Saltwater Melodies

by LinneaKou

Summary

Mila looked back and forth at both of them, mouth flapping silently. “How?” she finally asked.

“We have no idea,” Viktor said. “Probably magic.”

“Magic is not real,” Chris sputtered.

“Sure looks real to me,” Yuri said.

~
After falling into a magical lagoon during a once-in-a-lifetime eclipse, music students Viktor, Mila, and Yuri find themselves transforming into merfolk whenever they touch water... and considering that they live on the coast, that's probably going to cause some trouble. Things get even weirder when they discover strange powers that may have bigger effects on their daily lives than they could ever imagine.

Add to the mix a thalassophobic pianist, a marine biologist (possibly cryptozoologist) who might actually be completely insane, and a treasure-hunting Canadian... one thing's for sure: their lives sure just got a whole lot more interesting.

Notes

There are a few people who need to be thanked very profusely. Here we go:

The YOI/Sailor Moon squad Bunny and Nana, for the cheerleading on Twitter. I promise that Sailor Moon crossover fic is coming! Also, extra special thank you to Nana for the beautiful banners! I love them SO MUCH ;A;

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The creators of Grammarly, for creating my new favorite Firefox add-on! ...this sentence just got tagged for bad grammar. Huh.

I really hope you guys enjoy this fic. ONWARD!
Viktor had no idea what he was doing here.

His best friend Christophe - semi-professional surfer, professional beach bum, and owner of a malfunctioning Zodiac - had invited Viktor to spend the afternoon with him buzzing around the nearby island and soaking up some sun before witnessing the solar eclipse, an event that hadn’t happened for SoCal in fifty-eight years.

For all intents and purposes, they were sticking to that plan until the aforementioned malfunctioning Zodiac had proceeded to sputter out and die only a few miles off the beaches of Islaluna, an uninhabited patch of land that had been designated as a state park. So, it had only made sense to paddle over to Islaluna and attempt to fix the motor. When that hadn’t worked, the next step was to try to call for help. Except for the fact that they were so far away from a cell tower that their smartphones were basically shiny paperweights.

“Come on a beach trip with me, he says,” Yuri kept grumbling, stabbing the sand with a stick he’d found. “It’ll be fun, he says. A day of relaxation, he says.”
It probably hadn’t been a good idea for them to drag Yuri Plisetsky, one of Viktor’s conservatory students, along with. It had taken a lot of coercion. Mila Babicheva had been easier, and even she was getting frustrated with their plight.

“Lighten up!” Chris laughed, and oh god he’d already lost his shirt. Yuri was glaring at the surfer, his lip curled in disdain as Chris leaned back on his makeshift bed.

“You’re supposed to be helping with the signal fire!” Yuri shouted, and Viktor and Mila winced as Chris shrugged.

“It’s already big enough,” he said, tapping his round sunglasses and nodding to the bonfire they had going. “Someone’s bound to see it sooner or later.”

“The eclipse is soon!” Yuri snapped, wringing his hands. “Do you seriously think the water police will be looking for signal fires when that happens?!”

“Viktor, tell short stack here to chill out~!”

“Why--you--!”

Viktor caught the blond teen by the collar of his sweat-soaked t-shirt and sighed. Being the eldest in the group meant he had to be the adult, right? “Yura, relax. The fire’s big enough, the smoke is going to be visible for miles. You did a good job.”

“We did a good job,” Mila insisted, fanning herself with a palm frond. “I figured out how to light the thing.”

“Yes, yes, both of you.”

Yuri squinted up at them both, and his eyes glittered dangerously. “You know what would make it even bigger?” He wrenched himself out of Viktor’s grasp and sprinted away to Chris’s dead motorboat.

Viktor blinked and Chris sat up, eyebrows raised, as Yuri leaned over the side of the boat and rummaged around in the bottom. Then they both scrambled to their feet in alarm as Yuri hauled his armload of rum out of the cooler. Mila just laughed at them.

“What are you doing?!” Chris cried out as Yuri dropped his bounty on the merrily-crackling signal fire.

“I saw it in a movie,” Yuri answered smugly. “So there.”

“But… that was the good booze!”

“Oh no, what a hardship.”

Viktor let himself mourn the Bacardi, one of his sole indulgences for the week, before he sighed and retreated to the shade. His cheeks were already burning in the bright west coast sun. He didn’t want to think about the tan lines he’d be dealing with after that day.

Chris was still looking forlorn, but Yuri looked pleased with himself. And if Viktor was being honest with himself, the smoke was looking thicker and more plentiful.

Yuri joined Mila and Viktor under the palm tree, smirking, and leaned up against the trunk with his arms crossed.
“Good thing it’s the weekend, huh?” Viktor said aloud, and Yuri snorted.

“Yeah, just how I wanted to spend my Friday. Marooned on an abandoned island.” Yuri blew his hair out of his face and glared at the empty horizon. “I was going to hang out with Beka and do remixes with him today.”

Viktor winced. “Damn, I’m sorry.”

“And I can’t even text him because there’s no fucking signal out here!” Yuri exploded, kicking a tuft of sand up.

“That’s what I like about this place,” Chris offered. “I mean, sure, it’s a drag when it comes to updating Instagram, but as long as I’ve got battery and memory space, I can always upload when I get home!”

“Not helping.” Mila sing-songed as Yuri went scarlet. “Not that anyone cares, but I did want to go clubbing tonight with Sara and some of the other girls from school.”

Viktor pushed his overgrown bangs off his forehead. “I had plans for the evening as well, but there’s nothing to be done. We’ll get off this island soon enough, you’ll see.”

“Were you going to just hang around the conservatory and play sad jazz music all night?” Chris tossed over his shoulder.

Viktor frowned. “Not sad music. Contemplative.”

“No, yeah, sad music,” Mila chimed in. She made a face at Viktor. “This dry spell of yours is really not good for your artistry.” She did the exaggerated air quotes, and Chris laughed.

“I’m hurt,” Viktor muttered. “Maybe I’ll write a song about that.”

“Of course you are,” Chris replied, grinning. “You know what Georgi says, heartbreak makes for the best kind of art.”

“Heartbreak?” Viktor repeated. “What makes you think of that?”


“I don’t need to be psychoanalyzed by a sunbathing beach bum,” Viktor said, rolling his eyes.

“Hm, good point,” Chris said, rolling onto his stomach. “I could be sunbathing instead of psychoanalyzing you.”

“You were already doing that!” Yuri shouted.

Viktor sank to a sitting position against the tree, letting his head fall back against the trunk with a soft thud. He closed his eyes as Yuri began to rant again and Mila started to egg him on. The breeze in the shade was heavenly, and he felt himself starting to drift as the wind blew softly again.

He had no idea how long he dozed, but the next thing he knew he was being shaken awake by Chris. The normally carefree surfer actually looked concerned. “Hey, Yuri went off into the forest some time ago and he hasn’t come back yet. The eclipse is starting soon, it’s going to be too dark to search in a few minutes.”

Viktor scrambled to his feet and together he and Chris dashed back to the boat to find the flashlights. Mila had smartly put her phone in airplane mode after the zodiac engine had gone out, and still had
enough battery to use the flashlight function in it.

The three of them spent the next ten minutes searching desperately through the foliage, calling for Yuri. Viktor had a vivid image of being eviscerated by Yuri’s mother if he wasn’t successful in finding the teen, and he became increasingly frenzied as time went on with no sign of the youngest member of their quartet.

Worst of all, the eclipse was clearly starting; it was as if the sun was being blotted out in the sky above, like some kind of impossible sunset. Viktor didn’t have the special glasses, but he had checked using his powered-down phone and had been able to see the beginning of the shadow of the moon crossing into the disk of the sun. Viktor switched on his flashlight as darkness continued to fall. They had to be getting close to totality.

And then Mila shouted for him, and Viktor followed her voice through the trees until he broke the treeline.

He blinked. “Wow.”

“I know, right!” Mila twirled. “Isn’t it pretty?”

Pretty was an understatement.

They’d stumbled into a lagoon straight out of a fairy tale, a generously-sized body of water connected to the greater breadth of the sea with a tiny inlet. There was a small rocky drop-off from the treeline, ending in a sandy little beach. It absolutely lovely, and the greater ocean beyond the rocks blended right into the darkening sky over the inlet. To the left, Viktor spotted a small waterfall fed by a river snaking through the trees on the opposite side of the pool. The water in the lagoon was gently pulsing and reflecting the diminished sun overhead. It was breathtaking.

Viktor was beside himself with relief when he saw Yuri perched near the water, feet dangling off the edge of the cliff. He was still as sulky as ever, but he was okay.

“We’re still lost, Baba,” Yuri muttered.

“Yes, but Viktor found us! Viktor, do you remember the way back?”

“Yes, of course,” Viktor answered.

“See, we’re not lost anymore.” Mila stuck her tongue out at Yuri. She poked him on the shoulder. “Cheer up, Yura!”

“Shut up,” Yuri grumbled, shoving her back.

“Seriously?” Viktor muttered, making his way down the little hill towards them. Things were starting to devolve into a shoving match until Mila overbalanced and started to fall back towards the water. Viktor picked up speed as her eyes widened and she grabbed Yuri’s arm, and he yelled as his minimal counterweight did absolutely nothing to prevent them both from falling, screaming, over the cliff’s edge.

Viktor skidded to a stop, but his momentum was not having it, plus he couldn’t see the cliff anymore. Thus, he too ended up pitching over the edge, landing in the lagoon with an ungraceful belly-flop.

He resurfaced, spitting out seawater.

“Nice,” Yuri said flatly, and Viktor splashed the teen in irritation.
“Shit,” he said, treading water. “I can’t see a thing.”

“Oh,” Mila said, pointing upward. “I think it’s happening.”

“Don’t look up!” Yuri sputtered. “You’ll burn your retinas!”

Mila held up her phone, which was of course waterproofed. “I think it’s the totality! We’re in the total eclipse of the sun.”

“In the middle of the ocean,” Yuri snapped. “Turn the flashlight back on so we can swim to shore.”

“Yeah, one se- agh!” Mila squawked, and then Viktor could hear her splashing around for a second before she gasped. “Guys, check this out!”

Viktor frowned and began to swim towards the sound of her voice. Judging by the noises to his right, Yuri was doing the same. It took a minute, but he eventually found Mila with the help of a… massive glowing rock jutting out of the lagoon waters.

“Wow,” he breathed, and Mila giggled, having partially climbed onto it already. “How did we not see this before?”

“It was too dark,” Mila shrugged. “I couldn’t tell if there was anything in the water until it started glowing.”

“Why did it only start?” Yuri eyed it suspiciously. He was staying away, eyes narrowed. “If either of you says ‘bioluminescence’ I’m calling bullshit.”

“Maybe it’s some kind of mineral?” Mila suggested.

“I’m not touching that,” Yuri insisted.

Viktor rolls his eyes at the younger teen and put his hand flat against the rock. “I’m sure it’s harmless, or else the preserve staff would have put signs up.”

“Yeah, you say that until you get radiation poisoning,” Yuri grumbled.

“Oooh,” Mila said, peering at her phone. “I think that’s the ‘ring of fire’ up there.”

“What?” Viktor asked, and Mila handed her phone to him so he could see.

“Look at the reflection. Isn’t that cool? You can see the ring of the sun, just barely!”

Viktor squinted, and yeah, Mila was right. The moon was almost perfectly situated in front of the sun. “Yeah. That is pretty cool.”

“So cool,” Yuri griped. “We’re out here in the middle of the ocean--”

“Chill out, Yura. It’s a lagoon,” Mila laughed. “Not like you’re gonna get eaten by a shark!”

“You dragged me into this, Baba. I won’t be forgetting it.” Yuri kept treading water, then yelped as the lagoon began to bubble.

“What the hell?” Viktor shouted, grabbing onto the rock. The rock that was now glowing even more brightly.

And now Yuri was doing the same, panicking as the water thrashed around them.
“It’s like a hot tub,” Mila said, surprised. “But it’s not hot.”

“It’s freaking me out!” Yuri shot back, making a valiant effort to haul himself up onto the rock.

The water began to roil and sparkle like it was being lit from beneath. Fairy lights that had to be a trick of the light danced around their sodden heads, and Viktor blinked and went cross-eyed as one of them booped his nose, winking out.

“What in the world…?” he wondered aloud, squinting at the air above them.

“I don’t like this,” Yuri said nervously, but none of them made an effort to swim towards the shore.

After a few long moments, the totality ended above them and the sun began to emerge from behind the moon as water settled, the fairy lights fading away.

“What the hell,” Yuri demanded, still clinging to the rock.

“I think it’s safe,” Viktor said, venturing out away from the others.

Indeed, the water was now as calm as it had been before the totality, gently lapping at the sand that Viktor could now barely make out just a dozen feet away. He started to swim; eventually, his feet touched the bottom of the pool. “I’m at the edge,” he called back, hauling himself out of the lagoon.

Yuri was off like a shot, paddling desperately for the beach and laughing in relief when he reached the shallows.

“But this is such a cool spot,” Mila whined, but she stowed her phone and pushed off the rock, moving into a graceful breaststroke and joining Yuri on the sand, where the younger teen was wheezing and flopping around at the waterline.

“Don’t be such a drama queen.” Viktor rolled his eyes.

Yuri flipped him off and rolled over before fishing his own phone out of his pocket. “Fuckin’ bricked,” he said flatly. “Great.”

“Stick it in rice,” Mila suggested.

“What rice?!” Yuri yelled at her. “We are stranded on a friggin’ island!”

“When we get home,” Mila said, getting to her feet and shaking her hair out. “Vitya, do you remember the way back to the Zodiac?”

“Yeah,” Viktor answered, looking around at the little beach. “We’ll have to climb those rocks and head back into the forest. It’s that way,” he added, pointing.

As they scrambled up the rocky incline back towards the treeline, the eclipse was ending. It was like a midday sunrise. Viktor hadn’t brought his phone with him, so they were forced to rely on Mila’s compass app to make sure they were headed in the right direction. As the sunlight returned, they were able to look up and see the smoke of the still-burning signal fire.

At long last, they emerged from the forest and finally reached the beach where the zodiac had been left behind.

“Well,” Viktor said as Yuri collapsed next to the bonfire, “at least this is still going.”

“Ugh,” Yuri said. “It’s already getting hot again.”
Mila and Viktor exchanged exasperated looks and rolled their eyes in unison. “Yura, you’re such a brat,” Mila sang as Chris emerged from the trees a few dozen feet to the left.

“Fffffffuck youuuuu.”

“You kiss your mother with that mouth?” Chris called, fanning himself.

Yuri cracked a baleful eye and looked right at Viktor. “Speaking of her, she’s gonna kill you both.”

Viktor sighed and sat down, burying his face in his hands. “I accept my fate.”

Chris blew a raspberry and stripped off his shirt again. “So how about that eclipse? Hey, why are you all soaking wet?”

“We fell into a lagoon,” Mila informed him, sweeping her hair to the side and exposing her undercut.

“Oh, do tell?” Chris wagged his eyebrows. “Which lagoon?”

“It’s maybe a mile that way,” Viktor said, pointing. “It’s weird, though. Filled with some kind of weird reactive… thing that started acting up during the eclipse.”


“You wouldn’t,” Mila pointed out before they were all startled by the sound of a shrill siren.

“The water police!” Yuri literally jumped to his feet, exhaustion forgotten.

The next ten minutes were a whirlwind. The water police officer, a smiling bespectacled older man named Captain Katsuki, managed to bundle the four of them up in scratchy - but dry - blankets and settle them in on the patrol boat, making sure to tow Chris’s Zodiac along back to port. The trip across the channel took around forty minutes, and Viktor ended up dozing off a little at some point before they pulled into the harbor.

“Oh god,” Chris said, nudging Viktor back into awareness.

Mr. and Mrs. Plisetsky were standing at the end of the pier; Yuri’s father merely looked concerned but his mother, as Viktor had predicted, looked furious.

Viktor sank down in his seat and tried to bury himself in the scratchy trauma blanket. “If anyone asks, I died on the way over of heat exhaustion.”

“What was that about accepting fate?” Yuri snorted, but he still jumped off the boat and threw himself into his mother’s arms once they were docked.

Mila sniggered into her elbow while Chris and Viktor both were notably subdued once Mrs. Plisetsky turned to them, and honestly, if Viktor said that his student took mostly after his mother he didn’t think anyone would disagree.

“What the hell, Viktor?!” Mrs. Plisetsky demanded, and Viktor flinched.

“Honestly, ma’am,” Chris said quickly, raising his hand. “It’s all my fault. I had too much faith in the Zodiac.”

“No, he’s my responsibility,” Viktor argued, poking Chris in the shoulder. “I don’t know what I was thinking, artistic retreat. It was spur of the moment—″
“Well, at least that’ll never change,” Mr. Plisetsky muttered.

“Mom, I don’t even care, I’m not even mad anymore,” Yuri whined. “Can we go home?”

“Of course, dear. Your grandfather should be getting off work soon,” Mrs. Plisetsky squeezed her son tightly and whisked him away, leaving her husband to say goodbye.

“I get the feeling that’s not the end of it,” Chris said as Viktor watched the family leave. “Ah, well, I’m going to get my stuff settled and then head home too. Need a ride?”

“I’ve got my scooter parked at the wharf,” Mila said, shaking sand out of her shirt.

Chris shrugged. “Viktor?”

Viktor shook his head. “Nah, I’ll just hoof it.” He retrieved his bag from the patrol boat and set off along the shoreline, heading towards his neighborhood a short walk away.

When he unlocked his apartment door and let himself in, he was greeted by a loud bark and a ball of curly fluff as his pet poodle greeted him enthusiastically. “Ah, Makkachin, I hope you were okay while I was away,” he said, dropping to his knees to accept the slobbery doggy kisses. “I’m so sorry for leaving you alone, I won’t ever do it again.”

Makkachin whined, crowding onto Viktor’s lap like she thought she was still a puppy, and Viktor allowed himself to cuddle with the poodle for a bit longer before he had to get up. He fed Makkachin a jerky snack to tide her over until dinner that night, and briefly considered taking a shower before discarding the idea and just falling onto his bed, still clothed, for a well-earned nap. Makkachin jumped up next to him and Viktor could feel the mattress shift as the poodle curled up at the foot of the bed, and once that was settled he could finally give into the weariness tugging at his consciousness.

And as soon as he drifted off, he dreamed of dancing lights on the water.

When he awoke that evening, the first order of business was to make sure Makkachin got fed properly. As she shoved her face into the food bowl, to Viktor’s amusement, he checked his now-charged phone to see what he’d missed.

Yuri had managed to get himself a new phone, and Mila had tagged the four of them on Facebook for “Watching the Eclipse @ Islaluna”. Yuri was complaining about his lost data on the post in question. Chris had uploaded his photos of Islaluna and the eclipse to Instagram and Facebook, and he’d managed to get a nice shot of the corona with the moon centered in it. Viktor scrolled through his timeline before he couldn’t deny how itchy he was from the dried salt and sand on his skin, so he left Makkachin in the kitchen with her dinner in order to take a shower.

That turned out to be a mistake.

He turned on the shower and waited for the water to heat up, sticking his hand into the stream to gauge the temperature. It still had a ways to go towards being just right, so he shook the excess water off and was about to go brush his teeth when he felt a strange tingling traveling up and down his legs.

He glanced down and had a second to realize the fairy lights were back and swarming him from the waist down before his legs just… disappeared.
Oh. Oh, that was a tail.

And it couldn’t hold his weight so he pitched face forward onto his bath rug, making plenty of noise on the way down.

It took a moment for his brain to recalibrate, and then he flipped over and stared down his body in shock.

“What the fuck,” he said in a dazed, hollow voice.

He pushed himself into a sitting position and found that he couldn’t actually sit - he didn’t really have hips anymore. His hands were shaking as he slowly reached out to poke and then touch the new appendage, which was very solidly a part of him.

It was smooth and scaly, shifting between plum and magenta, and was incredibly muscular. He felt the new muscles shifting under the scales, which was both weird and fascinating. And it didn’t hinge where his knees would be, which allowed him to curl the fin upwards towards his face and examine it.

“Jeez,” he said, tugging on the fin and actually feeling it through the nerve endings in it. “How?” He let it flop back onto the tiles and then jolted at the sound of his phone buzzing on the counter.

“Ah, shit,” he muttered, and then he flipped back onto his belly so he could haul himself over to the sink and drag himself upwards enough so he could grab for his mobile.

The missed call was from Yuri, and he knew right then that this wasn’t just happening to him. He immediately called back.

“Viktor!” Yuri hissed without preamble as soon as he answered. “Don’t get wet!”

“Or else I’ll grow a tail?” Viktor asked dully, glancing over his shoulder at the tail in question. “Too late. You too, huh?”

Yuri was quiet for a moment then said, “Do you think Mila…?”

“Probably.”

“Have you called her?”

“I was kind of stuck on the floor.” Viktor sighed. “No more showers, I guess.”

“Shit.”

Viktor pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yuri, focus. Did you manage to get it to go away?”

“Yeah, it disappears when you dry off.”

Viktor breathed in relief and released the tension he hadn’t realized had been growing in his shoulders and neck. “Thank God.”

“Should I call Mila or do you want to?” Yuri asked, and Viktor picked up on his unease.

“How much trouble are you in?”

Yuri laughed flatly. “None, really. Mom’s still mad at you guys.”
“Okay, I’ll call Chris. You call Mila. Let’s meet at my place if we can get ahold of them. I need to get to a towel.”

“Okay.” Yuri made a pained noise. “I’ll tell my mom I’m meeting with Otabek early or something.”

“Don’t lie-- you know what?” Viktor eyed the towel on the opposite wall. “Do what you gotta do. I’ll text you.” He hung up and put the mobile down so he could start dragging himself across the bathroom.

His shoulders were burning with the effort by the time he got to the towel rack, and he just wearily reached up and tugged one off of its perch, rolling onto his back so he could start trying to dry off the - his - tail.

True to Yuri’s word, once he was completely dry, the tingling and fairy lights returned; his legs reappeared, replacing the tail. He breathed a sigh of relief, and then remembered that he’d left the shower running.

He allowed himself to indulge in a string of curses in three different languages before he tossed aside the used towel and grabbed the one that was more dry. Quickly, before he could get soaked again, he reached into the shower and flipped off the spigot, toweling off again before the tail could reappear once more.

Viktor sighed and scratched at the back of his head. This… this was not going to be easy.

After a lot of consideration, Viktor was forced to take a bath instead of a shower for the first time in a very long time, and luckily that seemed to wash away all of the salt and sand, even if it was awkward as hell. He had to drain the tub and then haul himself out in order to dry off, but he figured out how to use the tail to counterbalance and push off the bottom. It couldn’t sustain his weight, but it was better than solely using his upper body strength.

Chris eventually responded to the voicemail that Viktor had left with a confused text affirming that he was on his way over. A few minutes later, Yuri and Mila checked in as well.

Makkachin needed to go out, and once she’d relieved herself and was settled on the couch with a squeaky toy, Viktor tossed some leftovers from last week’s dinner with his parents into the microwave.

When the intercom buzzed, Viktor ducked out onto his balcony and glanced down at the front door. Chris waved from three stories down, and Viktor quickly buzzed him in.

Chris raised his eyebrows at Viktor when he unlocked his front door and let him in. “So what was so important that you couldn’t tell me over the phone?” he asked as the microwave dinged.

Viktor grabbed a towel so he could handle the hot plate and set it on his stove to cool off. “Chris,” he said slowly, unsure of how to proceed. “Have you been in the water since we got back from Islaluna?”

“Yeah, I went surfing with Masumi,” Chris said, referring to his boyfriend.

Viktor stared at him. “You went surfing.”

“Yyyyyeah?”
“And nothing happened?”

Chris frowned. “What was supposed to happen?”

Viktor opened his mouth to answer, but his intercom buzzed again.

Chris eyed him with concern as he hit the LISTEN button. They both heard Yuri’s angry shouting immediately, and Chris buzzed him in.

When the knock came, Viktor opened his door to reveal both Yuri and Mila.

“Well?” Yuri demanded, stalking in. Mila followed him and immediately squatted down to say hi to Makkachin, who had bounded forward in excitement to greet the visitors.

“He went surfing,” Viktor said, jerking a thumb at Chris.

Chris blinked in confusion as Yuri stared at him, aghast.

“And?” the teen asked.

“Didn’t happen to him,” Viktor answered.

“What are you two talking about?” Mila asked, making a show of checking her watch. “You know, I’m meeting Sara and Phoebe and the others pretty soon--”

“Mila, have you gotten wet since we got back from Islaluna?” Yuri rounded on her.

Mila made a face. “Yura. Seriously.”

“I’m serious!”

“No, I still need to take a shower before I go out!”

“That’s not happening,” Viktor said, poking at the leftover lasagna with a fork.

Mila groaned. “Vitya…”

“Miloshka, go ahead and turn on the sink and stick your arm under the faucet,” Viktor replied, raising his eyebrows. “See what happens.”

“Is that a good idea?” Yuri asked as Mila made another face at him.

Viktor shrugged, and Mila made a frustrated noise.

“Fine,” she grumbled, nudging Viktor aside and moving to the sink. “Does it matter if it’s hot water or cold water, старик?”

“Low blow,” Viktor muttered as Yuri answered, “doesn’t matter.”

Mila rolled her eyes and flipped the faucet on, putting her hand into the stream. “Ooooh,” she said in a spooky voice, waving her wet hand and sprinkling droplets on the counter. Yuri and Viktor both stepped out of range, and she stared at them in bemusement. “What are you--”

The change overtook her as quickly as it had both times for Viktor. The fairy lights suddenly appeared from thin air and swarmed her, and Viktor could swear he could hear twinkling noises before there was a brief flash of light and then Mila pitched forward, her new tail bending and failing
“WHAT THE FUCK,” she shouted in Russian, eyes wide enough that Viktor could see the whites all around her irises. “Viktor, what did you do to me?”

“I didn’t do anything,” Viktor said flatly as Chris yelled in wordless shock. “It happened to me earlier.”

“Same here,” Yuri added, crossing his arms.

Mila heaved herself into flipping over and stared down at her body. “What the hell,” she squeaked.

Her clothes had disappeared, replaced with blue-green scales over any body parts that Viktor probably wouldn’t want to see. And of course, her legs had vanished to make way for a long, muscular tail covered in matching scales that glinted in the kitchen lights.

Mila tentatively reached out to touch what had been her hips just a minute ago and yelped in surprise as her fin flexed on the tile floor. “What is this?!” she demanded.

“That’s a tail,” Yuri said sarcastically. “And it goes away when you dry off.”

“And it’s not a one-off thing,” Viktor added, chewing on a bite of lasagna. “It happened to me twice. I had to take a bath earlier instead of showering.”

Mila looked back and forth at both of them, mouth flapping silently. “How?” she finally asked.

“We have no idea,” Viktor said. “Probably magic.”

“Magic is not real,” Chris sputtered.

“Sure looks real to me,” Yuri said. “Hey, you don’t have knees anymore. Flex it towards you.”

“What?” Mila said, and did so. “HOLYSHIT.”

Viktor nodded. “Yeah. Weird, right?”

“How are you two so calm?!” Mila yelled at them.

“We got our freakouts done with earlier,” Yuri answered.

Mila let out a long, high-pitched wail and let her head flop down onto the floor.

“Let me get you a towel,” Viktor said, putting down his plate on his table. “One second.”

“Sure,” Mila said, sounding dazed, and Viktor ducked into the hallway to rummage through his linen closet. When he returned to the kitchen, Makkachin was investigating Mila’s new appendage and jolting away every time it flexed or moved.

Mila took the towels from him and started scrubbing down her tail, which was slightly damp for some reason, and refused to look at any of them.

“So this didn’t happen to you?” Yuri asked Chris, who shook his head.

“I spent most of the afternoon in the water,” Chris answered, looking like he’d gotten whacked in the face with a two-by-four.
“So it’s just us three,” Viktor said, and Yuri said exactly what he was thinking:

“It was that lagoon.” He crossed his arms again. “It has to be that. It’s the only thing we all have in common that he wasn’t there for.” He jerked his chin at Chris

“Maybe it was specifically the rock?” Viktor mused.

“Who cares?” Mila snapped. “How do we make it stop happening?”

Viktor and Yuri both shrugged in unison, and Mila groaned.

“I can’t go to the beach ever again,” she said, burying her face in the towel. “What would happen if someone saw me like this?”

Chris sat down on the loveseat, still looking dazed. “You’d get hauled into an aquarium, probably,” he said slowly. “Possibly even dissected. Holy shit.”

“Jesus Christ, Chris!” Viktor snapped.

“Am I wrong?!” Chris demanded. “My boyfriend is a marine park worker, remember? They capture and hold rare specimens for study!”

“I didn’t need to hear that,” Yuri said, sitting down on the floor. “Fuck.”

“We have to go back to the island,” Viktor decided. “There has to be some kind of answer in that lagoon.”

They all looked to Chris, who sputtered. “Don’t look at me! The Zodiac needs to be fixed!”

“So what do you expect us to do?” Yuri demanded. “Swim?”

“Why not?” Chris quipped, eyeing Mila’s tail.

“Okay, first of all, up yours,” Mila said, pointing at him. “This is freaky.”

“But it works, right? Theoretically, at least.” Chris crossed his arms and stroked his goatee. “I mean, you could jump in at the docks and probably make decent time on your own. You could even approach the lagoon from the ocean instead of trying to find it from the forest.”

“We don’t even know if these things work,” Yuri started to say, but Mila’s shrill laugh cut him off.

“Yura, I’m willing to bet they do,” she said as she furiously rubbed at her sides. “I’m feeling muscles that I’ve never had before.”

“Okay, so the tails probably work.” Viktor began to pace. “And we have a general idea of where the lagoon is.”

“Do we?” Yuri asked, raising an eyebrow.

“GPS,” Chris pointed out. “We have satellite views of Islaluna. Let’s see if we can’t find your lagoon on Google Earth before you set out.”

“And my phone is waterproof, so we’d have navigation,” Mila added as the fairy lights finally came back, returning her legs to her. She got to her feet, only a little unsteady, and pinched her thigh as if afraid it wasn’t real. “We can’t go out tonight,” she said. “I have plans, it’s Last Fling.”
“What if you get splashed in public, at a crowded club?” Yuri looked ready to grab her by the shoulders and shake her.

“I’ll be careful,” Mila waved him off. “It would look weird if I didn’t show.”

“What if it’s just water that does this?” Chris asked, tapping his chin. “Maybe there’s a scientific method to all of this—”

“If you’re even thinking of asking Masu about this, don’t,” Viktor warned. “We need to get a handle on this before we consult anyone. Nothing leaves this room, otherwise.”

“Don’t be so paranoid,” Chris said. “Who would believe us?”

“I don’t want to find out,” Viktor muttered.

“He’s right,” Mila agreed. “We all know our phones are tapped by the NSA anyway.”

Chris rolled his eyes. “My god, you’re a bunch of conspiracy theorists.”

“Better to be safe than sorry,” Mila sing-songed.

“So basically, act like nothing’s out of the ordinary,” Viktor said. He picked up his plate again and poked the cooling lasagna with his fork. “Be extra careful, and tell no one.”

“I think we can manage that.” Yuri narrowed his eyes at Chris. “Mostly.”

“I don’t want to see my best friend strapped to an examination table, thanks,” Chris replied coolly. “I’ll keep my mouth shut.”

Viktor waved Yuri’s concerns off. “He’s good for it. He didn’t breathe a word about my stint in rehab.”

“You went to rehab?” Mila and Yuri demanded in unison.

“See? You didn’t know. We’re good.”

Chris winced at him. “Viktor…”

“It’s fine. I’m fine.” Viktor took a generous bite of his lasagna to prove it. “See?”

Chris sighed and looked away. “Fine.”

“So we good?” Viktor asked, looking to the younger teens.

Mila and Yuri exchanged conflicted looks but ultimately nodded.

“Miloshka, be careful tonight. Yura, what about you?”

“I’ll just go over to Otabek’s place and hang with him.” Yuri shrugged. “No danger there.”

“Masu’s getting dinner,” Chris said. “I’ll try and get the Zodiac fixed tonight in case you need me out there.”

“When are we doing that?” Yuri asked, face still twisted in a frown.

“Tomorrow?” Viktor suggested, and no one protested. “Okay. Tomorrow. My apartment’s closest to the marina, so we can meet up here tomorrow, maybe around ten in the morning. I’m staying in
tonight anyway, so I’ll do research into the area. Cool?”

“Works for me,” Mila said. “Now I gotta figure out how to shower without falling over.”

“Bath,” Viktor stated. “Say goodbye to showers forever, at least until we figure this out.”

Mila groaned, and Yuri rolled his eyes at her. “C’mon, Baba,” he said, heading towards the apartment door. “Don’t you girls love taking baths all the time?”

“You really need to stop generalizing an entire gender, Yurashka,” Mila grumbled as she followed him out.

That left Chris, Viktor, and Makkachin alone in the apartment.

“You’re really all right?” Chris asked.

Viktor smiled, allowing the expression to be as tired as he actually felt. “I mean, it’s not the end of the world. It’s weird and inconvenient, but I’ll be okay.”

“You’re not going to do anything drastic, are you?” Chris pressed.

Viktor shook his head. “I won’t. I promise.”

“Listen, if you need me for any reason…”

“I’ll call my therapist,” Viktor finished for him, and Chris snorted.

“You do that,” the surfer said as he let himself out. Viktor locked the door behind him and collapsed onto his couch, Makkachin immediately hopping up to put her head in his lap.

“I should finish eating,” he told the poodle, who looked up at him adoringly. “I’ll finish eating. I promise.”

She licked his chin in response.

Chapter End Notes

Okay so before we get started, I have no idea how often I'll be updating this. But, I really want to keep this on a roll! Please feel free to come scream at me on Twitter and Tumblr, and also talk H2O/Mako Mermaids/Splash at me! PLEASE!

Mila called Viktor the equivalent of “old fart” in his kitchen. Ah, youth.

Yes, Yuuri will be showing up fairly soon. Don't worry. (If someone wants to draw Papa Katsuki in his water police uniform, I will cry all over you. I will show up at your house and cry on you, and probably hug you for an awkward amount of time.)

I've been doodling pictures of our merkids, does anyone want to see them?
on an island in the sun

Chapter Summary

The newly-minted merkids return to the island and then check out a local cafe with a few familiar faces...

Chapter Notes

I'm back! HYYYYPE!

Chapter title comes from "Island In The Sun" by Weezer.

I'm pretty sure the next chapter might take a little longer, seeing as I'm also participating in the BBOI and submitting to the nautical zine. But hey, I appreciate all the support!

Special thanks to lots of awesome people: Conversation Hearts, Bunny, Nana, lilithiumwords, selkiesou, Nic, Selen, everybody over on Discord, and lily_winterwood (especially for helping me develop the town and putting up with my crying over SoCal and Pacific marine life)

Shoutout to mah girl Stacie, who just got out of the hospital and is hopefully feeling seaworthy again. ARE YOU PREPARED? Who am I kidding, you've known me for years. You're prepared. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Islaluna was “discovered” by the Spaniards in the 1600’s. They colonized what would eventually be known as Lucía Bay, but for some reason, all attempts to settle on the island itself were mysteriously abandoned. This is what Viktor discovered once he pulled his laptop out of the office/studio and set up at the kitchen table to finish his meal, scrolling through the local digitized archives and reading translations of varying quality.

*It has been explained to me by the natives, one man’s journal entry read, that the island is a sacred place, a meeting place of the moon and sea. To tread there is to invite mishap. I believe it to be true, after these months.*

But what happened? Viktor grew frustrated after countless perusals of the archives that revealed nothing specific. It wasn’t until he switched to a university website that he started hitting paydirt.

There were several attempts to commercialize the island, throughout the nineteenth and twentieth century. One such attempt was halted after the man planning a hotel was killed after being *struck by lightning*. Another saw any progress gained washed away by an entire season’s worth of horrible storms and floods.

Bad luck, at first glance. After a while, people gave up on trying to put their mark on the island and eventually the entire place was made into a state park and wildlife sanctuary. There was a healthy
population of harbor seals there and plenty of whales and sharks that passed by consistently, but no humans lived on the island and rarely did anyone go there… except for wildlife types and the occasional idiot with a malfunctioning Zodiac.

Viktor hit a dead end with the research, having learned a lot and yet very little useful information. Just legends and secondhand accounts of strange misfortunes, and not much else. So, because he had to do something to occupy himself, he pulled up Google Earth so he could examine the island and see if he could spot the lagoon.

Islaluna translated to Moon Island in Spanish. Quite a fitting name, if Viktor was being honest with himself. The land mass was shaped like a fat crescent from above, the hollow part facing the mainland coast and the rounded part facing open sea. Viktor zoomed in very close and examined the island’s shoreline, and he eventually found it.

It was on the round part of the island, almost perfectly situated in the center of the outward curve facing the ocean. Viktor could even pick out the rock they’d climbed onto, and the waterfall he recalled.

Sertori’s Cove, he read. Hm.

He found himself fighting a yawn and realized it had been hours since sunset. He plugged in his laptop and put it to sleep before grabbing his plate and dumping it in the sink. He didn’t know yet how he’d do the dishes - maybe he’d go get himself some thick rubber gloves for the inevitable scrubbing he’d have to do - but he was too out of it to really care about cleaning right then. Tomorrow, he told himself. His nap earlier may have thrown off his sleep schedule, but he’d be starting up work at the conservatory again, which meant he needed to readjust his bodyclock before it messed with him enough to endanger his focus on his work.

He took Makkachin out one last time and then stripped down to his underwear and flopped onto his bed. Then he groaned and rolled off, spitting out sand. Dammit, he needed to change the sheets. But the bed had been made when he’d taken his nap earlier, so he stripped off the comforter, fluffed it, and left it in a heap next to his hamper.

Viktor instead crawled onto his bed, made with only the sheets and a thin summer blanket - the night was cool enough that he felt all right with opening his windows for a breeze and switching off the air conditioning - and Makkachin curled up next to him.

Tomorrow, he told himself again. He’d get everything done tomorrow. And then it was back to the island, to fix this… problem.

He hadn’t let himself say - or even think - the word merman. But… that was what he undoubtedly looked like when he’d touched water.

Viktor sighed and rolled onto his back, staring down at his bare legs. “I don’t feel like a merman,” he told Makkachin, who huffed sleepily.

Still, if this weirdness was still happening tomorrow, maybe a return visit to the island would bring answers in a way that the internet hadn’t.

Viktor closed his eyes, and he could swear he heard the sound of the ocean washing up on the shore as he fell asleep.

The next day dawned bright and clear and brought with it a text from Chris, apologizing for the fact
that his Zodiac was still not operational. Apparently, he was going to need to get the engine rebuilt, and a few parts needed to be ordered.

Viktor told him not to worry about it and instead texted Mila and Yuri to check in on them.

Mila responded after thirty minutes, reaffirming nothing had happened the previous night. Yuri took longer - the kid liked to sleep in insanely late - but also reported no aquatic incidents.

They all confirmed their meeting spot and Viktor set out to get done what he could without getting wet. He decided to stick his comforter in the dryer on air fluff mode to shake off any remaining sand, and debated walking to the corner store to grab some utility rubber gloves. He eventually decided against it and let his dishes pile up in the sink instead, but he couldn’t deny that he would definitely need those gloves if he wanted to keep up his tidy habits.

Nine o’clock whizzed past, and he locked up his apartment and stuck his valuables into the waterproof pouch he’d purchased after a previous Zodiac adventure had resulted in his phone getting ruined. ID cards, money clip, various keys, and cell phone all went in and were carefully sealed against the elements.

He was pacing in front of the entry to his building when Mila walked up, looking pleasantly worn out. They were exchanging inane small talk when Yuri showed up on his scooter, which he parked at the bike rack. The keys went into Viktor’s waterproof pouch, as did Yuri’s phone. Mila’s phone was, as Viktor was already aware, quite waterproof, so she held onto it as they made their way over to the north marina, the closer of the two.

Most of the commercial fishers were already out at sea, so there weren’t many onlookers when the three of them stepped up to the end of one dock and stared out at the cerulean waters.

“Well,” Mila said briskly, handing Viktor her phone in its wristlet case. “Here goes nothing.”

She assumed the traditional diver’s position and propelled herself into the water, executing the dive nicely, and Yuri and Viktor watched the rippling sea underneath them and waited.

She surfaced a dozen feet away and waved, and Viktor tossed her phone to her. She held her hand up for the pouch, and he threw it to her as well before preparing to jump. He was about to step out over the edge of the dock when he glanced at Yuri.

