’ve prepared a red wine beef tenderloin with a savory blackberry coulis and roasted root vegetables.

Christophe: Thank you, chefs. Good luck to both of you in the rest of the challenge!

Guest: [to Chef Altin] Oh my god, this tastes amazing! Can I come back for seconds?

Chef Altin: [pausing with his grater] Um...I’m not sure if that’s allows. But...thank you?

[Having refilled with wine glasses with the French Cabernet, the judges consider the offerings of the red station.]

Minako: Well, I know I’m starting with Isabella’s beef and blackberries. That sauce is beautiful to look at. [eyes lighting up as she tastes] And it doesn’t disappoint on the palate!

Celestino: [nodding] I would say this is a somewhat classic pairing with red wine, but as usual Isabella has managed to freshen it up. That woody rosemary fragrance is really coming through in her roast, and that goes a long way to complement the tobacco and red pepper notes of this Cabernet.

Josef: Hm...I can certainly enjoy this dish, but I agree that it is “classic”, perhaps too much so for me.

Yakov: I would have to agree. There is nothing wrong with the dish per say, but for me it is neither original nor spectacular.

Celestino: I disagree. I think Isabella’s tenderloin is a nice bit of cookery.

Christophe: Let’s move on to Chef Altin’s curry, hm?

Josef: A more humble plating, to be sure, but what a color with those beets!

Minako: [tasting] And flavor. I’ll admit I was skeptical of Otabek’s choice for this dish but wow!
Yakov: There is an incredible depth of flavor in this curry, yet the beef is undoubtedly the focus. Everything is tender, but the addition of the crouton was an intelligent choice. Unlike Chef Nikiforov Chef Altin has clearly considered texture in his dish.

Josef: [shaking his head with a grin] I just keep going back and forth between the wine and the plate. Every time I discover something new! This is not a pairing I ever expected but I’ll be remembering it for a long time to come. Both chefs at this station were smart to plumb the depths of sweet and savory with their dishes, but the layering of Chef Altin’s curry is something pleasantly unexpected.

Christophe: Well, we’re certainly on a pleasant trajectory with dishes this evening.

Celestino: This is my kind of night. It’s always a struggle to decide who to send home, but I think this evening we’ll be struggling to pick a winner!

Christophe: Only one station to go. Let’s sample that lovely Chilean red waiting for us and see what Phichit and Yuuri K. are up to.

[At a little past halfway through Cow and Cabernet the time is starting to show on some of the chef’s dishes, for better or for worse. At the blue station Chef Nikiforov appears to have caught a second wind, while Chef Plisetsky’s souffle’s are starting to sink despite the chef’s heroic efforts.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] It is best for everyone if we keep our eye off our ballot boxes and on our own dishes! I can’t help but notice the tides shifting in my favor as the night goes on, however.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] It’s not over til it’s over! Besides, taste is king! I’m still getting plenty of votes even if my souffles are starting to suffer from the heat.

[At the green station, Chef Katsuki has his head down, focused entirely on plating other than the occasional shy exchange with a complimentary guest. Chef Chulanont, on the other hand, is all smiles, talking with his diners as he handily slices and plates his stuffed steak.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] This is nothing like Restaurant Wars for me. My job here is to provide my guests with the best dish possible. Still, I can admit I’m a little jealous of how good Phichit is with people. I have no doubt his charm will win him some votes from any diners on the fence between our dishes.

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] Wow, I know I look like I’m putting on a good show, but I’m starting to get a little nervous about the temperature of my flank steak. It’s getting late and the judges still haven’t come by. Oh well, I’ve served plenty of happy diners tonight!

[When the judges finally approach its a clear relief to both chefs.]

Chef Katsuki: [tossing a clean towel over his shoulder after wiping his brow] Hi Chris.

Christophe: Hi Yuuri, it looks like the two of you are certainly busy.

Chef Chulanont: [from his side of the station] That’s because we’ve got the two best dishes of the night right here!

Christophe: [laughing] That certainly seems like the right attitude, chef. Why don’t you tell us about your wine, and the dish you’ve made to go with it?

Chef Chulanont: [to the judges] I got to choose the Calcu Cabernet from Chile. I was excited to push some bold flavors out of my usual comfort zone! To match the tang and tannins of the Calcu I’ve made roulade of flank steak and garlic rainbow chard, with just a touch of aioli on the plate for some
Chef Katsuki: My dish is Wagyu beef braised with red wine and mirepoix. Accompanying my beef are roast radishes in a brown butter sauce, which I intend to complement the acidity of the Calcu Cab while drawing out its black cherry richness.

Christophe: [as the judges pick up a plate from each of the competitors] Thank you both!

[The judges leave Chefs Chulanont and Katsuki to the rest of their service, settling back at their high table to sample the final two offerings of the Cow and Cabernet face-off.]

Christophe: Now here we have two very different plates from the green station. Where shall we begin?

Josef: I’ll be starting with Chef Katsuki’s dish. I just have to try this Wagyu braise.

Yakov: [clearly skeptical] I’m a bit disappointed in Katsuki’s choice in protein. An expensive cut like Wagyu in this challenge is expected, to say the least. I would have thought the chef would want to pin his hopes on his own skill, not on being first to the butcher’s counter.

Minako: [grinning after sampling Chef Katsuki’s dish] I think you might eat your words after you taste it, Yakov. This is...well, I think it’s Yuuri’s best dish of the season, and that’s certainly saying something.

[Celestino can only nod and gesture enthusiastically around a bite of Chef Katsuki’s braised beef, and even the articulate Josef seems taken aback.]

Josef: I...well. I’ve had Wagyu before, of course, but this is something very special. And the pairing with the wine! At the tasting we discussed the long finish of the Calcu, and it’s as if Chef Katsuki planned it as an ingredient in the dish. The red fruit and spice of the Cab feeds beautifully into the bite of those radishes, and the brown butter leads the palate right to the Wagyu. I can only call it...poetic.

Minako: This is what you get when you put a premium ingredient in the hands of a master. Chef Katsuki respects what he’s cooking with, and the evidence is on the plate.

Yakov: [pushing away his cleaned plate] In this case...I am happy to stand corrected.

Christophe: Yuuri K., setting a high bar for the green station. But what do we think of Chef Chulanont’s roulade?

Josef: I think, like Chef Katsuki, the Chef Chulanont has made a very smart choice by incorporating a bitter green into his dish. The heat of that garlic does wonders for the Calcu, leveling out that tang so you can enjoy some of the more complex notes of the wine.

Minako: I do really enjoy Phichit’s filling. There’s a hit of balsamic that is doing great things for the Cabernet. However…

Celestino: [correctly guessing Minako’s thought] Is anyone else’s beef a bit chewy?

Yakov: More than a “bit”. My portion is just plain overdone.

Minako: Let’s not get carried away. Mine is verging on medium well, but it’s far from inedible. I think this is a simple case of a bit too long spent in a warming tray.
Yakov: Yes, but a thicker cut of meat would have held its temperature longer under the conditions of the challenge! These are things a chef must know.

Josef: I agree, I think Chef Chulanont may have unknowingly sacrificed that perfect medium rare in choosing the roulade form for his beef dish. And in this case the direct comparison with Chef Katsuki’s Wagyu is...[wincing] a little unfortunate. Still, a sophisticated pairing in my book.

Christophe: I can tell we have a lot to talk about before judges’ table! Why don’t we let the chefs rack up the donations to Meals on Wheels while we get another glass of wine and ruminate?

Josef: [toasting his glass] I’ll drink to that.

[As the challenge winds down, the tension on the terrace rises. Guests have finished their tastings and are casting their ballots to decide which chefs will be safe, and who will be at risk of elimination at tonight’s judges table. Some of the contestants are paying close attention to their boxes, while others are keeping their sanity by focusing only on their dishes.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Ugh, keeping track of the score between me and Otabek is impossible. I feel like I’m at a blackjack table trying to count cards! Either way, I know it’s close.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Ha, I know if I so much as look at my ballot box I’m going to have a panic attack, so I’m pretending it doesn’t exist. I had a very positive diner response tonight though, so if I’m on the bottom at least I know I haven’t embarrassed myself.

[Eventually, the gala comes to a close. Aperitifs and small desserts which the chef contestants are thankfully not responsible for are passed among the crowd by a throng of well trained staff, while a few persistent guests get a second helping or two from their favorite chefs. Chef Nikiforov is down to the very last slices of his brisket, and Chef Altin has nearly scraped his Dutch ovens clean. Chef Katsuki ran out of his braised beef nearly ten minutes ago, and is dutifully cleaning up his station. The challenge is over, and now only judges’ table remains.]

[The air is solemn in the stew room tonight. At least the chefs have been provided with a generous stock of Cabernet left over from the challenge tonight. Exhausted, there is nonetheless a sense of shared camaraderie as the contestants await their fate.]

Chef Nikiforov: [toasting his glass] It’s been an honor sharing a kitchen with each and every one of you.

[There’s a murmur of agreement and a clink of glasses before the chefs collapse into the provided folding chairs. It’s only a few moment’s respite before Christophe arrives.]

Christophe: The judges would like to see all of you.

[There’s a few confused glances, but mostly resolve as the chefs rise to follow Christophe to judges’ table. Just before they reach the door, Chef Katsuki catches Chef Chulanont by the sleeve.]

Chef Katsuki: Phi—I—I just want you to know, no matter who wins the face-off—

Chef Chulanont: [with a small smile] I think we both know who won tonight, Yuuri.

Chef Katsuki: [frowning] You don’t—[shaking his head]—anyway. No matter what...just, [firmly] you’re my best friend, you know?
Chef Chulanont: [with an exasperated laugh] God, you’re so—come here, Yuu.

[Chef Chulanont pulls Chef Katsuki in for a hug, squeezing tight.]

Chef Chulanont: We’re best friends forever Katsuki, and you don’t have to do anything to earn that [voice teasing] including hold my hand through Quickfire challenges.

Chef Katsuki: [breaking the hug, shocked] You knew?

[Chef Chulanont raises one eyebrow.]

Chef Katsuki: ...I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have—

Chef Chulanont: Probably not, but it’s not like I’m upset I won. Just trust me to get there on my own next time, yeah?

Chef Katsuki: I do trust you. You’re a great chef. I’m sorry I didn’t act like it.

Phichit: All’s forgiven Yuu-chan. [laughing again] Now come on, before we get disqualified for delay of game.

[Chefs Chulanont and Katsuki join their competitors to face the judges. It’s all friendly faces...for now.]

Josef: Chefs, to begin I want to thank all of you for your contributions to tonight’s successful Cow and Cabernet gala. We’re still tallying additional donations but I’m thrilled announce that tonight’s advance tickets alone have raised forty-thousand dollars for Meals on Wheels, due in no small part to your excellent cooking tonight.

[Despite the tension of the evening, all the chefs give a cheer at Josef’s pronouncement, proud to have helped raised such a hefty sum for a great cause.]

Christophe: [still applauding] Yes, well done. I speak for the judges and myself when I say we had a very difficult job today.

Minako: [nodding] The margin between top and bottom was the slimmest it’s ever been this season. [growing solemn] Chefs, unfortunately one of you will be going home tonight for a very strong dish.

[That certainly puts the damper on the celebratory air.]

Christophe: Right. So while Josef’s charity board is still counting their donations, we have finished counting your diners’ ballots tonight, and the results are in. [dramatic pause] If I call your name, would you please step forward.

Chef Katsuki: I realize Christophe is about to reveal the winners and the losers of the face-off right now, and it’s like someone dropped an ice cube down my chef’s coat.

Chef Yang: [nervous] Can’t they just call us in from the stew room like civilized people?

Christophe: Chef Plisetsky. Chef Altin. ...and Chef Katsuki.
Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] These groups don’t tell me anything! Sure, I could be the winner of my face-off, but Victor’s in the other group and there’s no way—

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] The minute Christophe calls Yuuri’s name, I know. I’m surprised to see Yuri and Otabek up front, to be honest, but I tasted Yuuri’s dish and there’s no doubt in my mind—

Christophe: If I’ve called your name [a smile]...congratulations. The diners voted you the winners of your Cow and Cabernet face-offs. All three of you are through to the finale round.

[It’s a mixed display of emotions from the top three chefs. Despite his quiet confidence throughout the challenge, Chef Altin looks almost surprised accepting congratulations from Chef Yang who has accepted her defeat with grace, while Chef Katsuki is near tears, whether from relief or some other overwhelming emotion is uncertain. Chef Plisetsky appears to be in a state of shock. He startles when Chef Nikiforov places a firm hand on his shoulder from behind. Chef Plisetsky turns to face the older chef, who offers him a tired smile.]


Chef Plisetsky: [shaking his head] I...I learned to make that souffle from eating at your first restaurant.

Chef Nikiforov: [winking] I know. You made it your own tonight. Congratulations.

[Christophe clears his throat, and Chef Plisetsky only has time to offer Chef Nikiforov a quick nod before turning towards the judges again.]

Christophe: Congrats again, Yuri, Yuuri, and Otabek. Out of six strong dishes, you were voted the diner’s favorites, in the quality of your cooking and the quality of your wine pairing. Judges, what do you have to say to our top three?

Minako: Yuri P., you walked the razor’s edge tonight, and it paid off with your diners. None of us could believe the nerve of attempting a souffle at a catering event, but you executed it perfectly, and also gave us a perfectly cooked steak from under a heat lamp! It felt effortless, but there was a lot of labor in that dish, chef, and it did not go unnoticed.

Yakov: Chef Katsuki, I will be the first to admit I thought I had seen all there was to see of the Wagyu beef craze, but I am happy to say you proved me wrong tonight. There was an exquisite dialogue between the wine, the radishes, and the beef. Good ingredients go a long way, but the best ingredients in the hands of a great chef...you reminded us today what that experience can be like. Good work.

Celestino: And while great ingredients go a long way to make a great dish, humble ingredients in the right hands can still be a revelation. Chef Altin, you showed us today that the possibilities of a great wine pairing are truly endless. Your curry brought out a new side of the Le Forge Estate. The curry itself was mild, but a lack of chili heat did nothing to detract from the intense layering of flavor in your dish. Your perfect balance of savory and sweet really made the Cabernet sing, and at the end of the day your dish was just plain delicious.

Christophe: All three of you won your face-offs and you will all be moving on to the finale in Lisbon, but as usual there can only be one winner. Josef, would you like to do the honors?

Josef: It’s my pleasure. Tonight’s event was called Cow and Cabernet for a reason, and so the honor must go to the chef who did the best by his wine, and who gave me a braised beef like I’ve never
had it. Chef Katsuki, congratulations you are the winner tonight!

[The other chefs are quick to congratulate Chef Katsuki, who looks totally overwhelmed to have won.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I-I can’t believe it! I would have been happy to just be through to the final, really. But to win on a challenge with so many strong dishes...well, between this and Restaurant Wars I think I’m really starting to feel like a contender for the title.

[The room settles again as Chef Katsuki offers the judges a quick bow, a bright smile on his face.]

Chef Katsuki: Thank you. It’s been a great inspiration to me to cook among such a strong group of chefs.

Christophe: Modest as always, Chef Katsuki, but you have the strongest dish tonight, by a unanimous decision. And, as the winner of this challenge, you’ll be receiving fifteen cases of the Culcu 2012 Cabernet Sauvignon.

Chef Katsuki: [eyes wide but happy] Wow, I look forward to offering it at my restaurant back home in Tokyo. Thank you.

Christophe: Congrats, Yuuri, and to all three of you. We’ll be seeing you in Portugal in a few weeks! In the meantime, you are safe, and may return to the stew room.

[Despite his excitement over his victory Chef Katsuki hesitates to follow Chefs Plisetsky and Altin back to the waiting room, casting a long worried glance at Chefs Nikiforov and Chulanont. He leaves after Chef Nikiforov mouths “go” and offers him a reassuring smile.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] It’s great to win, but now comes the hard part. We know who lost their face-offs, but the rest is up to the judges. I know who I’m rooting for, though.

[Chef Nikiforov’s smile doesn’t last long after Chef Katsuki’s exit, and all faces are solemn as the losing chefs face the judges.]

Christophe: We’d love to take all three of you to Lisbon, especially after the strong showing tonight, but unfortunately we have to make a decision. The three of you did not win your Cabernet face-offs, and one of you will be asked to pack your knives.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I know what mistake I made in the kitchen today. If it is my time I will accept it. I lost to a stronger dish, and I feel no shame in that.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I love the dish I made for this challenge. Sometimes these things just come down to the diner’s tastes. It could easily be Otabek standing in my place right now.

Chef Chulanont: [voiceover] I may have lost to Yuuri, but I stand by every element of my plate. I know my pairing was on point.

Minako: Chef Yang, your dish was outvoted by Otabek’s curry, but only just. We found your dish to be well executed, and well paired with your assigned Cabernet. For those reasons...you are safe tonight, and you will be moving on to the final.

Chef Yang: [surprised] I...thank you. I look forward to giving you my best dishes in Lisbon.

