seek those who fan your flames

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by ebenroot

Summary

Yuuri gets hand-delivered a black-print T-shirt by one of his bodyguards on Friday. There's a small sticky note attached to the collar in Victor's handwriting that reads: 'Our new band shirt! Logo is still a work in progress. Name too. But it's a start! Let me know what you think after school. - Victor'

There's a heart next to his name that is hastily scribbled out. Then another heart next to that one, like Victor decided to put it in anyways.

Yuuri thinks he's in love.

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in which Yuuri is a teenager that's actually a prince, and Victor is a teenager with a band that just wants to listen to rock music with him
It’s raining when Yuuri wanders into a club that is drowning in tropical neon lights and smells like a locker room after varsity football practice.

He doesn’t know the club’s name. He doesn’t know any faces that he passes as he enters. Matter of fact, he doesn’t even know where the fuck he is in this jungle of a city with bright lights and tall-tall buildings, just that he’s far away from where he normally strays. It’s kind of scary and exciting all at once, like he’s on a roller coaster and anticipating the drop.

The club is smaller than it looks on the outside, but maybe that’s because it’s packed with teenagers rocking to the synth beats of some eighties song that Yuuri doesn’t know. He tries to make himself go unnoticed, drifting through a sea of twisting and jumping bodies without a single clue as to where he’s going. It’s not that hard; he’s dressed all in black like he dropped by to party after coming from a funeral. His glasses - big and round and painfully geeky - slip down his nose when he gets shoulder-checked by a guy in a heavy leather jacket.

“S-Sorry,” Yuuri apologizes. It’s hard to hear himself talk; the music is so loud and people are hooting and hollering every off-beat so it just sounds even louder. The guy doesn’t seem to notice Yuuri’s existence, nursing a Coke bottle from a bendy straw. In his unease, Yuuri shuffles away and keeps his head down low.

There’s a nook in the far right corner of the club that’s empty, dotted with vintage arcade cabinets. Yuuri has more elbow room to move around, and he inspects each arcade cabinet with mild interest. The lights have a gentle glow to them, nostalgia of an era that was way before Yuuri’s time. They chime in electric beeps and hums, a euphony of digital noise that sings sweet to Yuuri’s ears and draws him closer to their electric screens.

“…Burgertime?” Yuuri asks in bemusement as he pauses beside a video game cabinet. He’s never heard of it, but he's intrigued by it’s lights and display. He appraises the chef mascot that takes up the entire side panel and watches the demo play out on the screen that flickers in and out every two seconds. It looks relatively easy, but arcade games were never his thing, so he’s most likely going to suck.

He pats his pockets down for some loose change, smiling when he comes across a needed quarter and lets it drop into the machine. The joystick feels foreign and loose in his grip; the white plastic ball at the end has its paint chipping away from years of use and wear.

He dies in the first level, only because he has no idea what this ‘pepper’ button is supposed to do and he didn't realize that the cute little hot dog character is actually a mook to avoid. He readjusts his bearings, fingertip poised over the pepper button as the screen resets. He’s still a little clumsy with the controls, but he at least scrapes by to the second level.

He doesn’t know when - or where he comes from - but Yuuri notices he has an audience of one, his face reflected in the screen of the arcade cabinet. He's a boy, most likely around Yuuri's age, with long silvery hair tied into a loose ponytail that spills over his broad shoulder.

He's a special kind of beautiful, a Hollywood type with a perfect jawline and hypnotizing boyish-blue eyes. Yuuri can't help but stare at the reflection of the boy watching him intensely, his eyes
flickering back and forth between Yuuri and the game’s screen.

Naturally, Yuuri fucks up, his character gets cornered by the on-screen enemies, and he loses another life.

Behind him, the boy gives a chuckle.

It’s even harder to concentrate. Yuuri’s grip on the joystick is beginning to grow sweaty, fingers nervously twitching over the pepper button. He’s focusing more on the boy’s reflection than the damn game, conscious of his performance, conscious of himself.

What does the guy want? Does he want to play? Is he laughing to himself at how inadequate Yuuri is playing right now and this is better entertainment than the dozen other arcade cabinets he could be lurking around?

What if he knows who Yuuri is?

Yuuri pulls his hands off the controls and lets his character die. He only racked up fifty-three hundred points.

“You can play if you want,” Yuuri says hurriedly, shoulders shrugging up to his ears in that nervous tick of his as he scuttles away from the arcade cabinet. He’s blushing. His face feels hot and gross, hands clammy with sweat and trembles still coming out the tips of his fingers.

He feels his phone buzz in his back pocket for the fifth time tonight. Deftly, he silences the call without even looking at the number.

Yuuri mingles by a claw machine that is cluttered with plush animals overstuffed with cotton. There’s one in particular that Yuuri has his eyes on; a big brown poodle with a fat round body and a dumb felt tongue sticking out from its muzzle. Its shiny black eyes beckon Yuuri, calling to him in a high pitched tone that sounds like the small video screen on the side of the machine announcing that it is one quarter for three tries.

He readies a quarter, but before he lets it fall into the machine, he notices the reflection of the boy from before lingering in the corner.

Yuuri turns, back against the machine, hands sweaty. He drops his quarter, and when it clatters to the ground, it’s a sharp noise that makes Yuuri’s entire body give a nervous hitch.

“W-What do you want?” Yuuri urges through clenched teeth. The boy seems surprised that Yuuri is speaking to him, like he isn’t looming around Yuuri in a stoic and unmoving presence. He blushes - which isn’t fair because he's pretty when he blushes - and offers a hand towards Yuuri.

“I’m sorry. I…you go to Stammi Vicino, right?” the boy inquires. Yuuri only relaxes by a little; there’s no way this boy knows who he is.

“Um…yeah, I do,” he answers, staring at the boy’s hands like it’s a foreign object. After leaving the boy’s hand hanging in midair for a handshake never to come, the boy’s hand subtly retreats back to his side. He’s still blushing, but he’s smiling like he has everything under control, eyes sparkling bright with the twinkle of arcade lights making them shine.

“Go Hamsters, right?” he says with a thumbs up. Oh god, is he a jock? Yuuri doesn’t even go to any games or school functions. He is the perfect picture of ‘teen apathy for school spirit’.

Still, he musters up a pathetic little “Go Hamsters” and love taps the air with his fist. The other boy is
“Victor Nikiforov,” he introduces with a gesture towards himself. Yuuri shifts from side to side, not sure where to look at the quarter still on the floor in between their feet, or the arcade lights, or Victor’s brilliant eyes.

“…Yuuri…” His voice is small, unsure of himself and still cautious. Victor notices this; his eyebrows raise then furrow down and knit together like he’s not sure how to make Yuuri not be cautious and a nervous wreck of a human being.

“Yuuri,” he repeats, letting the name sit pretty on his tongue, “do you want a drink? Coke, Sprite, lemonade-”

“I’m fine,” Yuuri cuts off, deciding he will busy himself by staring at the tips of his feet and the quarter still on he ground. After a beat, Victor bends down and picks the quarter up and offers it towards Yuuri with a smile. Still without looking at him, Yuuri takes it.

“Those machines cheat,” Victor warns with a tilt of his head. “You have to waste about eight dollars before you can even get a plush animal even close to the hatch.”

Yuuri turns around and studies the machine with an inquisitive eye. The poodle is substantially larger than what the flimsy claw can possibly hold. It is also the farthest away from the brightly lit drop hatch. Clearly, it’s setting Yuuri up to fail not only once, but multiple times before he can even think about winning the poodle.

He slips the quarter in anyways.

Victor’s reflection smiles coyly at him. Yuuri pretends not to notice.

The claw stutters to life and swings precariously as Yuuri guides it over to the poodle plush. He studies the position of the claw in relation to the stuffed animal before he drops it, its thin metal hooks opening up like a spider as it descends and wraps around the back end of the plush.

As it rises up, the poodle flips over onto its back and rolls a quarter of the way down over the others. It’s closer to the hatch than it originally was. Much closer.

Victor gives an impressed whistle, and he is directly by Yuuri’s side now instead of looming from afar. He smells nice, not like the cheap teen deodorant and body spray combo that Yuuri is sporting and sweating through. It’s a scent that Yuuri can’t quite place, but knows that it’s warm, like the way the hearth of a fire pit makes a person feel warm and relaxed as they draw nearer to it.

“You’re really good,” Victor compliments, watching as Yuuri moves the claw for try number two.

“I guess I’m good at pointless things,” Yuuri responds, like the killjoy he is.

Victor laughs. The sound makes Yuuri’s finger slip and drop the claw too early, pressing into the cotton stomach of the poodle but not grabbing it. There’s heat that crawls over Yuuri’s skin, a mixture of embarrassment and sudden revelations that Victor has a nice laugh.

“It’s better to be good at something than nothing, right?” he says. Yuuri sucks his bottom lip in between his teeth, considering Victor’s words and regarding the placement of the claw for his final try. Yuuri responds with a shrug, wordlessly dropping the claw one more time. He watches the way it makes a pathetic grab for the poodle’s hind leg, and flips it even closer to the hatch without it actually falling through.
The lights flash a pitying color of blue that isn’t like Victor’s eyes; it manages to be obnoxious and depressing at the same time, accompanied with a sad emoji on the video panel beside the machine.

Yuuri lets his shoulders sag, but he doesn’t feel disappointed. Victor clicks his tongue, digging into the front pockets of his distressed jeans. “Here, lemme-”

“No, it’s fine,” Yuuri says, shooing away the offer of another quarter before Victor can find one. He feels awkward in his shoes again, clicking his heels together, rocking backwards and leaning his back against the claw machine. There’s a trickle of teenagers coming off the dance floor and shuffling their way over to the arcade area. Yuuri swallows, suddenly like there’s too many people, too many eyes watching him.

“I should…I should go home,” Yuuri says, because it’s partially true. His phone buzzes again as he says this, and he quickly withdraws the device to silence it once more.

Victor looks saddened by this, but Yuuri isn’t sure why. “Oh,” he responds, scratching the back of his head. Then, “Can I give you a ride home?”

Yuuri blinks at the other boy, eyes wide with confusion. Victor continues, a little bit more confident, “I got my license over the summer. I mean, I don’t have my own car yet, just driving around my grandma’s car cause she’s…older and…” Victor face palms, groaning aloud, “Forget that I said I drive my grandma’s car.”

Yuuri nods his head, the corners of his lips quirking into a crooked smile. “Um, thank you for offering but…I’ll just take the bus.”

Again, Victor gives a saddened look. This time, he’s quicker to mask it with a smile.

“Oh, yeah. Sure. I - uh - I guess then I’ll see you around school?” he asks, voice raising into a hopeful tone. Yuuri’s phone buzzes again, and Yuuri fumbles with it instead of giving an answer.

“I-I’m really sorry. I just need to - I -” Yuuri holds his phone to his chest, tightly like his heart is going to jump out at any moment. “Goodnight,” he hurriedly says, and with that rushes out of the arcade area and disappears into the sea of people on the dance floor and the glows of neon lights.

The bus ride from the club to the consulate is twenty minutes in length. An additional five minutes is tacked on at the end for Yuuri taking his time walking from the bus stop to the iron gates, thinking of what he’s going to say for his inevitable chew out.

The night air is cold for August. Yuuri shivers out a “Hello” when he presses his thumb on a button embedded into the voice box that is just beneath the golden plaque embossed with the family crest.

“Name?”

“Um, it’s Yuuri…”

There’s a pause.

“Minako has some words she’d like to tell you.” The voice comes out a little teasing through the static, as if to say ‘oooh, you’re going to get it now’. Yuuri bristles at the thought, but he keeps his
“G-G-G-Gooooood Morning Everybody! It’s another fine Monday morning - well, not fine for all those kids heading back to school for the daily grind. Hope you all didn’t waste away your summer because you’ve got a long ways till your next break! Roll up to school with some sweet sounds from all over the world, this is Melting Pot FM! Kicking off eighties week here in the station with some tunes from the land of the rising sun, Japan! Here’s ‘I Love You So’ by Junko Ohashi!’

“Ahh, this brings back memories,” Hiroko quietly fawns, and turns the volume dial up on the radio as she slows to make a right turn.

Yuuri is slumped in the passenger seat beside her, picking at the breakfast prepared by his dietician. It’s a quinoa fruit salad, which isn’t necessarily bad - it’s quite flavorful, actually. Just…it isn’t
pancakes drowned in syrup. Or fatty strips of bacon that is just burnt enough to give a savory crunch when Yuuri bites into it. He’s been pushing around the fruit in the Tupperware bowl for the past ten minutes, eyes solemn.

“You haven’t touched your breakfast,” Hiroko points out with a bemused hum, glancing out the corner of her eye. “Do you want something else to eat?”

“It would be kinda hard to go to a Dunkin Donuts with a police escort,” Yuuri mutters in response, giving a glimpse at the two officers riding their motorcycles, framing the ’97 Celica like two, intimidating bookends. “Really, mom, you couldn’t have talked them out of the police escort?”

“Minako said to consider it punishment for what happened with the dinner,” she says with a little giggle. “Besides, I kind of like it. Makes me feel like I’m a celebrity or something.”

Yuuri gives this groan that is defeating and agitated, slumping even further down in his seat when he sees people on the sidewalk take notice and taking photos with their cellphones. “You’re going to have police escorts all the time after you graduate, Yuuri,” Hiroko reminds.

“I know. But that’s when I’m going to be in Hasetsu where I’m still some faceless prince that nobody knew even existed until three years ago! Not here where there’s cameras and…and Twitter.”

“I’m sure there’s Twitter and cameras in Hasetsu, Yuuri,” his mother giggles. “It’s been such a long time since I’ve been there though. I’m sure a lot of things have changed since when I was still married to your father,” she then says with a gentle sigh. She always does that when she talks about Yuuri’s dad. It’s a dissonant sound, one that is at peace and at the same time longing for something more.

Unsure of what to follow up with, Yuuri eats a piece of watermelon.

The drive to school is relatively short without having to worry about traffic lights and a clutter of cars. Hiroko quietly hums along to the music on the radio and Yuuri tries to make a reasonable dent in his fruit salad so he doesn’t feel like he’s wasted the chef’s hard work in providing him a breakfast he didn’t ask for.

One block away from the school, the police escort is called off and allow the Celica to continue on ahead. It’s like a weight suddenly pushing off of Yuuri’s shoulders; he starts to sit up more in his seat as he gathers his schoolbag.

“Watanabe is going to pick you up like usual,” Hiroko responds. “Maybe he’ll let me drive you to school more often. Minus the police escort.”

Yuuri smiles at the thought. “I’d like that,” he says in response, eyes kind. In spite of the police escort, he missed riding in the car with his mother. He missed the sound of her singing under her breath along to the radio crackling through static. He missed the pine freshener smell of the interior of her car, the way that his foot braces nicely in the nook between the dashboard and the cardoor. It’s the little things that Yuuri took for granted once, but now desperately cling to so he can have some sense of normalcy in his life.

It’s a cluster of cars - single-file, bumper to bumper - heading into the drop-off zone. There’s a couple of freshmen students that are struggling with their bags and shaking off their parents dropping them off for their first day of high school. Out at the front gates by the steps, there’s a group of cheerleaders and ASB welcoming students with a peppy cheer, and the student body president yelling at them through a megaphone.
Hiroko pulls up against the curb behind a station wagon, watching as Yuuri hurriedly shoves the Tupperware in his messenger bag alongside his packaged lunch and his three-subject notebook. “Have a nice day at school! Senior year!” she chirps and Yuuri musters up a smile for her. She hugs him, kisses at the corner of his eye and pushing his glasses slightly askew.

He exits the car, quietly closing the door behind him, and gets a good grip of the strap slung around his shoulders. It’s a nice day; there’s still a warm breeze on the wind and the air isn’t smothered with summer heat that will make Yuuri sweat through the cotton of his T-shirt.

He gets only three steps past the cheerleaders when there’s a loud shrill screech of the megaphone.

“**HEY KATSUKI! WHERE’S THE LIMO?!**” the student body president yells. Yuuri jumps like a scared cat in a dumpster, face suddenly flushing with heat and suddenly conscious of the eyes that are turning to look his way and scrutinize him. His grip tightens on his strap to the point that he feels his blunt nails digging into the meaty flesh of his palm, and he hurries up the stairs with his head down.

“**THERE HE GOES! STAMMI VICINO’S OWN SNOB, ‘TOO RICH TO SPEAK’ KATSUKI YUURI! HAPPY FIRST DAY OF SCHOOL!**”

“I swear to God, he’s such an asshole.”

Yuuri doesn’t respond right away, but the slump of his shoulders speaks louder than words.

Phichit Chulanont gives a pointed glance over at the group of students congregating on the opposite side of the classroom, only a few more minutes left till third period starts. The student body president is at the center of the group, laughing at some joke one of the football jocks crowding around him tells.

“I bet you if you had one of your bodyguards or whatever shake him down, he’ll be singing a different tune,” Phichit murmurs under his breath. Yuuri slumps in his chair.

“You know I can’t do that. That would be…abusing my powers or…something.”

“You’re a prince, Yuuri. You should at least use some of the perks the job comes with! Like… making jerks like Mr. President over there kiss the ground you walk on.”

“I do have perks. Perks like getting chauffeured around in either a Mulsanne or a limo and have everyone gawking at you. Or having a chef cook me things so the chances of me being poisoned at school are negative twenty percent,” Yuuri points out. He gives a sad pout at this; Mondays are always ‘Meatloaf and Mashed Potatoes’ in the school cafeteria, and he could down a plate of cafeteria meatloaf like it’s a jello shot.

Yuuri pulls a pencil from his case, adjusting it neatly on the surface of his desk. “No more talking about prince stuff at school. No one is supposed to know about it. You’re not supposed to even know about it,” he then whispers out. Phichit gives an indignant pout at that, but he nods his head and sighs.

“Okay, mums the word. But my point still stands,” he says, and pulls out his binder and flips it open to a clean sheet of paper.
Class begins with Celestino slamming his bare palm on the surface of the wooden podium at the front of the desk, calling for everyone to take their seats. He rubs his hands together, appraising the size of the class and glances at each individual face, before he turns to the whiteboard and spells out ‘Speech’ in cursive writing.

“Ciao, ciao, everyone,” he says with a smile, slipping his hands into the pockets of his slacks. “I’m your speech teacher, Mr. Cialdini. To those of you who I had the pleasure of having in my English class in the morning, ciao ciao again! And to those that I’ve managed to have all four years of English with-” at this, he gives a look at Yuuri and Phichit sitting in the front row, and shrugs his shoulders, “I don’t know how you talk your counselors into doing it, but it’s also great to see you again!”

He paces the front of the classroom, gesturing to the whiteboard. “As you can see, this is Speech, or Public Address. We will be making a total of six major speeches over the course of this year, three for each semester. For now, we’re going to do something small as a way of getting our feet in the water, so to say. It’s the first day of school, so that means no one knows each other and we’re going to get to know each other through some introductions!”

A chorus of groans immediately erupts.

Celestino raises his hand to hush the crowd. “I know, introductions are annoying. Eighty percent of the time, I won’t remember your name unless I either really like you or you really get on my nerves. But this is going to be a fun thing! You’re going to be doing group projects in here too, so the sooner you weed out the people that are going to be deadbeats - no offense - the better.”

Celestino then turns back to the whiteboard, scribbling down a few bullet points. “So! Everyone get into pairs of two and put together a short speech about each other. Just basics, something that’ll last three minutes, nothing too intimate. Whatever you want the class to know about yourself, let your partner know so they can include it in their speech. Really sell the person.”

Yuuri hates speeches. He hates people trying to ‘sell’ the idea of him. The class is barely starting and he already hates everything.

Celestino rubs his palms together and cracks a toothy grin. “Alright! If there aren’t any questions, everyone pair up!”

Phichit’s hand slams on Yuuri’s desk with a loud thud! like he just crushed a fly Yuuri didn’t even see. “Partner!” Phichit chirps. Yuuri jumps, but the erratic beating of his heart quickly subsides and he smiles.

There’s a shadow that suddenly appears and looms over Yuuri, and he turns to see Celestino standing beside his desk with his arms crossed, eyebrow quirked and class roster in his hand.

“You two can’t be partners,” he says with a sigh. Phichit frowns.

“Aw, come on, Ciao Ciao!”

“You two have been attached to the hip since freshman year. The point of this exercise is to give a speech about someone you don’t know,” Celestino clarifies. He glances around the classroom that slowly becomes all a buzz with noise and idle chatter as people pair off, then gives a glance at his clipboard.

“How about Mr. Seung-Gil Lee for you, Phichit?” Celestino suggests. Phichit blinks, cocking a head in confusion.
“Who’s that?”

“If he hasn’t moved from his spot, he’s that kid sitting in the corner not making an effort to try and find a partner,” Celestino points out with a polite nod of his head to the far left back corner. Yuuri and Phichit turn to take a look. There is, indeed, a boy seated at his desk with a look on his face that is a mixture of apathy and ‘kill me now’, not even trying to make eye contact with anyone in the classroom.

Phichit turns back to Celestino, a wild look in his eyes.

“No. I can’t be his partner,” he states.

“Why not?”

“Because he’s hot.”

“And I would not have known that if you wouldn’t have told me. I’m sure there are other things about him that I don’t know that you could eloquently put into words, Phichit.”

Phichit does this thing with his eyes, where they roll so far back that Yuuri thinks they’ll pop out of his skull and then proceed to write a strongly worded Tweet about how much this particular moment is such a drag. He then frowns, opens his mouth, closes his mouth, glances over his shoulder at Seung-Gil still ignoring the world around him, and sighs.

With a sorry glance in Yuuri’s direction, Phichit gathers up his things and heads to the back of the room to make nice with Seung-Gil. Celestino then turns to Yuuri and Yuuri slumps in his seat. “And for you, Yuuri-”

“Could I just…I - I don’t really think that this is a good idea. Me giving…speeches and…socializing with other people,” Yuuri mutters, shoulders up to his ears. Celestino gives a hum to that, lightly tapping his clipboard against the side of his thigh.

“Well, then that means that you’ll be taking a zero for the first assignment of the year,” the teacher explains. Yuuri pulls his lower lip in between his teeth, hands tightening into fists on his desk. This makes the corners of Celestino’s lips quirk in amusement. “Of course, I will give points for attempting the exercise. It’s really not that difficult, Yuuri.”

“I know it’s not,” Yuuri mumbles. It’s stupidly easy. Just…sometimes when Yuuri stands up to speak, it feels like the entire Earth is spinning off its gravitational axis and his hands get disgustingly clammy and his lungs shrivel up to the size of raisins.

Celestino gives another look around the classroom. “Well, if you’re that insistent on not partnering up with someone but still want the points, I will consider letting you give your own speech. But, only if you go first.”

It’s suddenly hard for Yuuri to swallow his own spit.

“I…” he grasps and uncurls his hands, palms already sweaty with nerves. “I…okay…that’s…fine…”

Celestino claps a hand on Yuuri’s shoulder. It’s warm and familiar, paternal like and meant to calm the storm that brews in the recesses of Yuuri’s consciousness. He smiles at Yuuri, and then leaves him to his speech and goes to the opposite side of the classroom to mingle with other new students.

Yuuri pulls a fresh sheet of paper from his messenger bag and smooths it out on the surface of his
He takes his mechanical pencil and taps the tip of the lead against the first blank line.

What is there to say about him?

His name is Yuuri Katsuki. It was Yuuri Sato, but according to Minako, he will forever be addressed as His Imperial Highness, The Crown Prince Katsuki Yuuri of Hasetsu, so he might as well get used to the royal name ‘Katsuki’ and leave his mother’s last name in the past with his old life.

He’s never met his father, but he guesses he’s a nice person. He’s sent Yuuri a cactus plant every year for his birthday since he turned seven, along with a long worded letter that is fifty percent rambling, fifty percent bumbling father that has no idea how to be a dad and rule an obscure country off the coasts of Japan.

If someone were to step outside and squint their eyes, they would see a man in black standing in the shadows near the courtyard. That is one of Yuuri’s bodyguards stationed at the school per Minako’s request to the principal. That is the one bodyguard Yuuri is consciously aware of; he’s sure there’s at least five more men stationed around the school, an ever present watchful eye to make sure no harm comes to their prince.

He doesn’t have any friends.

He doesn’t like making friends.

He doesn’t like talking in general, which is bad because as a prince, he’s going to have to talk a lot.

This is his senior year, and his last year where he can pretend that he is a normal, dime-a-dozen teenage boy that has no idea what he wants to do with his life. This time next year, he will be in Hasetsu with his father and his half-sister, seated upon a throne with a crown of jewels being placed atop his head.

As if he’d write any of that.

Yuuri stares and stares and stares, as if words will magically appear on the page in front of him, and then read themselves aloud to the entire class so all he can do is sit at his desk and go unnoticed. Sometimes, he presses the tip of the lead to the line, and he thinks he’s going to write something simple like his name or maybe his favorite color. But then he starts to think and overthink and ‘who even cares about stupid shit like that?’, before he goes back to gnawing on the rubber end of his pencil.

Something about his summer vacation? It was mainly spent learning lesson after grueling prince lesson with Minako at the consulate. That, or working at his mother’s inn, which isn’t all that exciting but is something Yuuri is considerably proud of.

He likes action movies? He - He doesn’t watch any sports?? Well, he watches figure skating. He loves figure skating. Is that good to put? Who would care? No one would care if he likes figure skating. No one cares about anything that he’d have to say. God, but he has to say something. He doesn’t want a zero over something so stupid and trivial and that he knows he can do if he’d just stop feeling like everything is moving so quickly. That his only option is to just sit there and not speak.
He is practically teething on his mechanical pencil when Celestino announces, “Alright, let’s bring it back in for some speeches!”

Yuuri promptly gags.

Celestino takes his spot at his desk. “Alright now, we’re going to start off with our first speaker and then afterwards we’ll have volunteers go up. If no one volunteers, then I will randomly point at a name on the roster and whatever pair that person belongs in, they go up. So, without further ado, Mr. Katsuki?”

Yuuri’s head whirs around, heart threatening to jump in his throat. No, it can’t be time already! He looks down at his still empty paper, dotted with sweat and scribble marks of his pencil. Yuuri looks to Celestino, who then gestures to the front with a smile and a knowing, reassuring nod of his head.

Yuuri swallows, then he takes the useless piece of paper and folds it in half. He rises to his feet, shuffling away from his desk to the wooden podium in front of the classroom. There’s a quiet murmuring through the audience of his peers. There’s also a not-so-quiet whisper of “Special treatment” that Yuuri hears coming from the direction where Mr. President and the jocks are seated. The words sound mocking, a bit agitated; it rides up Yuuri’s spine like claws sinking into Yuuri’s back just beneath his shoulder blades.

When he places his hands on the podium, he realizes he’s shaking. His knees feel stiff and he’s already breathless from just walking to the front. He’s sweating. He’s sweating like a pig and it’s so gross. He doesn’t know what to do with his hands, if to wipe the sweat away from his forehead, or to start biting his nails, or to play with the piece of folded paper that was supposed to have his speech written on it.

Celestino gives a quick look at the clock, then to Yuuri. “We’re ready when you are, Mr. Katsuki,” he says, trying to sound like he’s not rushing Yuuri when he sorta is.

Yuuri swallows, but it’s hard to do so and the lump still feels like it’s clogging his throat. He licks his lips that are suddenly dry, then ends up wiping the spit from his mouth with the back of his hand. He doesn’t know where to look. He doesn’t know what to say. He doesn’t know what to do.

“I-I’m-” Yuuri clamps his lips shut. He hates his voice. It sounds so small and meek, like a mouse or something equally pathetic and unimportant. No, it’s worse than a mouse. It’s something more pathetic and he hates it.

He hisses in a breath of air, not raising his head. “I-I’m - um - I-”

There’s a group of girls seated in the middle that start giggling. Yuuri feels his resolve beginning to crumble.

“Um, my name is...I-I-”

“Guess rich people have their servants do all the remembering for them,” a guy two seats from the front row whispers to his partner, and the students around him dissolve into a fit of giggles that Celestino tries to quiet with a stern glare. Yuuri can’t breathe. He seriously can’t.

He tries to take a step away from the podium and loosen up his joints, but he feels like he’s trapped in cement and it’s starting to work its way into his lungs, his mouth, every orifice of his body. His hands are clutching at the front of his shirt like a lifeline, but it’s not enough to get him to stop feeling like he’s drowning on air.

There’s still a few snickers, a few giggles peppered around the classroom. He sees Phichit watching
him from the back of the class with expressions that flicker between a glare at the other classmates and worry for Yuuri.

Yuuri opens his mouth, and he lets out a pitiful croak.

He - he can’t do this.

He can’t breathe.

Yuuri feels a churn in his stomach and something hot burning at the back of his throat. He brings his hands to his mouth and he’s already running out the door before Celestino can get him to wait and the class bursts into laughter.

The boy’s bathroom is located down the nearby staircase and to the left. It’s empty and it smells, but Yuuri falls to his knees in front of the first available toilet and heaves, to the point that there’s tears burning at the corner of his eyes.

The door to the boy’s bathroom swings open again with a loud clatter, dress shoes sounding loud against the linoleum floor.

“Your Highness?! Are you okay?!” a gruff voice shouts while Yuuri still has his head halfway in the toilet bowl.

Yuuri grabs some toilet paper and wipes the sick from his lips, staggering to his feet. “I-I’m fine,” he stammers. “I just…I just got a little bit sick.”

“Was it the breakfast, Your Highness? Did you have an allergic reaction-”

“No, no. It’s not that. I’m fine. I just…” he wraps his arms around himself. “Could I just…be alone?”

Yuuri can’t see the eyes of the bodyguard from behind his black aviator shades, but he gives a stoic nod and bows his head.

“Yes, Your Highness,” he says. Yuuri gives an acknowledging nod of his head. Then, he quietly shuts the door of the stall and locks it. He then flushes the toilet and closes the lid, scooting against the cistern so he can pull his knees up to his chest in a fetal position.

He can still see the polished black shoes standing outside the bathroom stall, patiently waiting.

“…Can you please leave?” Yuuri calls out. He knows the man is just doing his job. He knows that all the members of Yuuri’s security team are just doing their job by following him around like he’s a lost little lamb, but he really doesn’t want anyone walking in on a man in a well-pressed suit standing around a bathroom stall for no reason.

There’s some hesitance, but eventually Yuuri hears the man respond with a quiet, “Yes, Your Highness.” The feet disappear; the echo of his footsteps leaving go with him out the door. Yuuri sits in the silence of the bathroom, mulling over his thoughts. There’s still a bitter taste of bile on his tongue. There’s also a taste that feels like remorse and absolute disappointment with himself. Yuuri feels that tastes the worst.

Outside, he hears the bodyguard relay, “Sparrow down in Building F’s first floor hallway bathroom. Standing guard. Antacid and water preferred.”

Yuuri drops his face into the crooks of his arms and groans.
Watanabe gets three blocks away from the high school when he glances into the rearview mirror at Yuuri pinching through a literature book for English AP.

“How was your first day of school, Your Highness?” he asks, making small talk, pretending he doesn’t know Yuuri vomited during third period and had to be shadowed the rest of the day for fear of being inflicted with an ailment.

Yuuri bites the inside of his cheek, turning to a new page without reading the words.

“Fine.”

“…That’s good…are you hungry, Your Highness? Your mother gave me coupons to that ramen place you like. It will be my treat,” Watanabe offers. Yuuri had a lunch of anise fennel salad and Greek yogurt, mixed nuts and a healthy juice blend. It made him want to crawl into a hole away from the delicious smell of meatloaf slathered in thick gravy and die.

“I’m fine,” Yuuri answers, moot.

“…Alright then.” Watanabe has gotten good in picking up Yuuri’s moods in these last three years. It’s a special skill that only his mother and Phichit has mastered, learning when Yuuri needs his space to breathe and waiting for the moment he invites them into his world and the mishmash mess of his thoughts. Right now, Yuuri hasn’t even made eye contact with the elder man, instead choosing to keep them focused on the pages of his book or out the window at all the teenagers walking together after surviving their first day of school.

Phichit texts him when the Mulsanne reaches a red light, sending Yuuri rows upon rows of emojis and words of enthusiasm. He also chats about Seung-Gil, who is apparently very hot and very much a buzzkill that wouldn’t know fun if it rammed itself against the other boy like a billy goat.

He texts back a promise to call later, when he isn’t feeling like such crap.

The light turns green and the car is back into motion in making its steady drive down the cluttered streets. There’s teens driving in a Jeep right beside them, touting Starbucks drinks and singing along to the radio. Yuuri can’t drive; his father promised to buy him whatever car he wanted for his graduation gift, but it’s pointless since Yuuri will never be asked to drive it and one of his bodyguards will gladly play chauffeur.

Yuuri slumps against the leather interior of the car with a sigh, awkwardly patting his hands against his thighs. The ride to the inn is usually more fun if Phichit tags along, but he’s already getting bogged down with work as the senior editor for yearbook. Yuuri glances at the panel of knobs and buttons and flips of the switch, the interior speakers playing a calming rendition of ‘Pas de Deux’ from The Nutcracker.

He glances out the window again, not sure of what he’s looking for to keep him busy, until the car rolls to a stop at another light.

Across the way, there’s a small mini-mart advertising new summer flavors for their slushee machine.

Mmm, slushees.
Yuuri is staring at the colorful flyers hanging crooked in the window, cheek resting in the palm of his hand and mouth watering at something refreshing going down his gullet. He doesn’t ask for Watanabe to make a stop - the elder man likes schedules and keeping to them and almost nothing is spontaneous. But, the moment the light turns green, Watanabe turns right instead of continuing on straight.

He pulls into a parking spot right in front of the mini-mart’s front door and turns off the engine. “I feel like having a coffee,” he answers Yuuri’s confused expression, placing on his shades. “Would you like to accompany me inside, Your Highness?”

It’s strange how Yuuri never thought he would become excited at the prospect of going inside a mini-mart without five other men staking out the parameter.

“Oh-Okay!” he says, grabbing his messenger bag and opening up the door before Watanabe can open the door for him. Yuuri enters first, doors sliding open with an off-key chime. It smells like pizza bagels and car fresheners. Yuuri breathes the scent in deep.

He heads directly to the slushee machine in the back corner, illuminated by bright neon colors of fuchsias and blues. The summer flavors are lemonade, piña colada, watermelon coconut, and raspberry dream - whatever that means. Yuuri rocks from side to side, weighing out his options and thinking of possible combinations.

Watanabe is preparing his coffee at the station a few feet away, quietly taking some hazelnut creamer and sugar. He’s taking his time, Yuuri figures. Possibly so Yuuri can also take his time and get some things he wants.

The doors slide open with a chime, and the clerk at the front counter lazily chewing a stick of bubblegum calls out, “You’re late!”

“Didn’t have the car!” whoever the person that barred through the front door shouts back. They duck into the back room behind the tobacco counter before Yuuri can see who it is. He shakes his head and shrugs, grabbing a large plastic cup and starts to fill it up with watermelon coconut. Halfway through, he switches it to piña colada, stirring up the mixture till it’s well blended and topped off. He licks the bit of sticky residue from his fingers and hums in delight. Absolutely perfect.

He sips from his drink as he wanders around the aisles of confectionaries and processed snacks. He picks up some caramel waffle cookies and a pack of Red Vines, then heads back to the slushee machine to top it off again when he whittles it down a portion of the way.

“I think I’m ready,” Yuuri says, gesturing with his handful of junk food. Watanabe nods his head, then grabs his coffee and both head to the front counter.

The clerk up front is a teenager - possibly Yuuri’s age - with blond hair done in an undercut and bored emerald eyes. He continues to pop his gum, watching as Watanabe places Yuuri’s snacks and their drinks on the surface of the counter.