The blond teen was clearly having second thoughts, and Viktor sighed before giving Yuri a small push, sending him over the edge with a yelp. He quickly followed so Yuri wouldn’t have a chance to gripe at him, and hit the water feet-first.

It took a few seconds, but then the magic happened and his legs were gone once more. He took a moment to gather his bearings and caught sight of Yuri’s scowling face. Their clothes were all gone, replaced by their bare chests, and Yuri’s tail was revealed in the blue murkiness to be a striking gold-orange color. Viktor began to… kick, for lack of a better word, and it was nothing like swimming with a monofin, so he kind of floundered a bit.

Mila suddenly appeared, swimming smoothly in front of him and twisting elegantly in the water. She gestured widely to catch the guys’ attention and brought her arms straight out in front of her face, elbows locked, and demonstrated her stroke. It was clearly very effective because she wasn’t having much trouble maneuvering at all.

Viktor copied her and found himself settling into an undulating motion that propelled him forward with a shocking speed. He found himself grinning in delight -- so much faster than the breaststroke
he usually did! Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Yuri doing the same.

They swam out past the buoys marking the docking waters and regrouped beyond the safe swimming limits, surfacing far enough away from any boats or onlookers to not be noticed. Mila handed Viktor his pouch back, which he put around his shoulder like a purse, and woke up her phone. “Okay,” she said, pulling up the GPS. “Here we are, and that’s the direction we need to be headed in.” She pointed a little to their right, and sure enough, Viktor could make out the island in the distance. “How fast do you think we can go?”

“Fast enough to make it in much less time than the Zodiac,” Yuri said, smirking.

“Let’s go, then,” Mila said, putting her phone back into the little wristlet, and they set off.

They stuck together for the most part, but Yuri was clearly starting to enjoy his newfound swimming abilities and zoomed ahead a few times before having to double back. It was kind of adorable.

It took a little less than half an hour to get across the area between the mainland and Islaluna, but once they were close enough they surfaced again and Mila pulled up the GPS map.

“Okay, there it is. Sertori’s Cove.” Viktor pointed at it on the screen.

“Here we are,” Mila said, tapping their location. “So it’s that way.” She pointed to the left side of the island, and they all looked around to make sure no one was around before ducking back under the water again.

The next time they surfaced, Yuri grabbed Mila and said, “Hey, have you noticed we haven’t needed to come up for air as much?”

That made them pause. “I wonder if we even need to?” Viktor finally mused before a large wave buffeted them around.

“The cove is right there,” Mila called, pointing, and they swam for it. Now that they were nearing shore, the waves were becoming more pronounced. Yuri yelled “dive!” and they all did, submerging deeply enough that the waves’ strength was halved, and it was easy swimming from there.

While they made their way to the cove entrance, Viktor took an experimental breath and nearly choked. Okay, no breathing under water then.

Or at least, no direct breathing. While he moved, he could feel an odd fluttering on his sides. Gills? he wondered as they swam past the little rock wall, aided slightly by the waves as the sea floor came up to meet them.

They surfaced within the cove and Mila made a beeline for the rock at the center, transitioning into a forward crawl stroke made inhumanly faster by her new appendage. She put the strap of her phone case in her mouth and began to haul herself up onto the rock, barely able to manage it on upper body strength alone.

“Use the tail,” Viktor called to her, having made his way over at a more leisurely pace. “Find a good foothold and push, those muscles have to be good for something.”

Mila made a harrumphing noise at him and splashed around with her fin for a bit before she was able to securely push off the rock with her tail and use it as leverage. “Wow,” she eventually said, safely atop the rock and spitting out her phone case. “I feel like Ariel.” She preened a little, pretending to
comb her hair as she reclined on the rock.

“More like Punk Ariel,” Viktor laughed. “Hey, have you noticed the gills?”

“Hm?” Mila blinked. “That would explain why we didn’t need to come up for air so often.”

“You losers done?” Yuri hollered from the shore. He’d beached himself and was trying to shuffle away from the water, presumably to dry off.

Viktor and Mila exchanged exasperated looks, and Mila dove off the rock and swam for the beach, Viktor following.

Yuri was rolling around in the soft white sand, tail flopping uselessly, when Mila and Viktor emerged from the surf and began to haul themselves out onto the beach.

“What on earth are you doing?” Mila asked, putting her chin in her hand and watching the youngest member of their trio flop face-down on the sand.

“Trying to dry off so I can friggin’ walk,” Yuri answered, rolling onto his back and shading his eyes from the sun. His tail was now caked in sand, but still glistening with moisture.

“This could take a bit,” Viktor said, reclining on his side. “And we’ve got all day.”

“I don’t wanna spend all day here,” Yuri grumbled.

“If it takes all day to figure out why we grow tails when we touch water, I’ll do it,” Mila said, rolling over as well and shuffling her fin away from the little waves lapping gently at the beach.

“We were all in the water, touching that rock,” Viktor recalled, pointing at it. “There were lights on the water, and the rock was glowing.”

“Yeah, I remember that,” Mila agreed, sitting up a little on her forearms. “Right during the totality.”

“The water was bubbling, too,” Yuri added, brushing sand off of his arms. “But it wasn’t hot. Just bubbly.”

“Vitya, did you find out anything interesting about the island last night?” Mila asked, glancing over at him.

Viktor let his head thump softly to the sand, rolling his shoulders a little. “Mostly that the natives in the area considered it to be cursed,” he said after a while. “And anybody who tried to build on the island either ended up dead or… good as, I think.”

“What?!” Yuri demanded, sitting straight up as best as he could. “Dead?!”

“Well, I think we’ll be alright,” Mila pointed out. “We aren’t trying to turn the island into a resort.”

“Still!” Yuri insisted, his eyes wide and frightened. “Doesn’t this whole transformation thing make you think maybe there’s something to the curse?”

“Maybe it’s the island’s way of protecting itself?” Mila mused, looking out at the lagoon.

“Maybe,” Viktor agreed, and then they blinked as Yuri’s body was swarmed by dancing lights and he changed back, clothes and all.

“I don’t think I’m going to get used to that,” Yuri grumbled, climbing to his feet. “Too weird.”
“I wonder what happens to our clothes,” Mila said thoughtfully as she transformed as well. She got up and brushed her capris off, shaking out her hair and sticking her phone into a pocket.

Viktor was last to change back, and it felt strange to go from basically naked to fully clothed again in an instant. “Holy shit, it’s hot,” he said, fanning himself. “Shade?”

“Shade,” the other two agreed, and they made for the treeline.

They combed the area around the lagoon, and Yuri accidentally fell into the little stream that fed the tiny waterfall and had to flop gracelessly out of the water and onto dry land again so he could dry off again. Viktor and Mila carefully did not laugh at him as he spent the entire time grumbling and bitching about how it had been an accident, he’d only put a foot in, this entire thing is so unfair…

Once Yuri was mobile again, they headed further into the brush and poked around the beach where they’d landed the failed Zodiac voyage, but nothing jumped out at them.

“You know what we might need,” Mila asked as she scanned the horizon, the mainland visible in the distance. “We might need a scientific approach.”

“Chris did say that last night,” Viktor nodded. “And honestly, we’ve got nothing to lose.”

“But we leave his boyfriend out of it,” Yuri insisted. He shaded his eyes from the sun and scowled out at the open sea.

“Of course,” Viktor agreed. He liked the guy fine, but something this bizarre should probably stay among a small group. How did the saying go? Two can keep a secret as long as one of them is dead? Wow, morbid. Pretty sure that’s a song lyric.

“Well,” he said aloud, dragging his mind away from the random intrusive thoughts, “this was certainly an interesting way to end the summer.”

“Interesting,” Yuri scoffed.

“I think it’s kinda cool,” Mila ventured, grinning. “I like being able to swim fast, honestly.”

“It is kinda cool,” Viktor admitted. “But I’d like to see if we can control it. I don’t want to be trapped inside on the off-chance of it raining.”

Mila raised her eyebrows. “Good point.”

She and Viktor exchanged thoughtful glances, and then in unison kicked off their shoes and dropped their personal belongings on the sand before heading out to the surf.

“H-hey! What are you two doing?!” Yuri yelled, chasing after them.

“Seeing if we can control it,” Mila answered.

“Mind over matter,” Viktor added.

Yuri made a face at them. “Fine,” he said, backing away from the water. “Go ahead. Fall on your faces. I’ll be here, pointing and laughing.”

Viktor and Mila both blew raspberries at the teen and then turned and eyed the waves licking at the sand. “Time us,” Mila called over her shoulder.
Yuri yelled something that Viktor didn’t catch thanks to a gust of wind coming off the sea, but after a minute Yuri called “ready” and then Mila and Viktor stepped into the sea.

Viktor concentrated. He concentrated every fiber of his being on not transforming. He stared down at his legs, willing them to remain. His focus was ironclad, honed from years of performing in front of crowds and in noisy concert halls. He concentrated.

It did nothing. The fairy lights reappeared, flowing over him and he fell backward as the tail reappeared. He heard a loud “OOF!” to his right and a splash as Mila fell as well.

“That was about ten seconds,” Yuri said, moving a little closer but still out of reach of the waves. “Give or take a jiff.”

“I was focusing,” Mila said, rolling onto her side. “Were you?”

“Yeah, definitely.” Viktor sighed and scrubbed at his hair. “So it looks like the change happens regardless of whether or not we want it.”

“Shit,” Yuri said. “I hope it doesn’t rain on a school day.”

“We can’t help if that happens,” Mila pointed out, but she looked concerned as well.

They dragged themselves out of the surf and waited in the sun to dry off, and Yuri retreated back to the shade so he could pace around.

“Well,” Mila sighed, rolling onto her belly and drawing spirals in the sand. “Good thing I don’t use the bathrooms at school.”

Viktor made a face “Seriously?”

“Yeah, you ever been in a women’s public restroom? It’s gross.”

“I thought that was just the guys’ bathroom.”

Mila snorted. “I feel like I’ve just stolen your innocence.”

They evidently dried off enough to transform back, and then they were getting to their feet and brushing off the sand from their clothes before they both grabbed their belongings and joined Yuri under the trees.

“So should we go poke around the cove again?” Mila asked, and neither of the guys could find anything to disagree with, so they checked their directions and set off.

The sun was high overhead when they all finally gave up on finding anything useful in the lagoon. They had combed the beach, examining foliage and trees, looking at the rock faces on the cliffside, and carefully searched the waterfall for some sort of hint as to whatever had happened on the day of the eclipse. When that yielded nothing, they re-entered the water once more and examined the rock that they had perched on the previous day, ducking underwater to check the submerged side, and then the floor of the cove.

Nothing jumped out at them, so they surfaced to reconvene at the rock.

“I think,” Mila said slowly. “Maybe this is an eclipse-only thing.”
“And the next time we’ll see an eclipse like this is in… uh,” Yuri grimaced. “How many years?”

“At least fifty,” Viktor said, wincing. “Yeah, we might be S-O-L.”

“What if we bring Chris here to do science?” Yuri pressed, seeming a little frantic.

“Yeah, Chris is known for his scientific prowess,” Mila snorted.

Yuri looked to Viktor. “But he can get his boyfriend to test stuff for him, right?”

Viktor pondered it. “Let’s head back to the mainland and we can talk with him then.”

Mila nodded in agreement and Yuri made a disgruntled noise, but they swam around the rock at the center of the pool and exited the cove the same way they’d arrived.

For some reason, Mila suddenly dived down to the ocean floor a few dozen feet out, and Yuri and Viktor both stopped and doubled back to see what she was investigating.

Mila waved excitedly and pointed down to something on the ground. Viktor followed her finger and blinked in surprise as something on the ocean floor shifted. Yuri flailed as he and Viktor simultaneously realized that an octopus was right underneath them, camouflaged against the sea floor.

The entire island was ringed by hydrocoral reefs, and this eight-legged crawly was taking advantage of all the colors. Viktor jolted back as it began to scamper away, with more speed than he would have thought possible.

Mila’s face was alight with glee, and she had her phone out and was taking pictures. Yuri exhaled a frustrated stream of bubbles and poked her arm. She waved him off, and Yuri shot Viktor a disgruntled look. Viktor shrugged helplessly.

Eventually, Mila frowned at her phone and tucked it away. She started to swim for the surface, and Yuri and Viktor followed.

“Finally!” Yuri snapped as they broke the surface, splashing Mila in annoyance. “What were you think--”

“I ran out of space,” Mila complained, pouting. “I should come back out here with a waterproof camera and a big memory card.”

Viktor snorted. “What will you do with those photos?”

Mila shrugged. “It’s just really cool! Did you see that octopus?”

“Only after he started moving,” Yuri muttered.

“It was pretty cool,” Viktor admitted. “Even if it was a little freaky.”

“Did you see how he camouflaged?” Mila was still excited, even with Yuri the party pooper doing his best to live up to his name. “I wonder if we can find more stuff out here?”

“Like what?” Yuri asked, making a face. “Like sharks?”

“Dolphins,” Mila answered airily, “Reef fish. Seals. Ooh, I’ve always wanted to play with a seal! We should check out the kelp forest!”
“Maybe some other day,” Viktor said, eying Yuri. “In the meantime, I say we stick together when we go out swimming. Buddy system and all.”

“I bet we’d be okay on our own,” Mila argued, but she didn’t protest further. They set back out for the mainland, and this time nobody broke away to investigate anything.

It was the weekend; they were confronted with this fact when they started seeing the pleasure crafts launched from the north marina. Then came the surfers, and the sailboats. And the beach was packed, of course.

They surfaced again beyond the buoys for the public beach, and it was clear they all had one thought in mind: where would be private and safe enough for them to come ashore and to dry off?

“Let’s head towards the south marina,” Viktor eventually said. “That one isn’t as big, and past that it’s protected park land. I know a spot out there, it’s secluded.”

“It’s also rocky as fuck,” Yuri argued, but they couldn’t think of a better place, so they ended up following the coast down past the public beaches.

As they drew closer to the pier, the beaches gave way to steep hills and cliffs. Yuri had been right, there were rocks in abundance along the shore. And, to Mila’s delight, plenty of seals. Or sea lions. Viktor had lived in Lucía Bay for almost all of his life, and he still couldn’t tell the difference. He should probably find out, if only because the coast was full of sea mammals. And, really… he was kind of one, now. Sort of.

They ended up overshooting past the south marina, and as they neared the Alexander Neptune Marine Park and Wildlife Center - otherwise known as “the good Sea World” - they found a perfect spot for their reentry to the mainland: a modestly-sized sea cave that they could swim into and enough space for them to climb out of the water and dry off.

“Holy crap,” Mila said, her mouth dropping as she looked around. “I didn’t know this was here.”

“It’s one of the best-kept secrets of the park,” Viktor recalled. “Chris and his surfing buddies found it a couple years ago. There’s an entrance that’ll take us up to the trail, and we can hike back onto the street from there.”

“How come there aren’t tourists hanging around?” Yuri asked as they waited to transform back. “Aren’t sea caves huge attractions?”

“Well, it’s a pain in the ass to climb out of here,” Viktor admitted. “Also, did I mention the hike?”

He took his phone out of the waterproof pouch and powered it back on. While it was booting back up and getting the signal, he pulled Yuri’s phone out as well and set it away from the water.

“Thanks,” Yuri said, but didn’t reach for it.

“Well, it’s officially been about four hours since I ate last,” Mila announced, lounging back and carefully keeping her tail away from the pool. “Shall we go grab something?”

“Sounds okay to me,” Viktor agreed. “Casual or fast food? We could hit the In-N-Out.”

“Summer’s over.” Mila let her head flop back on her arms. “I have to start eating healthy again for dance.” She was part of a couple performance groups at her school, plus the dancing she did at the conservatory.
“Is it such a good idea to keep that up?” Yuri asked, wringing his hair out. “I mean, it might be dangerous.”

“Uh, no?” Mila gave him an odd look. “Yura, there is literally no reason to quit dancing.”

“Are you looking for a reason to quit violin? Lilia’s not gonna be happy about that,” Viktor teased. Yuri sneered at him. “It’s not like someone could spill water on me in the music rooms. Yakov would literally murder anyone putting the instruments at risk. But dancing?”

“I’d be careful,” Mila argued. “I was able to do it last night.”

Viktor privately agreed with Mila. If she could keep herself dry in a dance club, she’d have no problem at orchesis. And despite her airy attitude, Mila was smart enough to know when she might be in real danger.

His phone finally connected with the cell network and chirped with an incoming message. “Chris is asking if we’re done yet,” he reported, thumbing the messaging app open. “He’s telling me to come meet him at Chihoko’s? Who the hell is that?”

“Ooh, I like that place!” Mila chirped. “It’s a cute cafe on the boardwalk! The wifi is fantastic, and they have an awesome healthy menu that actually tastes like real food.”

“They have a lot of live performers there, too.” Yuri examined his nails. “Otabek’s worked on a few gigs there, helping with sound and stuff.”

“Well, then I guess I’d better tell him we’re on our way.” Viktor fired off the message just as the fairy lights swept over them and they changed back. “Now, watch your step. The gravel’s a little loose.” He got to his feet, and Mila and Yuri followed suit.

Once they emerged from the cave, it took them a few minutes to find a trail that would take them to the park’s north entrance. They ended up on Neptune State Beach, and it was just a matter of finding the nearest bus stop and collapsing on a nearby bench under a conveniently-placed palm tree.

The bus that arrived was air-conditioned, and it was a route that would take them up the coast to the boardwalk. The trip was another half hour, with a handful of stops along the way, so they passed the time on their phones. Mila and Viktor reviewed her snaps of the reef, and Yuri ignored them in favor of texting someone - probably Otabek - and listening to music.

“You know,” Mila said eventually, stopping on a picture of the reef complete with small, colorful fish. “Maybe we should think of this whole… magic business… as a gift?”

“I mean,” Viktor considered it. “I guess it could be construed as… such? But we literally live a couple blocks away from one of the biggest bodies of water in the world. Shit’s gonna happen.”

“But it’s worth it,” Mila countered. “Do you know how much work and money goes into getting views like this? And all we have to do is jump into the sea with a waterproof camera.”

Viktor shrugged, not really willing to argue. “I do want to know why, though,” he said after a while. “Just to put it to rest.”

“I think it’s safe to assume we were in the right place at the right time.” Mila put her phone away. “I mean, sure, let’s do some investigating to find out for sure, but Occam’s Razor and all.”

And she had a point, Viktor had to admit that as Mila poked Yuri on the arm and mouthed “our stop”
at him.

They filed off the bus and began to meander down the boardwalk, weaving in and out of crowds of tourists and shoppers. The busy season was winding down, what with school starting up for the most part in the next two weeks, but that didn’t mean that vacationers would empty out of the town. Still, as Mila led the way past a bunch of chain stores and restaurants, Viktor began to notice a lot more college students than tourists.

“Here we are!” Mila sang out, spreading her arms in front of an unassuming building, set apart from the block of shops lining the boardwalk. Viktor’s eyes traveled up past the doorway to the sign, which read “Sachihoko Cafe” in bright gold lettering, flanked by two Asian-looking fish statues.

They ducked into the cafe, and Viktor blinked in surprise. “How have I never been here before?” he asked, taking in the cozy interior.

The cafe had two levels to it; the upper level looked to be more like a lounge, with comfy chairs and couches surrounding low coffee tables. The lower level was clearly more of an eatery, with an actual bar for patrons to sit at and an assortment of booths and tables scattered around. It was modestly full, the noise a gentle murmur over the easygoing music filtering through various speakers set into the walls. Mood lighting completed the setting, but the big windows and skylights ensured plenty of natural daylight.

“Well,” Mila tapped her finger against her lips and winked. “This is where normal college students hang out. And besides, it only got established a couple years ago. The owner used to be a dancer, that’s how I found out about it.”

“C’mon, let’s get a seat so I can eat something,” Yuri said impatiently.

Chris saved them the trouble, waving to them from the upper floor and quickly coming downstairs to slip his arm through Viktor’s and purr in his ear, “So how was the island?”

“Disappointing,” Viktor answered, as Yuri stomped over to a booth and plopped himself down in one of the seats. “How’s the Zodiac?”

“Still utterly useless. Masu had a good laugh at me last night about what bad shape it was in. There was a lot of ‘I told you so,’” Chris sniffled dramatically, but Viktor could see his eyes sparkling with fondness.

“I’m surprised it didn’t die on you sooner,” Mila teased as they crossed the cafe to join Yuri in his booth. “That thing has been on its last leg for years. I’d accuse you of keeping it alive with magic, but we all know your stance on that.”

Chris made a face as he settled into his seat. “Speaking of which, is that little thing still happening?”


“Mix in a ton of superfruit and it’s delicious,” Chris told him.

“Can you still do science?” Yuri demanded, slumping into the worn pleather of the booth seat.

“Care to elaborate?” Chris raised his eyebrows.

Yuri growled at him, and Mila rolled her eyes. “We didn’t find anything on the island, nothing pointing to why this whole thing happened.” She crossed her arms and leaned on the table. “So we
decided to take you up on your offer to scientifically approach this situation.”

“My offer?” Chris laughed. “I mean, yeah, I’ll help you. But when did I offer?”

Viktor fluttered his eyelashes at his friend. “Oh, Chris, I knew you’d come through for us.”

“It’s your fault we were on that stupid island in the first place,” Yuri grumbled.

Chris shrugged but was saved from having to respond when a waiter popped up to their table, wearing a big smile and a clean apron with a palm tree pattern printed on it.

“Welcome to Chihoko’s! What can I get for you guys?”

“Hey, Phichit!” Mila said, grinning. “Ready for swing season?”

“You know it,” their server answered, winking. He was a cute guy, probably right around Mila’s age, definitely of Southeastern Asian descent. He was fairly willowy, but if he danced with Mila then he probably was a lot more sturdy than he seemed. On closer inspection, Viktor realized he had perfectly applied eyeliner with the tiniest of wings at the tips. “I’m guessing you’re back on your health shake kick?”

Mila stuck her tongue out. “As long as it isn’t whey, I’ll be okay.”

“Extra whey, got it,” Phichit said, pretending to scribble it on his pad. “Drinks?”

“Strawberry-banana milkshake,” Yuri said. “And a large curly fries.”

“Mmkay.”

“I’ll have a tofu burger, with waffle fries.” Chris raised his hand. “And sparkling water, if you’ve still got it.”

“We totally do, what kind of an establishment do you think this is?” Phichit snorted. “For the sparkling water, do you want a specific flavor?”

“Nah, regular’s fine.” Chris nodded.

“I’ll have a salmon burger with waffle fries, and my usual smoothie.” Mila narrowed her eyes at the waiter. “If I taste a hint of whey, your shoes are all vanishing forever.”

“Extra-extra whey, gotcha.” Phichit blew a raspberry at her. He looked at Viktor expectantly.

Viktor glanced at the menu, searching for something that interested him. “Uh, I’ve never been here before—”


Viktor blinked, bemused. “Sure.”

“We have a special today, the turkey avocado club with sea salt chips. The avocado is super fresh and buttery, and I’m not gonna lie, it’s pretty amazing.”

“Sounds great,” Viktor said. “I’ll try that.”

Phichit wrote it down. “And to drink?”
“Uh. Just a Coke, if that’s all right.”

“Diet?”

Viktor made a face. “No, thanks.”

“Is it all right if we serve you Pepsi?” Phichit asked, lips curling into a wicked smile as he glanced at Mila. "That's what we've got."

Mila looked affronted. “You heathens.”

“Hey, take it up with the boss. I just work here. I’ll be right back with your drinks.” Phichit glided away, chortling.

Viktor watched him go, and then looked at Mila. “Friend of yours?”

“I had a couple classes with him in high school,” Mila said, playing with her coaster. “And he’s in the swing dance club with me. We repped the club at a regional competition, he’s really good. He does pole dancing, too.”

Viktor’s eyes widened and he looked back at their waiter, who was chatting animatedly to the guy behind the counter. “Where do you take pole dancing in this town?”

Mila shrugged. “Who knows? Maybe they have a studio set up for it at the conservatory.”

“I should totally check that out,” Viktor mused, and Yuri gagged.

The conversation turned to the upcoming semester - Mila was entering her first year of college, while Yuri was a junior in high school. Chris had decided to skip the college experience entirely, and when he wasn’t surfing he worked at a board rental and surf shop on the boardwalk. He also had gotten into teaching lessons during heavy tourist season.

Viktor had finished his studies years ago, and was now mostly working with students as an accompanying pianist. He did a few jazz gigs in town every month, and sometimes traveled to larger cities to perform, but not nearly as much as he used to do. He honestly preferred it this way, after the fiasco that had initially landed him in rehab for several months. His old instructor, Yakov Feltsman, had been the first person to welcome him back to the conservatory and offer him full-time work, and it was thanks to Yakov that he was able to stay afloat these past few years.

His parents had offered several times to take care of his finances, but Viktor had been determined to make it himself. Of course, he pretended not to know that his father had been the one to make his current apartment available for him at its current rate. He’d scared his parents that year in rehab, and if this made them feel better then he might as well not fight it. But he paid for his own rent and utilities, and he worked as close to a forty-hour week as he could. It wasn’t a horrible way to live, especially since he basically lived in a combination of a university town and a beach town.

A shadow fell over their table and Viktor was brought back to the present as their drinks were brought out, but by a different server. This waiter was another cute Asian boy, with floppy black hair and blue-rimmed glasses. He didn’t meet any of their eyes and stammered as he set their drinks down in front of them and checked that they were the correct orders, then fled as soon as they had their straws.

“Oh,” Viktor watched him go. “Is he all right?”

“I dunno,” Mila scrunched her nose. “Maybe he’s just a really shy guy.”
“Whatever,” Yuri said, already slurping his milkshake. He’d wiped the glass down with a handful of napkins to avoid getting wet by the condensation on the side of the cup.

Mila and Viktor both shrugged and turned back to the conversation, but Viktor could swear he felt the shy waiter’s eyes on him for the rest of his time there. Phichit returned to serving them their food and ended up being the one who took their payments. He got a strange grin on his face when he gave Viktor his check, and kept looking over his shoulder at the bar and the other server, who kept ducking below the bar and avoiding eye contact.

“What’s up with him?” Chris asked, nodding at the bar.

“Oh, that’s just Yuuri,” Phichit answered, smirking. “He’s shy.”

“His name is Yuri?” the other Yuri demanded, flushing. “I don’t wanna share my name with a dweeb!”

“Yu-ri,” Phichit corrected him, pronouncing his fellow server’s name slowly. “Make the ‘u’ nice and long. And sorry, dude, but that’s his name.” He nodded at their table and moved onto the next one.

“What’re the odds?” Mila laughed, and Yuri kicked her under the table.

“If he’s so shy, maybe the service industry isn’t the best place for him,” Chris mused.

“Oh, leave him be,” Viktor said, leaving a tip and putting his card back into his money clip. “What do we want to do now?”

“I have to get back to the shop,” Chris shrugged. “I’m sorry you guys didn’t find out anything on Islaluna, but things are still just starting out.”

“Maybe we should hit the library,” Viktor mused, and Yuri and Mila blanched. “God, you two are such children.”

“Why would we go to the library?” Mila demanded. “We have the internet.”

“Why does the library even still exist?” Yuri whined at the same time.

“One, free access to encyclopedias. Two, it’s air-conditioned.” Viktor ticked off his points on his fingers. “Three, less chance of drinks spilling because the librarians are strict about enforcing the no-food policy.”

“It still sounds boring,” Yuri insisted.

“Fine, don’t come with me,” Viktor said, shrugging and pulling Yuri’s keyring out of the waterproof pouch. “I’m sure you have better things to do.”

“Damn straight,” Yuri said, pushing him out of the booth. “I’m going to hit the arcade.”

“With Beka?” Mila teased. “One of these days he’s going to realize you have no other friends.”

“Shut up, Baba,” Yuri snapped, his face turning beet red.

Realizing she’d hit a nerve, Mila added in a kinder tone, “I think I’ll join you at the arcade. After all, it is yet another building that is air-conditioned.” She waggled her eyebrows at Viktor.

“Just be careful,” Chris reminded them.
“Don’t worry, we will,” Mila flapped a hand at him, and she and Yuri trooped out the door.

Chris eyed Viktor. “Kids, am I right?”

“You’re literally only a few years older than Mila,” Viktor reminded him.

Chris snorted and nudged Viktor’s arm. “Hey, check out who’s staring again.”

Viktor glanced over his shoulder and met the gaze of the shy waiter from earlier, who jolted back and disappeared into the kitchen.

“Maybe he’s a fan,” Chris mused, and Viktor sighed.

“Does it really matter?” he asked. “C’mon, you need to get back to work.”

“Are you seriously going to just show up at the library and read every book on mermaids that you can get your hands on?” Chris asked him, making a face halfway towards incredulous and halfway amused.

“I mean, it’s a start.” Viktor tapped his chin. “But I also want to look into the island, too. I wasn’t able to find much online, maybe some of the older print books will have more.”

“Ah, yes, our lunar-shaped lady of mystery,” Chris sighed. He patted Viktor on the shoulder before also taking his leave. “Good luck!” he called back, and then the door shut with a tinkle.

Viktor sighed and checked to make sure he still had his things, before following his friend back out into the sunlight.

Chapter End Notes

[cackles]

OH MY GOD I CAN’T WAIT FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER! It'll be from Yurio's perspective! AND ALSO PLOT THINGS!

Literally every time I figured out how to pull off a Plot Thing, I clapped like a seal. Please picture that if you need a pick-me-up.

BTW before I forget, Phichit has been aged down to... 19. A whole bunch there. Yup.

If you enjoyed this and want to talk with me, hit me up on tumblr and twitter! I'll be posting extras and doodles to my tumblr soon!
Black Flag sticker on a Cadillac

Chapter Summary

Yuri hangs out with Mila and has dinner with his family, and his grandfather comes bearing interesting news.

Chapter Notes

Before I start, chapter title is from the Ataris' cover of "Boys of Summer" and honestly, the Russian Punk should listen to classic punk, amirite?

AAAAAHHHH I'm sorry this is sort of late! I wanted to do my anniversary piece before I put this up! It's still Friday somewhere out there, right?

Here there be much Yuri introspection, because we need to. Mila's gonna be next, of course.

As usual, thank you to my Twitter, Tumblr, and discord fandom squads! Extra huge thanks to Lily and Wrath for Cali-picking (some of the edits to the previous chapter are thanks to them!)

Also, did you know that the California Spiny Lobster is supposedly much sweeter than the Maine lobster? AND YET WE CAN'T BUY THEM IN AMERICAN SUPERMARKETS DESPITE THERE BEING TONS OF THEM CAUGHT EVERY YEAR. For shame.

The arcade was further down the boardwalk, and only took a few minutes of walking to reach. Mila filled those minutes with useless babbling. Yuri mostly ignored her in favor of focusing on his phone.

Mila was checking out Wikipedia pages on some of the fish she’d seen on the reef, and she had figured out what kind of octopus that had freaked him out - not that he’d admit it.

Yuri really didn’t care. Sure, it was cool to be able to swim really fast, but they lived right by the ocean. If they couldn’t control when they sprouted fins, that would mean they were a splash away from exposure to the world.

Too bad Yuri couldn’t come up with a solution that would keep water away from him that didn’t involve hitchhiking to the nearest desert. The cell coverage was probably shit out there, anyway.

Otabek had responded to his text; Yuri had wanted to hang out with him but he was still working. That meant he’d probably be on his own at the arcade.

Well, as long as no one spilled a drink on him, he had nothing to worry about.

Mila gave him a sideways look, biting her lip. “You know, I was just teasing you. About Otabek.”
Yuri sneered at her but didn’t otherwise answer. Truth be told, there were a few other kids in his grade that he did hang out with - all orchestra nerds - but Otabek Altin was the person he’d always tended to gravitate toward.

At first, he’d been the cool older guy who hadn’t been too snobby to talk to the freshman violinist who’d heard him speaking fluent Russian and seized on the possible connection between them. Then he’d been the only sane guy in the high school orchestra on one of the school trips to Costa Mesa who Yuri had hidden out with while everyone else was sneaking off to get drunk. Beka had opted out because of his religion, and Yuri had opted out because he was scared of doing something stupid under the influence. They’d spent the day wandering the city together, staying out of trouble and having fun all the same.

Since then, Beka had been one of the few people Yuri felt safe telling his secrets to. His other friends were all in awe of him, for befriending the mysterious new student and being able to talk to him in basically gibberish (other than Viktor, Mila, Otabek, Lilia and Yakov, Yuri didn’t really speak Russian to anyone outside of his family.) It had been kind of awful when Beka had graduated, but he’d moved to Lucía Bay in the first place so he could attend the college and train at the Ariel. Yuri took his lessons with Lilia at the Ariel, so they still saw each other a lot.

Beka had been there for him the first time Mom and Dad had fought really badly, and Yuri had needed to escape his house. The older boy had met him a couple blocks away on his motorcycle, tossed Yuri the spare helmet, and taken him back to his apartment. They’d spent the night watching stupid Adam Sandler movies and mocking the actor’s de-evolution into shitty fart jokes until Yuri had fallen asleep sometime in the early morning.

Beka wasn’t like any of the other orchestra kids. He was smart and mature, already living on his own and working and earning scholarships through sheer determination. He was still funny, in his own dry and sarcastic way, and he had a motorcycle.

But yeah, he was responsible and that meant working until the end of his shift like a good employee. And his shift didn’t end for another few hours, so that meant Yuri was stuck with Mila.

“Yura?”

Yuri groaned and rolled his eyes. “I know you were just joking.”

“I really didn’t mean to hurt you, or whatever,” Mila insisted.

Yuri didn’t look at her. “I know.”

“Beka’s a good friend for you, and that’s the truth. He’s a good guy.”

“Yes.”

Mila sighed and bumped his shoulder. “So. You feel up to challenging me to DDR?”

“Fuck no,” Yuri growled. “I don’t want to make an ass of myself. Bloody Roar or nothing.”

Mila grinned. “I call Jenny.”

“No shit, of course you do,” Yuri rolled his eyes. He always tended to play as either Shina or Shenlong, but for some reason his best fighter was Uriko. Everyone gave him shit for it.

Mila stuck her tongue out at him, and they stepped into the arcade as they pulled out their reloadable token passes.
Twenty dollars bought them eighty tokens, and they spent half an hour trying to one-up each other at skeeball before Mila challenged another regular to old-school DDR to defend her title as reigning champion. Yuri took pleasure in shit-talking the challenger while Mila used her superior dancer’s stamina and coordination to snatch victory from the jaws of victory twice before the guy gave up. Yuri knew the asshole, a senior at his school, and he knew that the guy was trying to dance his way into Mila’s skirt. Too bad for him Mila was a giant lesbian.

After Mila had ground a few more admirers’ faces into the dust of defeat (Yuri should really get that printed on a t-shirt one of these days, along with the jaws of victory thing) they drifted into the vintage game section, with all the carefully-preserved 80’s-era stalls and the fighting games with horrible graphics that for some reason Yuri couldn’t get enough of.

His phone buzzed in his pocket - another text from Beka, mostly just stating that work was pretty boring and that he’d much rather be goofing off at the arcade with Yuri and Mila. Sometimes Yuri wondered if Beka was just humoring him, but then Beka texted him a photo with a caption scribbled on - he worked in a restaurant in the downtown part of the Bay, a fancy seafood restaurant that hosted prom dinners and fancy society brunches, and sometimes they got people who didn’t get how seafood tended to be served. He’d sent Yuri a snap of one of his fellow servers putting down a plate of lobster dinner in front of a customer, a woman probably around Viktor’s age, and she was clearly screaming at the dead lobster’s beady eyes staring up at her from the plate. Had she never eaten lobster before? How high pitched was her voice?

*Just another day,* read Otabek’s caption. Yuri heard it in Beka’s dry monotone that only came out when Beka was being sarcastic, and he snorted before showing Mila.

“I’m guessing she’s from out of town?” Mila said, giggling.

“Pretty sure they ship lobster inland,” Yuri answered.

“Yeah, but most people are expecting the ones with claws,” Mila pointed out, and Yuri burst out in laughter.

They passed some time playing Bloody Roar, and Yuri gave in and played as Uriko after Mila’s Jenny beat his Shina, Long, and even Gado. She yelled at him when he managed to pull off Uriko’s special attack and finally KO’d Jenny, but she was three up on him and he challenged her again. She switched up her character, and they went at it again.

He’d lost count of how many times he’d won or lost when his phone buzzed again. Instead of swiping his card for a rematch, he checked it and groaned. “It’s my mom,” he said out loud.

Mila frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“She’s telling me to come home,” Yuri muttered, sending off a response. “She wants to have a family dinner.”

“It’s kind of early for a dinner,” Mila commented, raising her eyebrows. “Is everything okay?”

Yuri shrugged.

“You want me to come along and invite myself over?”

“She’s telling me to come home,” Yuri muttered, sending off a response. “She wants to have a family dinner.”

“It’s kind of early for a dinner,” Mila commented, raising her eyebrows. “Is everything okay?”

You want me to come along and invite myself over?”

“Nah,” Yuri brushed her off. “I’m sure you’ve got stuff you wanna do. Don’t worry about it.”

Mila’s forehead crunched as her eyebrows drew together. “Are you sure?”
“Yeah. Positive. No problem.”

The minute Yuri walked into his family’s kitchen and saw his mom at the stove, he regretted agreeing to come home.

“Ah, Yura,” Mom said, not even turning around. “Your grandfather should be up soon. Can I get your help with dinner?”

“We’re eating early?” Yuri asked, eyeing the countertop absolutely covered in food.

“Yes, I thought it would be a good idea to get back into school year schedules.” Mom popped open the oven and slid her ceramic tray onto the middle rack. “I need you to start washing the vegetables for a salad.”

Yuri’s entire body went cold. “Uh, I’m kind of all gross,” he said, edging towards the hallway that would lead to the stairs and safe refuge. “I was out with Mila.”

Mom stilled, and then looked at him over her shoulder. “Yura.”

“Mom,” Yuri shot back at her, crossing his arms.

“After everything that happened yesterday, I thought you would start winding down a bit,” she said, giving him a stern look.

“We just went to the boardwalk.” Yuri shoved his hands into his pockets. “We got lunch at the cafe and went to the arcade.” He didn’t mention the whole sprouting-tails-and-swimming-out-to-sea thing. Obviously.

Mom sniffed. “School starts up on Monday. So does violin. Can you really afford to be slacking off?”

“I haven’t been slacking off,” Yuri muttered. “I still practice every day, I just missed today.” He’d spent the afternoon after the eclipse yesterday playing in his room, angrily scratching out a meandering melody while making sure his phone data transferred properly. It wasn’t like he would have forgotten how to play once he started up lessons with Lilia again.

“Ah, Yura!” Dad said, coming into the kitchen from the hallway. “Haven’t seen you all day, you slept in and then disappeared on us!”

Yuri rolled his eyes. “Last weekend before school, duh.”

His dad laughed and ruffled his hair, then frowned. “You have salt in your hair.”

“Well, yeah,” Yuri said quickly. “I was at the boardwalk. Stuff happens.”

“On the boardwalk?” Dad repeated, raising his eyebrows. “Did you take another ocean bath?”

“No.” Yuri reached up to try and fix his hair a little, and yeah, it was definitely stiff. “I don’t wanna brick another phone.” He only felt a little guilty about lying to his parents, but they didn’t need to know about this weirdness until he got it all fixed. Besides, Mom was still pissed at Viktor and Chris over their getting everyone stranded yesterday. There were too many minefields in this conversation. I have got to get outta here.

“Well, you can take a shower after dinner,” Mom said briskly. “Wash your hands and help me cut
the lettuce.”

“I’ll just…” Yuri jerked his thumb at the stairs. “I’m gonna go charge my phone before it dies. I’ll wash up in my bathroom.”

“You can wash up here, and I’m sure your phone will be fine,” Mom said, pointing at the kitchen sink. “C’mon, Yura, don’t make me ask again.”

“Mom,” Yuri said, fighting down panic. “I’ll just be a minute.”

“You’ve got five,” Dad said, and Mom glared at him.

“Seriously, Sergei?” she hissed, and Yuri made his escape while she was distracted.

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” Dad said behind him as Yuri practically sprinted upstairs. “I can help you cut vegetables, Rach.”

“I asked our son, and he dodged me. This is becoming a problem!”

Yuri paused at the top of the stairs, feeling deflated. But he couldn’t just go back down there and explain it, could he?

If his mom and dad found out what had happened, they’d whisk him away somewhere and try to fix him, and probably take him to… like, a lab or something. And that would probably lead to him disappearing forever…

Nope. Not worth the risk. Yuri went along with everything else his parents set for him, they could give him some wiggle room with this.