Christophe: Isabella, you may go and wait with your colleagues.
[The three winning chefs are surprised to see one of their competitors return so quickly from the
dreaded deliberation phase of the judging, and even more surprised to see Chef Yang, alone.]

Chef Yang: [answering the other’s curious glances] ...I’m safe. They’re still talking to the others.

Chef Plisetsky: [quietly] But that means…

Chef Altin: [nodding] It’s down to Phichit and Victor.

[All gazes swivel to Chef Katsuki, who looks vaguely nauseous. Back in judging Chef Nikiforov and Chef Chulanont stand side by side in a show of solidarity as they await the judge’s critique.]

Christophe: Chefs, you both made praiseworthy dishes today, but there were some mistakes made,
and at this stage of the competition we have no choice but to be picky. Judges?

Minako: Victor, how did you feel about the final texture of your *au gratin*?

Chef Nikiforov: [cool as ice] I would have liked the topping cooked a touch more. There was
a...small error in the oven before the event began. But nothing left the kitchen that I am not proud to
have my name attached to.

Yakov: We can all respect you standing by your dish chef, but you have already identified the fault
yourself. We found your brisket to be tender and flavorful, and a good match for the full-bodied
quality of your wine, but without the added crunch of a properly cooked *gratin*, the texture of your
dish was very same-same between elements.

Chef Nikiforov: [offering a brief nod] Thank you for your criticism.

Josef: Chef Chulanont, can you explain why you chose a roulade as the vehicle for your dish
components?

Chef Chulanont: I wanted the dish to be focused and unified in order to stand up to the boldness of
the wine, rather than feel like disparate elements. I feel that the balsamic dressed greens functioned as
a kind of self-saucing filling to keep the steak moist under the catering conditions of the challenge.

Celestino: Your dish was a good idea in concept, and we agree that your robust stuffing was a
lovely compliment to one of the more challenging wines of the night. However, despite the delicious
taste of the balsamic and garlic in your greens, it only went so far in preventing the conditions of the
challenge from taking a toll on your beef. Whether or not it left the kitchen properly cooked, by the
time it reached our plates the steak was overdone, and a bit dry. We loved the flavors of your dish,
but a different cut of meat might have better served them.

Chef Chulanont: I understand. Thank you.

[In the stew room you could cut the tension with a knife.]

Chef Plisetsky: [pacing] So the old man didn’t get a good enough broil on his side dish, and
Chulanont overcooked his steak. Which is worse?

Chef Yang: Overcooking your protein, for sure. But the challenge was all about wine pairing and
Phichit’s flavors were a home run with the Chilean Cab, I tasted the dish. Victor’s plate might have
been too plain this time around.

Chef Altin: [glancing in concern at Chef Katsuki] Let’s keep it down a bit, yeah?
Chef Katsuki: [wringing his chef’s coat between his hands] Only one of them made a mistake that we saw...

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Chef Katsuki: [visibly upset] I knew this competition would be brutal but I never considered the possibility it wouldn’t be both of us going through to the end. [blinking back tears] I can’t imagine going to Lisbon without him.

Producer: Without Phichit?

Chef Katsuki: [confused] What?

Producer: Just to clarify. You can’t imagine going to Lisbon without Phichit, is what you meant, right? Surely you’d rather see Chef Nikiforov go home than your best friend.

Chef Katsuki: [expression conflicted] I...

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Christophe: This is always the most difficult cut of the season. Know that this decision was not an easy one for any of us.

Chef Nikiforov: [clapping Chef Chulanont on the shoulder] Whatever the result, I’m proud to stand next to this chef, as a colleague and as a friend.

Chef Chulanont: [nodding firmly] Same here.

Christophe: The chef who will not be moving on to the finale….

[It seems as though a lifetime passes in Christophe’s pause as the chefs wait to hear who will move on and who will be staying behind.]

Christophe: ...is Chef Chulanont.

[It’s like a breath is released as Chef Nikiforov realizes he is safe, and Chef Chulanont, eyes wet, offers his fellow competitor a hug.]

Chef Chulanont: [barely audible] Watch out, Nikiforov, ‘cause I’m gonna be back to make sure Yuuri has the best sous chef in the world when you two face off in the finale.

Chef Nikiforov: [patting his friend on the back] I would expect no less.

Christophe: Victor, this means you are safe, and will be moving on to Lisbon. Phichit, it’s been a pleasure tasting your food this season, but I’m afraid I have to ask you to pack your knives and go.

Chef Chulanont: [wiping his eyes quickly before offering the judges a grin] If this is the dish I have to go home on, then I know I can leave with my head held high. [bowing] Thank you for this opportunity.

Christophe: Best of luck, chef. [to Chef Nikiforov] Victor, we’ll see you in the coming final rounds. Be sure to bring your best.

Chef Nikiforov: I look forward to showing you what I can really do. Thank you.

[Chef Katsuki is the first to his feet when Chefs Nikiforov and Chulanont return to the stew room.]
Chef Nikiforov nods his head, just a fraction of an inch, and Chef Katsuki has to school the expression of intense relief off his face before he offers his best friend a hug. Soon enough however, the emotions are real as the chefs offer the well liked and respected Chef Chulanont their well-wishes.

Chef Chulanont: [sniffling] Come on, Yuu, don’t cry. If you cry, I’m gonna cry and that never ends well—

Chef Katsuki: [laughing wetly] I know, I know. Just— I wish I could compete against you in the finale.

Chef Chulanont: Me too. But I’ve got a lot of hustling to do now that I’m a celebrity TV chef.

Chef Katsuki: [breaking the hug] Ha. I’m really proud of you, Phi.

Chef Chulanont: [grinning] You know what, I’m proud of me too. I know I still have plenty of room to grow, and I’m ready for that. I’ll come get you for a rematch, someday soon, Katsuki.

Chef Katsuki: [nodding] Bring it on, Chulanont.

[With several more hugs, and a wave goodbye, Chef Chulanont leaves his fellow chefs behind to pack his knives.]

[Chef Chulanont slings his knife bag over his shoulder, offering the camera twin victory signs and a beaming grin before leaving the Top Chef kitchen.]

[There’s a rarified air in the Top Chef apartment tonight, as the chefs prepare to return home for a well earned break before meeting again in Lisbon for the final rounds of competition. Amidst quiet celebrations, packing, and a well earned glass of wine Chef Nikiforov manages to find Chef Katsuki alone on the balcony, staring down at the city lights.]

Chef Nikiforov: [softly] Yuuri.

Chef Katsuki turns at the sound of his competitor’s voice, and wastes no time folding himself into Chef Nikiforov’s arms.

Chef Katsuki: [muffled] I’m so glad you made it.

Chef Nikiforov: [switching his wine glass to his free hand so he can stroke Chef Katsuki’s hair] Me too. It could have been either of us, really.
Chef Katsuki: [shaking his head as he breaks the hug] I knew it would be you. I was nervous...but I knew.

[The chefs resettle on the balcony, leaning against the railing and looking out at the city in nighttime.]

Chef Nikiforov: [quietly] I owe you an apology.

Chef Katsuki: [looking away] Victor—

Chef Nikiforov: [shaking his head] Let me. I did not approve of you helping Phichit in the Quickfire, it’s true, but I shouldn’t have questioned your commitment to this competition, not when I know better. I’m sorry.

Chef Katsuki: I— [a long exhale] Thank you. You were right, to some extent, though. I would never have risked my place here, but I was being overprotective of Phichit. [grinning ruefully] He called me out on it right before judges’ table, in fact.

Chef Nikiforov: [laughing] Phichit is far more perceptive than he generally is credited for, I think.

Chef Katsuki: Hm. But he reminded me: If I want to support him as a friend, then I need to respect him as a chef. Phichit is in a different place than me right now, but he’s got his own path to walk, and that’s okay.

Chef Nikiforov: [teasing] Wise of you to figure out, Katsuki-sensei.

Chef Katsuki: [rolling his eyes] Haha, alright.

Chef Nikiforov: ...How are you feeling, after your win?


Chef Nikiforov: Mhm...at least we’ll have a little time at home before Lisbon. [voice turning sly] Are you happy to be seeing your husband again after so long away?

Chef Katsuki: [confused] My— Oh. [laughing under his breath] Why yes, now that you mention it. [something heating in his gaze] I don’t think I’m going to let him out of bed for a week.

[Chef Nikiforov nearly chokes on a sip of wine, his cheeks flushing.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voice squeaking] W-wow! Well, I’m sure he’s looking forward to that. Between all your restaurant shifts, of course.

[Chef Katsuki laughs, breaking his moment of eros without a thought in favor of something warmer. With a sigh, he leans in until he can rest his head on Chef Nikiforov’s shoulder.]

Chef Katsuki: [almost too soft for the cameras to hear] We did it.

Chef Nikiforov: [looking down at Chef Katsuki with adoration in his eyes] Mm. And the best is still to come.

[The moon rises over the skyline as the chefs say goodbye to New York City, and hello to the next stage of Top Chef.]
Olá Lisbon!

Chapter Notes

Hi all, sorry for the wait! As I’ve mentioned on tumblr I’ve been having laptop issues so I’m now faced with typing the rest of this fic on my phone! It’s...slow going. But I hope you enjoy! All of your comments are so inspiring and encouraging, I couldn’t do this without you!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

[Quick camera flashes over Rossio Square, winding neighborhoods of bright pastel buildings with tiled roofs, and at the top of the city, São Jorge Castle. The setting is Lisbon, Portugal’s hilly coastal capital. In a busy city plaza a cab pulls over, depositing Chef Isabella Yang onto the medieval cobbled street. The chef has her knife bag over her shoulder as she takes in the sunny weather and fresh seaside air where the final rounds of Top Chef will be taking place.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] It’s great to be in Lisbon, the weather is amazing here! I really feel like this change of scene is a good omen for me. I was stuck in the bottom for the last few challenges in NYC but I spent the break working hard and reading up on Portuguese cuisine. Goodbye funk, hello Top Chef!

[Chef Yang crosses the plaza, passing the ornate baroque Basílica da Estrela to board the iconic yellow Tram 28. The 1930s street car sets off on it’s rattling route up the steep streets of Lisbon. It passes by Sao Bento, and the Portuguese parliament building, before reaching the trendy neighborhood of Chiado. Waiting in the shade of the Belle Epoque architecture are Chefs Nikiforov and Katsuki, both with their own knife kits and Chef Nikiforov in another pair of designer sunglasses. They wave to Chef Yang enthusiastically and climb on board the trolley.]

Chef Yang: [giving both chefs a hug] Hey strangers, when did you get in?

Chef Nikiforov: [yawning glamorously] Only a few hours ago. The red eye was brutal, and I worked a lunch shift before hand!

Chef Yang: Well, I hope you’re ready to compete, because Katsuki and I won’t go easy on you, right Yuuri?

Chef Katsuki: [determined] Definitely not.

Chef Nikiforov: [tucking his sunglasses on his head to better see the unique architecture the trolley trundles past] I would expect nothing less, my friends.

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Chef Nikiforov: It is wonderful to be in the south of Europe, even though it is still summer and hotter than is comfortable for me. [laughs before growing serious] I did not end the last New York challenge in pride of place. When I returned home, after seven days of tender love making with my beautiful husband [wink], I took time to focus on my restaurant. It was good to remind myself who I am as a chef, outside of this competition. I feel more than ready to remind my competitors why Victor Nikiforov is to be both loved and feared in the kitchen.
Chef Katsuki: I may have won the last challenge, but in a way that’s just more pressure. We’re all great chefs, and being ranked low can be a great motivator. Basically, I’m sure everyone is gunning for me, so I’m just going to cook my best.

[The next stop is Rua Conceição. Chef Altin is waiting with a serious expression and several shopping bags.]

Chef Nikiforov: [welcoming Chef Altin onto the tram] Otabek, playing tourist this morning?

[Chef Altin gestures at his bags, filled with decorative blue and white ceramic tiles, cork coin purses and smartphone cases, and several CDs of Lisbon’s famous Fado music.]

Chef Altin: I have... a lot of older sisters. They wanted souvenirs.

Chef Altin: I was able to spend the break from the show at home in Almaty with my family. It was...centering. A few episodes of the season have already aired so my mom and sisters got a real glimpse of my craft as a chef. They’re already proud of me, even after my stumble in restaurant wars. I ended the season in New York on a hit streak, and I want to continue that here in Lisbon.

[Waiting at the next stop outside Se Cathedral is the youngest remaining competitor, Chef Plisetsky. The young chef seems to have let his wheat blonde hair grow even longer since New York. It brushes his shoulders as he boards the now crowded tram and scowls through the enthusiastic greetings of the other chefs.]

Chef Nikiforov: [with fatherly concern] Ah, Yura, are you sunburned already? We Russians have to watch out for our ivory complexions! Yuuri, do we still have that sunscreen—

Chef Plisetsky: [looking a little singed across the bridge of his nose as he shoves Chef Nikiforov away] Bah, get away from me, geezer! The sun won’t stop me from kicking your ass again in the final!

Chef Yang: [under her breath to Chef Katsuki] You know I almost missed that belligerent energy while we were gone.

Chef Katsuki: [winking] I think we all did. It’s nice to be back together.

Chef Plisetsky: [managing to find a peaceful seat beside Chef Altin] Enough hugging already! When do we cook?

[The answer to Chef Plisetsky’s question is: right away. The chefs disembark at the appropriately named Portas do Sol, a wide sunny plaza near the top of the steep slopes of Lisbon. The wide pedestrian space offers a birds eye view of the busy streets below, all the way out to the Atlantic Ocean beyond the edge of the coast. Just above the plaza São Jorge Castle watches over the chefs as they approach a cleared platform in the middle of the space where Christophe is waiting beside five portable chef stations. Their host is ready for the sunny weather in a dapper white linen suit and gold aviator sunglasses. Standing beside Christophe is the intimidating presence of Lilia Baranovskaya-Feltsman, looking cool as can be in her floor length sleeveless black dress.]
Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Oh boy. I see Lilia and it’s like all the rest from our break is gone. It’s gonna be high pressure right from the start.

Christophe: Chefs, welcome to Lisbon, Portugal, and more specifically to the Portas do Sol, right in the shadow of the famous São Jorge Castle. [gesturing at the stunning seaside vista behind him] What do you think of this view?

[The chefs offer their applause, Chef Nikiforov even giving an enthusiastic whistle.]

Christophe: And of course there’s the even more stunning view right here beside me. Chefs, please welcome back Lilia Baranovskaya-Feltsman. She’ll be joining us at judges table for the remainder of the season.

Lilia: [nodding her head regally] Chefs, I look forward to seeing your improvement since I last tasted your food.

[The chefs applaud again, but share a look of trepidation, especially Chef Yang.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Oh great, Lilia’s going to be here for the whole final. Since I made such an amazing first impression in the wedding shower challenge.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] This is certainly an intriguing development. I know my new mission in life: make sure Lilia does not hate me! No problem!

Christophe: So here you are, the illustrious final five. Each of you has made it here to Portugal in your skills, your experience, and most importantly your instincts. Now, a little reminder of what you’re playing for, in case you’ve forgotten after a few weeks of rest and relaxation [chuckle].

Chef Plisetsky: [under his breath] Fat chance.

Christophe: For the last chef standing, a showcase at the Food and Wine Classic in Aspen, Colorado, a cover article in Food and Wine magazine, one hundred thousand dollars, furnished by the Glad family of products, and, of course, the prestigious title of Top Chef.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover, determined] That money means I’ll finally be able to open my own restaurant!

Chef Altin: [voiceover, expression stoic] A major magazine feature will finally put me on the map, and I can showcase the cuisine of my home country to the whole world.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] The title of Top Chef will finally prove that I belong here among the greats, to myself most of all!

Christophe: We have a very special challenge planned for your first days here in Lisbon, but first, let’s see if you’re all still sharp after your break. What better way to pay tribute to the plentiful and varied seafood of this beautiful port city than with a little contest? Chefs, please choose your stations!

[The Quickfire logo flashes across the screen before fading back to the action at hand. The five contestants each lay out their knife cases on one of the portable stations Christophe indicated. Covering each of main surfaces of the station is a red checkered cloth, covering the mysterious contents beneath.]

Christophe: The coastal nation of Portugal is home to a wide variety of delicious and diverse oceanic delights. For this Quickfire challenge, Lilia and I are going to make sure you’re up to the task of preparing them for cooking! Whatever mystery ingredient awaits you on your stations, your job is to
be the quickest and cleanest as you filet, shuck, and shell them to perfection.

Chef Katsuki: [eyes lighting up] I can do this!

Chef Yang: [determined] I have to do this!

Chef Altin: [shrugging] I'm from a landlocked country. I'm going to do my best.

Christophe: The competition will be held in three rounds, until only one chef remains to be crowned the winner. When you think you're finished, call for a check.

Lilia: I will be determining whether your preparations are up to par, and if they aren’t you will be eliminated automatically. So don’t waste my time, Chefs.

Christophe: To kick off the final round in Lisbon with a bang, let’s make this a little more interesting. As I’m sure you can imagine, immunity is not up for grabs today. Instead, the winner of the contest will win bragging rights... and ten thousand dollars!