“These and a pack of Marlboro Reds,” Watanabe says, readying his wallet.

Before the clerk can start ringing up the order, someone emerges from the room from behind the tobacco counter, tying their long silver hair back into a loose ponytail and-

Oh.

It’s that boy from the club.
Yuuri is able to squint and see the name **Victor N.** sloppily written on the small badge pinned to his ugly uniform shirt. Victor freezes in his spot when his eyes lock on Yuuri’s figure, gaze intense. He hurries to the cash register and all but knocks the other clerk out of his spot from behind the counter.

The clerk is understandably confused.

“What the hell are you-”

“Chris, do you think you can do that thing?” Victor blurs out, cutting him off.

“What thing?”

Victor isn’t even looking at the other clerk, just at Yuuri. “The thing. The thing that’s in the back that only you can handle and…that thing.”

The clerk - Chris - stares at Victor like he’s grown a third head. Apparently, that isn’t getting out of Victor’s way fast enough, so Victor just hurries Chris out from behind the counter and back to wherever Victor came from. Victor quickly hurries back to the counter, cheeks all aglow with a blush that dares to be diffident yet excited. “Hi,” he breathes, and his voice is such a sweet thing, all warm and airy and tickles Yuuri’s chest.

“Um…hi…” Yuuri responds. Victor’s grin grows even bigger.

“…These and the Marlboro Reds,” Watanabe repeats. Victor doesn’t even move to get the cigarettes out of the case behind him. He’s still stupidly staring at Yuuri with that smile of his, happily swimming in a world of his own and drowning in Yuuri’s visage.

Conscious of his appearance, Yuuri awkwardly sidesteps behind Watanabe and starts to fuss with his hair.

Watanabe snaps his fingers and Victor jolts out of his trance. “Eyes on me, please,” he says. Victor nods his head and gives an embarrassed chuckle, starting the order finally and fetching the cigarettes to place in a small paper bag. Victor looks at the slushee and smiles at the peachy color shade.

“That looks like a good combo,” Victor says. Yuuri pokes his head out from behind Watanabe, smiling.

“Um, yeah. It’s piña colada and watermelon coconut…not that you wouldn’t already know that since you work here and all but-”

“I like piña colada and the raspberry dream, but really piña colada goes with almost everything,” Victor responds before Yuuri could make that last sentence any more awkward and stilted. He snaps his fingers then, like he just forgot something up until now, and reaches underneath the counter to pull out a thin red and white card. “Uh, here! You can come back, try the different flavor combinations, and get your card punched with each purchase. If you get it punched ten times, you get a free slushee.”

Yuuri blinks at the card held between Victor’s thumb and two fingers, before he quietly takes it into his grasp. It has a cute little burger mascot in the corner. Yuuri smiles over it fondly.

“Thanks,” he says, and slips it into his back pocket.

“How much?” Watanabe questions. Once again, the only person that exist in Victor's world is Yuuri. Yuuri is starting to wonder if he has some slushee residue at the corners of his mouth. He averts his eyes, awkwardly wiping at his lips with the back of his hand.
This time around, Victor is able to snap himself out of his trance before Watanabe has to. He totals the order and announces the price to be a whopping fifteen dollars and sixty-three cents. Under his breath as he gets his wallet, Watanabe murmurs about needing to find a cheaper past time.

Victor accepts the twenty dollar bill offered. He takes his time in getting the change.

“Do you like rock music?” Victor directly asks Yuuri, putting coin after single coin in Watanabe’s open palm.

Yuuri shifts his weight onto his right foot. “Um, I’m not quite sure,” he answers, awkwardly sucking his bottom lip in between his teeth as he thinks. He’s never really been a fan of the whole ‘sex, drugs, and teenage rebellion’ rock and roll. Since he has been invested as the future heir of Hasetsu, the odds of him ever attending a music venue where there isn’t the graceful trill of a violin’s strings or some large woman singing operatics has greatly diminished.

Victor doesn’t falter, finally moving to hand Watanabe his dollar bills.

“Well, if you’re into it, there’s this club downtown that lets upcoming bands perform on Saturday nights. And - well - I’m going to be performing with my band next Saturday,” Victor says, chest puffing up with pride.

Yuuri doesn’t know how to respond, so he says, “Congratulations.”

Immediately after, he face palms. ‘Congratulations’? Really?!

Victor laughs that pretty dulcet laugh of his. “Thanks! It’s our stage debut! Normally we just play in our drummer’s basement or the garage, so it’ll be fun to play in front of a crowd, you know?”

He prints the receipt as Watanabe dumps the mass amount of coins into the pocket of his wallet. Victor hurriedly scribbles something on the back of it, thrusting the small slip of paper forward towards Yuuri. “Here’s my number! You can just call me and I can pick you up and take you there. And maybe we can - I don’t know - grab a burger or something afterwards? To celebrate?”

Watanabe takes the receipt instead of Yuuri. “I drive him around,” he states, placing the receipt into one of his inner coat pockets. “We’ll have our people call your people,” he then says, gathering up Yuuri’s snacks and his surely lukewarm coffee into his grip. He gives a tilt of his head towards the door and Yuuri grabs his slushee, taking a sip of it. It’s half-melted; a thick glob of sugary syrup hits Yuuri’s tongue first with the slush of ice chasing after it.

He waves - a polite circular motion that has control in his wrist, the proper wave for a prince - then silently follows Watanabe out the doors. He gets the door himself, sliding into the leather seat and sticking his drink in one of the many many cupholders the vehicle provides for him.

“Do you know that boy, Your Highness?” Watanabe asks, starting the engine. When Yuuri looks back at the mini-mart window, he sees Chris and Victor both up against the display window, nosily looking at the Mulsanne and it’s tinted windows hiding its passengers. Yuuri still slumps in his seat to conceal himself.

“He’s…I talked to him…once…”

“Do you want to go to his show?” Watanabe inquires with a raise of his eyebrow.

Yuuri doesn’t know. He doesn’t know Victor and he’s not that great with rock music. Besides, even if Yuuri wanted to go, he wouldn’t enjoy himself. Watching a rock band while seated at a table instead of mingling on the dance floor, with men in suits forming a human barrier to protect him from
nosy eyes isn’t how Yuuri would like to spend his Saturday night.

He takes a drink from his slushee, not giving Watanabe a verbal answer. The man doesn’t press him on the matter, appraising the downward turn of Yuuri’s eyelashes. He hands Yuuri his snacks, before he slowly pulls out of the parking spot and back into the streets.

Yuuri rips into the Red Vines first, biting one end of the licorice off with passive-aggressive teeth.

“Want one?” he offers. After a few seconds, Watanabe holds out his hand. Yuuri gives him two.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” he says with a smile. Yuuri relaxes into the seat cushions, turning the Red Vine in between his teeth.

“Yeah. No problem.”

Yuuri’s first week back to school goes off without anymore hiccups. The chef changed up his breakfast so now he has to slog through a small cup of bland oatmeal every morning while Watanabe chauffeurs him to school.

Celestino quietly informs Yuuri the following Monday that he got half-credit and is welcome to just give an informal speech during lunch period to make up credit if he wants. Yuuri turns down the offer immediately, face flushing with embarrassment.

None of his teachers are aware of his ‘special’ status; the principal herself only assumes that Yuuri’s parents are some billionaire tycoons that don’t believe the school security is competent enough to protect their son. He can’t imagine what kind of shift in behavior he’d see if they did know. He’d probably never have to worry about failing a test again if they thought he might have them hanged by their toes, as commanded by His Imperial Highness, The Crown Prince Katsuki Yuuri of Hasetsu.

He’d hate it.

He would absolutely loathe it.

Yuuri contemplates this with a sigh, looking out the window at the courtyard where some students are enjoying their lunch period. Meanwhile, one of the bodyguards unpacks his own lunch, a thermos of hearty beef stew and crackers. It smells like heaven.

He looks down at his own meal of grilled salmon with dried seaweed, a portion of jasmine rice and chia seeds, and a small thermos of brewed green tea still steaming when Yuuri opens it. It’s certainly more appetizing than the fennel salad. Still not Meatloaf Monday, but he can manage.

Yuuri picks at his food, taking small bites and sips of his drink. It’s uncomfortably quiet; even after three years of this, Yuuri can’t stand the silence. The clock on the wall makes an irritating ticking sound. He doesn’t point this out though, since he knows the second he doesn’t like something, his guards will spring into action to remediate the situation.

He turns his gaze to his guard sitting at a desk far too small for his tall, burly figure and quietly stirring his crackers into his soup. Yuuri doesn’t even know his name; he’s never been good with names and faces, and it’s gotten harder to remember just who is in Watanabe’s team of security when
they all look the same aside from a few minor differences. That’s going to be his life, surrounded by
dozens of people he doesn’t know and drowning in a sea of faces that he’ll never remember.

His phone suddenly buzzes with a text notification. When he checks it, he sees that it’s Phichit.

>r u free saturday???

Yuuri blinks.

>>why?

>i got invited to a rock show and i want u 2 come!!

Is rock the ‘in’ thing now? When did this even happen?

>>when do u listen to rock?

>all the time!!
>i have my secrets too ;)
>so can u come?? the guy that invited me said we could hang out backstage and get in 4 free!!

Yuuri gives a side glance at his guard, then back to his phone.

>>im going to be watched like a hawk
>>it’s not going to be fun

>D:
>come on~ we barely get a chance to hang out since the whole prince thing happened
>can’t u just sneak away?
Yuuri bites his lower lip.

>>i dont think i can

Phichit doesn’t respond right away. Yuuri feels guilt unnecessarily welling in his chest. He knows that it’s been a long time since he and Phichit hung out together. He *misses* hanging out and spending time with Phichit. Phichit is always fun and always guarantees that everyone will have a good time, even sticks in the mud with terrible social skills like Yuuri.

>well okay then

>i’ll talk to you later after school! :D

Yuuri winces at the text, but he doesn’t know what else to follow up with other than a smiling emoji that somehow manages to be the perfect representation of how dead he feels on the inside.

He drops his phone into his lap and then drops his head down on the surface of his desk, his chopsticks clattering against the salmon fillet with the heavy thud.

“Is the food not to your liking, sir?” the guard asks Yuuri.

“It’s fine. I’m just a lousy friend and I suck,” Yuuri says into the wood of the desk.

“You do not ‘suck’ to me, sir.”

Yuuri turns his head and gives a sad smile. “Thanks,” he responds with a sigh, sitting upright in his seat, and continues to push around his food on his plate.

Phichit’s complete awe and wonder of driving in a luxury car never fails to make Yuuri feel all flustered with embarrassment.

“Oh my god, is this the one with the massage chairs?” Phichit asks after he pressed the buttons that open up the small hidden mini bar in between their seats. He presses another button, then his eyes widen with recognition and amazement. “It *is*,” he gasps, then laughs and relaxes into the leather seat as massaging pulses work up and down his spine.

“Yuuri, promise me you’ll marry me if we’re thirty and single,” Phichit moans aloud. Yuuri laughs.

“Are you marrying me or my money?” he asks.

“You, of course,” Phichit says, then gives a little coo when the massagers go to his shoulders and kneads out the kinks just at the base of his neck. “The money is just a bonus. Like, me buying a milkshake and finding out there’s two extra cherries in it.”
“Glad four years of friendship is chalked up to me being compared to ice cream,” Yuuri says with a little scoff, smiling. Phichit pouts, reaching a finger out to poke the baby fat of Yuuri’s cheek.

“It’s cause you’re sweet,” he says, sticking his tongue out as he gives a wink.

It’s hard for Yuuri to smile back so easily; he spends his time twiddling his thumbs together, eyes watching the world pass by his tinted window.

“…About Saturday night–” he tries to start, but Phichit raises his hand to stop his tongue.

“It’s okay,” Phichit says. He leans in closer to Yuuri, eyes kind. “I know that this whole ‘bodyguard’ thing is a pain in the ass to deal with. And I wouldn’t want you going just for my sake when you know you’re going to be uncomfortable. So don’t sweat it, okay? We’ll hang out some other time.”

Sometimes, Yuuri hates that Phichit is a good friend like that.

Phichit beams a sunny smile at Yuuri that is all teeth and twinkles of his brown eyes, then faces forwards and allows the seat to do its magic.

The only noise is the sound of soft music playing over the interior speakers of the vehicle. There’s heavier traffic leaving the school than usual, so time seems to go by a lot slower. Yuuri rubs his bare palms over the knees of his jeans, contemplative for a few seconds, before he inhales a deep breath of air.

“…Phichit?”

“Hmm?”

“…I’m fine with coming over to study on Saturday.”

Phichit’s eyebrows furrow, then one of them quirks upwards. “Huh?”

Yuuri licks his dry lips. “I’m fine with coming over to your house to study,” Yuuri repeats, hoping Phichit will just get it.

After a few seconds of staring at Yuuri, Phichit does get it. His eyes widen and his lips form an ‘ohhhhh’ shape.

“You sure you’re okay with studying at my place? I don’t want to twist your arm into going.”

“Yeah. It’s fine. I want to study. I’ll…work things out.”

Phichit’s eyebrows furrow again, asking a question of their own how Yuuri plans to ‘work things out’. Yuuri makes this gesture with his right hand. It’s supposed to mean ‘I don’t know how I’m going to manage to sneak out Saturday night, but it’s going to happen’. It looks like he’s trying to swat away an invisible fly.

Phichit tilts his head from side to side, weighing out Yuuri’s words and his weird gesture, before his smile gets a little bit more enthusiastic and excited. “Well, okay then! I’ll see you Saturday night! It’s going to rock…the studying, that is.”

Yuuri nods his head a little too eagerly and hard, looking like a life-size bobblehead.

“Yeah, can’t wait.”
I still plan on continuing the Black Mirror AU but this AU has been on my mind for longer.

Will update every other Sunday/Monday or when I get antsy ahhahahahah
tonight i gotta cut loose

Chapter Summary

"You know, Bill, there's one thing I learned in all my years. Sometimes you just gotta say, 'What the fuck, make your move.'"

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Yuuri has tried on a total of five different outfits.

Each one of them makes him want to hurl himself into a nearby crater that leads to the center of the Earth so he can burn up in a fiery crisp because ugh, what the fuck even are these clothes?????

Ninety-percent of Yuuri’s ‘regular’ wardrobe consists of dorky printed T-shirts his mom got for cheap at the nearby Gap or ordered through Amazon. They make a fashion statement of ‘I don’t feel like dressing up today, but since it’s considered public indecency to go out naked, I’m going to try and be as comfortable in my clothing as I can’.

They’re frumpy, and some of them fit a little loose on Yuuri’s frame after he lost all that weight during sophomore year. Most of the items in his wardrobe don’t even coordinate with each other. There’s too many blues and not enough blue jeans and some of these shirts smell like they haven’t even been washed.

His other option would be to go through his ‘royal’ wardrobe for an outfit for tonight; those outfits would at least be coordinated due to his stylist putting them all together. He almost never touches them, so most of the clothing still smells like fresh cotton and wool. J.Crew and Burberry, Dior and Givenchy. He pinches the end sleeve of an outfit wholly from Calibre. a navy leather biker jacket with noir tailored pants, a simple black T-shirt, and wine-red Italian shoes.

…

It sort of looks rock and roll-ish.

Yuuri turns the sleeve of the jacket around in his hand, rattling the wire hanger it’s displayed on.

…

What if he looks like he’s trying too hard? There’s no way this outfit doesn’t scream, ‘Look at me! I’m trying to fit in with the normal crowd by wearing an outfit whose grand total comes out to roughly twelve hundred dollars!’ Ugh, why is he putting so much focus on this? It’s Phichit; Phichit wouldn’t care if Yuuri came dressed up in a trash bag, as long as he’s there to hang out and have a good time. He just needs to pick something.

There’s a gentle knock at his door, and Yuuri jumps to the tips of his toes.

“Y-Yeah!!”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to take you to Phichit’s house? We can stop at the grocers' and get
you two some snacks for your study session,” Hiroko’s voice filters though bedroom door. Yuuri makes a grab for the Calibre outfit and with great care, promptly shoves the clothing into his backpack.

“It’s okay! Watanabe insisted on driving me for ‘security’ reasons. He’s probably going to be parked outside of Phichit’s place just to make sure there isn’t a home invasion or whatever,” Yuuri responds, faking a casual air. His door opens just enough for Hiroko to peek her head in.

“Well, alright. Are you going to eat dinner over there as well? I’m making your favorite~” she coos with rosy cheeks. Yuuri’s mouth waters at the thought of His Favorite Food. It’s not like it’s a rarity that his mother makes a pork cutlet bowl; hell, it’s Yu-Topia’s specialty. But she makes it with love and drowns the cuts of meat in katsudon sauce that melts all over Yuuri’s tongue.

He shakes his head free of the temptation. Got to stay focussed.

“We’re going to grab a bite to eat before I come home. I’ll be fine,” Yuuri says. Hiroko nods her head, lingering in the doorway and watching Yuuri try and act as inconspicuous as possible. It’s really hard; he’s twitching like he has fleas and he keeps stupidly pacing back and forth from his closet to the foot of his bed.

“…Is it silly that I’m thinking about the day that this room will be empty?” she asks aloud. Yuuri looks at her, unsure of any words to offer. She’s looking at the tack board hanging above his desk, little Polaroids and post-it notes attached. There’s nostalgia at the curl of her lips, and she gently leans up against the doorframe to give a sigh.

Yuuri starts to busy himself with his sneakers. “It’ll be like I’m going off to college. I’ll still visit you,” he reassures. She hums, her tone inclining that her mind is elsewhere.

“Yeah, I know…you have to leave the nest someday,” she says, giving a laugh that has a somber note.

Yuuri doesn’t spend a lot of time thinking about what will happen when he graduates, even though he should. He still has college, but it will be in a foreign land where only the elite congregate. He’s sure he’ll see his mother from time to time, but it won’t be as often as it would be if he stayed here and helped her with the inn.

There’s a brief pause between them, both thinking about the future and what it entails. Yuuri’s phone buzzes on his desk and he scrambles to grab it. The text notification from Phichit is capped off with a string of dancing emojis.

>>alright I’m ready when u are!!

Yuuri pockets his phone and grabs his bag with his change of clothes and the shoes.

“I gotta go,” he says. Hiroko blinks, stepping aside to allow Yuuri to make a break for the stairs.

“Doesn’t Watanabe want to come in for some tea?” she calls as Yuuri takes three steps at a time.

“He already got his coffee! Love you! Bye!” Yuuri makes a swift exit through the hallway that separates their home from the inn, bypassing a few customers that are lounging in dining area and out the front door into the parking lot.
Phichit is waiting in his Prius parked just underneath the lone street lamp illuminating half of the parking lot. Yuuri climbs in, then quickly dives into the backseat and tries to hide himself as much as possible.

Phichit looks over his shoulder at Yuuri. “Uh, you're not riding upfront?”

“You probably didn't notice it but there are two BMWs always stationed at the corner of this street monitoring the area for security detail,” Yuuri explains.

Phichit makes a noise of astonishment. Then, he ponders, “Should I have worn a disguise?”

Yuuri unzips his backpack,shrugging out of his sweatpants in the process.

“The only one that really knows your face is Watanabe, and he's at the consulate with Minako. Just, don't make yourself look suspicious. I'm going to be changing back here.”

Phichit gives a salute to Yuuri's expression in his rear view mirror. “It is an honor to let you use the backseat of my car as a dressing room, Prince Yuuri.”

“Oh my god, never call me that. It’s weird when you do it,” Yuuri says, nose scrunching in distaste.

Phichit laughs at this, then throws the Prius into reverse and drives out the parking lot at a leisurely pace.

Yuuri lays low, body stiff and sweating a little as he watches the streetlights outside the car drift in hazy yellow hues past the windows. He only waits to move - or even breathe - until Phichit whispers, “I think the coast is clear.”

“No one in the rearview mirror, right?”

“No one except a guy that thinks just because he’s in his Bentley that I can’t see him digging for gold,” Phichit says with a wince as he observes the driver behind him. Yuuri laughs, and sits upright to pull off his shirt and start to get into his show outfit.

Phichit isn’t a reckless driver, but he’s not a good one. He talks while driving through stop signs and slams his foot on the breaks at the very last minute. The Prius was a birthday gift and also a congratulations for getting through one year without any accidents. Yuuri has already noticed there’s a dent in the front bumper that he’s pretty sure came from Phichit accidentally hitting the lamp post in the parking lot.

“What is this place anyways?” Yuuri asks when he struggles with the jeans, tight on his thighs and a pain to get up over his hips.

“It’s called ‘The Rock’.”

“Like the person?”

“No, like the genre. Rock and roll. The type of music that we are going to be listening to this fine evening,” Phichit clarifies. He turns up the radio just a bit, a dental ad playing through static and fades in and out of Yuuri’s ears. He struggles to zip himself up, sucking in his stomach to fasten the button.

“And these guys that invited you, are they good?” Yuuri inquires, grabbing his shirt. Phichit doesn’t answer right away; he looks like he’s trying to think for himself whether or not these people are actually talented.
Eventually, he shrugs. “I mean, I don’t know. But they got to be good. You wouldn’t invite someone to come and see you if you sucked,” he responds, and starts tapping his hands against the steering wheel on the off-beat of what sounds like Backstreet Boys. It’s hard to tell, what with the static and getting his head stuck in the cotton soft material of his black shirt so everything sounds muffled and distant.

Yuuri is lacing up his shoes when Phichit gets caught up in the downtown traffic, bumper to bumper and sitting amid a sea of car lights. Yuuri’s been downtown before; he’s familiar with the congestion of buildings and the smog-filled skies that shroud the stars.

Yet, it feels foreign looking up at the skyscrapers through the windows of Phichit’s car instead of the tinted windows of a limousine. He wants to say he’s excited, but he’s sure the knot that is sitting at the base of his gut is more anxiety than enthusiasm.

“…How much further?” Yuuri asks, bobbing his knee.

“It’s on E Street and Baker. Few more blocks,” Phichit says the same time there’s a loud buzzing noise that emits from Yuuri’s backpack.

He reaches in and pulls out his phone, stiffening when he sees Watanabe’s number flashing on the touch screen.

“Oh god, Watanabe’s calling!” Yuuri shrieks, phone vibrating even angrier in his open palms. Phichit looks back at the phone in Yuuri’s grasp, then turns face forward as traffic begins to move.

“Don’t answer it!” Phichit snaps.

“If I don’t answer it, he’s going to get suspicious!” Yuuri responds, just as frantic in tone.

“Okay, then answer it!”

“But what do I say?!”

Phichit makes a gesture with his hand, the bewildered raise of his eyebrows reflected in the rear-view mirror. Yuuri curses under his breath, quickly answering the call before it can go to voicemail.

“H-Hello?” his voice stutters, and he already knows he’s dead.

“Pardon for interrupting your study session, Your Highness, but I just wanted to see how you’re doing.” Watanabe’s voice doesn’t betray any hint that he’s suspicious. It’s a little bit sleepy, non-threatening on the syllables and crackles with a fond curiosity. Yuuri can’t find it in his spine to relax.

“I’m fine. Totally fine. We’re just…studying and…reading…about…school.”

“Fascinating. Will your mother need me to pick you up?”

“N-No. I want to ride with her back. I’ll be fine-” There’s a loud blare of a car horn to their right. Yuuri feels his lungs drop into his stomach.

“…Why did I just hear a car horn?”

“We’re watching a movie! As a reward for all the studying!” Yuuri says, voice dancing on the edge of hysterics. Watanabe is quiet on the line, and Yuuri wonders if the man can hear the sound of Yuuri’s heart over the phone line, or the way that his breathing is unsteady and eases from his lips in
panicked bursts.

“...I see...well then, I'll leave you to it. Do not hesitate to call me if the situation with your mother driving you home changes.”

“Of course. Sure. No problem,” Yuuri says, cringing as he stumbles over his own tongue. Watanabe says his goodbyes and the call disconnects with an audible click. Yuuri slumps in the backseat and groans. “He knows. He has got to know I’m not really there.”

“But no one is following us,” Phichit says, double checking his mirrors before he switches lanes and turns right. “How about this? We go to the club, listen to a few songs, chill with the band, and hightail it back to my place before midnight. We can say that you’re spending the night and your mom gave the ‘ok’.”

Yuuri rubs his hands over his face, pushing his glasses askew. “That’s not going to fool him,” he mumbles into his hands, defeated. Phichit ‘tut-tut’s, wagging a finger at Yuuri’s despondent reflection.

“I have a gift, Yuuri. I can bullshit my way out of anything. How do you think I got all those A’s on Ciao Ciao’s essays during freshman and sophomore year?” Phichit admits with a wink that does little to put Yuuri at ease. Then again, nothing puts Yuuri’s nerves at ease when he works himself up like this. His shoulders bow inwards, as if he is willing his body to sprout wings that he can fly away from the uncomfortable jitters clawing up his spine.

And then, the car stops.

“We’re here!” Phichit’s voice rings in animated tones that bounce off the interior of the car. Yuuri looks out the window and into the parking lot they’re parked in. There’s no light at all; even when he steps outside and lets the night air hit him square in the face - along with a scent of cigarette smoke - he can barely see two feet in front of him. Phichit huddles up next to him, turning his gaze to the sign perched on the building in front of them flickering in and out like a cheap motel sign. Yuuri doesn’t know what to make of this place, but he’s not sure if he likes it.

“...Where’d you hear about this place again?” Yuuri asks, feeling Phichit grab his hand and pull him towards a seedy looking alleyway.

“A guy on Facebook. He’s the drummer in the band, has a pretty smile,” Phichit explains and oh. So that’s what this is about.

The unsure feeling in Yuuri’s chest opens up like an ugly flower, twisting his lips as they try to sidestep the litter of Taco Bell wrappers and spilled soda cups. The gravel crunches underneath the heels under his shoes. Or maybe it’s cockroaches, since if Yuuri squints at the ground, he can see something moving in the dark when it shouldn’t.

He hurries Phichit to move quicker out the alleyway, the two emerging out and onto the front sidewalk where they are met with cars bustling down the road and hypnotic lights of city. The club’s facade looks just as duplicitous as it’s back; the front windows are boarded up and tagged with graffiti, and the black paint on the walls is chipping, which makes this place look less grunge for aesthetic purposes and more like Yuuri should be expecting to see a note on the door that this establishment is condemned.

Phichit’s talk with the bouncer, who is an elderly man dressed in a red flannel shirt and has his jeans pulled up around his portly stomach, is brief. Phichit says they’re with the band, the man doesn’t understand him with the defining noise of the cars on the street, and he lets them inside anyways.
It smells *horrible*.

Yuuri can’t even put a name to what is the odor that permeates the small interior of the dimly lit rock and roll bar. There’s a little bit of a sweaty smell, like deeply inhaling the scent of a teenage boy’s dirty laundry after sports practice. The resonance of the band currently playing on stage is unfortunately just how Yuuri imagined it would be, off-key and grating on the ears.

There’s some teenagers out on the dance floor, not a lot though, and none of them are dancing so there’s that. It is also ridiculously dark inside as well; there’s some cheap Halloween lights hanging along the wall Yuuri guesses are for aesthetic purposes and not because someone forgot to take them down. They do little to illuminate the path to the tables where Phichit takes a seat.

“This place is…different,” Phichit says. It’s a very Phichit thing to say; he always tries to make something better than it really is, spray painting a piece of shit gold with his honeyed voice and sweet smiles. Yuuri looks down at the table they’re seated at and the array of dick carvings and Sharpie graffiti embedded in the surface.

“If this guy is weird, Phichit, we’re going home.”

Phichit tosses that idea around in his head, before he gives a shrug. “Fair enough,” he says, and flags a waitress down.

They sit there at the table, sipping on root beer from the bottle and listening to act after act perform. None of the acts are the ones they came to see apparently. Phichit gets a text halfway through one band’s set that The Guy and his band are running late; the guitarist’s mom’s minivan broke down on the highway.

The waitress is a woman with string bean arms and a smoker’s cough. She’s nice, though; she compliments Yuuri on his outfit when she brings them their refills. Her ex-boyfriend allegedly dressed the same way. She shows Yuuri a tattoo of her ex that is just above her right shoulder blade so Yuuri can get a better visual. Yuuri politely smiles at her. Inside, he is screaming.

She delivers a chocolate brownie sundae just as the current band finishes up their set.

“She looks appetizing, but Yuuri doesn’t trust anything cooked here, so he spends more time staring at it than actually eating it. Phichit does some looking of his own, over Yuuri’s shoulder and at the tables opposite of the dance floor.

“…Do you know him?” Phichit asks. Yuuri is subtle with his glance across the dance floor. There’s a boy - scrawny, mustard yellow hair, and a long face dotted with pimples like constellations in the sky. He’s watching Yuuri, waiting for him to take a bite. The gaze crawls up Yuuri’s spine and gives him a discomforting chill, focusing his attention back on the dessert.

“No… I shouldn’t eat it,” Yuuri says, pushing the sundae away from him.


“It might be poisoned.”

Phichit snorts into his hand. “*Seriously?* That’s the conclusion you have about it? No one even knows you’re you.”
“There’s pictures of me with my half-sister when I visited Hasetsu in the summer. I mean, no one here connected the two, but what if-”

“Will it make you feel better if I gave it a little taste?” Phichit asks. Yuuri gives him an incredulous look, but Phichit is just watching the way a spill of vanilla ice cream drips off the crust and into the pie tin the sundae is served on. Yuuri bites the inside of his cheek, then leans back in his chair.

“Go ahead,” he says. Phichit gleefully takes up a spoon and scoops himself a piece. Across the dancefloor, the boy seated at table two gives a crest-fallen look. Yuuri ignores it.

“Oh my god,” Phichit moans, melted vanilla and chocolate syrup on his bottom lip. “Yeah. Yeah this is poisoned. You shouldn’t eat any,” he then says as he goes in for his third spoonful. Yuuri quirks a smile at him, resting his cheek in the palm of his hand, thumbing along the edge of his glasses while watching the next band bumble their way onto the stage.

“This was such a bust,” Phichit complains when he’s two-thirds of the way done with the sundae.

“I thought you liked it.”

“No. Not the sundae. This rocks more than anything we heard tonight,” Phichit says, shoulders slumping. “I mean, the whole sneaking you out to listen to rock and roll and maybe hang out with a rock band. That’s the bust. He hasn’t even texted me back and it’s been an hour. We can’t belong to the darkness forever,” he says with a groan.

Yuuri nods his head in agreement to that. “So do you want to just go home?”

Phichit puffs his cheek, resembling an indignant hamster with too many sunflower seeds in its cheek. “But I want to hang out with you! Do something fun! We never do fun stuff! And it’s not like we’ll be able to do anything when we’re out of high school.”

Yuuri winces at Phichit’s words. They’re both quiet for a moment, reflective over what’s going to happen to their friendship in the oncoming months. Yuuri will start to get tangled up in more political business, more dinners, more prince lessons and vacation trips to Hasetsu to know the people and their needs.

There will be less time with Phichit, less time listening to shitty rock music and hanging out.

Less time being just a normal high school boy.

“…We can…go get food? Taco Bell is still open, right?” Yuuri asks when the air between them grows too stale. Phichit’s smile on his lips is thoughtful, just a bit of melancholy hiding under the crumbs of chocolate fudge. When he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, it disappears with the chocolate.

“Yeah. Let’s eat some Taco Bell,” Phichit laughs, rising to his feet and dropping a couple of dollar bills onto the table for a tip.

They quietly bid their goodbyes to the waitress and to the elderly bouncer that gives them some hard lemon candies as they leave. They take the long way around the block, because Yuuri is too paranoid to go back into the pitch darkness of the alley where he has no idea what’s lurking. It’s a nice walk; their arms bump against each other and they step in sync, laughing at the mess of performances they had to witness and hum along to the vague melodies in their head.

They reach the parking lot in ten minutes. Phichit freezes before he can pull his keys from his car.
“Oh my god, look at that!” Phichit gapes, and darts over to the car that is parked next to his.

It’s a Cadillac DeVille. A pink 50s Cadillac DeVille. Phichit is making this squeal noise like he is seeing the world’s largest hamster roll around in a silicone ball the size of his head.

“Holy shit, I’ve never seen one of these up close before! Oh my god, look at the paint detail! Yuuri! There’s fuzzy dice! Oh my god.” He turns to Yuuri, who is still standing with a befuddled look - cars were never really that much of an interest to him.

Phichit waves him over, fumbling with his smartphone. “Quick! Let’s take a picture!”

“Um.” Yuuri glances around, not sure of who he is looking for. He approaches Phichit and lets his arm go around his shoulders as they pose in front of the car.

“Say ‘cheese’!” Phichit coos, throwing up a peace sign. Yuuri cheeses, and the flash is blinding.

“Aw, boo. Your eyes are closed,” Phichit says with a frown. “One more!”

“Phichit, maybe we should-”

“Hey!”

Both boys jump, heads whirling for the source of the shout. Someone is emerging from the alleyway, running straight towards them with a big black case in their hand and silvery hair trailing behind them.

Victor.

Again.

He seems a little bit more flustered, eyes worriedly looking to the car as he holds an arm out that separates Yuuri and Phichit from the side of the vehicle. “Step away from the car. My Nana is going to kill me if she finds fingerprints-” Victor pauses when his eyes lock on Yuuri, and he goes boneless.

He smiles a pretty smile, languid, like whatever concerns he had about Yuuri and Phichit being near the car have been tossed out a fifty-story window. “Hi,” he breathes to Yuuri. Yuuri averts his eyes.

“Um, hello…again.”

“You two know each other?” Phichit asks.

“We’ve met a few times,” is what Yuuri answers. Victor’s blunt “Yes” is just a little bit louder.

Phichit nods his head, holding out a hand to Victor. “Well, I’m Phichit. Nice to meet you, and your car is amazing,” he introduces. Victor shakes his hand, giving a proud smile.

“Victor. And thanks,” he says.

Phichit then glances down at the case in Victor’s hands, quirking a curious eyebrow. “…Are you a musician or something?”

“He has a band,” Yuuri answers. Victor beams, as if Yuuri remembering that is enough to put a heart-shaped smile on his lips.

“Yeah! I mean…I had a band,” Victor says, rubbing the back of his neck.
“…What do you mean? Did you misplace it or something?” Yuuri asks with a little curl of his lip. Phichit turns his head and fails to hide his laughter into his palm.

Victor gives a feeble chuckle. “No. I mean, we sort of...had a break-up,” Victor explains. Victor’s smile is plastic on his face. He doesn’t hide his disappointment in his eyes, but he does try to distract attention from it by the way he grins.

“Oh,” Yuuri responds. Then, not knowing what else to say, “I’m sorry for your loss.”

Phichit laughs again, more obnoxious. Victor laughs too; it’s brighter, and Yuuri doesn’t know whether to feel embarrassed at his own awkward word choice, or let his heart flutter in his chest at the reverb of Victor’s voice.

“It’s okay. Bands break up all the time. Girlfriends, creative differences, money-”

“What did your band in?” Phichit asks. Victor pauses, then taps his finger against the plushness of his bottom lip.

“They were just assholes, I guess,” he says after a beat, shrugging his shoulders. He looks to Yuuri, eyes warm and hopeful. “So...are you guys going home?”

Yuuri busies himself with his hands, tangling his fingers together and playing with the leather material of his jacket. “Um, yeah,” he answers, voice barely above a whisper. He rocks back and forth on his heels, too full of jitters to keep properly still. “Well, I mean, we’re going to get something to eat like Taco Bell or-”

“Can I come with you?” Victor asks, stepping forward, eyes eager.

Yuuri falters, which opens up an opportunity for Phichit to throw an arm around his shoulders and worm his way in the space between them.