He plugged his phone in and left it on his desk before locking himself in the bathroom he shared with Dedushka. Before, on Islaluna, it had taken ten seconds after getting wet before Mila and Viktor had sprouted their tails. He would have to wash his hands in less time than that.

Yuri squirted the soap into his palm and nudged the spigot on the faucet until the water was streaming out pretty strongly, and then shoved his hands into the stream before furiously sudsing up and scrubbing under his nails. He rinsed, keeping a countdown in his head, and went for the nearest towel, but he wasn’t fast enough.

“Oof!” he grunted as his legs morphed into the tail again. His clothes had vanished again, too. “Fuck.” He rolled onto his back, fighting the urge to groan in frustration.

“Yura?” his mother yelled from downstairs. “What was that? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he shouted back, his voice echoing in the tiled bathroom. “I’ll be a minute.”

“Yura, come on!”

He reached up for his bath towel and started rubbing the moisture off of his upper body, grumbling the whole time.

It had been worse yesterday, because he’d been outside when he initially discovered it. Luckily, no one had been around to see what had happened - Mom and Dad had gone back to work after they’d gotten Yuri’s phone replaced, and Dedushka had taken an afternoon nap in his room. Dad made sure to ask Yuri to clean the pool before he’d left, and Yuri wasn’t gonna make his grandfather do it, so he’d left his phone on the patio table and grabbed the skimmer from the deck.
He had gotten a ton of gunk scooped out of the pool before the net had popped off the pole and fallen into the pool. Luckily, it floated. Unluckily, he’d had to grab it out of the water, and had fallen into the pool when the tail appeared. He’d been too freaked out to do much more than drag himself out onto the deck and have a silent freakout until the sun had baked the moisture off of him and his legs had reappeared.

He’d practically wet himself with relief, but then had gotten scared again when he realized that he might not be the only one dealing with it. His call to Viktor had confirmed his hunch. At least he wasn’t alone, he reflected sardonically, wiping at the giant fish tail as it flopped on the bathmat.

“Yura, turn off the water!” Mom hollered. “We can’t afford to waste any!”

“Okay!” he yelled, and then sighed in relief when he transformed back. He shot to his feet and flipped the spigot off. Fucking magic, he thought ruefully as he hung his towel back up on the hook.

“That was more than five minutes, Yura!” Dad called, and Yuri fought down his annoyance and threw the door open.

“Okay, I’m coming!”

He stomped down the stairs and noticed his dad had migrated into the TV room and was reading something on his iPad.

“What’s your attitude about?” Mom asked from the kitchen, shooting a look over her shoulder.

Yuri shrugged. “I dunno, why’re you freaking out over me taking five minutes to wash my hands?” he grumbled, and his mom put down her knife with a loud clink and turned to fully face him.

“That was more than five minutes,” she said, “and I did not do anything to you to deserve this kind of treatment. I immediately got you a new phone after you broke your old one. You do not get to take that tone with me.”

Yuri winced and looked away from her, searching for a knife. “What do you want me to cut?”

“Thank you. The carrots and tomatoes, please.”

“Are they washed?” Yuri asked, and Mom made an affirmative noise. Yuri steeled himself and grabbed a dishtowel from the drawer before picking up a knife.

“What are you doing?” Mom asked, making a face.

“Cutting your vegetables,” Yuri said, keeping his voice as expressionless as possible.

“Are you seriously going to dry them off?”

“I mean, yeah? It’ll keep the knife from getting messed up, I read that on the internet.” Yuri fought down panic, and then squeaked in surprise as Mom took the towel and the knife away from him and pushed him out of the kitchen. “If you’re gonna be weird like that, go and set the table,” she said, snapping the towel. “Grab the Italian dressing and the croutons.”

Yuri breathed a sigh of relief and grabbed the everyday plates and salad bowls from the nearest cabinet before his mom could say anything else.
Dedushka was awake by the time Mom’s meatloaf finished cooking and slowly made his way into the dining room. He was rubbing his back again, and Yuri wondered what it would take to convince him to retire.

His grandfather was an archivist at Anderson College, which was the school connected to the Ariel Conservatory. He had worked previously in the library but then decided that the technology was getting too fast and too complicated for him to keep up with.

Dedushka was at the point where the college would probably shell out a decent pension, but he claimed that he would be too bored with staying home all day and doing whatever retired people did. Yuri had no idea what that would be.

Nobody was in a particularly chatty mood at dinner, and Yuri didn’t feel like carrying any conversation, so he picked at the meatloaf and salad as Dedushka kept shooting him concerned looks. Mom and Dad were still kind of not talking to each other, and it was making Yuri’s skin crawl.

“You have your classes for school, yes?” his grandfather asked at long last.

Yuri mumbled and nodded, chewing on the bite of meatloaf.

“Do you need things?” Dedushka gently pressed. “School things? For study?”

Yuri shook his head, and his mother sighed. “Yura, your grandfather is talking to you.”

“I know,” Yuri said.

“So answer him.”

“Stop riding him,” Dad said tiredly.

“Is fine,” Dedushka added neutrally, his eyes still on Yuri. “I just want to make sure.”

“We got all my stuff last week,” Yuri pointed out, stabbing his salad and impaling a crouton.

“Good,” Dedushka said. “I want you do well in school, yes?”

Yuri sighed and nodded. “I’ll be fine,” he said in Russian. “You don’t have to worry.”

His grandfather smiled at him wryly. “I’m not worried,” he answered in the same language. “But you’ve been withdrawn lately. Are you nervous?”

“About school?” Yuri wrinkled his nose.

“Anything.”

Yuri shrugged. “Not really.”

Dedushka wasn’t convinced. “Are you feeling unhappy that Miloshka and Otabek aren’t going to go back to school with you?”

“It’s not like I won’t see them anymore,” Yuri said. “And I didn’t have classes with them anyway.”

“Except orchestra,” Dad said, and Mom sighed in exasperation. She was the only one at the table who wasn’t fluent in Russian. “Dedushka has a point, Yura.”
“Please stop reminding me,” Yuri muttered.

“Sorry,” Dad said immediately, and then sighed. “We were just making sure he was ready for his classes,” he added to Mom, who didn’t answer.

“I not worry,” Dedushka said, winking at Yuri. “Yurochka is good student.”

“I know you don’t take any SAT’s until the third semester, but you should focus on maintaining a good GPA,” Mom said, fixing Yuri with a serious look.

“I will,” Yuri agreed, reflecting sourly that it wasn’t like he had much of a choice. It was practically impossible to get into a decent in-state college without a scholarship, and if Yuri couldn’t manage to get a music scholarship with violin then he needed an academic one. It fucking sucked, but that was the way colleges worked.

“I know you will,” Dedushka said, and then changed the subject to an interesting man who had come to the college looking for an unusual paper in the archives. Yuri tuned out the conversation, but he kept thinking back to his grandfather’s point from earlier.

Yeah, Mila and Beka weren’t in high school anymore. He was completely on his own at this point. Mila would be at Anderson, which was literally next door to the conservatory where Viktor usually was. If anything happened, they could cover for each other. Yuri didn’t have anyone.

He would have to never use a public restroom ever again. This was going to suck so hard.

*Note to self, stock up on hand sanitizer,* Yuri thought as Dad laughed at something Dedushka had said.

“Yura?” Dad asked, actually wiping at his eyes. “This weirdo at the college is looking for mermaids!”

Yuri choked on the lettuce in his mouth and gaped once he’d cleared his throat. “What?”

“The man that came into the archives today,” Dedushka said, switching back to Russian. “He was looking for historical records of mermaid sightings. I thought it was a strange request.”

“Why?” Yuri demanded.

Dedushka shrugged. “He claimed he was doing some kind of research into the history of the area. He was interested in Islaluna too.”

Yuri blinked. “What does Islaluna have to do with it?”

“I have no idea.” Dedushka went back to eating. “The man himself was quite strange. Very intense.”

Yuri wondered if the man had found anything, and filed away that tidbit for later. “Weird,” he said, shoveling another forkful of salad into his mouth.

Mom sighed again, and Yuri and Dad both muttered apologies before the rest of the conversation switched back to English.

Still, Dedushka kept looking at Yuri like he wanted to ask something, but he didn’t.

After dinner, Mom insisted that Yuri help clean up the table. Yuri had anticipated this and grabbed
rubber gloves from the cleaning closet. Mom had rolled her eyes at him, but let him wear the gloves as he rinsed the dishes.

It was weird; he would feel the cold of the water through the rubber, and he’d panic and think he was getting wet only to realize the gloves were so thin that he was feeling the temperature.

Mom seemed satisfied with his lack of complaining as he helped her tidy up the dining room and kitchen, and let him retreat up to his room.

Yuri was messing around on his computer, playing a first-person shooter with some of the guys from orchestra as his cat curled up in his lap, when Dedushka knocked on his door.

“Hold on,” Yuri said as Guang-hong and Kenjirou were bickering about the next campaign, and he yanked his headset off as his grandfather let himself in.

“You were in the ocean today,” Dedushka said, eyeing him. “You smell like the sea.”

Yuri grimaced. “Don’t tell Mom,” he pleaded, eyeing the hallway behind his grandfather. It was empty, and they were talking in Russian, but his mother was terrifyingly perceptive.

“Why? It’s not a crime for a young man to swim in the sea.”

Yuri shrugged as he distantly heard Leo log in and ask what the hell was going on. “She’s been kind of touchy lately, after the thing on Islaluna,” he said.

Dedushka raised his eyebrows. “What happened on Islaluna?”

“We got stranded?” Yuri reminded him. “Christophe Giacometti’s Zodiac broke down and we had to paddle to the island?”

Dedushka nodded slowly. “The man in the archives today, he was interested in the history behind Islaluna,” he said in a carefully neutral tone. “There are records of myths about the island, especially regarding eclipses.”

Yuri almost jerked in surprise but instead was able to school his expression into a bored one. “Is this history stuff? Dedushka, I have another day left before I have to do school stuff.”

Dedushka narrowed his eyes at Yuri, but then snorted and reached out to ruffle Yuri’s hair. “I can tell I’m boring you. Have fun with your friends, Yurochka.”

“We’re gonna hunt alien hordes,” Yuri informed him, hitching up his headset. “As soon as the guys stop fighting.”

His grandfather chuckled. “Sounds exciting.” He quietly let himself out and shut the door behind him, and Yuri waited a moment before diving for his phone.
Yuri: hey you still at the library

nope. went home. why?

next time you're at anderson check out the archives

dedushka said some guy was in today looking for info on isla luna and the eclipse

and he mentioned mermaids too

wtf???

idk just check it out since you're so interested

school's closed down tomorrow

so go on monday duh

yea. thanks for the heads up I guess

knock yourself out nerd
Viktor: nope. went home. why?

Yuri: next time youre at anderson check out the archives

Yuri: dedushka said some guy was in today looking for info on islaluna and the eclipse

Yuri: and he mentioned mermaids too

Viktor: wtf???

Yuri: idk just check it out since youre so interested

Viktor: school’s closed down tomorrow

Yuri: so go on monday duh

Viktor: yea. thanks for the heads up I guess

Yuri: knock yourself out nerd

Yuri finished up texting Viktor and tuned back into the conversation online. “Okay, so did we decide on a mission or what?”

“Yuri, where’ve you been?” Kenjiro whined. “Back me up here, I say we stay out of the Andromeda sector.”

“What, and pass up the Blue Flag team?” Yuri grinned savagely. This was a world he could dominate. “Let’s take it back from them.”

After several satisfying - if not entirely successful - missions and a whole lot of bug hunting, Yuri signed off from his PC and flopped onto his bed, checking his phone. Potya curled up by his head, purring as he absently scratched her behind the ears.

Mila had snapchatted him a few photos of her new high score on DDR - looked like someone else had been foolish enough to challenge her after he’d left - and then spammed his SMS with the photos she’d taken on the reef. Yuri showed them to Potya, who made indifferent noises.

Even if the octopus had freaked him out, Yuri had to admit that the fishes they’d seen were pretty cool. He’d only ever seen them in biology books, or on TV. But the trade-off kind of sucked, and if Viktor’s research found them a way to stop transforming whenever they touched a little bit of water then maybe he’d change his mind. He knew that Mila was enjoying herself.

Yuri was texting Beka when he was suddenly seized with the urge to tell his friend everything. It only seemed right that Beka, who knew about all of Yuri’s deepest darkest fears, should be in on this too. But Mila and Viktor would probably point out what a hypocrite he was being, so he deleted what he’d written and instead whined about the upcoming week.
look schools gonna suck without you guys there

sorry :(

also fcuk you for starting a week later its not fair

that i'm not sorry for :3

omg you're such a nerd

 BorderRadiusesRGB.png

the real thing is cuter

i know

so you want to do a last hurrah before school? tomorrow? i'm off

sure. i have to put in some violin practice or else moms gonna bite my head off lol

yeah i got you

there's a group playing in the park tomorrow, want to check it out?

what kind of group

they're called somnambulant misse!toe

jwill be there too hopefully
Yuri: look schools gonna suck without you guys there
Otabek: sorry :
Yuri: also fcuk you for starting a week later its not fair
Otabek: that i’m not sorry for :3
Yuri: omg youre such a nerd
Otabek: [cat emoji six times]
Yuri: the real thing is cuter
Otabek: i know
Otabek: so you want to do a last hurrah before school? tomorrow? i’m off
Yuri: sure. i have to put in some violin practice or else moms gonna bite my head off lol
Otabek: yeah i got you
Otabek: there’s a group playing in the park tomorrow, want to check it out?
Yuri: what kind of group
Otabek: they’re called somnambulant misseltoe
Yuri: i will bet you cash money its a hipster band
Otabek: probably but we could be surprised
Yuri: CASH. MONEY.
Otabek: lol

Yuri was smiling as he said goodnight and tossed his phone onto his bedside table. The park was a
safe place to be, it was a couple dozen blocks away from the sea, and he and Beka would probably be there long after any sprinklers were run. Tomorrow would be a good way to end the summer.

He was practicing his violin in the den when Dedushka came in and settled in the winged armchair by the window.

Yuri let the scale he was doing trail off and he blinked at his grandfather. “Did I wake you up?”

“Not at all,” Dedushka said, smiling. “I was hoping to hear you play when you weren’t feeling so negative.”

Yuri made a face. “I don’t always sound negative.”

“Of course not.” Dedushka leaned back in the armchair and looked at Yuri over folded hands. “Am I distracting you?”

Yuri snorted and resumed his scales before moving to a quicker-paced warm-up. After a little bit of that, he switched to a sonata that he knew his grandfather liked.

He played for a while, meandering from easier songs to stuff he’d learned more recently, as his grandfather just listened and hummed along when he recognized the piece. Yuri would never admit it, but Dedushka enjoying his music was better than when even Lilia gave him her rare approval. Maybe it was just nice to not be a child prodigy while he played, but a violinist.

He attempted to scratch out a Lindsey Stirling song he’d been learning by ear, one off her most recent album, and got frustrated when he forgot the melody and fell out of tune.

“What was that one?” Dedushka asked, his eyes still closed.

Yuri shrugged. “Just a pop song I liked.”

“Mm. You’ll get it eventually, you always do.”

Yuri grinned at his grandfather before replacing his violin in the case and laying the bow across his music stand. “Thanks, Dedushka.”

“Are you done?”

“Yeah, I’m going out after lunch to meet Beka before school starts up again.” Yuri snapped the clasps on his violin case shut and picked up both the case and the bow so he could put them by his backpack in his room.

Dedushka got to his feet, and Yuri could hear his bones creaking from across the den. “I hope you have fun, then,” he said, patting Yuri on the head. “Thank you for playing for me.”

“You’re welcome,” Yuri answered, and he actually meant it.

The park was not at all packed for Somnambulant Misseltoe, and they were definitely hipster.

“What even is this?” Yuri demanded, perched on a park bench with an incredulous look on his face. It must have looked hilarious because Beka couldn’t look at him without laughing. “No, seriously, you’re lucky you didn’t bet money on this. You would owe me so much money.”
“I bought you a corn dog,” Beka pointed out, nibbling on his pretzel. “And they’re not that bad.”

“They have sock puppets,” Yuri said, gesturing wildly. “And they’re a capella. Beka, where did you even find these geeks?”

“They had fliers all over the place.” Beka’s eyes glimmered. “And they take requests.”

“Someone’s gonna yell ‘Freebird’ and it’s not gonna be me.”

They waited, and as soon as the group wrapped up their performance of *Hips Don’t Lie*, one of the frat boys lounging on a picnic blanket with his friends yelled, “do Freebird!”

A couple of the performers looked annoyed, but then they actually started to sing the opening to *Freebird*, and Yuri nearly fell off the bench laughing.

“I’m friggin’ psychic!” he gasped, as Beka snorted. “You didn’t pay that guy to yell that, did you?”

“Yes, Yura,” Beka deadpanned. “I have connections to every pedestrian in this town, and I orchestrate elaborately staged pranks just to make you think you can predict the future.”

“Cool, good use of your money,” Yuri sniggered, taking another bite of his corndog.

The group did *Freebird*, a couple pop songs that Yuri had definitely heard way too often over the summer but was actually delighted to hear being performed by literal sock puppets, and even *Bohemian Rhapsody*, which usually was only good if it was being sung by Freddie Mercury or Brendon Urie and just those two. Still, Yuri was pleasantly surprised by how much fun it was to watch a bunch of musical nerds sing brainless pop songs with sock puppets, and he was actually having fun right up until he and Beka were heading back towards the downtown area and he bumped into someone.

It wasn’t that he bumped into someone that ruined his day, but that they spilled water on him.

“Oh, shit, I’m sorry,” said the girl who he’d bumped into, but Yuri was already panicking. He yanked himself away and tore off towards the trees that ringed the park, his brain screaming the ten-second countdown at him. He heard Beka calling after him in concern, but he didn’t even bother to focus on that as he found the park restrooms and threw himself into the handicapped bathroom. He barely made it before the little twinkling lights swarmed him and he transformed, his flopping tail pushing the door shut behind him.

“Fffffffuck,” he ground out, pushing himself up on his forearms and glaring down at the tail. “Fuck, fuck fuck fuck fuck.”

He tried to roll onto his side, but there wasn’t a lot of space to move around in. Also, he was stuck in a public bathroom. “Gross,” he gagged as he scooted away from a pile of wet toilet paper. It could have been water, but he didn’t want to take a chance. “Fuck, fuck me, fuck.”

“Yura?”

Otabek pounded on the door, and Yuri felt his heart rate pick up. “I’m fine!” he shouted, wincing. “Don’t worry, I’ll be out in a second!”

“Yura, what happened? Are you hurt?”

“I said I’m fine!”
“Yura, let me in.”

“No!” Yuri yelped as he belatedly realized he hadn’t locked the door and Beka tried the handle. “Don’t come in!”

Too late. Beka pushed the door open and his jaw dropped.

Yuri winced and let his head drop onto his arms. “Fuck.”

“What the hell?” Beka demanded, sounding like he’d been punched in the head. “Yuri, how…?”

“Please close the door so no one else sees me like this,” Yuri begged, not even able to make himself lift his head up.

There was a slight shuffling noise, and then the clicking of the door being locked. “What in the world?” Beka asked again, sounding less dazed and more straight-up confused.

“I don’t know,” Yuri said quietly.

Beka made a soft noise, and Yuri heard him squat down. “Where are your clothes?”

“Dunno,” Yuri muttered.

“Are you all right?”

Yuri laughed semi-hysterically. “I’m not hurt.”

Beka was silent for a second, and Yuri looked up at him. The older boy’s face was drawn in a thoughtful expression. “When did this start happening?”

“Just Friday,” Yuri said cautiously. “After I got stuck on Islaluna during the eclipse.”

“You hung out with me on Friday.”

“And I tried not to get splashed,” Yuri pointed out.

Beka’s eyebrows went up. “This only happens when you get splashed?”

Yuri nodded.

“So this isn’t, like… a family curse or anything?” Beka ventured, and Yuri snorted.

“Nope, definitely not.”

Beka eyed him. “How do you know?”

Yuri almost said because Viktor and Mila have it too, but caught himself just in time. “Just trust me.”

“Can you change yourself back?”

“Not until I dry off,” Yuri groaned. “I need a towel or something.”

They both looked dubiously at the empty toilet paper dispenser, and then at the electric hand dryer mounted on the wall.

“Well, we could stick you under that,” Beka said, but he didn’t sound all that into it.
“Ugh,” Yuri responded, trying again to flip over.

Beka glanced at the tail and then gestured at it. “May I?”

“Knock yourself out,” Yuri grunted, and Beka scooted forward to help Yuri rearrange his tail so he had more space to adjust himself on the floor. “This thing is such a pain in the ass on dry land.”

“I can imagine,” Beka said dryly.

“It’s cool in the water, though,” Yuri admitted.

“You’ve been out swimming with it?”

“Yeah, yesterday. I can go really fast with it.”

Beka smiled. “That’s actually really cool, yeah.”

They sat in silence for a minute, and then Beka tugged at the collar of his t-shirt. “Do you want to borrow this to towel off?”

“Nah, it would take more than a t-shirt to manage that.” Yuri waved his hand at the several feet of moist scales. “It actually dries off really fast in the sun.”

“Well, that’s out of the question,” Beka said firmly. “I’m assuming you don’t want people to find out.”

“You assume right,” Yuri answered, groaning. “God, today was going so perfect, too.” He clenched a fist in frustration, and then both he and Beka blinked when they heard a hissing noise start up in the bathroom with them.

“What the hell is that?” Beka asked warily, looking around for the source of it.

Yuri shook his head, then yelped as he felt a weird stinging sensation around his fin. “Wait. Wait! I think it’s… me?” He peered down at his tail, and to his utter shock, he saw steam rising from it.

“Wha… how?” Beka waved his hand over it and drew his hand back in surprise. “It’s really hot,” he said, surprised.

Yuri looked at his fist and then did the gesture again. “I think I’m doing this,” he said, dumbfounded.

“Again, how?”

“Magic?” Yuri hedged, as more and more of the moisture on his tail evaporated away. He brought his hand in towards his chest and winced as the water on his skin boiled and vanished, and then suddenly the lights were back and swarming him, eventually disappearing to reveal his legs and clothes again.

“Holy shit,” Beka said, putting Yuri’s feelings perfectly into words. “Did you know you could do that?”

“Take a wild guess.” Yuri scrambled to his feet, staring at his hands. “I wonder if I can do it again?”

Beka looked at him for a long moment and then raised his eyebrows. “Let’s find out.”

Yuri grinned.
I love Otabek. He's the Ota-BEST.

Yuri was trying to play "The Phoenix" off of Lindsey's album *Brave Enough*, which has been my jam for over a month now.

I borrowed the sock puppet a capella group from *Pitch Perfect* because... sock puppets. I dunno. I stole the "Freebird" joke from my dad, who is that annoying guy at every concert yelling "Freebird" at the performers. Here's the name generator I used to come up with their name.

Next chapter might be a bit delayed since I'm participating in the BBOI! Still, if you want to come talk with me about this AU, hit me up on Tumblr and Twitter! I REALLY LOVE MERMAIDS OKAY.
I ain't shy, watch

Chapter Summary

Mila gets some surprising news, goes dancing, and gets another surprise.

Chapter Notes

I'M BACK. I'm so sorry, I'm SO SORRY for the wait. I missed this AU. I'm sorry, I have more to say in the endnotes. Enjoy the update! Oh, and Sara (and Mickey) have been aged down to 20 years old here!

Chapter title is from Wild Child by Juliet Simms.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The chiming of her phone woke Mila on Sunday, and she allowed herself a groan before rolling over to check it.