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Oo, prizes! I am loving the finale round already!

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] My eyes are on the prize not pocket change. ...Still, I could do a lot with ten grand.

Christophe: First round! Please reveal your workstations!

[The chefs pull the cloths from their stations to reveal the first round of their challenge. Awaiting each chef are several empty trays of ice, a Kevlar glove, an intimidating but short pointed knife, and finally a large steel bowl piled high with fresh, irregularly shelled oysters.]

Christophe: To weed out the grouper from the guppies, we’d like you to please shuck fifteen oysters. That’s means a clean open shell, and be sure to sever that adductor muscle underneath! Only the first three chefs to finish will move on to the second round!

Chef Nikiforov: Pshhh, I was shucking oysters in St. Petersburg before I could speak full sentences. This is like homecoming for me, not a challenge.

Chef Plisetsky: [scowling] This is horse[beep]! Give me a real fish to filet!

Christophe: On your mark, get set…

[The shrill sounds of Christopher’s whistle fills the air and the chefs are off, pulling on their protective gloves and grabbing their first oyster. It’s about thirty seconds of intense silence and
muffled cursing as the chefs find the hinge of the oysters, looking for the perfect slot to wedge their oyster knives and pry open the shells to reveal the plump treasure within. The first sound to come from the chefs is a snap, from Chef Plisetsky’s station. The chef has broken the shell by wiggling his knife too forcefully. Unfortunately that means it won’t count towards his final count of fifteen. With a growl of frustration the chef grabs another oyster and begins again. Beside him, Chef Nikiforov is the first chef to cleanly remove the shell on his first oyster. He runs his knife over the top and bottom of the bivalve to sever the adductor muscle before thunking the perfect oyster down in his tray of ice. The older chef wastes no time to gloat, grabbing another oyster as Chefs Yang and Katsuki follow close on his tail.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover, almost serene as he finds the hinge on his second oyster] This brings back memories! I couldn’t tell you how many oysters I shucked for my family’s restaurant growing up. Never quite at this pace, though!

[Once the first oyster pops open time moves swiftly, and in a matter of minutes Chefs Nikiforov, Katsuki, and Yang are neck and neck with ten oysters apiece. Trailing but still respectable is chef Altin, who has seven oysters on his tray, and bringing up the rear is Chef Plisetsky, who has only managed four oysters without breaking a shell.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover as she slides her knife smoothly through the muscle that binds the oyster to the top and bottom of its shell] I think the top three are pretty clear in this round, which comes as no surprise since we’re all from coastal cities. I almost feel bad for Otabek and Yuri, but these are skills a well rounded chef needs.

Chef Altin: [voiceover as he patiently works his knife into the stubborn hinge of an oyster] I know the technique, And my oysters are all coming out clean, I just can’t keep up with the others. It’s frustrating, but I can only worry about myself.

[At only eighteen minutes it’s clear first place is going to come down to Chefs Katsuki and Nikiforov, though Chef Yang has hardly slowed down as she pops open her thirteenth oyster. Working on magic number fifteen, both Chef Katsuki and Chef Nikiforov seem to have embraced the fire of competition.]

Chef Katsuki: [grinning as he wiggles his knife into his final oyster] I’ve got to represent for island nations everywhere! [playfully to Chef Nikiforov] Take that, mainlander!

Chef Nikiforov: [refusing to stop even to wipe his sweaty bangs out of his eyes] At this point, I just really want to beat Yuuri! [grumbling] If only this last mother[beep] was not wanting to be so stubborn—

Chef Katsuki: [placing his final oyster on the tray] Check!

[Christophe blows his whistle, and Lilia carefully inspects all fifteen of Yuuri’s oysters before offering a solemn nod.]

Lilia: These are satisfactory. Chef Katsuki has earned his place in the second round.

Christophe: Well done, Yuuri! The rest of you...[blows whistle] Onward!

[It’s only a matter of seconds before Christophe is blowing his whistle again as Chef Nikiforov pops open his final oyster and calls for a check.]

Lilia: [looking over Chef Nikiforov’s offerings] Victor has performed acceptably as well. You may step aside, chef.
Chef Nikiforov: [to Chef Katsuki] I’ll get you next time, Katsuki.

Chef Katsuki: [grinning] In your dreams, Nikiforov.

Christophe: Back to the race! [Blows whistle] It looks like this is Chef Yang’s spot to claim, unless Chef Altin wants to surprise us with a four oyster upset—

Chef Yang: [dropping her oyster knife] Check!

Christophe: [blowing his whistle] Or maybe not. Lilia?

[Lilia only has to look over Chef Yang’s tray briefly.]

Lilia: Well done, chef. The third spot is yours.

Chef Yang: Thank you.

Christophe: That’s it! Yuuri K., Victor, and Isabella are our top three! Otabek and Yuri P., a valiant effort, but I’m afraid your time in our seafood showdown is over. You may take your place on the plaza bench of shame to observe the remaining rounds.

[Chef Altin takes his defeat with some grace, while Chef Plisetsky practically stomps over to the bench offering a pleasant view of the ocean as well as the rest of the competition. After a moment’s reset, Chefs Katsuki, Nikiforov, and Yang once again take their places at their station, a blue checkered cloth covering their new mystery seafood item.]

Christophe: Chefs, for this round, we wanted to test your skills with a more...delicate ingredient. Please, unveil your stations.

[The chefs pull aside their cloths to reveal two fresh sardines waiting on their stations. The small fish are barely four inches long. Beside the first two, a third sardine has been prepared in advance, the inside cleaned and the flesh butterflied perfectly. None of the three chefs seem unhappy with the revealed ingredient.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I love sardines! They’re tasty, and sustainable too! I make a point to include them in my menu.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Sardines are another staple for me! My husband and I cook them together all the time, since they’re a popular ingredient in his home cuisine as well as mine. [pause] On an unrelated note, I know that Chef Nikiforov is going to be tough to beat in this round. I’ll have to be going at top speed!

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Ah, this is competition!

Christophe: As you can see, Chefs, you have each been given two whole sardines. Lilia and I would like you to please clean and butterfly your sardines like in the example we have provided to you. The first two chefs to finish will compete in the champion’s round!

Lilia: Remember I will be judging the quality of your execution. No bones, no torn or wasted flesh on the sardine itself, or you will be disqualified.

Christophe: Speed and dexterity, Chefs your challenge starts now! [blows whistle]

[The sun continues to beat down on the final three as they gut and clean their sardines as quickly as they can, minding the soft flesh of the small fish as they work their knives skillfully.]
Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover as he carefully removes the spine and bones from his first fish] Sardines, I will admit, are one of the more difficult fish to work with fresh, especially under pressure. They are having very delicate meat, with a lot of fat and bones to remove. If your knife just slips, you could slice right through and ruin the butterfly presentation!

Chef Yang: [voiceover as she checks her first sardine for bones before laying it out cleaned on her final tray] This is one task I wouldn’t want to rush as home, but I’m doing my best today! It looks like none of us were intimidated by the surprise sardines, so this won’t be an easy race.

Chef Katsuki: Check!

[Both Chef Yang and Chef Nikiforov look over in surprise as Christophe blows his whistle, but Chef Katsuki does appear to have two butterflied sardines on his plate.]

Christophe: My, chef, that was quick! But are your sardines up to the Baranovskaya standard? Let’s find out.

[Lilia is more thorough than ever as she examines Chef Katsuki’s offerings, leaning over the table to get a close look.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I’ve never cleaned a fish so fast in my life. I hope I didn’t compromise the quality of my work…

Lilia: [straightening] Chef Katsuki…did not clean his sardines to my standard. Chef, I found several pin bones remaining in your second sardine. I’m sorry but that means you are disqualified.

[Chefs Yang and Nikiforov both share a sigh of relief and surprise as Chef Katsuki removes himself with dignity and joins Chefs Plisetsky and Altin on the bench of shame.]

Chef Katsuki: Darn! I should have taken my time. A few more seconds and I still would have been the winner. Oh well, lesson learned.

Christophe: Better luck next time, Chef Katsuki! As for Victor and Isabella, the competition continues! Remember, you must still present two properly cleaned sardines to Lilia, or your competitor will win automatically! [blows whistle]

[The pace slows considerably after Chef Katsuki is eliminated, as neither Chef Yang nor Chef Nikiforov want to be eliminated on a technicality.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover as she cuts into her second sardine] Whew! That was intense. I’m bummed for Yuuri, but it’s a big relief in a way, because now no matter how long it takes I only have to clean my sardines properly and I’m guaranteed a go into the next round.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover as he checks his two cleaned sardines for remaining bones] Slow is best, now. I’m not calling check until I am certain these fish are perfect.

[True to his word, Chef Nikiforov takes his time on his sardines, so much so that Chef Yang overtakes him, calling for a check five minutes later. Lilia also takes her time examining Chef Yang’s plate, but eventually offers her approval.]

Lilia: Clean and well boned. Chef Yang will move on.
Chef Yang: [voice over as Chef Nikiforov continues to labor] Yes! I am not letting any stupid mistakes embarrass me in front of Lilia this time!

Chef Nikiforov: Check!

[Lilia does not spend quite as much time, but it is still a tense minute where Chef Nikiforov waits for approval, and Chef Yang waits to see if she’s won by default.]

Lilia: [nodding] This is adequate. Both chefs will move on to the final round.

Chef Nikiforov: All right!

[Both chefs exchange a good natured high five having made it through the surprisingly difficult second round. But the final, most challenging round of the seafood showdown is yet to come, and ten thousand dollars is on the line. Another quick reset, and with only two stations remaining Christophe introduces the third part of the challenge.]

Christophe: Chef Yang. Chef Nikiforov. For your final round, all we ask is a simple filet. Of course, this far in the competition we can’t make things too easy. Go ahead and reveal your stations.

[Chefs Nikiforov and Yang pull the checkered cloths off their work stations to reveal a steel bowl containing one…eel.]

Christophe: For your final round, please skin, clean, and filet these lovely freshwater eels!

[From the bench of shame, the losing chefs all react differently to the revelation of the final ingredient. Chef Plisetsky looks intrigued, Chef Altin is horrified, and Chef Katsuki seems disappointed to be missing out.]

Chef Katsuki: [pouting] Aw, eel is my favorite. [sigh] Oh, well.

Lilia: Chefs, while not alive, these eels are extremely...fresh, and you may notice some remaining reflex action due to their strong nervous—

[There are some exclamations as the eel in Chef Nikiforov’s bowl decidedly wriggles. On the bench of shame the usually stoic Chef Altin nearly jumps out of his skin.]

Lilia: —systems.

Christophe: We did warn you this would be the most difficult round.

Chef Nikiforov: [looking at the writhing eel in his bowl fondly] I mean...I am Russian. Preparing eel is like riding bicycle.

Chef Yang: [laughing as she wrangles her own still twitching eel] Hey, I grew up in a Cantonese restaurant, so this isn’t my first rodeo either!

Christophe: Well, alright then! Isabella, Victor, the first chef to clean and filet their fresh water eel to Lilia’s exacting standards will be the winner, and claim their prize of ten thousand dollars. On your mark, get set…[blows whistle]

[Neither Chef Nikiforov nor Chef Yang look uncertain as they dive under their chef stations, both pulling out a heavy wooden cutting board. Also apparently provided are a hammer and a nail, as neither chef hesitates to stake their eel to the aforementioned board. Only once the head of the eel has been nailed down can they begin to use their knives and pure elbow grease to begin tugging the thick
skins off the slippery eels.]

Chef Plisetsky: [observing the proceedings with relish] Cool!

Chef Altin: [looking slightly nauseous] That is...intense.

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Chef Nikiforov: [tossing his hair] I mean, of course you must nail down the eel to the cutting board, otherwise how will you get the grip to pull off the skin?

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[Chef Nikiforov seems to take on a slight lead as the two chefs peel, tug, and pull to remove the skin from their eels, but he loses a few seconds on a stubborn patch of scales. It’s Chef Yang who is the first to cut open her serpentine ingredient and start removing the unwanted innards.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Cleaning the eel is no big deal, once you’ve got the skin off and you finally remove the head. You just want to be careful not to nick the flesh, so you have a nice clean filet when you’re done.

[Chef Nikiforov gains ground, catching up to Chef Yang so they’re almost moving in sync as they begin the careful process of cutting the long, narrow filets away from the backbone of the eel.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover as he lays out his first filet and moves on to the other side] This must not only be done right, but done the quickest! Chef Yang is no slouch, and this sun is really starting to overheat me. The faster I am done, the better off I will be.

Chef Yang: Oo, [beep]!

Christophe: Everything alright, chef? No injuries I hope.

Chef Yang: [chagrined] Sorry, sorry, everything’s fine!

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Everything is not fine. I can see now I must have not cut close enough to the spine, and I’ve left a ragged edge on my second filet. Damn it! I have to hope Victor somehow makes a bigger mistake.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Clearly Isabella is not hurt, so she must have made some mistake. Still, I will not know until the finish and Lilia gives her opinion.

Chef Nikiforov and Chef Yang: [in unison] Check!

[With the shrill sound of Christopher’s whistle, the challenge is over. The chef’s stations are a mess of fish guts and discarded eel skin, and the chefs themselves are worse for wear after racing in the bright summer weather.]

Christophe: Wow, Chefs, that was too close to call! And what a performance! The winner is going to have to come down to Lilia’s judging. Mrs. Baranovskaya-Feltsman, please judge these eel filets.

[Lilia looks between both chefs filets, comparing their size and thickness as well as feeling for missed bones.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I know my mistake will stand out, but at this stage I won’t be disqualified. It’s not about being perfect it’s about being the closest to perfection.
Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I am feeling confident overall, but am I noticing my filets look a bit shorter than Isabella’s?

[Sure enough, Lilia pauses over Victor’s filets, her mouth drawing into a frown. Completely unsqueamish she prods at the eel’s head still lying on chef Nikiforov’s cutting board, and her frown deepens.]

Lilia: [to Chef Nikiforov] Chef, you’re filets are well done, but you have wasted a valuable portion of the meat by trimming off the head too far down. By comparison, Chef Yang has only made a cosmetic error. [to the group] Chef Yang is the winner. Well done, Isabella.

Chef Yang: Yes! Thank you. [leaning on her chef station] Oh my god, that was intense.

[Chef Nikiforov offers his competitor his congratulations, finally wiping his sweaty bangs out of his eyes.]

Christophe: Congratulations Isabella, you are our seafood showdown champion and the winner of ten thousand dollars, courtesy of Azores Airlines! Quite the good omen for your stay here in Portugal, wouldn’t you say?

Chef Yang: [beaming] This is just the start, I promise!

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Chef Yang: Woohoo! I really needed this win. I broke my funk from New York, and I redeemed myself after my poor performance for Lilia in the wedding shower challenge! Watch out, Lisbon, Yang is back in the game!

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Chef Nikiforov: [sighing] Ah, well, you can’t win them all, and I am certainly not embarrassed of my performance today. Still, I will not be handing my competitors any more victories here in Lisbon. Second place does not make a Top Chef!

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Che Katsuki: Today was a big reminder to stay true to myself as a chef, and trust in the techniques that I have studied my whole life. I’m counting on both my upbringing and my professional training to see me all the way to the finish!

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Chef Altin: [still a little green] The eel stuff was...gross. [shuddering] Can we get back to cooking?

Chapter End Notes

My only defense for all the eel wiggling in this chapter is that this was a REAL challenge that happened on Top Chef, eel wriggling included [Can you imagine???] So sorry, Otabek. Lol.

Coming up next: A very special “Elimination” Challenge, with some surprise guests! But will it be more fun for some chefs than others? Stay tuned to find out!
To celebrate 100k of this fic, please enjoy a very special chapter!!

A note: things got a little crazy in here with some guest characters, but please just assume all our guests are speaking their native languages unless otherwise noted.

And as of recently, please remember I am typing this all on my phone, so I hope you can forgive my typos! Apple autocorrect is weird af. Thank you for reading, and thank you for all you’re wonderful comments! Seriously, your support and good wishes are so inspiring. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

[The “Elimination” logo flashes across the screen as we return to the chef’s first day in Portugal. The five contestants face Christophe, who now stands in front of a large display which has been covered with a checkered sheet, hiding its contents.]

Christophe: Now that we’re all warmed up and we’ve given out some cash, it’s time to get down to cooking! This first challenge in Lisbon is going to be very special, because mon amis, there will be no elimination this round.

[Christophe’s announcement gets a strong reaction from the chefs.]

Chef Katsuki: [thrilled] Yes!

Chef Plisetsky: [outraged] What?

Chef Altin: [curious] Hm…

Christophe: Yes, yes, you are all guaranteed at least one more round in this competition. Instead of fighting to stay, you’ll all be cooking for a different prize: immunity.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Immunity?

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Does he mean…

Christophe: [grinning] That’s right chefs. The winner of tomorrow’s challenge will be safe in the remaining challenges in Lisbon, and guaranteed a coveted spot in the three-way showdown which will decide the next Top Chef.