“If it means we get to ride in your car, sure!” Phichit answers for the both of them. Yuuri can’t find his tongue, can’t find his words as they jumble up into a pile of mush in his brain, liquidating when Victor blinds him with his bright smile.

“Y-Yeah, sure! That’s totally fine! Uh, lemme just put this away-” Victor hurries around to the car’s trunk, unlocking it to deposit his guitar case.

“Should we be doing this?” Yuuri whispers while Victor is busy. Phichit still is eyeing the car, eyes wide, sucking his lower lip in between his teeth while his fingers itch in anticipation like he’s taking it out for a spin.

“I mean, when would we have another opportunity like this? He’s not a creep, is he?”

“I don’t know,” Yuuri stresses, fiddling with the cuff of his jacket. “He’s…nice? He gave me a coupon card-”

“He’s pretty cute, yeah?” Phichit adds on with a cheeky grin.

Yuuri flares with sudden heat. The noises that stutter from his mouth aren’t words, but they sound close enough.

Victor hustles back over, and it seems like he’s grinning even bigger.

“Uh, you want to ride up front?” Victor asks Yuuri. Yuuri does a good impression of a fish out of
water, mouth open and closing until he turns a stiff head towards Phichit, blinks, then turns back to Victor.

“U-Um, he’s the one that’s really excited about riding so…I’ll be fine in the backseat,” Yuuri says with a nervous laugh that sounds out of place. Victor nods his head, that diverting smile on his lips while his eyes are downcast.

“Oh, sure,” he says, and he laughs too. It sounds even more awkward than Yuuri’s.

Victor opens the door for both of them, sliding into the driver’s seat. Phichit immediately starts gawking over the controls of the radio (“It’s so retro!” Phichit chirps, then snaps a picture for his Instagram), while Yuuri tries to make himself comfortable on the back bench and buckles up. The start-up takes a minute of Victor repeatedly turning the key, the engine wheezing and sputtering with each quick turn of his wrist.

He laughs it off, constantly looking at Yuuri’s face in the rear-view mirror like he’s trying to gauge Yuuri’s reaction. Yuuri smiles at him, his lips a little stiff at the corners. Victor turns a shade of pink, and turns the car key with more vigor.

The vehicle revs to life and Victor eases out onto the road towards the town center downtown. Traffic is lighter; the streets are open and they cruise while the radio DJ’s voice is inaudible through the radio’s static.

“Will your Nana be okay with us being in the car?” Yuuri feels the need to ask when they’re already a block away from The Rock.

“Huh? Oh. Uh, it’s okay. I mean, she lets me drive it on the weekends. And I’m a safe driver so,” Victor shrugs, “it’s fine.”

There’s a pause of silence between the boys, where there’s only the radio and the quiet purr of the engine. The city lights are a blur around them, soft hues of neon color glossing over the windows, smudging together like someone wiped their thumb against the facade of the clubs and late-night bars. They’re a pretty sight; Yuuri gazes in wonder like he’s seeing these lights for the very first time.

Then, there is a shriek of a car horn that rudely jolts Yuuri back to reality.

A Camaro - sleek and black with the windows down - rolls up on the right hand side. There’s teens all piled up in the backseat, but it’s the face of the class president that Yuuri sees behind the steering wheel.

“I knew I recognized this Malibu Barbie piece of shit! How ya doing, Nikiforov?!” the boy shouts from his window. Victor keeps his eyes forward, choosing to be the bigger person and not engage. The class president continues anyways. “Hey! I heard from Giacometti that you were supposed to have a show tonight! You think we can get on the VIP list?!”

“God, does this guy ever shut up?” Phichit mutters under his breath. Yuuri slumps in his seat, hand to the side of his face, keeping his eyes averted.

“What’re you doing with Chulanont?! He a groupie?!” Mr. President yells. There’s a couple of hoots and hollers from inside the Camaro, jocks closest to the window making obscene faces. Phichit sucks in a deep breath of air, biting down any comeback. The hollering quickly ceases when one of the back windows of the Camaro gets rolled down, and a grubby finger points.

“Hey! That’s Katsuki in there!”
Yuuri immediately feels something shoot through his chest like a bullet.

“Ohhh, Nikiforov! You’re playing chauffeur or something?!” Gotta admit though, this is a major downgrade from what Katsuki rides in!” Mr. President shouts with a laugh.

“Don’t you guys have a cow to tip over or whatever it is meatheads do?” Phichit finally retorts. His smile is on, big and pleasant, but his voice is dissonant and sharp.

“Awwwww, come on, Chulanont! You know I’m just kidding! We’re all friends! Nikiforov knows I’m joking, don’t you?!”

Victor still doesn’t make any attempt at acknowledging the other boy’s existence. His hands look stiffer on the wheel, though.

One of the jocks leans his head out the passenger window. “Hey Katsuki! Fifty bucks and I can give you something to ride!” he yells with a wink.

Victor suddenly slams his foot on the gas.

The Cadillac shoots forward, engine and exhaust roaring as Victor accelerates. Yuuri’s hand shoots out and latches onto the back of Phichit’s seat, hissing out a breath of surprise through his clenched teeth.

The Camaro immediately catches up to them, the jocks hooting and hollering ‘Race! Race! Race!’, while Mr. President keeps with Victor’s speed and eggs him to go even faster. There’s a light up ahead that is turning yellow. Yuuri feels like his heart is going to drop in his stomach when it becomes clear that Victor isn’t going to stop.

There’s a semi-truck entering the intersection and the Camaro slams on its breaks.

Yuuri finally witnesses that feeling where it’s like your life flashes before your eyes. He wishes that it weren’t so bland.

Victor’s darts through the intersection and the semi-truck angrily honks their horn as it immediately screeches to a stop.

For a few seconds, Yuuri forgets how to breathe entirely. When he finally does remember, he forgets how to swallow the sudden pool of saliva in his mouth.

“…We’re here,” Victor says, hooking a right into a small parking lot.

Yuuri has never been more excited to see the gaudy neon lights of the downtown Taco Bell in his entire life.

He doesn’t even wait for Victor to fully park into a space, clawing at the door handle like a trapped animal and staggering out of the car with shaky legs. Phichit quickly exits the car and helps Yuuri up to his feet.

“I’m going home,” Yuuri repeats, face pale and heart still beating in his throat. “I’m going home.”

“Yuuri-”

“I’ll see you at school on Monday,” Yuuri cuts off, not meeting Victor’s gaze as he spins on the heels of his shoes and tries to walk off. Phichit grabs his hand and reels him back in.

“How are you going to even get back? The buses don’t even run this late!”
“I don’t know, but I’m not going to ride back with him!” Yuuri snaps. He looks at Victor, and the boy has the audacity to give Yuuri a pitying look, eyes sad like a puppy dog that just got kicked. He’s jutting his lower lip out too; it’s unfairly cute and it makes Yuuri even angrier.

He approaches Victor, hands drawing into fists at his sides. “‘Safe driver’?! You could have - we - I - we almost.” Yuuri opens his left palm and drives his right fist into it, like that’s supposed to signify something where his words fail.

“…Sorry,” Victor apologizes. His voice is too gentle and it’s too soft and it’s frustrating how it makes Yuuri’s body feel like well dressed jelly in Italian shoes. He wants to yell at Victor some more, drive whatever point he’s trying to make home, but he also wants to eat and maybe just forget that this night happened.

Victor’s eyes move up to lock on Yuuri’s, a penitent shimmer in those pretty baby blues.

Yuuri’s response dissipates into a dumb sounding, “Well…good.”

He gives his stiff shoulders a roll, looking towards the front doors. “I’m just going to get my food and go home,” he announces.

“Um, I don’t think you’ll be able to do that,” Phichit quietly says.

Yuuri doesn’t get the chance to ask Phichit just what did he mean by that. A bright light flashes over their bodies belonging to the headlights of a BMW rolling into the parking lot and parking directly beside them.

The driver window rolls down, Watanabe’s stone expression and furrowed brow greeting them.

Yuuri forgets how to breathe again.

“This is a long way from Phichit’s house, isn’t it?” he asks, looking from both Phichit to Yuuri. Phichit seems to forget how to use his gift of gab, frozen like a deer in headlights. Watanabe then looks at Victor, expression growing darker. “You’re the young man from the mini mart with the staring problem, aren’t you?”

Victor bristles at the tone, but he throws on a smile. “Er, yes, sir.”

“Is this your car?” he asks, pointing at the Cadillac.

Victor nods his head, not sure where this conversation is going. “This car that I witnessed at that intersection back there almost get hit by a sixteen-wheeler with him inside?” Watanabe further questions with a nod of the head towards Yuuri. Victor blanches.

“W-Watanabe, it’s not-” Yuuri tries to croak out.

“In the car, please,” Watanabe says. Yuuri’s lips purse into a thin line, before he quietly moves to get into the backseat of the BMW. Watanabe adjusts his grip on the steering wheel. “Phichit, do you need me to take you home as well?”

“W-Watanabe, it’s not-” Yuuri tries to croak out.

“I’m fine,” Phichit answers, still stiff. Watanabe nods his head, glancing at Victor for only a beat, before he rolls up his window and puts the car in reverse to back away. Yuuri looks at Phichit and Victor standing by the Cadillac, their figures getting smaller as Watanabe exits the parking lot and drives down the street towards home.

They go through three lights until Yuuri finds his words. “How’d you know where I was?” he asks.
Watanbe sighs through his nose.

“I called your mother to verify that she would be picking you up and she told me that since I took you, I would bring you home. I called you and you fed me that terrible lie, worked out that you must be someplace where there would be heavy traffic and people honking their horns, and have been driving around the city for the past two hours looking for anything suspicious,” Watanbe explains, looking at the rear-view mirror. “And there’s nothing more suspicious than a pink Cadillac speeding through an intersection racing against a Camaro.”

“He - I didn’t know he was going to do that,” Yuuri murmurs.

“He put your life in danger-”

“There were these kids that were egging us on and - and saying things about me and he was just trying to get away from them-”

“What kind of things?” Watanabe questions, frowning. “Who are these kids?”

“No one. I - It’s nothing-”

“Do you have bullies?”

“No. It’s - they’re just some jerks but I-” Yuuri huffs, hands dropping in his lap. “Look, it happened and I’m still in one piece, okay? Can we just drop it, please?”

“…You lied to me. You lied to me and your mother,” Watanabe says, eyes facing forward, hands on the steering wheel rigid. “It is not my job as head of your security team to reprimand you, nor is it my place to do so. However, that doesn’t mean that I cannot feel disappointed in your reckless actions.”

Yuuri swallows a bitter lump down his throat.

Watanabe doesn’t speak for the rest of the drive. Yuuri doesn’t say anything either.

The elder man drops Yuuri off at the inn approximately ten minutes to midnight. Hiroko greets them both at the door and thanks Watanabe for bringing Yuuri home safe and sound. Her voice is quiet when she speaks; Yuuri knows the eyes on his retreating back are her concerned ones. He hurries up the stairs to their home, shucking off his shoes in the hallway and stripping himself of his jacket and his shirt.

He goes into his bedroom and shuts the door behind him, pulling off his jeans in the same motion and leaving them in a bundled up pile on the floor as he crawls into bed. He takes off his glasses and places them on the nightstand, then pulls the bedsheets over his head and wishes the world outside will disappear.

Minutes later, there’s a knock at his door.

“Yuuri…can I talk to you?” Hiroko asks. Yuuri draws the sheets tighter around his body and doesn’t respond.

There’s a few seconds of hesitation, before Yuuri hears the sound of his mother’s footsteps quietly retreating down the hall.

His body curls inwards from the sound, and wishes that he didn’t feel any shittier than he always does, before closing his eyes and forcing his mind to go into a dreamless sleep.
Yuuri is presented with a breakfast by his mother Sunday morning. Three cuts of bacon and egg over rice, the egg slightly runny, just the way that he likes it.

“Morning,” she says with a smile, fixing her tea. Yuuri wanted to sulk in his bed like a hermit all day, but his stomach that hasn’t had any substance for twelve hours rudely forced him out of bed with a hungry growl.

“Morning,” he says back, quietly taking a seat and grabbing some chopsticks. Hiroko sets down a small glass of orange juice beside his bowl, taking a seat opposite of him with her mug of tea and cup of fresh cut fruit. Yuuri takes a bite, moaning at the taste of egg on his tongue.

“Good?” she asks. Yuuri nods his head enthusiastically.

“Better than what I normally get. No offense to Kaede though,” Yuuri says. He doesn’t want to sound ungrateful, but there’s just something missing in breakfast from a renowned chef with three Michelin stars that Yuuri always finds in his mother’s cooking. It tastes like comfort; it tastes like home and the warm hugs and kisses that come neatly packaged with it.

Hiroko smiles, lightly rubbing her thumb along the handle of her mug.

“…How was last night?” she asks. Yuuri pauses mid-bite. Of course, she’d want to talk about this. He continues to chew, keeping his eyes on his food. “It was…okay…” he mumbles around the wad of rice in his mouth. He’s not sure what to say; he knows that she knows what happened last night.

Hiroko nods her head, taking a small sip of her tea. When she brings it down from her lips, she is smiling.

“I told you the story about how I met your father, didn’t I?” she says. Yuuri doesn’t look at her, but he’s smiling.

“Yeah,” he says, pushing around the egg, “but I don’t mind listening to it.”

She giggles. “He was handsome back then, still is in my opinion. There was just something about the way he walked into the lobby of the inn, eyes wide and intrigued, shoulders proud and strong,” she fawns and laughs again, bringing her hands to her cheeks. “I was so nervous I could barely spell his name correctly in the ledger when I checked him in!”

Hiroko then gives this pleased smile. “Every time he left, he’d ask me what would be a great place to go out and eat. I’d tell him someplace cheap that me and your uncle always frequented, a little embarrassed that I couldn’t tell him of some high-class place more worthy of royalty than a yakitori stand. The same night, he’d take me to dinner and we’d sit on wobbly stools eating meat off a skewer and just…talk. About everything. About our families and our likes. He’d share with me all his pictures of Mari, and the way his voice always went soft when he said her name just made me feel so touched. During those times, he wasn’t this King of a neighboring country. He was just Toshiya, a father who carried around pictures of his little girl in his wallet and always let me have the last gyoza. And I think that was all he wanted to be when he visited Japan…when he was with me…”
Hiroko looks to Yuuri, smile softer. “What I’m trying to say is, it’s okay that you want to be just Yuuri. You’re sixteen going on seventeen. Lord knows I’ve done worse when I was your age,” she admits. “But, you need to remember that you still are a prince, and if you’re going to take on this job, you still need to follow their rules.”

Yuuri’s grip on his chopsticks tighten. “…Yeah…I know…”

“…Maybe if we have a chat with Watanabe and Minako and your father, we can schedule some days where you can do ‘Yuuri’ things,” Hiroko offers. Yuuri looks at her, eyebrow raised.

“Without any bodyguards?”

“Your father still had his team of security on our dates, so I don’t think we can completely nix the bodyguards,” Hiroko says with a wave of her hand. Yuuri scrunches his nose.

“They were with you on all of your dates?…Wasn’t that…awkward?”

Hiroko giggles. “Actually, I thought it was funny! I knew I wasn’t going to have a normal date with him, but I did appreciate his and his security team’s effort to try and make our dates as normal as they possibly can,” she says. Yuuri smiles, pushing around his food again.

“…Do you miss it?…Being with him?” Yuuri asks. Hiroko’s smile dips for a nanosecond. It still remains on her lips, but it looks wrong with the downcast of her eyes.

“He was my best friend and he’s your father. Of course I miss him,” she says with a sigh, wiping her hands. “But, I know my place is here keeping this inn together and helping your uncle with the original in Japan.” Her voice and posture is resigned, mature, like she’s said this sentence so many times now that it sounds natural on her tongue.

She rises up to her feet and walks over to Yuuri, giving a soft kiss to his hair. “I’m going to freshen up and head down to the inn to run check-out. Do you mind helping with the laundry?”

Yuuri nods his head. “Sure thing.”

“Now, when you have dinner with the viscount, you got to remember to be *engaging* with him. Entertain him as your guest. Create meaningful conversation with him that leaves little room for awkward pauses.”

“I can’t reach my silverware.”

Minako furrows her eyebrows. “The moment I give you a chance to slouch, you’re going to slouch. This is so you learn proper posture,” Minako explains, tapping the red scarf bounding Yuuri’s shoulders to the chair with the tip of her French manicure. Yuuri runs his tongue over his bottom lip, making another feeble attempt to grab at the silverware just out of his reach.

“But - I’m not going to be having dinner with the viscount while I’m strapped to the chair like an asylum patient, right?”

“If you learn proper posture, you won’t have to be,” Minako answers simply, pacing around the table over to where Watanabe is seated with his own set of silverware. “Now, Watanabe is going to play
the viscount. You have just been served your hor d’oeuvres of bruschetta toast and quiche. Now,”  
Minako gestures to Watanabe first.

The elder man takes a piece of bruschetta toast delicately between his thumb and middle finger,  
taking a small bite and fully chewing before he swallows. Yuuri attempts to do the same, snatching a  
piece of toast and brings it to his mouth. He bites into it with little decorum and some of the tomato  
and hummus spread immediately falls off the toast and onto his thigh in a huge glob. There’s little  
remnants of it on his lips as well.

Minako facepalms.

“*Smaller* bites. These are appetizers, not the main dish,” she reminds. Yuuri nods his head,  
awkwardly wiping up the mess on his leg and keeping his napkin folded on his lap. He takes a  
smaller bite, cleaner this time around. Minako nods her head, gesturing with her hand towards  
Watanabe. “And conversation, remember? Conversation-”

“O-Oh,” Yuuri stammers, sucking a little bit of basil out from between his front teeth. “Er, how is…  
the Queen?”

“She’s doing fine in her age, Your Highness,” Watanabe answers in-character, not bothering with a  
posh accent.

“That’s…good…and how are…her corgis?”

“They are also doing well. She recently adopted another one actually.”

“Oh! That’s cool! I’ve always wanted a dog of my own. Maybe nothing big like a Labrador or a  
Great Dane or something. But we’d have to worry about the dog bothering the inn guests so I might  
not be able to have one until I move to Hasetsu-” Yuuri pauses, looking down in his lap as his front  
pocket begins to buzz.

He maneuvers with his bound arms, pulling free his phone to look at the text notification. “Oh, um,  
Phichit wants to apologize about the whole ‘Saturday thing’-”

“It is water underneath the bridge,” Watanabe says with a nod of his head. Yuuri pulls his lower lip  
in between his teeth, pensive.

“…I’m sorry too…I must have scared you disappearing like that and lying and…I’m sorry…” he  
quietly admits. Watanabe nods his head again, a smile pulling at the wrinkles of his face and the  
corners of his eyes.

“It is alright, Your Highness…you are still young, and youth is all about making mistakes and  
decisions and growing into an adult because of them,” Watanabe says. He folds his hands over his  
lap. “But, speaking as the viscount now, it’s rude to have cell phones at the dinner table.”

“Sorry,” Yuuri says, slipping his phone in his pocket and gets himself another piece of bruschetta.

Wednesday after school, Yuuri escorts himself down the front steps of the school to the BMW  
waiting for him at the front steps. Watanabe gets out of the car per the usual routine, walks around  
the vehicle and opens up the door with a bow of his head.
“Good afternoon,” he greets. Yuuri opens his mouth to say ‘hello’ back, but his jaw locks up when someone screeches ‘HEY, WAIT!’.

He turns and sees Victor quickly running down the stairs, flushed in the face. Watanabe immediately puts himself between Yuuri and Victor approaching, forming an intimidating barrier of black mirror aviator shades and a trim-black suit.

Victor skids to a stop in his Converse. “Uh, hello. Sir,” he greets.

“Speed Demon with the Cadillac,” Watanabe greets, folding his hands in front of him. “What can I do for you today?”

Victor tries to lean around Watanabe and Watanabe follows his movements, rocking side to side to keep Victor from getting a clear view of Yuuri.

“I just - I wanted to tell Yuuri I’m sorry for what happened on Saturday! I was being a total asshole and I didn’t mean to scare him and I want to make it up to him! A-And to you too as well, Sir! For…reckless driving…” Victor says, long ponytail swaying with his erratic and insistent movements.

“Our people will call your people,” Watanabe says, turning and begins to usher Yuuri inside the car.

“Do you like pie?!” Victor blurts. “I know a pie place! My treat!”

“Thank you, have a nice-”

“I like pie,” Yuuri answers over his shoulder, ducking under Watanabe’s bowed arm. Victor’s face is all flushed with determination. It’s rather cute. He blinks owlishly at Yuuri, then beams.

“Yeah! I like pie too! Who doesn’t like pie, right?” he starts to ramble, immediately drawing towards Yuuri like there’s some sort of magnetic pull. Watanabe shoots an arm out and keeps Victor at bay, looking at Yuuri with a raised eyebrow.

Yuuri gives a small little shrug. “He said ‘his treat’ right? And…in my future profession, I will be dealing with persons wishing to end hostilities between two arguing forces so…” Yuuri makes a vague gesture, completely obvious that he’s pulling this nonsense right from his ass, “we should eat pie?”

Watanabe blinks at him. Victor blinks at him too.

Then, he gives a thumbs up. “I completely agree,” he says.

Watanabe sighs. He then bows his head. “…If that’s what you want, then I will oblige,” he responds. Yuuri’s smile is soft; he climbs into the backseat and Watanabe closes the door. Victor makes an attempt to get in the backseat with Yuuri, but Watanabe gives a sharp point with his hand for the boy to take a seat up front.

When Victor climbs in and buckles up, he immediately turns around in his seat and tries to strike up some conversation. Instead, Watanabe turns on the radio and lightly grips the steering wheel.

“Eyes forward, please,” he announces. Victor doesn’t, not at first at least. He stares at Watanabe, then at Yuuri, conflict in his eyes. Watanabe doesn’t make any move to start driving, hands still gripping the steering wheel and the quiet purr of the engine in Yuuri’s ear.

Victor turns around, a pout on his lips.
The pie shop is small and it’s cozy. It’s kind of like a small kitchen nook tucked in between a bookstore and a cafe. The walls are a fuzzy peach shade, adorned with black and white and sepia photographs of women displaying freshly baked pies in their oven-mitt clad hands. There’s a small little radio that rests on the display case housing twelve different flavors of cheesecake and cream pie; ‘Kodachrome’ plays through gentle static amongst the quiet clinks of silverware against a small porcelain plate.[1]

“One slice of peach pie,” the server says, placing it in front of Yuuri. “One apple pie turnover a la mode-” they set the dish down in front of Victor, “-and one slice of salted caramel chess for the spy.”

“I’m not a spy,” Watanabe says as the plate is set down in front of him, seated one table across from where Yuuri and Victor are seated by the window.

“That is exactly what a spy would say,” the server points out, before they scurry back behind the counter and into the kitchen.

Yuuri gives a chuckle under his breath, poising his fork over his slice of pie. “Looks good,” he compliments. Victor nods his head, cutting into one of the turnovers and getting it soaked in the bit of vanilla ice cream already beginning to melt.

“I used to come up here all the time with my dad. Nowadays, it’s mostly me bringing the pies home instead of sitting here and enjoying the ambiance. It’s nice,” Victor says, looking at Yuuri’s free hand resting on the table by his plate. “Being here with someone and enjoying company.”

Yuuri glances up at Victor through his eyelashes, cheeks warm. He takes an un-gentlemanly bite of his slice of pie, bit of peach juice dribbling down his chin.

“Um,” he swallows the bite, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “So, uh, how are things with…the whole…break up with the band?” Yuuri asks, internally wincing at his topic choice. It’s not like he knows Victor well; he doesn’t have any classes with Victor, he doesn’t eat lunch with Victor, he doesn’t even know if Victor has any siblings or his favorite color or anything.

Victor laughs. “Well, I’m doing what I can. I mean, it should have been obvious we wouldn’t get that far. They were all too preoccupied with their own stuff. Didn’t take it seriously like I did,” Victor answers.

“Yeah…”

“We weren’t even that good actually,” Victor admits, rubbing the back of his neck and his smile grows bashful. “Actually, I’m kinda glad we broke up. Would have embarrassed myself on that stage playing like shit in front of you.”

“Well, I mean, it’s not like you would have been the only terrible band up there,” Yuuri says, then bites the tip of his tongue. “I mean! No! You couldn’t have been *that* bad!”

Victor laughs. It’s so warm and it tickles up Yuuri’s chest like there’s a pair of fingertips walking up his sternum, traces up his Adam’s apple, and curls underneath his chin. He starts to fiddle with the peach slices spilled on his plate.
“We were bad. Trust me.”

“…How about you though? Did you think that you were good?” Yuuri asks.

Victor ‘pffts’. “Yeah, I was good. I mean, I was the frontman. I got to be good, you know? That’s the - that’s the face of the band. The personality. If the frontman’s terrible, the whole band is terrible.”

“So how was your band terrible if they had such a good frontman?”

Victor opens his mouth, closes it, rubs his chin as he ponders, and then eats himself another bite of turnover and ice cream.

“Touché.”

Yuuri smiles.

Victor rubs the back of his head. “It was just…creative differences, I guess. I don’t know. I can’t work with people that don’t want something as badly as I want it. Don’t have anymore surprises or anything, no spark, perfectly fine being stagnant. I hate that kind of thing.”

Yuuri doesn’t know how to respond to something like that. He thinks about himself and his own drive, but finds that his drive is pushing him towards the dark, to someplace that he isn’t sure if he wants it or not. It’s unsure; like wandering around a forest waiting for the light of a new day to shine through the trees that look oh-so menacing, and it never comes. He’s not sure if he’s fine being where he is. He’s not sure if he’s fine moving away from where he is. He’s not sure about a lot of things.

Yuuri shoves another unreasonably large chunk of pie in his mouth.

Victor pushes around his food on his plate. “Can I ask you a question now?” he asks. Yuuri swallows the mouthful of peaches on his tongue, wiping his mouth with his hand again.

“Um, okay?”

“Do you have a boyfriend?”

Yuuri nearly chokes.

He coughs and sputters and Watanabe almost knocks over his table to jump over and try to clear Yuuri’s airways with a Heimlich maneuver, but Yuuri quickly waves him away as he manages to swallow down his food properly. He continues after a few seconds reassurance, still visibly frazzled.

“I-I’m sorry. What?”

“A boyfriend. Do you have one?” Victor repeats. Yuuri starts to nervously fiddle with the bottom of his shirt.

“N-No, I can’t say I don’t,” Yuuri answers. Victor nods his head, lips forming into an ‘oh’. Yuuri starts to push around his food on his plate again. “Dating…wouldn’t work out with my situation. So there’s really no point for me to get a boyfriend-”

“What’s your type?” Victor asks.

“I’m not telling.”
“Come on~”

“That’s embarrassing!” Yuuri says with an astonished laugh. Victor clicks his tongue.

“Is not. People say what they’re into all the time. They broadcast it all over Facebook and Twitter. Likes, dislikes. I like guys that are artistic and you like…”

Yuuri rocks back into his chair. “Boys that are safe drivers,” he answers. Watanabe audibly snorts around the forkful of pie in his mouth.

Victor bites the inside of his cheek, smirking. “That’s cute. You’re really cute. Anybody ever tell you that?” Victor says. Yuuri’s cheeks are warm, averting his eyes.

“No. I just get the usual ‘stuck up snob’ comment thrown at me instead,” Yuuri says.

“…Well, you are cute,” Victor says. It’s strange how soft his voice is when he says this, like he’s telling Yuuri a secret. Yuuri looks at him, and sees Victor’s eyes are cast downwards to his plate. He has a smile on his lips that is subtle and a rosy hue to the cheeks and the tip of his nose. He’s playing around with the ice cream on his plate, stirring around bits of soggy crust in the melted soft-serve.

Yuuri starts to fiddle with his glasses. “O-Oh. Uh…” Yuuri’s not good with compliments. He doesn’t know how to take compliments. He doesn’t know if he’s expected to compliment someone back and it’s a very uncomfortable and awkward situation to place Yuuri in because he just doesn’t know how to talk about people, let alone himself.

“Can I ask you another question?” Victor pipes up before Yuuri can stumble over a sentence involving Victor’s hair spilling over his right shoulder. He gives a dumb nod of the head, and Victor continues. “Can I ask you to be in a video? For my band?”

Yuuri blinks. “…You don’t have a band. Did you forget that?”

“No. I mean - I’m going to put together another band. With people that are serious about actually being in a band and creating music and stuff. Be professional and make a name of ourselves with a music video,” Victor explains.

Yuuri blinks at him slowly, trying to process just what is being asked of him.

 “…I…I’m not a model or anything. I can’t even dance or - I look really bad on camera. It adds ten pounds and I’m already bleh enough as is and…” Yuuri bites the inside of his cheek, dropping his hands into his lap. “Shouldn’t you…see how well you work with this new band before you try to make a music video? I mean, what if they’re not any good?…Not trying to sound like it’s already going to be a failure or anything, I mean.”

Victor purses his lips at this. Yuuri starts playing with the cuffs of his sleeves. “I mean, I don’t even know what you sound like,” he says with a breathy laugh to cut the tension.

“I can sing,” Victor says.

“I never heard you sing.”

“But I can,” Victor reassures, leaning in far too close. “Do you want me to sing right now?”

“N-No, that won’t be necessary,” Yuuri stammers.

“I’ll do it. I’ll sing. Any song you want, I’ll sing it. What do you like?” Victor asks all in one breath.
"I-I can’t pick a song off the top of my head like that-"

"You know a-ha?"

"A…a-ha?"

Victor beams. “Yeah. My dad owned their first record. Always played it when he was having a smoke. I know a couple of songs-”

“You know the one where he’s in the sketchbook?” the server suddenly cuts in, topping off Watanabe’s mug with some fresh coffee.[2] Victor blinks at them, then gives a nervous laugh.

“Uh, that one’s a little high for me-”

“Come on~ I thought rock stars could sing anything!” they goad with a cheeky little grin. Victor licks his lips clean of his dessert, rubbing his palms together. He clears his throat and squares his shoulders back in his seat, going over the lyrics in his head before he starts in a soft register.

…

…He’s not terrible.

He's right about the song not being a good fit for him, though, since it seems he gets weirdly pitchy on certain words and has to stop and correct the key to better suit his voice. Yuuri doesn't know what the song is supposed to sound like anyways, but he thinks he likes it coming from Victor’s tongue and his lips and his sound.

There's a hand on his knee under the table, confident like the sparkle in Victor’s eyes. Yuuri didn't remember them being so blue, but now that's all he can look at while Victor sings, just stare deep into those irises and happily drown.

He feels his breath being coaxed out gently with Victor’s voice; it’s so sweet, so easy. His words drip past his lips and come out in honeyed melodies. His voice echoes in Yuuri’s ears and strike through his body like bolts of well aimed lightning. There's butterflies in Yuuri’s throat threatening to strangle him. It’s art, seducing and romantic and making Yuuri’s toes curl tight in his high-kicks.

The server’s small round of applause is what snaps Yuuri out of his trance. His knee jerks up and bangs against the underside of their table, their dishes rattling with the sudden jolt.

“Not bad, not bad~” the server coos, not noticing Yuuri’s behavior. Victor’s smile is unabashed; he lightly scratches the back of his neck, eyes turned to Yuuri for a response.

“…You were good,” Yuuri says, voice barely able to sound from his throat where he still feels a tickling sensation.

Victor’s smile shapes into a heart, and his hand finds its way back on Yuuri’s knee. Yuuri’s cheeks feel like they are burning, and the tickle in his throat is making it uncomfortably dry. He takes a messy sip of his water, bit spilling down his chin.

“I think we should be heading back home now. You have your studies, after all,” Watanabe announces when the tension threatens to strangle Yuuri by the neck. He wipes his mouth with a napkin and pulls a couple of loose bills from his wallet for the tip.

Yuuri nods his head, standing to his feet, legs a little bit wobbly like his mind is still in a daze. Victor stands up and steadies him, hands lingering on his shoulders longer than they need to.
“No touching without his consent, please,” Watanabe says, driving his arm in between the two to separate them. He allows Yuuri a head start, keeping Victor at bay while he dutifully follows behind. Yuuri’s heart still feels like it’s about to jump into his throat. When they climb into the BMW and Victor is asked to keep his eyes forward, the boy glances at Yuuri through the rear-view mirror. His eyes are sparkling, smiling, stupidly giddy.

Yuuri gets put under their spell all over again.

Watanabe drops Victor off first. Victor’s house isn't located far from the school. It's nestled on the corner of a small housing development where all the homes are arranged in neat little rows. They all have the same green front lawn, the same picket white fence, the same pastel splash of paint on the facade. It's a pretty sight, but at the same time painfully monotonous.

“Uh, thanks for the ride home, Sir,” Victor says in his last ditch effort. Watanabe nods his head.

“Thank you for the pie,” he responds in a tone that says, ‘you are still on my list’. Victor nods his head, accepting that, and then unbuckles his seatbelt. He turns to look over his shoulder at Yuuri. Yuuri thinks he forgets how to breathe because suddenly, all he can do is choke out surprise as Victor’s eyes twinkle at him.

“I’ll see you around school? Your people call my people or something?” he says with a lopsided smile. Yuuri averts his eyes, playing with his hands that are starting to grow sweaty.

“U-Um, I…sure.”

Victor nods his head once more, opening the door and quietly closing it shut behind him. He starts to make his way up the cobblestone path towards the front door, past the driveway where a car covered by a tarp sits out in the sun. Watanabe puts the car in drive, about to pull away from the curb, when Yuuri suddenly shouts, “Wait!”

His body is moving faster than his brain, shoving a sweaty hand into his messenger bag for a Sharpie while unbuckling his seatbelt at the same time. He forces open the car door and nearly falls to his knees in his scramble to get out. Victor pauses halfway up the path, looking over his shoulder with surprised eyes as Yuuri rushes up to him.

Yuuri is sweating. He’s red in the face and he’s feeling out of breath even though he just ran a distance of seven feet. He takes Victor’s hand without warning, turns Victor's palm towards him, and quickly scribbles out his phone number.

As he is doing this, he realized he should have taken a piece of paper from his bag as well.

“I-I just - for the - you - I -” Yuuri groans, hanging his head. Victor is staring at the number in his hand, not saying a word while Yuuri fumbles with his. He wishes Victor would say something though. Laugh at how much of a fool Yuuri looks right now, or complain about the Sharpie ink and writing all over his hand like some cheap hook-up.

After a few seconds of staring, a smile pulls on Victor’s lips, full of elation and like the cat has finally got the cream.

It makes Yuuri flush with even more embarrassment.
“I just - so - your people can call my people. I mean, you call me. And I'll answer it. If I'm not busy, which I usually am. But - I - we can schedule the video and stuff. After the band gets formed. And I'm rambling right now, oh god, tell me to shut up,” Yuuri says, dropping his face into his hands.

“Okay,” Victor responds. His voice sounds like he’s floating up up into the atmosphere.

Yuuri peeks at him from between his fingers and Victor starts nodding, resembling a human-sized bobblehead. “I mean the ‘I’ll call you’ part. Not the ‘shut up’ part. I like hearing you talk or ramble. Your voice is nice. Really relaxing. And now I'm starting to ramble so it's okay. Rambling. Just one of those…human things…which we both are…human…”

There’s a knocking sound, and both boys turn to look at the window just above the neatly trimmed marigold bush. There’s another boy, younger with blond hair and an impish face, glaring at Victor. He gestures with his hand, as if to say, “What the fuck are you doing right now?”

Victor turns back to Yuuri and juts a thumb at the window. “Little brother. He's a freshman. He's got the same name as you, actually. But it's Yuri, really short. Don't sound out the ‘u’ like it's pronounced in your name. Which is really nice. Really pretty.”