It was a text from Sara. Mila smiled as she thumbed the message open.

```
good news! a couple spots opened up in that pole dancing class lol

hey isn't phichit chulanont in that class

you know that guy that works at chihokos

I know Phichit! he's a total sweetheart! I didn't know...```
Sara: good news! a couple spots opened up in that pole dancing class lol

Mila: hey isn’t phichit chulanont in that class

Mila: you kno

Mila: that guy that works at chihokos

Sara: I know Phichit! he’s a total sweetheart! I didn’t know he did pole dancing lol

Mila: you know everyone

Mila: you know more people than me

Sara: I have something you need to see, can I stop by?

Mila: probably sure!
Mila: this must be rectified

Sara: give it a month

Sara: what are you up to today?

Mila: just got up. loving the college life

Sara: lol

Sara: ok

Sara: I have something you need to see, can I stop by?

Mila: probably sure!

Mila stretched and rubbed at her eyes, making a face when she had to wipe eye gunk on her shirt. “Ugh,” she said, and then louder, “ugh.” She kicked her covers off and swung her legs out over the edge of her twin bed. She wiggled her toes and winced at the two days’ growth on her legs. “I guess I’m going au naturale,” she grumbled.

She stretched and scooted off the bed, digging her feet into the plush rug she’d put down next to her bed, and stuck her phone in her pajama pants pocket as she shuffled into the hallway.

If there was one thing she was grateful for over the past few days, it was the fact that her aunt and uncle were both incredibly busy with work this week, and her cousin was spending as much time as she could with her friends before school started up the next day. Mila had to share the bathroom with Tamara, who was only 11 and just begun to preen and explore adolescence. Tammy had been hogging the bathroom lately, and barging in when she felt like it. Mila had started locking the door, just to be safe.

She used to be so sweet, Mila thought as she made her way downstairs and veered into the kitchen. She lived with her aunt, uncle, and cousin in a townhouse that was only a couple miles away from downtown, and was situated close to the high school. Tammy got bussed in to the middle school every day, and Mila took public transit downtown to reach the conservatory. Her aunt and uncle commuted out of town on an almost daily basis… which is why Mila was a bit surprised when she stumbled upon both of them still at the kitchen table.

“Good morning, milaya moya,” Auntie chirped, and how was she such a morning person?

“How’s our favorite collegiate?” Uncle Erik chimed in.

Mila sighed and shuffled over to the stove so she could put a kettle on boil. She pulled her favorite mug, a Tinkerbell mug from Disneyland, out of the cabinet and hunted for her box of teabags. “Still waking up. Can Sara come over today?”

“Of course!”

Mila hummed at her aunt’s answer and cut a bagel in half to stick it in the toaster. “Jam,” she muttered, popping the fridge open. “Jam, jam, jam, jam.” She pulled her aunt’s fake butter and favorite lingonberry jam out, grabbing a plate and leaving all of her breakfast things on the counter while her bagel toasted. The kettle began to whistle, and Mila took it off the stove to carefully pour the hot water into her mug.
It felt weird to be doing such mundane stuff when she knew on an intellectual level that if she so much as got a drop of water on her skin, she’d grow a tail.

Mila smiled to herself; one she’d gotten over the shock and had come home to bathe, she’d been kind of excited. She’d crawled into the bathtub, turned on the water, and waited. Once she’d transformed again, she’d taken the opportunity to examine the wide fin and the jewel-like scales. The lack of knees was also kind of intriguing. Thinking about all the movies she’d seen with live-action mermaids in them, she had to snort. Tails didn’t need to hinge at any halfway points, there weren’t joints like in a leg or an arm. Illusion destroyed, she thought sardonically.

Her fins had an interesting flexibility to them, there had to be cartilage in them. It flexed, but there wasn’t a lot of fine motor control to it. Mostly, they reminded her of a fish’s fin more than a dolphin’s fin or a whale’s fin.

“What are you laughing at?” her uncle asked. Mila shrugged and pulled her bagel out of the toaster and dug a butter knife out of her utensil drawer. Once her bagel was properly prepared and her tea was steeped and cooled, she joined her aunt and uncle at the table.

Auntie Yulia was a lawyer in Costa Mesa and Uncle Erik worked in the neurosciences institute at Hoag Memorial, so eating breakfast with both of them was kind of a rare occurrence. Uncle Erik didn’t often take Sundays off, and Auntie was one of those people who had to plan everything out.

Sometimes, Mila had to envy Viktor. His parents, for the most part, were pretty easy-going from what she remembered of her previous encounters with them. Of course, Viktor was also working full time and paying for his own living expenses, something that Mila had yet to do.

“That’s an awful lot of carbs,” Uncle Erik said, and Auntie elbowed him.

“Are you excited for university?” she said as her husband fell quiet.

Mila paused in chewing her bagel and swallowed. “Of course,” she said, wiping her mouth on the back of her hand. Then, something clicked and she narrowed her eyes. “What happened?”

Auntie’s face went blank and Uncle Erik’s mouth turned down in a massive frown. “Nothing,” he said too quickly, and Mila narrowed her eyes.

“I don’t believe you,” she said, putting her bagel down on her plate and sitting back. “Why are you not at the office today?”

“I had some errands to run,” Auntie said immediately.

“What errands?”

“Shopping errands.”

Mila raised her eyebrows. “Says the woman who swears by Amazon Prime.”

“Can’t a grown woman enjoy going out on shopping dates with her husband?” Auntie asked, mirroring Mila’s expression.

“Of course you can, but I’m pretty sure you’re not telling me something.”

“Not everything is a conspiracy,” Uncle Erik pointed out. “Miloshka, you’re being unfair.”

“And you’re not telling me something. I can’t believe you’re hiding something from me. Dyad’ka,
Tetushka, I can handle it,” Mila protested, crossing her arms. “I can keep this up all morning.”

Her aunt and uncle winced.

“Fine,” Auntie grumbled. “Fine. Your father is back in California.”

Mila blinked. “What? When did he--?”

“This week.” Uncle Erik sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “So I take it that he hasn’t contacted you?”

Mila shook her head. “I didn’t even know he was back in America,” she said, dazed.

“Well,” Auntie said briskly, “you don’t have to reach out to him. If he calls, you’re within your rights to hang up.”

Mila thought about it but didn’t have an answer to that statement. “When did you find out?”

“When he called my office yesterday asking for our new address.” Auntie’s face twisted into a distasteful expression, like she was about to spit.

“Why did he want to know that?”

“He mentioned your birthday,” Uncle Erik said, and Mila made a face.

“Uh, he’s a bit off the mark.” Mila’s birthday was in October.

“Well, he doesn’t know that we’ve moved since the last time he saw us,” Auntie grumbled. They had lived in a smaller apartment home before Tammy had been born, eleven years ago.

Mila bit her lip, but she had weathered so many strange things in the past couple of days that she was feeling strangely brave. “Do you have his contact info?”

Her aunt and uncle exchanged unreadable expressions, and then Auntie nodded. “We have his phone number and address.”

Mila closed her eyes but pressed on. “Don’t throw it out.”

Her uncle made a quiet noise of surprise. “Miloshka.”

“I know, I know I don’t have to. But…” Mila fixed her eyes on her abandoned breakfast and sighed softly. “I don’t know, it’s been years.”

“Exactly, it’s been years,” Uncle Erik grumbled. “And now he’s suddenly reaching out?”

“This has been a special year,” Mila mused. She blinked and snorted when her aunt and uncle both stared at her. “What? It has,” she insisted.

“How so?” Auntie asked, raising her eyebrows.

Mila smiled. “Well, you remember Vitya, right?”

“The idiot who got himself stuck on Yakov Feltsman’s roof a few years ago?” Uncle Erik asked slowly, forehead crinkling. He didn’t really pay all that much attention to the music scene in Lucía Bay, that was Auntie’s field.
“Yep. I went with him and Yura Plisetsky, and another friend, and we were on Islaluna during the eclipse. It was pretty cool.” Mila picked up her bagel again so she could nibble on it.

“Oh, yes, I saw that on your Facebook,” Uncle Erik nodded, smiling. “That looked fun.”

“The totality was pretty cool,” Mila agreed. “We didn’t have any glasses, but we were able to use our phones to see it.”

“Trust me, those glasses were overrated,” Auntie said, waving her coffee spoon at Mila. “A cheap cash grab for a once-in-a-lifetime event.”

Mila giggled and shrugged. If she were going to be honest, she’d gotten the rarest souvenir of all; she didn’t need to mourn not having gotten the sunglasses.

“Well, I’m happy you got home safely,” Uncle Erik told him, spearing a strawberry on his fork. “And you seem to have had a good time, which is all that matters.”

“Yep!” Mila agreed.

Her aunt and uncle seemed eager to leave the topic of her father behind, so she let them quiz her on her class schedule and her dance tryouts. When Auntie got up to get herself a fresh cup of coffee, Tammy stomped in and took her mother’s seat.

“Good morning, Tamara,” Uncle Erik said, and Tammy grumbled something that was definitely not human speech.

Mila snorted, then made an indignant noise when her cousin stole the other half of her bagel. “Tammy, what the heck?!”

“Mmrghfurglerduh,” Tammy answered, biting into her purloined breakfast. She scowled. “What jelly is this?”

“Lingonberry,” Mila said sweetly as Tammy gagged. “This is why you don’t steal other people’s breakfast.”

“I hate that stuff,” Tammy whined, shoving her chair back so she could scramble over to the garbage and spit the offending bite out.

“Tomochka, that was rude,” Uncle Erik admonished her, but Tammy ignored him to go dig in the fridge for something else.

“Tamara,” Auntie jumped in, frowning. “Your father is talking to you.”

“That’s not my name,” Tammy tossed over her shoulder.

“Thank god you weren’t like this as a teenager,” Uncle Erik muttered to Mila, who sighed and reclaimed the rest of her bagel. While her aunt and uncle dealt with their grumpy daughter, she checked her phone again.
[previous day: Mila sent photo of reef]

Viktor: wow! nice! you sure you need a whole camera?

Mila: hell yeah i want more memory!

[today]

Viktor: help. I've fallen and I can’t get up

Mila snorted.
help. I've fallen and I can't get up

oh dear

makka isn't helping

🤔

I forgot to get gloves for the dishes

lol this is what happens when you don't clean for yourself

but I do clean for myself

lol oh dear

I'm buying stock in swiffer

is there anything else I can help you with or did you text me to whine?

I don't whine

complain

I fell on my face have some sympathy

learn how to fall

it's rule #1 in dance

you should have gone into dance vitya
in what alternate world
do I not have 2 left feet
madness
lunacy
SIGH

so you're just bored?
no sympathy at all
so cruel
talk to Chris
Chris laughed at me
welp
miloshkaaaaaaaaaa

oh my god you're such a drama queen
just dry off and go buy some rubber gloves
it would be easier to dry off if I could reach a towel
weren't you a boy scout at one point? always be prepared?
who told you that? I was
who told you that? I was never a boy scout

shouldn’t you be dried off by now?

shouldn’t I indeed

I’m gonna go

fine. just leave me alone here on the floor.

lying naked on the floor?

YOU ARE TOO YOUNG TO KNOW THAT SONG

the hell I am

god im so old

no you are not

has my hair been thinning?

OH SHIT

male pattern baldness is maternal

is your mom's dad bald?

HOW SHOULD I KNOW

well you could always do what yakov does

I DON'T WANT TO WEAR
Mila: oh dear

Viktor: makka isn’t helping

Mila: [D: emoji]

Viktor: I forgot to get gloves for the dishes

Mila: lol this is what happens when you don’t clean for yourself

Viktor: but I do clean for myself

Mila: lol oh dear

Viktor: I’m buying stock in swiffer

Mila: is here anything else I can help you with or did you text me to whine?

Viktor: I don’t whine

Mila: complain

Viktor: i fell on my face have some sympathy

Mila: learn how to fall

Mila: it’s rule #1 in dance

Mila: you should have gone into dance vitya

Viktor: in what alternate world

Viktor: do I not have 2 left feet

Viktor: madness

Viktor: lunacy

Viktor: SIGH
Mila: so you’re just bored?
Viktor: no sympathy at all
Viktor: so cruel
Mila: talk to Chris
Viktor: Chris laughed at me
Mila: welp
Viktor: miloshkaaaaaaaaa
Mila: oh my god you’re such a drama queen
Mila: just dry off and go buy some rubber gloves
Viktor: it would be easier to dry off if I could reach a towel
Mila: weren’t you a boy scout at one point? always be prepared?
Viktor: who told you that? I was never a boy scout
Mila: shouldn’t you be dried off by now?
Viktor: shouldn’t I indeed
Mila: I’m gonna go
Viktor: fine. just leave me alone here. on the floor.
Mila: lying naked on the floor?
Viktor: YOU ARE TOO YOUNG TO KNOW THAT SONG
Mila: the hell I am
Viktor: god im so old
Mila: no you are not
Viktor: has my hair been thinning?
Viktor: OH SHIT
Mila: male pattern baldness is maternal
Mila: is your mom’s dad bald?
Viktor: HOW SHOULD I KNOW
Mila: well you could always do what yakov does
Viktor: I DON’T WANT TO WEAR HATS ALL THE TIME
Mila: lol you could get plugs
Viktor: I shouldn’t have texted you

Mila: [smiling devil emoji]

Mila was halfway through her pilates workout when the doorbell rang.

“Oh, good, you’re wearing exercise clothes,” Sara said when Mila let her in. “Where’s the fam?”

Mila shrugged. “Tammy’s out with friends again, last hurrah. Auntie and Uncle Erik went shopping, not sure where. Why, what’s up?”

“Not much, I had a copy of the last orchesis performance from May and figured you’d want to look at it for tryouts.” Sara reached into her purse to extract a DVD with the words Orchesis Spring Finale scribbled on it. “The captain’s kind of a hardass, so you’re gonna wanna bone up on some of the jumps.”

“Oh, goody,” Mila clapped her hands. “I’ve been looking for footage of that!”

“Ask and ye shall receive,” Sara intoned, bestowing the DVD upon her with a smirk. Sara had been part of the university’s Orchesis group since she herself had been a freshman, and Mila had befriended her while they were both in high school so it was kind of like having the inside track to making it past auditions. “Do you need a spot to practice?”

“I’m sure the gym will let me have one of their yoga studios.” Mila shrugged.

“You know, since you’re a student, you have access to the public parts of the conservatory,” Sara pointed out. “Plus, I know all the staff out there. I can get you in one of the private rooms.”

“With your masterful powers of seduction?” Mila waggled her eyebrows, and Sara whacked her lightly on the shoulder.

“You know Mickey would burst a blood vessel,” Sara giggled. “I’m pretty sure he’d have a stroke if I ever got another boyfriend.”

Mila frowned. “Okay, that was kind of sweet when you were both much younger, but you’re a grown-ass woman now.” She flopped down onto the couch cushions and blew a raspberry.

“I know, I’m working on it.” Sara bit her lip, then grinned. “But hey, speaking of boyfriends…” Her eyes sparkled. “Guess who I met the other day?”

“Who?”

Sara waggled her eyebrows. “Bella’s boyfriend.”

Mila sat up, jaw dropping. “The Canadian? He actually exists?”

“He actually exists,” Sara confirmed. “He’s… quite a character.”

“Wow.” Mila tapped her chin. “That’s the first time I’ve ever heard of there being an actual ‘boyfriend in Canada’.”

“He’s totally head-over-heels for her,” Sara reported, steepling her fingers. “It’s pretty cute.”

“D’awh.” Mila stretched a leg, resting her foot on the coffee table. “What brings him to Cali?”
“He’s transferring out here, to Anderson’s. He wanted to be with Bella.” Sara sighed. “Can you imagine, having someone as devoted to you as that?”

“Nope,” Mila declared. “Love is terrifying and not at all something I’m old enough for.”

“You’re ridiculous.” Sara elbowed her again and then fluffed her hair. “Get your laptop. We’re going out, I know a spot.”

“Ugh, school isn’t even started yet and already it’s work, work, work, work, work.”

“You bet your bottom,” Sara sang out. “Let’s gooooo~!”

Sara ended up dragging Mila to the Y that was out by the public schools, surrounded by the more typical style of single-family homes that had yards and everything.

“This way, we can get all sweaty and then jump in the pool afterward!” Sara said, pointing to the Olympic pool behind the building.

“Ah, hard pass,” Mila said immediately, then shrugged when Sara gave her an odd look. “Not feeling it today. Besides, I didn’t bring a suit.”

“Not feeling it?” Sara made a face. “Who are you and what have you done with my best friend?”

“She’s tied up in the garage,” Mila deadpanned. “Are we going to dance or not?”

They went in, and Sara flashed her membership card at the front desk before asking if the yoga class was done. They ended up having to wait a bit before it was and they could take the room the class was in, and Mila took the opportunity to stretch and warm up.

Mila had been dancing for as long as she could remember, even before she’d come to live with her aunt and uncle. They had been happy to continue her lessons, and she’d danced competitively in high school. Of course, you had to have at least two or three extracurriculars in primary school in order to look good on college applications, so Mila had joined the Russian club at school (there were a lot of Russian students in the public schools) and then her aunt had signed her up for piano lessons with Yakov Feltsman when she was in middle school.

Hilariously, the reason for those lessons was… Viktor. Auntie had seen him perform and decided that Mila should follow his example, and while Mila had had fun with piano throughout high school, she’d dropped it in her senior year to focus more closely on dance. Yakov had actually lamented it, in his own gruff way. She still made sure to drop in and visit her old instructor every now and then, and of course she’d managed to befriend Viktor over the seven years she’d been playing piano so she certainly didn’t regret learning. Viktor had even done music for her swing routines, jazz ditties that were just unfairly fun to dance to.

The song that she and Sara were going to be dancing to wasn’t one of Viktor’s though, and once she’d plugged in her laptop and Sara had connected a Bluetooth speaker, they put on the DVD of the Orchesis performance. Sara began to meticulously run Mila through the choreography, and it felt good to be dancing intensely again.

Halfway through their third or fourth run-through, there was a knock at the door. Mila blinked in surprise when Phichit Chulanont poked his head in. “Hey, I thought I recognized you two!”

“Phichit!” Sara waved. “I didn’t know you did pole dancing!”
“Good morning to you too,” Phichit stuck his tongue out at her and cocked his head. “Is this the Orchesis showcase music?”

“Yep, I’m giving Mila a rundown on the choreography for tryouts.” Sara fanned herself and sat down. “Now’s a good time to take a break, I think.”

“I can keep going,” Mila sang out, twirling a little. The song in question was pretty fun to dance to.

“Can we join?” Phichit asked, edging into the room a little more. “I’m trying out too, and I swear this is the year I’m getting in. I swear it.”

“We?” Mila asked, and Phichit ducked back out for a second to pull someone from behind him and nudge them into the room. She blinked when Yuuri from Chihoko’s shuffled in, looking a bit flustered. “Oh, hi there!”

“Yuuri!” Sara called from her prone position on the floor. “How’s it going?”

“Fine?” Yuuri looked back at Phichit, who snorted at him and shut the door behind them.

“You two know each other?” Mila asked, and Sara laughed and nodded.

“Yuuri’s on the Orchesis roster!”

“Ooooh,” Mila clapped. “We can make this a big practice session!”

“I don’t want to intrude,” Yuuri said hesitantly, but Mila shook her head.

“You’re not intruding, I want as much insider knowledge as I can get. Phichit?”

“I’m ready,” Phichit agreed, stripping off his loose over shirt. “Yuuri, change your shoes. We’re staying.”

“Oh, this’ll be fun!” Sara said, raising an arm. “Someone help me up, this girl is gonna kill me. Yuuri, your stamina might be a match for Mila, can you keep up with her?”

“I don’t know?” Yuuri made a face.

“I don’t know?” Yuuri made a face.

“I dare you to try,” Sara challenged.

“He can, totally,” Phichit stage-whispered. “Okay, time to get back up, Crispy!”

“I really wanna swim,” Sara moaned as Yuuri and Phichit switched out their street shoes for ones more suited to dancing. “Milaaaaa, why didn’t you bring a suit?”

“Because I don’t feel like swimming,” Mila said briskly. “You’re such a whiner-baby.”

Sara made a face and let out a long whine just to prove Mila’s point, but hauled herself to her feet again. “Okay. From the top?”

“Which one?” Yuuri asked.

“Wild Child.” Sara poked Mila’s laptop to wake it up. “Come through, Spotify.”

Mila stretched her back out, rolling her shoulders and neck. “So I know Phichit from swing dance, but what do you do, Yuuri?”
“Ballet, mostly,” Yuuri said, also stretching. “I try everything, though.”


“She’s my godmother,” Yuuri answered.

That made sense. “Tell her I love her cafe and also that she needs to change her soda options.”

Phichit snorted as Yuuri frowned. “What--?”

“Ignore that,” Phichit said.

“Don’t ignore that,” Mila insisted.

“Stretch, dammit!” Sara yelled. “I don’t need to deal with any strains today!”

“We’ll discuss this later,” Mila told Phichit, who smirked as he sank into a lunge.

“You shouldn’t be drinking soda anyway,” Yuuri said, taking off his glasses and setting them aside. “Sugar is bad for you.”

Mila sighed. “Point,” she admitted, and then Sara turned the song back on and they started up again.

An hour later, Mila was beginning to realize that Sara was right. Yuuri’s stamina gave Mila a run for her money, and Mila was almost jealous when they took a water break and he was barely sweaty. “Are you even human?” she demanded, panting.

He blinked and blushed. “Yes?”

“It’s a compliment,” Sara reassured him, flopping against the wall that didn’t have a mirror on it. “I’m telling you, Yuuri.”

Yuuri tugged at the collar of his t-shirt. “Right.” He put his glasses back on and stooped down to grab his phone. “How long do you have the room for?”

“Ah, I don’t think anyone requested it after us,” Mila said, using the bottom hem of her tank top to pat the sweat off her face.

“Nice!” Phichit said. “Is it okay if we keep using it after you guys are done?”

“Sure,” Sara agreed. “But if someone comes in and kicks us out, I can’t do anything.”

“That’s fine,” Yuuri said, finishing what he was doing with his phone. “We have to work in a couple hours anyway.”

“Last Sunday Funday before the school year starts!” Phichit pumped a fist. “After this, it’s weekend mornings and weekday evenings until the cows come home.”

“Maybe I should get a job,” Mila ventured. “Is Minako hiring?”

“She’s always accepting applications,” Yuuri answered automatically.

“Spoken like a true service worker,” Sara snorted.

Yuuri cracked a wry smile. “Yep. Go again?”
A while later, they were kicked out by a Jazzercise group and split up, Yuuri and Phichit heading to their apartment to shower before work while Mila and Sara heading back towards Mila’s home.

“We could hit the beach,” Sara wheedled, and Mila sighed. Yeah, the no-knees thing and the fast swimming was really cool, but the mermaid thing was going to cramp her social life at this rate.

“C’mon, this is our second-to-last weekend before classes. We’re going to be so bogged down after syllabus week!”

“I’m really not feeling it,” Mila said, wincing. “I’m sorry, I’m really sorry. Maybe we can hit Main Street instead?”

Sara wrinkled her nose. “I mean, sure. But. Beach, Mila.”

“New jeans,” Mila mimicked her friend's tone. “I’ve been thinking of getting a chandelier for my room, maybe we can go to the Dorm Store.”

“Why would you need a chandelier in your room?” Sara demanded, making a face.

“Aesthetic?”

“You’re weird,” Sara shook her head. “Okay, sounds good to me.”

“Cool, I’ll--” Mila cut herself off when she looked up and saw Yuri and Otabek sitting on her front steps. “Uh.”

“Where have you been?” Yuri demanded, standing. “Stuff happened!”

“Uh.” Mila made a face. “Stuff?”

“Stuff!” Yuri reiterated, bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Viktor won’t answer his phone either.”

Mila’s eyebrows shot up without her input, and she gave Otabek a meaningful look. “Viktor?” she repeated slowly. There was only one reason she could think of that Yuri would want to get in touch with both her and Viktor on a Sunday about.

Otabek smiled wryly. “We had a water incident,” he said in Russian, and Mila quickly schooled her expression into a blank one.

“Water, huh?” she answered in the same language. “Sure is a lot of it outside.”

“Yes.”

“What’s going on?” Sara asked, confused.

“Nothing at all,” Mila said immediately. “Yura here has a Russian thing for me.”

“You Russians and your Russian things,” Sara snorted. “I’m going home to shower and change, give me a call when you’re ready to go downtown.” She waved and took off, and Mila waited until her friend was a block away before whirling around to face the boys on her front stoop. “What the hell, Yura?!” she hissed. “My family could be around!”

“They’re not, we knocked on the door for, like, ten minutes,” Yuri shot back at her.

“Still!”

“Where were you?!” Yuri steamrolled over her. “We’ve been sitting here for, like, an hour.”
“I was dancing. God, Yura!”

“So you haven’t gotten wet?” Yuri pressed, and Mila eyed Otabek.

“I’m guessing you did?”

Otabek remained impassive. “I saw his tail, yes.”

Mila stared at him, and then at Yuri. “So he knows?”

“Not like I could help it,” Yuri grumbled. “I had to hide in a public bathroom.”

Mila shuddered at the thought. “Eew.”

“So yeah, but I made an important discovery,” Yuri added, vibrating. “Mila, we can dry ourselves off! Almost instantly!”

Mila blinked. “What?”

“I was able to make all the water boil off of me!” Yuri looked at Otabek and nudged him. “Beka, back me up here.”

“It’s true,” Otabek offered.

Mila blinked. “Nice backup.”

Yuri rolled his eyes.

“Did you see it happen myself,” Otabek added.

Mila closed her eyes and took a deep breath, centering herself. “Okay, what happened?”

“I got water spilled on me,” Yuri said. “And then I sprouted the fucking tail—”

“You know what, let’s go inside,” Mila interrupted, pulling her keys out from her pocket and ushering the boys in.

Once they were safely indoors and Mila had confirmed that her family was still out, she crossed her arms and leaned back against the kitchen counter. “Continue.”

“As I was saying,” Yuri stuck his tongue out at her. “We were at the park, I got a drink spilled on me, the tail came back, and I was stuck on a bathroom floor with no way to dry off until I did this.” He brandished a fist dramatically.

Nothing happened.

Mila stared at him, unsure of what she was supposed to be seeing. “Uh huh. Interesting.”

“It really did happen,” Otabek added.

“Give me water,” Yuri demanded. “I can show you.”

Mila made a face at him, but grabbed a dirty glass from the sink and filled it with water from the faucet. “Okay, show me.” She set the cup on the counter in front of the younger teen, and Yuri raised his hand over it before slowly curling his fingers back into a fist.

Mila was about to snort when the water began to bubble and froth, and steam began to rise from the
rim of the glass. “What the fuck,” she gasped, crouching down and staring at it up close. “How are you doing that?”

“Fucking magic, that’s how,” Yuri muttered, and relaxed his hand. The bubbling stopped.

Mila ran a finger along the outside of the glass. “It’s hot,” she exclaimed, still shocked. “Holy shit.”

“Yeah, so I did that and the water evaporated off of me, and I changed back,” Yuri finished, hopping onto one of the stools. He was grinning. “So now if there are any accidents at school, we’ll be all right!”

“You think all of us can do this?” Mila asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Well, why not?” Yuri countered, still bouncing a little. “I mean, we all got hit by the same mojo, right?” To their left, Otabek was watching with what Yuri referred to as his “resting bitch face” but Mila knew was actually just intense focus. He shrugged when they looked to him for his opinion.

“I guess that’s… true…” Mila considered it. She raised her hand and glanced at Yuri. “Like this?”

“Yeah.”

Mila mimicked Yuri’s fist, but nothing happened. “Do it again,” she said after a minute of nothing happening.

Yuri did so and got the water to boil again.

“Okay,” Mila said after examining Yuri’s gesture closely. “Let me try again.”

Again, nothing happened.

“Maybe I’m special,” Yuri offered, sniggering, and Otabek made an exasperated noise and nudged him while Mila narrowed her eyes at him.

“That is such a you thing to do,” Mila grumbled as she relaxed her fist, “waiting for me at my house to show off how special you are.” She compounded her statement with a jab in Yuri’s face, and then they all yelped and drew back as the water in the glass literally jumped out and splashed Yuri’s face and chest.

“What the fuck?!” Yuri yelled as he tried to peel off his wet shirt, but he wasn’t fast enough and he transformed again. Mila stared, jaw dropped, as Yuri slumped back on the stool, his tail flopping against the wooden legs.

“Did you do that?” Otabek asked, looking from the empty glass to Mila.

“I… maybe?” She picked up the glass and shuffled around the counter over to the sink so she could refill the glass. She set it back on the counter and then, carefully, pointed at it. The glass actually shuddered, and Yuri stopped fidgeting as he and Otabek both watched as Mila slowly raised her hand.

“Wait,” Yuri said, but Mila felt a sudden sort of tugging, not a physical sensation but still there, and she twisted her wrist and opened her hand, and the water rose out of the glass in a steady stream that defied gravity.

“Wow,” Otabek breathed, and Mila brought her hand up higher, spreading her fingers, and the top of the pillar of water opened like a flower.
“That’s… that’s insane,” Yuri said, eyes wide. “So… you can’t boil it but you can… like, waterbend?”

“It’s like I’m shaping it, or like it’s a puppet and I’m pulling the strings,” Mila said softly. She stopped concentrating, but only realized her mistake when the water splashed down onto the counter again and hit both Yuri once more and her as well.

“Oh shit,” she said as her legs vanished again and she fell on her face.

“Wow,” Otabek said, looking down at her on the tile floor and then at Yuri, who was still stuck on the stool. “You two are kind of helpless if you get splashed.”

“No shit,” Yuri said wryly, and then began to use his newly-discovered power to dry himself off.

“C… can you do me next?” Mila asked weakly, flopping over onto her back.

“Sure.”

“You’re a peach.”

Otabek sighed and grabbed a roll of paper towels so he could mop up the mess while the other two were indisposed.

“So do you think Viktor has one of these powers?” Mila wondered as she waited for Yuri to finish drying off. “Or a different one?”

“We should go find out,” Yuri said as steam began to rise off of his tail. “Just so you know, this stings a little.”

“I can handle it,” Mila said, flapping a hand.

“So who else has this?” Otabek asked as he swept the water back into the sink. “Is it just you three?”

“Yeah, Chris was on the island with us but he wasn’t in the lagoon when the eclipse happened,” Mila said.

“Hm.” Otabek tapped his chin. “You guys can trust Chris with this?”

“I trust him,” Mila said. “He’s been friends with Viktor since they were both really little, and honestly we have no reason to not.”

“Well, most of the human body is water,” Yuri said matter-of-factly as he transformed back. “I’ll show him what I can do and tell him that I’ll boil him inside-out if he outs us.”

“I really don’t think you’ll need to do that,” Mila rolled her eyes. “Chris regularly campaigns against Sea World and literally went to Australia to protect sharks. He’s not going to turn on us.”

“When did he do that?” Yuri demanded. “I don’t remember that!”

“What, the shark thing? That was last year. The finning thing, that got huge online.” Mila played with one of her fins. “It’s on his Facebook, you can find it.”

“Huh. Hidden depths. Never knew.” Yuri slid off the stool and squatted down next to her. “And he’s okay with his boyfriend working at the marine park?”

“It’s a rehabilitation and education center, and they do research and conservation,” Mila reminded
him. “They’re literally the ethical version of Sea World.”

Yuri shrugged and raised his fist over her. “If you say so.”

“You know, you probably could have cleaned up the mess yourself without making Beka do it,” Mila added.

“I don’t mind,” Otabek said, dropping the soggy paper towels in the trash under the sink. “I’m still kind of processing all of this.”

“Trust me, we all are,” Mila said as she felt the aforementioned stinging up and down her tail. “Oh, that’s kind of itchy,” she complained as the steam began to rise off her scales.

“Yeah, yeah, quit whining.”

Mila slapped Yuri’s knee, and he glared at her. “I can stop, you know,” he said, narrowing his eyes.

Mila stuck her tongue out at him.

“So, do we call Viktor?” Otabek asked, switching to a dishtowel to wipe off the remaining moisture on the counter.

“I’d say yes, just to be safe,” Mila said as Yuri moved onto her upper body. “I’m curious, I wonder what he can do.”

“He’s probably at the library,” Yuri sniggered. “Like the old fart that he is.”

“Well, maybe he found something out,” Mila suggested as she felt the water evaporate off her skin. “That’s so nifty!” she added after she’d changed back. “Man, I wish I could do that.”

“Well, you can literally control it,” Otabek pointed out. “Just think of me, I can’t do either.”

“True.” Mila giggled. “But then again, you don’t sprout fins if you get so much as a drop of water on you.”

“True,” Otabek agreed.

Yuri had picked up his phone, and he made a quiet noise. “I just got a response from Viktor, he’s at the board shop with Chris. Of course he is.”

“Well, we can meet him there. I’ll tell Sara I’ll be a little late. Oh, crap,” Mila checked her still-sweaty shirt. “I gotta take a bath.”

“Oops,” Yuri cackled, and Mila whapped him on the arm.

“You two hang tight, I’ll be quick,” she said, heading for the stairs. “If my aunt and uncle come home and find you, don’t answer any questions.”

“I’ll handle them,” Otabek said evenly as Yuri blew a raspberry at her.

“And if my cousin comes home, pretend she doesn’t exist.”

Yuri winced. “Yeah, fair enough.” He’d been on the receiving end of Tammy’s insufferable preteen-ness before.

Mila sighed and made her way upstairs, quickly grabbing her bathrobe and stripping off her dirty
workout clothes before locking herself in the bathroom.

“Well,” she said to herself as she pulled a few extra bath towels out of the closet and set them by the tub. “I guess things just got even more interesting.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, a couple things.

Those of you who watched H2O, you already know. Don't spoil it for everyone else, please!

I went to a high school that had an Orchesis dance group, and it was pretty badass. I can totally see Yuuri and the rest of the dance squad on one! (And before you guys ask, YES. Yuuri is going to become more important in later chapters. I'm working on it!)

(Speaking of which.)

So those of you who know me and/or follow me on social media know that I got hired mid-October at Amazon, and I got hired full-time. That means I work upwards of 40 hours a week, and... it's the holiday season. They're tapping me for as much overtime as they possibly can. You guys, I've been SO. BUSY. I work for 10-11 hours a day and then I come home, eat, and pass out in bed. There hasn't been a whole lot of time for ficcing, and I apologize for the wait.

That being said, this fic is going on a semi-hiatus until after 2 things happen: the holiday season dies down a little bit, and I get my weekends back; and, once I've completed the bulk of my Big Bang On Ice fic. If you are enjoying this, I guarantee you'll enjoy the BBOI entry!

In the meantime, rest assured that I haven't abandoned this! I have so much planned for it, and I can't wait to share it with you all! Plus, I have commissioned ARTWORK from RikoJasmine, please check it out and give her some love!

Please feel free to hit me up at my tumblr and Twitter, come talk to me about mermaids and YOI and true love! I love talking with you guys!

Also, tell me what you think so far! Your input brightens my day so much, I love reading your theories and thoughts! Ask me for clarification, give me your conspiracies, suggest more mermaid stuff to me! I love it, and I love you guys too!

I look forward to our future mer-adventures, which ARE coming! In the meantime, happy Thanksgiving (if you're celebrating!) and remember to hide on Black Friday! (Seriously. Do all your shopping online. Getting trampled is NOT worth it.)
Chris knew it was going to be an interesting day when the tourists arrived halfway through his shift.

“Why do we have to be so highly recommended?” he groaned, and Josef slapped him on the shoulder before disappearing into the backroom to hide. Lucky jerk.

The kids were already touching everything, including the things that had “DO NOT TOUCH” signs on them, and the parents were awkwardly examining things that would probably end up in storage bins labeled “family vacation to California” in a few months. A tragedy. God help him hold his tongue.

“This is so expensive, though,” the wife was saying as Chris rescued yet another ukulele from an untimely death. “I’m sure the Ron Jon’s has it for much cheaper.”

“Excuse me? Is there a Ron Jon’s near here?” the husband asked.

Chris turned away to school his expression into one of cheerful servitude before engaging. “I'm
sorry, Ron Jon doesn’t have a store in this entire state.”

The wife frowned. “But I could swear—”

“Nope!” Chris gritted his teeth and grimaced hard enough that it could pass for a smile. “Not here!”

“Maybe the Walmart has something instead, dear,” the husband said sotto voce, but Chris still heard him.

“Mom, I like this one!” one of the kids yelled, trying to tug a five-hundred-dollar longboard off the wall.

“Ahh!” Chris shouted, catching it. “You break it, you bought it.” He pointed at the sign on the wall that stated exactly that, hand-painted and decorated with palm trees.

The parents both got deer-in-headlights expressions and quickly ushered their children out.

Chris breathed a sigh of relief as the door tinkled with their exit, and Josef poked his head out of the backroom. “Did they ask for a Ron Jon?”

“I’m going to go back in time and destroy their first-ever store,” Chris said in an aggressively cheerful voice.

“Oh Lord.” Josef checked his watch. “Why don’t you go grab the refresher for the t-shirts? I’ll watch the till.”

Chris carefully did not stomp into the backroom to grab the shirts that would go up on the display table nearest to the door. He was digging through the box that had just come in from the print shop that Josef had partnered with when the door creaked open again.

“I’ll be just a minute,” he tossed over his shoulder.

“Psst, do you have this in pink?”

Chris dropped his armload of t-shirts and whirled around. “You are not supposed to be back here,” he hissed, chasing Viktor out of the backroom. “For the love of god, if you want to work here then apply!”

“Josef never complained before,” Viktor whined, but he went willingly as Chris doubled back to grab the abandoned shirts so he could earn his pay.

People often gave him shit about being laid-back, but that was only when he was off the clock. Chris knew where to put the bulk of his energy: earning his paycheck and destroying Sea World.

If he were being fair, Josef knew very well that Viktor wouldn’t mess around in the backroom… but still. Chris was one of the shift managers. He had to have standards while working.

Viktor eyed the shirts in his arms and stepped back to let Chris edge around the sunglasses display. “Soooo. Pink?”

“What’s up, Viktor?” Chris weaved through the shop so he could dump his armload on the table.

Josef waved from behind the point-of-sales counter. “Hey Viktor!”

Viktor waved back and leaned against the display table that Chris had begun to restock. “I spent the morning on the floor, getting a doggy tongue bath, all because I forgot to buy rubber gloves at the
corner store last night. I just needed to get some fresh air.”

“So you came to bother me at work?” Chris quipped, refolding the kids’ shirts that had been pawed through earlier. “But seriously, wow. That sucks.”


“Well, until we figure out how this whole thing works,” Chris reminded him.

“But what if this is how it works? Chris. Chris. Chriiiiiiiissssssss. I can’t wash my own dishes anymore!!”

Chris snorted, and Viktor glared at him.

“No, you’re right, it’s not funny,” Chris admitted. “But at least we don’t get insane weather here?”

“How am I supposed to clean?!” Viktor demanded, tugging at his shirt collar.

Chris went back to folding the shirts. “Just let your parents finally hire a housekeeper for you like they keep bugging you to do?”

“I’m an independent adult!”

“Do you know how badly others would want to be in your shoes?”

Viktor groaned and leaned against the jewelry counter. “I had a handle on things, and I mean, it’s cool and all? But this whole--” he dropped his voice to a murmur, “--this whole growing a tail when wet thing is super inconvenient and I want to be able to opt out of it.”

Chris pondered it for a second. “I bet there’s something out there that could stop it. Maybe I can look into compounds that form a film on your skin?”

“That… sounds… uncomfortable?”

“Well, yes, but you could do things away from home without having to worry about being splashed.”

Viktor frowned, but then shrugged. “I guess it’s an option.”

Chris winked. “That’s the spirit. So, any plans for the week?”

“Uh, Yakov wanted to talk to me so I’ll be stopping by the conservatory tomorrow.” Viktor made a face. “I guess there are some new kids he wants me to work with? I’m just… preemptively worn out.”

Chris frowned. “Viktor, if piano is starting to get too tiring for you--”

“It’s not, I’m just not very inspired lately.” Viktor shrugged. “I’ll get over it.”

Chris was about to press when the door jingled, and two familiar figures stepped into the shop.

Viktor perked up, probably at the conversational escape route that had presented itself. “Gosha!”

Georgi Popovich, who worked with Viktor at the Ariel, looked up and waved before he went back to the quiet discussion he’d been having with Faddei, his older brother (who frankly looked nothing
like him, if Chris was being honest with himself: where Georgi was tall, thin, and fairly athletic, Faddei only came up to Chris’s chin and was very, very round and easily winded.)

“What brings both of you in here today?” Chris asked as the Popovich brothers drifted closer.

“I don’t think Deya has ever set foot in this store before in his life,” Viktor added.

“Yes, well,” Georgi sighed. “Deya is here to replace my longboard that he destroyed the other day while trying to show off on the beach for tourists.”

Faddei looked fairly unperturbed at Georgi’s ire. “Sometimes, little brother, you gotta do what you gotta do.”

Georgi looked like he was trying to set his brother on fire with his mind.

“So what’s your cheapest board?” Faddei added, waggling his eyebrows.

Chris glanced at Georgi, who gave him a look, and then looked back at the grinning man. “Well, I know what Georgi uses, and you’re not getting off easy with this one, dude.” He thumbed at a similar board on the wall. “You’re gonna have to shell out for around $650 to replace Georgi’s last board.”

Faddei blanched.

Viktor and Georgi both snorted at the older man’s expression. Chris tried to keep his expression as neutral as possible.

“Are you sure you can’t… settle for a different one?” Faddei pleaded, turning to Georgi.

Georgi crossed his arms and narrowed his eyes. “No.”

Faddei shifted on his heels, like a little kid that needed to pee really badly. “D-do you think you can swing a deal?” he asked, widening his eyes at Chris.

Chris once saw Faddei try to sweet talk his way out of paying for an expensive seafood dinner and leave his then-girlfriend with the bill, forcing her to stay at the restaurant all night working off the balance. “Not a chance.”

Faddei’s face fell. “Six-fifty?”

Chris nodded. “Six-fifty plus tax. We take credit.”

Faddei slumped and dramatically hung his head, and Georgi looked fairly pleased as Chris led his brother to the till so that Josef could ring up the purchase.

While Chris fetched the ladder to pull the board off the wall, Viktor and Georgi ended up nearby.

“So. Showing off to his admirers?” Viktor said, and Georgi sighed. Heavily.

“One of these days, I’m going to kill him.”

“Ah, brotherly love,” Chris offered as he unlocked the rack so he could remove the board. “So glad I’m an only child.”

“So helpful,” Georgi grouched. He rubbed his forehead, carefully avoiding his carefully gelled hair. “I don’t get it all. He just shows up at places and carries on, and the women are all charmed.”
Chris reflected that Faddei had nearly gotten married three times, and he was only 27. “Mmhm.”

“He has all the luck,” Georgi continued mournfully.

*Ah, that’s right.* Georgi’s most recent girlfriend Sylvia had dumped him the previous week. “Maybe you should take a break from the dating game,” Chris suggested.

Viktor groaned. “At least you’re playing the game, Gosha. I wonder if there’s something wrong with me.”

“You’re just picky,” Chris offered, handing the board down before carefully descending the ladder. “Get over your high standards and get out there.”

Georgi and Viktor both glared at him with similarly prissy expressions. “He doesn’t understand it, he’s been with the same guy for almost four years now,” Viktor muttered.

“Well,” Georgi repeated, dark brows drawn together in a severe line. “You know what?” Viktor turned to Georgi dramatically. “How about if we’re both still single by the time we’re thirty, let’s just make a marriage pact so we don’t die alone.”

Georgi looked his former classmate up and down, grimacing. “No offense, Vitya, but you’re not exactly my type.”

Viktor laughed. “Yeah, you know what, I could say the same.”

Georgi snorted and hefted his new longboard before calling to his brother in rapid Russian. Faddei flipped him off before waving the receipt at him, and then Georgi turned back to the others. “That’s it for me. I’ll see you out there, Chris.”

“Count on it,” Chris said, saluting, and the Popovich brothers departed with another tinkle of the doorbell.

“I wonder how he broke the last board,” Josef said mildly.

“I don’t,” Viktor replied, idly messing with his phone.

He stuck around while Chris continued to tidy up the shop, ducking into the backroom to grab a replacement for the board he’d sold Faddei, and finishing up the t-shirt display. Chris’s half-day shift was nearly almost over when Yuri, Mila, and Yuri’s older friend Otabek burst into the shop.

Chris blinked as they surveyed the store and then made a beeline for Viktor and him, over by the till. Josef was in the back doing inventory, and Chris was waiting for the two other employees to show up and clock in. Once he was done at the surf shop, he had about forty-five minutes for a lunch break before he was scheduled to teach bodyboarding classes. He and Viktor had been discussing going down the boardwalk to find somewhere to eat before splitting up. The city library would be opening up around noon and Viktor wanted to get some more time in there before it closed again at five, because he apparently planned to spend the following day at either the Ariel or the college anyway.

“Yura,” Viktor said in surprise as the teens drew near. “You guys, what’s--”