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Chef Plisetsky: I take back what I said before, this challenge sounds awesome!

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Chef Katsuki: An automatic place in the finale? I have to win this.
Chef Nikiforov: [thoughtful] Immunity is nice, yes. But why no elimination? There must be a twist coming to this challenge.

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Christophe: But winning immunity won’t be easy! In fact, we’re going to require each of you to make two dishes. However, we aren’t totally heartless, so we’ve brought in some sous chefs to lighten your load in the kitchen. Here they come now!

Chef Yang: [under her breath to Chef Katsuki] Do you think it’s the eliminated chefs back already—oh my god, mom?!

[Sure enough, joining them on the plaza is a tall, slender older woman who looks strikingly similar to Chef Yang. Soon to follow her are three more newcomers who the chef contestants quickly recognize as loved ones from home.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I was expecting to see old contestants come back as our sous chefs, and instead it’s family! I’m so excited to share this challenge in Lisbon with my mom, but I’m glad they aren’t eliminating anyone. Don’t tell her I said this, but my dad was definitely the cook in my house growing up.

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Chef Nikiforov: [expression blank] Ah. The family challenge. Of course. ...how nice.

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[Christophe does not try to interfere when the chefs eagerly break ranks to greet their family members.]

Chef Plisetsky: [practically tackle hugging a tall, grey haired man] Grandpa!

Mr. Plisetsky: [managing to keep his balance with a laugh] Yuratchka.

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Chef Plisetsky: [with his grandfather seated beside him in the interview frame] This is my dedushka, Nikolai Plisetsky! He was a cook in the navy before he retired, and he was my first teacher on what makes good food.

[Mr. Plisetsky says something in Russian as he ruffles his grandson’s hair affectionately.]

Chef Plisetsky: [grinning] He says we’re here to win, and show the judges what Moscow men can do in the kitchen!

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Chef Altin exchanges a more reserved hug with a beautiful middle aged woman in a striking violet hijab, though the smile on his face betrays his happiness.

Chef Altin: [quietly] I did not think I would get to see you again so soon, Ana.

Mrs. Altin: [in accented English] It had to be a surprise! I could hardly get your sisters to keep the secret.
Chef Altin: My family has always been supportive of me as a chef, even though it meant being far from home. I’m glad my mother Nadia could come to cook with me for this challenge.

Mrs. Altin: [smiling] We are so proud of him. Beka has always been my little man of the house. [patting her son’s cheek] And so serious! We always knew he would be commanding in the kitchen once he got tall enough!

Chef Altin: [blushing] Ana...

[Chef Yang gives her mom a hug, while Chef Katsuki offers his mother a more formal bow and greeting before she waves him off with a laugh and pulls him into a warm embrace.]

Chef Yang: This is my mom, Veronica Yang!

Mrs. Yang: It’s great to be here! I think Isabella’s dad might have been better suited to this challenge, but he couldn’t leave the restaurant.

Chef Yang: [laughing] I’m sure you’ll do great.

Mrs. Yang: Of course, because I have my amazing chef daughter to teach me!

[Mrs. Katsuki does not seem intimidated by her language barrier in the interview booth, speaking rapidly to Chef Katsuki in Japanese. Standing out are the words “Yuuri-kun” and “Vicchan”.

Chef Katsuki: [slightly frazzled as he translates] Ah, she says she is happy to be here, and proud of me for making it this far. She’s excited to help me do well in this challenge! And [listening] Oh. [laughing nervously] She also says hello to my husband, and hopes his cooking is going well also. ...wherever he might be, at the moment.

[It’s a bit chaotic wrangling the chefs and their loved ones, with excited conversations going on in four different languages, but eventually Christophe manages to get everyone in some semblance of order so that he can finally introduce the challenge properly.]

Christophe: Welcome, welcome, loved ones and now, sous chefs! Before we begin, there is a short bit of housekeeping. [to Chef Nikiforov] Victor, you have declined to invite a loved one to participate in this challenge.

[Four chefs and their family members glance at Chef Nikiforov, just noticing that their competitor is standing alone. Chef Nikiforov has his arms crossed over his chest tightly, but his expression is a careful and pleasant neutral.]

Chef Nikiforov: That is correct, Christophe.

Christophe: [nodding] After consulting with the producers it has been decided that Victor will be allowed to proceed alone. As long as he meets the dish requirements of the challenge he will still be eligible for the win.

[Several of the moms appear distressed on Chef Nikiforov’s behalf, most of all Mrs. Katsuki, who
seems to see the chef’s solitude as good reason to begin scolding Chef Katsuki in very hushed Japanese. Chef Katsuki answers back, just as quiet, and Mrs. Katsuki falls silent with a skeptical expression.

Chef Nikiforov: [clearly uncomfortable, but holding his head high] I refuse to think of it as a help or a hindrance, it is just what is. I do not have any blood family who would come, so I did not invite them.

Chef Katsuki: [arms crossed] I am deeply uncomfortable with Chef Nikiforov being at such a disadvantage in this challenge, and he knows that but sometimes he just has to be so stubborn—

Chef Altin: [shrugging] Victor’s personal life is not our business. He’s a strong chef. He might do better cooking alone than some of us who have to guide inexperienced loved ones.

Chef Yang: Hm...some might say Victor has it easier, being allowed to cook alone for this challenge, but I don’t think so. I wouldn’t trade having my mom here with me for anything. [frowning] Victor must have a reason to not want to include his family.

Chef Plisetsky: [reluctantly] Hmph, based on what gets around in Moscow I could probably have guessed Victor would be flying solo on this one. The Nikiforov dynasty doesn’t like it’s sons dropping out of Olympic training programs. Or having husbands. [scowling at the camera] Which is [beep]ed up!

Chef Nikiforov: [responding to a producer’s question] I am afraid it was not a matter of availability. My parents are not...part of my life, at the moment.

Producer: [indicates that he should continue]

Chef Nikiforov: It’s not really relevant to the competition. I suppose there came a point when I had to choose between my dreams and their expectations, and...I made my choice, yes?

[Chef Nikiforov’s lip wobbles dangerously, but he shakes his head ruefully.]

Chef Nikiforov: Anyway, that’s all in the past! [grinning too cheerfully] I have my husband, and his family! We have a wonderful relationship with his parents. I’m grateful for them every day.

Producer: Couldn’t your mother-in-law have joined you for the show?

Chef Nikiforov: [smile shrinking] Ah, well, no. Unfortunately she’s...unavailable. But I know she’s sending me her good wishes! [waves at camera] Hi mama! I can’t wait to cook with you again soon!

[Chef Nikiforov inhales shakily despite his smile, his eyes red, but he waves away the offered kleenex from the producer.]
Chef Nikiforov: [blinking rapidly] Can we get back to competition, please?

Christophe: [noticing the drama of the moment but electing to move on] And what are dish requirements of the challenge? Well, Chefs, in order to welcome our judging panel to Lisbon I’ve decided to host a little lunch. And of course you will be doing the cooking. With the help of your sous chefs, I would like you to each make two dishes to be served family style. The first dish should be inspired by your first food memory, while the second should tell the judges about a new food tradition you’ve shared with your loved ones since becoming a chef. A little past, and a little present. Sounds simple enough, right?

[The chefs nod and glance at the covered table behind their host, by now expecting the dreaded Top Chef twist.]

Christophe: Just one more thing, since we are in Portugal I thought it would be nice to feature another iconic local ingredient from the sea.

[With a flourish, Christophe pulls the tarp away to reveal a tank full of writhing, tentacled octopus. A few chefs look enthused by this revelation, while a couple, particularly Chef Altin, look a little disgusted.]

Christophe: You’re featured ingredient, required in at least one of your two dishes, is none other than polvo, or as we would say in English, the octopus.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] When I see the special ingredient, I get excited. It’s not like octopus is that rare anymore in major restaurants, but in Japan it’s an everyday supermarket ingredient. Between me and my mom we could probably name twenty different preparations just off the top of our heads.

Mrs. Altin: I’ve had octopus at a few of the nice restaurants back in Almaty, but I’ve certainly never cooked it myself.

Chef Altin: I know the basics. [reassuring] We’ll figure it out together.

Christophe: Not to worry chefs, these are not the cephalopods you’ll be cooking with! You’ll be free to choose your own octopus, along with all the rest of your desired ingredients, at the Mercado da Ribeira, the largest fresh market in Lisbon. Tonight you and your loved one have an hour and three hundred Euros to shop. Tomorrow you’ll cook and serve lunch to the judges on the terrace of Casa da Comida, a Michelin Star restaurant which has been generous enough to host us for this challenge.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Wow, I can’t wait to explore the market! Who knows what we’ll find that could inspire a winning dish?

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Hm, I should have figured they wouldn’t be sending us to Whole Foods here. Anyone speak Portuguese?

Christophe: Off you go, now! Have fun with your loved ones, but keep your eyes on the prize!

[The Mercado da Ribeira is a spacious bi-level shopping market offering the best and freshest of
meat, seafood, and produce, along with numerous specialty vendors. The chefs and their loved ones are let loose in the open air market for one hour. They mingle with locals and tourists alike as they seek out the ingredients they’ll need for two family style lunch dishes. Chef Altin and his mother take care of their proteins first, getting their octopus along with some ground lamb from a vendor before taking a more exploratory stroll. Eventually they stumble upon the food pavilion where local chefs are serving up their best, both classic and contemporary Portuguese cuisine.

Chef Altin: [voiceover] I know some basic octopus dishes, but here with my mom I feel like I have an opportunity to try something new. Why not learn from the experts when they’re right in front of us?

Mrs. Altin: [pointing to a dish passing them by on the way to a customer] Beka. That looks delicious. With the potatoes and coriander?

Chef Altin: [nodding] Let’s see if the chef speaks any English.

[Chef Katsuki and his mother have focused on their produce options, of which there are plenty in the section populated by local farmers. They’ve already filled a basket with cabbage and cucumbers, and now they’re looking through the mushrooms with a discerning eye.]

Chef Katsuki: Hm...Shitake?

[Mrs. Katsuki examines the wide capped mushroom, but shakes her head, unhappy with the quality.] Chef Katsuki: [in Japanese] You’re right. I wish they had enoki. [pursing his lips in frustration]

Mrs. Katsuki: [patiently] Look here, Yuuri-kun.

[Hidden behind a large section of portobellos, Mrs. Katsuki finds a pocket of golden chanterelles. Chef Katsuki’s expression lights up, and he shares a smile with his mom as they collect the perfect mushroom for their dish. Across the market, Chef Yang and her mother appear to have gotten lucky in the specialty section.]

Mrs. Yang: [holding up a glass jar] I found miso!

Chef Yang: [at a nearby table] And I found fermented black beans! This dish is really coming together. Let’s check out the pears next, then we’ll hit the fish counter.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I’m making something pretty classic for my first dish, so I really want to go out on a limb for the second! My new tradition as a chef is using Chinese ingredients like fermented black beans in contemporary ways. I know the beans and sweet pear will be a great complement to the paprika charred octopus I have planned.

[Despite his earlier trepidation about language barriers, Chef Nikiforov seems to be getting by at the fish vendors with an interesting mix of English, French, and assorted hand gestures.]

Chef Nikiforov: [indicating the young woman wrapping up his mix of shellfish] She is studying French at university, what are the odds? [To the vendor] Merci! Avez-vous de la morue?

Vendor: [processing] La morue...Ah, o bacalhau, oui!

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I may be cooking alone tomorrow, but I’ll be channeling my paternal grandmother, Marie-Thérèse. I had...difficulties, growing up, but when I came to her in tears she would give me an apron. Together we would cook the food she remembered from her childhood in Marseille. Those memories are...very special. [clearing his throat] So, yes. Tomorrow, My first dish
is bouillabaisse.

[The vendor hands Chef Nikiforov his wrapped portion of cod, and the chef almost steps away before spotting a case filled with baby octopus.]

Chef Nikiforov: [interested] Hm...

[Chef Plisetsky already has his fish selections for his dishes, which include fresh sardines and a whole octopus. He and his grandfather are in a section of bulk dry goods, measuring all purpose flour into a paper sack.]

Chef Plisetsky: [in Russian] Next we’ll see if they have buckwheat flour, then we’ll find the yeast.

Mr. Plisetsky: [amused but proud] Da, chef.

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[With their shopping completed, the chefs are finally ferried via taxi to their oceanfront accommodations in Lisbon along with their loved ones. Each of the final five will have their own bedroom in the spacious beach house, with plenty of space for their family members who will be staying the night. In the spacious chef’s kitchen a welcome platter of local meats, cheeses and pastries are waiting, along with several bottles of Lisbon’s best port and Madeira. Tired after a long day of travel, challenges, and shopping, the chefs drop their bags and explore the house. Particularly attractive is the back terrace, stocked with comfortable furniture and offering a stunning view of the ocean lit up by the orange and coral sunset.]

Chef Yang: [pouring out nine tiny glasses of Madeira] A toast, everybody!

[Glasses are passed around as contestants and company gather out on the terrace.]

Chef Yang: Here’s to the final five making it to Lisbon, to a brutal Quickfire—

Chef Nikiforov: [toasting his glass with a grin] Hear, hear.

Chef Altin: [shaking his head] Ugh.

Chef Yang: —to great company here with us tonight, and most of all, to no elimination tomorrow! Let’s all cook our best, and may the top chef win.

[Once all the necessary translations are made, there’s a cheer from the gathered company, with multilingual cries of cheers, kanpai, and na zdorovie, along with the clinking of glasses. It’s a generally celebratory air among the chefs once the stars come out and the day’s stresses are erased by some good wine and the company of their loved ones. Chefs Altin and Plisetsky claim a couch on the patio along with a tray of Portuguese desserts. Their families are getting along famously ever since Mr. Plisetsky figured out that Chef Altin and his mother both speak Russian.]

Mr. Plisetsky: [in Russian] So this is the “Otabek” Yuratchka has been calling home so much about, hm?

Chef Plisetsky: [embarrassed] Grandpa!

Mrs. Altin: Oh, Beka has been just the same. We can hardly get ten words out of him about his work, but lately it’s been “Yura this, Yura that.”

[Chef Otabek has a blush dusted across his cheeks, but he merely exchanges a commiserating glance
with Chef Plisetsky as their loved ones continue to chat over their heads. It seems embarrassing mothers and grandfathers are a tradition that transcends international borders. Exploring the water’s edge only a short walk down from the house, Chef Yang and her mother have a glass of wine and catch up on some gossip.]

Mrs. Yang: ...I just got to see the wedding shower episode before they flew us out here. I know you told me what happened but I was on the edge of my seat!

Chef Yang: [laughing] You’re telling me! I thought I was going home for cutting parchment paper.

Mrs. Yang: But what a twist, thanks to that Leroy boy.

Chef Yang: [rolling her eyes] I wouldn’t exactly call him a “boy.” JJ’s like thirty.

Mrs. Yang: [casually] And did he ever end up stopping by?

Chef Yang: Ha, um, yeah, actually. [sipping her wine] It was nice. He’s...more grounded, since the show.

Mrs. Yang: [raising her eyebrows] Hm…

Chef Yang: [exasperated] Don’t count chickens, mom.

Mrs. Yang: [teasing] I would never.

[Inside the house, Chef Nikiforov has been firmly parked in a seat at one of the high bar stools facing the kitchen as Mrs. Katsuki dishes him up a full plate from the three different pots she has bubbling on the stove, having deemed the provided snacks to be insufficient nutrition. All the while she keeps up a steady commentary in Japanese, stopping occasionally to shake her stirring chopsticks at Chef Nikiforov, as though chastising him. The normally intimidating Russian chef looks properly cowed, but he also can’t keep a small smile off his face at the sight of the diminutive Japanese mother determined to feed him. Unbeknownst to either of them, Chef Katsuki is leaning against a nearby doorway, observing the goings on with a fond expression that has a tinge of sadness to it.]

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Chef Katsuki: I know it’s only one day, but I really wish Victor wasn’t cooking alone tomorrow. [brow furrowing] It makes me so...so angry, that Victor’s parents can’t support him doing what he loves. Victor is so talented, and kind. He’s worked so hard to become the great chef that he is and the fact that his family doesn’t recognize that…

[Chef Katsuki shakes his head, getting his unusual display of temper under control.]

Chef Katsuki: I’m glad that Victor’s married, anyway. [looking into the camera] Married to someone who loves him more than anything else in the world. Someone who knows Victor is worth so much more than what the Nikiforovs let him be.

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Chef Nikiforov: [spotting Chef Katsuki] Yuuri, come sit! Hiroko-san made soba!

[Chef Katsuki pulls up a chair beside Chef Nikiforov, offering his fellow competitor a warm smile.]

Chef Katsuki: [in Japanese] So, mom, who’s cooking at the onsen right now?

Mrs. Katsuki: [laughing] Oh, you know your father is doing his best! I promised Noru-san down the
road free sake if she’ll come and help with things during the dinner rush.