Yuuri thinks he's about to combust into flames. “I-I have a sister. Half-sister. She's older. And…in a different country…”

They both give an awkward laugh. “Rambling again,” they both say and agree. Victor's brother starts impatiently banging on the window.

“I should go. But I'll call you! I'll definitely call you and we're going to be amazing and-” Victor almost trips on a crack in the pathway as he attempts to walk backwards towards the door while talking. He quickly gains his footing and steadies himself, waving his hand with the number written on it. “I'll call you! Bye!”

Yuuri dumbly waves his hand goodbye, face sweaty and hot. Victor gets dragged inside the house and Yuuri walks back to the car, swaying like a baby lamb just taking its first steps in the new world. When he climbs inside, Watanabe is looking at him with an expression of surprise.

Yuuri holds his stomach, suddenly experiencing nausea and a sharp pain. “Watanabe?” he asks, voice meek.

“…Yes, Your Highness?”

“Could you take the long way back to the consulate? I…don't feel so good.”

“Is it the pie?”

Yuuri curls inwards. “I just…feel really dizzy.”

Watanabe observes Yuuri in the rear-view mirror, quiet for a moment. Then, he reaches into his glove compartment and pulls out some peppermints.

“These should help clear your head. Would you like some, Your Highness?”

After a pause, Yuuri holds out his hand. “Please?”

Watanabe places two mints into Yuuri’s open palm. He then starts the car, and slowly pulls away from the curb at a leisurely pace.
Yuuri rolls one of the mints in between his teeth and sucks on it, closing his eyes and letting the muddle of his thoughts drop out one by one, till only the memory of Victor singing plays in his head, in time with his beating heart.

Chapter End Notes

[1] Kodachrome is a 1973 track by Paul Simon. Possibly the only song referenced outside of the 80s that will be in this fic.

[2] A-ha is a new wave band from the 80s. The music video that the server refers to and the song that Victor sings to demonstrate his vocal skills is Take On Me.
there's a new wave coming, i warn ya

Chapter Summary

"They just don't write love songs like they used to."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

LOOKING FOR BAND MEMBERS!

Do YOU want to be in a band? Searching for bassist, keyboardist, drummer and rhythm guitarist. Looking to take the classics of rock and roll foundation and make it our own! We provide instruments!

Auditions this Friday, in Auditorium A first come, first serve.

If interested, contact Victor Nikiforov. Available during second lunch and after school just before hockey practice.

“I didn’t know he played hockey,” Yuuri muses.

“I don’t think he does. I just see him hanging around. His little brother is a hockey player though. He cussed out two of my interviewers looking to get a word in for their freshmen team spread,” Phichit says.

Both boys look at the flyer for a bit, still a few minutes to spare before they have to go to their separate homerooms. Victor’s writing isn’t at all pretty. Yuuri had to read the message over three times before he was able to even make sense of it. Yet, it’s kind of endearing. He’s smiling at it with fondness in his lungs.

“That’s nice though. Him putting together another band. Maybe I can ask Luke if he knows someone that can come in and play,” Phichit says.

“…Who’s Luke?”

Phichit smiles. “Remember that boy that invited us to see him and his band perform and they never showed up? The drummer?”

Yuuri blinks. Phichit continues. “He texted me to apologize for the no-show. I got invited to watch them practice and then afterwards, we all went to this diner that sells really good chili fries,” the other boy gushes. It’s not at all like Phichit is walking through a daydream when he speaks about the boy;
there’s sunshine in his smile but it doesn’t look any different from the smiles he gives everyone.

“…So are you two…dating?” Yuuri asks.

Phichit shakes his head ‘no’. “He’s cute, but he’s kinda a flake. That might have been okay when I was just a doe-eyed freshman, but I’m a senior, and I need people I can depend on in my social circle that I’ll keep after I graduate,” Phichit says, throwing a casual yet firm arm around Yuuri’s shoulders.

“I’m kind of a flake too,” Yuuri feels the need to bring up.

“You’re only a flake when you start thinking too much.”

“I think too much all the time.”

“Yuuri, you must be crazy to think that I’ll let you become ‘the friend that got away’ just because you’re… you,” Phichit says, turning Yuuri to face him, pout on his lips. “You do trips, don’t you? Visit me on business. Or I’ll visit you. I’ll get all the paperwork and security clearances done if I get the chance to hang out with you.”

The corners of Yuuri’s lips twitch. Sometimes, he wonders how did he manage to get a friend in Phichit. Maybe because Phichit is this ball of light that you can’t help but be drawn to, like flies attracted to the glow of a neon lamp, someone bright and beautiful that Yuuri wants to covet for himself.

There’s a hand that reaches over the both of them and grabs the flyer off the tack board, crumpling it in their fist.

Both boys turn, seeing Mr. President balling the flyer up and tossing it over his shoulder into the trashcan, a protein bar in between his teeth.

“Hey! You can’t do that!” Yuuri snaps, and it surprises himself. Mr. President looks Yuuri up and down, eyebrow raised.

“No student body stamp. It’s unauthorized and can’t be displayed on official bulletins. It’s the rules, Katsuki. I know your kind thinks that just because they have money, they’re above rules,” he drawls. Yuuri opens his mouth to protest, but the warning bell manages to cut him off. Mr. President gestures towards the ceilings to where the speakers are embedded. “Better get to class,” he says, and strolls off with a pip in his step.

“What a tool,” Phichit grumbles, adjusting the strap of his bag. “I’ll see you third period,” he says.

Yuuri nods his head. “See you there,” he responds, and both start to head in opposite directions of the hallway towards class.

Homeroom is, as always, a total mess.

Yuuri sits three seats to the right, next to the open window so he can see the courtyard and his bodyguard can see him. It takes about ten minutes past the start of the class for everyone to get in their seats and shut up for the morning announcements played over the small television monitor in the corner of the classroom.

The announcers go through their normal schtick, announcing that homecoming tickets are now on sale and enthusing about the upcoming football game that Yuuri doesn’t care about. They cut to the weather segment, and Yuuri recognizes the face of the other clerk that was at the mini-mart, dressed in a tweed suit that looks better suited for a crotchety old man than a young adult.
“Good morning, Stammi Viccino! I’m Christophe Giaccometti and it’s another beautiful day as you can see by this green screen projection behind me. It is to be expected, since our high is going to be at a lax seventy-three and our low is going to be at a fifty-nine. Current temperature is sitting at sixty-three. Now, let’s look at our weekly projected forecast and - oh, what do we have here?

On the weekly forecast, specifically in the Friday slot just above the predicted weather icon – looking at some cloudy skies - is a Les Paul guitar. Christophe gestures to the icon as if he has no idea how it got there.

“That looks like a guitar. And speaking of guitars, Victor Nikiforov will be holding auditions for his rock band in Auditorium A this Friday. Anyone that thinks they have any rock and roll talent, stop by and see him! This is a paid-for advertisement by Victor Nikiforov, who is once again, asking all rock musicians to come and try out for his band. He’s not that desperate to take any schlub that walks in, but he’s getting pretty damn close. So, bring your A-game and stay classy, Stammi Viccino.”

There’s a quick shuffle of screens, a screech that sounds like Mr. Karpisek hissing “We don’t take paid-for advertisements!”, and then the news anchors are back on the air with their awkward smiles, quickly reading off the next few announcements before signing off.

Yuuri hides his smile behind his hand, and quietly opens up his notebook.

“Now, when greeting a dignitary and offering their hand to shake, it’s very quick,” Minako says, gesturing with Watanabe, who does a polite bow as a greeting. “You want to give two or three short ‘up-down’ shakes. Do not pump their hand like they are an oil well, do not crush their hand like yours is a bear trap.”

Yuuri nods his head, offering his hand and letting it slide along Watanabe’s palm, performing a brief handshake.

“Could I have a ‘Me Day’ this Friday?” Yuuri asks as his hand recedes back to his side.

Minako blinks. “What do you want to do?”

“Um - there’s…this thing…that I want to see…at school…” Yuuri starts rocking back and forth from heel to toe, eyes darting to look at everything but Minako’s bemused expression.

“Does this thing have anything to do with the ‘Rock and Roll Casanova’ you gave your phone number to?” Watanabe asks with a raise of his eyebrow. Minako gapes, turning to Yuuri with a wide-eyed expression.

“You gave your phone number to someone?” she asks. Yuuri feels his cheeks flare in embarrassment, nervously starting to fiddle with the bottom of his shirt.

“I - It’s nothing. It’s just for a video. He’s in a band. Well - forming a band and - he asked if I could be in the music video and…I don’t know…”

“Well what kind of music video is this? It’s nothing like…you running around half-naked, strung out on drugs while heavy metal plays in the background, right?” Minako asks, hand to her cheek, eyebrows furrowed and lips pulled into a displeased frown.
“Wha- no! It’s a high school band,” Yuuri states.

“I’ve done some weird avant-garde stuff in high school, pretentious shit that I was,” Minako sighs, shaking her head. “Point being, I don’t want you to be associated with something that might tarnish your reputation we’re trying to build, especially before we’ve yet to formally introduce you as ‘The Crown Prince Katsuki Yuuri of Hasetsu’.”

Yuuri bites the inside of his cheek at his title. He hears it all the time when around Hasetsu staff and dignitaries. He reads about it in the online articles about how people are dying to get a picture of him, even though one technically exists in a blurry candid caught of him being escorted around Hasetsu with Mari and several dozens of security officials.

Yet, it never feels real to him. Like, maybe this is all some elaborate dream that he has coaxed up in the recesses of his mind; the kind of fantasies he sees in the movies - a young nobody that suddenly finds out that he’s a prince. However, he never becomes glamorous and a thing that is dressed in gold and pearls. He’s still a nobody, just now he has ‘The Crown Prince’ tacked onto the front of his name like a cheap little bumper sticker.

Minako tilts her head to the side. “Who is directing the video?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who’s the rest of the people in the band?”

“…I don’t know…”

“…What kind of boy is this ‘Rock and Roll Casanova’?” Minako questions. Yuuri pulls his bottom lip in between his teeth.

“I…the kind that buys people pie to say he’s sorry?”

Minako purses her lips. “You’re not making a very convincing case as to why you should still go along with this,” she points out. Yuuri knows. He knows he’s bad at making a convincing argument, knows that sometimes his shoulders start to bow inwards as he shields himself from the onslaught, like they are doing at this exact moment.

Minako shifts her weight onto her left foot, crossing her arms over her chest. She hums, giving a tilt of her head. “Find out what kind of band is this boy putting together and asking you to be a part of. If it sounds like it might jeopardize your image, you have every right to say ‘no’, okay?”

Yuuri bites his bottom lip. “…Right…okay…”

The woman nods her head, clasping her hands together as Watanabe steps off to the side and fetches a small radio set. “And now, let’s continue with what we left off from Thursday. You will be meeting with the Princess of Luxembourg in December and nothing charms a young lady more than a man that can dance~”

She elegantly spreads her arms like a swan that fans its wings to take flight, then spins on the tip of her heel and smiles big.

Yuuri closes his eyes and braces himself.
Halfway through a problem for statistics and he’s a quarter of the way done with a small bag of rice cakes, Yuuri starts thinking about what he’s going to say to Victor.

Really, it shouldn’t be difficult. Victor has been texting him a lot since he gave his number, but it isn’t anything about the band. It’s more-so things like asking how Yuuri’s day has been, some funny little thing he saw on his bike ride from the school to the mini-mart, little anecdotes like that. Yuuri can easily worm an inquiry about what Victor is thinking about for the video into their mostly one-sided conversation.

…But…what if it is bad?

Not that he thinks Victor is malicious and wants to make a fool of Yuuri, but it’s not like he has any idea what kind of band Victor is putting together and what kind of music they’re going to be playing. Yuuri’s knowledge of rock and roll is limited, and the only image he can think of when picturing the music is what he saw at The Rock - greasy and grungy and nothing that should be one-hundred feet near a future monarch.

What would Yuuri even wear in the video? He hates about every outfit on him that doesn’t fit loose and reminds him about how his thighs are a little on the thick side and there’s still fat in his hips that won’t leave no matter how much exercise his dietician recommends. Oh god, what if it is something skimpy and makes Yuuri look like he’s strung out on drugs in order to give the video an ‘edgy’ vibe? Does Victor like edgy? Yuuri doesn’t want to be edgy. God, what did he get himself into???

There’s a gentle knock at his doorframe and he looks over his shoulder, seeing his mother standing with her phone in her hand.

“Mari wanted to say ‘hi’,” she whispers. Yuuri pulls his bottom lip in between his teeth.

“Um, okay,” he murmurs, getting up and taking the phone from Hiroko. She gives a warm smile and lets Yuuri know she’s heading back down to the inn to check the ledgers and patrons in the dining hall. Yuuri quietly nods his head in understanding, and goes back to his seat at his desk.

“Hello?” he answers.

“Hello there,” Mari responds. There’s a coyness to her voice, like she knows something Yuuri doesn’t. It’s probably the whole ‘sneaking out and almost getting ran over’ tidbit Yuuri wishes would get quietly swept under the rug. “How are you doing? It’s been a while since we’ve talked since you last visited.”

“I’m fine. Just…school and…stuff…”

Mari makes a noise of displeasure. “School never was my thing. Always hated it. Had tutors breathing down my neck every hour. Sometimes, I tried to hide from them before lessons started. Didn’t do any good for me though when they found me; they just made the lessons even longer to make up for wasted time."

Yuuri chuckles at this, resting his cheek into the palm of his free hand. “Maybe I should get tutors. Can’t be bullied if I only have to deal with one other person.”

“I thought you liked that school. It’s the best in the country, isn’t it? Costs a pretty penny. Besides, you’ll get assholes everywhere, even outside of school and definitely when dealing with other foreign diplomats.”
Yuuri hums. “…I guess…”

“Plus, you’ll miss out on some of the things that come with going to a school with other kids...like... someone that...maybe interests you in a certain way…”

“You’ve been talking to Minako, haven’t you?” Yuuri asks bluntly, rubbing his eyes.

“You gave a boy your phone number. The Prime Minister’s son joked about getting your number and you flat out told him you didn’t own a cellphone. While you were holding your cellphone.”

“I - I didn’t - I got nervous,” Yuuri stammers. Mari clicks her tongue. “And besides, I’m not interested in him. It’s for a band. That he’s putting together. And I’m having second thoughts about doing the whole thing anyways so really, it was really just a waste of time giving him my number because now, since I’m turning his offer down, it’ll be awkward to have his number so - logically - I should just never speak to him again and-”

“Woah, woah, woah. Slow down there,” Mari laughs. “Why are you second guessing the band? Do they sound terrible?”

“I…well I don’t know. He hasn’t put it together yet. He’s got auditions on Friday though…I was thinking about going to see, but also I was thinking about telling him to his face that I don’t think I should be a part of the video. Not just for my sake, but for his too. I mean,” Yuuri leans back in his chair, staring up at the ceiling. “I’d look so out of place around rock stars. People already think I’m a stuck up snob that considers himself better than everyone, what would they say about this?”

“Whatever they do say, fuck ‘em. Not like they want to get to know the real you. Why bother pleasing them when you could maybe give this boy a chance? Maybe he’s got some wild concept that you’ll be perfect for.”

Yuuri groans, slumping against his desk, pushing his homework askew on the surface. “But I wasn’t really… thinking when I gave him my number. I - my body just - moved. And - I don’t know, what if it’s really bad and I regret doing this-”

“It’s just going to be a silly little video, I bet. But if you’re really uncomfortable about it, you don’t have to force yourself into going along with it. Do what Yuuri wants to do, not because Minako says you should or shouldn’t.”

“But I don’t know what I want to do,” Yuuri complains.

“Is he cute?”

“I’m not answering that.”

“Ah, so he’s cute.”

Yuuri flares red, cheeks burning and tongue sputtering out half-finished thoughts. Mari laughs to herself, voice coming in softer than her usual demeanor. “Well, all I can say is, do what you want. It’s your life, not anyone else’s. Besides, you’re a teenager. I think everyone has their stupid thing they did as a teenager that they look back on fondly. This can be yours.”

Yuuri makes a noise that isn’t agreeing to what his sister is saying, but at the same time isn’t discouraging it. It’s a whine that emanates from the back of his throat and hisses out through his teeth, drawing the sound out for a few seconds before he cuts it short with a weathered sigh.

“Yeah…I’ll just… see what kind of band it is. If it’s bad, I’ll just tell him no,” Yuuri tells himself
more than Mari. His voice isn’t very confident that he’ll follow through with this plan. His mind is
thinking about other alternatives that’ll politely and cleanly cut Victor loose without Yuuri having to
do much of anything.

“If that’s what you want,” Mari responds, laziness in her voice. There’s a brief click, and then she
curses. “That’s one of the representatives calling.”

“Ignore it,” Yuuri tells her. She laughs.

“I may not be a princess anymore, but I still have to have my foot in some political matters. I’ll call
you again another time. Tell Hiroko I hope she’s doing well.”

“Yeah, I will,” Yuuri hums. There’s a brief pause that always occurs when he and Mari are about to
hang up. The weird interlude in between the end of their conversation and the call disconnecting,
where both wonder if the other is going to say ‘I love you’. Yuuri’s known Mari for a total of eight
months, but he knew she existed since he was ten. It’s kind of awkward, like Yuuri feels he’s
supposed to show some sort of affection, but the concept of Mari and ‘big sister’ still feels like he’s
trying to force two mismatched puzzle pieces together.

He knows she loves him, loves him as much as his father loves him. But it’s still odd for him, loving
someone that’s been in his life for such a short amount of time, still practically a stranger.

Mari breathes out a little chuckle that rings understanding. It always does.

“I’ll see you later, alligator,” she says, cheesy and drawing her words out.

Yuuri smiles. “Yeah. After a while, crocodile,” he echoes back. It’s their own special thing that
works for now. He’s fine with it.

The call disconnects and Yuuri turns his attention back to his homework and his worksheets. He
lightly taps the tip of his mechanical pencil against problem number seven, and hums a-ha under his
breath.

There’s a flyer posted on the door of Auditorium A Friday after school. It reads, ‘Rock and Roll
Auditions for Victor Nikiforov’s Band!’. Underneath the chicken scratch of handwriting, there’s a
small stick figure of someone playing a Stratocaster that shoots out flames that a poodle is dancing
around.

Yuuri is so amused by the doodle that he almost forgets the feeling of vomiting from nerves about
what’s going to happen when he steps inside the auditorium.

Watanabe is parked outside, waiting to escort Yuuri home. One of Yuuri’s bodyguard’s is
accompanying him, one that doesn’t look so intimidating per Yuuri’s request, but can still apparently
put someone in a choke hold if they are a threat to the prince.

“It’ll be brief,” Yuuri tells the man standing beside him. “I’m just…going to tell him that I thought
long and hard about it and that I don’t think I should be in the band. But that we can still talk. He’s
really nice, I don’t want to just completely cut off ties with him. Maybe I shouldn’t tell him I’m
quitting. What if there’s people there? What if they think I’m quitting because I’m being a snob when
that’s not the reason but it sorta is the reason and ugh.”
The bodyguard quietly folds his hands in front of him. “Shall I open the door for you, Your Highness?” he murmurs.

Yuuri sucks in a breath. “No. I - gimme a couple of seconds.”

The teenager shifts from foot to foot, left to right, running in place and quietly mouthing over something that sounds okay in his head, but he’ll surely screw up when saying it to Victor’s face. He gives his cheeks a few quick pats and then holds his breath as he pushes open the doors of the auditorium.

It’s empty.

The auditorium’s space is huge, and Yuuri’s footsteps as he approaches the stage is the only sound. There’s instruments on the stage, a bass and a drum set and a guitar dead center, while the school’s Baldwin sits off to the side, blending into the shadows and the shroud of curtains hanging from the rafters.

“…Hello?” Yuuri calls, but his voice barely travels, a whisper amid the rows of theater chairs. He reaches the stage, rounding the orchestra pit to the small set of steps. There’s hesitance in each footfall as he moves around the edge, careful not to disturb the instruments where they sit. “…Hello? …Victor?”

There’s a loud clammer and Yuuri shrieks in surprise. He feels his bodyguard grab hold of his wrist and pull him down from the stage into his hold, prepared to shield him for any incoming threat.

The curtains billow with a wild gesture of someone attempting to tear right through them than manage to go around like a sane person. Eventually, Victor is the one that untangles himself from the drapes, flushed and sweaty with his hair down and a jean jacket tied around his waist.

“Hi!” Victor greets per the norm like he didn’t get stuck in the curtains a few seconds ago. He has his heart-shaped smile on his lips, and Yuuri feels his heart leap in his throat.

He peels himself away from his bodyguard and approaches the stage. “Um, hi,” he responds, voice small and unsure. He glances around the still rather empty auditorium, then towards the back of the stage where Victor emerged. “How are…um, auditions going?”

Victor leans his back against the stage, turning his gaze to the hot lights above to ponder.

“It’s going great! I mean, it could have gone better if my flyers didn’t get tore down, but nothing I can do about that.” Victor says with a shrug. He hops off the stage and stands close to Yuuri, giving a glance at the bodyguard standing a polite distance away but carefully gauging Victor’s figure. “You really have guards wherever you go,” he muses, and it’s not meant to be rude, Yuuri knows it, but he still feels a burn of embarrassment in his cheeks.

“I…It’s just - my parents -” Yuuri says lamely, but his words don’t sound convincing to even his own ears. Victor nods his head like he understands, and Yuuri pretends that he does, folding his hands behind his back. “I didn’t want to keep you from your auditions. I just…wanted to ask about the video and what you’re thinking about…”

Victor leans his back against the stage, turning his gaze to the hot lights above to ponder.

“I don’t know. I didn’t think about a concept for a video yet since I haven’t written anything,” Victor says.

“…You can write music?” Yuuri asks. Victor nods his head, eager grin stretching on his lips.
“Yeah! I mean, every school has a cover band, right? I don’t believe in singing in someone else’s voice, using someone else’s art, to make something of myself. It’s already been done, why do I want to copy it, you know?” Victor explains, rambling a little, gesturing with his hands.

“Oh. I see.”

“But I’ll keep you updated on it. Yuri - er - my brother says he knows a junior that’s pretty good. Also, I got this other junior that really wants to play in a band. KK, BB, GG, I don’t know. He says he’s good at drums, so I’ll give him a listen whenever he decides to show up,” Victor adds with a shrug.

“Oh. Well, I don’t…mind waiting with you until he shows up.” Yuuri offers, voice trying not to wobble on the last syllable. He starts playing with the cuffs of his sleeve because his hands start doing the thing where they start nervously twitching. “I mean, it’s probably boring in here all by yourself. Not that I’m entertaining or anything. You’ll probably be more bored with me lingering around actually. But, you know, two’s company? Well, three actually, counting him-” Yuuri gestures with a quick tilt of his head, “and that’s a crowd…oh god, this is getting awkward-”

“Do you want to see something really cool?” Victor politely and thankfully interrupts. He’s grinning like a madman, eyes twinkling with mirth as he offers his hand forward to Yuuri. “The drama production is putting on *Little Shop of Horrors* for their fall production. They built some Audrey II’s back there, completely out in the open to touch.”

“What’s that?” Yuuri asks, taking Victor’s hand anyways. Victor’s got callouses just at the tips of his fingers, maybe a little worn from bending guitar strings. It’s a strange sensation against the inner part of his wrist, just above his pulse. He finds that he rather likes it.

“Well, this will make it all the more fun if you don’t know what it is,” Victor enthuses, and he carefully guides Yuuri onto the stage, bodyguard following immediately behind at their heels.

“You said it would be brief,” Watanabe says, slowly pulling away from the curb when Yuuri is buckled in his seat and his bodyguard has been dismissed.

“I know,” Yuuri answers.

“You were in there for an hour.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What did he say?”

“I…’m still going to do the video. I mean, I said I would. Going back on something that I offered to help with is just flakey, and according to Phichit, I’m only a flake when I’m thinking about this too hard, which I was so I decided I’m not and I will,” the boy says under his breath. A few seconds later, he blinks and tries to process just what the hell did he even say.

“If that will make you happy, Your Highness,” Watanabe says, letting his grip go lax on the wheel as he turns the corner. “We have a short amount of time before I have to take you back to the inn. Would you like something to snack on?”
Yuuri looks out the window and runs his fingertips along his inner wrist, where it feels like a phantom touch of calloused fingers still tickle gentle and sweet.

“Wherever is fine with me,” Yuuri says, and traces spiderwebs against his pulse.

Ten minutes before third period is due to start, Yuuri gets cornered in the hallway by surprisingly Seung-Gil Lee.

“Chulanont, does he have a boyfriend?” is what Seung-Gil immediately opens the conversation with, eyebrows furrowed and all up in Yuuri’s own person bubble. Since Seung-Gil has never spoken a word to Yuuri, this naturally startles him.

“H-Huh?” he stammers. Seung-Gil rolls his eyes like Yuuri is an idiot and he is wasting oxygen just talking to him.

“Phichit Chulanont,” he states, tone flat. “Does he have a boyfriend?”

“U-Um, no. He doesn’t,” Yuuri answers, unsure about just what is going on. Seung-Gil lets the answer soak in his mind, still not allowing Yuuri to exit from the corner of the hallway in between the lockers where he’s trapped. People are staring, snickering in their cliques as they give quick glances their way or as they pass the two of them by.

“Who’s this Luke guy he keeps talking about?” Seung-Gil then interrogates.

“Huh? He’s…a guy…in a band.”

Seung-Gil wrinkles his nose. “A band,” he says, and he makes the word ‘band’ sound like it’s the filthiest thing in the world by the way his eyes narrow and the corner of his mouth curls into a displeased frown. Yuuri doesn’t know how to respond, so he stupidly nods his head and lightly presses the panic button hidden in the inner mesh material of his messenger bag.

Seung-Gil crosses his arms. “You’re friends with that long-haired pretty boy right? The one with the band?”

“Oh, um,” Yuuri scratches his cheek. “I…I guess we are sorta friends,” he says, sounding unsure of himself.

“Is he still looking for people to be in his band?”

“Um, he said he found a drummer and a rhythm guitarist-”

“I’ll join his band,” Seung-Gil bluntly announces. Yuuri blinks.

“W-What?”

Seung-Gil doesn’t dignify Yuuri with a response or with clarification. “I’ll talk to him after school,” he mutters to himself, adjusting his grip on his school bag and fixing his tie. He finally gives Yuuri some needed breathing room, turning on the heel of his shoes and strolls down the hallway to third period.

Moments later, a bodyguard shows up, slightly flushed from running down the steps from the third
“Is everything alright, sir?” he asks, students stopping to gaze upon the large man in the black suit and aviator glasses. Yuuri gives a regretful shake of his head, scuffling the toe of his black shoes against the tile flooring.

“No, it’s fine now,” Yuuri reassures. “Um, but…you can…escort me to class?”

It’s literally only ten steps away and Yuuri hates escort detail, but he hates being a waste of someone else’s time more.

The bodyguard nods his head and stands at attention, allowing Yuuri to take the first steps forward before he follows behind like a shadow. Yuuri keeps his eyes to the ground and ignores the stares, the smirks, the groups of people whispering, and bites his tongue like a proper prince should.

Saturday evening, Victor excitedly messages Yuuri that he has found a bassist. Yuuri texts him back a congratulatory message, then adds some random happy emojis at the end because the sentence looks oddly formal.

“Who’re you texting?” Phichit asks, bouncing up and down at the foot of Yuuri’s bed. They’re supposed to be studying - actually studying for a physics exam, but Victor sent Yuuri a text message of his poodle and he just conveniently forgot his study guide.

“Nobody,” Yuuri answers as he sees the little grey bubble pop up, then a sticker of a dancing dog replaces it. Yuuri has found in his iMessages with Victor that he texts with enthusiasm, emojis and stickers punctuating the sentences if there isn’t a string of exclamation points. It’s extremely tacky; Yuuri kinda likes it.

“Is it Viiiiiictorr?r?” Phichit coos, voice raising to a high pitch as he draws out the name. Yuuri keeps the blush down, but he still sucks his bottom lip in between his teeth out of embarrassment. Phichit continues to bounce on Yuuri’s bed, his rolled up workbook in his right hand. “How’s he with the whole ‘putting the band together’ thing?”

“Going good.”

“I know a junior that plays piano that said he got in contact with him. He’s got a friend in Yearbook that takes great photos. You said that he’s filming a video, right? Does he need a cameraman?”

“I don’t know. He still hasn’t told me anything about the video,” Yuuri murmurs. It doesn’t really bother him all that much that Victor isn’t talking about the music video, but Yuuri isn’t sure if that’s a good thing he’s not stressing out about it, or bad.

“Is there a video? He didn’t just tell you that to get your phone number, did he?”

“Of course there’s a video,” Yuuri says. Really, now that he’s thinking about it, he wonders if it is all a lie. But it seems too elaborate to be one, and Victor seems too nice to openly lie and stretch it out for so long. Plus, there’s no reason to lie to get Yuuri’s number. Who would even want his number?

“Well, if he needs a cameraman, let me know so I can pass it on to Guang-Hong,” Phichit says in midst of his bouncing. Yuuri nods his head, smiling as Victor sends him another picture of his poodle
hiding underneath the dinner table for some scraps.

It’s quiet aside from the bounce of Yuuri’s mattress springs with Phichit’s up-down movements.

Then, out of nowhere, Phichit asks, “Has he kissed you yet?”

Yuuri almost drops his phone.

“Wha - no!”

Phichit laughs. “Joking! Joking!” he teases with a playful wink, jumping to his feet. He stretches his arms over his head, arching his back until it clicks. “Mind if I help myself to a fruit pop from the freezer?” he inquires, joke already forgotten while Yuuri is still reeling through the aftershocks.

“I - no - yeah. Go for it,” he says, and he knows he’s blushing; he can feel it in his cheekbones and the way his jaw trembles.

Phichit beams sunshine and bright white teeth, and excuses himself from Yuuri’s room to trek downstairs to the kitchen area of the apartment. There’s a heavy thud Yuuri hears; a rhythmic thump-thump-thump! that only begins to slow down to a normal pace when he realizes it’s his heart. He hisses in a few breaths, feeling the lock of his shoulders straining his back as he hunches forward.

He’s burning. He’s positively burning.

He spins around in his desk chair and turns his attention back to his physics that he forgot about and can’t find in himself to care for. He tries to focus on the problems, the string of numbers and formulas, his complicated notes from class with the words highlighted in different gaudy colors.

Nothing distracts him from the thought of what it would feel like to have his first kiss given by Victor’s heart-shaped lips.

Victor shows up at the inn at ten on a Sunday morning. Yuuri’s in still in his pajamas and still has a spoonful of Lucky Charms in his mouth when he hears someone give a polite rapt at the door, and is not expecting to be greeted with the boy’s heart-shaped smile and a loud ‘Hi!’

Yuuri blinks at him, finally pulling the silver spoon from his lips. “How’d you find my house?” Yuuri asks. He doesn’t mean to sound suspicious and questioning the security of this encounter, but it’s early, and Yuuri’s never been a morning person to converse with.

“Our people,” Victor answers, then bites the inside of his cheek. “Or, like, I asked Phichit since when I saw him at lunch and he told me the name of the inn. And then one of your bodyguards got your mom and she said you’d be here,” Victor explains, rocking onto the heels of his Converse. He’s wearing a faded shirt with holes in it; Yuuri can blearily make out through his sleepy half-blind vision the name ‘Def Leppard’.

“Well…what is it?” Yuuri asks, resting against the doorframe, tendrils of sleep still determined to keep their hold on him.

“Are you busy?”
“It’s a little late to be asking me that, don’t you think?”

“But are you?”

“No,” Yuuri says, shaking his head for further emphasis. Victor smiles.

“Do you want to meet the band?” Victor asks, practically vibrating in his shoes. He looks like a child about to show off something spectacular, like macaroni art or some misshapen bowl made in art class. Yuuri squints his eyes at him.

“Like…like now?”

“Yeah! Let me go tell them to come up-”

“W-Wait, I’m not-” Victor is already barreling down the stairs before Yuuri can finish his sentence.

He clicks his tongue, hastily looks at his sloppy form of dress, and then has a brief five-second panic attack that he actually answered the door and talked to Victor looking like this. He closes the door and grabs his half-eaten bowl of cereal to chuck into the sink, then scrambles up the second set of steps to his room, grabs a random change of clothes and darts into the bathroom for a quick shower.

When he emerges fifteen minutes later, smelling like cedar wood and wearing sweatpants and a sweater that looks casual - it has a Gucci tag, but it doesn’t say Gucci anywhere, but it still looks too try hard and ugh - Yuuri treads down the steps into the kitchen.

There’s a group of boys all crowded in the kitchen, hands in their pockets, looking just as awkward at the prospect of being inside Yuuri Katsuki’s home as Yuuri feels about having them in his home.

At the doorway, two of his bodyguards stand watch.

The first thing Victor says when Yuuri cautiously approaches him while watch the other boys is, “You smell really nice.”

Yuuri wishes he didn’t say that, because he turns the shade of a fucking tomato.

“Okay! So, you met JJ, our drummer,” Victor says, pointing at the junior standing closest to the door. JJ waves, a little awkward since he keeps glancing over his shoulder at the bodyguards like they’re about to jump him if he makes a wrong move. Victor then points at the two boys standing beside the refrigerator.

“That’s Leo, our keyboardist, and Guang-Hong, our cameraman. Phichit gave his recommendation for Guang-Hong’s work. He’s going to make us look awesome,” Victor gushes. Both boys look young, possibly juniors as well, but they seem friendly. They smile at Yuuri and give polite waves that Yuuri reciprocates.

Victor gestures to Seung-Gil, and Yuuri already knows Seung-Gil too, but let’s Victor introduce him all over again. “Seung-Gil’s going to be our bassist,” Victor says. Seung-Gil looks like he doesn’t even want to be here. He’s standing the farthest away from the entire group, arms crossed over his chest, eyebrows knitted downwards. Yuuri also assumes that Seung-Gil is also one of those non-morning people, since there’s still bags under his eyes and sleep at his corners. He gives him a sympathetic nod of his head.

“Finally, we have Otabek, our rhythm guitarist and co-writer for music,” Victor says, and gestures to the boy standing closest. He’s the only one that makes the offer to go up to Yuuri and shake his hand clad in a leather glove.

He looks like a rock star; he’s got ear piercings and two piercings on his right eyebrow, a undercut
hairstyle and a leather jacket adorned with crude and obscene pins. He’s got a strong handshake, not like Yuuri’s diplomatic ‘one-two’ handshake. It’s got a camaraderie behind it, friendly and warm and hoping for the best. It’s odd how relaxing Yuuri feels after shaking Otabek’s hand when the boy hasn’t even said a word to him yet. He already feels like he’s made a new friend.

There’s one boy Victor didn’t introduce that’s made himself comfortable at the kitchenette table, slumped in his chair with hands shoved in his leopard print jacket. Yuuri vaguely remembers him as Victor’s younger brother; he’s just confused as to why he’s here when everyone else present fills the roles for the band.

Victor’s brother shoots Yuuri a dirty look. “The fuck you looking at?” he spits with extra venom.

“Nothin’!” Yuuri quickly responds, hands raised to show he means no harm. The younger boy clicks his tongue in annoyance and slumps in the chair even more, looking like he really doesn’t want to be here.

Victor gives a lazy wave of his hand in his brother’s direction. “That’s my little brother Yuri. You sorta met him. My mom didn’t want him cooped up in the house while she went out for breakfast with her friends so—” Victor shrugs, lips pursing tight. “Anyways, this is the band! Band, this is Yuuri, our talent for the video.”

“What does he do?” Otabek asks. His voice is deep. Yuuri is having a hard time believing he’s around their age.