“We need to show you something,” Mila said urgently, raising her eyebrows.

“It’s eclipse-related,” Yuri added. He frowned. “We should come up with a codename. Like
rutabaga or something."

“Eclipse-related gets the point across fine,” Otabek said, and Chris and Viktor exchanged alarmed
looks.

“Yeah, he saw me get splashed,” Yuri added before either of them could ask. “He’s sworn to
secrecy.”

Chris didn’t know Otabek very well, but Viktor’s expression cleared and he nodded in satisfaction.
“Well, okay then.”

While Viktor had a tendency towards being a drama queen, his judgment of people usually was
fairly solid. If Otabek knowing about their tail situation didn’t set off alarm bells for him, Chris could
afford to relax. Still, with how little they actually knew about all of the merman stuff, Chris’s first
instinct was to play everything close to the vest. He knew for a fact that while the marine park to the
south was primarily a conservation facility, there were a couple military bases to the north that
probably would give them trouble if the news about magical merkids got out into the open.

“Well, Indiana and Luke should be in any minute to take over, and I can clock out.” Chris looked up
just as the two aforementioned high school students walked through the door, chatting and waving to
him. “Perfect timing, hold that thought.” He ducked away to let Josef know he was finishing up, and
then pass the to-do list off to Indiana, before punching out via the cash register. He grabbed his bag
and did a quick sweep of the store, noting that Viktor and the others had exited.

“Have a nice Sunday,” Indiana said, waving, and Luke echoed her. Chris nodded goodbye and took
his leave.

He found the others a few paces down the boardwalk, hanging by the railing.

“Incredible,” Viktor was saying, and then he caught sight of Chris and beckoned him over. “Mila
and Yura have additional powers, apparently!”

“Powers?” Chris made a face. “Can the whole… tail thing really be called a power as opposed to a
condition?”

“Point,” Viktor conceded. His eyes still sparkled as he turned to the younger kids. “So… you guys
think--”

“Only one way to find out!” Mila said excitedly.

“Should we go somewhere more private?” Otabek nodded at the passerby.

“Probably a good call,” Chris agreed, and they all started trooping along the boardwalk.

“Cafe?” Mila suggested, nodding at the familiar fish statues in the distance.

“We were literally just there yesterday,” Yuri groused.

“Oh, I’m sorry, where would you rather go?” Mila asked, raising her eyebrows.

Yuri opened his mouth to snap at her, but Otabek cut in smoothly. “I could go for Chihoko’s,
honestly.”

Chris and Viktor exchanged amused looks as Yuri shut his mouth and his nostrils flared. “I mean, I
guess it’s fine.”
Chris spared a moment to thank whatever benevolent service industry gods were out there for the fact that Sachihoko Cafe tended to cater to cash-strapped and half-crazed college students because if it were any other eatery on the boardwalk, he would probably be uncomfortably close to spending more than he’d budgeted for the week. The five of them grabbed a table outside on the patio and Yuri drummed his fingers impatiently.

“So, what’s the deal?” Viktor asked, eyeing the younger kids. “I’m kind of intrigued.”

“You probably got something,” Mila reminded him. “We just need to figure out what.”

Viktor tapped a finger to his lips. “So go over this for me again, you…”?

“I can control water, sort of like waterbending from Avatar. Yura can boil it.”

“Hm.” Viktor glanced at Chris. “I kind of want to see this.”

“I guarantee that’s a bad idea,” Yuri said. “Baba splashed me while she was figuring her power out.”

“Yeah, that would be a problem,” Chris immediately agreed, envisioning three flopping merpeople right there in the middle of the crowd of tourists.

“I think I have an idea of how to handle it,” Mila argued, and she was all smiles when the cute Asian waiter from yesterday approached with a tray full of water glasses. “Hi, Yuuri! Nice seeing you again!”

To Chris’s surprise, Yuuri flashed Mila a quick smile - then again, everybody loved Mila once they spent an hour in her presence - and carefully set down the glasses. “Hi again. Great to have you all back here. Do you need a moment to pick through the menu?”

“That would be nice, thanks!” Viktor said cheerfully, and then he trailed off and stared at something near Yuuri’s ankle. “Oh my god.”

Yuuri froze like a deer in headlights and Chris blinked, leaning back in his seat so he could follow Viktor’s eyeline.

Oh.

There, sitting patiently by Yuuri’s feet, was an adorable toy poodle wearing something that Chris quickly identified as a red service dog vest. The poodle’s eyes were trained on Yuuri, and it was completely ignoring everything else nearby.

“Oh my god. Oh my god.” Viktor babbled, pressing his hands to his cheeks. “Oh my god, so cute!”

Yuuri flushed bright red and pushed his glasses up his nose. “Ah. Thanks. Please don’t distract him, he’s working when he has the vest on.”

“Of course!” Viktor immediately agreed. “What a good boy! What’s his name?”

“V-Vicchan,” Yuuri stammered, looking away.

Viktor beamed. “He’s so adorable! I’m sorry, I really love poodles—”

“Yes, right,” Yuuri interrupted, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. “I do too. Thanks.”

Viktor snapped out of his “oh my god I love dogs” mode and seemed to pick up on how uncomfortable he was making the waiter. “Clearly you have the best taste!” he said, leaning his elbows on the table. Chris figured it was one of the ones with a messed up leg, because it wobbled, making Yuri and Mila exclaim in protest. “What would you recommend?”
Yuuri swallowed, and the little poodle nudged at his ankle. “Ah. Pick your favorite three fruits and get a smoothie,” he said, his voice strained. “That’s what I usually do.”

Viktor beamed. “Sounds great! Hmm, what are my top three fruits,” he muttered, diving deep into thought.

Chris snorted at the Serious Thinker face he was pulling, and caught Yuuri’s attention. “While he’s mulling that over, can I get sparkling water?”

“Sure,” Yuuri answered, scribbling it down on his pad.

“Can I just get a Coke?” Yuri asked, and to his right, Mila made an annoyed noise.

“Pepsi okay?” Yuuri asked.

Yuri slapped Mila’s hand down from whatever gesture she was going to make and sneered at her. “I literally don’t care, dude.”

“Great.” Yuuri glanced at Otabek. “For you?”

“I’m good with water,” the teen answered.

“Okay.” Yuuri looked at Mila. “Do you want your usual smoothie with no whey?”

“You are nicer than Phichit and I love you,” Mila said in a single breath. “Also ditch the Pepsi.”

“I have no control over that,” Yuuri said immediately. He looked at Viktor. “Do you know…?”

“Oh!” Viktor snapped his fingers. “Mango! And strawberry and banana! Does that work?”

“Sure.” Yuuri scribbled the order down and bobbed his head. “I’ll be right back with your drinks.” He scurried away, his poodle close on his heels.

Viktor squeaked. “That dog is the cutest dog that isn’t my own dog. I love him.”

“He’s a service dog,” Yuri reminded him, eyebrows drawn together. “Don’t fuck with him, he’s working.”

“Oh, I won’t!” Viktor immediately said, making a face. “That’d be a dick move.”

Chris sighed and snagged a menu. “You guys want to just get a giant plate of nachos?”

“I don’t really care,” Viktor shrugged, turning back to the table. “I want to see what you guys can do.”

Mila waggled her eyebrows and gently nudged her glass forward. She waved a hand at it, and Chris leaned forward as a round glob of water began to rise from the glass almost like a mushroom cloud. She spread her fingers, and the head of it flared out, flattening like a plate. Chris glanced at Mila’s face, and she had an expression of intense concentration, complete with lip-biting. She carefully lowered her hand, relaxing her fingers, and the little pillar of water collapsed back into the glass. “Last time I did that, I splashed us both,” she said, tilting her head at Yuri. “I think I’ve got an idea of how to handle it.”

“That’s.. insane,” Chris said, mind whirring. “You just thought of a shape and it obeyed?”

“Pretty much, yeah. I can’t just look at it and move it, at least not yet.” Mila sighed and slumped
forward. “It’s like a pulling in my mind.”

“Wow,” Viktor breathed, glancing at Yuri. “And you?”

Yuri brandished a hand and closed it into a fist. The water in Mila’s glass began to bubble and froth, boiling almost immediately. Chris’s mouth dropped open as steam rose from the glass’s rim and half of its contents evaporated away. “That defies all laws of thermodynamics if I’m not mistaken.”

“It’s magic, surfer boy,” Yuri said. “It doesn’t have to make scientific sense.”

“I’m pretty sure our tail situation defies other laws of physics,” Viktor agreed. He rubbed his chin. “So you just kind of gesture at it, and it boils?”

“Make a fist,” Yuri confirmed.

Mila waggled her fingers, and the glass actually shook.

Chris rubbed the bridge of his nose. Insane.

Viktor glanced around to make sure no one was obviously watching, and then did a Spider-man web-shooting motion at the glass. Chris snorted when nothing happened.

“Worth a shot,” Viktor laughed and then mimicked Mila’s gesture.

They all leaned forward to examine the glass. “Anything?” Chris asked.

“Not that I can tell,” Otabek said, and the others murmured their agreement.

“Try boiling it,” Yuri ordered, and Viktor brandished a fist at the glass.

Again, nothing.

“So you don’t have my power or Yura’s power,” Mila mused, drumming her fingers on the table. “You might have a different one.”

“Or you might not have any powers at all,” Yuri sniggered.

Viktor pouted.

“I doubt that,” Chris said, stroking his goatee. “I mean, honestly, there’s got to be some logic to this magic stuff. Think about it: Yuri has the power of boiling, which could be considered one direction, and Mila can manipulate it in its medium state, which could be neutral. So the opposite of boiling is freezing, which would be the logical ability left.”

“Again, magic,” Yuri argued. “For all we know, magic doesn’t have rules.”

“It has to,” Chris answered. “Otherwise, you guys wouldn’t be able to really do much with it on purpose.”

“Chaos is a thing,” Otabek spoke up. “I’m sure magic could possibly follow that too.”

“We literally found out about magic’s existence two days ago,” Viktor sighed. “But I kind of agree with Chris, especially since our tails go away when we dry off. That’s a pattern of logic.”

Yuri and Mila both looked surprised, and then Mila nodded. “Yeah, okay, that makes a lot of sense.”
Viktor eyed the glass again, and then opened his hand and thrust it, palm-out, at the water. His fingers straightened snapped together, and his brow furrowed as he concentrated.

Chris almost jumped in surprise when the glass suddenly flash-froze, complete with frost and fuzzy ice crystals around the rim. “Holy shit,” he gasped, snatching the glass up and hefting it in his hand. The water within was literally frozen solid. “Well, that answers the question about rules.”

“You were right, though,” Viktor said excitedly. “I can freeze stuff. Wow. That’s… kind of cool!”

“Why didn’t we all three get the same powers?” Mila wondered. “I imagine it would be more helpful that way since Yura here can at least boil off any water he gets on himself.”

“That’s true,” Viktor agreed as Chris put the glass back down on the table. “Maybe someone figured it out and I’ll be lucky enough to find a book in the library about their discovery.”

“That would be awfully convenient,” Otabek said blandly, and Chris had to laugh at that.

“That was a huge hypothetical, of course,” Viktor grinned. “Still. Wow. I have magic powers, how cool is that?”

“It’s pretty cool, yeah,” Chris nodded, putting the glass back down in the middle of the table. “Yuri, can you bring that down to liquid?”

Yuri pulled a face but made a fist again and concentrated on the ice. Chris watched in bemusement as it changed back into liquid like it was sped-up footage of ice melting. Yuri cut it off, pulling his hand away, and Chris probed the water with his finger. It was only just about room temperature if a bit warmer than it had been before Mila had demonstrated her abilities.

“Nice,” he said, looking up at the teens in front of him. “So obviously, practicing should help with finer control, just to be safe.”

“Practice making a fist and making water boil,” Yuri snorted. “Okay, professor.”

“You might be able to control how hot you make something, or how quickly it heats up,” Chris said. “It’s worth trying out, I think.”

“This could be really fun!” Mila exclaimed brightly. Her phone buzzed and she pulled it out to check it. “Ah, Sara’s on her way. Let’s get all eclipse-related stuff figured out?”

“How much is there to figure out that we actually can right now?” Chris asked, and then Yuuri showed back up with his drink tray loaded down with their orders and his admittedly adorable service poodle.

“Sparkling water,” he said, nodding to Chris. “Cola. Blueberry-blackberry-raspberry smoothie, absolutely no whey. Mango-strawberry-banana smoothie, also no whey. All good?”

Everyone murmured in the positive, and Yuuri slipped his drink tray under his arm. “Are you all ready to order?”

“Can we get the nacho party platter?” Chris asked, looking around at his tablemates and checking for dissent. No one spoke up, so Yuuri wrote down their order and headed back inside to deliver it to the kitchen, calling to his little dog as he went.

“What a good dog,” Viktor said, with feeling, making Chris need to smother his laughter with the back of his hand. “What? It’s true!”
“You’re so obsessed,” Yuri deadpanned, taking a sip of his drink. “Literally.”

“Anybody who has a poodle of any sort is immediately the other classiest person in the room,” Viktor stated, playing with the little umbrella that came with his drink. “This is scientific fact.”

“Well, we live in a world where an eclipse gave us magic powers,” Mila said, nudging Yuri. “Science just threw its hands up and went back to bed.”

Yuri choked on his drink and had to duck to the side, his laughter broken up with weak coughs.

Viktor made a face, but Chris was laughing too. “Viktor, you are fixating. Plus, you’re biased. Just let it go.”

“He’s literally Elsa,” Mila squeaked, clapping her hands. “He’s got the ice powers, that makes him Elsa!”

“Oh my god,” Yuri sputtered, devolving into giggles. Even Otabek was laughing.

“Does this mean I get a sparkly blue dress and a bitchin’ ice castle? Because hell yes, I want a castle.” Viktor grinned and made a dramatic hand flourish. “The cold never bothered me anyway,” he sang, and of course he sounded good while mockingly singing a Disney song.

That set the teenagers into even louder laughter, and Chris waggled his eyebrows at Viktor. “If you freeze the Bay and flounce off to your ice castle, I’m showing up with a reindeer and kicking your ass.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Viktor answered, smirking.

The conversation shifted to the upcoming school year and Yuri’s annoyance that he was the only one in their party to be starting up classes the next day. Sara Crispino joined them right before Yuuri brought out their nacho platter, and she ordered a sparkling water from him as well.

“Okay, so help me convince Crispy here that a chandelier in my bedroom would be the best thing ever,” Mila said, and Viktor smacked the table with his palm, causing it to jolt and everyone to yell at him.

“Sara, I love you as best as I know how, but how do you not know how classy chandeliers are?” Sara rolled her eyes at Mila. “Yes, chandeliers are great. Not exactly for swinging from, and they’re not my first choice for bedroom lighting. Besides, don’t you have a ceiling fan?”

Mila lifted her chin as if she’d stumbled upon the winning argument. “I do not, no.”

“Well,” Sara said slowly, shrugging. “I think a ceiling fan would be a better investment. Air circulation helps lower energy costs, and helps cycle out stale air, resulting in a healthier occupant.”

“You sound like an infomercial,” Yuri snorted. “I think Baba here could use all the help she can get when it comes to classiness.”

“Yura, one of these days I’m going to shave you bald,” Mila said sweetly.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Try me.”

“Children, children, please,” Viktor said. “There will be no shaving done on anyone unless they
Mila sniggered and burst into laughter when Viktor narrowed his eyes at her. “What?” she demanded. “Just because you’re insecure about your receding hairline doesn’t mean everyone else is!”

“His hairline is not receding,” Sara disagreed.

Viktor made a fake sobbing noise of gratitude.

“I dunno,” Chris said, poking at Viktor’s forehead. “I could swear there wasn’t this much real estate a week ago.”

“I have a wide forehead, I refuse to go bald.”

“Whatever you say, Binktop.”

“You’re all the worst,” Viktor groaned, pressing his fingers to his scalp.

“It’s okay, Binktop,” Mila said kindly. “We’ll still love you when you’re bald.”

“I hate you all. Except for Sara.”

Sara beamed, and that was when Yuuri reappeared with her drink order. He seemed a lot less nervous now and even chatted with Sara about the Orchesis group they both were in while the rest of the others kept picking at the nachos and talking about school stuff and other plans later in the week. Chris was eyeing his watch, trying to figure out how much time he had before he had to head out to the beach, when another customer walking past the table squealed and dropped to her knees next to Yuuri’s service dog.

“Oh my god, what a cute little baby!” She started petting the poodle’s head, trying to redirect his attention to her.

“Oh, lighten up, jerk!” the girl giggled. “I’m just saying hi.”

“No, you really should stop,” Viktor said, tapping her shoulder. “He’s wearing a vest, that means he’s working.”

“Hey, butt out,” the girl snapped at him, slapping his hand away. “This isn’t any of your business.”

To Chris’s surprise, Yuri shot to his feet, complete with his chair skidding back on the floor. “Listen, asshole,” he growled, getting in the girl’s face. “They asked nicely, so now I’m telling you to back the fuck off.”

“You fuck off!” the girl shoved him back. “I’m just saying hi!”

“No, you are distracting a working service dog from his work, you idiot.” Yuri refused to back down. “Do you not know how to read English? Do you not understand manners? Go away!”

“What the fuck!” the girl yelled, and she turned to Yuuri. “What the fuck, dude? What’s your deal?”

Yuuri’s eyes were wide again, and Chris caught sight of the tiniest tremor in his rigid shoulders. “Ah...”
“Call your posse off, dude! I’m just saying hi!”

“Um—” Yuuri stammered, and Chris couldn’t take it anymore. He got up and caught the girl’s attention, giving her his flirtyest grin.

“Looks like there’s been a misunderstanding. Do you want me to get the owner of this establishment to clear things up?”

“Fuck you all,” the girl spat. “I’m leaving.” She stomped away, and Chris breathed a sigh of relief.

“Hey,” Viktor was saying. “Are you okay?”

Chris looked back at Yuuri, who looked close to tears. Vicchan was barking and pawing at his ankles, clearly alerted to his owner’s distress.

Shit. “Yuuri, take a seat,” he said, scooting his chair out and maneuvering their waiter into it. “Do you want to hold your dog?”

“P-please,” Yuuri said, sucking in a breath.

Viktor caught the poodle and set him in Yuuri’s lap, and Sara grabbed one of the extra glasses of water from the center of the table and pushed it over next to him. “Here, take a drink,” Viktor said. “You’re fine, we won’t let anything happen. Do you want me to go grab someone?”

“M-Minako,” Yuuri sobbed, burying his face in Vicchan’s fur.

Viktor looked up at the others. “Who’s Minako?”

“The cafe owner,” Mila answered, and Viktor nodded before heading inside.

“That girl was a fucking asshole,” Yuri said, still indignant. “Who does that?”

“Yura, that’s not helpful,” Otabek admonished.

“H-he’s right, though,” Yuuri mumbled, still shaking. “But people do i-it a lot.”

“Jeez,” Mila said, and that seemed to be the shared sentiment. “That’s awful.”

Viktor returned with an older Asian woman in tow, and she immediately dropped to her knees next to Yuuri and started talking to him in Japanese. He shook his head at whatever she was saying, and she put her arm around his shoulders and chivied him to his feet. “Thanks for getting me,” she said to Viktor. “Your bill’s on me.” She escorted Yuuri back inside, and everyone just sat in silence for a moment.

“That was enough fun for the day,” Sara finally said, but she sounded worried. “I hope Yuuri’s okay.”

“Yeah, I hope so too,” Mila agreed softly.

They finished up their drinks and lunch, and despite the woman’s statement on their bill, they all pulled out cash and left it with the other waiter who had taken over the patio before taking their leave.

The group split up, the younger kids heading downtown to goof around in the shopping district, and Viktor and Chris towards the beach. Viktor kept glancing back at the cafe, clearly still worried. “I feel like I didn’t do enough.”
“You did fine,” Chris said. “I’m surprised at little Yuri, though. I’ve never seen him jump to anyone’s defense like that.”

“Yeah, well, he’s really a good kid underneath all that bluster. I’ve known him for years.” Viktor smiled slightly. “Plus, I’m pretty sure a girl at Neptune has a seeing-eye dog in his year. I’m sure he knows more about this stuff than the rest of us do.”

That made sense. “Well, Yuuri’s in Minako’s care now. Right?”

“Yeah, that was who answered when I called for Minako. I think he’ll be safe with her, at least.” Viktor sighed. “That just sucked, man. God.”

“Yeah, but the world’s full of assholes. Nothing we can do about it.” Chris looked out over the bay, filled with pleasure crafts and a spattering of surfers. “Well, except for imitating the Tiger Child.”

Viktor snorted. “Very true.” He fiddled with his phone and then rolled his shoulders. “Well, the library should be open now and I know you’ve got a class to teach. I’ll catch you later, yeah?”

“Let me know if you find anything interesting,” Chris said. “This additional powers thing is a bit of a doozy.”

“Yeah, for sure.” Viktor winked, and then headed off in the direction of the municipal sector of the downtown area.

Chris turned to the beach again, and then shook off the midday’s events so he could get himself in the mood to deal with enthusiastic tourists and nervous parents.

“Well,” he muttered to himself. “There aren’t a lot of more interesting ways to end the summer.”

But, if he were being honest with himself, he’d probably be proven wrong soon enough.

Chapter End Notes

IMPORTANT PSA: service dogs in vests are WORKING. I don't care how cute they are, you leave them alone to do their jobs! SERIOUSLY.

DISCLAIMER: I have nothing against Ron Jon Surf Shop. I have several bumper stickers from them and I've been to their flagship store. Everything was expensive. Of course it was.

Also CAN YOU TELL I DON'T MISS WORKING RETAIL? [cackles]

A lot of you guessed Viktor's power. A LOT of you. I'm not surprised, it was fairly obvious. XD

As an added note, if any of you recognize the inspiration for Georgi's brother, SHHH! I promise it will be a great payoff!

Is Chris right? Does the magic follow logic and rules? We'll have to see!

So as I said in the endnotes of the previous chapter, my peak season is finally over and I'll have 3 days a week off work, so I plan on getting a lot more writing done! I have a
lot of special stuff planned, both for this AU and for others I've got brewing (THANK YOU MARY AND NIKKI) so please look forward to it!

In the meantime, did everyone have a good holiday season? I hope so! It's cold in Chicago where I live, so I'm living vicariously through the merkids right now, ahahaha!

So like I said last time, I had the pleasure of commissioning RikoJasmine (min-min-minnie on Tumblr) for some amazing artwork that you can see here! Please consider commissioning her as well, she did such a great job and is so easy to work with!

As usual, if you want to yell with me about mermaids, or these specific merkids, or California, or the ocean, or life in general: come find me on Twitter or Tumblr!

Remember, Sea World must be ended! RELEASE THE WHALES!! END CAPTIVITY!! FIGHT THE POWER!!
Yuri starts up high school again, drops in at the Ariel, and goes for a swim. Plus, teenager stuff.

Wow, look at this! A short gap between updates, amazing!

Chapter title taken from *Headphones* by Matt Nathanson feat. LOLO

Tons of filler characters pop up in this chapter, I apologize in advance. Hee.

Special thanks to the Discord crowd, Conversation Hearts on Tumblr, and my lovely friends on Twitter. (EM, I DID IT! I'M SORRY IT TOOK SO LONG!) You guys are the BEST cheerleaders!

Yuri would have thought that accidentally getting magic powers over the weekend would make starting his junior year of high school a little more interesting. And he’d be right.

Didn’t mean it was *good*.

And that was added to waking up at six in the morning so he could roll out of bed before his mom broke down his door to make sure he was up.

Yuri had been careful on Sunday night, locking himself in the bathroom so he could take a bath without being interrupted. He’d been able to wash his hair and face, and scrub down as much of himself as he could before draining the tub and using his newfound powers to dry off.

He should have felt bad, since Mila and Viktor didn’t have the same luck when it came to the magic lottery, but he didn’t. He was clean.

*For now.*

And now he had to be hyper-aware of *every single drop of water* that he might come near. To make matters worse, he lived in *California.*

Hopefully no one threw a water balloon at him or anything. Water balloon wars had been banned years ago, but that didn’t stop some genius asshats from trying to start one in the middle of passing period.

Yuri fought down a yawn and fired off a text to Beka, just to be a little shit and make him wake up early too. Although, Beka probably had his phone on sleep mode. He was smart like that.
Anyway, Dedushka was driving Yuri to school, since it was on his way to work. Dedushka was already up and about, pouring coffee into his thermos and adding his sugar. Mom was leaving for work, and Dad had already left, so Yuri was left to make his own breakfast and scarf it down before tossing his stuff in the back of Dedushka’s Oldsmobile; he had also put out his backpack and violin case out the night before so he didn’t have to rush to pack. He knew what he was doing.

“Be grateful that we live in America,” Dedushka had once told him, his mother tongue rough and harsh compared to the English that Yuri tended to speak every day. “When I lived in Moscow, I had the absolute worst old car. Even more so than this one. Americans call those cars ‘lemons’.”

Yuri had seen pictures. Yeah, Soviet Russia had to have sucked. His uncles never shut up about it, even if they’d only been in their teens when the Soviet Union was broken up. Dedushka didn’t talk about it much, other than the car stuff.

So when Dedushka started talking in Russian as Yuri was slouched in the passenger seat as they pulled out of the neighborhood, he was a bit surprised.

“This time of year is very pretty in Saint Petersburg,” he said, and Yuri looked up from his phone in confusion. “I remember when I was your age, even if there wasn’t time to dally at the seaside, we still tried to.”

Yuri swallowed. “I don’t see why it’s such a big deal,” he finally muttered, tugging his jacket hood down over his eyes.

“It is not,” Dedushka answered. “But you are a young man in your prime, and while I wouldn’t dream of contradicting your mother’s wishes, I do firmly believe you should enjoy the freedom afforded to you as an American in the modern day.” He smiled wryly.

Oh.

“Thanks,” Yuri said. If Dedushka wanted to… make up for his own youth spent under a communist regime by encouraging Yuri to have fun, Yuri wouldn’t fight him. And Yuri did have fun, just not the kind of fun that everyone else seemed to be having.

When they were stopped at a red light, Dedushka looked at him. His face was very serious. “Yura, is there anything you want to tell me? You’ve been distant and distracted these past few days.”

Yuri met his grandfather’s gaze and he wondered if it was true that some people could read minds using nothing but what was in another person’s eyes.

“Nope,” he said, and hoped that even if Dedushka didn’t believe him, he understood that Yuri was not going to talk about it.

Dedushka breathed out a sigh and nodded, the light turned green, and kept driving. The conversation stalled after that.

Yuri wasn’t sure what to think, but he was relieved when they arrived at the hellhole of a high school and Dedushka dropped him off at the curb.

“Hey Yoooooooooriiiiiiiiiii,” Matt called, walking past with his crowd of jock loser friends. “You need help with that thing? It’s bigger than you are.”

“I could beat your head in with this case, you dick!” Yuri yelled, hefting his violin case. “Try me!”

“Angry little kitten, eh?” Matt’s buddy Jamie cooed, making meowing noises.
Yuri growled, but was stopped from shoving the hard case up Jamie’s ass when Guang-hong grabbed him and hauled him away.

“First day back and you’re trying to get suspended?” the viola first chair demanded in exasperation. “Jeez, Yuri!”

“I swear to god I’m going to--”

“Ignore him,” Kenjirou finished for him, popping up on his other side and tugging the case from Yuri’s grasp. “Everyone else does.”

“They’re all clowns,” Guang-hong agreed. “Too many jet skis to the head, am I right?”

Kenjirou stared at him. “That sounds fatal.”

“Good,” Yuri muttered, reclaiming his violin from Kenjirou. “Stupid assholes, I can’t wait until they graduate and leave.”

“Yuri, they’re in our graduating class,” Guang-hong pointed out. And yeah, that was true; by the end of the current school year, Yuri would be left behind yet again by people he knew and tolerated. Both Kenjirou and Guang-hong were seniors this year, and Yuri was only a junior.

Yuri made a face and hunched his shoulders. “Don’t remind me.”

“It’s not like we’re leaving town, though,” Kenjirou added. He grinned and nudged Yuri’s arm. “And you’ll be at Anderson too, right?”

Yuri shrugged.

“C’mon, homeroom first. I want to see if I got P.E. before or after lunch.” Guang-hong picked up speed, and the other two matched him as they made their way to the front entrance.

“I hope they got someone else to do announcements,” Kenjirou said. “Mrs. Geddes talks too much.”

“I don’t care who’s doing them as long as they don’t play Taylor Swift over the loudspeakers anymore,” Yuri answered.

Guang-hong made a face. “What is your deal with Taylor?”

“She makes me want to destroy everything around me,” Yuri deadpanned. “Everything.”

“She’s a little overplayed,” Kenjirou agreed.

“I’m not talking to either of you ever again.” Guang-hong turned his nose up at them.

Yuri rolled his eyes and turned to Kenjirou. “See? This is what all her fans do. Annoying.”

Kenjirou looked flustered. “I mean, I like some of her older songs?”

Guang-hong made a scoffing noise.

“There’s no pleasing them,” Yuri said sotto voce, and Kenjirou actually snickered.

They goofed around a little more before the warning bell rang, and then they split up to go to their homerooms. Yuri was upstairs, in the English wing.
The problem with homeroom was that it was all with people in his grade, and Yuri didn’t really hang out with other juniors. Especially not the ones in his homeroom.

“Hey Yori.”

Yuri rolled his eyes and dumped his book bag and violin case next to the desk closest to the door before slouching into the seat.

“Yori.”

Yuri checked his phone to make sure he had no messages before putting his phone into silent mode and sticking it in his bag.

“He’s so rude, he won’t even look at us.”

*Rude? You’re the ones who won’t say my name right.* Yuri folded his arms on top of the desk and buried his face in his jacket sleeves.

“Well, if he’s going to ignore me, he’s not getting invited to my birthday party.” Annabelle said dismissively, her voice carrying over the din of the classroom.

“So rude,” her Yes Woman Tiffany agreed.

Yuri really didn’t care. He’d been in school with Annabelle since the sixth grade. Her birthday parties were all the same - her dad would rent out an entire place and then would invite the entire class to come and worship the birthday girl for a few hours before she went back to ignoring everyone for the rest of the year. Yuri wished he could pretend Annabelle didn’t exist, but she was the third chair violinist in the orchestra.

He was actually relieved when the bell to signal homeroom finally rang, and Mrs. Amor greeted them all. She’d been his homeroom teacher for his entire time in high school, and she was pretty chill for an English teacher. He’d never gotten her for that subject, but from what he understood she tended to let the students come up with their own interpretations of the books they had to read. She even assigned *Harry Potter* book as summer reading for homeroom one year. Easiest “A” he’d ever gotten.

He got his assigned schedule, and noted with satisfaction that his two-hour orchestra allotment was exactly the same as it had been last year. Orchestra, band, and choir students were given a two-hour block at some point in the day so that they could either have the entire block devoted to a group rehearsal, or split it into two and allow for one-on-one practice in the music wing. Yuri wasn’t sure if other schools did this, but he had no problem with it; since he had lessons with Lilia at the Ariel, he tended to use that extra hour as either a free period to get his homework done or a chance to just hang out.

After a morning of a couple close calls with spraying drinking fountains and over-pressured faucets he finally escaped to the safety of the orchestra room, and as usual he was one of the first to arrive. Miss Atkinson looked up from the piano and smiled at him. “Hello, Yuri! Welcome back.”

“Nice to be back,” he answered honestly, sticking his bookbag into his assigned locker and setting his violin case down on the first chair. The auditions for the current school year had been at the end of the previous year, and Yuri had managed to earn first chair for the second year in a row.

“Did you have a good summer?”
Yuri nodded as he settled in his seat and unlatched his violin case so he could get his instrument out.

“I suppose I can assume Ms. Baranovskaya has kept you in shape?”

“Of course she has,” Yuri snorted, fiddling with his bow.

“I expected no less.” Miss Atkinson laughed and put the fallboard down over the keys of the upright. She disappeared into her office as the rest of the student body orchestra began to trickle in.

There were three orchestras in the school; the freshman one, the upperclassman one, and the audition one. Yuri, Guang-hong, and Kenjirou were all in the audition one, so of course they joined him for the same class block. Since the other guys also took private lessons at the Ariel, they all tended to have the second hour free if the group practice was cut short. Back before Mila and Beka had graduated, they all would go outside into the quad and goof around until the bell rang.

Yuri was not going to admit missing those days. Nope.

“So I hear Annabelle is going to invite the entire orchestra, not just ours, to her birthday party this year,” Kenjirou said, setting up shop next to Yuri with his own violin.

“Who cares?” Yuri grumbled.

“Eh,” Guang-hong leaned against the lockers to Yuri’s right, looking a bit pouty. “I’m kind of sick of parties, to be honest.”

“You’re weird,” Kenjirou snorted. “School’s started up again, summer’s over.”

“I’m the one with SAT’s this year,” Yuri pointed out sourly. “You two are seniors. This is your coast year.”

Kenjirou and Guang-hong both gave him incredulous looks. “Uh, you do know that our families expect us to keep up our academics, right?” Guang-hong asked, raising an eyebrow.


“You’re lucky,” Kenjirou muttered. “I bet you’ll be allowed to coast senior year.”

“Have you met my mom?” Yuri shot back at him. “She’s been riding my ass about scholarships and grants since May.”

“Fistbump of solidarity,” Kenjirou said solumnly, offering a fist.

Yuri rolled his eyes but obliged him.

“Anyway, yes, I am totally sick of parties,” Guang-hong swerved them back to their original topic. He hefted his viola case. “Especially since everyone’s pulling crap that I don’t feel like getting arrested for.”

“Big mood,” Yuri agreed. “Parties are overrated.”

“Well, small parties are okay,” Kenjirou offered.

“Since when has Annabelle ever had a small party?” Yuri asked, making a face.

Kenjirou deflated. “Good point. I mean, I probably wouldn’t go anyway, but still.”
“There are events at the Ariel coming up that we have to attend, I’d rather save my social energy for those,” Guang-hong said as the bell rang. He waved and picked his way across the room to the viola section.

Annabelle slid into her seat on Kenjirou’s other side and quickly got her violin set up as Miss Atkinson stepped up to the director’s podium and called for everyone’s attention.

“So, as I’m sure you’ll all be happy to hear, we will be going through with the entire two-hour block today.” She smiled indulgently as some of the kids groaned. “You’ll get used to it. We have some new faces joining us, so allow me to welcome you to the Chamber Orchestra. We’re going to have a lot of fun this year, and I want to get started on that right away.” She picked up a stack of papers off the top of the upright. “So, let’s pass out the syllabus and then we can get right to warming up. Please go over the syllabus when you’ve got a moment, as it has contact information and the required essay assignment included along with our rules for conduct in class.”

Yuri had seen her syllabus before and assumed that nothing serious had changed, but he still stuck it on his music stand to take with him after class. Once the shuffling of papers had died down, everyone took up their instruments as Miss Atkinson led them through warm-ups and scales. She passed out sheet music for them to put into their required binders for the class, and then they were off learning their newest piece.

“Please be sure to practice this during your time at home,” she called over the din as they took a breather to hand out more sheet music. “These songs will be the ones we perform at the Showcase at the end of September.”

The first piece they worked on was a Mozart piece that Yuri had done before, years ago - it was definitely a different arrangement for a different skill level, but he knew how it should sound - and the second was a piece done by a contemporary composer, called Agape.

“Ah-gah-peh,” Miss Atkinson intoned, looking around at them. “The form of unconditional love. The purest of emotions. Any person may feel agape for any other, regardless of their relationship. I think this piece will resonate well at the Showcase.”

“That’s kind of romantic,” Kenjirou said softly, and Yuri made a face at him. “What?”

“Romance is so boring,” Yuri muttered. “And it’s not the only kind of love out there.”

Kenjirou shrugged, and the guy behind them shushed them as Miss Atkinson gestured for them to pick up again.

Agape was kind of wistful sounding, too soft for Yuri’s tastes. But it was the piece that they had to learn, and Yuri supposed he’d figure out the feeling of it after he’d learned the incredibly intricate violin part and memorized the bulk of it.

“Geez,” Kenjirou muttered as they stopped halfway through the first movement. “This is intense.”

“I hate it,” Annabelle groused, and Yuri barely fought down the urge to scoff at her before they started over again.

Agape took up the rest of the block, and then Miss Atkinson announced (to loud cheers) that the next class would be an hour block with the remainder dedicated to one-on-one practice. She pointed out the sign-up sheet on her door for people to put their names down for the lessons, and then dismissed them.

Yuri left his violin in his locker for the rest of the day, heading to lunch with Guang-hong and
Thanks to scheduling being somewhat automated, most of the audition orchestra had similar lunch periods, so a good majority of the class all started walking in the direction of the cafeteria.

Once he stepped through the doors of the lunchroom, Yuri’s entire body went cold. *Oh, shit.*

On the other side of the room, Matt and his buddies were having what looked like a squirt gun fight. Yuri couldn’t even fathom how they’d managed to sneak gun-shaped objects into school in the first place, but the lunchroom monitor that was stomping over to them looked pretty annoyed. Even if they didn’t seem to care about it, they were going to be in *deep shit.*

Still, Yuri found himself ducking behind the others and edging towards the wall. Growing a fish tail in the middle of the cafeteria was *not* how he wanted to start off the year.

“You okay, Yuri?” Guang-hong asked, looking confused.

“I really don’t want to get squirted,” Yuri said, eying Jamie as he managed to get one last shot off at Matt before the monitor confiscated the toys.

“They just got the water guns taken away,” Kenjirou pointed out.

Yuri caught sight of one of the janitors grimly pushing a mop and bucket over to the mess. “Yep. Those meatheads were totally the *only* ones who brought water guns to school today.”

“Well, they’ll probably take it outside,” Kenjirou said reassuringly, and Yuri made a face at him. “Fine, don’t believe me. Let’s get lunch.”

To Yuri’s relief, no one else started an impromptu water war in the cafeteria. He grabbed a packaged meal from the sandwich bar, paid, and joined Guang-hong, Kenjirou, and a few other orchestra kids at a thankfully dry table.

“That fucking eclipse, though, man,” Chai was saying. “Did you guys see? Fucking wild.”

“I don’t see what the big deal was,” his girlfriend Gemma said, pushing her salad around in the cheap container it had come in. “There’s literally eclipses all the time, I thought?”

“Yeah, but we don’t get to see them very often,” another guy said. Yuri was pretty sure his name was Dom. “Usually they’re over a different part of the world.”

“What about eclipses of the moon?” Kenjirou piped up. “Those are more common.”

“That’s when the Earth overshadows the moon,” Dom said in a know-it-all voice.

Yuri snorted. “Literally everyone has learned that by now,” he said, popping his potato chip bag open. “The solar eclipse was a big deal, yeah yeah.”

“You were stuck on Islaluna for that, though,” Guang-hong said, sniggering. “The infamous Zodiac, huh?”

Yuri sneered at his friend. “Viktor has shit like that happen to him all the time.”


Yuri blinked and looked up at the others. Guang-hong and Kenjirou were somewhat used to the fact that Yuri had known Viktor for years - they were a bit nervous in his actual presence, but they’d heard Yuri griping about Viktor’s antics for so long that it didn’t phase them anymore. The others,
“Uh, yeah?” he said slowly. “He’s been accompanying me since I was in middle school.”

“Wow,” Gemma said softly, covering her mouth with her hands. “Is it true he almost got a record deal?”

“I dunno,” Yuri shrugged. “He doesn’t talk about it to me.”

“It’s totally true,” Chai said. “But he turned it down due to creative differences.”

Yuri snorted again. “Uh, trust me. It wasn’t that.” Anybody who knew Viktor would probably willingly bend over backwards to accommodate his creative choices. There wasn’t a record executive in the entire world who would try to stifle him. Yakov certainly couldn’t contain him, and Yakov was one of the biggest hardasses Yuri knew. That was saying something. “Anyway, Viktor’s always getting roped into harebrained schemes, and he dragged me into it. I spent hours on that island and my phone got bricked. It fucking sucked.”

“Why were you guys out there on the island?” Brooke, one of the other girls, asked. She leaned forward in interest.

“Chris Giacometti suggested we go out to sea for the eclipse, and Viktor got it into his head that it would be a good exercise in creativity or something.” Yuri bit into his sandwich. He chewed and swallowed before continuing. “Only one problem: Chris’s boat is a piece of shit. It broke down and we had to paddle to the island. Then we were stuck there for the eclipse, and no one noticed us until after it was over. I had to build a signal fire.”

“That sounds like an adventure,” Brooke said excitedly. You don’t know the half of it, Yuri thought bitterly.

He was spared from having to answer when Annabelle plopped down onto the bench next to him, grinning. “Happy birthday to me! And to celebrate, you’re all invited to my pool party at the country club!” She brandished a stack of invitations, and some of the others made vaguely interested noises as they plucked one for themselves.

Guang-hong passed, as did Kenjirou, and Annabelle turned to Yuri, sticking the pamphlets right in his face. “Yori, don’t tell me you’re skipping out on this!”

“Oh, I won’t tell you,” Yuri grumbled, pushing her hand away. “Pool parties aren’t my style.”

Annabelle pouted. “I guess if you wanted to bring a friend along, so you wouldn’t be lonely, you totally could.” She toyed with the corner of one invitation. “I mean, if Otabek doesn’t feel weird about hanging out with a bunch of high schoolers, I guess you could bring him.”

Yuri narrowed his eyes at Annabelle. “He’s busy. He works, you know.”

“Wow,” she said breathily, fluttering her eyelashes. “He’s so grown-up!”

“Yeah, so you’re probably right, he won’t want to hang out with a bunch of high schoolers,” Yuri sniped.

“Doesn’t he hang out with you?” Tiffany asked, snickering.

Yuri froze, but snapped out of it to shake off Guang-hong’s hand on his arm. “Fuck off!” he hissed
“Rude,” she said, and then turned on her heel and flounced off.

“Jeez,” Chai said. He frowned at Annabelle. “You know, I think I’m busy this Saturday. Sorry.”

“Yeah,” said Gemma. “I’m meant to start up my harpsichord lessons this weekend. I’ll have to dip, sorry.”

The other orchestra kids looked like they were feeling similarly, so Annabelle shot Yuri a forced smile and got up to follow Tiffany across the lunchroom. “I don’t get her,” Kenjirou said, mystified. “It’s like she thinks she’s in Mean Girls or something.”

“People with low self-esteem often feel the need to compensate with shiny things,” Dom rolled his eyes. “I dunno, I’ve never been all that interested in her parties. It all feels like a cry for attention.”

“That’s because it is,” Brooke said knowingly. “Plus, her dad’s running for Mayor next year. The homeowners’ association’s been talking about it all summer.”

“Wow, politics,” Gemma said, pushing her salad away. “Suddenly, I’ve lost my appetite.”

“Hey, I didn’t know you were taking harpsichord lessons,” Kenjirou quickly jumped in with a subject change. “That’s so cool!”

Yuri sat back and let the conversation wash over him. He was starting to slump into dark thoughts when Guang-hong nudged him again.

“Otabek hangs out with you because you’re his friend,” he said softly. “And fuck anyone who makes you feel badly about it.”

Yuri smiled tightly and went back to his sandwich.

He was heading to his next class after lunch when it finally happened.

“Think fast, prettyboy!” Jamie shouted, then spritzed Yuri with his uncapped water bottle.

_OH SHIT._

Yuri shoved Jamie away and ran, his bag hanging off his shoulder. He heard Guang-hong and Gemma calling his name out behind him, but he couldn’t acknowledge them.

Ten seconds.

Nine.

_Bathroom too public._ He ducted down a hallway and yanked at the janitorial closet before throwing himself in and pulling the door shut behind him.

Five.

Four.

He heard people running past, including Kenjirou yelling for him, and quickly dropped his bag on the floor and dropped into a crouch before he could transform and fall over. He still landed on his ass
with a *thump* and winced. “Fuck,” he growled, and raised his hand over the tail flopping uselessly on the floor. His fin smacked a bucket, sending it skidding on the linoleum, and Yuri made a fist and waited for the steam to start rising off of him.

Passing period was only about six minutes long. He and the others had left the lunchroom before the end of the lunch hour, so the bell chiming overhead was to signal the end of the class period. *Fuck.* His next class was on the other side of the building.