[Chef Katsuki laughs, and asks more questions, spurring his mother on to tell some humorous stories about the inn and restaurant his family runs back home in Hasetsu. Chef Nikiforov laughs frequently, occasionally chiming in with a question of his own in accented but entirely passable Japanese.]

Chef Nikiforov: [innocently] Of course I speak Japanese! Doesn’t everybody?

[The moon rises over the sea as the chefs enjoy their first night in Lisbon with their family members, and prepare for tomorrow’s competition.]

[It's a bright and early start for the chefs this morning, since they have plenty of cooking to do before serving the judges lunch on the terrace of Casa da Comida. With their groceries delivered to the restaurant the night before, the contestants need only pile into two mini van taxis with their loved ones in tow and their off.]

Mrs. Altin: [in the first taxi] Dumplings sound delicious! Is it something you make a lot?

Mrs. Yang: Oh yes. Dumplings are a family affair at home, so even I have plenty of practice getting the wrapping right! What are you two making?

Mrs. Altin: [a little nervous] Beka is sure we should make Uyghur noodles, though I don’t know if it’s the kind of food the judges are looking for.

Chef Yang: [from the back seat] Pasta from scratch? The judges will love that!

Chef Altin: [patting his mom’s shoulder] It’s gonna be great.

[In the other car, conversation is a little more stilted.]

Mr. Plisetsky: [quietly in Russian] Why does your competitor not have a partner for the challenge? No family, I understand, but I thought you said he was married. Why does his wife not join him?

Chef Plisetsky: Grandpa, he could hear you—

Chef Nikiforov: [with good humor from the front seat] It’s alright, Yura. My wife is not here because I don’t have one, Mr. Plisetsky. I have a husband.

[Chef Plisetsky seems embarrassed to have been overheard, but Mr. Plisetsky just laughs.]

Mr. Plisetsky: Forgive me my mistake, then. But where is the other Mr. Nikiforov? Surely the American network has no objection to his being here.

Chef Nikiforov: Ha, no. Unfortunately, he is on...hm...a very important business trip. [winking at Chef Katsuki in the rear view mirror] It couldn’t be missed.

Mrs. Katsuki: [to Chef Katsuki in Japanese] What are they talking about, Yuuri?

Chef Katsuki: Ah, Yuri’s grandfather wanted to know where Victor’s wife is.
Mrs. Katsuki seems to find this humorous, and she laughs quietly. She sobers somewhat as she observes Chef Nikiforov, who has left Chef Plisetsky and his grandfather to their conversation and is looking at the scenery outside with a pensive expression.

Mrs. Katsuki: Vicchan is acting very brave, but I can see he is hurting today.

Chef Katsuki: [taking his mom’s hand and squeezing] I know.

[In order to avoid chaos in the kitchen, the chefs cooking time will be staggered. First to leave the waiting area and start cooking will be Chef Katsuki, who seems hesitant to leave Chef Nikiforov.]

Chef Katsuki: Victor—

[Whatever Chef Katsuki is about to say, Chef Nikiforov cuts him off with a hug.]

Chef Nikiforov: [warmly] Cook your best today, and don’t worry about me.

[They part too quickly, judging by the expression on Chef Katsuki’s face, but Mrs. Katsuki is there to pat him on the back and remind him that they only have so much time to cook.]


Chef Nikiforov: [with shaky smile] Thank you.

[Chef Katsuki finally waves goodbye to the group and heads into the kitchen with Mrs. Katsuki right behind. They don’t see how the smile fades from Chef Nikiforov’s face the moment they leave the room. The remaining chefs wait their turn with their loved ones, alleviating their nerves with conversation or by going over their recipes for the day.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Yes, alright, I admit, it is hard to see the others with their family, but I am determined not to let this challenge be any different than the others. I am a chef, damn it! I can make two lunch dishes on my own, and they will be the best, because to do otherwise is unacceptable. I have done great things alone, and I will do this also!

[First in the kitchen, Chef Katsuki lays out his knife kit and takes a deep breath. Mrs Katsuki ties on an apron and awaits her son’s instruction.]

Chef Katsuki: [to his mom] Octopus first, and I’ll start the dashi. Set the water boiling for me?

Mrs. Katsuki: [with a wink] Hai, chef.

[Mrs. Katsuki expertly handles a whole octopus, dipping the tentacles in and out of the boiling water like a yo-yo until each limb is curled before letting the whole thing submerge into the stock pot. Meanwhile Chef Katsuki begins the delicate process of making dashi, soaking konbu, or dried kelp, in a bowl of warm water and placing a traditional ceramic pot on the stove.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I’m definitely thinking of my husband as I begin the challenge today. I brought our donabe, which is a multi purpose ceramic pot very common in Japan, from home. This is the vessel we use when we cook everyday meals together. Having it with me reminds me of the warmth and constancy of our love. That is the feeling I want to share with the judges today in my dishes.

[In ten minutes Mrs. Katsuki is fishing the octopus out of the pot and submerging it in an ice bath to
stop the cooking, while Chef Katsuki is ready to add his kombu to the donabe and carefully bring it to a boil.]

Mrs. Katsuki: Vegetables next?

Chef Katsuki: [nodding] Shred the cabbage and wash mushrooms. I’ll start cleaning the snapper.

[It’s a quiet kitchen with only the Katsukis, both mother and son familiar with their tasks and with each other’s pace.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] My mom has plenty of her own restaurant experience, so I’m really honored that she’s willing to take my leadership in the kitchen. I’m proud to show her how I keep my family’s traditions alive in my work as a chef.

Chef Katsuki: [offering a spoon] Mom, come taste?

[Mrs. Katsuki accepts the spoon, and they both taste the simmering dashi, still cloudy with the addition of bonito flakes. They exchange a look, Chef Katsuki looking for criticism. Mrs. Katsuki shakes her head.]

Mrs. Katsuki: Perfect. It’s ready to strain, Yuuri-kun.

Chef Katsuki: [nodding] Hai.

[Halfway through Chef Katsuki’s time, Chef Plisetsky and his grandfather are allowed to begin their dishes. Chef Plisetsky also decides to begin by cooking his octopus, though his process is much different than the Katsuki’s.]

Chef Plisetsky: [hefting a large stock pot onto the stove] Remember the plan! Piroshki dough, then blini batter.

Mr. Plisetsky: [opening all their various bags of flour]

[Wasting no time, Chef Plisetsky deposits his octopus in the stock pot, adding a halved head of garlic and a quartered onion along with several ribs of celery and a carrot. After tossing in two bay leaves and several sprigs of parsley with a cup of red wine the chef takes the whole pot to the sink to cover the contents with water before lifting the heavy pot back onto the stove and turning on the burner.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] I’m making a risky dish, so I want my protein to be cooked with classic flavors I know work. Mirepoix, carrot, onion, and celery, is the foundation of French cooking for a reason.

Mr. Plisetsky: [voiceover as he adds flour to a bowl of activated yeast, water and milk] I can’t believe how strong my little Yuratchka has gotten! I remember when he was too small to lift a gallon of milk, and now he is a chef carrying full stock pots like they weigh nothing.

[While his octopus cooks, Chef Plisetsky works on his mise en place, finely dicing beets and juliennning a small pile of radishes. His grandfather is finishing up his piroshki dough, covering the steel mixing bowl with a towel to let the bread like dough rise. Next is the much blini recipe, which will also require time to rise.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] I know the waiting time to make sure both my doughs are risen will be tight, but I have my grandpa here and I want to take the best advantage of his skills. Plus, don’t tell him I said this, but he isn’t as young as he used to be. I’ve arranged my dishes so that he can have a rest in the waiting time if he needs it.
Mrs. Katsuki: [observing Chef Plisetsky] They certainly seem to be cooking their octopus for a long time, don’t they?

Chef Katsuki: [nodding] It’s the Western way. It gets tough, then tender again.

Mrs. Katsuki: [wrinkling her nose] How funny.

Chef Katsuki can’t help but laugh.

Chef Katsuki: I know. Will you dress the sunomono? I need to get our proteins in the donabe. We only have a few minutes left before service.

Mrs. Katsuki: [nodding] The glass noodles should be almost ready as well.

[With time winding down before the first course the judges arrive. Christophe leads the Minako, Yakov, Celestino, and returning judge Lilia to the terrace of Casa da Comida, an eclectic but intimate outdoor space complete with Roman sculpture and a feature wall of blue and white ceramic.]

Christophe: Welcome, everyone, to Lisbon, and the lovely Estoria at Casa da Comida. I hope you’re all hungry!

Celestino: I’ll say!

Yakov: [tucking his napkin into his lap] I’m very curious how our chefs handle themselves in this new environment, and guiding their inexperienced sous chefs, to boot.

[In the kitchen, Chef Plisetsky is finally pulling his octopus out of its pot after forty five minutes of cooking. With a large chef knife he begins the process of breaking down the large cephalopod while his grandfather has his proved blini batter out of the fridge and is patiently flipping the small savory pancakes in a large skillet. On the other side of the kitchen with only moments to go, Chef Katsuki tastes the contents of his donabe before placing the lid on top with a satisfied hum. Just as the timer goes off Chef Katsuki lifts the pot off the stove with a dish towel in each hand. Waiting by the door is Mrs. Katsuki, already holding their other finished dish.]

Christophe: So just to refresh everyone’s memories, I’ve asked our chefs today to make two dishes, one to represent their favorite childhood food memory, and one to represent a new tradition they have now that they are chefs. At least one of their dishes must feature octopus as a main component.

Minako: This should be an interesting meal.

[Right on cue, Chef Katsuki and his mom enter. Chef Katsuki places his donabe in the center of the table, lifting the lid to reveal a delicious smelling plume of steam. Mrs. Katsuki sets down her serving bowl as well, and they both offer the judges a short bow in greeting. When they smile the family resemblance between them is obvious and it’s clear the judges are charmed.]

Christophe: This aromatic first course comes courtesy of Chef Katsuki. Chef, will you introduce us to your assistant in the kitchen today?

Chef Katsuki: [smiling] Yes, I was very happy to cook this meal with my mother, Katsuki Hiroko.
Mrs. Katsuki: [in practiced English] Hello! Please enjoy what we have cooked today!

[The judges offer Mrs. Katsuki their polite greetings, including Minako who shares a few pleasantries in Japanese that seem to put Chef Katsuki’s mother more at ease.]

Christophe: Yuuri, please tell us about your dishes.

Chef Katsuki: For our starter dish, we’ve prepared octopus and cucumber sunomono. This is the first dish I was allowed to help with in my family’s restaurant, at least using an actual kitchen knife. [laughing] I practiced slicing the cucumber for hours until I could get it thin and even like my mom’s. So the dish itself is a cold octopus and cucumber salad, with a vinegar-mirin dressing. Our main dish is “Anything Goes” Donabe. This donabe pot was my parent’s gift to my husband and I when we got married, because it is a central vessel for starting your own household in Japan. Wherever I am, cooking with this pot reminds me of the warm home I have built with my husband.

[Chef Katsuki pauses, an absent smile on his face, until an amused Mrs. Katsuki gives him a little nudge.]

Chef Katsuki: [shaking his head] Ah, sorry, too many good memories. Anyway, “anything goes” just refers to whatever is fresh and flavorful from the market. In the donabe today you have red snapper, chicken, and chanterelle mushrooms steamed in a dashi broth with glass noodles and cabbage. Please enjoy.

Christophe: Thank you, Yuuri, and thank you, Mrs. Katsuki. We’re certainly looking forward to these dishes.

[Chef Katsuki turns to go, Mrs. Katsuki close behind, when the chef pauses. A complicated expression takes over his face before he turns back to the table where the judges are already serving up his dishes.]

Chef Katsuki: [glancing nervously at the cameras] Um, Christophe, when you have a moment, can I speak to you in private?

Christophe: [surprised] Of course, Yuuri. I’ll come find you in a few minutes.

Chef Katsuki: Thank you.

[The Katsuki’s take their leave, and the judges dig in to the first two dishes of the night.]

Minako: Any idea what that was about?

Christophe: [eyes twinkling] I have an inkling. Anyway, how are we liking Chef Katsuki’s dishes?

Celestino: [after slurping up a spoonful of noodles] I feel like I’ve just been to the Katsuki’s for dinner, and it’s an invitation I’d like to have repeated.

Yakov: [nodding] Katsuki certainly knows how to cook octopus. The meat is incredibly tender, and the dressing is bright and fresh on his salad.

Lilia: His donabe has a good depth of flavor, and the fish is well cooked, though it is a bit homey.

Minako: I wouldn’t call that a negative quality. I think in fine dining we look down on homestyle preparations, but Chef Katsuki has certainly made us feel at home with these two dishes despite them being highly refined and elegant. If I had to nitpick I might say that it’s a bit warm for a hot pot style dish like this one, but his dashi is very light and fragrant.
Yakov: I would agree that it’s too warm for the soup, but it is well executed, and he was smart to pair it with a cold starter.

Lilia: I am not so sure about this salad. They are playing for immunity, after all. Isn’t this a bit simple?

Minako: That will depend on what else we’re served today, I think. As Chef Katsuki has shown us before, sometimes the simple things are the most delicious.

Celestino: Well, said.

[Back in the kitchen, Chef Plisetsky is frying sardine fillets while his grandfather stuffs piroshki. Seated on a stool found for him by the production staff, Mr. Plisetsky uses a biscuit cutter to stamp out circles of his rolled out dough, which he then wraps around the chopped octopus filling Chef Plisetsky prepared earlier. Each piroshki gets a small cube of butter added to its inside before Mr. Plisetsky seals it up and adds it to the waiting baking tray.]

Chef Plisetsky: [giving a thumbs up] Looking good. Do you need anything? A glass of water?

Mr. Plisetsky: [laughing, though he looks a bit tired] I am not that old, Yuratchka. I can handle two hours with you in the kitchen. Have you got the oil heating? I only need a few more minutes.

[Soon to join them in the kitchen are Chef Altin and his mother Nadia. They have had plenty of time in the waiting room to go over their plan.]

Mrs. Altin: [pointing to herself] Noodles. [pointing to Chef Altin] Octopus.

Chef Altin: Let’s do this.

[Mrs. Altin sets up her work area on a clean stretch of countertop and begins mixing the flour, egg, and water to make her noodle dough. Meanwhile Chef Altin has decided on a pressure cooker to make sure his octopus is tender. He sets up the device on the counter near Chef Plisetsky, who is getting ready to fry his piroshki.]

Chef Altin: Mind if I set up here?

Chef Plisetsky: [punching his friend lightly on the arm] Just don’t get in my way.

[Elsewhere, in a quiet corner between courses, Chef Katsuki, Mrs. Katsuki and Christophe are speaking almost too softly for the cameras to pick up.]

Christophe:...well certainly, I think we could get the approval. As long as you’re certain that’s what you’d like to do, Yuuri. There won’t be any putting it back in the box.

[Chef Katsuki and his mother exchange a glance before Mrs. Katsuki gives her son a firm nod.]

Chef Katsuki: This is what I want.

Christophe: Alright, I’ll handle it between the next courses. In the meantime you two return to the finished waiting area, and I’ll make sure someone comes and gets you when it’s time.

Chef Katsuki: [relieved] Thanks, Christophe.

[In the kitchen, Chef Plisetsky’s time is beginning to wind down. His grandfather has taken over frying the piroshki’s while the young chef layers pickled beet, sour cream, and fried sardine on the blini he made earlier.]
Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Ugh, this dish was simple to cook, but I forgot how long it takes to assemble all these little components! I still have to make the herb sour cream to go with the piroshki, and that’s more important to me than having a full dozen of the blini. If I have time I’ll come back to it.

[While Chef Plisetsky abandons his half full plate of blini, Chef Altin is helping his mother shape their noodle dough. They cut the dough into four pieces and press it with their fingers into rectangles about twelve inches long. Then with a sharp knife Mrs. Altin cuts the dough into short half inch strips. Chef Altin follows behind with plastic wrap to cover the sliced dough. It will need at least a half hour to rest before it is ready to be stretched. Just as they finish, Chef Altin’s timer for his pressure cooker goes off.]

Mrs. Altin: Perfect timing, Beka, just like you planned. Shall I start the lamb?

Chef Altin: First can you help me scrub the potatoes? I want to get our main course baking as soon as possible.

Mrs. Altin: Of course.

Chef Altin: [voiceover] My dishes today are all about being patient. I have to let the noodle dough rest, I have to wait for the pressure cooker. Next the octopus goes in the oven and that will be more waiting. It’s probably for the best that I have my mother here with me, she will keep me from fidgeting too much.

[Chef Plisetsky finishes his cooking time with only nine blini on his platter, but his piroshki are a nice golden brown and accompanied by a sour cream and cilantro dipping sauce.]

Mr. Plisetsky: [in Russian] You worked hard, Yura. You should be very proud.

Chef Plisetsky: [nodding] Thanks grandpa. Let’s go.

[Out on the terrace, the judges are ready for the next round. Yakov and Lilia seem particularly interested when Chef Plisetsky places his two platters on the table.]

Yakov: [in Russian] Well this reminds me of home.

Mr. Plisetsky: We are representing Moscow, today! Right Yuratchka?