“He’s the talent,” Victor repeats, like that’s more than enough of an answer. Since JJ and Leo nod their heads, it probably is.

“So the person that just walks around looking pretty for the camera while we play,” Seung-Gil fills in the blanks, sounding decidedly unimpressed. Yuuri flares red at that.

“No,” he blurs, then regrets it instantly because now everyone is looking at him waiting for his interpretation on what he’s supposed to do in the video. Which, fuck if he knows.

He starts to shift from left foot to right foot. “I-I can…dance…ballroom dance, but…it’s dancing…ballroom would look totally out of place in a rock music video, wouldn’t it? I’m not even good at ballroom dancing. I still step on people’s toes and waddle around like a fat penguin when I try to do a sidestep.”

He decides he’s going to shut up, and drops his head and hunches his shoulders. “But it’s nice to meet you,” he says to the wooden floor of his kitchen. His words are met with uncomfortable silence.

Victor clasps his hands together and whistles. “Well! How about we all sit down and hash out some things, yeah?” Victor says when it becomes obvious no one else is going to take the lead on this impromptu meeting. He turns to Yuuri, eyes sweet and sparkling. “You got a place where we can all sit?”

“Oh. Um. Actually, we could go downstairs to the dining hall. It’s a lot bigger than the den in here, and we could get some snacks,” Yuuri offers, because he really doesn’t remember if the den is up to standards for guests and he already sees Otabek inspecting the sink where he dumped his bowl of cereal so he does not want anyone else scrutinizing another inch of his home, his private area.

Yuuri awkwardly rocks from side to side. “So? Is that okay? I…I can find us some fruit pops?”

Guang-Hong turns to Leo, and lightly punches at his own jaw, eyebrows raised.
“You got fruit punch?” Leo then asks Yuuri and Yuuri blinks.

“Um, I think so?”

“Cool,” Leo says, nodding his head, glancing around at the other boys. “We’re down.”

Twenty minutes later, they’re seated at the far back table, away from other patrons so as not to disturb them. It doesn’t do much, since Victor and JJ talk with no indoor voice and Yuuri constantly feels the irritated eyes of the customers glancing at them every time JJ interrupts Victor or Victor makes a loud exclamation around his lemon ice pop.

“So, who’s available for Saturdays for rehearsal?” Victor asks, composition notebook open on the table, dotted with melted fruit pop syrup. The weekly calendar that Victor hastily drew up in multi-colored Sharpie currently lists the availability of all their members - aside from Yuuri, who has a star doodled next to his name and On call written beside it. He’s been staring at his name for the past five minutes.

“So, who’s available for Saturdays for rehearsal?” Victor asks, composition notebook open on the table, dotted with melted fruit pop syrup. The weekly calendar that Victor hastily drew up in multi-colored Sharpie currently lists the availability of all their members - aside from Yuuri, who has a star doodled next to his name and On call written beside it. He’s been staring at his name for the past five minutes.

“Saturdays are good with me,” Leo says with a shrug. “No Sundays though. My mom would kill me if she thinks I’m giving up Jesus Time to play the ‘Devil’s Music’,” he adds, air-quotes included. JJ nods his head at that, gesturing with his grape ice pop.

“Yeah, I can’t do Sundays either,” he says. Victor hums, taking the red Sharpie to draw a big ‘X’ through Sunday.

“Okay. No Sundays. But Saturday is good for everyone?”

“Saturday I work at the auto shop. My mom doesn’t want me to become a deadbeat drunk like my uncle, so work’s gotta come first,” Otabek mumbles around his orange ice pop. “But if you don’t mind, we could practice there on breaks. Good acoustics,” he says with a nod of his head.

“Sweet!” Victor chirps, and pencils that tidbit on Saturday. “Okay, so it looks like rehearsals every Wednesday after school and Saturday unless something comes up. Guang-Hong-" the boy sits up at attention, intently watching Victor’s lips, “in the meantime before we shoot the video, I need you to find a really good camera. Like, something that’ll make us look like the real deal.”

Guang-Hong signs a moment, Leo watching the movement of his hands.

“Most of it is editing, but I’ll try,” Leo translates. Victor beams, then reaches into his pocket and pulls out five bucks, a paper clip, and some lint, handing it off to Guang-Hong.

“That’s my share for the camera when you find one,” Victor offers. After a beat, the other boys start awkwardly turning out their pockets for some loose change to offer as a donation as well. Yuuri keeps his eyes averted as Guang-Hong quietly scoops all of the coins and crumpled dollar bills into his lap.

“…I’ll…have someone write a check for the remaining balance,” Yuuri offers, but he’s half-mumbling it so barely anyone around the table hears him. Leo leans back on his palms, glancing up at the paper lantern hanging above their table and the rustic walls of the dining hall.

“You’re not being mean or anything, but this isn’t at all what I thought your house would look like, Katsuki,” Leo says, rather astonished. “Like, I don’t know, I was thinking a million dollar mansion, or a two-million dollar mansion. Not… this.”
“But it’s nice!” Victor cuts in. “It’s cool that you live over an inn and you have a hot springs in your backyard!”

“What do your parents do?” JJ asks, leaning forward with the popsicle stick hanging from his mouth. “Like, does your mom do this for a hobby or something? No way she does this for a living when—”

“Can I say something?” Yuuri rushes out before he can properly think about it. He looks at each individual face, hands trembling in his lap. “If I’m going to be a part of this band, I don’t want to be treated differently. I - I don’t want to talk about what my parents do, or how do I afford such things, or why I don’t fit into some ‘snobby rich kid’ stereotype box you crafted for me without my consent. I - I get enough of it at school already so…” He starts to lose steam, his hands start to nervously fidget and claw at his knees. “I don’t want to be treated like this during a time when I just…wanna…be myself…and not think about those things…if you mind…”

It’s uncomfortably quiet around the table again. Yuuri feels like he just swallowed his entire right leg.

Seung-Gil closes his eyes and crosses his arms over his chest. “Whatever,” he grunts, “I could care less about what your personal life is like. So long as you’re not a detriment to the music video and needlessly get in the way.”

“I agree, but with a less harsh word choice,” Otabek responds. Yuri snorts, rolling around the popsicle stick in his mouth.

“O-Oh…okay then…good.” Yuuri wipes his sweaty palms on his thighs, keeping his eyes averted.

Victor scratches the back of his neck. “Any other questions or concerns?” he asks. JJ raises his hand.

“Can we name the band ‘King JJ and the Squires’? We could have kinda one of those medieval things going on, everyone would be wearing a crown but mine would be bigger—”

“That’s fucking stupid. Don’t ever suggest anything ever again,” Yuri snaps. JJ doesn’t seem the least bit fazed, leaning in close, hands framing around a space of air.

“Why does have to be you exactly?” Seung-Gil questions with a raised eyebrow. JJ leans back, puffing his chest out like a peacock preening its feathers for display.

“Because I’m the drummer. Everybody knows the drummer is the face of the band.”

“No, like, bands have a thing. I’m just saying our thing could be ‘King JJ and the Squires’.”

“No they’re not,” Victor interrupts, smile on his lips that looks more dry cut than sweet. “The frontman is. And we’re not naming the band ‘King JJ and the Squires’. It doesn’t fit with the kind of music we’re going to be playing.”

“What kind of music we’re going to be playing?” Otabek asks.


JJ looks like he’s been personally attacked, but he resumes sucking on the fruit pop without any further outbursts. Victor gives a lazy hand wave. “We’ll figure out sound and band names later after we put together our first single. So give me and Otabek a couple of days to hash something out and we’ll all meet up again to go over the video. Sound good?”

There’s scattered grunts of approval all around, everyone nodding their heads, twirling their half-eaten fruit pops in between their sticky fingers. Victor puffs up his chest, proud and confident. He
has his chin held up high, and his eyes shimmer with all the future possibilities of what these group of boys are going to provide.

He thrusts his hand forward towards the center. “Alright, bring it in!” he says. After a few seconds, Otabek layers his hand over Victor’s, then Leo and Guang-Hong, then JJ and Seung-Gil. Victor looks at Yuuri, tilting his head towards the stack of hands in the center. Yuuri gets the picture, and politely places his hands over the ridges of Seung-Gil’s knuckles, hoping his hands aren’t as clammy as he imagines them to be.

“I hereby dub this first band meeting to be officially over! Gentlemen, this is going to be the start of something amazing.” He says it with such earnesty, and Yuuri’s heart hurts a little just hearing how excited Victor sounds to be doing this. He wants this to work. He wants this to be good for Victor. He wants to have just as much fun and excitement for being a part of something. He's never been a part of something.

Hiroko comes by their table with some small hand wipes and bottles of cream soda, shortly after they do their little victory cheer that was just a confused noise because no one knew what they were supposed to say or if they were supposed to be in unison while saying it. Most of the boys take their bottles to go. And by 'most of the boys', it's all of the boys except for Yuri and Victor, who linger behind at the table.

"New friends?" Hiroko asks lightly, collecting the small bits of trash from other tables.

"Um, yeah. Sort of," Yuuri mumbles.

"We're in a band," Victor tells her. He sounds so proud; it's like a new father talking about his first born child. Hiroko giggles.

"A music man, how interesting," she coos, tucking a serving tray under her arm. "Yuuri, when you're done entertaining guests, could you help with the dishes in the back?"

"Y-Yeah. Sure thing," he responds, cheeks growing pink.

Hiroko smiles, gives a polite bow to Victor and Yuri, and then moves to tend to the customers sitting at the tables closer to the television. Victor leans back on his hands, trying to keep his side glances at Yuuri subtle. Yuuri takes a tentative sip from his bottle, awkwardly running his finger along the side where he feels a water droplet cascade down the neck.

"I won't be needed until you actually start filming, right?" Yuuri asks.

"Oh, yeah. Yeah, you don't...have to come to the rehearsals if you're too busy. I'll keep you updated on the song, though. And I'll send you a copy of it so you can learn the words," Victor says. There's a beat, then, "You ballroom dance?"

"J-Just a little. I'm...I'm not that good or anything. And ballet. But never with a partner. And it's been a while, like, since I was in elementary. I'm probably not any good at it anymore," Yuuri awkwardly laughs. Victor nods his head, thinking.

"Ballet and ballroom dance," he murmurs. "Okay then...I'm not much of a dancer. I know some folk dancing, cause my grandma - not the one with the Cadillac, my other one - she showed me some moves when she visited America last year."

“Really?” Yuuri muses. He’s never met his grandparents on his father’s side. He has fond memories of his maternal grandparents, however. He still receives a small tin of homemade cookies from his grandmother every birthday and Christmas.
Victor nods his head and he puffs up his chest, angling his chin upwards to expose the long, beautiful lines of his throat. “So, if you want to learn how to dance like ‘young strong man who seeks beautiful lady’,” he says, voice curling with a thick Yiddish accent and a wrinkle of his nose, “I am your man.”

Yuuri laughs into his hand, hiding his smile behind his fingers. “I’ll keep that in mind,” he says. Victor smiles, and scoots in a little bit closer to Yuuri.

“I hope you will,” he says. His voice is soft again, hopeful. There’s a tickle in Yuuri’s throat again. He doesn’t try to clear it away with a cough this time around.

Yuri sits upright, clicking his tongue. "I'm hungry . When are we going to leave?" he complains.

"Oh! We have a special here that's really good!” Yuuri enthuses, eyes bright. He looks between both boys, rising to his feet with a flushing face. "I can ask the chef to prepare some for you, i-if you want."

“Sure!” Victor answers before Yuri can profess he doesn’t want any. Yuuri nods his head, hurrying out the dining hall and into the kitchen where there’s a stack of dishes in the sink and Kaede and his mother are standing around the stove preparing a meal.

“Can we get three pork cutlet bowls to our table, please?” Yuuri asks his mother. She smiles at him, and rubs her hands together as she nods her head.

“Of course! Three Yu-topia specialties coming right up!” she chirps, heading around the kitchen island to prep the ingredients. Kaede gives a respectful bow to Yuuri per the normal greeting, but bristles when she gets a good look at Yuuri’s face.

“Your Highness,” she begins, voice alarmed, “your face is very red and you’re sweating.”

Yuuri puts fingertips to his cheeks. “H-Huh?”

“Are you coming down with something? Do you need me to prepare you some tea?”

“N-No, I - I’m fine. I’m - I’m just a little hot, that’s all. I’ll just...wash these dishes here and take a quick shower. I’m fine. Totally fine,” Yuuri says, giving two thumbs up to better illustrate how totally fine he is. Hiroko is giggling from her spot at the kitchen island, lightly seasoning the cutlets. Kaede bows out of respect more than compliance, and goes back to finishing the stew with a frown on her lips.

Yuuri fills up the wash basin with cold water, watching the stream of water pour from the faucet as he grabs some soap and a sponge. When the water is about halfway full, he removes his glasses and slips them into his back pocket. Then, he turns off the faucet, grabs both sides of the basin, and dunks his face into the water for five seconds.

He whips his head back, water flying with the sudden movement, and gasps for air. He wipes at his eyes with the sleeves of his sweater, then wipes his hands on his thighs and hisses in a breath of air. When Yuuri glances over his shoulder, Kaede and Hiroko are looking at him with expressions of concern and amusement.

Yuuri gives a weak smile and lightly punches the air. “Alriiiight, time to wash these dishes.”
On Instagram, Phichit has posted a selfie with him and Luke seated in one of the grungy booths at The Rock, both sharing a brownie sundae. Luke’s got his arm around Phichit’s shoulders, and Phichit’s smile seems a bit bigger on his face than normal.

Yuuri likes the post, then exits out to scroll through YouTube while he lounges in his bed after his shower. He doesn’t get a chance to watch a video, since Victor’s number immediately flashes up onto the screen, accompanied with a picture of Victor’s poodle Yuuri saved on his phone.

“Hello?” Yuuri answers, placing the call on speaker.

“Hi!” Victor chirps. “Are you busy right now?”

“Why? Are you outside my room?”

“I might be.”

“Well, that’s unfortunate, since I just got out of the shower and I don’t intend on entertaining any guests for the evening,” Yuuri says, feigning an exaggerated yawn. His joke is met with silence on the other line, and Yuuri immediately begins to backpedal. “N-Not that I wouldn’t mind entertaining you. I just-”

“O-Oh, no. That’s not - I - I was just thinking about something, that’s all.”

“Oh. Okay,” Yuuri says, cheeks red. “...So...what did you want to talk about?”

“I got some of the song written. Music too. But it might change, it’s just something I came up with for now.”

“Already? That’s impressive.”

Victor chuckles. “I gotta strike when inspiration does. Do you want to hear a little bit of it?”

Yuuri places his phone on his pillow beside him, turning towards it as he does so.

“Sure, I don’t mind. But I feel like I should warn you, I’m not a rock and roll expert so-”

“It’s fine. I just want you to get a feel for the lyrics. See if you like how they flow.”

“Well, what’s the song about?”

There’s another bout of silence. “Well...it’s kind of like...a love song. But it isn’t going to be slow or anything. No ballads. Not right now.”

“...Okay...”

“You know when you see someone at like, a party or something? And you don’t know this person and they don’t know you, but...they’re just beautiful. And they can be anything to you, your new best friend or your new flame and you...you want to know everything you can about them.”

“I see...and...I’m supposed to be the ‘someone’, right?”

“Yeah.”

Yuuri feels his heart hitch up in his chest. “Oh...I...um...that’s really sweet of you.”
“...O-Oh, this - the song isn’t about you.” Victor says. It’s unconvincing.

“Oh.”

“That would be weird. Writing a song about you when we don’t even know each other that well. No, this - this is like a tribute song, you know? Has a bit of The Cure influence, New Romantics, stuff like that.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. But, you are the ‘someone’ in the video.”

“What's the song called?” Yuuri asks, pinching at the fabric of his bedsheets.

“Everything About You. Still a working title though.”

“I like it,” Yuuri says. There’s some shuffling on Victor’s end, like the boy is trying to get something arranged that Yuuri can’t see.

“Can you still hear me?” he asks. He sounds a bit fainter, more far away.

“Sort of?”

“I’ll play you the first verse, the bridge and the chorus. Afterwards, feel free to give me your thoughts on it.”

Yuuri sits upright in his bed, hugging his knees to his chest. “Alright, I’ll do my best,” he assures. He can’t see it, but he somehow feels Victor is smiling at him. He visualizes it clear as day, a heart-shaped smile and blueblue eyes sparkling just for Yuuri.

A guitar chord rings through the phone’s static, and Yuuri feels warmth blanket him in an instant.

On Wednesday, the student body representatives put up the banner counting down the days till homecoming, and announces who will be in the running for homecoming king and queen. Phichit is the only one that Yuuri knows, so he automatically gets his vote.

"You should go," Phichit tells Yuuri as they watch one of the female nominees begin her campaign by intermingling with the freshmen getting on the bus. She’s one of those cheerleader types: big and beautiful golden ringlets for hair, perky in the right places, and knows how to accessorize with makeup. The nerdy freshmen are practically eating out of her hand.

"No thanks," Yuuri says. Phichit pouts.

"Yuuuuuuuriiiiiiii , you've never been to a high school dance before! This is going to be your one and only chance to experience a homecoming football game and dance!” Phichit exclaims. Yuuri bites the inside of his cheek, holding tight to the strap of his messenger bag.

He knows this is his last year to actually make something of a high school experience. He’s thought about joining a club, but nothing’s really caught his interest. He was in lacrosse freshman year, but he doubts he’ll be able to talk Minako into letting him join a sport where a majority of players knock the shit out of each other with sticks and shoulder checks.
Dances...Yuuri’s never thought about dances.

“Who would even be my date?” Yuuri asks.

“You can go stag. Or hang out with me in my homecoming court,” Phichit offers, lightly bumping into Yuuri as they head down the steps towards the waiting Benz and Watanabe standing outside the open passenger door.

Yuuri allows for Phichit to slide in first. He tosses his bag inside, about to slide in beside his friend, before Watanabe holds out his hand to stop Yuuri and points at something behind him.

“I think that boy is trying to give you something,” Watanabe says. Yuuri turns, seeing Guang-Hong hurrying down the steps, notebook in his grasp and stumbling over his own two feet. He skids to a stop, giving a hurried wave ‘hello’ that Yuuri politely reciprocates.

Guang-Hong then hands Yuuri his notebook, a quick note written out on the first page.

Hi! ( *^ワ^* )

Victor wanted to know if you were going to come to rehearsals today. Also, I wanted to know if you would be interested in going camera shopping this weekend since you seem pretty close to Victor and I have no idea what he wants tbh.

“Oh!” Yuuri gasps, glancing at Watanabe, then back to Guang-Hong. “Oh, no. I - I can’t come to the rehearsals today. I...have...things. But I can do the camera shopping! Although, I don’t even know what the music video is supposed to look like.”

Guang-Hong nods his head, then reaches into his overcrowded backpack to fish out a pencil and also a crumpled up piece of paper.

He hands the piece of paper to Yuuri first, who then proceeds to stare at it in bewilderment. Guang-Hong gestures for Yuuri to turn the paper over and he does, seeing various scribbles of...

“Oh...” Yuuri hums, turning the paper over again as if he’s missing something. He sees that it’s a worksheet actually, a Spanish quiz taken by one Victor Nikiforov. He’s godawful at conjugating.

Guang-Hong takes back the notebook and writes a quick sentence, handing it back to Yuuri when he’s done.

Ideas for the video. Victor gave it to me in passing period. Told me to throw something together based off of it. Hence (⊂_⊂;;)

“Jeez,” Yuuri sighs, looking at the scribbles again. He can’t even make out what they’re supposed to be. One of the scribbles looks like they’re doing an arabesque; that, or they’ve got an alien tentacle that is bursting out of their stomach. He sincerely hopes the scribble isn’t supposed to be him.

Yuuri puffs up his cheeks and sags his shoulders. “Well, we’re both relegated to video work
anyways, so we should try and help each other out. Make sense of his madness,” Yuuri says with a little smile, and folds up the note to slip into his pocket. "Do I have your phone number?" he then asks, making a texting gesture with his hands.

Guang-Hong understands, and pulls his phone free from the side pocket of his backpack. Yuuri smiles at the the small teddy bear charm dangling from the phone as the other boy exchanges it, inputting his phone number in Yuuri's contacts while Yuuri does the same in Guang-Hong's.

"Text me a time that you want to meet up and I'll pencil it in," Yuuri says with a wave of his hand. "Nice talking to you," he says as he begins to climb into the car, then pauses. "...Um:"

Guang-Hong shrugs it off, like it's something he's used to. He waves goodbye to Yuuri and with that, hurriedly dashes back up the stairs and inside the school.

When Yuuri finally gets inside the car, Phichit scoots in close beside him, eyes curious. "What did he want?" he asks as Watanabe rounds the car and gets into the driver's seat.

"Something about the band," Yuuri says, pulling free the note and unfurling it to study its drawings. “Victor’s already putting together ideas for the music video. They’re having their first practice session, but I can’t stay because of lessons .”

“Already? He’s moving pretty fast,” Phichit muses aloud.

“Yeah. He’s a guy that makes things happen, I guess. Maybe he should become a prince of a far off nation. He’d probably get a lot of things done efficiently,” Yuuri hums. He then adds, “Hypothetically speaking.”

Watanabe glances at him in the rear-view mirror, but ultimately decides not to comment.

“I bet if you were a hypothetical prince of a hypothetical nation, you’d be pretty awesome. Just saying,” Phichit says with a shrug.

“Let us get away from this conversation about princes, shall we?” Watanabe asks, turning on the radio. Yuuri gives a side-eye towards Phichit, and mouths ‘ Later ’. Phichit complies, and relaxes into the leather of his seat, enjoying the ride.

Yuuri goes back to the paper, looking at the intricacies of Victor’s sloppy doodling. He’s got to admire Victor’s creativity; some of these drawings look very extravagant. A little bit too extravagant to be replicated in real life, but he digresses. There’s something rather charming about these little drawings, another little facet of Victor that Yuuri is excitedly discovering.

He smiles as his eyes roam the page, taking in each drawing, trying to figure out what they mean or what Victor’s vision is, and tries to picture himself in each one no matter how ridiculous the doodle itself looks.

But then, he pauses on one doodle tucked in the bottom right hand corner, just underneath where Victor’s Spanish teacher left her notes on his poor performance for the quiz.

It’s hard to make out with the writing overlay, but it’s still by far the clearest doodle that’s on the page: two faceless figures - one of them with long hair - holding each other. There’s no detail aside from the hair on one of them, but how their heads are drawn so close in together, Yuuri’s mind starts to fill in the blanks.

Two figures in a loving embrace, sharing their first tender kiss just as the video ends and the guitar fades into silence.
"Little Shop of Horrors" is a 1982 musical with a 1986 musical adaption. One of the characters, Audrey II - a sentient plant - is usually a set of constructed puppets.
Minako stares at the mess of scribbles on the back of the Spanish quiz for a good minute. Then, she laughs. “What is this, a comic book?” she asks, placing the note down on the desk. Yuuri sucks his bottom lip in between his teeth, rocking back onto the heels.

“It’s ah, it’s ideas for the music video. Work in progress stuff. Kinda…spitballing things, you know? I just - um - you know - wanted you to know that we’re going to start working on the video and…things…”

“What’s this one that looks like two people kissing?” Minako dryly points out, tapping the corner doodle with the tip of her fountain pen. Yuuri bristles. “Oh. That one is…um…you know, this is all beginner stage stuff, and it’s not like we really know what the doodles are supposed to be so - you know - maybe it could be something else. Like…two friends…giving each other…platonic nose kisses?”

“You’re not ‘bro-ing’ any of this,” Minako says, looking at the doodle. “This just reeks of ulterior motives.”

“Ulterior motives? He’s a high schooler. Not some criminal mastermind attempting to assassinate the image of the crown prince,” Yuuri says unabashedly. Minako relaxes in her chair, tapping her chin. “But why you? I’m sure there’s other people he could have asked to be in the video, but he singled you out. And with Maehara’s reports of some little shits antagonizing you outside of your speech class-”

“It’s fine. I’m fine. There’s nothing wrong,” Yuuri stresses. Minako sighs, unconvinced. She steeps her long fingers, a pink diamond ring on her index finger that catches the slivers of sunlight peeking through the window by her desk.

“It just seems…sketch,” Minako states, and sighs again. “When are you shooting this thing and where?”

“Don’t know yet. But I’m going camera shopping this Saturday at the mall with the guy that’s going to be filming so-“ Yuuri shrugs his shoulders, pursing his lips as he finds something to look at other than Minako’s skeptical raise of her well-lined eyebrows.

The woman gets up from her desk and moves around it. “Well, I’ll let your father know that there’ll be an interruption in your lessons. But I’m also going to ask for more information about your little Guillermo del Toro and his rock and roll horror picture show. Because if this in any way some sort
of practical joke to make a fool out of you then—"

“It’s not. I’m sixteen, I’m not stupid,” Yuuri huffs in frustration. He busies himself with staring at his feet, his black shoes worn out and scuffed at the tips; improper for a prince, but does fine for a high school boy.

“…I know you’re not. You’re brilliant, Yuuri,” Minako says. Her voice has a softer edge around her words. It’s a kind of voice she doesn’t normally use, she’s never been one to coddle Yuuri or fluff him up just because he is her future prince. Yet, her eyes sparkle with fondness as she looks at him, a smile curling on her lips. “…Okay. We’ll drop the matter for now. If you are going to be a prince, then I as your advisor can only suggest. In the end, your word is the final go, and I will support your decision.”

Yuuri doesn’t speak at that. He puffs his cheeks up again as he holds his breath, then blows a raspberry as he lets all of that air go.

Minako claps her hands. “So! Onto lessons! You brought your dance shoes?”

“In my Nike bag.”

“Go and fetch them. I’ll be waiting for you in the ballroom,” Minako says, lightly pinching Yuuri’s cheek as she departs from her office. Yuuri sighs, shoulders slumping as he takes the doodle paper back into his hands. He carefully folds it into a small square, placing it in the inner pocket of his school blazer, before he briskly walks out the office to grab his things.

Yuuri meets Guang-Hong at the mall’s food court Saturday in the afternoon. He is accompanied by two bodyguards, both identical in face and stature and hairstyle. He thinks they’re twins. They insist they aren’t.

Guang-Hong greets him with a big smile and handshake, adjusting his grip on his backpack when he feels it slipping down his shoulder. Yuuri gestures to his bodyguards, who are already getting a couple of curious stares from various diners seated at the tables around them.

“Um, I hope you don’t mind that I have company with me. My parents are just…they’re really into security,” Yuuri says with a wince. Guang-Hong nods his head in understanding and offers to shake the hands of the two men as well out of politeness.

With a gesture of his head, Guang-Hong leads them to the escalators. He’s tapping away at something on his phone, and it’s only when Yuuri gets a text message that he sees Guang-Hong’s eyes twinkle with friendly gaiety.

>>You mind if we talk like this?

> oh no :D it’s fine

>>The first rehearsal was really good! o(^▽^)o I videotaped some of it in case u wanna see

>Sure. Maybe when we take a break from shopping. Did Victor give you any more…notes?

They reach the top of the escalator and quietly move off to the side towards the railing that overlooks
the food court. Guang-Hong hands his phone to Yuuri, a text conversation with Victor open.

---

>>you know romeo and juliet? that movie with leonardo di caprio?

> yeah???

>>i want that

>>that feeling when they first see each other

>>that's how this song is

---

Yuuri furrows his eyebrows. “He told me that this wasn’t supposed to be a ballad,” he says. He feels his hands growing sweaty at the thought; he remembers very clearly freshman English and the girls loudly swooning over the romantics of Romeo and Juliet.

Guang-Hong makes a gesture with his hand, his palm ghosting around the shape of his face before he sharply pinches the air with all his fingers. Yuuri stares at Guang-Hong for a beat, then his lips form an ‘oh’. “Oh…so like…the look? That’s what he’s going after?” Yuuri asks for clarification.

Guang-Hong nods his head ‘yes’.

“How are we supposed to replicate that?”

Guang-Hong shrugs.

Yuuri groans and hands Guang-Hong back his phone, resuming their text conversation.

> Maybe we can ask around in the store. They’re supposed to be experts on this sort of thing

---

Guang-Hong gives Yuuri a smile, one that clearly says ‘god, I hope so cause if not, we’re screwed’.

They walk casually, side by side, conversing through text messages and stickers and kaomojis. They make playful guesses as to what the music video is supposed to be about; right now, Guang-Hong is positive the music video is going to be some sort of space opera where there’s a tentacle monster that can only be stopped by the power of rock. It sounds convoluted, and way out of a high school boy’s budget.

The video store is located in between a Hot Topic and a Journey’s. It looks out of place, like a relic undisturbed that teen culture grew around. One of Yuuri’s bodyguards volunteers to stand outside and watch the front, while the other accompanies the two teenagers inside.

It smells musty, old like the linen in his grandfather’s closet that his mother never completely airs out. There’s a wall of cameras to Yuuri’s right and then recording equipment to his left. At the center of the store, there’s a display for cheaply priced video cameras. He immediately heads to the display first while Guang-Hong lingers around the microphones.

“…Can I ask for your opinion on something?” Yuuri quietly asks his bodyguard as they circle around the display, pinching at each individual price tag.

“Yes, sir.”

“…So…there’s this person that is doing something for another person. And, it’s not like they have the full idea of what the thing that they’re doing together is, but there may be some kissing. And the person, they’ve never kissed anyone before. So, a part of them isn’t sure about it because they want
their first kiss to be something special and not for...the thing. But the other part of them doesn’t want to disappoint the other person because they volunteered to do this and - you know, it would be bad to nitpick away at their ideas when nothing is set in stone yet, and maybe this person is just overthinking things like they always do and there isn’t any kissing in the final product and that would be fine but...it’s not like this person wouldn’t mind kissing the other person. They...they’re really kissable.”

“...Hm.”

Yuuri feels the tips of his ears burn. “...Actually, can you please forget everything I just said right now?” he asks.

“As you wish, sir.”

“Thank you.”

Guang-Hong comes over to Yuuri with some recording equipment in his grasp, expression unsure if they really need any of it. They circle around the display again, inspecting the cameras and fiddling with the special features. Guang-Hong films five-second clips of Yuuri with each device, then both boys judge the footage before moving onto the next one while Yuuri’s bodyguard discreetly deletes the footage.

At the counter, Yuuri sees the store clerk watching them closely. He’s an older man, with big square glasses and a yellow shirt stained with pizza grease from the food court, and he looks like he wants to snap at them for picking up and putting down all the cameras they can get their hands on, but the presence of Yuuri’s guard is making him bite his tongue.

“I kinda like this one,” Yuuri murmurs, turning a camera around in his hands. “It’s not that heavy and doesn’t look too difficult to master. How things are going now, he’d probably want you to be able to film something really quickly and throw it all together at the drop of a dime.”

Guang-Hong winces at the thought and nods his head in agreement.

They wander around and pick out a camera bag and a tripod since Guang-Hong’s mom decided to chip in forty bucks for their music video essentials. Apparently, she’s elated Guang-Hong is making more friends outside of just Leo. Yuuri’s sure his mother feels the same way about himself.

When they approach the counter with their things, another man rushes to cut in front of them and place his things on the counter first.

“Bag these up for me,” he tells the clerk, fishing his wallet out of the deep pockets of his trench coat. Yuuri cradles the video camera to his chest, a small crease forming in between the furrow of his eyebrows.

“Would you like me to remove him, sir?” his bodyguard whispers.

“No. We’ll...just wait...”

The man has more photography gear than video camera gear. High powered telephoto lenses and bags to carry them all. He’s grinning at the clerk as he gets a few hundred dollar bills out of the bifold. “They say that viscount visiting the country is supposed to be meeting with some prince,” he brags to the clerk that honestly doesn’t give a shit. Yuuri visibly stiffens in his spot.

“Is that so?” the clerk mumbles.
“No one’s got a photo of him. No one even knows what he looks like. But News Quarterly is offering five grand for a shot and I can’t just ignore money like that, you know? He can’t be too far from wherever the viscount goes.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

Yuuri’s phone buzzes in his back pocket. He hands the video camera to his bodyguard so he can check the text notification from Guang-Hong on his screen.

>>Wow 5k bet if we had a picture we could DEF pay for a space opera music video

Yuuri sees Guang-Hong smiling beside him, cheeks a rosy hue. Yuuri tries to smile back, and he’s sure it looks just as fake and forced as it feels on his lips.

The paparazzo pays for his equipment and rudely bumps past Yuuri as he leaves. His bodyguard watches the man, eyes hidden behind his aviator shades but a scowl on his lips.

“Um, just these,” Yuuri tells the clerk as they set their video camera equipment down. The clerk looks at Yuuri, then at the bodyguard, then at the video camera equipment. He sniffs and scratches at his belly before he starts ringing up each item and placing them in a discreet black plastic bag.

The grand total is six hundred. The band and Guang-Hong’s mother combined contribution is eighty dollars and forty-two cents. Yuuri’s bodyguard hands the clerk a Visa to take care of the rest.

There’s another ping from Guang-Hong.

>>tell your parents that we really appreciate them doing this! I can ask my dad to give them some complimentary sausages from his butcher shop on Cantabury if they’re interested!

“O-Oh, it’s no problem,” Yuuri tells the other boy with a wave of his hand. Guang-Hong smiles big at him, and Yuuri feels something warm in his chest.

It’s a feeling he hasn’t experienced in a while. It harkens to the moment that Phichit first sat down at his lunch table in freshman year when he was still plump and didn’t know of his true heritage. The sparkle in Guang-Hong’s eyes is like the sparkle in Phichit’s then. It’s an exciting little shimmer, one that speaks of possibilities for a future where this sort of thing can be the norm between them, smiling at each other and conversing through emojis. It’s hopeful.

When they emerge out of the camera shop, Yuuri’s other bodyguard quietly assumes his place beside his prince. Guang-Hong gives a glance at him, then taps at a spot just above his chest, smiling big. Yuuri only understands when he sees two enamel pins against the stark black material of his bodyguard’s collar - one a slice of pizza and the other a golden revolver.

“I like those pins,” Yuuri compliments. His bodyguard nods his head.

“They were on sale,” he notes, pointing at a small sign hanging in the Hot Topic window. After a beat, he withdraws a small plastic bag from his pocket. “Would you like some, sir?”

Yuuri takes the bag into his hands, opening it up so Guang-Hong can take a look in it as well, before holding it at his side. “Thank you,” he says and rocks back onto his heels, tapping his thumbs against the screen of his phone.

>Wanna grab a bite to eat?

>we can get some nachos to share?
Yuuri blanches. “Oh.”

They put in a Hot Dog on a Stick. I think they still got a buy two sticks get two free deal going. And funnel cake fries!

“Oh. We can do that,” Yuuri says, nodding his head. Nothing can ever make him regret eating funnel cake fries.

Guang-Hong beams, and it’s like the sun. Yuuri beams back, and he feels at ease.

Victor stops Yuuri in the hallway before he can leave the school, a gentle hand on his shoulder and smelling of quickly spritzed body spray.

“Can I take you out for pie again?” he asks. Yuuri looks at the little hair clips dotting Victor’s silver locks, pinning the wispy strays of his hair down. They shimmer in the sunlight, a pretty hue of neon sparkling colors. A part of Yuuri wants to pull each one from Victor’s head and watch the way his hair falls into his face like melted starlight.

“…Hm?”

“You. Me. Pie.”

“Oh!” Yuuri gasps, blush reddening on his cheeks. “Um, sure. Sure we can have some pie,” he says with a breathy laugh, smiling. He squeezes the strap of his messenger bag and draws it closer to his quickly beating heart. “So, um, I need to let Watanabe know you’re going to be coming with us but I’m sure-”

“Actually, I was wondering if…if I could take you to the pie shop.”