He concentrated harder, and felt the stinging on his skin and on his tail. *Faster,* he thought, gritting his teeth.

It took another minute before the tail disappeared again, and he scrambled to his feet, grabbed his bag off the floor and bursting out of the closet.

There were a few kids walking past who gave him odd looks as he straightened his clothes and threw the strap of his bag over his shoulder before slinking off. He checked his phone for the time and broke into a mad dash in order to make it to his next class.

When he collapsed at the only empty lab table left in the chemistry lab, he was wheezing. *Stupid fucking Jamie.* Yuri laid his head down on the cold slate tabletop and tried to get his breathing back under control.

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**Messages**

**guanghong**

**Contact**

- hey u ok?
- what happened?
- im fine
- dude u just ran off
- i needed to get to the bathroom
- i got soaked
- but we checked the br
- which one?
- i went to the one in the science wing
Guang-hong: hey u ok?

Guang-hong: what happened?

Yuri: im fine

Guang-hong: dude u just ran off
Yuri: yes

Yuri: sorry for freaking u out

Yuri: i was kind of pissed

Guang-hong: im sorry about evrythng

Yuri: not ur fault

Yuri: worlds full of assholes

Guang-hong: u still goin 2 ariel 2nite?

Yuri: dUH

Yuri: lilia would murder me if i skipped

Guang-hong: lol tru

Guang-hong: starcrash latr?

Yuri: yea sure

The rest of the day passed uneventfully after the closet incident. Yuri caught a ride to the Ariel with Allie and Isabel, other girls from the music program, in Allie’s car. She was nice enough, even if she was a bit too chatty for his liking. He could barely get a word in here and there, but Yuri didn’t really care about what she was talking about.

As they pulled into the Ariel’s parking lot, Allie winced. “Ugh, I’ll let you guys out here,” she said, turning into the drop-off lane. “Parking is gonna suck. Izzy, take my oboe?”

When Allie let them out, Isabel grabbed the other case from the backseat next to Yuri and hefted it under one arm. Yuri took it from her so she could pick up her French horn, and then they headed into the building.

“This is what happens when you pick a heavy brass instrument,” Yuri said as Isabel switched the horn to her other hand.

“I usually just leave it in the band room all day,” she whined. “This is exactly why!” Still, Isabel was the one with one hand free, so she had to let them into the building.

Soft piano music rang out through the hallway as they made their way to the practice rooms. Yuri stopped by an open door to the auditorium and poked his head in.

The waiter from Chihoko’s was seated at the grand piano, seemingly lost to the world as he played. It wasn’t a piece that Yuri recognized, but it was simple and yet flowed like water in a stream. On second look, he saw that the little poodle was sitting right next to the bench, still clad in his red service vest. One of the conductors from the college was pacing in the middle of the audience seats - the Italian guy who handled private studies with the music majors. Yuri couldn’t remember his name.

“That’s Ciao Ciao,” Isabel whispered. “He’s a conductor for most of the choirs.”

Yuri nodded. “I know the pianist.”
“Oh, Yuuri? Yeah, he’s always around. He’s been my accompanist a couple times, he’s really sweet.”

“Does he always have that dog with him?”

Isabel giggled. “Vicchan? Yeah, always. Vicchan helps him stay calm. He even goes to class with Yuuri. Lucky.”

Yuri raised his eyebrows. “Well, if it works out for him.” He backed away from the auditorium door, and Isabel followed. “I gotta check in with Yakov,” he said. “You?”

“I’m meeting Mrs. O’Donnell in our regular practice room, but it’s not for a while.” Isabel held out her hand for Allie’s oboe case. “Have fun.”

“Oh, yeah,” Yuri drawled, taking off down the hallway.

The Ariel hosted several programs for performance art majors, the bulk of which was the music department. There was also various forms of theater, a TV/film production course, and of course visual arts programs like costuming and makeup. Then there were the fine arts programs, which weren’t exactly hosted at the Ariel but still saw a lot of bleed-over. The general art courses tended to interweave with each other, like a big symbiotic circle of life straight out of a Disney movie.

Yuri didn’t really care about the visual art majors, only that he didn’t trip over any in the hallway (there were always first-year drawing students hanging out in the hallways with their sketchpads, trying to practice perspective. It was annoying.) He rounded the corner to the atrium of the administrative offices for the Ariel and let himself in.

Viktor was already there, fighting with a copy machine. “Oh, hey Yura!” He grinned, too cheerful for a Monday of any kind. “How was your first day back?”

Yuri glanced at Yakov’s secretary, an older lady named Mrs. Stimler. “I got splashed at school,” he said in Russian, and Viktor’s face went paler than he’d ever thought possible. “Don’t worry, no one saw,” he added, dropping his things onto one of the empty chairs outside of Yakov’s office and shook out his arms. “I was careful.”

“That’s good,” Viktor said in English, forcing a smile onto his face. “Lilia’s already here in her office, she’ll probably be out in a minute.”

Yuri nodded and flopped into another chair. He eyed Mrs. Stimler, who seemed oblivious to the world. Then he squinted. “Uh, is she wearing a shower cap?”

Viktor shook his head at Yuri. “Don’t ask.”

“Don’t ask what?”

“Just don’t,” Viktor said as Mrs. Stimler got up and shuffled around her desk to poke at the fax machine. Yuri saw that she was wearing a t-shirt for the Ariel over what were probably pajama bottoms, and that she’d put her bra over the t-shirt. She was also wearing a fluffy bathrobe and matching slippers.

Yuri’s eyebrows went up. Viktor shook his head at him again.

“Ah, Yura,” Yakov said, coming out of his office. “How was your first day back at school?”

“Uneventful,” Yuri said, before nodding at Mrs. Stimler. “Yakov, what’s up with her? I don’t
remember her being this weird last year.”

Behind Yakov, Viktor smacked himself on the forehead in exasperation.

Mrs. Stimler was now using scissors to cut up a magazine, and as Yuri watched she stopped what she was doing, put the scissors down, and picked up a permanent marker. She examined it, put it back down, and picked up the scissors again.

Yuri really doubted she should be allowed sharp objects.

Lilia had also come out of her own office by now and was eying the secretary as well. “Yakov,” she said flatly.

“Don’t mind her,” Yakov said dismissively. “She went to visit family in New York over the summer and had a little incident.”

“Incident?” Yuri repeated, confused.

“She. Ah.” Yakov winced. “She got zapped a little. With electricity.”

“How do you get a little zapped?” Yuri demanded, making a face. Over on the desk, the phone began to ring. Mrs. Stimler took a second too long to notice it.

“Well, it wasn’t so bad that she can no longer work, obviously,” Yakov sniffed.

Viktor tapped Yakov on the shoulder. “She’s trying to answer a shoe, Yakov.”

Yakov whirled around to see that yep, Mrs. Stimler was trying to speak into a shoe and looking pretty annoyed that no one was answering her. “Hello?” she said, frowning as the phone continued to ring shrilly on her other side. “Hello? Well, if you’re going to be rude like that, then I guess I won’t bother.” She put the shoe down on her desk and went back to cutting up magazines.

Yakov dived across the desk for the phone and answered it. “Hello, this is Yakov Feltsman. I apologize. Yes.” He waved at Lilia, who sighed and beckoned for Yuri to follow her. Yuri glanced at Viktor, who was literally facepalming.

“Uh, I think she probably could afford not to work anymore,” Yuri said to Lilia as they made their way towards the reserved practice room for lessons.

“Yes, well, I’m fairly certain her family figured they could get a free babysitter out of Yakov and unloaded her on us. She’s even getting paid, good grief.”

“Sounds about right.”

Lilia snorted. “In any case, Yura, you had better not have slacked off over the summer.”

“Of course I haven’t,” Yuri grumbled.

Lilia raised her pencil-thin eyebrows. “We shall see about that.”

Sixty grueling minutes later, and Lilia finally called a stop to Yuri’s drilling. “I’m quite satisfied,” she said, and coming from Lilia that was glowing praise. “You have not worsened over your vacation, Yura.”
“Thank you, ma’am.” Yuri lowered his bow and glanced at the clock set into the wall. His grandfather would be finishing up in the archives by now. But, this was Lilia he was dealing with; you were finished when she told you that you were finished.

Lilia snapped her fingers at him, and he looked back at her. “You are still having problems with your progressions, however. I want you to continue to work on those as well as your part for Agape, but for the Winter Showcase I’m planning on having you work on another piece. You will have an accompanist, as well.”

“Viktor again?” he asked as he flipped back to the first page of Agape, raising his violin to his chin again for another run-through.

“Perhaps. He’s very in-demand this year, we may have to work with a different pianist.”

That was a surprise. Yuri usually worked with Viktor if he needed a pianist. They tended to work well together, or at least Viktor knew how Yuri played and could match him if needed.

Lilia was looking at him as if daring him to comment, but Yuri really couldn’t be bothered to protest. Viktor could be annoying if Yuri saw him too often, and this whole merman thing was definitely already bringing them all together one time too many. He shrugged and mumbled “whatever” before starting up Agape again.

After that run-through, where Yuri stumbled a few times over the fingerings and lost the pacing more than he was happy with, Lilia finally let him go. “Keep at it,” she said. “You’ve already got an idea of how it should sound.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“And don’t slack with those progressions, Yura. You can’t afford to get sloppy.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Go,” Lilia ordered, picking up her sweater from the chair behind her. “I can hear that phone of yours buzzing in your messenger bag.”

Yuri blinked and paused in putting away his violin to dig for his phone. He blinked when he saw the notification from Otabek.

__Otabek: are you done yet?__
What was he planning? Yuri finished putting away his violin and bow, securely zipping up the case, before he actually responded.

Yuri: I'm done wats up
Otabek: meet me and mila at the boardwalk
Otabek: 😎
Otabek: i know a spot.
Yuri: a spot for what
Otabek: a little swim
Yuri: really???
Otabek: yes really, you still haven't shown off to me
Yuri: ok omw
Yuri suddenly realized he was smiling. Suddenly the prospect of suddenly growing a tail didn’t seem so bad. He said his goodbye to Lilia and ducked into the hallway with his things, making a beeline for the campus library.

It took him another ten minutes before he was able to get down to the archives, and Dedushka looked up in surprise as Yuri skidded to a halt next to him. “Yurochka, you’re done with your lessons?”

“Yeah,” Yuri said, wheezing for breath. “I’m meeting Beka and Mila for a little bit, can you take my violin home?”

His grandfather blinked, but he smiled. “Of course. I’ll make excuses to your mother.”

Yuri snorted. “Thanks, Dedushka.” He hugged his grandfather and carefully set down his violin next to the desk. “I’ll have my phone with me, and I’ll be back before the sun goes down.”

“Have a good time,” Dedushka called as Yuri backtracked out of the archives and into the sun.

He had to run to catch a bus that was headed to the boardwalk, and it took another twenty minutes before he reached the entrance on foot. He looked around and caught sight of Mila’s familiar hair.

“Yura!” she called, waving and catching his attention.

Yuri wove through the throngs of tourists until he could join Mila at the railing overlooking the water. “Where’s Beka?” he asked.

“Down below,” she said, grabbing his arm. “C’mon, let’s go!”

They left the crowds behind as they made their way down a dune until they were both carefully picking their way between the boardwalk’s support beams. A couple dozen feet in, and Yuri caught sight of Otabek a bit further down. They were pretty well out of sight from anyone looking from the sea, and they were definitely hidden from the tourists above.

“Wow, you really know a spot, huh?” Yuri called as Beka got to his feet.

“You gonna need a ride home?” Beka asked.

Yuri shrugged, and dropped his bag on the sand. They were high enough up the dune so that high tide wouldn’t get to their stuff.

“Beka brought his bike, and I’ve got my scooter,” Mila said. She pulled her dress off, revealing a swimsuit underneath.

“Oh,” Yuri said, making a face at her. “I didn’t bring my trunks.”

“You don’t need to,” Mila pointed out. She kicked off her sandals and looked at him expectantly.

Yuri started to take off his shoes and socks, but froze as Beka stripped off his t-shirt. Beka raised his eyebrows at him, and he ducked his head and went back to unlacing his sneakers.

“So it’s about ten seconds?” Beka asked.
“Yeah, more or less,” Mila confirmed, playing with her phone. “Yura, come on.”

“I got splashed at school today,” Yuri said, and the others gasped. “I didn’t know I could move that fast, but I found a janitor’s closet in under ten seconds. No one saw.”

“Good,” Mila said, sounding winded. “Geez, Yura, what happened?”

“Matt and Jamie,” Yuri muttered, tossing his balled-up socks aside.

“Oh. Eew.” Mila sighed, and then tugged Yuri to his feet and dragged him towards the water. “Let’s go, let’s go! It’s hot out here.”

“We’re in the shade,” Yuri reminded her, but he still ran with her into the waves as they lapped at the support beams.

Transforming on land was very different from transforming in the sea, and as soon as he knew his tail was back he was wiggling up towards the air again. His head broke the surface of the water and Mila popped up next to him. “Much better!” Mila sang out, throwing her arms around Yuri and dragging him down a little. “C’mon, Beka!”

Yuri looked back towards the dune and saw Beka staring at them, face unreadable. When he caught Yuri looking, he shook his head and charged after them.

Mila let Yuri go and they swam back to meet Beka as he paddled closer. His eyes widened as he caught sight of Mila’s tail in the water. “Amazing,” he said.

Yuri pouted, but then again Beka had already seen his tail up close. “Don’t slow us down,” he said instead, and dived.

To his surprise, Beka ducked down under the waves right after him. He blinked at the saltwater stinging his eyes, but he got used to it enough that he was chasing after Yuri pretty quickly. Still, Yuri had the element of speed on his side. He easily evaded Beka, and Mila tugged at Beka’s ankle, surprising him into releasing a burst of bubbles.

They resurfaced and Beka blinked again. “Okay, note to self, get goggles.” He was grinning anyway. “Wow, you two are so fast in the water.”

“Told you,” Yuri said, preening a little. He lay backwards into a back-float and stretched, feeling it all throughout the tail. “This is a lot better than the janitor’s closet.”

“I’ll bet,” Mila giggled, and she dived again. Yuri felt bubbles tickling his back, and he flipped over to chase after her. They doubled back to pull Beka further into the sea, and the three of them spent another hour playing tag in the shadow of the boardwalk.

After they tired themselves out, Beka helped drag both Yuri and Mila up the dune a little bit so Yuri could start drying them off with his powers. All in all, a pretty nice ending to a kind of weird day.

“So did anything else happen at school, other than idiot teenagers being idiot teenagers?” Mila asked, rolling onto her back as she waited for Yuri to finish up.

Yuri snorted. “Just Annabelle being a pain.”

“Annabelle? Ugh, god, not her.” Mila made a face. “I remember her throwing a tantrum at Miss Atkinson because she was put in the fourth chair.”
“She’s third chair this year,” Yuri reported, barely hiding his contempt as steam continued to rise off of him. “She’s having a pool party at the country club for her birthday, and she wants me to show up. But of course, she’s sure that I won’t feel comfortable there without a friend,” he added, piling on the sarcasm. “So she told me it would be totally fine to bring Beka along.”

“When is it?” Beka asked, sounding barely interested.

“Saturday, I think.”

“Wouldn’t work. I have a shift at the restaurant.” Beka scrubbed a hand through his hair. “I wouldn’t want to go, anyways. Annabelle was always a little too much for me.”

“Yeah, well,” Yuri grumbled.

Mila looked at him, and dammit but she knew him too well. “Did Annabelle say something else to you?”

“No,” Yuri answered, and technically that was true. “Did someone else say something?”

Yuri shrugged.

“Yura,” Beka said, and Yuri looked up at him. “Look, everyone has a tough time in high school. The people who go out of their way to make everyone else feel miserable like they feel, they don’t deserve your energy.”

“Besides,” Mila added, “I’m sure plenty of the orchestra kids don’t like Annabelle enough to go. People eventually figure out that nasty kids aren’t worth the time.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Yuri looked back at his tail, and winced a little at the heat of the evaporating water. “But I’m stuck dealing with her, you know?”

“Well, yeah,” Mila admitted. “But only when you’re at school, and you only have a few classes with her. So don’t sweat it.”

Yuri finally changed back, and he scooted over next to Mila so he could start steam-drying her off too. “I guess.”

“And I’ll bet she’d be jealous if she knew what you can do,” Beka added, completely deadpan.

Yuri pictured the look on Annabelle’s face if she ever saw him with his badass tail and magic powers. “Good point,” he said, smirking.

“You can’t show her, though,” Mila reminded him.

Yuri snorted. “No worries. She doesn’t deserve to know.”

“If that works for you,” Mila said, and Yuri went back to drying her off.

Once they both had their legs back and put their clothes to right, Yuri checked his phone and saw two missed calls from his mom. “Shit,” he groaned as they emerged from under the boardwalk and headed over to where the vehicles were parked. “I’m gonna be in trouble.”

“Oh no,” Mila said sympathetically. “Call her back.”
Yuri pulled a face but called, sighing in relief when it went to voicemail. “Hey, Mom,” he said, turning away and playing with the zipper on his jacket. “Sorry for missing your call, I was with Mila and Beka. I’m on my way home now. I’ll see you in a bit.”

He turned back to his friends. “Uh. I kinda need to go home now,” he said, fidgeting.

Beka nodded, and tossed Yuri the spare helmet from his bike. “No worries, I’ll get you there.”

“See you later, Yura!” Mila added, putting her own helmet on and starting her scooter. She pulled out of her parking spot and zipped away.

Yuri was latching the helmet under his chin when Beka got the motorcycle started and revved up. He made sure his bookbag was secure and then climbed on behind the older boy. “Thanks,” he yelled in Beka’s ear, and Beka nodded. As they pulled away from the curb and headed back towards the residential part of town, Yuri put his arms around Beka’s chest.

And he definitely did not feel all warm and tingly all over.

Definitely not.

Chapter End Notes

So as you can probably guess, I had to push back the official start of the ~*~Romance Arc~*~ to the next chapter. I promise it will be worth the wait!

Before anyone says anything about poor Mrs. Stimler's health, I need you all to know that Mrs. Stimler herself is from one of my favorite movies and that scene is literally a tribute to her scene in that movie. She's fine. Just a little discombobulated.

All of the other characters named in this chapter (along with a few in the last one) were... pulled from the H2O: Just Add Water and Mako Mermaids cast lists. Literally. I was going to name all of the one-off characters after the characters in those shows, but I figured it would get too confusing. Either way, it's safe to assume if someone has ever appeared on one of those shows, I might mine their name for a filler character.

Yuri's Agape piece is, yes, directly inspired by his SP in canon. I'd say that if you wanted to try and imagine the arrangement, you could keep the basic melody and mess with the tempo, replace everything with strings, and that's more or less what I'm imagining.

I'm not sure which piece of Mozart's I want to have the orchestra performing. I... kind of... love.. Mozart? I can't pick a single piece. I can't.

Yuri's school schedule is heavily inspired by my own experience as a music student in high school, especially the block scheduling for the music program. My school took the performing arts very seriously. It was legit one of the toughest things I've ever done academically. I'm so glad I'm done with those days. (Sorry, Yura. It gets better, it's worth it.)

In the meantime, tell me about your high school's music programs! And of course, you can always find me at Twitter and Tumblr! I'll see you all next time, when we pop back
into Viktor's POV! Look forward to it!
Chapter Summary

Viktor checks in with his parents and gets a little reality checkup.

Chapter Notes

WOOHOO! Lucky chapter seven! Title comes from Kate Alexa’s "Somebody Out There" off of the H2O: Just Add Water season 2 soundtrack.

EXTRA HUGE THANKS to Gabapple, who has graciously agreed to beta for me! Check out the fic she's co-writing, Never Look Away! (If you love Viktor, you HAVE to read it!)

As always, shout out to everyone who kept me going and cheered me on while writing this, especially the folks on the Water Cryptids discord server and my lovely friends on Tumblr and Twitter! This fic wouldn't exist without you guys. ❤️

I hope you all enjoy the update! Onward!

Thursday rolled around and with it, Viktor’s appointment with Dr. Gilbert. Viktor had a monthly session with the therapist, and he’d been agonizing over how the hell to talk about his… newest life developments without explicitly revealing them.

He floundered around for a good fifteen minutes or so, watching Dr. Gilbert’s face slowly fall into a concerned expression, before deciding that refuge in audacity was the way to go. “What if… I put this into a metaphorical sense?” he finally asked.

Dr. Gilbert blinked and leaned back in her chair. “Metaphorical?”

“Like. What if I… used a metaphor?” Internally, Viktor was slapping his forehead. Words.

“I… I suppose that’s okay?” Dr. Gilbert rubbed her chin, forehead still crinkled in confusion.

“Viktor, it sounds like you’re having a bit of an interesting time.”


Dr. Gilbert nodded. “How does this make you feel?”

“Uh, annoyed. Aggravated. Like, stuff is randomly happening, and I don’t have control anymore.”

“I could see why that’s upsetting,” Dr. Gilbert said, catching on. The woman was clearly a genius. “Do you want to go into more detail, perhaps give me more of an idea of what the situation is? Yes, of course you can use a metaphor.”
“Well, okay.” Viktor stared at the ceiling. “On the day of the eclipse, everything changed. I changed. I transformed. It’s thrilling, it’s exciting, but it’s really weird. And I don’t have much of an explanation for it.”

“But is it a bad thing?” Dr. Gilbert asked.

Viktor shrugged. “It can be, sometimes it feels really inconvenient, you know? Like, I have a routine. Everything has its place. And suddenly it’s all mucked up.” He played with the hem of his shirt. “And like I said, I don’t have an explanation for it. I know how it happened, I know the cause, but I don’t know why. And I certainly don’t understand the mechanics of the cause.”

“Hmm.” Dr. Gilbert pondered this. “Well, as to the why… sometimes things just happen. That’s the way of the world, and all you can do is react to it. And you know what I always say…”

“You can only control three things in life,” Viktor recited. “Your thoughts, your feelings, and your reactions.”

“Exactly. Sometimes, the world just lobs a fastball at you. You know?”

Viktor nodded. “But I want to understand it,” he said. “Make sense of it. And maybe handle it.”

Dr. Gilbert frowned. “This change… is it good or bad?”

“A bit of both,” Viktor admitted. “Like I said, it’s exciting but it’s weird.”

Dr. Gilbert nodded slowly. “I see. A bit like falling in love.”

Viktor snapped his fingers. “Yes!” He flopped back on the couch, and he could admit he was being a tad dramatic. “Exactly!”

Dr. Gilbert let out a small “ah” of understanding. “Well,” she said, smiling. “I could understand why you’re so bewildered by it.”

See? A genius. Viktor sat up a little. “I mean, if I could understand why it happened--”

“Viktor, how would you describe your focus on this?”

Viktor blinked and fell silent. “Describe?”

“Yes, I want you to try and describe the level of focus you’re giving to this… change of yours.” Dr. Gilbert tilted her head at him.

Viktor thought about it. He’d been spending an awful lot of time on the internet and at the library, combing through history books. If he were being honest, he was probably not giving Makkachin the attention she was used to or deserved. And god knows he was probably driving the others crazy with his… yeah, obsession over what had happened to them. “I… might be hyper-fixating? I guess that’s. Yeah.”

“Do you think that’s a good or bad thing?”

Viktor took a moment to consider the question. “I guess it could be… a little bad. But at the same time, it would be irresponsible to not try and figure things out.”

“So there’s a balance that you need to strike,” Dr. Gilbert said, and that sounded right.

Viktor nodded. “Yeah, I need balance. That makes a lot of sense.”
“How would you achieve balance?”

Viktor pondered that. “Um. Hm.” He frowned. “I don’t know.”

Dr. Gilbert was still smiling softly at him. “That’s all right, you’re not supposed to know everything right away. How would you feel about a take-home assignment?”

Viktor grimaced, and his therapist laughed at him.

“Oh, don’t look so sad,” she chided him. “All I want you to do is journal a little bit, and when we meet up next I want you to look over what you’ve written and think about what you’ve been doing to find your balance.”

Viktor shrugged. “I guess I can do that.”

“It doesn’t have to be every day,” Dr. Gilbert added. “It only needs to be when something of note happens, and that can be anything remarkable. It’s all up to you, Viktor. But I do want at least a little bit to look over next month. Okay?”

Viktor nodded.

Dr. Gilbert beamed at him and swiveled in her seat to grab her planner. “Let’s get you scheduled for September, shall we?”

A few minutes later, Viktor had an appointment set for the next month and a written reminder to journal until then. He slipped the note into his money clip and took his leave, waving goodbye to Dr. Gilbert.

He caught a bus that deposited him a block away from his apartment, then ran upstairs to grab Makkachin and her leash. “Let’s go for a walk, my darling puppy,” he cooed, clipping the leash onto her collar. Makkachin was certainly excited to go outside for longer than a few minutes to do her business, and Viktor felt his mood lifting as she danced around and nearly tangled him up in the lead.

They set out heading west towards the boardwalk, and Makkachin happily stopped to sniff everything they encountered on the way. Viktor indulged her, and she would periodically press up against him and snuffle at his jeans before something else caught her interest.

Viktor only lived a few blocks away from the boardwalk, so it was only a twenty-minute walk until the old wooden arch finally popped up above the sea of people that seemed to always populate the shoreline. Makkachin garnered a lot of attention from passer-by - she was a gorgeous dog, Viktor was quite proud to admit that - and that slowed them down, but they eventually reached Viktor’s intended destination.

Josef’s boardshop was fairly innocuous on the outside - nothing splashy like the more touristy surf shops on the boardwalk - but in this age of Yelp and online reviews, it was certainly still one of the best (and oldest) of the businesses that served the surfing public.

To his relief, Chris was out in front of the shop, putting more stock onto the rack marked “CLEARANCE - ALL SALES FINAL.”

“Hey,” he said once he noticed Viktor and Makkachin. “Long time no see. Do you want one of these shirts in pink?” He waggled his eyebrows.

Viktor snorted, and Makkachin shoved her face into Chris’s leg. The surfer laughed and finished stocking the rack before he squatted down to greet the poodle.
“You know what,” Viktor said, leaning against the outside wall of the boardshop. “I don’t understand why you make fun of my life decisions.”

Chris made a face and gave Viktor an exasperated look. “Viktor. You still listen to the Black Eyed Peas and Britney Spears.”


Viktor narrowed his eyes at his friend. “Thank you for your qualified input, Dr. Giacometti.”

Chris just smirked at him. “So. What are you going to do for the rest of the day now that you don’t have to go back to work?”

“Viktor…”

Chris glanced over his shoulder and then leaned in. “Yeah, I’ve got the parts that I need. I can finish work on it tonight and probably have it seaworthy by tomorrow. Why? Do you really want to go back to the island?”

“I have to,” Viktor argued, lowering his voice. “It’s driving me crazy.”

“You just came to the realization that you have a tendency to obsess over things and you’re just… gonna keep it up?” Chris asked, incredulous.

“Chris, tell me this isn’t a worthy reason.”

Chris sighed and hung his head. “No, I guess you have a point.”

“Great. So.” Viktor raised his eyebrows. “Could we possibly meet up at the cove tomorrow, whenever you get off work? How does that sound?”

“Sounds finstastic.”
Viktor’s mouth dropped open. “Chris.”

The surfer grinned and fluttered his ridiculous eyelashes. “Yyyyy?”

“Chris. That was. That was so bad.”

Chris shrugged. “You either laugh or cry at life.”

Viktor socked him on the arm and whistled to Makkachin. “C’mon, Makka. We don’t deal with pun-abusers.”

“Says the guy who still sings along to Smash Mouth,” Chris shot back at him.

Viktor stuck his tongue out as he and Makkachin were swept up in another wave of people. Still, Chris was laughing as they drew away.

“Guh. ‘Fintastic.’” He looked down at his beloved poodle, who was happily investigating the ground for tidbits of food. “Makka, leave it. C’mon.”

Makkachin dropped the fast food wrapper and Viktor quickly led her off the boardwalk before she could grab anything else.

They spent the rest of the afternoon walking up the beach, crossing into the national park, and Viktor could admit to himself that he was definitely feeling a lot more relaxed after a good, honest workout. Of course, there was also the fact that he’d forgotten to bring sunblock and, as a result, he got fairly sunburnt on exposed parts of his face and neck.

*Crap.*

He resolved to ask after aloe lotion once he reached his parents’ home, which was fairly close to where he and Makka had ended up. He found another path and cut across the parkland, Makkachin at his heels, and found the nearest exit onto the sidewalk. From there, it was a simple task of crossing Shoreline Drive at a stoplight and then he was walking right alongside the massive four-star Blue Rose Hotel, the resort-and-spa that his father was the general manager of.

Dad probably wasn’t home from work yet, but it was getting close to his quitting time, so Viktor kept walking until he passed into the shopping and boutique block that ringed the resort.

His parents still lived in the condo he’d grown up in, located in one of the pricier neighborhoods that Lucía Bay boasted. He still knew many of the neighbors and their kids, and had accompanied a lot of those kids in the past few years. He waved at the Bauers, who were out on their porch. They waved back, and then Viktor heard his mother calling out his name.

Makkachin yipped and tugged on her leash, and Viktor quickly let them both in through the gate so he could let go of her. Makka tore off up the steps to the front door and barreled into Mom’s legs, panting excitedly.

“Ooh, my grandpuppy!” she squealed, dropping to her knees and letting Makka lick all over her face. “I missed you too! Ohh, hello baby girl!”

“You saw her last week,” Viktor pointed out, smothering a snort.

Mom made a face at him and finished doting on Makkachin so she could stand back up. “I still
missed her. And my son, who doesn’t come by often enough.”

“I’m never in the area,” Viktor said, rolling his eyes, but he still hugged his mother tightly when she threw her arms around him.

On first glance, no one ever could guess that Amanda Nikiforov was his mother - he looked nothing like either of his parents. Mom had dark, dark skin, gray eyes, and thickly curled hair, and she only came up to Viktor’s chest. Dad was only a little taller than Mom, and he was potbellied, slightly balding, with a beaky nose and thick glasses that he needed to be able to read things. Dad had immigrated to America in the early 90’s, and Mom had grown up in Detroit. When they’d gotten married in 1996, they had gone back to Russia and come home with Viktor.

Viktor honestly didn’t remember his early years in the Russian orphanage, but that didn’t matter; Boris and Amanda Nikiforov were the only parents he’d ever known. And frankly, they were the best parents he could have asked for.

“How’ve you been, sweetheart?” Mom asked, tugging him down so she could kiss his cheek. “Did you go to your session with Dr. Gilbert today?”

“Yeah.”

She patted his head. “Good boy. C’mon in, I’m making dinner.”

Viktor froze. “A...are you?” he asked, alarmed.

“What’s that tone for?” she asked, arching an eyebrow.

Viktor brushed past her and kicked off his shoes before skidding down the hallway and into the kitchen. “Mom!” he yelled when he saw the pan on the stove that was starting to smoke. He shut off the stove and ran into the dining room so he could open the door to the patio in order to beat the smoke alarm.

After a few years of Mom nearly catching the kitchen on fire, Dad had installed sprinklers. Big nope! Viktor thought grimly as he started fanning the fresh air into the kitchen.

“Oh, dammit!” Mom sighed as she took the pan off the stove. “I was making tacos.”

Viktor eyed the half-pound of ground beef that was sitting on the counter. “I’m sure we can salvage it,” he said.

Mom beamed at him and started scraping out the burned taco meat into the sink. Makkachin sat down next to her by the sink and whined, but Mom ignored to her puppydog eyes. “No, baby,” she said to the poodle as Viktor left the patio door open but slid the screen door shut. “This isn’t good for you.”

Viktor snorted. He knew perfectly well that his mother had slipped table scraps to his dog for years. “Of course it’s not.”

Mom stuck her tongue out at him and rinsed off the pan. “You want me to scrub it?”

“Nah, just dry it off and get the cooking oil.” Viktor grabbed the ground beef and the taco seasoning. “So what have you been up to all day?”

“Oh, I was working on my lesson plans for next week.”
Viktor frowned as he dropped the beef into the previously used bowl and poured the taco seasoning onto it. “Wait. All Saints didn’t start up the year yet?”

“No, they’re on the same timeline as the college.” Mom sighed. “It’s both a relief and a pain. I’d like to get started sooner, but it’s nice to have time to finalize things before the semester begins.”

She was a teacher at the All Saints Private Primary School, which was located a couple blocks down the street from the house. It was a very small Catholic school with less than two hundred pupils that serviced kindergarten through sixth grade, with classes sized at about fifteen students per teacher. It was difficult for kids to get in, and parents who could slap a ‘my child is a student at All Saints’ sticker on their car considered it something of a badge of honor.

Viktor would have gone to All Saints if it weren’t for the fact that he’d spent most of his childhood fairly sickly, and ended up homeschooled until he was about fourteen. He ended up attending the private high school downtown, however. (Honestly, Viktor wasn’t sure what Hanon had done for him that Neptune Public High couldn’t have, but because of his mother’s connections, tuition had been free. He wasn’t going to complain, anyway. It had been years, and high school was far behind him.)

While Mom kept working on the non-cooking parts of the taco bar, Viktor finished seasoning the meat and started dropping it into the pan to sizzle and brown. He got all the meat in the pan and wiped his hands with a paper towel before poking and breaking up the beef with a spatula.

“When is Dad coming home?” Viktor asked as he turned the heat down lower.

“Any minute,” Mom answered. “He was taking off at four, but you know how he gets.”

Viktor snorted. “Oh, god.”

His father had a bad habit of intending to leave the office at a set time and then getting swept up in the hotel drama that always seemed to pop up near quitting time. Last time, someone had flooded the men’s locker room at the spa right before he’d been able to punch out. Dad had stayed for hours afterward, helping to mop up the overflow and calm down the patrons.

Still, it was only quarter-past. Dad had plenty of time to make it home before one of them had to go and extract him.

Viktor took another ten minutes to finish browning the beef before pouring it into the serving bowl Mom pointed out, and then set the pan back on the stove to cool off. “I’m gonna go use the bathroom real quick,” he said, and Mom nodded absently while hip-checking Makkachin away from the counter.

Viktor ducked into the downstairs bathroom and locked the door behind him.

He contemplated the tiny shower and the decorative towel on the rack behind him, then finally sighed and flipped the spigot on the sink before pumping a handful of soap into his palm. Ten seconds, he reminded himself. Then he lathered up and stuck his hands into the stream.

He was able to get himself rinsed off and grab the bath towel off the rack before the tail could make its appearance, and he breathed a sigh of relief as he dried off.

Well, this isn’t so hard. He hung the towel back up and flipped off the faucet before letting himself back out into the hallway.
“Vitya, come and get your daughter!” Mom yelled as Makkachin hopped up on her hind legs to paw at Mom’s apron.

Viktor whistled, and Makkachin’s ears popped up before she bounded over to him, tail wagging wildly.

“Did you give her anything?” Viktor asked, raising an eyebrow.

Mom crossed her arms. “Do you honestly think I would?”

“Yes.”

Mom sniffed.

Viktor sighed and rolled his eyes. “Mom, how many times do we have to go through this.”

“It was just a little bit of cheese that fell on the floor, isn’t that okay?”

“Mom.” Viktor caught Makka’s collar and shepherded her into the living room.

“I know,” Mom sighed, but then the garage door opened and Makkachin snapped to attention once again.

“Incoming!” Viktor called as Makkachin barreled into his father, sending him reeling back against the wall.

“Thanks for the warning,” Dad coughed as Makkachin climbed into his lap and licked at his face.

“Okay, okay, I see you! Okay!”

Viktor grabbed Makkachin again and pulled her off of his father so he could get up.

“Sorry,” Viktor said, and Dad waved a hand at him.

“I’m used to it.” He patted Viktor on the head (which required Viktor to stoop down a little) and shuffled off into the hallway so he could head upstairs and change out of his work clothes.

“What, no hello for me?” Mom called from the kitchen, only half-serious.

“Hello, dear!”

“Thank you.”

Viktor smothered a laugh in his hand and ushered Makkachin back into the living room.

Viktor and his mother were setting the table for dinner when Dad finally reappeared, dressed in his sweatpants and t-shirt and looking a lot more relaxed.

“Ohay,” he said, spreading his arms wide. “Now I can say hello.”

Mom immediately caught him in a hug and kissed his cheek with a big smack. “You don’t taste like doggy slobber,” she said, and Dad laughed.

“I figured I’d wash that off before greeting you.”

Viktor watched as his parents cuddled up to each other in the middle of the kitchen, and Dad kissed the tip of Mom’s nose. God, but they were adorable.
Next May would be their twenty-second wedding anniversary, and the way that they tended to act, you’d think they were still in the first flush of dating. It kind of made Viktor’s heart flutter.

“Vitya,” Dad said, holding out an arm. “C’mere, get over here, I haven’t seen you in ages.”

“You saw me a week ago,” Viktor reminded him, but still put down the silverware so his dad could draw him in for a real hello hug.

“Yes, you don’t visit enough,” Dad chided him, and Mom made a noise of agreement.

“I do have a life, you know.”

“Do you hear that, Boris?” Mom said with a fake sniffle. “Our boy has a life.”

Dad scoffed. “What, there’s no room in your exciting life for your dear old mom and dad?”

Viktor rolled his eyes. “Good grief. You’d think I never stop by.”

Mom and Dad both grinned at him.

“So what did you make?” Dad asked, and Mom smacked him on the arm.

“Why do you assume he made it?”

“Because the sprinklers haven’t gone off.”

Mom smacked Dad on the arm again, and Dad snorted.

“Mom had started on tacos,” Viktor cut in before they could start play-bickering. “I just helped.”

“Just helped,” Dad said, but he was smiling. “Smells fantastic, I’m starving. Are you both all set?”

“Grab a plate if you wanna eat.” Mom picked up hers and stalked off into the kitchen.

“Don’t worry,” Dad added, waggling his eyebrows. “She’ll get over it.”

“Of course,” Viktor agreed, and he handed his father a plate.

Makkachin pawed at their ankles while they fixed their dinners, and Viktor had to stop his mother from sneaking Makka some of the meat, but once they were settled at the table, Mom seemed to have gotten over Dad’s teasing.

“So how are things at the Ariel?” she asked as she drizzled Ranch on her taco. “Got any new kids?”

“A few,” Viktor shrugged. “Mostly a lot of students from last year. I think Yura is being reassigned to a different pianist for the Showcase, though.”

“Yura?” Dad frowned. “Which one is that?”

“Kolya’s grandson,” Mom reminded him.

“Ah. Right.” Dad nodded. “The loud, angry one.”

Viktor snorted into his taco. “Yeah, that one.”

“How’s Yakov doing?” Dad asked. “Haven’t seen him in a while, is he still as stressed out as he’s been?”
“Well. He might need to start interviewing for a new receptionist.” Viktor thought back to yesterday’s incident with Mrs. Stimler and the paper shredder. “I’ve been playing secretary to him in the meantime, in between practice sessions with the students.”

“He should pay you double for that,” Dad said.

“I’ll tell him you said that.” Dad and Yakov went way back, back to when they were the only two Russian guys working at the Blue Rose in the eighties. The whole reason Viktor had even taken lessons with Yakov was because of Dad.

“Tell him to stop by one of these nights, he doesn’t need an excuse,” Mom said, sipping her drink. She’d made margaritas, and had put an awful lot of lime in Viktor’s.

“Tell him yourself,” Viktor tossed back at her, making a face. “You have his email, don’t pretend you don’t know how to use it.”

Mom threw a piece of lettuce at him, which fell flat and landed in the center of the table. “I’m an old lady, you should be helping me out.”

“Old, my ass,” Viktor snickered. “An old lady wouldn’t get on top of a bar to dance.”

“That was once,” Mom protested as Dad started laughing. “No, don’t start with this! That was years ago!”

“Two years,” Viktor replied. “Just saying.”

“We should do that again,” Dad said, his eyes going dreamy.

“Oh, oh no you don’t.” Mom frowned. “I don’t need pictures of me doing the can-can ending up on Face-Space, or whatever it’s called.”

Viktor started choking on something, it might have been his tortilla, and he had to duck to the side so he could cough it up. His dad pounded helpfully on his back as Makkachin licked his face.

“Listen,” Mom insisted. “I have a reputation!”

“Yes, dear,” Dad agreed.

Viktor got his breathing back under control and wheezed a little bit. “Um,” he rasped, pushing Makkachin’s nose away from his plate. “Can you even do the can-can?”

“I can totally do the can-can,” Mom sniffed.

Viktor sighed and shook his head. “Why couldn’t I have been a good dancer like you?”

“Because we needed you to bring music into this house,” Dad answered, taking another messy bite of his taco. “Speaking of which…”

“There’s nowhere to put it,” Viktor cut him off. He’d rushed past the front room, where his grandmother’s piano still waited for him to take home with him. “Dad, I live in a tiny apartment. I’m not taking a baby grand with me anytime soon.”

“He’s still young, Boris,” Mom added. “We can’t expect him to have a house of his own, not in this market.”

“Thank you,” Viktor groused, flicking a piece of lettuce onto his plate. “No way in hell I could
afford a mortgage right now.”

“I could help…” Dad ventured, but Mom nudged him and shook her head.

Viktor contemplated his plate and sighed. “I’m fine in my apartment,” he said. “Maybe one day I’ll get a house, but right now I’m fine.”

“And.” Dad leaned forward, and Viktor immediately got a sense of foreboding. “Any prospective… romances?”

Viktor groaned as his mom eyed him with a similar look of interest. “Oh my god, for a second I thought we were going to get through an entire visit without you bringing this up.”

“Vitya, darling,” Mom said immediately. “We just want you to be happy.”

“I’m happy!” Viktor protested. “I have Makka, I have friends, I have work. I am pleasantly busy!”

“Vitya,” Dad patted his arm. “We know you. We know you better than you know yourself. We’ve done this whole thing before. You’re at a point in your life where you can go out and find your happiness.”

Viktor buried his face in his hands. “Oh my god, please stop.”

“It’s been how long? Since your last date?” Mom added.

“Eight months.”

“Eight months. ‘It doesn’t matter.’”

Mom and Dad exchanged worried looks. “Vitya, honey, you can’t keep going on first dates only,” his mom said.

Viktor pushed his plate aside and laid his head down on the table. “Mom.”

“You’re not going to know if they’re your soulmate on a first date, Vitya.” Mom pressed.

“Look,” Viktor grumbled, his forehead still pressed into the wood. “If I don’t feel anything after the first date, what’s the point of going on a second one?”

“You might be too picky,” Dad said. “I know I certainly was.”

“Your father would never have gone out with me if he’d kept up his dating habits.”

Viktor let his forehead roll until he was facing the kitchen wall opposite his parents. “Please stooooooooooooooop.” Makkachin laid her head on his thigh, and he buried his hands in her fleece. “Makkachin is the only one who loves me.”

Makkachin licked at his pants, eyeing his abandoned plate hopefully.

“You know,” Mom said, “maybe one of these days someone will correct your Russian and you’ll fall in love.”

Viktor snorted. “Or, I could be living in a little house filled with happy poodles and be content. That’s an option.”

Dad sighed as Mom grudgingly agreed. “Yes, you’re right. That’s a legitimate option.”

“Great!” Viktor popped himself back upright, forcing a bright smile on his face. “So. Anyway. I’ve
been avoiding Facebook, has Ti-ti made up with her boyfriend?”

Mom blinked, confused, but Dad shook his head. “She’s still mad at him.”

“Good. He’s a dick.” Viktor picked up his taco again.

“Why are you avoiding Facebook?” Mom asked, making a face.

“Social bullshit,” Viktor said before taking another bite. Mom would have thrown something at him if he tried to talk with his mouth full. “I really don’t need to be dragged into passive-aggressive relationship fights and falling-outs. Also, Minion memes.”

“What?” Mom blinked again.

“Minions,” Viktor said slowly. “You know. From that one movie.” The title was escaping him. *Crap.*

“The one with the guy with the nose,” Dad added, unhelpfully pantomiming a longer one on his own face.

Mom looked back and forth at the both of them. “...what?”