Chef Plisetsky: Yeah!

Christophe: Welcome, Yuri. P. Why don’t you tell us about your guest today, and what you have cooked for us?

Chef Plisetsky: [in English] Um, so basically my grandpa has been my family since I was a little kid, and he’s a really good cook! At least, he’s really good at cooking Russian food. So my starter is a combination of some dishes he makes for lunch, blini, borscht, and sardines. It’s a savory blini with quick pickled beets, sour cream, and a bite of fried sardine fillet. For my second dish, we made piroshki! Baking these with my grandpa inspired me to train in pastry as well as regular culinary school. Now we experiment on new fillings together! These are filled with octopus slow cooked with mirepoix and red wine, accompanied by a herb sour cream. Thank you.

[Once the Plisetsky’s leave the terrace it’s time to taste. The judge’s help themselves to blini and piroshki.]

Christophe: This might be our easiest dish to serve today, wouldn’t you say?
Yakov: Better than trying to ladle our soup. [chewing thoughtfully] I like Chef Plisetsky’s blini. The pickled beet has a good acidity.

Celestino: [scratching his head] I can’t complain about the flavor, but it does feel a bit like lunch to go, doesn’t it?

Minako: Hm, I have to agree. His blini are a bit close to a canapé to me, rather than a sit down lunch dish, and I’m not sure the piroshki are substantial enough to pick up the slack.

Lilia: These piroshki are very even in size and shape, and they are a good uniform color. While I am also a bit puzzled by Chef Plisetsky’s choice in dish, he has executed them well.

Yakov: His octopus is well cooked, also. The filling is quite tender, and though it is unusual I think it is a good fit for the bread roll.

Celestino: By far my favorite thing on his plate is this fried sardine, but there’s not enough of it! He clearly put thought into these components, but I think working in miniature might have slowed him down in the kitchen.

[The other judges nod. With Chef Plisetsky having presented his dish it’s time for Chef Yang to start cooking. Like most of the her fellow competitors, Chef Yang will need to boil her octopus before she can incorporate it into her dish, so she starts her time by setting up a deep lidded skillet with water, onion, garlic, and prosciutto before adding her octopus and bringing everything up to a simmer. Mrs. Yang, in the meantime has been given the relatively simpler task of mixing the dough for dumplings.]

Mrs. Yang: [pouring hot water into a food processor filled with AP flour] Just follow the recipe. Just follow the recipe. Just follow the recipe…

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I can tell my mom is really nervous, but really everything’s under control! After my Quickfire win I’m ready to keep the momentum going and get my spot in the final three.

[At the stove, Chef Altin is tossing a hot skillet full of his ground lamb, onion, garlic, and bell peppers, while Mrs. Altin is getting ready to stretch her rested noodles.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover] Laghman sauce is basically a kind of lamb ragu. I’ll simmer the meat and peppers in a tomato broth until everything is tender. This dish originated on the eastern border of Kazakhstan, close to China, which is where my mother’s family is from. I’m certain this is not a dish the judges have had before, and I’m looking forward to surprising them.

[On a floured work area, Mrs. Altin pinches the ends of her first noodle and begins to stretch it. She patiently pinches and pulls the elastic dough until the noodle is stretched to over a foot long, then she dusts it with flour and leaves it at the edge of her work surface in a cute coil.]

Mrs. Altin: [smiling] This is the fun part! Beka, you should come pull some too!

Chef Altin: [placing the lid on his simmering sauce] Be right there.

[Mrs. Yang has successfully completed her dumpling dough despite her trepidation. While the dough rests, she and Chef Yang work together on the filling, using the food processor once more to grind their cod into a coarse paste along with chicken stock, soy sauce, and dry sherry.]

Mrs. Yang: It smells like we’re doing it right!

Chef Yang: [mincing fresh ginger and chopping chives on a nearby cutting board] It’s coming along
great. You’re doing just fine, mom.

[Times moves quickly, and it seems like no time at all before the Yangs are ready to start wrapping dumplings and the Altins are putting the finishing touches on their dishes.]

Mrs. Altin: [admiring the fresh cilantro Chef Altin sprinkles over their finishes octopus dish] It looks wonderful, Beka. I’m so proud of you.

Chef Altin: [wrapping his arm around his mom’s shoulders] I’m proud of both of us.

[The judges eagerly await their next course, which Chef Altin and his mother deliver right on time.]

Chef Altin: Hello, everyone. It’s been a good day in the kitchen with my mother, Nadia.

Mrs. Altin: [tucking her arm into Chef Altin’s elbow] It’s always wonderful to spend time cooking with my son, so thank you for having me.

Christophe: The pleasure is ours, Mrs. Altin. Otabek, why don’t you tell us about your dishes?

Chef Altin: Our first dish today is my mother’s specialty, Uyghur noodles, or hand pulled egg noodles with lamb and a bell pepper sauce finished with a little bit of black vinegar. When I was too small still to see over our countertops my Ana would let me stand on a chair to let me help stretch the noodle dough. Cooking together for our family eventually inspired me to become a chef.

Mrs. Altin: He was so cute back then!

Chef Altin: [cheeks pink but with a small smile] For my second dish, we’ve prepared octopus with traditional Portuguese methods. Octopus is not an ingredient I grew up with, and while I have cooked it in the restaurants I’ve worked in, the new tradition I wanted to share with you is the one I started with my mother today. We explored the market, asked questions, and built a new recipe together. Learning and cooking together, with my skills and hers, is something I hope we can do again soon. So please enjoy polvo à lagareiro, or oven baked octopus with potatoes, garlic, and fresh coriander.

Christophe: [after Chef Altin and Mrs. Altin step out] Let’s eat.

[There is some conversation and clinking of serving utensils as the judges enjoy both of Chef Altin’s dishes.]

Minako: Once again, Otabek has given us a seemingly humble dish teeming with flavor. This lamb ragu has so many layers, I can’t stop eating it.

Yakov: Chef Altin’s noodle dish speaks to a particular culture, one that isn’t familiar to culinary circles, but I for one am glad to be learning from him today. The pasta has a remarkable texture, and it’s well seasoned. That hit of black vinegar is a welcome addition.

Celestino: It’s always a pleasure to try something new that is done well. Otabek has really shared something of himself in this dish. It reminds me of his pot pie from restaurant wars in the best way.

Lilia: The octopus is well cooked on his second dish. It is tender, and the garlic flavor comes through.

Celestino: Hm, there’s something lackluster about this dish for me.

Minako: How so?
Celestino: I can make no complaints about the plate itself, except that in comparison to the first, which told me so much about Otabek’s lineage as a chef, it just seemed a bit...generic.

Minako: But in terms of highlighting the octopus, who do you think was more successful: Yuri P., or Otabek.

Celestino: [admitting] Otabek.

Christophe: Now we’re getting some debate, and still two chefs to go!

[With Chef Altin finished, only one chef remains to begin cooking. Chef Nikiforov has been patiently waiting his turn as the other chefs and their loved ones filed out to cook and serve their dishes to the judges. Having had the waiting room to himself for the last round, it’s a solemn faced chef who enters the kitchen at last, only to find someone waiting for him. Chef Katsuki is wiping down a countertop, his knives laid out and ready to begin. Chef Nikiforov pauses, his stoic expression crumbling into something much more vulnerable.]

Chef Nikiforov: [glancing at the cameras] ...Yuuri? What are you still doing in here?

Chef Katsuki: [smiling] I’m here to be your sous chef. Did you really think I would make my husband take this challenge on by himself?

[Chef Nikiforov is speechless, tears brimming in his eyes.]

Chef Katsuki: [offering Chef Nikiforov his hand] Let’s cook together, anata.

[Chef Nikiforov takes Chef Katsuki’s hand, pressing a reverent kiss to his palm before cradling it against his cheek. Chef Katsuki leans their foreheads together, eyes wet with a few tears of his own.]

Chef Katsuki: [softly] You are not alone, Victor. The world should know.

Chef Nikiforov: [beaming] Thank you, my love.

[Chef Katsuki tips his chin up for a kiss, but his eyes widen as he catches sight of the timer on the counter.]

Chef Katsuki: Oh my god, Victor, time’s running!

Chef Nikiforov: Oh [beep]! Start cleaning the baby octopus, I must get my croutons in the oven!

Chef Katsuki: Yes, chef!

[Chef Nikiforov slaps a kiss on Chef Katsuki’s forehead and then both chefs get to work. Across the kitchen Chef Yang is applying a spice rub to her boiled octopus, while Mrs. Yang is lining a tray with neatly wrapped dumplings. They unobtrusively observe their competitor’s romantic moment as they progress on both their dishes.]

Mrs. Yang: [quietly] So cute!

Chef Yang: I know, right?

[Chef Nikiforov moves on quickly from his croutons, beginning his bouillabaisse by boiling a lobster and setting tomatoes, onion, and garlic to cook down in a large stock pot.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I’m on something of a suicide mission with my second dish today, which will be tempura fried baby octopus! [laughing] The timing of it will have to be perfect,
because I must fry at the last possible moment. In order to give my whole attention to the tempura later, I will have to make sure my bouillabaisse is as close to finished as I can get it in the next hour.

Chef Katsuki: Victor, is there any other fish you need cleaned while I’m working on these octopus?

Chef Nikiforov: Go ahead and scrub the mussels, and filet that cod. I want it in two inch chunks to be ready for the stew, yeah?

Chef Katsuki: You got it, chef.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Victor is incredibly strong, and I have no doubt he would have managed on his own today, but now that I see the fire back in him I know I made the right choice. Victor has always been the chef to beat in this competition, and I have a feeling today will prove that.

[Ad the kitchen heats up for Chef Nikiforov time winds down for Chef Yang. The chef has browned her octopus in a hot skillet, and now she carefully slices up the tentacles and lays them down on her bed of sauces, showing off the charred edge of the octopus against the creamy white flesh inside. Mrs. Yang is mixing up a classic dumpling sauce to go with the steamed fish dumplings which are already safe and ready for the table in their bamboo steaming baskets.]

Chef Yang: [placing a few slivers of fresh pear on the platter for garnish] Perfect.

Mrs. Yang: Great job, honey. I know the judges will love it.

Chef Yang: [wiping her brow] Let’s hope, right?

[Chef Yang and her mom leave to serve their dishes to the judges, leaving Chef Nikiforov and Chef Katsuki alone in the kitchen for their remaining time.]

Chef Nikiforov: Yuuri, have you got a second?

Chef Katsuki: Yes, chef—

[Chef Katsuki turns, expecting another task, but instead Chef Nikiforov greets him with a long, slow kiss.]

Chef Katsuki: [dazed] What was that for?

Chef Nikiforov: I am just terribly in love with you, zvezdochka.

Chef Katsuki: [pink cheeked but happy] I love you, too.

[The chefs exchange one more quick kiss, then return to their work without a second to lose. On the terrace, Mrs. Yang sets down her tray of delicate green dumplings, while Chef Yang’s striking octopus dish sits beside it.]

Chef Yang: Hello, everyone! Please meet my mom, Veronica. She did a great job helping me in the kitchen today!

Mrs. Yang: Hi, everyone! This is my first time keeping up in a professional kitchen, so I hope you’ll go easy on me.

[This gets a friendly laugh from the judges.]

Christophe: Why don’t you tell us about these two lovely looking plates, chef.
Chef Yang: For my childhood memory dish, I knew I had to do dumplings. These are made with white fish and Chinese chive, with a spinach dyed wrapper to give it some color. Making dumplings is a process that involves the whole family, and I remember spending plenty of Saturday afternoons with my mom and dad in the kitchen learning all the different shapes you could wrap them in.

Mrs. Yang: It’s also the first dish Isabella’s father made for me when we were dating, so fish dumplings have always been special in our house!

Chef Yang: As for new traditions, when I get a rare weekend off I come home and make dinner for my family, combining the familiar ingredients of their pantry with the things I’ve learned as a chef. This dish is skillet roasted octopus with fermented black bean and pear sauce. The octopus has a hot paprika rub and everything is sitting on a miso vinaigrette. Becoming a chef has given me a million new ways to use the ingredients I loved growing up, and it’s always wonderful to share my discoveries at my family dinner table. Thank you!

[Chef Yang and her mom take their leave, and the judges take a few minutes to sample the chef’s dishes]

Christophe: Well, judges, your thoughts?

Celestino: As we’ve come to expect, Chef Yang has presented us with two visually stunning dishes again today. Cutting open one of these dumplings is like a work of art, with that delicate white fish filling.

Minako: The dumplings look beautiful and taste beautiful. However while I can say the same for her main dish, texture is a bit of an issue for me.

Yakov: Yes, unfortunately Chef Yang’s octopus is a bit chewy. This sauce however is something very original. The sweetness of the pear is in good harmony with the black bean and the miso.

Lilia: I would agree. The protein is over cooked, but Chef Yang’s sauce work is an exercise in subtlety I would look forward to again.

Christophe: An elegant meal from an elegant chef. Only one chef’s cooking left to taste now! I wonder what Chef Nikiforov is whipping up for us?

[With exactly ten minutes remaining, Chef Nikiforov is finally ready to mix his tempura batter. In a chilled mixing bowl he has lightly beaten two eggs. Beside him on the counter waits a nearly frozen bottle of seltzer, a twice sifted bowl of flour, and three shots of vodka. Chef Nikiforov has foregone a whisk in favor of a large pair of mixing chopsticks.]

Chef Nikiforov: Is our oil up to temperature?

Chef Katsuki: Yes, chef.

Chef Nikiforov: The octopus is dredged and ready?

Chef Katsuki: Yes, chef.

Chef Nikiforov: [taking a deep breath] Okay. Let’s do this.

[Chef Katsuki and Chef Nikiforov both take a vodka shot and clink their glasses solemnly before downing the liquor.]

Chef Katsuki: [gritting his teeth past the harsh taste] Let’s make tempura, Vitya.
[Without further ceremony Chef Nikiforov tips the remaining vodka into his egg mixture, followed by the soda water and then, carefully, the flour. The chef begins to stir the mixture with his chopsticks, watching carefully to see when the batter is at perfect consistency.]

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] This is the moment of truth for this dish. Tempura batter is incredibly delicate, and you have to mix the absolute minimal amount possible or it will lose its air bubbles. Vodka is my secret ingredient to keep the gluten from developing, but no secret trick will save my dish if I over beat it.

[With only seven minutes remaining, Chef Nikiforov appears satisfied with his batter.]

Chef Nikiforov: Time to fry!

Chef Katsuki: Yes, chef!

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Whew, we are down to the wire! Victor doesn’t have any choice though. You can’t let tempura sit for more than a few minutes. Still, he’s cutting it close and if anything goes wrong he won’t have a second dish at all.

[Seven minutes later, the judges await their final course. Emerging from the kitchen first is Chef Katsuki, carefully carrying another hot bowl of stew. This time it’s Chef Nikiforov’s bouillabaisse, accented with an artfully placed fan of croutons around the lip of the bowl. Behind him comes Chef Nikiforov himself, triumphant with a full platter of crispy, pale gold tempura. They set their treasures down on the table and face the judges hand in hand. A few of the judges look surprised by Chef Katsuki’s reappearance, but Yakov and Lilia exchange a knowing glance.]

Christophe: [eyes twinkling] Victor, would you like to introduce your sous chef today? He looks familiar...

Chef Nikiforov: [proud] Of course. My partner in the kitchen today, and every day, is the light of my life, my beautiful husband Chef Yuuri Katsuki.

Christophe: What a reveal, and not a moment too soon! Let me remind the judges that as a chef Yuuri has already been judged on his own course tonight. He’s present now only as Chef Nikiforov’s loved one, and the food before us will only count for or against Chef Nikiforov’s standing in the challenge.

Minako: You’ve certainly worked hard in the kitchen today, Yuuri.

Chef Katsuki: [wrapping his arm around Chef Nikiforov’s waist] It’s been more than worth it.

Christophe: Victor, why don’t you tell us what you’ve prepared today.

Victor: My first dish is bouillabaisse, with garlic croutons and rouille, as it was taught to me by my French grandmother. She saw my passion for food at a young age, and she showed her love by welcoming me into her kitchen. [hesitant] I know that she would have wanted to cook with me today, if she were still with us. So this dish...it is for her.

[The judges are clearly touched by Chef Nikiforov’s tribute. Celestino is dabbing his eyes with his dinner napkin.]

Chef Nikiforov: My second dish is a celebration! Tempura baby octopus, with classic tempura sauce, a savory matcha salt, and a sweet chili geleé on the plate for dipping. When I married Yuuri I had no idea I would be welcomed into a family who love food almost as much as they love each other! Now whenever we are able to go home to Hasetsu, the Katsuki’s invite all their friends to the house and
we make tempura. Yuuri and I help Mama Hiroko in the kitchen and we keep the fryers going all
night until none of us can eat another bite. Today when I think of new traditions, I think of tempura
with the Katsuki’s, and I know I am part of a family again.

[Chef Nikiforov pauses to wipe his eyes on his coat sleeve.]