Victor Nikiforov doesn’t have a shy voice. He speaks proud and he speaks without fear. Yuuri admires that about him; it makes him get a little bit jealous that Victor feels so comfortable in his voice and his skin, compared to Yuuri who always feels like his voice is something he’s trying on, and it fits wrong in every ugly nook and crevice of his person.

Yet, Victor is watching him through the length of his eyelashes, and there’s a sparkle of worry in his blues that Yuuri doesn’t understand why it exists.

Yuuri looks over his shoulder at his guard who is watching the exchange behind the lenses of his aviator shades. “Um…I don’t think Watanabe will allow me to ride with you again after the whole-“

“Oh. Yeah.” Victor scratches at the back of his head, pouting. “…But what if I’m not driving my Nana’s car?”

Yuuri’s head cocks to the side. “How are we going to get to the pie shop if we’re not driving?”

He gets his answer in the form of Victor taking him by the hand and leading him out of the back entrance doors, past raised brows and curious eyes that watch them as they enter the student parking lot and meander over to the bike rack.
Victor stops next to a bike that has decals all over its cherry red painted body. There’s a beat up queen of hearts card in the spokes of the front wheel. The seat is worn down and already has a bit of stuffing coming out of the side. Victor gestures two hands out towards it and smiles his heart-shaped grin.

“Ta-da!” he exclaims.

Yuuri stares at the bike for a beat. Behind him, his bodyguard is discreetly laughing into the palm of his hand.

Victor rubs the back of his neck. “I mean, I know it’s not a Mulsanne or a BMW or…a limo or anything. But, it’s a good bike. It gets me where I want to go and I want to take you for a spin to the pie shop on it,” he professes.

“…But there’s only one seat.”

“You can ride on the handlebars,” Victor offers. He gives them a pat as he says this. The handlebars are heavily wrapped up with duct tape and have decals on the grips. Yuuri’s head falls into a confused tilt to the left and questions the stability of this entire bike.

“Our apologies, civilian, but Mr. Katsuki has lessons that he needs to attend to,” his bodyguard announces, gloved hands folded in front of him and shoulders squared back to give off an intimidating image.

“Uh, my name is Victor, actually.” Victor holds out his hand towards the man, the heart-shaped smile on his lips a little bit lopsided with unease. The guard stares at Victor’s hand, unmoving. After an awkward beat, Victor pulls his hand back to his side and whistles a flat note. “Well…I guess we’ll just do a raincheck on the pie,” he says with a laugh that’s hollow in his lungs.

Yuuri winces at the sound, wringing the strap of his messenger bag in his right fist. Victor nods his head and swings a leg over his bike, planting himself down on the seat. “I’ll text you later,” he says with a smile, bracing one foot against the pedal.

“W-Wait,” Yuuri stammers, holding out his hands to keep Victor from pedaling away. He looks over his shoulder at his bodyguard, pulling his lower lip in between his teeth. “…Can I propose a compromise?”

_Tell me what you like_

_We can talk while I take you for a ride_

_Passing by underneath the city lights_

_I’ll meet where you are, don’t hide_

“Watch the bump,” Victor announces and Yuuri’s hands tightly clutch at the bar he’s sitting on underneath.

Victor’s bike bounces when he gets off the curb and back into the streets, riding carefully alongside
the cars. There’s a wind current gently whistling against Yuuri’s face and his ear that isn’t housing an earbud that plays Victor’s voice singing amid a chorus of guitars and drums.

“How do you like it?” he asks. Yuuri can’t see his face behind him, yet he knows Victor is smiling and happy as a fucking clam.

“How do you like it?”

“Both.”

Yuuri smiles, listening to the harmonies of Leo and Seung-Gil as the song swells into a guitar solo. “I like it,” he says. And after a beat, when Victor turns the corner and cruises into the bike lane with ease, he adds, “And your driving isn’t that bad either. I’m not too heavy, am I?”

“Nah. It’s like carrying a beautiful sack of feathers,” Victor says without a moment’s hesitation. Yuuri is thankful that Victor can’t see how red he’s getting in his face, but he’s sure that the tips of his ears are burning scarlet underneath the wisps of his locks blowing in the wind.

When they pull up to the stop light Yuuri uses the time to give a sparing glance over his shoulder, not necessarily to look at Victor and his cheeky little grin.

The BMW is still monitoring them from a safe distance, following not too close behind that Yuuri starts to feel uncomfortable and embarrassed, but not so far away that Victor can just run off with the prince on his trusty red bike.

Watanabe waves at him from behind the wheel and Yuuri gives a small wave of his hand back. Victor turns to wave at Watanabe too, just because. Watanabe gestures for Victor to pay attention to the road.

“He hates me, doesn’t he?” Victor asks.

Yuuri laughs. “No, he’s just…protective. They’re all just doing their job, making sure that I’m safe. I… I don’t really interact with other kids at the school, aside from Phichit. I mean, me and socializing, talking with people is just… blegh.”

“You’re talking to me just fine,” Victor says.

“Well, you’re different.”

“How?”

“I don’t know… you just are…” Yuuri’s heart is starting to beat fast in his chest. It doesn’t hurt to breathe, but it’s hard to swallow.

“Oh.” Victor’s quiet for a beat. They go over another bump in the road. The song in Yuuri’s ear goes quieter as Victor’s voice gently sings the end. It sounds so intimately close, almost like Victor is whispering against the shell of Yuuri’s ear. There’s a heat that begins to bloom from Yuuri’s chest like a rose opening wide and proud; it spreads up to his face and he feels a shiver come out by the way his toes curl in his shoes.

“…Left here, please,” Yuuri directs. Victor makes the turn, and Yuuri catches a glimpse of Victor’s long hair trailing after him in the wind.

“So, what about homecoming? Does that count as ‘ blegh ’?” Victor pipes up as they pass by a Dairy Queen.
"I never been to a homecoming dance. Or...any dance for that matter," Yuuri says, voice quiet and embarrassed.

Victor gives a gasp. "You've been deprived of seeing Mr. Karpisek and Mr. Cialdini trying to get everyone to do the Cha Cha Slide at every school dance then," he whispers. Yuuri smiles and he choke out a laugh. His cheeks are burning, but the sensation is growing sweeter, a little bit dizzying.

"How come you've never gone to a dance? You can dance, right?" Victor asks.

"I just never thought about going to one," Yuuri says, glancing up at the sky. "I'm not the kind that likes to get all dressed up for something. I probably wouldn't even dance much if I were there. Plus, I'd be surrounded by security all night and it will be awkward so..." Yuuri shrugs, "homecoming would be a blegh from me."

Victor's response isn't immediate. When he does speak, it's a quiet, "Oh."

They don't speak for the rest of the bike ride.

Victor gets to the consulate long after the demo of the band's song has ended and Victor's iPhone shuffles through the first two tracks of his seventies rock playlist. He stops in front of the iron gates, allowing Yuuri to hop off the handlebars as the BMW parks alongside the curb.

"It's a long way from your house. I can make arrangements for someone to drive you home," Yuuri offers, suddenly feeling a little guilty.

Victor handwaves it away. "It's alright. It's good exercise," he says with a heart-shaped smile, giving a glance at the facade of the consulate. "Pretty cool that you get private tutoring at some diplomat office."

Yuuri nervously laughs, sounding like a seal choking on a fish bone. "Oh. Yeah. My parents. They're...super big on good education...and things."

Victor nods his head like he understands. His hands lightly grip at the handlebar, straightening the joints in his fingers as he curls them. "So, we have a band meeting next Saturday, at the car garage. Can you make it?" he asks.

Yuuri nods his head. "Yeah, I'll be there," he says, turning his head as Watanabe exits the car with both of their backpacks. Yuuri's other bodyguard quietly informs security of their arrival. Shortly after, the steel gates begin to open.

Watanabe hands Victor his backpack. "Thank you for delivering him to the consulate safe and sound," he tells Victor. Victor gives an eager nod of his head as he takes his bag and slips his arms into the strap loops.

"You know, I don't mind giving Yuuri a ride on my bike from time to time. You can have some free time to...get yourself some coffee...or something," Victor says, smiling a little bit too hard.

Watanabe folds his hands in front of him. "No," he says, and that's the end of that.

He gestures to the consulate, glancing over at Yuuri. "Minako is waiting," he says. Yuuri nods his head, turning to give a polite bow of his head to Victor.

"Thank you for the bike ride," he says, bringing his hands together. "Hopefuly next time, we can go out for pie instead."
Victor nods his head, and there's something oddly solemn in his eyes. He's thinking, but Yuuri doesn't know what. His smile on his lips delicately holds a veneer of complacency at the corners of his mouth. It rubs Yuuri the wrong way.

"Sure," he says, pushing off with his left foot. "See you Saturday."

He doesn't give Yuuri time to say goodbye in response, hurriedly pedaling around the corner westbound. Yuuri watches him depart, a tension in between his shoulder blades that burns uncomfortably at the apex of his spine.

"What did you and Juke Box Hero talk about on your bike ride?" Watanabe asks Yuuri as they walk up the pathway to the consulate.

"Um, well he played me a demo of the song. It's really good. I like it."

"Mmm-hmm."

"And he asked me about homecoming and I told him I wasn't interested in going to dances. They're not really my thing, you know?" Yuuri says with a shrug.

"...I see."

Yuuri pauses in the doorway, eyebrows furrowing. "...Did...did I say something wrong?" he asks. Watanabe gently rests his hand on Yuuri's shoulder and continues to lead him inside.

"Not if you don't think so, Your Highness."

Yuuri blinks. "...Oh...okay then."

Otabek works in a car garage north of Perdue. The blue paint is chipping off the walls and the front is marked with graffiti. Next to a park bench, there's a food stall vendor selling fruit out of a dubious ice chest. Watanabe has two men circle around the perimeter before he allows Yuuri to exit the car.

Inside the car garage, it smells of motor oil and exhaust from a rusty tailpipe. There are two mechanics working on the engine of a '72 Mustang, both men giving curious looks as Yuuri crosses the work floor with Watanabe two steps behind him.

The band is tucked away in a corner of the garage next to the manager's office, all huddled together in a circle with their backpacks off to the side. Victor jumps up to his feet when he sees Yuuri approach, stumbling over JJ to go and greet him.

"You're here!" he chirps and Yuuri blinks.

"Of course I am, I said I'd be here."

"Yeah I know but...I don't know. I'm just glad that you are," Victor says with a smile. Yuuri smiles back, cheeks tinting pink as he tucks a lock of hair behind his ear.

"So, I didn't miss anything, did I?"

"He wouldn't let us start until you showed up," Seung-Gil points out, eyebrows furrowed. "You're
late."

Yuuri bristles at the tone. "I - I'm sorry. There was...we just had to do a quick security check."

"This area is pretty safe," Otabek pipes up. "We had a bum show up with a switchblade once, but it's been like...two weeks since that happened."

"But we're not here to talk about that," Victor quickly cuts in, watching the way Watanabe starts to square his shoulders back. "We're here to talk about the band. And the video."

The teenager makes a gesture to the manager's office. "Gentlemen, if you please," he says, and the rest of the boys rise up to their feet, grabbing their things.

One of the mechanics shouts from behind the Mustang's hood, "Twenty minutes, Altin! And don't touch my stuff!" Otabek gives him a thumbs up as Victor ushers everyone inside, closing the door shut behind him.

The office smells like cigarettes. There's a window that gives a view of the garage outside, yellow curtains framing it with dust at the top. The mahogany desk is cluttered with junk mail and invoices. If Yuuri squints his eyes, he can see the corner of a *Playboy* underneath the electricity bill.

Victor takes his seat at the manager's desk, taking out his notebook. "Okay, so, the concept of what I'm thinking about for the music video is something big. Like, with a story and everything, not just us standing around looking cool and playing instruments," he explains, steeping his fingertips. "We all know Queen, right?"

"I don't know any queens," Yuuri hurriedly denies.

"I think he's talking about the band, Sir," Watanabe quietly informs. Leo nods his head.

"Yeah. You know, like 'Bohemian Rhapsody', 'Killer Queen', 'We Are the Champions' - that song they sing after every football game?" he explains.

"I...don't go to football games," Yuuri admits.

"Really? You should come to a game sometime," Leo offers, "Leroy's the mascot. Me and Guang-Hong sometimes throw bags of sunflower seeds at his hamster head from the bleachers."

"That was you two?!" JJ exclaims.

"Anyways, back to the topic at hand," Victor cuts in, "Queen. Their video for 'It's a Hard Life' is how I want our video to be like. But, not copying. More like playing a homage to it." He pushes forward his notebook, open to a crudely drawn storyboard.

Yuuri takes it in his hands, the other boys crowding around him as Victor continues.

"So it opens up with all of the instruments coming in, panning to each one when they play in the song. And then, when I come in with the lyrics, we see Yuuri. He's got this amazing prince outfit on, and all the lights around him make him look like he's glowing."

Yuuri's feels his lips wanting to twist into a grimace at the word 'prince'. He luckily fights the urge down.

"Yuuri talks with people at the ball, and no one is really capturing his eye. He wants to go and dance, but he doesn't have a partner that stimulates his interest. But then, across the room, he sees a
mysterious stranger in the corner. And it's like time just stops for him.”

There are no objections so far, but the boys around Yuuri are scrutinizing the doodles with confused eyes and downward brows.

“So they see each other, and it's basically love at first sight. The mysterious stranger wants to dance with Yuuri - and this is almost time for the guitar solo. Yuuri pulls away from him and decides to give a show of his own. And there's a spotlight on him and he's dancing, right? And then, right as the guitar solo ends, all the lights come on, and the mysterious stranger takes Yuuri’s hands. They’re moving in close at the refrain, and then.”

“I have a question,” Seung-Gil interrupts. “Where are we supposed to be? Since it’s obvious you’re going to be the mysterious stranger Katsuki makes out with at the end.”

“I didn’t say we were going to make out,” Victor denies, the blush on his face saying otherwise. “And you guys are going to be the people at the party. Like, mingling around with each other.”

“So we’re the people that Katsuki has no interest in until you show up and get pushed aside.”

“You don’t have to say it like that.”

“Where are we going to get the costumes for this thing? They were wearing some Shakespeare stuff, weren’t they? Katsuki’s parents paid for a bulk of the camera equipment, it wouldn’t be right to ask them to pay for our costumes either,” Otabek says.

“And where are we going to film it? Mr. Karpisek only allowed us to use one green screen for effects. There’s no way we can recreate a ball. We don’t even have stage lights,” Leo quips. Guang-Hong signs something, a hurried gesture of his hands and flicks of his wrist that Leo nods in agreement with. “Yeah, it’s going to take a lot of time for Guang-Hong to film all of that with only one camera.”

“Guys, guys!” Victor hushes, hands outstretched to silence the band members. “Look, we have time. We can put something together. This is just…phase one.”


“We’ll get there when we get there.”

The boys break out into chatter again.

Yuuri awkwardly stands to the side, notebook to his chest. Behind him, Watanabe quietly watches with his hands folded in front of him. He gives a sparing glance at the clock on the wall hanging beside a swimsuit calendar, before he decides to clear his throat and remind the boys of his presence.

“Pardon me for interrupting your meeting, but we do not have much time left in this office,” he says, squaring his shoulders as he tilts his head towards Yuuri. “And his time is valuable and shouldn’t be wasted.”

Yuuri flares red in embarrassment as all eyes rest on him, then warily glance at Watanabe standing behind him. A few mumbles of ‘sorry’ come from Leo and Otabek, while Seung-Gil crosses his arms over his chest and bites his tongue.

Watanabe holds out his hand expectantly. It takes a beat, but Yuuri understands and quietly hands over Victor’s notebook with the storyboard. He looks it over, turning the pages and scrutinizing the doodles. Everyone is quiet, watching him closely. The tension in the air begins to clog Yuuri’s lungs.
and taste stale on his tongue.

Watanabe closes the notebook. “No kiss,” he tells Victor, and slides the notebook back onto the desk. Victor flares an embarrassed shade of pink.

“But the song—"

“No kiss. The camera pans to you two holding hands and the video ends there. A kiss can be implied but not shown. These are the conditions if you want him to be in your video,” Watanabe states.

Victor doesn’t look like he wants to comply with those conditions, but everyone is now looking at him and Yuuri doesn’t have anything to squeeze against his chest to smother the sound of his heart beating like the roll of a snare drum. Victor bites the inside of his cheek, and he averts his eyes to his notebook. Watanabe takes his silence as a begrudging agreement.

The mood inside the office is sour now. No one is bothering to make a comment, and everyone awkwardly stands around each other waiting for some topic to be brought up. The steady click of the second hand on the clock is the only noise that fills the silence, a reminder that whatever they need to say must be done quickly.

Yuuri tangles his fingers in the material of his shirt, wringing it between his hands. “Um,” he starts, and all eyes turn to him. He swallows hard, pulling his lower lip in between his teeth. “It’s…we’re midway in September. Halloween stores are already popping up. Instead of wearing…whatever they wear in the original video, we can just wear Halloween costumes. It could be like a costume ball, and it would be in our budget if we each pay for our own costume.”

He turns to Seung-Gil, who is still looking rather cross. “If you have a costume that stands out, I’m sure that even with the limited screen time, it will still be memorable,” he offers.

Seung-Gil is pensive for a moment, a crease forming between his thick eyebrows.

JJ shrugs his shoulders. “It sounds like a good plan to me,” he says, beaming. “So that means, I can dress up like a king, right?”

“Well, if you want?”

“Sweet! And for our makeup, can I get ‘JJ’ painted on my eyelids so like, when the camera pans to me, you’ll see it?”

“Makeup is another expense,” Otabek reminds, arms crossed. Yuuri clasps his hands together, lips forming an excited ‘Oh!’.

“Phichit - er - my friend is going to school in New York to become a makeup artist! I’m sure he wouldn’t mind doing our makeup if I ask him!” Yuuri says.

“I am for having makeup,” Seung-Gil suddenly speaks. “Not for the stupid reason he wants it,” he then quickly adds with a lazy tilt of his head towards JJ, “but because if we want to look decent on film, we should have something to take off shine and blemishes.”

“No need to disguise your hard-on for Chulanont with that flimsy excuse,” JJ laughs. Seung-Gil’s expression darkens and his eyes glare at JJ’s throat like he wants to rip it out with his teeth.

Leo raises a hand. “What are we going to do about the filming part? Or where it’s going to be?"

Yuuri rocks back and forth on his heels and his toes. “Well…like Guang-Hong said, it’s mostly
editing. We may not be able to do anything about the lighting situation, so we’ll just have to work with what we got and see if we can fix it post-production.”

“Chris is good at editing videos,” Victor finally speaks up from his spot at the desk. He’s got a thumb in between his teeth, looking at his closed notebook with despondency in his eyes. “I can ask him to look over the footage we film, maybe see if he can help edit and put it all together,” he mutters.

Yuuri nods his head. “And…don’t worry about the venue. I…I’ll think of something…”

“We don’t want to ask you to take too much of a workload, Katsuki-” Otabek begins, but Yuuri squares his shoulders back.

“Look, I know my only job in the band is just to look nice for the music video. But…but if it’s something that I can help with, then I want to do it. I’ll find a venue. One that matches Victor’s vision. I’ll  try ,”

Victor’s eyes are beginning to sparkle. Yuuri feels his cheeks beginning to grow warm from his gaze. “So…um…yeah…that’s…that’s all I wanted to say,” he mumbles and quietly steps backward towards Watanabe, who rests a kind hand on Yuuri’s shoulder.

Leo looks around, giving a small shrug. “Well…then I guess we should all start looking for costumes in the meantime? Until Katsuki secures a place we can film.”

Victor nods his head, rubbing the pad of his thumb against his bottom lip. ”Then the meeting is adjourned,” he announces and rises to his feet.

Watanabe allows Yuuri to be the first to exit the office, and he didn't realize how hot and stuffy it was in the small space until the cool air of the garage hits his face. The other boys exit after him, bags slung over their shoulders. Victor is the last one to exit, pulling his long hair back to tie into a high ponytail and dejection in his eyes.

”I’ll message you when I find something. Get your seal of approval,” Yuuri says with a smile that means to be humoring, but it feels a little weird on his lips.

“Sure. If you need help, just message me,” Victor says. He reaches into one of the side pockets of his backpack - the one with a fuckton of keychains of different animals and anime characters hanging off the zipper - and withdraws a small CD case. He offers it to Yuuri, who takes it gingerly in his hands. He recognizes the chicken scratch of Victor’s handwriting along the surface of the CD. ‘ Mixtape #1 for Yuuri ‘.

“…What’s this?” Yuuri asks.

Victor starts to shuffle from foot to foot, looking at everything but at Yuuri. He’s got some pink to his cheeks, and Yuuri likes how pretty it looks against Victor’s skin.

“It’s a mixtape. It’s got the song on there for the music video. Figured that you should learn the lyrics. Plus, there are some songs on there that sort of fit the vibe of it that - I don’t know, I just thought you might like it,” Victor explains. His eyes hold a smolder of embarrassment to them, and it hurts something mean in Yuuri’s chest because ‘Victor’ and ‘embarrassed’ don’t fit right.

He cradles the disc to his chest. “Thank you,” he says, words quiet on his lips. “Um…I’m sorry about the…the kiss.”

Victor turns an even prettier shade of pink. “It’s okay. It’s not like it’s a scene that will ruin the video if it doesn’t exist,” Victor plays it off with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders.
Yuuri nods his head, and he wants to let the conversation end there. Quietly thank Victor for his time and the other boys with a respectful bow of his head before allowing Watanabe to escort him to the vehicle. But instead, he feels that moment before, like the time he raced and tripped over his own feet to give Victor his number, like electricity is sparkling through his body and making him move faster than he can have the time to comprehend.

He shoots up to his toes and his lips find Victor’s cheekbone. His skin is soft against Yuuri’s mouth. He feels like he can get drunk off the sensation rather quickly.

When Yuuri pulls back, Victor isn’t a rosy shade of pink, but now blushing a deep crimson scarlet. Yuuri thinks he likes this shade the best.

“U-Um,” he stammers, sure he’s flushing the same color as he starts to shuffle from foot to foot. “…So…bye.”

He does a one-eighty on his heel and speed walks past Watanabe, past the ’72 Camaro with the mechanics all gathered around, and right out the front door to the car parked and waiting.

He nervously paces around the side and back, mouth trembling. Watanabe doesn't even get the chance to open the door for him. The moment he unlocks it, Yuuri paws at the door and shakily opens it, climbing inside with a sweating face and clammy hands.

He rests his head against the window and groans. Watanabe shortly climbs into the driver's seat afterward, looking over his shoulder with concern.

"...Shall I take the long way back to the consulate, Your Highness?"

"Please do."

Yuuri informs the band and Minako of a filming date - the Friday before Homecoming - the following Monday, as well as instructions to please bring all needed materials and costumes with them, while he will provide instruments at the venue. It’s a little over two weeks till filming, and is the only day Phichit will be free since he’ll be spending the week after rifling through the Yearbook spread and mass deleting any fugly photos of him. Yuuri believes that he’s given them far enough notice.

Homecoming flyers appear in the hallways as the day draws closer, scarce compared to what the hallways look like during Prom season. Phichit uses every day leading up to the dance campaigning for Homecoming King. Yuuri offers his support by helping pass out cookies after school, Watanabe keeping a watchful eye on the two from the Mulsanne.

“This would have been a nice photo of you for Yearbook,” Phichit compliments, eating a leftover cookie as they head to the car.

“Don’t talk about photos of me around Watanabe. They’re really antsy about the whole ‘five-grand photo award’, ” Yuuri whispers.

“It’s not like it’s your fault that viscount didn’t keep his mouth shut about meeting with you and starting the whole mess,” Phichit points out.
“He’s like, seventy, Phichit. I would probably accidentally blab things if I were that age too, especially if the ones doing the asking were shoving a camera and a mic in my face,” Yuuri defensively says, and quells the conversation as Watanabe opens the car for them.

Spirit Week arrives with a loud cry of mediocre enthusiasm; Yuuri slogs through it like any other week until it’s the Friday before Homecoming. It just so happens to be the same week that Celestino assigned the class’s first major speech: a personal story about a fond memory.

Yuuri doesn’t necessarily have memories that he can write speeches about. Phichit already used his go-to idea when he gave a speech about the first time that he met Yuuri in freshman year. It made Yuuri want to cry and also hide in the folds of his school blazer.

The seating order has been changed specifically for speech day. The students are seated in the order they want to present, the first presenter in the front left seat and the last presenter in the far back right spot. Yuuri is seated in the tenth spot while Phichit is up front in spot three. Aggravatingly, Mr. President decided he wanted to be seated ninth.

“Want me to move the trash can close to the podium when you go up after me?” Mr. President whispers to Yuuri from the side while Seung-Gil gives his speech about adopting his Malamute at the age of six, “You know, just in case you—” he puffs up his cheeks and makes a low rumble at the back of his throat like he’s about to gag. Celestino gives a stern glance their way, but turns his attention back to Seung-Gil to continue grading.

Yuuri keeps his eyes on his own speech, a mess of hurried writing that he isn’t sure the sentences string together to form a cohesive thought. Mr. President chuckles under his breath, drumming his fingers against his desk.

“Come on, I know you don’t think you’re above talking to someone like me when you hang around Nikiforov. You two dating? I mean, it’s so obvious how big of a hard-on he has for you,” he murmurs.

Yuuri starts nervously twisting his pencil between his hands, wishing that his body didn’t show how he feels. The smile on Mr. President’s lips is big, like a crocodile about ready to swallow its prey whole.

“Aw, that’s cute. You two are like that Disney movie with the two dogs eating spaghetti,” he fawns.

Celestino clears his throat, eyes giving a hard glare over in their direction. Yuuri sucks in a quiet sigh, and doesn’t grace the boy beside him with even a glance.

Seung-Gil wraps up his speech to scattered applause. Mr. President gathers up his speech, standing up from his seat. “I’ll make sure to move the trash can,” he says to Yuuri, laying a chummy hand on his shoulder as he passes by his desk.

“Take a seat inside while you’re at it.”

It takes Yuuri a beat to realize the comment came from his own scathing tongue.

Mr. President looks at Yuuri like he sprouted a second head that told him to go fuck himself three different ways in Pig Latin. Yuuri forces himself to stare back for approximately five seconds, before the gaze of electric blue on his face becomes too intense and he has to look at the mess of a speech on college-ruled paper in front of him.

“…Something wrong, Mr. Class President?” Celestino asks.
“…No, sir. Nothing wrong at all,” the boy mutters, and continues towards the podium.

“That’s what you said?” Phichit asks after school, eyes wide and smile on his lips filled with glee. Yuuri feels his cheeks burning along with the tips of his ears, but he nods his head in acknowledgement. “Serves that jerk right. Had it been me, I would have told him to take the trash can and shove it up his ass.”

“I can’t say that,” Yuuri hisses, giving a glance at his bodyguard quietly trailing behind them and listening to every single word.

“Why not? Show him that you mean business and that you’re tired of his bullshit. He’s been treating you like this since freshman year, and now it’s your time,” Phichit enthuses. He moves in closer, lowering his voice. “I still think you should use your perks and get one of your scary guards to chuck him into the nearest dumpster.”

“No happening,” Yuuri whispers back, gently nudging Phichit’s shoulder with his own. “Anyways, you got your makeup case, right?”

“Yes,” Phichit says, winking. The two move down the front steps of the school, towards the limousine that is waiting in the loading area. Watanabe is standing outside, hands folded behind his back. To his left, Victor and the band are already queued up beside the limo with their backpacks and Guang-Hong’s camera gear. Yuri is mixed into the crowd, the normal ‘I would rather eat paint chips than hang around my brother’s stupid band’ expression on his face and hockey gear on his shoulders. Yuuri sees Chris mingling in the group too, popping some bubble gum and texting someone on his phone.

Victor perks up when he sees Yuuri approaching, eyes bright. “Hi!” he greets.

Yuri gives his brother a disdainful look. “You’re like a fucking dog when it sees its master,” he points out. Chris starts sniggering behind his hand.

Yuuri’s smile is sweet on his lips and Victor smiles like he didn’t even hear a thing his little brother said. “Um,” Yuuri starts, tucking a lock of hair behind his ear, “so, everyone has everything, right?”

“Yeah. Chris is coming along to help direct the video, if you don’t mind,” Victor says, gesturing with a tilt of his head towards the blonde boy. Yuuri nods, turning to Watanabe who has yet to open the door and allow them all inside.

“So, I guess we’re ready to leave then,” he tells his guard. Watanabe clears his throat.

“If I can speak with you for a moment in privacy, Sir?”

Yuuri blinks. Privacy means ‘this is a princely matter’. He starts to sweat.

“O-Okay,” he murmurs, allowing Watanabe to pull him off to the side and away from the group of teens still gathered by the limo. When Watanabe is sure that they are a good distance away from any eavesdroppers that pass by, he lets out a sigh.

“I understand that Ziggy Stardust and his Spiders from Mars are coming along for the music video. You didn’t bother to inform Minako where the music video or the instruments you requested will be at, however,” Watanabe says in a voice that already speaks volumes of exhaustion. Yuuri hates it.
“Well… I was thinking… you know… the consulate’s ballroom would be nice, don’t you think? It… has the gold molding and… the lighting from the chandelier is good…” Yuuri’s voice dies mid-conversation, and he starts to look regretful.

“I was hoping you wouldn’t say that,” he says, rolling his shoulders back. “Ms. Baranovskaya decided to pay you a visit. She’s waiting for you at the consulate.”

“What?”

“I was informed of this hours ago while you were still in class.”

Yuuri blows a raspberry, turning his face skywards so he can groan. “Can’t she postpone this until tomorrow?! I can’t tell them that we can’t film today when they already have their things!” he exclaims with a gesture in the general direction of the group. “That’s so flakey.”

“But would you rather ‘be flakey’ to your royal stylist you only see every quarter, or to a group of teenage boys that act like they have never seen a limousine in their entire life?”

“Ugh.” Yuuri paces around back and forth, cheeks puffed in frustration. He throws a glance over at the group of guys, still waiting around the limo though now they have looks of concern and confusion on their face. Yuuri then turns to Watanabe, dragging his hands along the side of his face to let out another ‘Ugh’.

Watanabe watches him flitter and pace around and panic, before he gives a nod of his head.

“I’ll see what I can do,” he says, but he sounds like the outcome will be something that Yuuri isn’t going to like. He gestures back towards the limo with an open palm, and Yuuri quietly walks to the limo with his hands tensing into fists and shoulders stiff.

“Is there something wrong?” Victor asks as Watanabe finally unlocks the door. Yuuri throws on a smile, but it’s fake and it hurts on his mouth, trembles at the corners like the way the tips of his fingers lightly quake.

“No! Everything’s fine! We’re… we’re going to make a music video!” he shouts more than says in a voice that doesn’t sound right coming out of his own throat.

Victor doesn’t look convinced, and he doesn’t try to hide it either. He steps closer to Yuuri, and he has that heady scent of body spray and deodorant that shouldn’t make Yuuri feel so dizzy, but he thinks he might swoon.

“If this is inconvenient for… your people-”

“No!” Yuuri objects, face burning. “Don’t think that you’re being an inconvenience to me. I want to do this. Everything’s fine. Everything’s really fine,” he repeats, as if maybe hearing it twice will make his nerves less wracked.

Watanabe clears his throat. “Gentlemen, if you please?” he calls out, and Yuuri nods his head. He gives a hurried glance to Victor, and he tries to smile again to make the last bit of uneasiness just disappear from both of their faces.

It doesn’t work.
“This place is perfect!” Victor gushes as one of the consulate security staff escorts the group into the ballroom on the second floor. There’s no set of staircases, but there is an ornate door encrusted with white gold decorations and painted an eggshell color that makes the splendor of it pop. The dome ceiling above is a honey shade of gold, and the chandeliers that dangles from it makes everything sparkle like a dream. In the center of the ballroom, two assistants are lugging in the instruments for the shoot, brand-new with a beautiful shine to them.

“It’s only going to be for a few minutes and we won’t have to see her for another three months,” Minako whispers under her breath, fingers to her ear as she listens to the relay from guards escorting Lilia up to them. Yuuri is biting his nails, chewing them down to stubs that Lilia will surely complain about. Watanabe stands off to the side, watching the boys and Victor and Chris as they try to map everything out.

When Lilia enters, she makes a scene. She always makes a scene. It’s in her presence and the way that she walks that demands all eyes be on her and nothing else. Lilia told Yuuri the first time that they met that he will be able to do the same; with the right amount of preening and care with her expert hands, any ugly little duckling can become the most beautiful and desired of swans.

She withdraws her sunglasses and stops short of five inches from Yuuri, looking him over from head to toe while her two assistants lug in her makeup equipment like a pair of pack mules. “You regressed,” she says instead of ‘hello’. She lightly taps the rim of Yuuri’s glasses. “I thought I destroyed these last time.”

Yuuri adjusts them with fidgety hands. “I have a lot of pairs,” he answers.

Lilia gives an unimpressed grunt, turning to Minako. “Okukawa,” she greets, narrowing her eyes. “…That color eyeshadow doesn’t suit you.”

“Nice to see you too, Lilia,” Minako says through clenched teeth, approaching close. “As you can see,” she speaks quietly, a subtle gesture to the teenage boys behind her, “His Highness has guests that aren’t aware of his status. So we would prefer if you refrain from addressing him with his royal titles while we are in mixed company.”

Lilia spares a glance over at the boys. It lasts about a millisecond.

“Yes, yes. I know how to keep a secret, Okukawa. Now, let’s not waste any time,” Lilia says, moving Yuuri into the natural glow of the chandelier’s light. “Turn and let me assess the damage-”

“Yuuri!”

Heads turn as Victor approaches with a party bag stuffed with a costume. He stops short, giving a confused glance at Lilia, before he continues with whatever he wants to tell Yuuri as he digs through the bag. “So, I didn’t know if you had a costume or not, so I picked one out for you!”

“O-Oh,” Yuuri stammers, blush spreading on his face as Victor hands him a costume pack. Yuuri honestly was planning on wearing one of his father’s old coronation outfits that he brought with him from his Hasetsu visit. The prince costume Victor picked out for him is…well, it looks nice from the photo on the packaging.

It’s over the top, with mustard yellow tassels on the shoulders of a double-breasted white suit. The red pants look like they’re made of velvet, gold lines running along the length of the model’s leg. The accessories included are a gold sash and a badge for a made-up country to be pinned just above
Yuuri’s heart. In small print, the words **crown not included** is tucked away neatly in the corner.

Yuuri stares at it, then looks at Victor, then back at the costume. “Thank you,” he says, smiling ardently. He hands the costume to Lilila, who looks at it like it’s a piece of crap in plastic, and then gestures to Victor. “Um, this is Victor. I’m going to be playing opposite him in the video we’re shooting today.”

Lilila hands off the costume to Minako since she’s the closest set of hands. She steps towards Victor and takes his chin in her grasp, turning his face at all angles.

“…He isn’t ugly,” Lilila deduces, now circling Victor like a predator sizing up its prey and deciding if it’s worth a bite. She lets a manicured hand gently thread through his long hair, admiring the way it slips through her fingers. “Beautiful hair,” she mutters under her breath.

Victor shudders at her touch, but he keeps smiling, albeit uneasy. “Uh, thanks. My mom said I got hair like my dad,” he says. Lilila hums, not interested.

“Well,” she starts, hands moving to rest on her hips, “I don’t intend on sprucing up everyone present. I’m not a god.”

“Oh, no, no that isn’t what I’m asking you to do,” Yuuri hurriedly says, gesturing to Phichit who decided to wrangle in Seung-Gil first to work on his makeup while he changes into his costume. “They already have a makeup artist.”