Wait. He had it. *Despicable Me.* Viktor snapped his fingers. “Steve Carrell did a horrible eastern European accent?”

Mom still looked lost.

“Those annoying yellow pill-things,” Viktor said flatly. “With the goggles and the overalls.”

“Oh.” Mom’s eyes widened. “Those horrible little monster things? All my kids love them.”

Dad groaned and rubbed his forehead. “I fear for the next generation.”

“It’s gonna be the next *Twilight,*” Viktor said. “Everyone’s going to be talking about it, it’ll show up everywhere, and then in a couple years everyone will forget what they even are.”

“That day cannot come soon enough,” Mom agreed. She took a long drink of her margarita. “Anyway.”

The rest of dinner passed with much easier conversation, with Dad veering into the topic of veganism for a long-winded tangent, and then Mom started telling Viktor about a new TV show she’d discovered (it was the first season of *Stranger Things* and Viktor had to fight down laughter as she insisted he check it out, deciding not to tell her that he’d already seen it.)

The dregs of their margaritas were melted in their glasses and Viktor had stopped his mother from sneaking leftover bits of meat to Makkachin at least three times before Dad started yawning more often and declared an early bedtime for himself. He gave Viktor another bearhug before shuffling upstairs again without even cleaning up his dishes.

Viktor had anticipated this, and he quickly started gathering up the dinnerware before Mom could go drag Dad back down to help. He carefully rinsed off the dishes while Mom grabbed a rag to wipe down the table.

“I don’t even live here anymore and I’m still cleaning up after you both,” Viktor said, grinning, as Mom snorted at him.
“Hey, I cleaned up after you for nearly twenty years,” she pointed out.

“Not that long,” Viktor countered, popping the dishwasher open. “I started helping out.”

“Yeah. After I made you help.”

Viktor dropped the silverware into the basket on the bottom rung and started standing the plates up alongside it.

Mom dropped the used washcloth in the sink and wiped her hands on her pants before putting her arms around Viktor’s waist. “God, you’re so tall. I didn’t sign up for being shorter than you.”

Viktor laughed and shrugged. “Oops?”

“Pff.”

Viktor rolled his shoulder and winced at the tight pulling sensation of his sunburnt skin. “Hey, do you have any aloe?”

“Aloe?” Mom squinted and then tugged Viktor down so she could examine him up close. “Oh, geez, I thought that was just a flush. God, you’re so fair.” She patted his shoulder and then disappeared into the hall closet to find the sunscreen basket.

Viktor closed up the dishwasher as she came back into the kitchen with the basket, and allowed her to tug him back to his seat. “Pull your shirt off, sweetheart,” she said.

“It’s just my neck and face,” Viktor whined, batting at her hands.

“Okay, fine, let me--” Mom had a bottle of green aloe gel out, and quickly uncapped it.

Viktor patiently waited for her to spread it over his nose and cheeks, and then his ears. He hated the scent of aloe and the feeling of the gel, but he couldn’t deny that it helped with the sunburn.

“Do you need a ride back home?” Mom asked as she moved onto his neck.

“We can walk,” Viktor answered.

“I can drive you.”

“Seriously.”

Mom frowned and squirted more aloe gel onto her hand. “Seriously. Sweetheart, it’s a long walk.”

Viktor sighed as she continued to rub the gel onto his burnt skin.

“You could get a car,” Mom added.

“Nah.”

“You’re such a millennial.”

“Damn straight.”

Mom rolled her eyes and capped the aloe bottle back up. “Here, take this one home with you. We have an extra.”

Viktor groaned, but accepted the bottle.
“And I’m driving you home. Don’t argue, you walked all the way here.” Mom eyed Makkachin, who had given up on trying to get table scraps and was passed out on the couch by the family room window.

Viktor relented, because he was pretty worn out, and helped Mom pack up some of the leftovers into a Tupperware container before waking up Makkachin and herding the poodle into Mom’s sedan.

Dad’s car had been parked by the curb, and Viktor noticed that his father’s bicycle was hanging on the wall. “Dad gave up on biking into work?”

“He said it was too hot to bike during the summer,” Mom said, carefully pulling out of the driveway.

Viktor made a face but opted not to joke about his dad’s prominent beer belly. Makkachin sighed loudly in the back seat, and Mom rolled down the windows for her.

It was still fairly busy on the roads, especially as they passed through the tourist strip along the beach, and it took another twenty minutes before Mom was pulling up in front of Viktor’s building.

“Don’t forget the aloe,” she said as he climbed out and clipped Makkachin’s leash back onto her collar. He made sure to wag the bottle of aloe before hefting it and his leftovers under his arm, the leash securely wound around his other hand. He kissed his mom goodbye and then headed towards the front entrance, juggling his belongings so he could wiggle his keyring loose.

At the last minute, he veered onto the grass to let Makkachin take a potty break before going inside. He nodded to one of his neighbors as he let himself in the front door, whistling for Makka to take the stairs ahead of him.

Makkachin immediately flopped onto her doggy bed in the TV room, and Viktor stowed his leftovers in the fridge. “Should have given her the other Tupperware, Makka,” he said, eying his drying rack next to the sink. “Oh well.”

His dog just sighed and shuffled a little on the doggy bed, and Viktor grabbed the aloe off the counter and left her to sleep off the exciting day.

He paused when he opened the door to his bathroom and winced when he saw himself in the mirror. “Geez,” he muttered, putting the aloe on the counter before tugging off his shirt. He took a moment to grab a bath bomb from the basket under the sink; it was one of the glittery ones, because he felt like indulging himself.

He flipped the spigot on the faucet and turned it over to the warmer end. The bathtub was still ringed with salt from the last weekend, which he didn’t really mind.

After testing the temperature and drying off before his tail could reappear, he adjusted the faucet and made sure the tub was plugged before straightening up again and making sure the big fluffy bath towel was positioned at the sweet spot where he could grab it from the tub but not get it damp before he needed it. The faucet was switched off once the water had gotten to an acceptable level.

His dirty clothes went into the hamper by the door - he’d gotten the rubber gloves he’d so desperately needed so he could do laundry again - and he took a moment to pull a lighter from the drawer next to the sink so he could light the white lily-scented candles on the little shelf he’d assembled over the toilet. As a final touch after he’d brushed his teeth, he thumbed his phone open and opened Spotify, putting on his feel-good retro-oh-god-I-got-old hits playlist. (There were plenty of Britney Spears songs on the list, and Chris could go suck an egg.)

“Peak gay,” he muttered to himself before unwrapping the bath bomb and stepping into the tub.
There was something doubly magical when the bath bomb began to fizz and spit out galaxy swirls of glitter and color just as his lower half transformed, the pink-purple tail flopping over the edge of the tub and uncurling. Viktor just watched and waited as the fizzy shrunk in his palm, humming along to the song playing on his phone. When the water was sufficiently glammed out and smelling pleasantly of white peach and peonies, he sank into the bath until his shoulders were submerged.

The sunburn was still there after he transformed, and it stung as the hot water rushed over it, but he could ignore it. He wriggled until he was comfortably settled in the tub, which wasn’t as large as he would have liked what with his tail, and reached for the soap and washcloth.

The soap he’d put in his bathroom was a fancy chunk of ‘crystal soap’ from a seller on Etsy, and it literally looked like a cut of raw amethyst. Viktor couldn’t deny how much he liked it, especially since it smelled so nice. He took his time to lather up and scrub, feeling his muscles relaxing in the hot water. The scent of lavender joined the others in the air. It should have been cloying, but Viktor had always preferred to overload his senses.

“Somebody out there’s got my name on their heart,” he sang along with Kate Alexa as the chorus started up. “Somebody out there is watching the same star--”

Overhead, the ventilation kicked in and made the candles flicker. Viktor plucked his facial scrub off the tub ledge and squirted a dime’s worth into his palm.

Going through his washing routine was comforting, and had helped for the past week’s worth of baths with his tail. Still, he soaked for a bit longer before he drained the tub and managed to shuffle around so he could wash his hair directly under the faucet. (And he could swear it was starting to thin around his forehead. Oh god.)

He shut off the water and shook out as much water as he could, and then groped for his towel and buried his face in it. It took a little bit more maneuvering before he was able to climb out of the tub and flop over onto the fluffy bath rug that he’d strategically scooted away from the tub. Now came the hard part.

It took another ten or fifteen minutes of toweling off before Viktor transformed back. He blew out his candles and decided to deal with any mess left in the tub over the weekend, pausing his Spotify playlist and yawning. Lavender always made him sleepy, especially after a long day. He took a moment to spread the aloe over his sunburnt skin again, sighing at the soothing relief of the gel as it made contact, before he wiped the excess gel off his hands on his week-old towel and tossed it into the hamper as well.

When he opened the door to the bathroom, Viktor heard Makkachin’s tags jingling as she bounded down the hallway to follow him into his bedroom. He pulled on some clean sleep pants and climbed into bed, plugging his phone into the charger on his bedside table, and then cuddled his dog to his chest. She went willingly, and wriggled so that she could curl up against him.

“Good girl,” he told her, burying his face in her fleece. She huffed sleepily.

Viktor could feel excitement and anticipation curling in his belly, and it was going to be a bit of an effort to fall asleep, but he yawned a couple times as he started to drift off. As his eyelids drooped and grew heavier, he again heard the roar of the sea.

*I’m getting the hang of this,* he thought proudly, and the sound of the surf carried him away.
He felt so small next to Her. He always did.

He looked up at Her face, but She turned away.

“Wait!” he cried out, but he tumbled forward as he tried to follow Her. He looked back at his tail, but it shouldn’t have... he was on dry land, he shouldn’t have a tail here. He was dry, how did he have a tail?!

He looked back up at Her, and Her long silvery hair writhed around Her head in a strong gust of wind. Her eyes were cold, like the ice he could create with a single gesture.

“This,” She said in disgust. “This is why I didn’t want you.”

He felt his heart shatter.

She turned from him once more and suddenly She was so far away, and he was helpless on the ground, his tail flopping uselessly behind him.

“Please!” he gasped, his throat tight with tears. “Please, come back!”

But he was alone.

Viktor’s eyes flew open and he jerked all the way back to wakefulness with a sob, clutching at his chest.

He hadn’t dreamed of... Her... in years.

“Dammit,” he whispered, gritting his teeth. He rolled onto his side, curling in on himself, and tried to breathe deeply, but it was no use. He began to cry.

I don’t need her, he told himself furiously. She didn’t want me. I have Mom and Dad. I don’t need her. I don’t need her.

He didn’t even know what she actually looked like, and neither did the people who ran the orphanage. And yet, she had haunted his adolescent nightmares like a ghost from another lifetime.

“I don’t need you,” he repeated softly, a mantra that he could only cling to in the darkness. Makkachin whined from the foot of the bed and got up so she could resettle next to him. She licked at his face, and he smiled and drew her in close again.

“Thank you, Makka,” he said, closing his eyes.

I don’t need you, he thought, forcing the image of the silver-haired woman from his mind. I have a family. I’m happy. I will never need you.

And slowly, once more soothed by the sound of the sea, he fell asleep again.

Chapter End Notes

AND SO IT BEGINS. You guys know what's coming, especially if you're on Discord with me. Who's ready for the first MAJOR arc?! :D
Before anyone asks: yes, Viktor can do a Gru voice. It brings him nothing but shame.

Viktor being a bath bomb junkie is dedicated to burblordmary, AKA my internet selkie wife. (HER ART IS AMAZING, HAVE I MENTIONED?)

Shout-out to dadvans and lily_winterwood for their tireless work in convincing me that Viktor would be a Britney Bitch. This one's for y'all.

YES. Viktor was adopted at a very young age. I'm planning on commissioning art of the Nikiforov family pretty soon! I LOVE VIKTOR'S PARENTS SO MUCH. Can you tell?

So how about those Olympics, huh? Who's watching? (I AM SO PROUD OF SHOMA!! AND YURI ON ICE IN PAIRS, DID YOU GUYS SEE? I WAS SCREAMING!)

So, who's got bath bomb suggestions for Vitya here? What will he and Chris find on Islaluna next time? And how does a certain shy pianist fit into it? I guess we'll find out (or else venture guesses in the comments!) (Seriously, I love reading the predictions you guys put out! Keep 'em coming!)

Come find me on Tumblr and Twitter! And be on the lookout for my Big Bang!!! on Ice entry, coming in a little over a week!
are we getting too close, do we dare to get closer

Chapter Summary

Viktor has an encounter at the library, he and Chris poke around the magic cove, and Mila drags him to a party that he won't soon forget.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from *And We Danced* by The Hooters (AKA Tig Ol’ Bitties THANK YOU TODD IN THE SHADOWS)

No spoilers but I think y’all gonna like this one :3

HUGE GIGANTIC THANKS TO GAB FOR THE BETA, she and mamodewberry just posted another chapter of *Never Look Away* and lots of people screamed so clearly she knows what's she's doing! (Gab you rock so hard thank you so much!)

And of course huge gigantic thanks to everyone who cheered me on on discord and Tumblr and Twitter, I love you all so much! Enjoy the update! (I THINK YOU WILL.)

warning, this chapter contains some of the characters drinking while under the legal age for alcohol consumption (21 in the United States.) If you live in the US and you're not 21+ years old yet, please don't drink!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The Lucía Bay Public Library, to Viktor’s surprise, had proven to be fairly robust when it came to the mythology and… cryptozoology section. This was his third trip to that particular shelf, and he was still finding new books to peruse.

After thumbing through a twenty-year-old copy of *The Water Spirits* and finding very little useful information - it wasn’t that selkies, nixies, and undines weren’t interesting (and possibly real? A week and a half ago Viktor would have snorted at the notion but now he knew that mermaids and mermen at least existed) but they weren’t what Viktor was looking for - he found a book that hadn’t been in this section the last time he’d checked.

*The Lost City and the Eye of the Moon: the story of the vanished people*, written by Dr. Richard Chadwick and published in 1984, had clearly seen better days. Viktor blinked at the cover and held back a surprised gasp.

*That’s the lagoon!* He recognized the beach and even the rock in the center of the little cove, and the waterfall to the side, and the canopy of trees that ringed the beach. It looked pretty much the same in the thirty-year-old photo as it had on the day of the eclipse. *Why would the lagoon be featured on this cover?*

Viktor immediately stuck the book under his arm along with *The Water Spirits* and *The Ocean’s*
Calling, and headed out of the aisle he’d been mucking around in.

He ducked down a row just a few Dewey Decimals over, looking for the sign that proclaimed Local History, and started pulling books on the colonization of the Bay out to examine their indexes. He found three more books that included sections on Islaluna and the Tani, the native people that had been living in the area before the Spanish had come in. They weren’t substantial, but they had more than the two or three pages listed in the other books.

Viktor juggled his finds with one arm as he shuffled over to one of the study tables by the window. He’d brought a notebook with him, and flipped it open to a clean page so he could start taking handwritten notes.

The history books were about as helpful as his initial internet search had been. He found notes transcribed from Spanish settlers, missionaries, and even a few of the remaining members of Tani tribe; of course, it was that last group that intrigued him the most.

There were substantial accounts of Islaluna from the last of the Tani natives before they were either assimilated by the Spaniards or they died out entirely, and that frustrated Viktor to no end. Why hadn’t anyone bothered to transcribe the local legends? How much lore had been lost? How much of it could have helped him and the others? How many others could have used this information? Surely there had to have been other eclipses over Islaluna?

He saw the phrase “eye of the moon” at least four times as he paged through the history books, three times from the Tani accounts and once from a priest. The latter spoke of the full moon, and how strange things would plague the trading post - one journal entry dated mid-August described a sudden thunderstorm that had disappeared as quickly as it appeared, and another told of a sudden influx of sharks and whales outside of their typical migration pattern. Every story had Viktor’s eyebrows climbing higher and higher on his forehead.

When it came to the Tani stories, the eye of the moon got even weirder. One tribal elder spoke of a time when the beach became coated in ice due to the gods’ displeasure with man’s actions.

Chris wasn’t that far off with the Frozen joke, he realized. If there had been other people caught in eclipses like he and the others had been, surely someone had gotten his freezing powers. And that someone could have been powerful enough to temporarily freeze over the northern beach.

Briefly, he wondered if he could do that, but he had to conclude that that would be as good as painting “magic exists” on a billboard and splashing himself in the middle of the boardwalk.

He went back to his research.

One story from a Tani woman caught his interest and sent chills down his spine. She told whoever had written it down that one night, the full harvest moon had risen huge and bright and golden over the sea. Her daughter had caught sight of it and began to walk into the waves, drawn by some unseen and unheard force that she claimed was coming from the island. Her mother had been forced to bind the girl to her bed to prevent her from trying again.

Only the story hadn’t ended there: the rest of the village shunned the girl after that, as the girl’s father had supposedly been some kind of a water spirit. They believed the girl was trying to rejoin her father in the sea. The mother, for years, kept watch for the full moon and continued to bind the girl to her bed on nights when it rose in the sky.

Then, one day, the girl’s half brother did something that allowed the girl to escape the home. She disappeared into the sea after all, and her mother was heartbroken.
It was very sad, for sure, but... there hadn’t been any mentions of the girl growing a tail when she was splashed with water. *Maybe it was a different... water cryptid - one of the aforementioned selkies, or a siren, or perhaps an undine... whatever those were.*

Still, he wrote down the gist of the woman’s story along with the sudden ice and the unseasonable storms. They were all flying blind in this, and couldn’t afford to disregard anything.

The last mention of the eye of the moon came from a general piece of folklore that a child had recited to whoever had been compiling these stories. It was brief, and not at all specific enough to be truly helpful, but Viktor still took notes.

Basically, it was a story of the Sea Folk. They came out of the ocean during the full moon and supposedly danced and did magic rituals on the island, in a secret cove.

*Secret... cove...?!*

The story concluded with a warning to never intrude on the Sea Folks’ full moon rituals or else face dire consequences, and to mind the skies so as to know when it was safe to venture out onto the island.

Viktor began to look for more mentions of the Sea Folk - no other name given, as far as he could tell - and hit *pay dirt*.

The Sea Folk were supposedly nothing more than legends to the Tani, and no one had ever truly seen them, but the chapter on them was substantial enough that Viktor wondered if there wasn’t truly something to the stories that clearly had been passed down through generations of Tani.

The Sea Folk were the original inhabitants of the area that the Tani eventually settled in and were subsequently replaced with the Spaniards. According to lore, they had built a grand city called Shiirta-ea under the waves, and a bit of cross-referencing pointed to that city being beyond Islaluna, past the hydrocoral reef.

Early, *early* stories from the furthest reaches back in Tani folklore told of limited interactions with the Sea Folk. They were supposedly inhumanly beautiful and talented, and had gifted the Tani with boats that would allow them to fish beyond the island. They’d suddenly vanished, long before the Spanish had ever shown up, leaving the Tani behind on the shore with their boats and legends.

Then, there had been the gold.

Where had the gold come from? No one seemed to know, but the Sea Folk couldn’t have been limited to this part of the Pacific...

If these Sea Folk were... *magic*...

Viktor starred and underlined “Tani folklore - Sea Folk” for emphasis. If these people were known to hang around Islaluna, it made sense that they would be connected to the lagoon.

Hell, what with his newly-acquired swimming abilities, he could possibly even find Shiirta-ea.

Viktor snorted and stacked the history books to the side, flipping open *The Water Spirits* so he could start skimming.

He continued in this vein, jotting down notes on mermaids and their supposed appearances and abilities as reported by sailors worldwide, until someone slammed their hand down on his table.
Viktor jumped in surprise and glanced up at the man leaning over him, breathing like a winded horse. “Uh. Can I… help you?”

“This book,” the man said, his voice rough. “I need it.”

He pointed at *The Lost City*, and Viktor blinked.

“Uh, sorry,” he finally said. “I’m kind of using it now. But you can have it after I’m done.”

The man went scarlet, and Viktor leaned back in confusion. The interloper was of average height, probably a bit shorter than Viktor, and he seemed to be in his late thirties or early forties. He had a long, wide nose, a square chin, and thick eyebrows; he wore thick glasses that only magnified his dark eyes until he resembled a cartoon character, and his curly brown hair was messy and sticking up like he’d gotten tossed around in a windstorm. He wore a brown suit that had definitely seen better days, and scuffed loafers, and was sheened in a slight veil of sweat that in of itself was not unusual due to the summer heat. He drew up, puffing his chest out and breathing deeply in through his flared nostrils.

“What the hell are you looking up mermaids for?” the man demanded, his wide eyes fixed on Viktor like he was trying to set fire to Viktor with the power of his mind.

Viktor’s face twisted into a bewildered expression without him really meaning to do so, but he couldn’t blame himself. “Uh… none of your business?”

“I knew it,” the man hissed, smacking the table with his palm again. Viktor winced at the noise it made, and the guy suddenly squeaked and clutched his wrist as if he only just realized that he was hurting himself.

“Dude,” Viktor said slowly. “Are you all right?”

“What do you care,” the man wheezed, doubling over. “You’re probably a plant from Dr. Ross! Or is it Denman? I never thought she’d be up to it, but you never know. It couldn’t be Hiroko, she wouldn’t… or would she?” He glared at Viktor. “You tell whoever put you up to this that Walter Kornbluth will not be deterred!” He made to snatch up *The Lost City* again, but Viktor got it first and shoved it onto his chair before sitting on it.

“Chill out, Walter,” Viktor said, making a face.

“That’s Dr. Walter to you!” the guy sputtered, and then a rather tall librarian stepped up behind him, his pleasant expression strained.

“Dr. Kornbluth, please stop harassing the other patrons.”

“I’m not harassing anybody!” Kornbluth bellowed.

The librarian only smiled wider. “Yeah, okay, that’s enough.” He grabbed Kornbluth’s arm and dragged the man away, nodding in apology to Viktor and the other people who had been watching.

Viktor blinked, and pulled *The Lost City* out from underneath himself to look it over. “Yeah, no, I’m taking this home with me,” he finally decided. His phone buzzed; he checked it to see a text from Chris, who would be finishing up at the board shop in the next half hour and heading out to Islaluna once he could grab the Zodiac.

Viktor quickly gathered up his notes and the books he’d be taking home with him, heading over to checkout so he could stuff everything into his messenger bag. Once he had his receipt and due dates
for the books, he ducked out of the library and jogged back to his place.

His apartment was a few blocks west of the library, situated in the business district of the downtown area. The streets were already bustling with activity, anticipation of the weekend thick in the air. Viktor managed to make it to his building without any incidents, and let himself in.

He dropped his bag off on his kitchen table and grabbed the waterproof pouch for the trip, stuffing a portable battery charger and a short cable into it along with his phone and other necessities. Makkachin was happy to go outside for a bit to relieve herself and sniff at some new scents in the front of the apartment building, but Viktor couldn’t take her with him to the island so he brought her back upstairs, cuddled her for a bit, and gave her a Kong toy filled with peanut butter in apology for not spending more time with her. He grabbed his waterproof pouch, slathered his face with sunscreen, and locked up before heading back out again.

Once more, he headed to the northern marina. The commercial boats were all already gone, and there were a few pleasure crafts still docked as their owners went about their business, but Viktor was able to find a spot where he could jump into the water without drawing any attention.

The waterproof pouch survived the impact fine, and Viktor had to swim and grab it once his tail appeared, but once he had it secured on one arm he dived down under the surface to avoid being seen by onlookers as he started navigating out of the marina.

The visibility in the marina got better the further he got from the docks, and once he managed to get out to the open sea the water cleared up exponentially. He disturbed a few schools of fish as he checked his directions and reoriented himself so that he was headed to Islaluna, and it was smooth swimming from there on out.

Once again, Viktor ended up surfacing on the sea-facing side to scan for either the lagoon or Chris’s Zodiac. He didn’t see either, so he ducked underwater again to keep swimming.

The second time he resurfaced, he saw the opening to the cove and started paddling towards it. Once he passed the rocks that formed the ocean entrance and popped up by the big central rock, he was able to see that he’d beaten Chris out to the lagoon. He hauled himself onto the rock and made sure he’d shaken off most of the water on his upper body before he checked his phone.

There was a single text from Chris that confirmed he was on his way. Viktor sighed and re-sealed his phone inside the pouch. He took a moment to lounge back against the rock, flexing his fins still dangling in the water. It was still strange to feel those muscles moving, and he was still getting used to the sensation of the tail overall, but he was getting used to it.

The sun felt nice on his bare chest, but he could still feel the pull of his sunburnt skin, so he heaved himself off the rock and let himself sink back under the water. Bubbles tickled his skin as he floated just beneath the surface, stretching himself out in the weightlessness of the saltwater.

Of course, after a moment of silently drifting in the relative calm of the lagoon, he accidentally bumped the rock and jerked out of the daze he’d worked himself into, and that resulted in him losing his grip on the waterproof pouch.

_Ah, shit!_ He scrambled to try and catch it, but it escaped his grasp and began to sink towards the bottom of the lagoon.

_Nope!_ He dived for real, kicking his tail for a burst of speed, and caught the pouch before it hit the sandy floor. He was about to surface again when something glinted against the base of the rock, catching his eye.
Frowning, Viktor crept closer, his belongings secured under his arm. He reached out and carefully brushed the sand aside, blinking in surprise when it revealed what looked like a piece of metal.

He pulled it free of the sand and shook the grit loose in a dusty cloud before he pushed off the floor of the lagoon and headed back to the surface. This time, he pulled himself up onto the beach, wriggling his way up onto the dry sand. He flopped over onto his back once his upper body was free of the gentle lapping of the water and opened his hand to reveal what he’d found.

“Oh, wow,” he breathed as the sunlight glinted off of the golden pendant in his palm. He sat up as best as he could without full use of his hips and set his stuff aside so he could turn his find over and examine the back. “Wow,” he said again.

It was still faintly cold from its time at the bottom of the lagoon, and it had no chain to hang off of, but it was clearly a necklace charm. It reminded him of the medallion his maternal grandfather had, the one he’d brought from Cuba.

But there were differences; his grandfather’s medallion had an image of the Our Lady of Charity etched into it, and this one was a much simpler image of a circle flanked by two crescents facing opposite directions. It looked like a Wiccan symbol, if Viktor’s recollection of his yearly binge-watches of witch-related movies was accurate.

Still, he’d found it in the lagoon where the magic had happened. It had to be something.

He was still examining it when he heard shuffling and rustling noises up in the treeline, and his heart raced for a moment before Chris finally pushed through the brush and caught sight of him.

“There you are!” Chris called, picking his way down the hill into the lagoon. He skidded to a stop a few feet away and took in the tail, and Viktor suddenly remembered that Chris had never seen it before. “Wow.”

Viktor laughed at the gobsmacked look on his friend’s face. “Yeah, weird, right?”

“I mean,” Chris squatted down to examine the scales, and their reflections twinkled on his face. “It’s one thing to know about it intellectually, it’s another thing entirely to see it in-person.”

“Fair enough,” Viktor agreed. He rolled onto his side and let Chris get a look at the dorsal fin. “Do you think it looks like an actual fish’s? Like, a specific species?”

“Dude, I don’t know enough about that to answer accurately,” Chris admitted. “Masu would know, maybe. The coloring makes me think tropical, though.”

“Good thing we’re in this warm weather paradise, huh?” Viktor said, gesturing at the lagoon.

Chris stood back up to survey the scenery as well. “Hot damn, how is this not a prime destination for tourists?”

“Magic, probably,” Viktor snorted, picking at a scale on his hip. “So what took you so long?”

“I left the Zodiac on the other side of the island,” Chris said, setting down his backpack that Viktor presumed was full of the survey equipment he’d requested. “I didn’t know if I could find the lagoon or even if I could get the Zodiac through. And, honestly?” He shaded his face against the sun as he eyed the cove entrance. “Yeah, I don’t think the Zodiac would fit through those rocks. And it’s a small craft.”

“I was able to swim through, but it’s wider under the surface,” Viktor agreed. “You might do better
on a surfboard.”

“Oh, yeah,” Chris scoffed, sitting down next to Viktor and fanning himself. “I’ll just paddle all the way out to sea on my board. Sure, dude.”

Viktor flipped him off. “Just a suggestion, dude. I’m just saying, a board could fit through there.”

“You’re probably right, but again. I’m not paddling out here on a board.” Chris flipped his sunglasses up and eyed Viktor’s face. “Viktor. The sun hates you.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Did you bring sunscreen?”

Viktor winced. “I couldn’t fit any, but I put some on before I left.”

Chris snorted and unzipped his backpack so he could pull out a bottle of sunblock. “You’re lucky I think ahead.”

“You’re the best,” Viktor said, snatching the bottle out of Chris’s hands. He quickly brushed the sand off his hands so he could lather up with lotion and apply it all over his face.

“You’re such a Russian,” Chris said, openly laughing.

“Fight me,” Viktor retorted, tossing the bottle back at his friend.

“Oh, no, you’ll turn me into an ice block,” Chris answered, hopping to his feet. “Okay, so what do you want to do? What are we taking samples of?”

“The water,” Viktor said, pointing. “And the rock. I think those are the main catalysts.”

“Other than the eclipse.”

“Well, yeah.”

Chris looked at the lagoon water and then at Viktor. “Were you planning on drying off?”

“Well, I was going to come looking for you in case you’d gotten lost. I know you can navigate at sea, but for all we know you’re hopeless on the land.”

Chris made a face at him. “Okay, up yours. As long as I have GPS, I can’t get lost.”

“No service out here,” Viktor pointed out.

“I’ll just make you my guide,” Chris answered breezily. “You can be my helpful dolphin.”

“Oh my god, fuck you.”

“No thanks, I have a boyfriend.”

Viktor flicked sand at his friend, who snorted at him again and pulled a bunch of test tubes from his backpack.

“What, that’s all you brought?” Viktor demanded, making a face.

“It’s all I really know how to use,” Chris said. “I would ask Masu for help, but…”
“No, yeah, okay.” Viktor eyed the rest of the backpack’s contents. Chris had brought four test tubes, his boating kit, and the sunblock, plus a bunch of plastic shopping bags that Viktor figured were meant to serve as a cushion for the glass vials.

“I found a gold medallion at the bottom of the lagoon,” he said, and Chris’s head snapped up in surprise.

“You did?”

“Yeah, weird, right?”

“You found an artifact?” Chris pressed, his eyebrows drawn together. “Here?”

“Yep.” Viktor nodded. “It’s like one of those Cuban Virgin Mary medallions, except it doesn’t have the Virgin Mary on it.”

“What does it have?”

Viktor held it out to Chris, who gingerly took it in his own hand to examine it.

“Viktor, I think this is actual gold.” Chris turned it over in his palm and looked up at Viktor with wide eyes. “You found it in the lagoon?”

“Yeah.”

“If it weren’t gold, I don’t think it would look this nice.” Chris said, handing it back to Viktor. “You should take that to a jeweler or something, see if it’s real.”

“Did you see the image on it?” Viktor asked, slipping it into his bag.

“Yeah, they look like moons.”

“Yep.”

Chris waggled his eyebrows. “You know, Viktor, I think the moon might have something to do with all of this.”

Viktor was surprised into laughter. “Oh, you don’t say.” He watched as Chris carefully pulled one of the test tubes from the carrier and scooped some of the lagoon water into it. “I was doing more research into the island and the Tani legends about it. They talked about people who lived in the sea and came onto the island to do rituals or something, and there was gold mentioned…”

“I thought that was all just a myth, but.” Chris nodded at Viktor’s tail. “Mermaids.”

“Yeah, and some dude at the library freaked out at me when he saw one of the books I was reading. I think the book is about these sea people the Tani were talking about, and the cover was a photo of this lagoon.”

“How has no one really… I dunno?” Chris shrugged, wading further out into the water. “Studied this cove? I mean, it’s named and all, but? Why aren’t more people aware of it?”

“Magic?” Viktor suggested again.

“You said some dude at the library freaked out over that book?” Chris looked concerned. “So that’s someone that might know about this place, and maybe even about the magic stuff.”
Viktor tapped his chin. “The librarian that dragged him out of the building called him Dr. Kornbluth. He yelled a bunch of other names at me, but I don’t remember them.”

“Other names?” Chris made a face.

“Yeah, he accused me of sabotaging him for these other people? I dunno.” Viktor shrugged.

“Hm. When we get back to the mainland, we should look this dude up.”

“Walter Kornbluth,” Viktor said slowly, and yeah, that sounded right. “Not sure if it’s with a ‘c’ or a ‘k’ but I remember his first name is Walter.”

“With a name like that, though,” Chris said, smirking.

“Hey, my name basically translates to ‘Winner McWinerson’ so I can’t say much.”

Chris burst out into laughter and nearly dropped his test tube. “Okay, winner-boy, go get me some silt samples near the base of the rock?”

“I literally just dragged myself out of the water.”

“I know,” Chris deadpanned. “And I have no idea why you even bothered to.” He brandished two of the test tubes at Viktor. “Chop-chop, Fishman.”

Viktor stuck his tongue out at Chris as he pushed himself back into the shallows, leaving his things with Chris’s bag. “I’m not your pet dolphin, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Chris said in a sing-song voice. “Dolphins aren’t this mouthy.”

Viktor huffed and accepted the vials from Chris. “Silt in both of these?”

“Actually, no, we can probably get some scrapings of the rock itself…” Chris tapped his chin. He grabbed the rest of them and followed Viktor into the water.

They spent a good thirty minutes chipping at the rock and getting a plastic baggy full of samples, and then Chris had climbed up to the top of the rock to survey the lagoon from the new vantage point before cannonballing off and splashing Viktor in the face.

“So you want to spend the whole day out here?” Chris asked as he secured the filled vials in his bag. They’d gotten two samples of water and two samples of sand, one of each from in the lagoon and one of each from outside the lagoon - Viktor had been the one to collect those.

“I mean, Mila and Yuri and I already poked around last weekend, but I wouldn’t be opposed to having you take a look. Maybe you’ll spot something we didn’t.”

“Right, okay,” Chris agreed. “Dry off and we can go take a look around.”

“Sure wish I had Yuri’s powers,” Viktor grumbled, starting to haul himself up onto the beach. “Come to think of it, why didn’t we all three get the same set? That would make a lot of sense.”

Chris snorted. “Why don’t we ask the moon? Or the magic rock?” He shook the baggy for emphasis.

Viktor stuck his tongue out at the surfer as he carefully maneuvered his fins out of the water.

It took a few minutes to dry off, thanks to the late summer heat, and once he had his legs back Viktor joined Chris at the treeline. They set off into the brush, consulting their phones in order to figure out
where they were, where Viktor and the younger kids had already been, and where none of them had gone yet.

Islaluna wasn’t really all that large, but there was still quite a bit they hadn’t seen on the last trip. Viktor let Chris lead the way into the thicket of trees; according to his compass app, they were heading south and a little east. Viktor had teased Chris about his horrible sense of direction, but Chris had carefully estimated where he’d landed the Zodiac and marked it on his own map. It also didn’t hurt that the eastern shore was almost entirely a stretch of beach, with the eastern side of the island dominated by rocky cliffs and steep inclines. Worse came to worse, Viktor could definitely swim back to the mainland for assistance, but he didn’t really want to do that.

Too many questions, he thought as Chris started shouldering his way into the greenery, pulling a point-and-shoot camera from his bag.

“Hey, did you bring any food?” Viktor asked his stomach rumbled, reminding him that it had been several hours since he’d last eaten.

Chris made a face at him. “Should I have?”

“D… nevermind.” Viktor sighed and ducked to avoid getting whapped in the face by a leaf.

“Do you need to head back?”

“I’d rather stick around and watch your back, just in case the Sea Folk come back and chase you off the island for trespassing,” Viktor said, only half-joking. “Seriously, it’s okay.”

“I might have a protein bar.” Chris dug around in his bag and pulled out a Fiber One snack, tossing it to Viktor. “Dammit, Binktop. You gotta take care of yourself better.”

“I’m taking care of myself fine,” Viktor grumbled, unwrapping the snack and biting into it.

“The fact that you’re inhaling one of the grossest flavors of Fiber One is telling me otherwise,” Chris pointed out. “Maybe we should cut this trip short.”

“When is there going to be another chance for us both to come out here?” Viktor asked, his mouth still full from the protein bar.

“I’m willing to bet that there will be plenty.” Chris rolled his eyes. “You act like you can’t ever take a day off, and we both know that the tourist season is going to slow down in less than a month.”

Viktor closed his eyes and chewed, considering his response. “This’ll hold me over for a bit,” he finally said. “Let’s keep looking around for another hour or so, yeah?”

Chris narrowed his eyes at him, but nodded. “You start feeling lightheaded or nauseous, you tell me.”

“That bar’s flavor made me feel nauseated,” Viktor muttered.

“Told you.”

They both resumed climbing through the overgrown bushes, occasionally startling at the sounds of birds and particularly loud bugs in the canopy above them.

Viktor was starting to regret pushing on, the fiber bar surprisingly not sticking with him for that long, when Chris lost his footing and nearly tripped. Viktor caught him and nearly went down as well,
only barely finding stability when his foot slid into whatever Chris had tripped on.

“What the hell? Was that a rock?” Chris muttered, toeing the leaves aside with a frown. Then he blinked. “Uh.”

They both dropped to their knees as Chris uncovered a very large, very flat stone. The size wasn’t what was remarkable, even if it was impressive; it was the fact that the exposed part of it had something etched into it.

“Holy shit,” Viktor breathed, and they both began to dig it out, working to brush off the dirt and debris.

“It looks like a pitchfork,” Chris said, tracing the etching.

“Trident,” Viktor corrected him. “Like Poseidon had.” He dug his fingers around the sides of the rock, searching for the bottom, and was surprised when it continued down. “This is huge.”

“I think it was buried on purpose.” Chris glanced over his shoulder at the way they’d come, then stood up and peered in the direction they’d been heading. “What that purpose was, I have no clue.”

“Well, I was thinking we take it with us, but that’s not looking likely.”

Chris nodded in agreement and instead took several photos, circling the stone and documenting the area. “Let’s see if there are more.”

They didn’t find any more of the stones as they picked their way through the trees, occasionally detouring off the straight line they were trying to follow when something caught their eye. Those things ended up being fairly mundane, but their earlier find had kind of heightened their awareness of their surroundings. Viktor caught Chris studying the trees with an intense focus, even if he couldn’t figure out why.

Eventually they burst through the other side of the trees and ended up on the beach, near the one end of the island. They hadn’t found any other stones, but Viktor still had the gold medallion in his waterproof pouch and Chris had the photographic proof of the trident stone.

“You know,” Viktor remarked as they started heading north to where Chris had parked the Zodiac. “People have tried to develop this island.”

“Yeah, but still. That stone looked like it came from here,” Chris said, flicking through the photos on the camera. “I bet you it would match the rocks from the cliffs.”

“I wouldn’t bet against you,” Viktor conceded. “But still. The Spaniards and the later American settlers could have left that there, easily. I mean, it’s not like tridents are exclusive to any one culture.”

“True.” Chris made a face and fanned himself. “This is like a mystery, or a treasure hunt.”

“Hm.”

They walked on until the orange Zodiac came into view, and once they reached it Chris loaded his bag with their samples and findings into it. “Well, now we know what to look for,” he said. “C’mon, let’s head back to the Bay. I’m starving now.”

Viktor nodded. “You need any help? I’ve got about ten seconds before I flop over and become useless.”
“Nah, this baby’s pretty light when I don’t have a bunch of whiny Russians in it,” Chris winked at him and started to push the boat into the water, wading in until it was deep enough that he could jump in and rev the engine. He waved, and Viktor waved back before securing his belongings and making sure the pouch was sealed. Then, he too waded into the surf.

This time, Chris parked at the marina and hauled Viktor under the pier to dry off. “Less of a walk to civilization,” he said as he tossed Viktor a towel to use. “Plus, there are cute seals that stop by on occasion.”

“Aw,” Viktor laughed, towel ing off his hair. “Hey, what are the differences between seals and sea lions?”

“Uh, basically? Sea lions are loud,” Chris answered, grinning. “And they have little ear flap thingies. Seals are rounder and more roly-poly, and the ones that live here are quieter. Those are the harbor seals, they’re really cute and they only make noise underwater.”

“Hm. Interesting.”

Viktor transformed back again after some more toweling and just letting the heat bake the moisture off him. Chris rolled up the towel and then they ducked out from under the pier, heading up the sandy embankment and stepping onto the boardwalk.

“Do you want to head home for food, or are you willing to buy me lunch?” Chris asked, flipping down his sunglasses.

“I think I’d better eat at home,” Viktor said, digging in his pouch for his wallet with his transit authority pass. “Makkachin will need to go out again soon.”

“Ah, well, that’s a good reason to ditch me,” Chris laughed. “Want me to email you the pics?”

“Definitely. I’ll let you know if I find anything interesting in that book.”

“Please do.” Chris waved and headed north along the boardwalk, in the direction of his apartment, with his bag swinging from his shoulder. Viktor walked east, taking advantage of the shops’ awnings to hide from the punishing rays of the sun. The tourists were definitely thinning out, even if they wouldn’t go away completely even as the school year started up. That was the thing about living in a beachside town; the tourists never truly left.

Viktor found a bus stop for the route that would let him off fairly close to his building and settled on the bench to rest. His phone buzzed in the pouch, and he pulled it out to check it.
I need a favor

yes?

........

don't be like that

I need a chaperone

to what

last bash

what

bonfire on the beach tonight

please??

why do you need a chaperone?

you know how uncle erik gets

true

will I have to escort you home?

nah I'll have Sara and the other girls with me

just wanted to make uncle erik feel better
Mila: VITYA
Viktor: yes?
Mila: I need a favor
Viktor: ……
Mila: don’t be like that
Mila: I need a chaperone
Viktor: to what
Mila: last bash
Viktor: what
Mila: bonfire on the beach tonight
Mila: [praying hands emoji]