Chef Nikiforov: [Laughing] So sorry, I am just happy. These dishes are a tribute to the woman who
made food a refuge for me as a child, and the family I am blessed to know as a man. I'm grateful for
them every day, especially for my life and love, my Yuuri.

Chef Katsuki: [beaming as he wipes away a tear of his own] Victor.

[Chef Katsuki hides his face in his husband’s shoulder, overwhelmed with emotion, which draws an
aw from the judges. Chef Nikiforov, his own eyes still a little red, offers the judges a smile as he rubs
Chef Katsuki’s back.]

Chef Nikiforov: Please enjoy, everyone!

[The two chefs take their leave hand in hand as the judges serve themselves.]

Celestino: [wiping away one more tear before setting his napkin back in his lap] Well, I have to taste
the dishes, but that certainly takes the cake for most touching story. What a reveal!

Minako: [serving herself and Celestino some bouillabaisse] And from two of our most serious
competitors. Those two certainly have played things close to the chest. And you, Christophe, you
must have been in on it as well!

Christophe: I’ll admit I knew from the start. They wanted to keep things professional, but it was
hardly a secret on set when they put each other down as “spouse” on their emergency contact forms.
Anyway, let’s hear about this food. What do we think of Victor’s offerings?

Minako: [tasting the stew] Hm, if this is grandmother’s recipe I can see where Victor got his talent in
the kitchen. It’s delicious.

Yakov: There are a few dishes that really summon the south of France, and Victor has done it with
this bouillabaisse. The fish is delicate and flaky, and his rouille could have been made by a native.

Celestino: I think the crouton was a smart choice, given the family style presentation. They’ve had
just enough time to begin absorbing that delicious broth but they still have that hearty bread chew
that you crave with a good seafood stew.

Christophe: Glowing reviews all around. What about this showstopper tempura?

Lilia: First of all, the presentation on this second dish is very elegant. The tempura looks almost
floral, and it’s a perfect delicate color in contrast to those vibrant sauces. Chef Nikiforov reveals
much about his value of this humble dish with his refined plating.

Minako: [snagging a piece of tempura and cutting into it] Tempura has proven a pitfall for chefs on
past seasons, but by the sound of that crunchy batter I’d say Victor has pulled off a miracle.

Celestino: And by the taste! The ethereal tempura batter and the slight chew of that baby octopus are
a perfect contrast, and I’m intrigued by the matcha salt.

Minako: Texture is the great achievement of this dish, I think. Even in his condiments, Chef
Nikiforov has offered us an intriguing variety, which is the real fun of tempura as a party food.
Yakov: If anything I would have liked to see more variety in the tempura itself. Perhaps some vegetables would have been a welcome addition to the platter.

Christophe: [munching] Maybe, Yakov, but I certainly won’t be turning my nose up at these tasty tentacles.

[Judges table will be remarkably informal today, with the chefs all summoned out to the terrace with their loved ones. Chefs Katsuki and Nikiforov are both beaming, a happy Mrs. Katsuki sandwiched between her taller son and her much taller son-in-law.]

Christophe: Chefs, today we asked you to serve us up one of your fondest food memories, and to share one of your new family traditions with us. With the help of your sous chefs, we’re happy to say that we had a very satisfying meal today. There were some minor mishaps, but many moments of triumph on our plates. Judges?

Minako: Yuuri, there was a lot going on in your donabe, but every bite was pure goodness. Your dishes were a beautiful representation of both your upbringing and your cooking philosophy. Some of the judges thought your sunomono could have been more complex, but great technique and clean, thoughtful flavors will always be a winner in my book.

Chef Katsuki: [bowing] Thank you.

Celestino: Otabek, we loved seeing the food traditions that have made you the bold but complex chef you are today. Your noodle dish was something very special, full of the slow cooked layered flavors that we have come to love in your cooking. Octopus was an ingredient out of your comfort zone, but you took advantage of your environment to push yourself out of your comfort zone and turn a challenge into a new tradition. Well done.

Yakov: Yuri, you showed us today that you didn’t just learn your baking talents in culinary school. Your piroshki were well made and the filling was delicious and original. We were a bit surprised by your choice of a canapé style dish to accompany the piroshki, but the bite was flavorful and well seasoned. Many of us agreed we would have liked more of that fried sardine. A more substantial dish might have been more appropriate, but it was a strong showing of your heritage.

Minako: Victor, you also surprised us with your dishes today, but in the best way! You’re bouillabaisse was a beautiful tribute to your grandmother. Then we got to celebrate family with you! Your tempura was a masterpiece in texture and taste, and we all know the risk you took in pulling it off. You’ve always been a strong presence in the kitchen, but today you cooked from your heart, and we all felt it.

Chef Nikiforov: It was a pleasure, thank you.

Lilia: Chef Yang, I was very happy to see two very refined dishes from you today. I have been made to understand by my fellow judges that you have made a name for yourself in this competition for your elegant plating and subtle flavors, and I was happy to see them proved right. I believe Celestino called your dumplings “a work of art” and I find myself inclined to agree. It is unfortunate that your octopus was slightly over cooked, because otherwise I think we all agree your main course would have been a perfect dish.

Chef Yang: Thank you.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Aw, I’m so disappointed that my octopus was tough, but otherwise Lilia only had good things to say! I feel like I could still win this.
Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] They’re mostly dishing out compliments, probably because our families are here and they don’t want to look like [beep]holes. It still sounds like I got the harshest criticism. But whatever! I’m still proud of what me and Grandpa cooked!

Chef Altin: [voiceover] No matter who wins, I know I’ve grown today as a chef, and I got to have a special experience with my mother. It was definitely worth it.

Christophe: Chefs, you all have cooked us something to be proud of today, and we had a very difficult job in choosing the winner. However, after much deliberation, the chef who will receive immunity, and a guaranteed place in the final three is...Chef Nikiforov!

[For once Chef Nikiforov appears shocked to have won, but he hardly has a moment to gasp before he is crushed with two very enthusiastic Katsuki hugs.]

Chef Katsuki: [crying again] I knew you could do it, Victor!

[Chef Nikiforov squeezes his husband and his mother-in-law tight, overjoyed. Mrs. Katsuki murmurs something to the chef in Japanese before pressing a kiss to Chef Nikiforov’s brow, which only brings a fresh wave of happy tears from Chef Katsuki.]

Christophe: Congratulations Victor, your excellent tempura and vivid food memories have earned you a place in the Top Chef finale.

Chef Nikiforov: [beaming] I couldn’t have done it without the love and support of my family!

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Chef Yang: Honestly I’m not even mad Victor won. That was the cutest thing I’ve ever seen.

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Chef Plisetsky: [rolling his eyes] Yeah, yeah, Katsuki and the old man have been married the whole time and it’s adorable and we’re all shocked. Seriously, I might have a heart attack from how surprised I am.

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Chef Altin: [shrugging with a small smile] I think it’s sweet.

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[For the first time, Chef Nikiforov and Chef Katsuki share an interview booth, pressed shoulder to shoulder with their hands joined.]

Chef Nikiforov: I guess the secret is out!

Producer: So how did you two meet?

Chef Katsuki: Well, we started out as business partners…

Chef Nikiforov: [gasping] Yuu-chan, that’s not true! I was in love with you the whole time!

Chef Katsuki: [blushing] You were?

Chef Nikiforov: Of course! In love with your cooking, anyway. Then I fell in love with your hands, and your voice, and your beautiful smile—
Chef Katsuki buries his face in Chef Nikiforov’s shoulder with a squeak. The look on Chef Nikiforov’s face is one of pure adoration.

Chef Nikiforov: So we fibbed a little on our application forms, since we both own and cook at Tokyo Amour и серебро и золото. It’s a bit of a juggle, but we split our year between St. Petersburg and Tokyo. Sometimes together, sometimes apart, but always connected by our love.

Chef Katsuki: [looking up at Chef Nikiforov with matching devotion] I wouldn’t have it any other way.

[Back at the new Top Chef beach house, the contestants celebrate one more night with their loved ones. Between the five chefs they know how to whip up a decent pizza dough, so they all take turns topping their pies with fresh local ingredients and soon the house is full of good smells and happy people.]

Chef Yang: [in control of the pizza cutter] Linguica and spinach is done! Next up, sardine and mushroom! Mom, do you want another slice?

Mrs. Yang: You bet!

Chef Yang: [voiceover] I didn’t win today, but I’m still feeling strong going into the next challenge! I feel like I really redeemed myself to Lilia this round. That, plus knowing how much my mom believes in me, has me pumped for whatever’s coming next.

[In the warm living room, Chef Plisetsky takes a big bite of his pizza, clearly satisfied with the result.]

Chef Plisetsky: Hey, Grandpa, you gotta try this linguica stuff! It’s spicy!

Mr. Plisetsky: [holding up his empty plate] I’ll have whatever the chef recommends.

Chef Plisetsky: You got it. [to Otabek’s mom] Can I get you some more ginger ale, Mrs. Altin?

Mrs. Altin: That would be lovely dear, thank you.

Chef Plisetsky: Beka, anything for you?

Chef Altin: [holding his full can of seltzer] I’m good, Yura, thanks.

Chef Plisetsky: You bet.

Mrs. Altin: [to her son after Chef Plisetsky leaves] Yuri is such a nice boy. You should bring him back to Almaty sometime.

Chef Altin: [nearly choking on his seltzer as he blushes dark] Uh, wow, um, maybe.

Chef Altin: [voiceover] I think I could have won today, if any of Victor’s components had fallen through, but I am still proud of my dishes today. I am a bit worried that one of my toughest competitors is now safe from elimination, but he earned the win. I’ll simply have to cook my best, which is what I plan to do anyway.

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] I wish I had done better today, because I want to make my grandpa proud! I’ll show them in the next challenge that I don’t need any stupid immunity. I’ll make it to the finale by being the best.
Outside on the deck, Chefs Nikiforov and Katsuki are enjoying no longer being a poorly kept secret. Chef Nikiforov keeps his arm around Chef Katsuki’s shoulders as they enjoy their remaining time with Mrs. Katsuki, conversing in Japanese at only a slightly slower pace for the Russian chef’s benefit.

Chef Nikiforov: Oh, don’t let us forget, Yuuri and I have gifts to take home to Mari and Toshiyasan! We’ll have to wrap them so all the bottles will be safe in your suitcase.

Mrs. Katsuki: That's sweet of you, I’m sure they’ll love the surprise.

Chef Katsuki: [pressing a kiss to Victor’s cheek and grabbing their empty plate] I’ll get us another slice.

Chef Nikiforov: Thank you, moya solnyshko.

[Chef Katsuki steps inside, leaving Chef Nikiforov alone with his mother-in-law.]

Chef Nikiforov: [in Japanese] Mama, I’m sure Yuuri must have asked, but has there been any news? ...About the baby?

Mrs. Katsuki: [shaking her head] We haven’t heard anything back from the agency yet.

Chef Nikiforov: [obviously disappointed] Oh. Of course not. I’m sure it’s much too early—

[Mrs. Katsuki smiles, and pats her son-in-law on the cheek.]

Mrs. Katsuki: Don’t worry, Vicchan. If it’s meant to be, we’ll hear something soon.

Chef Nikiforov: You’re right. Of course, you’re right.

Mrs. Katsuki: You and Yuuri just worry about cooking right now. We know you will both make us proud.

Chef Nikiforov: We’ll do our best.

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] It feels amazing to be secure in the top three, but I never could have achieved it without the help of my Yuuri. He is my one true love, my family, which I hope we’ll be able to expand one day soon. I will not be resting on my laurels, however. Every challenge from here on out is a test, and I plan to face them with everything I have!

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I have no regrets helping Victor win today. He is absolutely the love of my life, and I want nothing more than to see him succeed. That doesn’t mean my competitive spirit has died out! I plan to give my all in the challenges to come. Victor will have to fight hard to win the title of Top Chef!

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[Chef Nikiforov and Chef Katsuki are together again in the interview booth.]

Chef Katsuki: Why did we both audition for Top Chef? Well, I wanted to prove that I am an executive chef. Not because of my training, not because of who I married, but because of who I am. I’m ready to be Top Chef, to prove it to the world and to prove it to myself. I belong among the best of the best.

Chef Nikiforov: And for me? I’m here to prove I deserve the title because of who I am, and who I married. I can only be Victor Nikiforov-Katsuki. The sacrifices I have made along the way, [pause]
the relationships that I have given up, it has all been worth it because this is the only person I can be. I was meant to be a chef, and I was meant to love Katsuki Yuuri. No one can change that, and I wouldn’t want them to, even if I could.

Chef Katsuki: [to Chef Nikiforov] I love you, but I’m here to win.

Chef Nikiforov: My darling, I could ask nothing less. I can’t wait to take you on in the finale.

[The two chefs exchange a tender kiss, the threat of intense competition nothing in the face of their enduring love.]

Chapter End Notes

A few translation notes:
Ana=mama in Kazakh
Hai=yes in Japanese
And a short explanation of “anata.” “Anata” technically means “dear” or “darling” in Japanese, but it is a very old fashioned term, mostly only used by women to refer to their husbands. I use it in this fic because of my personal headcanon that Victor looked it up online so that he would have a cute Japanese petname to call Yuuri, as is the way in Russian. Yuuri, though he knows Victor isn’t using the word quite right, thinks it’s cute and occasionally says it back because he loves his husband and loves that he tries his best embrace Yuuri’s native language. Enjoy!
Moda Lisboa: Part 1

Chapter Notes

I live!!! I have no excuses for how long it's taken to update this fic except grad school. I promise, tho, this fic is not now, nor will it ever be abandoned. Thanks to all my readers old and new who have stuck with this exciting story! All of your comments warm my heart and motivate me to write faster!

[It's early afternoon in Lisbon. The screen shows flashes of white washed walls, terra cotta roofs, and busy locals picking their way through winding streets. After sharing breakfast with their loved ones and seeing them off to the airport the chefs are ready for the next round of competition. They disembark from the iconic yellow tram in the medieval neighborhood of Alfama. From there it's only a short walk to their destination, where Christophe awaits. Tucked away between two unassuming house fronts is the Restaurante A Baĩuca.]

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Chef Yang: It's definitely an intense vibe among the final five chefs. It was great to have our loved ones in the last challenge, but saying goodbye this morning really brought the reality of the competition home. I miss my mom already, but we all have to stay focused. There's not going to be anymore non-elimination challenges!

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Chef Nikiforov: [serious] It was all loving and playing nice last week, but no more! I'm happy to be here with my Yuuri, but we are still competitors. I love and respect him too much to give anything less than my best! After the family style challenge I am guaranteed a spot in the finale, but that doesn't mean I will hold back on a single dish.

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Chef Altin: Victor has immunity, and that means there are only two spots left in the finale. Half of the chefs remaining will be eliminated, and despite our respect for one another we're all hoping to hear someone else's name called at judge's table. From here on out more than ever, every advantage counts, starting with this Quickfire.

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[In side the restaurant, the lights are dim. The chefs enter the small space, confused.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] I can't see very well in the dark, but even I can tell that this is a tiny place. There can't be more than like...ten tables? Even compared to the space in Tokyo this is cozy.

Chef Plisetsky: What's up? Did they send us to the wrong place? I can't see my hand in front of my —

[There's a skillful trill of guitar, and suddenly the low stage in front of the chefs is illuminated by a dramatic spotlight. Standing before a microphone is a beautiful older woman in a long black gown, accompanied by guitarist. In a strong, clear voice, the woman begins to sing in Portuguese. The]
Melody is smooth and melancholic, with the guitar as a strumming rhythmic counterpoint.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] The music is so beautiful and sad! Even though I can’t understand the lyrics I can tell the singer is calling out for a lost love. [sniff]

[Chef Katsuki leans in to Chef Nikiforov, who appears to be blinking back a few tears of his own. Even Chef Plisetsky doesn’t appear totally unaffected by the haunting melody.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover as he sniffs] Yeah, maybe it’s all mushy and stuff, but art is art! I can tell this lady is a badass musician just like I’m a badass chef, and that’s cool!

Chef Yang: [voiceover] This is such a special moment for us to share. You wouldn’t get this kind of experience anywhere else in the world. I know I’ll remember it forever.

[The performance ends on a clear sustained note. Once the song has finished the singer smiles and bows, before stepping aside to reveal Christophe, dressed in a fitted shirt and vest with red rose in his lapel.]

Christophe: [wiping his eyes with a handkerchief] Good afternoon, mes amis! How about a big round of applause for that stunning performance!

[The chefs give an enthusiastic cheer for the singer and guitarist, who offer another bow. They both remain onstage with Christophe. The Quickfire challenge logo flashes across the screen.]

Christophe: [tucking away his tissue] Ah, now that I’ve pulled myself together [laughter] Chefs, welcome to A Baîuca. This well-loved restaurant and bar is nestled in the heart of Alfama, Lisbon’s most historic neighborhood. This week’s challenges are all about the arts, and A Baîuca is known to host performers of Lisbon’s most iconic musical art form: fado. On that note, I’m thrilled to introduce João and Carlota, two of Alfama’s local fado musicians!