“Hmm.” Lilila snaps her fingers and her two assistants grab hold of their bags. She turns on the heel of her shoes. “We’ll go somewhere secluded. I do not work in front of an audience,” she announces aloud, and begins to walk back towards the doors.

Yuuri takes the costume back from Minako. “Tell them to film as much as they can without me. Help them any way you can,” he whispers, then turns to Victor. “I’ll be right back,” he says, squeezing the costume against his chest. “Thank you for buying this for me.”

Victor looks confused, but he also looks a little smitten with something sweet in his eyes. “Sure, no problem. Figured you’d look beautiful in it,” Victor says, rubbing the back of his neck. “…But, being honest, you look beautiful in any-“

“Oi! Hurry it up! We don’t got all day!” Yuri yells from his spot off to the side where Guang-Hong is trying to work the camera. Yuuri gets frazzled, and he doesn’t realize how close he’s standing to Victor. He honestly doesn’t remember moving from his spot, but now he’s all in Victor’s personal bubble, so close that he can see himself reflected in nervous pools of blue.

“We shouldn’t waste time,” Yuuri says, voice quiet. He hugs the costume, stepping away and towards Lilila. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

Victor nods his head, remaining rooted in his spot and never taking his eyes off of Yuuri as he gets ushered away.

Before Lilila begins, one of Yuuri’s guards confiscates hers and her assistants’ phones.

“Security reasons,” he explains in his baritone voice. Lilila scoffs, but doesn’t protests it. She takes off her rings, opens her hands for a brush and comb to be handed by her assistants, and gets to work.
Lilia takes an hour; she doesn’t believe in rushing perfection. The costume itself doesn’t fit as nicely as it looks on the packaging. Yuuri thinks that maybe Victor bought a size too small; it’s tight in the arms and around his thighs, the sash fits loosely over his shoulders and he thinks that maybe he should be wearing gloves as well, despite his rather nice manicure given by one of Lilia’s assistants.

“Beautiful,” Lilia compliments, tweezing Yuuri’s eyebrows so they’re perfectly even. She turns his head from side to side, admiring the light over his skin and the honeyed glow of his eyes sans glasses, before she gives an affirming nod of her head. “Alright, you are dismissed.” Yuuri is running out the doors of the small office Lilia converted to her workspace before she can even finish her sentence.

It’s down the hall from the main stairwell, and then the ballroom is at the end of the third hall to the right. He passes by portraits of Hasetsu dignitaries, past royal portraits of ancestors long lost to time. He passes his father’s portrait and pauses for only the briefest of moments, looking at the violet jacket and crimson pants, the sash over his chest and badges pinned over his heart.

Yuuri brings a hand to his own chest where the plastic badge does little to appear impressive and barely holds to the fabric. Here he is, a prince in a Halloween costume, gazing up at his father and the standards he will surely be held to. He feels strange. He doesn’t feel like he could ever look like that, proud and with his chin held high. Maybe this is all he’ll ever be: just some kid in a costume called ‘Prince Charming’.

When he gives a tentative knock on the door, one of his guards opens.

“I’m not interrupting, am I?” he asks, then pauses. “...Why is your face painted like a clown?”

“You’re not interrupting, Sir,” he answers in all seriousness, “and it’s a long story.”

“...Okay.”

His guard opens the door to allow him inside, where the sound of Victor’s voice and guitars echo loudly to the alcoves above.

He doesn’t know what the hell he’s looking at.

There’s a group of guards, each individual face painted like children at the carnival, awkwardly swaying offbeat to the music while being coached by Chris on how to move and dance. Guang-Hong circles them fast, the camera shaking in his grasp with his hurried movements, almost tripping over his own feet.

Minako is standing in a corner, a hand to her eyes like if she just doesn’t look, none of this is actually happening.

“What’s going on?” Yuuri asks her as he approaches. He feels the corner of his mouth quirking up, only realizing when he sees Minako frown at him that he’s laughing.

“We’re helping ‘any way that we can’,” Minako explains, hand on her hip. “Apparently, they realized that they were short on footage out of their main storyline or whatever. So, they’re creating some filler and need extra bodies to do so,” she says. She spares an elevator glance, taking in Yuuri from head to toe, before her scowl gets softer around the corners with a begrudging respect. “She really did a good job on you.”
Yuuri teases his fingertips at his slicked-back hair, soft with conditioner and each strand held loosely together by hair gel. “You think I’ll…I’ll look good?”

Minako ‘pfft’s. Yuuri’s not sure how to take that.

He waits off to the side until someone cuts the playback. He assumes that’s Yuri’s job since he’s seated amongst their belongings with two phones in his hands and a portable speaker by his foot. Yuuri then approaches the crowd, hesitant in his step, his mouth feeling like it’s dry even though he can taste the cherry lip balm Lilia coated his lips with moments prior.

JJ is the one that notices first, and his dumbfounded ‘whoa’ makes Yuuri’s cheeks burn.

“You look like that painting of that guy in the hall!” he points out, and Yuuri wants to combust into flames when everyone looks at him. Victor spots him, and his eyes sparkle with something so beautiful and loving that Yuuri can’t even bring himself to look directly into them.

“I - I get that a lot,” Yuuri tries to play off, pinching his fingers at the cuffs of the sleeves and turning his toes inwards. “Uh, so, how much have we got filmed?”

“No,” Victor interrupts, and he approaches Yuuri slowly, his footfalls a little bit dazed and uneven, like he’s walking in a dream that he is being so careful not to wake from.

He stops only inches from Yuuri, dressed in a flowing, long-sleeved white shirt and a tight brown leather vest. His gray leggings hug the curve of his thighs and the brown leather boots look like they fit him one size too big. His long silver hair is hidden underneath an ugly bright blonde wing, spiked at the top with thin ends that flow to his shoulders.

Yuuri has no idea who he’s supposed to be.

Victor drinks in Yuuri’s sight, eyes carefully studying each detail of Yuuri’s figure. He gives an audible swallow, cheeks pink. "You," he pauses to cough and clear his throat of nothing, "you shouldn’t rush perfection."

Yuuri feels hot in the face. "I..." he starts to scuff the tip of his toe against the ballroom tile. "Um...I like your costume."

Victor beams. "Thanks! I mean, it wasn't what I planned initially, but I liked this movie and, you know, David Bowie was great in it," he gushes.

Yuuri slowly nods his head, making a mental note to ask Watanabe to look this film up.[1]

They take a few seconds to stupidly stare at each other, smiling and admiring the other’s costume, until Chris clears his throat and loudly claps his hands.

"O- kay! We have our star, let’s hurry up and get this video filmed so I can get my beauty sleep for Homecoming!” he shouts, hands resting on Victor’s shoulders to steer him to a different spot in the ballroom.
Yuuri blinks, watching Victor over his shoulder as Guang-Hong gently takes him by the hand and leads him towards the door. He withdraws his phone, tapping something quick in the notes app before he shows it to Yuuri.

*ready?*

Yuuri nods his head, making a texting motion with his hands. Guang-Hong offers his phone forward, and Yuuri accepts it with a smile. He taps a message out, handing Guang-Hong’s phone back so he can read:

*I’ll do my best(^o^)/ lets make a video!!!*

He's not sure how much time passes in making the video, but Yuuri has fun doing it.

He makes his amateur mistakes: he constantly looks at the camera when he shouldn't, he walks off his mark, and he's sure he looks as awkwardly stiff and unnatural as he feels. He's constantly apologizing to Guang-Hong and Yuuri gets encouraging thumbs-up when he doesn't think he quite deserves it.

Yet, he’s having fun.

He dances and twirls around to Victor’s words and the guitar strings. He feels something tickling up his spine that he can lose himself in, a blissful smile on his lips as he moves in a dance that has no planned steps and no elegance of a prince.

Lilia and her assistants come up to watch them, standing off to the side and only intervening to touch up Yuuri’s face or brush a stray strand of hair back into place.

When he comes to Victor at the end, Victor takes his hands like they are treasures too pure to even look at. It’s then that Yuuri feels his mouth going dry, his throat finding it hard to swallow the lump that forms when he looks at the gloss on Victor’s lips.

He’s never wanted so badly to kiss someone before. He’s never felt anything like this before - excitement, joy, verging on something a little frantic by how Yuuri trembles in his shoes.

He looks into Victor’s eyes, and his reflection looks small, his expression warm and dizzy. He likes the way he looks in Victor’s eyes. He wants to stay there in those gentle blues where he shines so beautifully, where he shines as Yuuri Katsuki and nothing more.

"Cut!" Christophe yells. "That’s a wrap!"

Phichit stretches his arms over his head, exaggerating a yawn. He approaches Victor and Yuuri, their hands still tightly interlocked, and smiles something knowing, but kind.

“**We should take a picture! Like something for us to look back on when we’ve been chewed up and shitted out by Life!**"

“**That’s...really morbid,**” Yuuri says with a small wince. Phichit laughs away the concern, throwing an arm around them both and momentarily separating their hands. It’s like forcing apart two pieces of Velcro, and Yuuri immediately misses Victor’s touch. By the quickest flash of chagrin on Victor’s
face that appears as Phichit steers them like cattle towards the others, Yuuri guesses he still wants them to be touching too.

They all huddle together and one of Lilia’s assistants volunteer to take the photo. She’s a thin woman, with spindle-like fingers and chartreuse varnish over her stubby nails. She doesn’t have steady hands, Yuuri remembers. Lilia constantly berated her for her terrible brushing technique and relegated her to the sides to stand and watch like a child banished to the corner for timeout.

She takes a total of four pictures; only one of them is good. Victor is standing close to Yuuri, but not close enough for Yuuri to easily tangle their fingers back together and hold on just a little bit tighter. All of their smiles - aside from Seung-Gil’s handsome stoic frown and Yuri’s scowl for being included when he ‘didn’t fucking do anything’ - shine bright and youthful. It’ll be a fond photo for Yuuri to look at when he is in Hasetsu; he’ll ask Phichit to print him out a copy and have everyone sign it, leaving a special space for Victor. Maybe he’ll look at it when he’s alone in his chambers, in a bed that is too big and too immaculate, and remember how for the first time in years, he had fun. He was a normal teenage boy, goofing off with friends, and he held hands with someone that looked at him like he was better than the moon and the stars and the cosmos combined. He’ll remember this moment. He just dreadfully wishes it didn’t have to be a memory trapped in a photograph.

"I’ll post it on Instagram! Everyone follow me @phichit+chu!" Phichit exclaims.

"I still have to pick out corsages for me and Mathieu," Christophe groans, a little tired, cracking his back as he fans his arms backwards.

Guang-Hong signs to Leo, and Leo turns to Yuuri. "Me and Guang-Hong are going to hang out at the pizza arcade. You wanna come? They got slices the size of your head," Leo says.

"O-Oh. Um, no thank you. I still have some things I need to do," Yuuri says with a side glance towards Minako. She’s conversing into her cellphone, back turned and daily planner tight in her grasp.

"Alright," Leo says, shrugging, then gestures to Guang-Hong to follow him over and out the doors being held open by one of Yuuri’s guards.

When he turns, he sees Victor lingering behind. Trying to at least. Watanabe is only a few feet away, quietly discussing with another of the security detail still wearing clown face on where to drop each person off at their destination.

He’s got his hands resting limply at his sides, and his right hand looks lonely.

Yuuri approaches, hands behind his back, shoulders squared nice and proper.

"I’m sure Maehara and his men will be taking you all home. But if you have somewhere else to be, they’ll take you," Yuuri explains. Victor smiles at him, lopsided. He puts his hands behind his back too, and Yuuri imagines the right palm he’s squeezing behind his back is actually Victor’s.

"Oh. Sure. I mean, I don’t have anywhere else to be so..."

"No last minute homecoming shopping?" Yuuri asks with a laugh. Victor laughs too, but it’s hollow and jarring and wipes the smile from Yuuri’s face.

"No. I’m not going to homecoming this year." Well.
Yuuri looks at their feet, the tips touching. "Oh...um...why not?"

"Didn’t have a date," Victor answers with a shrug.

"You could have gone with friends," Yuuri says, but Victor shakes his head.

"I wanted to go with someone special. But dances are _blegh_ for them so, yeah."

Oh.

Yuuri blinks.

_Oh._

His hands pull away from behind his back and slap against his mouth to muffle his gasp. "Oh my god," he says into his palms, and he remembers. "Oh my _god._"

Victor nods his head, not as solemn as before, but there’s still some melancholy to the tilt of his head, the downturned cast of his eyes. He smiles. "It’s okay. I’ve had bland punch and seen Mr. Cialdini and Mr. Karpisek dance way more than what’s healthy for a teenaged male such as myself," he jokes, withdrawing his hands from behind his back. "I’ll let you know when we post the video on YouTube," he says, and he begins to walk away.

Until Yuuri quickly snatches his hand from where it swayed at Victor’s side.

Victor immediately halts in his spot, and Yuuri starts talking before his body seizes up and his lungs constrict. "I’m sorry! I - I didn’t know! I would have wanted to go! I...I wouldn’t have minded...dancing with you. And drinking bland punch. I wouldn’t have even minded getting roped into doing the Cha Cha Slide with Mr. Cialdini...as long as you wouldn’t laugh at me for being terrible at it."

Victor is turning that pretty shade of pink again. "I-I wouldn’t."

Yuuri nods his head. Their fingers thread instantly, seamless and fit like two halves of one whole. He likes the feel of it.

"S-So. Um." Yuuri looks down at their feet, but he just sees their hands, tightly locked, and now that’s making him embarrassed and red in the face. "Since I messed that up...and we’re available...we can...I...we can...pie?"

Victor blinks. Yuuri thinks he’s swallowed his tongue.

"Y-Yeah," Victor answers, breathless and with a smile that shapes into a heart. "We can pie. I’d love to pie with you."

"Oh my god," Yuuri groans again, bringing his hands to his face. Victor doesn’t let go, so his knuckles gently tap against his forehead. They feel a little rough, with callouses on the side.

"Can I pick you up? At six?" Victor asks, hopeful. Yuuri lowers their hands just enough to look at him over the ridges of their fingers, close enough to his lips that he could kiss Victor’s fingers if he wanted to. Does he? He kind of does.

"Y-Yeah. Can we take your bike there? I - I had a lot of fun last time."

Victor nods his head eagerly, head jerking up and down so fast that the blond wig begins to slip from his head. Yuuri laughs behind their interlocked hands, and his lips do accidentally kiss up against
Victor’s fingers, just a little, quick and fleeting. Victor turns redder, and his smile gets stupidly big. Yuuri thinks his smile looks the same, not in that heart shape - that’s Victor - but dumb and full of glee.

From the door, Yuri shouts, "Hurry the fuck up! I want to go home!"

Yuuri says his rushed goodbyes, and it’s so hard to let go of Victor’s hands. They let go at the same time, so neither felt deprived of the other’s touch too soon, but he’s still warm and missing Victor’s hands. He watches Victor leave, squeezing his hand as he disappears behind the stocky figure of a bodyguard and swallows hard.

Yuuri’s never liked a boy the way he likes Victor. He’s had crushes, silly fleeting ones on boys that he admired from afar, over the edge of his textbook during study hall or through the television as he gawked at a model with kissable pouty lips. Victor is different. He’s beautiful, hypnotic in a way that is like wildfire: scorching and sweltering out past Yuuri’s control, and he might regret the burns. He’s real, real in his touch and his smile and the shine of his eyes that sparkle in a way that Yuuri thinks is only for him, hopes and prays that it’s only him that gets that special place beside the shimmer in Victor’s eyes.

He likes Victor so much that it hurts.

And like that photograph that he wants to tuck away, he wants this feeling of Victor holding his hands and this sweet flicker of a light that can’t ever fully blaze in his chest, to last forever instead of becoming just another memory long lost to time, to fun and normal high school autumn days.

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Victor shows up at the inn on his bike at six sharp the following evening. Yuuri pretends he didn’t spend three hours fussing over what to wear while Phichit sent frantic texts back to back that stressed Yuuri to the point that he switched the notifications off. It’s homecoming night; he’ll hear all about it later, after his and Victor’s ‘pie thing’.

It feels weird to call it a date, even though that’s probably what it is. Does Victor think it’s a date? Yuuri should have dressed nicer. His mustard yellow sweater is a bit of an eyesore, and his jeans are ripped at the knees. He’s wearing a nice pair of Converse at least, not dirty or scuffed at the toes like all his shoes usually end up getting.

"How’s the ride?" Victor asks against the back of his neck. His lips make Yuuri give both a tickled giggle and a hardened blush.

"You’re doing fine. Just let me know if you get tired, and I’ll tell Watanabe to come around with the BMW," Yuuri reminds. Watanabe isn’t following directly behind them this time around, so Yuuri thinks the man has delved some trust to Victor to take care of his precious cargo. But, he knows that he’s probably following them on a street parallel to them, expertly keeping out of Yuuri’s sight but both boys remaining in his.

"I don’t mind. I like this," Victor says, smiling.

He makes a sharp turn right and Yuuri leans with it, hands gripping tight to the bars he rests on. The street lights flicker on the sidewalks, guiding them through the city streets with their hazy yellow hue. The skies themselves are blue and pink and pretty, the view prettier than seeing it viewed through a tinted window.
Victor suddenly jolts on his bike and it shakes, unstable. He quickly regains control and apologizes as Yuuri spares a quick glance over his shoulders. "Something wrong?" he asks, slight concern slipping past his smile.

"It’s my phone in my back pocket. Probably Phichit. He really wants to talk to you, but he didn’t want to tell me what about," Victor explains. Yuuri furrows his eyebrows at that.

"I’ll...I’ll text him when we get to the pie shop," he says, turning his gaze down at the road, the broken yellow lines flying by under his feet as Victor makes another turn.

"Well, the school is on the way to the shop. We can swing by there or something? I know a guy that could sneak us in if I asked," Victor offers.

"We’re not even dressed properly. I look like a mess," Yuuri chastises.

"You’re a beautiful mess," Victor quips so easily. Yuuri’s brain takes a moment to reboot after that comment.

"I - I," Yuuri stammers, pulling his lower lip in between his teeth. Watanabe is expecting them at the pie shop, no detours allowed. But, Yuuri partially wants to see Phichit and figure out what’s up. Maybe he got crowned. Maybe Luke flaked out on being his date to homecoming and he’s roped a half-willing Seung-Gil into dancing with him. Maybe Yuuri wants to stretch his time with Victor out as long as he possibly can because he just...doesn’t want this to end.

"...Really quick. I don’t want to get in trouble with the faculty for sneaking in," Yuuri says with a voice that is partially concerned, but tinges excitement at the syllables. Victor laughs, and it’s a wondrous reverb in Yuuri’s ears.

"Ten minutes top. Pinky swear."

They don’t hook pinkies together, but the tip of Yuuri’s brushes gently against the side of Victor’s hand, and that’s good enough.

The parking lot is heavily congested with vehicles. As Victor carefully weaves through them, Yuuri recognizes some of them are vans for the local news stations, all lined up in a row and making it hard for Yuuri to see the front steps where a red carpet is laid out and people crowd around it.

"Is something happening?" Yuuri asks as Victor decides to park his bike by a tree, helping him off as he puts the kickstand down.

"It’s ‘Hollywood’ theme. Chris’s boyfriend is in the Dance committee, he said that everyone comes up the red carpet as they enter and get their photos taken by the ‘paparazzi’. I guess the news vans are an extra touch of realism or whatever," Victor explains. "So we should probably avoid the front."

Yuuri nods his head, glancing over his shoulder down the street, expecting Watanabe to show up immediately in the car and chew Victor out for taking Yuuri off course before putting him ‘back on the List’. They probably only have five minutes at least before Watanabe busts them.

But Victor takes Yuuri’s hand, and Watanabe is out of his mind.

"Act natural," Victor says, bringing his phone out to text his friend. Yuuri gets the idea to text Phichit
to and let him know he’s here.

When he opens up the Messages, he’s hit with a flood of texts.

>>YUURI!!

>>YUURI OH MY GOD IM SORRY I DONT KNOW WHAT HAPPENED

>>I LOCKED MY ACCOUNT BUT I DONT KNOW IF THAT WAS ENOUGH

>>YUURI!!! ANSWER ME!!!

>>IM SO SORRY PLS BE OKAY

…What’s going on?

Yuuri pauses, hand squeezing Victor’s. "Hold on,” he says, dialing Phichit’s number and bringing it to his ear. It rings only twice.

"Yuuri!" Phichit’s voice answers, frazzled and almost lost to the sound of loud music in the background.

"Phichit? I’m outside the school-"

"What?! No! Go away!"

"But why? What’s going on-"

Yuuri doesn’t get the chance to finish his sentence, since there’s a voice that cuts through the air, loud and antagonizing, "That’s him! Over there! That’s Yuuri Katsuki!"

And suddenly, everything is a blur of lights.

The people that swarmed the red carpet area where students were entering turn immediately with their cameras flashing. At the top of the staircase in a black Vera Wang suit, Mr. President stands tall with an accusing finger pointed directly at Yuuri, a big smile on his lips.

They charge towards them, microphones suddenly unsheathed like war swords, camera flashes leading the herd as a chorus of ‘Prince Katsuki! Prince Yuuri! Your Royal Highness!’ roars like excitable thunder.

Yuuri can’t move. He can’t breathe. It’s the first day of senior year all over again, standing before a crowd with his sweaty hand holding Victor’s instead of a blank speech. He only realizes the situation when he feels a paparazzo rudely bump into him for an extreme close-up and shouts in his face ‘who’s your boyfriend with you?!’

That’s when Yuuri gets scared out of his mind.

Victor’s arms get around Yuuri immediately, doing a futile job of protecting him from the cameras that surround them like piranhas. "Back off! What do you want?!" Victor shouts. His voice doesn’t cut as sharply as his little brother’s does, no bite to his bark. The questions continue to fire, the people continue to shove them around like two rag dolls in a pit, and Victor continues to hold him tight against his chest, against his rapidly beating heart.

Yuuri wanted to be in Victor’s arms, but he thought that moment would come when they were
kissing and there would be the soft dulcet sounds of a guitar and a bass and a drumbeat in time with his heart. He didn’t want it to be like this. He never wanted it to be like this.

There’s another voice that appears distinctive over the cacophony of noise, two actually. One is the loud and gruff yell of Principal Feltsman, his big hand shooting out to clap onto Victor’s shoulder. The other is fainter, more hurried, but just as gruff. It’s Watanabe.

"I got you," he says, and there are figures in black pushing through the crowd, swarming Yuuri and forming a barrier around him, but not Victor. He loses his hold, and he tries to say ‘wait’ as the hands start rushing him from the school. Principal Feltsman is reeling Victor away, his hand swinging like it’s a wild machete as he yells at the paparazzi and news reporters for trespassing on school property. He sees Victor shouting something that gets lost on Yuuri’s ears, but the way his lips shape, it looks like he’s shouting Yuuri’s name, confused and desperate.

Yuuri wants to croak out Victor’s name, to say something. But his words trap in his throat and he can’t swallow them down or spit them out, and it’s a horrible ache that almost makes him want to cry. The lights are blinding and the voices aren’t the ones he wants to hear. He didn’t want this to happen. He just wanted to go out with a cute boy and eat pie, maybe be lucky enough to have a dance and drink bland punch at the risk of being caught.

Victor’s face drowns in the bright whites of the camera flashes, and Yuuri gets gently pushed into the backseat of a BMW with tinted windows that shroud the interior and everyone inside.

"We got news of what happened too late. Had I known, I wouldn’t have let you even go," Watanabe tells him as he and another guard get inside and the car peels away from the curb. Yuuri doesn’t know what reassurance that’s supposed to be. His hand feels numb. His whole body feels numb.

Watanabe looks at him in the rearview mirror, and his eyes hold some solace. "...Are you alright, Your Highness?"

Your Highness.


That’s what he is. He’s not a normal high school boy, with a silly crush on a boy and danced in that boy’s music video. He’s a prince, and any semblance of a normal life is now gone from his fingers like the warmth of Victor’s hand.

He finally finds his voice. It croaks from his throat.

"No. I’m not."

Chapter End Notes

[1] The film is the 1986 film Labyrinth. Victor is dressed as David Bowie's character Jareth, the Goblin King

quick shout outs to this wonderful comic from chap 1 by riladoodles and also if you want to hear the song the band sings - everything about you (like a dream) - there is the original by forovnix that also features katsuki-skates on bass and also a cover by postingpebbles. both are amazing and i dont have enough thanks for the music and art
that is being created for this fic. thank you all so much OTL

dthis ended up taking longer since my keyboard is out and trying to figure out how to
transfer the text from iPad over to AO3. also starting school next week, so updates will
be when i can!! thank you for reading!!
"When it comes down to making out, whenever possible, put on side one of Led Zeppelin IV."

In the Sunday paper, there are two pictures on the front page: one is of Phichit’s Instagram picture of the band in their costumes, the colors ugly in newsprint and the faces hard to see aside from Yuuri’s which is magnified. The other is of Yuuri and Victor, in a sea of paparazzi lights, frozen in the moment from when they were pulled apart and the pain on their expressions speaks thousands of words.

"I don’t understand how this could have happened," Minako says with a sigh, hands steeped and eyes reading over the newspaper once, twice, three times. She then takes it and tosses it into the trash. It’s full of other news articles and trashy tabloids, each one with the same two photos on their cover with bright obnoxious print spewing out the headline.

Yuuri sits in a rosewood chair in front of her desk, hands in his lap and eyes cast downwards to the floor. He hasn’t turned his phone on since last night since it was taken by Watanabe out of fear of his device being compromised. He doesn’t know if Phichit or Victor has been trying to get in contact with him. When he thinks about Victor now, he thinks about his face. That confused look in his eyes, the way he tried to protect Yuuri - so fiercely too when he didn’t truly understand what was going on.

It hurts to think about Victor, but he can’t help but think about him all the time now.

What’s going to happen to them?

"It’s going to be okay," Minako says, voice soft. Softness doesn’t suit her. She’s playful, she’s serious, she’s encouraging in ways that make Yuuri embarrassed at times but thankful. But she’s not soft.

"...Am I going to see him again?" Yuuri asks. "He didn’t know. He couldn’t have been involved with the leak-"

"The media is already spouting out bullshit about you two and what your relationship is. For his privacy, you should maintain distance. At least until we put together a statement saying that he doesn’t mean anything to you and you are just merely acquaintances," Minako says, so wise and astute.

Yuuri wants to say that’s not true. He wants to say that Victor means more to him than acquaintances, more than friends, more than bandmates. He wants to say that he *likes* Victor. God,
his bones ache and his heart ties itself up like a balloon animal ready to burst when he and Victor merely touch.

Instead, he swallows his feelings and his lips purse tight. "Okay..." he murmurs, voice small in his throat and tasting pale on his tongue.

Minako’s shoulders dip like there is a weight pressing down on her. Her eyebrows pull downward, and she does a rhythmic tap of her nails against the surface of her desk. *Tap tap tap*. She’s thinking. She’s thinking about something to say not as Minako Okukawa, the aide to His Imperial Highness The Crown Prince Katsuki Yuuri of Hasetsu, but as Minako Okukawa trying to make the hurt on a sixteen year old boy’s heart lessen just enough for him to breathe again.

“...You know your father wouldn’t dream about putting his only son through unnecessary pain. You are royalty, and you being placed in front of the cameras was going to happen eventually. But...if this is too much for you...you can walk away from it," she says, voice quiet, soft and foreign.

They don’t talk a lot about that aspect. Yuuri will not be formally invested as the future king of Hasetsu until he becomes of age. His press event where he was supposed to introduce himself as The Crown Prince to the general public was to be in January, the start of a new year and the end of his old life. Until then, Yuuri had the option presented to turn away the crown, to keep living his average high school life.

But the thing is, Yuuri doesn’t know.

He doesn’t want to be a disappointment. He doesn’t want to let his father and Watanabe and Minako and - Christ, an *entire country* down. Even his mother quietly insisted that he has a duty as prince the night he was told royal blood runs through his veins, him barely turning fourteen and still soft and chubby. Even as she gently ran her fingers through his hair when Yuuri cried as his life stopped resembling his life, she insisted that it was something that must be done.

He doesn’t want to leave Phichit and his mother behind. And now that Victor’s wormed his way into the furrows of Yuuri’s heart and carved a place for him to reside, Yuuri doesn’t want to let Victor go too.

He just...he doesn’t know what he wants to do.

“...I need to think," he answers. Minako nods her head, sliding around some papers on her desk with no true purpose.

“Okay. Take your time.”

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HELLO! | NEWS | ROYALTY

**THE CROWN PRINCE OF HASETSU NOW AMERICA'S CINDERELLA**

November 4, 2018- 17:22 CET BY BARBARA HOLLOWAY

THE secret is out: His Imperial Highness, The Crown Prince Katsuki Yuuri of Hasetsu, is a sixteen-year old boy living among ordinary citizens.
Two nights prior, the world caught their first glimpse of His Imperial Highness, the Crown Prince attempting to attend Stammi Vicino Preparatory School’s 40th homecoming. His Imperial Highness was in attendance with another male - whose identity has been asked to not be made public, but can be assumed to be an intimate partner to the Crown Prince.

The Imperial Household has yet to release a statement, but the Crown Prince’s Chief of Staff Minako Okukawa is expected to hold a press conference sometime this week to further address the situation, as well as the Crown Prince’s future in America.

Currently, the Crown Prince is living with his mother, Hiroko Sato, in a hot springs resort. After the incident, Yu-Topia Inn and Hot Springs is closed to the public for an indefinite amount of time.

"The hot springs are a wonderful place to unwind, and the staff has been nothing but cordial and familial to me during my stays," says Miya Toguchi, a frequent patron of the establishment since it opened in 2002. "Ms. Hiroko is a very kind woman and I remember her son helping tend to guests with such a manner of professionalism."

When asked about how she felt about the sudden realization she had been interacting with royalty, the sixty-eight-year old woman was not deterred.

"He is just a boy, no different from my grandsons. There should be no reason for such a fuss," she says.

And while the ‘fuss’ has seemed to die down, it is only due to the Crown Prince’s sudden disappearance and subsequent hiding. It is with no doubt that when the Crown Prince comes forward to the public, everyone will be there to ask who he is, what are his plans going forward, and how he will conduct himself.

And we certainly will wait for that moment to bring you the newest details.

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It’s dreadfully quiet.

The morning sun that streams through the curtains of Yuuri’s window isn’t what wakes him. It’s the quiet.

He stirs out of bed and shuffles from his bedroom to the kitchen of their home, but finds that it’s empty. The sink is empty of dishes, so Yuuri isn’t even sure if his mother made breakfast. The living room is empty as well, and there’s no audible noise of someone moving around below their apartment where the dining hall of the inn is.

Yuuri swallows and rubs his fist at his eyes, before he sighs and grabs a pair of slippers. Toeing them on, he exits the apartment and trudges down the steps to the inn.

It’s been empty for the last three days. Yuuri can’t help but feel discomfort at seeing all of the sandals stacked and neatly tucked away in the cupboards. The dining hall seems so much bigger now that there are no patrons inside at the tables, enjoying pork cutlet bowls and conversing with each other while the television plays in the background.
There’s some noise coming from the kitchen, quiet conversation that is almost faint to Yuuri’s ears. As he creeps closer to the door, the voices become more distinct and familiar. He recognizes the exhausted sigh of Watanabe, but Yuuri hesitates from making his presence known.

“We have exhausted all other trails but we are sure that the source of the leak was one of Ms. Baranofskaya’s assistants. After Phichit’s Instagram was locked, Ms. Baranofskaya called Minako and filled in the details. Apparently, her assistant quit after she collected the photo money and sold that picture and a few others she downloaded from Phichit’s Instagram to other magazines;” Watanabe quietly explains.

There’s a gentle hum that sounds like Yuuri’s mother.

“Well,” she begins, voice wavering, “I hope she’s enjoying her life after harming my son’s.” Yuuri never really heard his mother speak with a tone of anger. At least, never to his face. But it’s there, quiet and pained, her words sounding like they were spoken through pursed lips.

“We knew this would happen someday. Now all we have to do is see how he handles this…Minako brought up to him the idea of turning away the crown if the pressure is too much,” Watanabe brings up. He sighs again. The sound makes something hurt in Yuuri’s chest.

“Did Toshiya say anything about that?”

“He doesn’t want to twist Yuuri’s hand into being his successor, but we all know that since Mari has given up her claim, Hasetsu’s future under the Katsuki monarch rests solely on Yuuri’s shoulders. We can’t afford for him to give up the crown as well.”

Yuuri winces at that, curling away from the door in the few moments of silence between his mother and Watanabe that follows.

“I know. I understand…if he decides that he does want to continue with his investment, are you planning on removing him from the school?” Hiroko asks.

“Personally, I think it would be fortuitous if he were home-schooled,” Watanabe responds. There’s a pause - likely Watanabe taking a sip of his usual morning coffee - before he says, “However, I know he’s rather fond of Sgt. Pepper and his Lonely Hearts Club Band, so I doubt he will be happy with the idea of being taken out of school.”

Hiroko giggles. “He’s a sweet boy. I’ve never seen someone so taken by Yuuri. Almost reminds me of the way Toshiya was when we were young,” she fawns. Her voice fades away into a quiet pause like it always does when she talks about Yuuri’s father. Yuuri can’t see her expression from his spot at the door, but he knows her eyes are turned downwards, thinking about the past.

“…I know Yuuri has an obligation to take the crown. But…I wanted him to enjoy the few months of being a normal boy for as long as he could. And to know that someone just took that away from him, and that more people want to force themselves into his life to scrutinize it just-“ When Hiroko sighs, it shudders out like she’s struggling to control her breathing. “I just want him to be happy.”

“I know.”

There’s more silence. Yuuri wraps his arms around himself, letting their words run through his mind. He gets startled with the loud growl of his stomach and jumps, worried that they noticed him. But, since Watanabe continues with the conversation, Yuuri assumes they didn’t hear.

“I should head back to the consulate,” the elder man states. “Minako is almost done preparing the
press statement. After that, we just have to wait for Yuuri to make his decision on whether or not he wants to continue...if he comes and talks to you—"

“I know, I know,” Hiroko responds before Watanabe can finish that statement. “…I have no doubt in my mind that he can do it. I just wish that everyone would remind themselves that he’s just a teenager.”

Watanabe grunts at that, and the sound of footsteps begin to echo close to the door.

Yuuri stands upright and backs away as the door swings open, Watanabe’s eyes widening in surprise for only a second. He gives a bow out of respect, squaring his shoulders.

“Your Highness,” he greets. “Good morning.”

“M-Morning,” Yuuri stammers. He twines his fingers behind his back, averting his eyes to the floor. "Is...is everything okay?"


"I'm fine," Yuuri responds, then he bites at his bottom lip. "But...I'd like to go back to school soon...if that's okay."

Watanabe stares for a beat, before he gives an understanding nod of his head.

"I'll see what I can do," he says, bowing his head once more before he excuses himself from Yuuri’s presence and heads towards the back entrance. Yuuri enters the kitchen after Watanabe disappears from his sight, spotting his mother standing by the kitchen counter with a cup of tea in her grasp and Watanabe’s empty cup of coffee left behind.

Hiroko smiles at Yuuri, but the corners of her mouth don’t reach her eyes. “Morning, Yuuri. Are you hungry?” she asks, placing her tea down to grab one of the aprons hanging on the hook.

“No. No, I’m fine,” Yuuri says. He leans up against the wash sink, empty of dishwater and plates. The faucet’s steady drip-drip-drip is the only sound that floats in Yuuri’s ears, making the silence between his and his mother all the more uncomfortable.

Yuuri swallows, tangling his fingers in the front of his shirt. “Mom? Would...would you be upset if I decided I didn’t want to be a prince anymore?”