Carlota: [in a soft Portuguese accent] Boa tarde, chefs. A Baîuca is one of Lisbon’s more intimate dining experiences. Locals and visitors can mingle here over drinks and petiscos and enjoy the rich offerings of Alfama’s amateur fado community.

Chef Nikiforov: [tapping his fingers over his lips] Right away, I am hearing one word in that sentence that I don’t understand. This tells me it must be related to our challenge.

Chef Yang: What’s a petisco? If I have to take a guess I’d say it could be like a tapas. [thinking] Also, did Carlota just say they were amateur musicians? Holy cow, they’re so talented!

Christophe: [grinning] I can see the uncertainty among you! For those who don’t know, a petisco is a sharable, small plate version of a larger dish.

João: [more heavily accented] But it is not a tapas!

Christophe: Right you are! Petiscos are a small plate model of eating traditional to Portuguese bars and taverns, though they can now be found in trendy restaurants and the new fad of petisqueiras. While their culinary origins may be separate, petiscos are similar to tapas in that they are the perfect way to enjoy a wide variety of textures and flavors without committing to an entree sized dish.
Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] I will be totally honest: I cannot see the difference between petiscos and tapas. However, I will trust that they are the experts.

Carlota: Friends and strangers alike gather here at A Baîuca to enjoy a variety of petiscos and support the musicians of Alfama. João and I certainly enjoy our share after our performances!

Christophe: Chefs, for your Quickfire challenge you’ll serve these fadistas and myself your own take on a petisco, inspired by this unmistakably Lisboan musical tradition. João, Carlota and I will choose our favorite. The winner will not receive immunity, but they will have a big advantage in the upcoming Elimination challenge.

Chef Altin: Based on what we’ve heard, I would interpret the fado tradition as something rich and melancholy. I immediately think of red wine as a component of my dish.

Chef Plisetsky: I’m guessing fado is about lovey-dovey romance crap, so playing off of both sweet and savory seems like a good idea in this challenge.

Christophe: Before I say go, let me give you a glimpse of your working environment for this afternoon. Chefs, your kitchen is just beyond these doors.

[The chefs eagerly follow Christophe’s directions through a pair of swinging doors only to find a workspace about the size of a shoebox. Chef Nikiforov is first into the space.]

Chef Nikiforov: [setting down his knives and stretching on his toes to touch the ceiling] Wow, what a classic tiny kitchen!

[Chef Katsuki walks in behind and nearly collides with Chef Nikiforov. The rest of the contestants follow and it’s basically a five chef pile up in the cramped restaurant kitchen.]

Chef Yang: [squeezing past to a sliver of free counter space] Well this is going to be... cozy.

[When the chefs are all lined up elbow to elbow at their workstations, Christophe pokes his head into the kitchen.]

Christophe: Well chefs, as you have figured out, the kitchen at A Baîuca is quite...intimate. But I’m sure this will be no trouble for five consummate professionals such as yourselves. The pantry is fully stocked, and you may use any ingredients you find there to whip up a delicious dish.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] If the kitchen is this small, how big is the pantry? I can see the other chefs ready to run and get the first pick of proteins in case there’s a limited supply. I realize that I’m on the opposite side of the kitchen from the pantry, so I’m definitely going to be getting leftovers.

[All eyes fall on Chef Altin, who by coincidence is at the narrow station closest to the walk-in.]

Chef Altin: [voiceover] Oh boy.

Christophe: [winking] Chefs, good luck...negotiating. You have thirty minutes and your time starts now!

[With the clock running all five chefs make a break for the cooler. Chef Altin makes it first as]
Chef Altin: [voiceover] I crack open the cooler and I know I only have seconds to see my options and grab first choice. After the last challenge the only thing I know I don’t want is octopus.

[Chef Altin pushes past a few wrapped packages, eyes lighting up when he sees the protein he wants to cook with. Behind him, the chefs are pushing and elbowing to reach the cooler. Scrappy Chef Plisetsky manages to get to the front just as Chef Altin turns with the only package of linguica clutched to his chest.]

Chef Altin: **Linguica** is a spicy smoked sausage, kind of like chorizo and native to Portugal. I know I can use it similarly in a recipe to chorizo, and the rich fatty flavor along with heavy spice will make a great base to my petisco dish.

Chef Plisetsky: [staring at the parcel with danger in his eyes] Is that the only one?

Chef Altin: [holding the sausage protectively] Yeah. How much do you need?

Chef Plisetsky: [shoulders relaxing] Just one for a stuffing.

Chef Altin: [shoulders relaxing] Okay. We can share.


[The two chefs bump fists before Chef Plisetsky sorts through the cooler to find bacon. Next to the cooler is Chef Nikiforov who gathers up several crab, then Chef Yang claims a fresh pound of clams. Last to the cooler is Chef Katsuki, who looks over his remaining choices while the other chefs decide on their produce and cooking pans.]

Chef Katsuki: [rolling his eyes] Well that was intense. As I expected most of the seafood has been claimed by the time I reach the cooler. It’s down to cod and octopus. I’m not feeling very inspired by the cod, and after the last challenge we’re all tired of octopus. Stil...

Chef Katsuki makes his choice and returns to his station next to Chef Nikiforov, who laughs when he sees his competitor lay his main ingredient out on his small section of countertop.

Chef Nikiforov: More octopus, Yuuri?

Chef Katsuki: [grinning] Never enough.

Chef Nikiforov: What are you thinking, lubya moya?

Chef Katsuki: I’m aiming for a Portuguese take on the takoyaki.

Chef Nikiforov: [setting a large pot of water to boil] Oooh, very exciting!

Chef Katsuki: [sharpening a large chef’s knife in preparation for breaking down his octopus] What about you?
Chef Nikiforov: I’m doing crab cakes! One of my favorite small plates.

Chef Katsuki: Looks like we’re having the battle of the seafood fritters.

Chef Nikiforov: [blowing a kiss to Yuuri as he tosses his crab into the boiling water] May the best chef win!

[Across the kitchen, two chefs using the same protein appear to be developing very different dishes. Chef Altin is peeling a small mound of garlic, a bottle of red wine waiting beside his station, while Chef Plisetsky cleans a carton of dates and slices his share of the linguica into small matchstick size pieces.]

Chef Altin: [apropos of nothing] This style of plating would be good in our restaurant. You know...someday.

Chef Plisetsky: [shocked] Our...oh yeah! Our restaurant! [nodding quickly] We could do small plates so people get to try a lot of our stuff.

Chef Altin: [thoughtful, a small smile playing at his lips] It would be easier to share Kazakh dishes that diners wouldn’t recognize.

Chef Plisetsky: [wiping his brow as he scoops up his sausage with the flat side of his knife, the linguica all perfectly sliced] Mise en place would be a [beep] tho.

[Chef Altin and Chef Plisetsky laugh. Beside the two younger chefs Chef Yang is mincing coriander with a wistful smile on her face.]

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Chef Yang: Yuri and Otabek are so cute! I remember when I was that young and still dreaming up my first restaurant ideas. I just hope they stay focused on the competition.

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Chef Plisetsky: There’s been so much [beep] going on, I never thought that Beka was serious about us opening a place together when we talked about it after Restaurant Wars. [shy] I’ve been thinking about it a lot though.

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[As the timer reaches the halfway mark, the chefs start feeling the squeeze with only four burners to share between them. As soon as Chef Nikiforov pulls his boiling crab off the heat Chef Altin is taking his place with a large saute pan full of red wine, garlic, and sausage. Chef Yang claims a burner for her Dutch oven and Chef Plisetsky is quick to start heating up a large pan even though he’s still in the process of stuffing his dates and wrapping them in bacon. Chef Katsuki is staking out the small deep fryer, still mixing his takoyaki batter.]

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover as he scrapes a large pile of herbs from his cutting board into his thick batter] Takoyaki are a popular Japanese street food. From what I hear it’s similar to an American hush puppy. Basically a savory cooked fritter with a piece of squid stuffed inside. Unfortunately they’re usually made with a special popover pan, which I don’t have, so I’m altering the recipe a bit so I can deep fry them, as well as adding some traditional Portuguese flavors. They should still be a yummy salty bite, perfect to go with a cold beer and great music. Plus, I’m far away from the rat race on the stove.
Chef Plisetsky: [loudly] Don’t touch my dial, old man!

[Over at the stove Chef Nikiforov raises his hands placatingly.]

Chef Nikiforov: Just a mistake Yuratchka. You know how confusing these international stoves are for me.

Chef Altin: [Fishing out his poached sausage to slice it on his cutting board] Ten minutes, everyone!

[Chef Nikiforov finds the right dial, and gets his crab cakes pan frying without a second to spare. While their fritters fry both he and Chef Katsuki are whipping up aiolis as fast as they can. Out of burners on the stove, Chef Yang has had to get creative, putting a tray of bread triangles under the oven broiler to toast. Chef Plisetsky is reaching over the far side of the stove to keep his stuffed figs turning.]

Chef Plisetsky: [voiceover] Since my dish is so simple, I can’t afford to let my bacon burn!

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] With all the traffic around the stove I’m not sure my crab cakes will be getting enough time for a good golden crust. My Yuuri might be the winner of our little fritter face off.

Chef Katsuki: [fishing golden brown takoyaki from his fryer basket] Two minutes everybody! Get it on the plate!

[The chef’s run down their remaining time putting their finishing touches on their single plate, which will be shared between the judges. Last to hit the service window is Chef Nikiforov, who waits to the last possible moment to pull his crab cakes from the sizzling oil and set them on a swirl of aioli. He adds a sprinkle of parsley and sets his plate beside the others exactly as the buzzer sounds.]

Chef Yang: That’s time! Great job everybody.

Chef Katsuki: [wiping his brow] Whew, it’s hot in here.

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Honestly at this point I’m just glad no one’s gotten hurt. That was one cramped kitchen! Now it’s up to the judges to see who gets the advantage going into the Elimination round.

[Back in the dining room, a few bartop tables have been pushed together to give the appearance of a long tasting table for Christophe, João, and Carlota. All five chefs have placed their dishes on the table and await the judges’ opinions.]

Christophe: [rubbing his hands together gleefully] So? How was it?

Chef Yang: [blousing out her chef’s coat] A little warm.

Christophe: [grinning] I believe it. No one is about to faint, right? Victor? Any wooziness?


Christophe: Alright then, as long as we’re all hale and hearty, let’s eat! João, Carlota, where would you like to begin?

Carlota: [pointing to Chef Altin’s dish] I believe I see linguica on the table, Chris, so I have to vote for starting on that end.

Christophe: Ladies choice, then. Chef Altin, please tell us about the petisco you have prepared.
Chef Altin: Today I’ve put a petisco twist on a classic tapa. This is linguica poached in red wine with garlic and bay leaf. I was inspired by the warmth, but also the sadness of fado.

[The judges sample Chef Altin’s dish with provided toothpicks, keeping with the theme of authentic tavern eating.]

Carlota: [chewing] Hmm...very rich chef.

João: [speaks briefly in Portuguese]

Carlota: Yes, I agree. [to Christophe and Chef Altin] João is wishing for a nice piece of bread to soak up this sauce.

Christophe: [nodding] I feel similarly. Moving on!

Chef Altin: [voiceover] I can’t tell if that was a criticism or a compliment. As usual they aren’t giving too much away as they taste.

Christophe: Next up, Chef Nikiforov! Victor, what have you made for us?

Chef Nikiforov: I found some beautiful crab in the cooler, so what could be more classic for a small plate than crab cakes? I’ve topped the with an herb salad and a spicy aioli.

[Christophe, Carlota and João taste Chef Nikiforov’s dish, exchanging a meaningful but ambiguous glance before thanking the chef and moving on to the next competitor.]

Chef Plisetsky: I don’t know Portuguese, but I could tell the song Carlota sang was romantic, so I wanted an element of sweetness and heat to my dish. My petisco is a bacon wrapped date. I also used linguica, as stuffing for the date to add spice and richness.

Carlota: Hmm, richness is clearly not a shortcoming of this dish.

Christophe: Very indulgent, chef. Thank you.

[The judges now approach Chef Yang, who offers a large bowl of clams in a delicate green sauce.]

Chef Yang: When I heard Carlota’s song, I was immediately reminded of a sailor’s wife, waiting for her sweetheart to return from sea, so I knew I wanted to do something briny for my petisco. I noticed clams on a lot of tavern menus around town, so I thought I would try for my own version. Please enjoy little neck clams in a light cilantro pesto, with a garlic toast.

João: [chewing] Finally, bread!

Carlota: Definitely a welcome addition to these petiscos.

Christophe: [licking a taste of Chef Yang’s sauce off a toothpick] Hmm, thank you, chef. An intriguing offering. Last but not least, we have Yuuri P. What have you concocted for us today, chef?

Chef Katsuki: When I think of a warm snack to share between friends I think of takoyaki, a traditional Japanese street food. To give it a petisco spin I replaces the squid with octopus, and added a healthy dose of coriander and parsley. It’s topped with a spicy mayonnaise, though I couldn’t find any bonito flakes in the pantry, so I replaced it with some breadcrumbs for texture.

[The judges are eager to sample Chef Katsuki’s dish, but also eager to take a sip of water afterwards.]
Carlota: Wow, that is hot!

Christophe: [grimacing] And we don’t mean spicy. Yuuri, that batter is still practically molten inside. I’m glad we tasted it last, because I’m not sure I have any taste buds left!

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Chef Katsuki: [covering his face with his hands] Ugh. I’m probably the only Top Chef in existence who wishes his food hadn’t come out so hot for the judges.

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[Having tasted every dish, Christophe, Carlota, and João face the final five contestants to offer their verdict.]

Christophe: Chefs, you each put your unique spin on the petisco today, some with more success than others. Only one of you will walk away with an advantage in the coming elimination challenge. Carlota, which dishes were your least favorites today?

Carlota: We weren’t in perfect harmony, but João and I each had a least favorite. Mine was Chef Nikiforov’s dish. Chef, there was nothing wrong with your crab cake, but there was also nothing special. I was missing the deep feeling of fado in your dish.

Chef Nikiforov: I understand. Thank you.

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Chef Nikiforov: Hmmm...I am thinking that I am just too happy in love to fully understand fado music! Why should I be sad when I have my lovely Yuuri to inspire me to make happy food?

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João: Our second least favorite dish was...Chef Katsuki. I am interested in Chef Katsuki’s Japanese/Portuguese dish, but it was so hot! [fanning self] Chef, I could not taste the flavors of your dish.

Christophe: I have to agree. Yuuri, I think something went wrong in your frying temperature. The takoyaki overall was a bit greasy, and it definitely burned our tongues.

Chef Katsuki: [voiceover] Ugh, I do not have time right now to be making these mistakes! My dishes in the elimination challenge will have to be absolutely perfect.

Christophe: And what about our favorites? Carlota, please give our chefs the good news.

Carlota: João and I definitely are in agreement on our top two. The first is Chef Altin. Chef, we appreciated the richness of your dish, and how you embraced a native Lisbon ingredient. We still wish there was some bread on plate, though!

Chef Altin: Thank you.

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Chef Altin: This late in the competition, I’m happy to be named in the top whether I win or not. Every reminder to my fellow chefs that I’m a contender is a step in the right direction.
Carola: Our other favorite was Chef Yang, partially because you gave us bread! But mostly because when you promised us clams with pesto, we were expecting an overpowering sauce. However when we tasted the dish, the clams were front and center. Your light pesto was a lovely partner, it didn’t drown out the natural salt and sweetness of the shellfish.

Christophe: With these two strong dishes at the forefront, which would you say is the winner today?

João: It is a close call, but Chef Yang is the winner. A very beautiful dish, chef.

[The other chefs applaud, while Chef Yang looks pleased.]

Chef Yang: [voiceover] Wow, two quickfires in a row! I’m looking forward to continuing this hot streak in Lisbon!

Chef Nikiforov: [voiceover] Hm, Isabella has now won two challenges in the finale round. She is definitely one to watch as we move forward. Her flavors may be subtle, but Chef Yang is not to be underestimated.

Christophe: Congratulations, Isabella! As promised, you will have a big advantage in the coming Elimination round! And believe me, you are going to want it, because I have some serious news.

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Chef Yang: Oh boy. I’m super glad to have the advantage, but Christophe’s face is making me super nervous right now.

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Chef Altin: There are only two spots left in the finale, so no challenge from here on out is going to be easy.

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Chef Katsuki: [pulling at his hair] I hate the suspense! Just tell us so I can worry about it in peace!

[

Christophe: Chefs, this is going to be the last elimination challenge before the finale.

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Chef Plisetsky: I’m still counting five chefs, right? That means one of two things: either their taking four of us to the finale, or….

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Chef Yang: [pale] Oh no…

[

Christophe: That means the next challenge…will be a double elimination.

[Chef Katsuki: [cursing furiously in Japanese]
Chef Nikiforov: I can’t even say to you how relieved I am to have immunity for this challenge. [clutching his hand to his chest] Oh, my poor Yuuri....

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!