Hiroko thumbs against the side of her cup, thinking.

“You’ll always be a prince, Yuuri. It’s in your blood,” she says with a weak smile. “You’re my only son. I’ll still love you whether you were homecoming king or The Emperor Katsuki, so long as you’re happy,” Hiroko explains.

Yuuri doesn’t give much of a response to that. Hiroko pulls out a frying pan and sets it on the stovetop before she moves to the refrigerator.

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“Do you still want to be a prince?” she asks quietly. Yuuri bites his bottom lip.

“I...I don’t know,” Yuuri says, sighing to himself. “This would have been so much easier if Mari didn’t reject her claim to the throne.”

“She had her reasons. She had other aspirations, other wishes that couldn’t have been fulfilled if she
were a ruling monarch,” Hiroko says fondly, taking out a pack of ham to fry in the skillet. Yuuri watches her, contemplative of his own thoughts and wants.

He’s only sixteen, going on seventeen in a few more weeks. As of now, he doesn’t really know what he wants to do with his life. Being a prince and ruling over Hasetsu when he becomes of age just seems like his determined path. Maybe he’d like to go to college, but it’s not like he’ll know what to do with whatever degree he’ll get.

He doesn’t want to be such a burden and an inconvenience. They need him to take the throne, whether they want to admit to his face or not.

Yuuri bites his lower lip again, remaining quiet and only moving when his mother quietly asks him if he can get her some English muffins while she cooks the ham.

When he brings her the muffins, he mumbles, “I’ll still do it.”

Hiroko doesn’t speak up right away. She turns over the ham, taking an English muffin to stick in the toaster.

“I want you to be happy, Yuuri,” she tells him, looking up at him with soft, sparkling eyes. “All I ever want - all everyone wants is for you to be happy.”

Yuuri nods his head. “Yeah… I should pick up on my reading Minako had me start before all this paparazzi stuff happened.”

“So you want to eat first?” she asks. Yuuri smiles. His lips don’t stretch across his face far enough for it to look convincing.

“Sure. I’m starved.”

Yuuri is allowed to return to school on Friday, his slotted arrival to be at the start of lunch due to Watanabe wanting to starve out any waiting paparazzi.

“It couldn’t have been earlier?” Yuuri inquires as they approach the school in the Mulsanne, knocking his knees together.

“I have never seen a high school boy so eager to have a long school day,” Watanabe quips. Yuuri’s cheeks puff in indignation at that, but Watanabe continues, “The fewer sharks we deal with getting you in there, the better. I can only fathom the hoard of photo hounds and ‘Tweens Magazine’ reporters that will come to see you when school lets out.”

Yuuri keeps quiet, a disheartening taste filling his mouth as he slumps in his seat.

Watanabe doesn’t seem to notice. “The Twin Rivers will be accompanying you while you are at school. Please let them know if you need anything and they will get it for you,” he says, pulling the vehicle alongside the curb in the drop off zone. There’s two news vans parked further down the street, the cameramen and reporters lingering outside for any glimpses of the prince. It’s a small enough crowd for Yuuri to see the tension in Watanabe’s shoulders ease for only a bit.
The elder man turns to look over his shoulder. “Remember: head down and keep walking,” he tells Yuuri, placing the car in park and unbuckling the seatbelt. Yuuri doesn’t respond, just unbuckles his seatbelt himself and prepares to exit.

With a hard swallow, he pushed open his door and grabs his bag.

The shouts happen in an instant. ‘Prince Katsuki!’ and ‘Your Highness!’ sound in cacophonous yells intermixed with camera shutters firing. Yuuri feels Watanabe’s hand on his shoulder and Yuuri immediately raises his messenger bag to obscure his face.

He takes one step, then two, then accidentally four and stumbles. The bag drops down, some papers spilling as Yuuri takes a knee. The shouts of ‘are you okay?!’ sound less concerned and more amused. Yuuri’s cheeks feel like the hot sun above.

"Leave them, leave them," Watanabe’s urges when Yuuri does a feeble grab for his Pre-Calculus notes and the photographers are coming up from the rear. Watanabe grabs Yuuri to his feet and hastens him inside past the double doors, right into the arms of another bodyguard.

"I’ll stay outside and deal with the crowd. Kurokawa, anything His Highness needs, you or your partner give him,” Watanabe instructs.

The fluorescent lights that have a flicker to them make the gold on the guard’s pins give off a little glint. The man is wearing the pizza slice pin again, along with a silver milkshake just beneath a bronze badge with the royal emblem.

“It’s Arakawa, but I’ll let Kuro know as well, Sir,” he speaks in a lax tone. Though Yuuri doesn’t see Watanabe’s eyes through the mirrored aviator shades, he assumes they are rolling back, accompanying the downward sag of Watanabe’s shoulders.

The elder man places a firm hand on Yuuri’s shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly before moving up to lightly muse Yuuri’s hair.

“Have a nice day at school, Your Highness,” Watanabe says.

Yuuri manages to smile, adjusting his hold on the strap of his bag. “I’ll try,” he says back, and for Watanabe, that is good enough.

Arakawa leads Yuuri down the hallway as Watanabe goes back down to handle the crowd that tries to barge in after Yuuri. Their footsteps echo loudly against the linoleum flooring as they walk, hurrying up the stairwell to the classroom where Yuuri has his lunch before the period begins.

As they approach the room, Yuuri sees the other guard stationed just outside the door, hands folded in front of him and staring straight ahead. When he hears them drawing near, he turns to face Yuuri and bows.

“Sir,” Kurokawa greets, opening the door for Yuuri to enter. However, Yuuri hesitates, rocking from side to side on the edges of his new Converse.

“Um,” Yuuri starts, and he looks up through his eyelashes before he continues, “so, I was wondering if...if maybe we could have guests over for lunch? Just - just a small crowd of people, you know. To - um...discuss things and...um...”

“You want us to find your bandmates for you?” Arakawa asks bluntly, hands slipping casually in the pockets of his blazer for the time being. Yuuri’s ears burn a hot red just at the tips, but he nods ‘yes’ for his answer.
Arakawa turns to his partner. "Kuro?"

"I will find them, Sir," Kurokawa responds back, his head bowed at a low angle. Yuuri twiddles his thumbs.

"Just - don’t make it a *thing*, okay?"

"I promise not to make it a ‘thing’, Sir."

Kurokawa gestures to the empty interior of the classroom. "Please," he says, "wait here while I go and fetch them. Lunch period is almost about to begin."

And Yuuri knows he can’t argue the matter any further. He knows that he should be grateful that the guards are allowing merely *this* to happen in opposition to Watanabe’s orders of ‘see no one, speak to no one’. Yuuri nods his head, clutching to the strap of his book bag, and escorts himself inside. Arakawa follows inside and stands at the doorway, closing it shut behind them.

The classroom is lonely, with so many desks and zero people sitting at them. Yuuri takes a spot by the window, close to the teacher’s desk. As he peers outside, he sees the street running parallel to the baseball field. Lining the road are news vans, paparazzi trucks, photo hounds all squatting by the fences to take shots of the school from where they cannot enter.

The bell sounds, and Yuuri hears the bustle of life outside the walls, above him, below him. Arakawa remains rooted at his spot by the door, hands folded in front of him.

"Would you like to eat your lunch, Sir?" Arakawa speaks when Yuuri hasn’t even moved to open his bag and retrieve the bento Kaede prepared. Yuuri fiddles nervously in his seat, before he complies and starts to rummage through his bag.

Yuuri eats, but he takes small bites of his meal. He picks through the bits of steamed cabbage and nori rice. He half heartedly chews pieces of grilled mackerel and sips from his bottle of chilled green tea. At times, Yuuri focuses his attention to the clock just before he takes another measly bite, gauging the time and wondering how much longer will it take.

He waits.

He waits.

He waits.

And there, ten minutes before the first scheduled lunch is to end and the second about to begin, a sudden knock at the door sounds. The raps are like Morse code, two quick ones before two heavy knocks. Arakawa moves away from guarding the door with his body to open it, and Yuuri sits upright in alarm.

Phichit is the one that runs through the door first, bolting towards Yuuri with his arms outstretched. Yuuri holds his arms out to catch his friend before Phichit successfully barrels him over, hugging him tight as Phichit immediately goes into a slew of uncharacteristic apologies.

"It’s okay, it wasn’t your fault," Yuuri says over and over, and huh, he remembers Phichit always telling him that when their positions were switched. The words taste a little funny on his tongue. He clears them away with a strained noise of his throat.

Guang-Hong follows shortly after, getting his arms around them both as best as he can. Yuuri hugs the other boy as well, smiling, before he steps back to allow some breathing space. Turning his
attention to the door, Yuuri sees the other members of the band quietly filing in one by one with Kurokawa taking the rear. The majority of the boys hug the furthest wall, watching Yuuri with uncertainty and the guards even moreso.

Victor is nowhere in sight.

"My apologies for disappointing you, Sir," Kurokawa speaks, bowing his head. "The little blond one alluded me and I was running short of time."

"Oh," Yuuri says, rubbing at his forehead to find that he is frowning. "No, no. It’s fine, thank you for your work."

Turning to the remaining band members that have yet to approach him - Otabek, Leo, Seung-Gil, JJ and even Christophe - Yuuri awkwardly folds his hands behind his back. He smiles, feeling the right corner twitch with anxiety.

"Um, will you please sit?" he asks, gesturing to the rows of chairs around his own. After an uncomfortable beat, Otabek is the one that steps forward. He finds a spot to Yuuri’s left, then shortly after, the others follow and take seats around Yuuri.

When all eyes are on him - but not like never weren’t - Yuuri clears his throat, clasping his hands together. “So, I’m sure you all heard the news about me. Um...it’s true. And...after talking with my advisor and head of security, I am still going to be a student here at school. And...I just - I really don’t want this to change how you see me and - I really, really liked making a music video with you guys and I - I don’t want to jeopardize anything-“

“Woah, woah, woah,” JJ interrupts, hands going to his head like he’s struggling to just comprehend Yuuri’s ramblings. “Look Katsuki, er, Your Majesty-“

“Majesty is for kings, you call him ‘Your Highness’,” Otabek corrects with a mumble. JJ pinches the bridge of his nose.

“The point I’m trying to make is, you know I always thought you were some stuck up snob that didn’t talk to anyone, which was weird because who wouldn’t want to get to know a guy like me?” JJ boasts. He drops his hand down to his knee, and his smile is bright. “But you’re alright!”

Otabek crosses his arms, then gives an agreeable nod of his head.

“It’s not like I have a problem with you being...you. None of us do,” JJ further explains with a shrug.

“Yeah!” Leo exclaims. “Why would we be angry you’re a prince? That’s freaking awesome!”

There’s something warm that burns in Yuuri’s cheeks. It starts as a mild embarrassment, before it swells with happiness and relief.

“Oh,” says Yuuri, and he says it with a tiny little smile, “Oh. Then, I’m glad.”

JJ leans back in his chair. “We have a prince in our music video. That’s so fucking cool.” And with a sudden lurch forward, JJ then boasts, “We should definitely have our name be ‘King JJ and the Squires’ now! It just make sense.”

“We’re not going with that stupid name,” Seung-Gil says, rather exasperated.

The band members erupt into a small burst of side-chatter on the topic of names for the band. Yuuri
stands off to the side, hands behind his back, observing from off to the side.

Eventually, his eyes wander to Christophe, who has moved to merge within the group, but is the only one that still remains standing. Quietly, Yuuri approaches, biting at his lower lip.

“Um,” he starts, and Christophe raises an eyebrow at him. “Victor...he isn’t here today? Is he alright? Were you able to speak to him?”

“He’s alright,” Christophe answers. He’s smiling, like he knows something Yuuri doesn’t. It accompanies the twinkle of his eyes. “He’s lying low, though. Apparently they had the paparazzi camping on their street wanting to catch glimpses of him and his family.”

Guilt bubbles up in Yuuri’s gut immediately. He wraps his arms around his midsection, wincing at the invisible pain.

“Is there any way you could pass a message on to him for me?” Yuuri asks, averting his eyes momentarily. “I’ve been on suspension from my phone since this mess happened.”

Christophe winks, bringing a finger to the fullness of his bottom lip.

“If you want,” Christophe starts in a low whisper, “I can suggest something else that’ll make you both happy.”

As Watanabe inferred, the streets are overcrowded with news vans and photographers that swarm the front steps as the bell rings. There’s a larger squad of men in black awaiting Yuuri after his last class period, where he sat awkwardly in his chair while his Economics teacher floundered over the lecture and students that had no interest in Yuuri before now try to force a conversation to arise.

There’s pushing as he and his guards move down the hallway towards the front doors, a concession of students parting like the Red Seas as Yuuri makes his way past them. He does what he did in the morning, head down, eyes averted, moving at a quickened pace. It’s hard to block out the noise of the students whispering and chatting and outright shouting ‘Your Highness!’ , but Yuuri manages.

Arakawa gets Yuuri out the door and down the steps, while another guard in the security unit fends off the reporters and microphones and high-scale cameras. The shutter of dozens of cameras goes off at nearly the same time, creating an echoing reverb of clickclickclick!

It is only a few steps before Yuuri is in Watanabe’s hold and is safely being ushered inside a black BMW.

The view of the outside is through dark tinted glass. He sees his guards surround the back of the vehicle to still shield Yuuri from the onslaught of cameras flashes and busybody newscasters. Twiddling his thumbs, Yuuri has a brief moment of pause as Watanabe climbs into the driver’s seat.

“Were you well, Your Highness?” Watanabe asks, and Yuuri hates how the man doesn’t hide his concern and worry this time around.

He tucks his chin downwards. “I’m fine. It’s fine...but I do have a request for you,” Yuuri speaks.
He looks through his eyelashes at Watanabe up front, and sees the beguiled raise of the elder man’s eyebrow.

“A request for what, Your Highness?” Watanabe asks, but Yuuri doesn’t have the time to answer.

There’s two knocks on the right hand side of the BMW, and Yuuri immediately unlocks his door. Watanabe makes a startled noise, but that gets drowned out by the sound of Yuri cursing up a storm as he is courteously shoved into the backseat with Yuuri.

“Thank you!” Yuuri says to Kurokawa who does a bow, before he closes the door shut.

Yuri gets himself situated on the leather bench, eyes mad and searching for a way out.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” the freshman snaps with extra venom. Yuuri places his hands on his knees, offering up a friendly smile.

“Um, so Christophe told me that you don’t have a ride and, I was just thinking that maybe I could offer to give you a ride home? Or, to wherever you need to go,” Yuuri explains.

“I don’t need a ride or to be seen with you,” Yuri says, and his tone makes him sound like he is absolutely disgusted with the mere thought. “It’s been hell trying to shake off those paparazzi. I can’t even go to the fucking laundromat without someone shoving a mic in my face asking about ‘the prince’ and ‘His Imperial Highness’.”

Yuri crosses his arms, and he lounges back in the cushion of the leather bench. “Not like I’m the one that has a hard-on for you, so why do I have to put up with this shit?”

Yuuri bites his lip, averting his eyes. “I’m...I’m really sorry for the inconvenience I’ve caused you and your family. I didn’t want things to be like this,” he apologizes, head bowed. “Please, if there is anything I can do to help fix this mess that I’ve caused, I’ll make sure that it gets done.”

A pause. Then, Yuri snorts.

“What’re you going to do? Stop being a prince?” Yuri questions. There’s not much scorn in his tone, but as Yuuri takes a glance over at the other boy, he sees Yuri’s arms are still defensively crossed over his chest.

“I can arrange escorts if you should need them. Or, at least ask for my advisor to arrange escorts. I’ll keep my distance from you and your family as well if you want-“

“Victor wouldn’t like that.” And there, Yuri’s voice loses the harsh edge.

Yuuri looks up to see that Yuri is looking away, out through the tinted window with a solemn expression. He sighs, and he kicks his feet on the bench to his left. “Whatever. You should talk to Victor first. That’s the reason why you had your thug manhandle me into your car, right?”

Yuuri winces. “He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“I’m not dainty or anything,” Yuri spits back with renewed fire, then slouches in his seat. “Just don’t like being ‘escorted’ like some toddler.”

Yuuri nods, cheeks warm. “Um...I would like to see Victor if you know where he is.”

Yuri closes his eyes. “Yeah, I know.” He buckles himself in, then starts to poke around the small stack of magazines tucked into a side pocket for Yuuri’s reading. “Head to Plisetsky’s. It’s at the
corner of 22nd and Beverly," he says, withdrawing a motocross magazine.

Yuuri nods, turning to Watanabe who has been passively sitting in the driver’s seat.

“Um, Plisetsky’s please,” Yuuri says, buckling his seatbelt as well.

Whatever Watanabe was thinking, he doesn’t voice it aloud. He nods, placing on his shades and putting the car in drive.

“As you wish, Your Highness.”

It’s a longer drive than expected. Paparazzi vans tail the BMW in order to discern the final destination, so Watanabe drives in circles and blends into the flow of traffic heading into the heart of the city. It’s a quiet drive too, uncomfortably so. Yuri keeps his nose in the magazine while Yuuri stares out the window and fidgets in his spot.

Plisetsky’s is a small appliance shop, Yuuri finds when at last Watanabe pulls up along the curb and puts the car in park. The facade of it is rather faded, like a relic of a shop with a yellow awning and an assortment of colored blenders and toasters on display in the window. Though it is hard to see through the tinted windows of the BMW, it doesn’t seem like there is anyone even inside the store.

Yuri gets out first, and Watanabe gets out to open the door for Yuuri. Immediately, Yuuri hurries to Yuri’s side, eyes darting around as Watanabe opens the door and ushers the boys inside.

There’s a smell of lemon-scented freshener in the air, quiet jazz crackling through the speakers tucked away in the corners of the shop. The walls are a gentle shade of blue, and the appliances are organized in bright colored displays from toasters to washing machines to refrigerators.

Yuri puts distance between them, shoving his hands into his pockets. Before Yuuri can ask about Victor - if he’s here and why would he be in an appliance store of all places - there’s a bright and warm greeting of ‘Hello!’ from the back of the store.

There’s a man that comes out from an office with the nameplate ‘MANAGER’ on the door. He’s tall, his limbs rather gangly and awkward. The bottle green of his eyes is like Yuri’s; the blond hair is also a similar shade, slicked back to give an appearance of professionalism. He approaches Watanabe first with a hand outstretched, while Watanabe immediately moves to stand in front of Yuuri and obscure him from the man’s line of sight.

“Mikhail Plisetsky, proprietor, manager and top salesman,” he greets Watanabe, his hand left hanging in the air. His voice has the same harsh sounds around the vowels like Yuri, but his smile and demeanor is far kinder than the freshman’s.

“Dad, is Victor here?” Yuri cuts in before the man can start his sales pitch.

“Eh?” The man gives an owlish blink, before he checks the watch on his wrist, the leather band worn down and snug around the joint. "He’s picking up some lunch, but he should be back sometime soon." Mikhail explains, then takes a second glance at Watanabe. "Er..." Mikhail starts, "is he...an acquaintance of yours, Yurotchka?"
"No," Yuri says flatly, though the tips of his ears are red.

Finding this a new angle to approach, Mikhail gestures for a handshake. "I’m Yuri’s father. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mister..."


Yuri separates himself from the group, to which Yuuri immediately bolts out from behind Watanabe to huddle close to the other boy. Watanabe then immediately follows after Yuuri, and now Yuri’s face turns a peachy shade of red.

“Quit following me!” He snaps, putting distance between them again and shoving his hands into his pockets. “Just...wait here or something, I don’t know.” Yuri grumbles something under his breath that Yuuri can’t decipher, before he stomps off and into the manager’s office that Mikhail exited from, slamming the door shut behind him.

An awkward silence follows. Watanabe clears his throat.

“Perhaps we should reschedule this impromptu meeting,” he suggests. Yuuri turns to him, wringing his hands behind his back.

“Just a little bit longer?” Yuuri asks. “I just want to see if he’s okay-“

“Um, excuse me?” Mikhail speaks, standing off to the side. He approaches Yuuri, hand raised for a third time, eyes wide with sudden clarity and awe. “Aren’t you...you’re not the...are you the boy with Victor on the newspaper cover?”

Yuuri spares a glance to Watanabe, before he then nods and shakes the other man’s hand with two quick pumps. “Um, yes. I...I’m Yuuri.”

“Yuuri,” Mikhail says, dragging out the vowels with a small smile, before a chuckle rises from his throat along with the color of pink in his cheeks. "Oh, wow. I’ve never met royalty before. I - I can’t believe my Yurotchka’s friends with a prince! I should have dressed better for the occasion - oh!"
Mikhail steps back, glancing behind him at the array of kitchen utilities and appliances. "I should find you a gift. A blender! My finest blender that I have in store!"

Watanabe claps a hand on Yuuri’s shoulder, reeling the boy back to his side with a protective grip. "That will not be necessary. We’re leaving shortly."

There’s a chime of a bell as the door opens once again. Watanabe shifts to stand to guard Yuuri, but hesitates at the last second. Out of the corner of his eye, Yuuri sees Victor standing in the doorway, sunglasses on his nose and hair tucked beneath a shoddy grey beanie. Clutched in Victor’s fist is a bag of takeout, but that promptly gets dropped to the ground the same time Victor’s jaw drops from surprise.

In the short span of a second, Yuuri has already broke free from the surroundings of Watanabe and Mikhail, and his arms go up to wrap around Victor’s shoulders while Victor’s arms wrap around Yuuri’s waist.

Victor smells like vanilla and peppermint. It makes it all the more easier for Yuuri to melt in his arms.

“Are you okay?” Victor asks, his lips tickling against the curve of Yuuri’s neck, right at his speeding pulse. Yuuri hums, eyes closed tight.
“Are you okay?” Yuuri asks back, and he feels Victor’s smile against his skin. Victor pulls his face away, but keeps Yuuri closely pulled up against his front, arms squeezing around Yuuri’s waist.

“Better that you’re here,” he says, and his smile shapes into that heart-shape Yuuri adores oh so much.

Yuuri’s foot steps back and crinkles against the plastic of the bag, still laying on the floor where Victor dropped it. “Ah!” Yuuri says in surprise, pulling out of Victor’s hold momentarily to stoop down and pick the food up. “Is it okay? I can ask Watanabe to get you something else-”

Watanabe clears his throat again, louder this time around. Yuuri looks over his shoulder at the elder man, then back to Victor and sighs.

“Um, I...I wanted to talk to you about...the situation...and things...”

Victor nods, and his right hand finds Yuuri’s left, squeezing it. Without warning, he tugs Yuuri along past Watanabe and Mikhail, not giving any words to the blond man though Yuuri fleetingly sees Mikhail’s eyes brimming with confusion.

Victor pulls Yuuri into a room marked off for ‘EMPLOYEE’S ONLY’, closing the door shut and locking it behind him. It’s a small break room, with a couch in desperate need of being reupholstered pressed against the left wall and a snack table to the right. To the far back, there’s a section of steel metal lockers, but only one of them has an actual lock on it.

“We’re alone for the time being,” Victor says, taking the bag of spilled food from Yuuri’s other hand to place on the snack table, before he leads the two of them to sit together on the couch. Yuuri doesn’t make a sound; his mind is slowly comprehending the reality of being alone in a room with Victor.

“Um,” Yuuri starts, but his throat is feeling dry suddenly. He clears it, and remembers he’s still holding Victor’s hand so he unfortunately can’t start playing with the bottom of his blazer. “So...I’m a prince.”

Victor laughs, but it’s awkward. “Uh, yeah. I found that part out.”

Yuuri winces internally. “I’m sorry if you think I lied to you about myself. I - it wasn’t supposed to come out this way and - and everything just gotten worse with the photos being leaked and the paparazzi and I’m really sorry if I’ve caused you any inconvenience!” he apologizes all in one breath.

Victor shakes his head, pulling off the beanie and the sunglasses. The silver hair spills over Victor’s shoulders, and Yuuri’s breath hitches when he sees his reflection in the blues of Victor’s eyes.

“You’re not an inconvenience. You’re never an inconvenience,” Victor states. “We’ve been getting by. It’s been a little bit hard with the camera people and the newsvans, but eventually they’ll get tired of harassing us and move on to some more interesting subjects.” Victor’s eyes widen with alarm then, and he adds, “I didn’t tell anything about you. Nothing...nothing that would make you look bad or anything.”

Yuuri smiles. “Thank you,” he says, “but you don’t have to worry about protecting my image. This is my mess that I need to fix. I don’t want you to do more than what you’re already doing.” He squeezes Victor’s hand, like he needs a reassurance that Victor is still here beside him. Victor squeezes Yuuri’s hand back, warm and strong.

“But what if I want to?” Victor asks with a strangely small voice. Out of the corner of his eye, Yuuri
sees Victor slowly taking on a pink shade. “I mean, I don’t want people saying bad things about you if they don’t even bother to get to know you. And maybe I don’t know that side of you much, but I like the side that you let me see...I like it a lot.”

“M-Me too!” Yuuri’s voice squeaks, face too hot and lips twisting from becoming so frazzled. “B- But about you!”

“Ah,” Victor says with the dumbest, happiest smile.

They sit like that for a few seconds, not looking at each other but with red in their cheeks and hands still tightly interlocked.

“S-So! Um! The video!” Yuuri blurts to distract himself from the hot burning at the tips of his ears. “Did it go good with the editing? Did it come out okay? How many views?”

“Oh,” Victor says, but this tone sounds a little bit sad. “I didn’t upload the video.”

Yuuri turns to Victor with eyes wide and surprised.

“Well?”

Victor shrugs, biting the inside of his cheek. “...After all that’s happened, I...I didn’t know if ‘your people’ would have been happy about it. I didn’t want to make you look bad and just put more stress on you. I mean, god, this is the first time we’ve talked and I don’t even know the full story about what’s going on.”

Looking to Yuuri, he forces on a smile. “I just didn’t want to complicate things. That’s all.”

Yuuri blinks. Then, he frowns.

“But everyone worked hard on it! Guang-Hong had to film everything by himself and everyone bought costumes and - I don’t want all of it to be a waste because of me!” he exclaims. “I told you before that I wanted to do the video. I still do want to help you with your band for as long as I can. I don’t want to hold you back and I don’t want to get in your way, so please.”

Yuuri’s heart is beating so fast and so hard, he thinks it’s going to leap into his throat. He closes his eyes tight and squeezes Victor’s hand. “Please, don’t ever hold back when it comes to me! Treat me like you’ve always done. That’s...that’s all I want.”

There’s a pause where there’s only the sound of Yuuri’s heartbeat thumping loudly in his ears. Then, Victor releases Yuuri’s hand to cup his face within his palms, and slots his mouth over Yuuri’s in one deft tilt of his head.

Yuuri’s never been kissed before, though he knows deep in his heart, he’s thought about this moment many many times. He’s thought about the how the world would react in the moment, if it fades away into a quiet silence or it disappears all at once the moment so the only thing that can matter is how Victor’s lips connect with his own.

Victor’s lips are soft on Yuuri’s mouth. It tastes like cherry lip balm.

The kiss is kept dreadfully short, just a peck that lasts only long enough for Yuuri to register that Victor kissed him, Victor kissed him, Victor kissed him. The other boy pulls back, creating a distance between their lips that Yuuri only wants to cross and close with his own trembling mouth.

Victor’s eyelashes are fluttering, dazedly, like his body’s moved on its own just now, and his mind
has yet to catch up.

“...You said...don’t hold back,” he murmurs. His voice is groggy with something that itches its way between Yuuri’s shoulder blades and makes him tremble. "I never, I never want to hold back. I never want to hold you back. I-"

"You won’t," Yuuri breathes. He doesn’t know where to focus, either the soft twinkle of Victor’s eyes or the softness of Victor’s lips. Slowly — as though he is getting familiar with how to use his body, how to place his hands on Victor’s shoulders and bring himself closer — Yuuri’s eyelashes give a gentle flutter. "Um...may I?"

Victor gives an audible swallow, before he nods in approval.

There is not much of a distance for Yuuri to lean in and kiss Victor back. The moment he does, he feels Victor’s lips smile into it and oh, it makes Yuuri feel like he’s floating upupup.

There’s still a sense of inexperience that lingers in the way Yuuri kisses with his mouth closed, eyes tightly scrunched. His body is stiff, even as Victor’s hands coax trembles out his spine as they move down his body and eventually bracket Yuuri’s hips. Victor’s mouth — ah, Yuuri tries to keep his gasp from escaping his throat. It’s so warm, so soft, so sweet.

Victor’s hands squeeze Yuuri’s hips, and he hums against the seal of Yuuri’s mouth. The vibration makes Yuuri feel bubbles fill his chest and his lungs, and a sigh just seeps out languid and slow, his teeth grazing against Victor’s bottom lip.

KNOCK! KNOCK! KNOCK!

Yuuri’s head whips around so fast to look at the door that his glasses nearly fly off the bridge of his nose.

"U-Uh! Hey kids, Mr. Watanabe needs to get His Highness to his piano lesson. Also, Victor, there’s some cars pulling up so we might have some business!" Mikhail shouts through the door.

The first sound that Yuuri responds with is a throaty squeak. "S-Sure! I’ll - we - us - c-coming!" he manages to stammer afterwards, running his mouth over his bottom lip.

Huh. He thought they’d taste like cherry lip balm. Instead, Yuuri is tasting copper.

"U-Um, so we - I’ll - I’ll um -" Yuuri trips and stumbles over his words to face Victor, just in time to catch Victor quickly grabbing a wad of Kleenex tissue with one hand and holding his bloody mouth with the other.

"I didn’t knowf you pwayed pwiano," Victor speaks through the tissue. Yuuri’s eyes widen with mild horror as he tastes the copper on his tongue once again.

"Oh my god. Oh my god. I - I’m so sorry! I didn’t mean to - I -" Yuuri drops his face into his hands. "I’ve never kissed anyone before and I know I might have been bad but I didn’t think this would-"

"It’s fine," Victor says,shrugging with that lovestruck shine of his eyes. "It could have been worse. You could have bit my tongue off or something."

Yuuri doesn’t know whether to be mortified at the thought, or embarrassed at kissing Victor with tongue. For a brief interlude, he fidgets while Victor dabs away the blood from his lip. The bite doesn’t look bad when Victor pulls the tissue away, but it doesn’t look pretty either.
Another round of knocks occur, these ones quieter and more subtle.

"Sir," Watanabe’s voice sounds from the outside, "we need to get leaving."

"Just a second!" Yuuri urges, turning to Victor with a look of conflict. He closes the space in between them, his hand going to hold Victor’s not currently occupied with a bloody napkin. "I," Yuuri starts, then swallows, "Please, upload the video. I-I may not be able to see it right away, but I don’t want everyone’s hard work to go to waste because you’re concerned about me."

Not meaning to, Yuuri squeezes Victor’s hand as his shoulders shrug up to his reddened ears. "A-And I’ll talk to you! I’ll call you! I’ll figure out anyway to see you again because I - I really like you! A-And! I! U-Um!"

Yuuri makes a noise like a deflating balloon, bringing his other hand to shield his eyes as he tries to collect himself.

Victor gives this longing sigh. "I want to kiss you again," he says while his body already starts to lean in to do so. The sound of three more knocks, as well as Yuuri’s hands against Victor’s chest, is what stops him from doing so.

"I-I need to go, but-" Yuuri makes sure to lean in fast before his body goes too rigid from nerves, kissing Victor square on the nose. Pulling away in time to see the spot he kissed bloom a fierce shade of pink, Yuuri rises to his feet, approaching the door with shaky steps and legs feeling rather like jelly.

The lock comes off with a fumbling of sweaty hands, and the door is opened to find Watanabe waiting just outside of it.

The man first looks at Yuuri, who immediately averts his eyes to the ground as a hand goes up to obscure his mouth. Then, Watanabe looks at Victor and the bloody tissue still held up to his mouth.

There’s a pause.

Then, Watanabe grunts out a ‘hmm’, and whatever else he might have planned on saying, he decides to keep it to himself.

"We’re done," Yuuri blurts with an awkward head gesture to Victor behind him, "Talking." He gives a glance towards the front of the store, and he sees both Yuri and Mikhail guarding the front doors while a small crowd of photographers gather outside.

"They must have recognized my car," Watanabe speaks when the worrying makes itself present in the crease of Yuuri’s eyebrows. "It’s just a small crowd, nothing that I can’t handle on my own. But I don’t want it to get any bigger."

"I can help," Victor immediately offers. Watanabe shakes his head, and brings Yuuri back to his side.

"You’ll make the situation worse if they could take more pictures of him and ‘His Imperial Highness’ Alleged Boyfriend’ together," Watanabe says, and Yuuri doesn’t miss how Victor’s body grows terse from the comment. Continuing on, Watanabe says, "If you can show us a back exit, then that will be enough."

Slowly, solemnly, Victor nods his head.

He walks past the two and they follow immediately behind, around the corner and down a hallway
that leads towards the bathroom and utility closet. There’s a third door at the end, one that has no
sign or labels near it to give off any clue as to what’s behind it. As Victor opens the door, a gust of
the outside cold air bristles Yuuri’s skin.

The door leads to an outside alley, cleaner than the one that Yuuri had to traipse through on his way
to the Rock’s entrance. There’s a stool on the porch one can use to sit outside with, a metal ashtray
tucked just beside the leg of it. The air still smells of garbage from the dumpster across the way, but
it’s not so pungent that Yuuri chokes out his breaths.

There are no photographers in sight. Yuuri doesn’t know how long it will take for them to make their
way back around the building, or what they’ll do if the photographers discover them on their way to
the car, but his posture slackens just a bit out of relief for now.

As Watanabe goes to guide Yuuri down from the small ledge they stand on, Yuuri resists. Pulling
away momentarily, he spins back to face Victor lingering in the doorway. As before, Yuuri’s body
moves before his mind, and he wraps his arms around Victor in a tight embrace.

"Don’t forget to upload the video," Yuuri says into Victor’s neck, his face and breath warm. He feels
the hard swallow Victor does against the tight seal of his mouth, then Victor’s arms wind around his
torso shortly after.

"Okay," Victor says, ever so softly, and lets Yuuri go.

Yuuri lingers in Victor’s space for a second, but it isn’t long enough for his liking. With a sigh, he
hurries back to Watanabe, and allows the man to escort him down the alley, not daring to look back.

They exit onto the street moments later, slowing their pace as they approach the vehicle while the
photographers are still gathered at the front door waiting for Yuuri to exit from there.

"Remember, head down and move calmly," Watanabe murmurs, readying the keys.

When they are in arms length of the BMW’s trunk, one man leaning against the car with a camera
hanging around his neck takes notice. His hands immediately grab hold of his camera just as Yuuri
raises his hand to obscure his face.

"Prince Katsuki! Smile!" the man goads, taking a picture that is accompanied with a painfully bright
flash. Immediately after, the other photographers turn on their heels with cameras raised.

"Prince Katsuki! Your Highness! Your Highness!" they all parrot, just as Watanabe swiftly opens
the door and Yuuri hurries himself inside.

Watanabe shortly gets into the driver’s seat and starts the engine just as the photographers swarm
around the sides. The flashes of the cameras are not as bright from within the interior of the car; all of
the royal vehicles have heavily tinted back windows, so Yuuri doubts that they can see him even
with the bright flashes of light.

"We’ll have another long drive before we can shake them and I can take you back to the inn," Watanabe
says with a sigh. Yuuri slouches in his seat, bringing his fingertips to his lips as warmth
fills his cheeks.

The prince smiles. "It’s okay. I don’t mind."

Chapter End Notes
two reasons for such a long hiatus: school is killing me, and i tried so hard to keep this fic a slow burn but no matter how many times I rewrote this chapter to keep the pining going on longer, Victor and Yuuri just kept coming back together so

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