Mila: please??
Viktor: why do you need a chaperone?
Mila: you know how uncle erik gets

Viktor: true

Viktor: will I have to escort you home?

Mila: nah I’ll have Sara and the other girls with me

Mila: just wanted to make uncle erik feel better

Viktor: fine

Mila: THANK YOU SO MUCH

Mila: YOU’RE THE BEST BINKTOP

Viktor: damn right

Mila: [heart emojis]

Mila: meet me at the boardwalk at 8?

Viktor: sure

The bus arrived at quarter-to, and Viktor was unlocking his door half an hour later.

“Makkachin, love of my life!” he sang out as he heard the sound of his dog jumping down off his bed and running out to meet him. “Let’s go outside for a bit!”

Makkachin was certainly game for this, and once she was leashed and Viktor had grabbed a leftover sandwich from earlier in the week along with his collection of pick-up bags, they took a nice leisurely walk around the neighborhood, visiting the little dog park a few blocks north. He let Makkachin off the leash once they were inside the gate and watched her tear off to chase some hapless squirrels at the base of one of the massive oak trees near the other side of the park.

They stayed at the dog park for about half an hour; Viktor ate his sandwich as Makkachin did her business, sniffed everything, and chased other animals with questionable survival instincts. Viktor made sure to pick up after her - there were other owners around and not all of them cleaned up after their dogs, which was not very neighborly - before whistling for Makka and clipping the leash back on her collar.

Once he was home again and Makka had been fed, he collapsed onto his couch with The Lost City, cracking the book open to the foreword. He’d always had trouble concentrating on reading with background noise like music, so the apartment was almost completely silent save for the noises in the kitchen as Makka ate.

Makkachin eventually jumped up onto the couch with him and crawled onto his lap, forcing him to lay back and adjust so he could keep trying to read, but focusing was starting to become difficult as his dog’s warm weight settled on his chest and she laid her head down with a sigh.

Viktor cooed at her and stroked down her nose before going back to the book, but his eyes kept sweeping over the same lines over and over again as his mind started to fizzle with exhaustion. I have such little stamina, he thought blearily as he struggled to keep his eyes open.
It was a useless endeavor, and Viktor dozed off in less than ten minutes.

He woke up after seven when Makkachin decided to get up and step on his crotch in her effort to relocate to her doggy bed, and checked his phone to see several texts from Mila reminding him of his agreement to chaperone her. Chris had also emailed the photos from Islaluna, which Viktor decided to open on his laptop so he could study them in more detail later on.

He’d already discovered that the wet wipes his mother liked to use to wash her face on lazy skincare days were… problematic, to say the least. As in, he had to be quick and scrub his face so he could dry off before he grew a tail and flopped over. Because of course the brand of wipes he bought were absurdly moist and in some cases outright soaking wet with actual water.

So, he ended up wiping off the day’s sweat and grime while seated on the closed toilet, and he took his time because he needed it, and he didn’t bother freaking out when the tail reappeared. He just sighed and scrubbed behind his ears, resolving to bathe in the morning.

The sun was only just setting when Viktor headed out to meet Mila at the boardwalk entrance, which also served as one of the main entry points to the beach. He’d changed his clothes and reapplied aloe to his face, which he swore was more sunburnt than before, and had charged up his phone enough to last the night.

Mila was with her friends, all of whom were in college at Anderson. Viktor had worked with a few of them at the Ariel, and they all looked surprised to see him there.

“Viktor! What are you doing out on a Friday night?” Amy demanded, grinning good-naturedly.

“Yeah, I’d’ve thought you’d be locked in the conservatory doing sad jazz music,” Cariba agreed, wagging her eyebrows.

Viktor shot Mila a look. “Miloshka here needs a chaperone and I’m practically a boring grown-up, as you all know,” he said, and Mila shrugged at him.

“Aw, Viktor!” Phoebe reassured him, patting his arm. “You’re not boring, all we need to do is get you a date.”

“Please don’t get me a date,” Viktor said immediately.

“He’s sworn off dating indefinitely,” Mila added.

“What?” Cariba snorted. “Well, now that you’ve done that you’re going to meet the love of your life tonight. You know that’s how it works, right?”

On her other side, Phoebe’s boyfriend Angus snorted. Cariba elbowed him in the diaphragm, making him wheeze.

“Are we waiting for anyone else?” Viktor not-so-subtly tried to change the subject.

“Ivy and Lucy are probably already here,” Claire said, checking her phone. “So, nope. Let’s go.”

“This is going to be low-key,” Sara added, linking arms with Cariba and Amy. “But I can’t promise there won’t be beer, there’s always beer snuck in.”

“I wouldn’t expect any different,” Viktor admitted, rolling his eyes. “Miloshka--”
“No, I know,” Mila interrupted. “Uncle Erik will blow a gasket if I go home smelling like booze.”

The students had already gotten the bonfire going, and Viktor certainly wasn’t the only faculty member present, but most of the faculty was from Anderson and he didn’t interact with them very often. Plus, he was quite a bit younger than the people he noticed lurking at the fringes of the gathering. He resigned himself to awkwardly hovering vaguely near the kids, some of whom were already dancing to music that was being blasted through a Bluetooth speaker. A bit closer to the boardwalk, a party DJ was still getting set up in his pop-up booth. Students were mostly milling around, sipping various drinks from red Solo cups and keeping up a mid-level buzz of noise that was barely able to edge out the sound of the surf.

Mila caught his eye and nodded at the sea, and he made a face at her. She laughed at him and patted his arm. “Don’t worry,” she shouted in Russian. “I'll stay away.”

“Damn straight,” he said.

“Vitya, relax! You don’t actually have to chaperone me much, it’s not like I’m going to get into trouble.” Mila winked at him before Sara tugged her to the dancing crowd by the bonfire. Viktor could hear the faint strains of Safe and Sound over the party sounds, and found himself leaning against the flimsy drink table as volunteer parents handed out underage-safe punch that would probably end up spiked as soon as the cups were out of sight. He wondered if the parents all kind of figured that would be the case as he accepted a cup offered to him by one of the moms he actually knew.

The DJ finished setting up and hollered his greeting into the microphone, prompting cheers from the kids and a few of the parents. He started his set with Icona Pop, always a good choice in Viktor’s book, and soon there was a veritable mosh pit on the beach.

I DON’T CARE!! I love it! I DON’T CARE!!

Viktor had to laugh; these kids were all at least seventeen and used to hearing swear words, yet the DJ was using the clean track. Then he glanced at the moms at the drink table and figured it was probably a good thing.

Cariba danced past, tugging along a tall guy with dark hair that Viktor vaguely recognized. He’d lost track of Mila, but he wasn’t worried; despite Mila’s wild party-girl tendencies, she knew how to take care of herself.

The DJ put on a Miley Cyrus song, and Viktor drifted away from the drink table to wander around the outskirts of the party. He’d never really understood the whole clubbing thing; being part of a sweaty, undulating throng of people who barely had room to dance didn’t sound like his idea of fun. Then again, there were very few people he’d actually be willing to party with, and most of them were related to him.

Viktor passed his time playing on his phone and avoiding college students who weren’t looking where they were going. The DJ cycled through a few Top 40 hits before putting on Bohemian Rhapsody, which got almost everyone screaming along with the lyrics. Viktor wouldn’t have pegged that song as a party jam, but it was amusing to see elaborately choreographed flash mob-esque dances to the Queen standard. The DJ put on a long mashup so he could take a quick break while someone took over for him, and Viktor found himself next to the steps to the Boardwalk.

Someone stumbled out of the dancing crowd towards him, and Viktor nearly spilled his drink catching them. He blinked as one of the waiters from the cafe grinned up at him.
“Heyyyy, you’re here!”

Viktor scrounged his memory for the guy’s name. “Uh. Peach--?”

“Phichit! Hey! Man, you’re here!” The waiter grabbed his wrist, trying to tug him back towards the bonfire. “Oh, wow, this is awesome! You never come to these things!”

“I’m here as a babysitter,” Viktor admitted, tugging back.

“Doesn’t matter!” Phichit declared. “You’re here~!”

The slight unsteadiness to his gait and the loose way his upper body was rolling told Viktor that he’d indulged in a little spiked punch.

“Why is it good that I’m here?” he asked, and Phichit giggled.

“Because do you know,” the younger man jabbed a finger at Viktor’s nose. “Do you know, honestly, how hard it is to randomly run into people in a town like this? Too fuckin’ hard, and I’ve been waiting for this moment.”

Viktor blinked again. “Okay.”

“Yuuri’s here too!” Phichit told him, tugging on him again. “It was so hard getting him out here.”

“Is he all right?” Viktor flashed back to the last time he’d seen the other waiter.

“He’s goooooooooood,” Phichit sang out. “Super good, better if you dance with him!”

“Uh--”

But Phichit was a dancer, and drunk he may have been, he still had a bit of heft when he put his mind to it. Viktor actually did drop his drink as he was dragged into the crowd.

“Yuuri!” Phichit called out, and then swung Viktor around so he could literally throw Viktor at someone. And, of course, that someone was the nervous waiter from the cafe.

“Oof!” Viktor only barely caught himself, and grabbed onto Yuuri to steady himself. “I’m so sorry,” he said immediately.

Yuuri was staring up at him with the widest eyes Viktor had ever seen. His glasses were gone, and his hair was pushed back off his forehead. Viktor almost hadn’t recognized him.

“Oh,” Yuuri said softly. His hands tightened on Viktor’s arms. “Oh, you’re here.”

“Yeah, that seems to be a big deal,” Viktor agreed. He patted Yuuri’s elbow. “You all right?”

“Mm,” Yuuri nodded, and then the DJ started up his second set and the opening notes to Cut To The Feeling came on. The younger man’s face split into the most dazzling smile Viktor had ever seen and he threw his arms around Viktor’s neck.

“I love this song,” he cheered, swaying.

Viktor swallowed as Yuuri began to dance. “I’m really not good at this,” he tried to say, and Yuuri laughed.

“Silly, anyone can dance!” He relinquished Viktor’s upper body and took him by the hand. “C’mon,
c’mon--”

Viktor was again pulled, this time to the fringe of the crowd, and Yuuri smiled as he pulled Viktor in close and put his hands on Viktor’s waist. “Loosen up,” he said in Viktor’s ear, making him shiver. “This isn’t a concert.”

“I--”

“Relax,” Yuuri urged him, undulating like the dancer he was. “Feel the music, can’t you?”

Carly Rae’s vocals made Viktor’s blood thrum, made his head spin. He started to move, a little self-consciously at first, but he couldn’t listen to Carly Rae without feeling good.

“That’s it!” Yuuri cheered, and there was that smile again. “See? You can dance!”

“Yeah, badly,” Viktor quipped, but Yuuri shook his head.

“No one is bad at dancing,” he insisted. Viktor could smell the slightest tang of alcohol on his breath, but the way he moved was liquid, like the dance of the sea beyond the bonfire and the press of bodies.

“I think it’s all you,” Viktor said without thinking, and then he realized that was it. That was it.

Yuuri beamed at him. “I’m glad you came,” he said softly.

Viktor breathed in sharply in surprise, not unpleasantly so but… oh. He felt funny, like something was humming in his chest.

“Would you be happy if I was around more?” he found himself asking, and where were these words coming from?

“You’re always around,” Yuuri answered, as the song changed in the background.

Oh don’t you dare look back, just keep your eyes on me--

Viktor blinked. “I guess you’re right.”

Yuuri shook his head and pulled him back into dancing crowd, and Viktor lost himself in the frenzy.
Mila (56m ago) where'd you go?

Mila (22m ago) I see you having fun there

Mila (14m ago) hey we're heading out soon

Mila (3m ago) we're heading out

Chapter End Notes

D'AWWWWWW.

I told you it was happening. [tosses confetti]

ART HAWKING TIME!!

I commissioned dyeingdoll for TWO!! PIECES!! OF ART!! AND SHE DID SO GOOD.

Viktor and his parents after a concert!

Viktor and his parents with Makka in the kitchen!
ALSO THIS. I MIGHT HAVE LAUGHED A LOT.

(Hey. Hey. You should totally commission Dasha for art :D)

More fun stuff! I'm accepting prompts over on my tumblr for little drabbles in this AU! I've written a ton about Viktor's extended family, for one thing!

I also do have a tag on my tumblr for all my merman AU needs, and I sometimes post updates! Especially when people tag me in writing memes... hah!

Speaking of my tumblr, feel free to send me a message or an ask! You can also find me on Twitter! Or just leave me a comment and tell me what you think of what's going on, or what is going to happen next! I love talking with you guys!

NEXT TIME ON SALTWATER MELODIES: FULL MOON. See you then!
learn a bit, live a bit, let it all sink in a bit

Chapter Summary

Mila's school year starts up, she decides to get a job, and she goes swing dancing. (Plus, lots of lovestruck teens and young adults. And shenanigans.)

Chapter Notes

WHAT UP I'M BACK WITH A DOUBLE UPDATE!

Yes, this chapter is one of two new ones! As in THERE WAS SO MUCH I WAS TRYING TO CRAM INTO ONE THAT I DECIDED TO SPLIT IT IN TWO. So! Double rainbow, whoooooo!

Everyone please go give Gab some love for betaing two chapters in less than a week, what a miracle-worker!

This chapter's title comes from Box of Secrets by Zarif. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Back-to-school season was always rough in Mila’s experience. It was doubly so this year, because college was a completely different beast from high school. Luckily, Ivy and Lucy were signed up for quite a few of the same core classes as Mila, and Amy was in her humanities group, so she wasn’t alone. Plus, Sara and the others had offered all of their advice - Claire had literally made notes for the freshmen, and Cariba had quietly misplaced those notes while reassuring the younger girls that they’d be fine.

Still, Mila couldn’t help but be hyper-aware of her surroundings, even after a week of getting used to the whole magic-mermaid-thing. She was definitely making her friends look at her funny, in any case, since she’d started crossing the hallway whenever she came upon a drinking fountain or another source of water. Then there was the fact that water balloon fights and squirt guns were thick on the ground at Anderson. Mila wasn’t alone in trying to avoid those, and joined the others in hiding in the cafeteria as Cariba’s off-again-on-again boyfriend was bombarded by his friends while crossing the courtyard.

Still, Syllabus Week was definitely different in college - especially since it wasn’t really an entire week of nothing but syllabi review. In fact, that first day’s classes had introduced the first of the semester’s projects, her first research essay, and the first Classic Lit novel (Moll Flanders, which was already turning out to be a pretty entertaining read.)

Otabek and Leo had ended up in her biology class, and Lucy was in her Lit class. Ivy and Amy weren’t in any of her classes, and she was still in a lot of basic 101 subjects for the current semester so she also didn’t get to see any of her other friends. That being said, cell phones were a thing.

It was still Monday; Mila was camped out on Chihoko’s upper level with her laptop and her PDF of
Moll Flanders when the text came through.

Orchesis tryouts had been the previous Wednesday, and the dance captain had been deliberating over the roster ever since. Sara and Claire were already on the team, and one of them was going to text Mila as soon as the captain made her selections.

She apparently had.

[WhatsApp conversation]

Claire: AWESOME NEWS

Claire: there was no doubt but YOU ARE ON THE ROSTER

Claire: you should be getting a text from Jen within the hour btw so it’s official :)

Claire: HOLY SHIT OMG IM GONNA GO SCREAM

first practice Friday at six, be there or else I’m dragging you in

Claire: first practice Friday at six, be there or else I’m dragging you in

Claire: AWESOME NEWS

Claire: there was no doubt but YOU ARE ON THE ROSTER

Claire: you should be getting a text from Jen within the hour btw so it’s official :)

Claire: first practice Friday at six, be there or else I’m dragging you in
Mila: HOLY SHIT

Mila: OMG

Mila: I'm gonna go scream

Claire: first practice Friday at six, be there or else I'm dragging you in

Mila was vibrating as she put her phone down on the table before pumping a fist into the air. “Yes!”

“You got the text, huh?” Phichit asked as he sidled past with a tray full of empty and used glasses. He winked. “Congrats in order?”

“Hell yeah!” Mila cheered. “That didn’t take long at all!”

“Well, there were only, like, four spots on the roster.”

Mila suddenly remembered that Phichit had been trying out as well. “What about you?”

“Yuuri told me this morning,” Phichit said, and high-fived her.

“Sweet! Congrats!” Mila clapped as Phichit took a bow. “That means we’re on two rosters together; people are going to get suspicious.”

“Or we’re just really awesome.”

“Or that.”

Phichit hefted his tray a little. “First rehearsal is on Friday, you ready?”

“I was born ready,” Mila said.

“Awesome.” Phichit grinned at her. “Hey, there’s a group chat for the Orchesis team, I think we need WhatsApp for it? Anyway, I can always bug Yuuri to add us, sound good?”

“Cool!”

Phichit saluted her before descending the spiral staircase with his tray carefully balanced in front of him as Mila excitedly updated her Instagram story with the news and texted her aunt and uncle about it. She got immediate congratulations from her guardians, and a handful of responses to her Insta post.

A shadow fell over her table, and she looked up as Viktor slid into the seat opposite her. “Whoa, did someone run you over with a Mack truck?” she demanded as Viktor let his head fall to the table with a thunk.

“Mila,” he whined. “I think I’m sick.”

“You look sick.”

Viktor sighed and his shoulders slumped as Mila took the chance to slowly scoot away from him. “I feel weird,” he mumbled. “Like, feverish. I haven’t had a fever in, like, six years.”

“Oh no, poor you,” Mila said, gingerly patting his elbow. “Are you going to have to take a sick day
“so early in the school year?”

“I’m not,” Viktor grumbled. “Nope. Haven’t taken a sick day ever. Not starting now.”

“If you’re contagious you shouldn’t be out and about.” Mila looked around and caught sight of Yuuri delivering a tray of drinks to a group of Hanon students still wearing their uniforms. “Hey, Yuuri!” she called, waving.

Yuuri glanced at her, and his eyes flicked to Viktor before his entire face went red. He finished with his tray and called to his little dog before shuffling over to her table. He cleared his throat and cautiously said, “Hi, what can I do for you?”

Viktor raised his head, and his eyes widened. “Oh. Hi, Yuuri.”

Yuuri flushed even harder, and his dog barked. “H-hi.”

“Viktor needs a health smoothie,” Mila said, poking Viktor’s forearm. “Maybe pour a year’s worth of multivitamins in it? He’s coming down with something.”

Yuuri frowned. “Uh, I think tea would probably work better.”

“What kind of teas do you have?” Mila asked, nudging Viktor under the table. He was staring at Yuuri so hard, it was getting a little creepy.

“U-uh, we have a-a lot of the common ones,” Yuuri fished around in his pocket, shuddering a little so his glasses fell down on his nose a bit. “A few Japanese ones. There’s a Turkish dessert tea that’s mostly sugar, so that wouldn’t be good for illness.”

“What would you suggest?” Viktor asked, leaning in. His voice was pitched low in a way that Mila had never heard before.

She blinked. Oh. This is interesting…

“Green tea is g-good,” Yuuri said, practically hiding behind his notepad. “I c-can add fruit flavoring?”

“How do you drink it?” Viktor prodded their waiter, seemingly oblivious to how nervous he was making Yuuri.

“Plain?”

“I’ll try that!” Viktor decided, smiling brightly. “I feel better already.”

Yuuri squeaked and nodded, scribbling the drink order down on his notepad.

“Are you okay?” Viktor asked, his forehead creasing in concern. “You seem a little tense.”

Mila put her chin in her hand and watched in growing amusement. Not so oblivious, then.

“I’m fine,” Yuuri hurriedly said, sticking his tray under his arm. “I’ll go get that tea for you.” He scurried away, his dog running after him.

Viktor watched him go, and was he wistfully sighing? What in the world was going on here? Mila stared at him as he turned back to the table, and he startled a little at the expression on her face. “What?” he demanded self-consciously.
“Viktor,” Mila said slowly. “What was that?”

“I-I don’t know?” Viktor gave her a weird look. “What are you talking about?”

“That whole lovelorn shtick,” Mila poked his chest. “Were you flirting?”

“No,” Viktor protested, blushing. “I-I don’t think-- no, I wasn’t!”

Mila stared at him, incredulous. “Viktor, that sure looked like flirting to me.”

“I don’t flirt, you know that,” Viktor grumbled.

“You perked up as soon as Yuuri came over.”

Viktor opened his mouth to argue, but fell silent. He tried again, and Mila had to laugh at how confounded he looked.

“You looked like you were having fun on Friday night,” she said. “Phoebe said you were dancing with Yuuri all night long.”

“It was fun,” Viktor answered softly. “A lot of fun.”

“You don’t even like parties,” Mila added. “Did you drink?”

“Hm? Only a little.” Viktor played with a sugar packet that had fallen out of the caddy on their table. “Not a lot. Yuuri had a lot more than I did.”

“He was wild,” Mila said, eyeing the staircase that Yuuri had fled down. “Who knew that beneath such a nerdy exterior there was a buck-wild party animal waiting to bust loose?”

“That’s one way to put it,” Viktor said, his eyes going day-dreamy-faraway like Mila had only ever seen in chick-flicks and romcoms. “He got me to dance, Mila.”

“I saw.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to dance with anyone else ever again,” Viktor went on, seemingly unaware of what he was saying. Then Mila watched as his brain literally caught onto what his mouth was doing and his eyes widened. “What the fuck.”

Mila had seen enough movies to know what she was dealing with. “Viktor, are you crushing on him?”

“I-I don’t know?” Viktor whispered, looking terrified. “How do you know? How do you know if you’re crushing on a person?”

Mila considered it. “Uh, you keep thinking about that person?” She thought back to the previous dates she’d had in high school, and the people she’d been interested throughout the years. “You feel happier when they’re around, sometimes your mouth runs away from you and you start babbling? You try to make them laugh a lot, you want to learn about them?” She tapped her chin and raised her eyebrows. “Viktor, would you go on a date with Yuuri?”

“Yes,” Viktor said immediately, and then looked shocked at himself.

“Would you go on a second date with him?”

“I-- maybe?”
Mila’s eyebrows both went up. “That wasn’t a hard no.”

“Mila, I have literally never felt this way before, HELP ME,” Viktor deadpanned as Phichit popped up next to their table and set a steaming cup of tea in front of him. “Oh,” he said, blinking up at Phichit. “Thanks.”

“Where’d Yuuri go?” Mila asked, and Viktor kicked her under the table. She kicked him back.


“No reason,” Mila said as Viktor kicked her again. “He’s on the Orchesis roster, right?”

“So’re we,” Phichit raised an eyebrow.

“Right, but Yuuri’s on the roster,” Mila pressed. “So that means he’ll be busy on Friday too, right?”

“Hah, yeah. Yuuko and Seung Gil have to pick up our shifts, but we figured that’d be the case. Minako’s pretty cool about scheduling around our stuff.” Phichit twirled his tray.

“Is he busy on Saturday?” Mila asked, and Viktor glared daggers at her.

Phichit eyed her, nonplussed. “Mila, I can tell you with absolute certainty that you are not his type.”

Mila turned to Viktor, her eyebrows as high up as she could get them.

Viktor looked like a deer in headlights, but he visibly swallowed down what she assumed were his soft and squishy feelings. “But is he busy on Saturday?”

Phichit’s head snapped to the right so hard that Mila got secondhand whiplash. His expression morphed from shock to delight. “He has plans, but I can probably get that changed.”

“Oh, god, I don’t want to screw up his plans—” Viktor said immediately. “What kind of an asshole would that make me?”

“Oh my god, you’re considerate too.” Phichit fluttered his eyelashes. “Oh my god. Okay. Tell you what, you’re always at the conservatory. Right?”

Viktor nodded.

“Tomorrow afternoon, he’s going there after classes to work with an instrumental student. Actually, he’s been spending a lot of time in the practice rooms. I bet if you played your cards right, you could stumble across him goofing around on piano.” Phichit’s eyes sparkled, and Mila had to admire the level of scheming that he was just plucking out of thin air right there.

Viktor blinked. “That’s… tempting, but isn’t it a little creepy?”

“Oh my god,” Mila groaned, burying her face in her hands. “We’re giving you advice, you can take it or leave it!”

“What she said,” Phichit agreed, pointing his pen at Mila. “Anyway, you figure out what you’re gonna do, I’ll just leave you to it.” He drifted away to another table, leaving Viktor and Mila to what ended up being a staring contest.

Viktor broke first, letting his head drop onto the table again. “Mila. I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“Disaster gay,” Mila agreed.
“Thanks,” Viktor muttered.

Mila snorted. “Hey, you know where he’s definitely going to be tomorrow. You don’t have to be creepy, just talk to him. Or better yet, *serenade him.*”

Viktor’s head shot back up, and his eyes were as round as they could possibly be. “Oh my god. *You’re right.* He’s a musician. *He’s like me.*”

Mila fought down giggles as Viktor came back to himself and slid right back into terror. “This is very amusing and all, but I’ve got reading to do,” she said.

“Mila, is this normal?” Viktor asked, and there was a note of genuine confusion and fear in his voice.

*Oh crap. I am not equipped for this.* Mila pushed her laptop aside and leaned forward. “Vitya. There *is* no normal. If it’s scary or painful, stop. Otherwise, have fun.”

Viktor blinked. “How old are you again?”

“Too old for this crap,” Mila grumbled half-heartedly. She took a sip of her iced tea and looked up at Viktor again. “You gonna be okay?”

“Probably,” Viktor admitted. “I… this is just… new, I guess?”

“Really?” Mila raised her eyebrows again. “I’m surprised, you’ve really never felt this way for anyone else you’ve dated?”

“I mean, sort of kind of?” Viktor hedged, playing with his teacup. “I… I never felt like… *focused* on anyone like this. Does that make sense?”

“Hm, it does.” Mila tapped her chin. “Vitya, maybe you should look up the gray-ace spectrum.”

“The what?”

“It’s a scale of asexuality, sometimes it’s conditional?” Mila shrugged. “Sexuality is weird, man. Google it and read, see if any of it makes sense to you.”

Viktor sighed. “You say you’re too old for this, but I’m positively *ancient* compared to you.”

“No shame in being a late bloomer,” Mila said. “As long as you’re happy in the end.”

Viktor groaned, but sipped at his tea in relative silence as Mila went back to reading. After a while, he finished off his drink and took his leave after sticking a couple bills under the teacup.

It was much later on when Yuuri stopped by again with his dog, his eyes immediately darting to Viktor’s vacated seat. “Uh--”

“He appreciated the tea,” Mila reassured him, smiling. “Hey, thanks for getting him to have fun on Friday. He really needed it.”

Yuuri blushed so hard that Mila was worried he might fall over. “I-- ah, I--”

Mila frowned. “Yuuri?”

“I… don’t remember a lot of Friday night?” Yuuri admitted in a small voice. “I was *really* drunk.”

“Yeah,” Yuuri said, eyes locked on his sneakers. “So.”

“Well, Phoebe and Angus were there pretty late and they said you and Viktor danced your hearts out.”

Yuuri’s shoulders slumped. “Oh god.”

“What? You were just having a good time, nothing to be ashamed of.” Mila patted his arm.

“I’m a disaster drunk,” Yuuri said, burying his face in his hands. His little dog pawed at his pant leg, whining softly. “And Phichit got me to pregame but that never goes well—”

“Do you want to sit down?” Mila asked, eyeing the way Yuuri’s knees threatened to buckle.

“No, no, I’m on the clock. I just… god. I made an ass of myself in front of Viktor Nikiforov.” Yuuri scooped up his dog and fled, leaving Mila blinking in his wake.

Eventually, Phichit came back to clean the nearby tables and Mila caught him so she could pay for both Viktor’s and her drink. “I think I upset Yuuri.”

Phichit frowned. “How?”

“I told him Viktor had a great time with him on Friday.”

Phichit’s expression didn’t change. “So?”

“He told me he didn’t remember it.” Mila bit her lip. “I feel bad.”

“Ah, crap.” Phichit pinched the bridge of his nose. “He didn’t believe me at first when I told him he danced with Viktor Nikiforov. Oh boy.”

“Is he gonna have a panic attack like before?” Mila asked, suddenly very worried.

“Maybe. Did he have Vicchan with him?”

“The poodle? Yeah.”

Phichit sighed in relief. “He’ll be okay as long as he has Vicchan. Crap. Okay. We’ll roll with this. Thanks,” he added, smiling. “I mean it. Do you need anything else from the coffee bar?”

Mila shook her head. “I really am sorry for upsetting him. Tell him that?”

“Sure thing. See you tomorrow!” Phichit winked at her and bustled away.

Mila only stuck around a little bit longer before packing up and heading home for the evening - she’d signed up for an 8 A.M. class in the morning and she was already regretting it. She waved goodbye to Phichit and the other guy behind the coffee bar - she hadn’t seen Yuuri since he’d run off - and caught the bus home.

“There’s our reigning queen of the dance!” Uncle Erik called from the kitchen as Mila let herself into the townhome, dropping her book bag on the stairs. There was a pleasant smell of food in the air, and Mila’s stomach was growling since she’d only had her drink at Chihoko’s, and hadn’t eaten
since lunch.

“And official collegiate,” Auntie added. “Congratulations, milaya moya!” Over in the kitchen, Uncle Erik began to sing ‘her song’ over the sound of something sizzling in the frying pan.

Mila rolled her eyes, but couldn’t stop the grin stealing over her face as she accepted the hug from her aunt. “I’m pretty excited,” she said. “First practice on Friday after school, at six.”

“Ah, perfect!” Auntie clapped her hands together. “Do you have a class on Saturday?”

“In the afternoon.”

“Why would you get a class on Saturday?” Tammy demanded from the kitchen table. She had worksheets spread all over the surface, and Auntie sighed.

“Tammy, clean up your homework, please?”

Tammy grumbled and started gathering up her papers, sticking them in her textbook so she could move it all off the table.

“I got a class on Saturday because that’s the only day it was offered that didn’t clash with my other classes,” Mila said, scooping up the pencils Tammy had left behind. “And it’s a required class, so I’m pretty sure I won’t be the only one taking it.”

“Mila, Tammy, help set the table?” Auntie handed Mila a pile of plates.

Tammy made another frustrated noise. “I’ve been doing homework, why do I have to help set the table?”

“Hey, I did homework too,” Mila said, rolling her eyes. “Tammy, look, I’m helping.”

Her cousin shot her a dirty look. “Yeah, right, like you’d do homework instead of going out partying.”

“Hey,” Mila protested as she set the plates around the table. “I only partied those two times, and just because the summer was ending.”

“Mila’s due her party quota,” Uncle Erik agreed. “This year’s already better than the Infamous 2015, you know.”

Mila winced. “Yeah. Mm.” She played with the last plate she’d set out.

“I said you’re doing better,” Uncle Erik said. He snapped the dish towel in Tammy’s direction. “Tamara. Silverware. Now.”

“Mila gets dishwashing duty!” Tammy shouted, smacking the table with her palm like that made it official.

The bottom of Mila’s stomach dropped out, but she kept her expression neutral. “Fine,” she agreed. “We do have a dishwasher, Tam.”

Tammy stuck her tongue out at Mila as she shuffled past to grab the forks and knives from the drawer.

Dinner that night was stir-fry with all the frozen vegetables that Uncle Erik had unearthed from the freezer over the weekend, and Auntie kept the conversation light and lively by updating them all on
her various pet projects coming up. Mila talked about her first day of classes and the stuff she and her friends had seen posters in the halls for, stuff she was interested in.

“Don’t stretch yourself too thin,” Uncle Erik said, pointing his fork in Mila’s direction. “You’re on two dance teams, and one of them is competitive. I want you sleeping and taking care of yourself.”

“Of course,” Mila agreed. “I wasn’t thinking of doing anything crazy except…” she trailed off, and her aunt and uncle both looked up at her in unison.

“Oooooh,” Tammy said, and Auntie shushed her.

“Well, I was thinking of getting a part-time job,” Mila hedged. “Just something for the weekends, fifteen hours a week at the most. I’d like a little bit more spending money, is all.”

“We give you an allowance,” Uncle Erik said, frowning.

“And I appreciate it,” Mila said, immediately. “But… I’m going to be eighteen years old. I need to learn how to fill out W-2’s and stuff.”

“How do you even know what a W-2 is?” Uncle Erik demanded.

Mila snorted. “Uh, my high school economics teacher taught me how to do my taxes?”

“And that’s why we pay high property taxes,” Auntie said in satisfaction. “Good schooling.”

“When was this?” Uncle Erik asked, still frowning.

“That’s not important,” Mila said, insistent. “I’m just saying, maybe I get a job at the college or somewhere nearby, just a little something for a little walking-around money.”

“Well,” Auntie said thoughtfully. “I mean, we can’t stop you. And I personally gotta say, I’m impressed with your initiative.” She traced the rim of her glass and gave Uncle Erik a Look. “I’d offer you a job in my office, but it’s a long drive.”

“I don’t know if I want to start in an office,” Mila admitted. “Maybe one of the eateries on the boardwalk?”

“You could get tips,” Auntie said.

“A ripoff,” Uncle Erik said sotto voce, and Auntie kicked him under the table. “What? It’s ridiculous!”

“Not at the table,” Auntie said. She aimed a look at her daughter, eyebrows raised. “Well, Tammy? What do you think about getting a part-time job?”

“I’m not even a teenager!” Tammy squawked. “Isn’t that against the law?”

“But it would be good for your work ethic,” Uncle Erik agreed.

Tammy shot Mila a poisonous look, and Mila smothered a giggle in her hand.

“I don’t wanna work,” Tammy whined, shoving her plate away from her and upsetting her own glass.

Mila reacted without thinking, making a brushing-off gesture as the water spilled out onto the table. The water immediately responded, and splashed all over Tammy’s shirt.
Her cousin screeched as Auntie quickly got up and bustled into the kitchen for a towel.

“That’s what you get for dramatics,” Uncle Erik said as Mila breathed a sigh of relief that no one had noticed the water’s strange behavior in the chaos. She wasn’t quite sure how her aunt and uncle would take the news that their niece grew a tail when splashed, but Tammy would happily make her life a living hell if she knew.

Mila took a sip of her own drink, which she’d stuck a straw in to avoid any spills, as Auntie patted Tammy down with the dish towel and mopped up the spilled water. It hadn’t been that bad, and most of the water had ended up on the table. Tammy was still surly, so Mila decided not to tease her as they finished up dinner.

As soon as Auntie gave the word, Tammy flounced off upstairs to take over the shower and sulk. Mila gathered up the plates and followed through with cleaning up the dishes, and Uncle Erik pecked her cheek in thanks before disappearing upstairs for his readers and Kindle. Auntie started boxing up the leftovers for lunches, bumping into Mila in her search for matching Tupperware lids.

“What brought on this job thing?” Auntie asked as Mila dumped Tammy’s scraps into the trashcan under the sink.

Mila shrugged. “I just did some thinking and figured it would be a responsible thing to do.”

“I mean, I can’t deny that. But…” Auntie paused in stacking the leftover containers in the fridge. “Mila, you don’t have to work. If you feel like it’s something you have to do… we’d rather you focus on getting used to college and doing well in your classes.”

Mila laughed. “Oh, trust me, I think I’ll be okay. Claire’s called for study meetings on the nights we don’t have dance.”

Auntie snorted. “Oh, god, well. If Claire’s got that covered.”

“Yep.”

“Good grief.” Auntie went back to filling the fridge, and Mila carefully rinsed the plates off before standing them up in the dishwasher. She managed to avoid getting wet right up until she was shutting up the dishwasher, when a cup that still had a little liquid in it tipped over and splashed on her leg.

*Bad luck!* Mila grimaced.

“Oh, *blyad*,” Auntie said as Mila began to edge out of the kitchen. “The towel’s still wet--”

“Nah, it’s all good,” Mila said, making a break for it. “I’ll just change into my PJ’s.” She grabbed her school bag and dodged Uncle Erik, who looked confused as she tore up the stairs and dived for her bedroom. She could feel the telltale tingling as she kicked the door shut and the magic swept over her, and then she was falling over in an undignified heap on her rug.

Grumbling some uncharitable things in Russian, Mila turned over onto her back and sighed as her tail uncurled against the door. “Ugh,” she groaned, letting her head fall back against the carpet.

She didn’t have any towels in her room, so she made herself comfortable on her floor and dug her phone out of her bag.

“Milochka?” Auntie tapped on the door. “You all right?”

“Yep!” Mila called, shifting the weight of her fin against the door in case Auntie tried to come in.
“Uh, doing some maintenance!”

“Right,” Auntie said, laughing. “Well, I’m doing a load of laundry. Do you have anything in your hamper?”

Mila eyed her half-full hamper. “I think I’m good, thanks.” She waited until she heard her aunt’s footsteps retreating down the hallway before relaxing again.

Deciding to not chance any more surprises, Mila hauled herself around and scooted over to her bedroom door, pushing herself up on her arms so she could click the lock on the doorknob. Once that was settled, Mila checked her messages and ended up playing a match game on her phone until she dried off and got her legs back.

Well, she reasoned as she changed out of her dirty clothes from that day and slipped into her pajamas. *I made it almost the entire day without any incidents. Go me.*

The next day, halfway through her very first Intro to Philosophy class - well after they’d finished going over the syllabus and the professor had introduced herself - Professor Nanami sat back on her desk and smiled at the drowsy college students. “Well, that’s enough about me. Let’s all go around the room and tell a little about yourselves, sound good?”

Some of Mila’s classmates roused themselves, and Mila laid her head on her Plato textbook as Professor Nanami zeroed in on the poor sap in the front.

The dude got the ball rolling with an awkward, generic “hi, my name is…” speech before yielding the floor to his neighbor, who was a bit more energetic. Mila zoned in and out as more people talked, but it wasn’t until someone mentioned the eclipse that she snapped back to attention.

“...from the north, so we were way far away from the totality, which was a total bummer, but I saw NASA’s coverage of it,” the guy was saying. “Best part of my summer.”

“Ah, yes, the eclipse!” Professor Nanami said, nodding. “I double as a mythology instructor, obviously,” she added, waving at the posters of the various Greek and Egyptian gods on the wall, “and I gotta say, the eclipse was pretty inspiring! The moon figures into a lot of mythology, and even some philosophies. I do love our little satellite… and even better, the full moon is upon us tomorrow night. You guys want a fun fact?”

The class shuffled around in their desks, but a few people looked interested.

Professor Nanami grinned. “People used to believe that the full moon affected our sanity. That’s where the word ‘lunatic’ comes from.”

Mila’s eyebrows went up against her will, but then the class was moving onto the next person. When it came to her turn, Mila gave a glib little quip about her planned dance major and passed the spotlight on, and no one mentioned the eclipse again.

The very first meeting of the Anderson swing dancing club took place that afternoon after classes had mostly wrapped up. Mila had joined as a high school senior and hadn’t thought she’d really enjoy it, but then she’d been paired up with Phichit as a dance partner.

Phichit had enough energy to power a small city, and he brought every drop of it to swing club.
They’d eventually been selected to represent the club at a local swing dancing competition in San Diego, and even though they hadn’t placed high enough to get a ribbon, Mila had had the time of her life. If she and Phichit played their cards right, they could probably go after that competition again.

Mila really loved swing dancing; the dresses were fun and the music was super bright and snappy to listen to. She found herself stealing the club president’s playlists and listening to them when she worked out. Electro swing was the best music ever, and Viktor could go pout in a corner over classic jazz all he wanted.

“It’s so weird,” Phichit commented as they milled around in the practice studio at the Ariel, waiting for the rest of the club to wander in. “You’re in college.”

“How is that weird?” Mila asked, playing with her skirt hem.

“I dunno, you’re all grown-up now,” Phichit said, laughing when Mila swatted him in retaliation.

Amy showed up then, and she, too, was unamused at Phichit’s jokes.

“I’m officially eighteen,” she sniffed, crossing her arms. “So shush.”

“Aww, I remember when I was that young,” Phichit cooed.

Mila snorted. “Yeah, it’s so hard to remember a year ago.”

Phichit made a face at her, and Amy brushed him off with a hand to the face. She turned to Mila. “So, like, do you get paired up by the instructor, or…?”

“Eh,” Mila shrugged. “Sometimes, but most of the time everyone just pairs up by themselves.”

“Oh, I hope there’s enough guys to go around…” Amy was fretting just as Rowan walked in.

Phichit and Mila got matching looks on their faces as Rowan caught sight of Amy and his face lit up. He immediately joined them. “Amy, hi! I didn’t know you were joining the club!”

“Mila strong-armed me into it,” Amy said, grinning and playing with her long blonde hair.

“Good call, huh?” Phichit nudged Rowan. “Looks like she won’t go without a partner, right?”

Mila stifled a snort with her hand as the Crispino twins showed up as well. Mickey looked like he was about to handcuff Sara to himself as he surveyed the rest of the club, which was a fairly even mix of guys and girls. He even positioned himself between Sara and Rowan, despite the obvious way that Rowan only had eyes for Amy.

Phichit didn’t bother hiding his laughter, but Mickey didn’t seem to notice. “Crispy! You ready for the workout of your life?”

“What, more intense than dancing with Yuuri?” Sara asked incredulously.

“Why do you think my endurance is so high?” Mila fluttered her eyelashes and swished her skirt.

“Probably not more than Yuuri,” Phichit admitted at the same time. “But you’re gonna sweat.”

“Oh boy.”

“Uh, I’ve never done this before…” Amy raised her hand. “Is… that a bad thing?”
“No worries, we’ll probably start slow for beginners,” Phichit said, swinging his arms and accidentally whacking Mila. “Mila here only started swing last year.”

“It’s really easy once you’ve got a handle on rhythm,” Rowan added.

Mickey still looked sour, but he didn’t try to jump in or anything as the others chattered until the club leaders and instructors called for attention. Roughly a third of the club was brand new to swing dancing, and Mila found herself and Phichit being tugged up to the front to demonstrate the basic steps for the beginners.

Warm-ups were the simplest steps, stuff like the kick-ball-change and so on. Once everyone had been moving for a few minutes, the instructor had Mila and Phichit do the East Coast swing and called for everyone to pair up.

“Check it out,” Phichit said as Mila ducked under their joined hands for a turn. He pointed with his chin. “When do you think they’ll finally figure it out?”

Mila followed Phichit’s gaze and snorted when she saw Rowan leading Amy through the dance. They were doing pretty well, in her opinion. “They’ll figure it out when they figure it out. I’m surrounded by lovestruck young adults, this is ridiculous.”

“It’s like DeGrassi or a Disney Channel show,” Phichit commented, and Mila actually laughed.

“Hey,” she said. “Check out Mickey and Sara.”

“Oh man.”

Oh man indeed; Mickey was moving very stiffly as Sara was doing her best to mimic the other ladies around them, but they were definitely not on the same wavelength.

“You know, I’d go offer to cut in but he might bite my head off,” Phichit mused.

Mila frowned. “Hmmm. He’s really gotta get over this whole thing about never letting Sara get within breathing distance of other dudes.”

“Look, he might literally shank me if I try to help,” Phichit said as they switched sides again. “I’ll just keep pointing and laughing.”

“I mean, yeah, Sara’s dated her share of terrible guys, but they’re both adults now,” Mila added. “She’s learned from her misadventures.”

“Ugh, mood,” Phichit agreed. “But unless she chases him off herself, he’s not gonna stop.”

“Hmph.”

“Hey, she’ll listen to you,” Phichit said. “Be the change you wish to see in the world.”

Mila didn’t get a chance to respond as the music wound down and the instructor called for attention. The man released Mila and Phichit and grabbed one of the advanced pairs for the next demo.

“So, how are we feeling?” Phichit asked as they rejoined their friends closer to the back of the crowd. “Pretty solid?”

“This is fun!” Amy chirped, and Rowan beamed.

Mickey looked like he was very much not willing to return, but Mila knew better than to suggest he
let Phichit dance with Sara for a bit. Sara, for her part, looked annoyed at her brother, but not enough
to demand a partner switch.

The instructor yelled for them to pair up again, and the advanced pair demonstrated the Lindy Hop,
one of Mila’s favorites. The beginners moved inward towards the demonstrators so they could be
walked through it step-by-step; meanwhile the intermediate and advanced dancers shifted further out
into the studio.

“She should we try a throw?” Phichit asked as they took a breather with some side-bumps.

Mila blanched. “Put on some more muscle, dude.”

Phichit grinned, but they jumped back into the Lindy and he swung Mila out, sweeping her back in
before they spun around and switched the leading foot.

Another pair was called up to demonstrate the wrap and the dishrag, and then a few alternating turns.
The instructor kept trying to correct Mickey and Sara, and Mickey was just not getting it.

“So you still looking for a job?” Phichit asked as they took another break. Some of the newbies were
looking pretty winded, and the instructor was arguing with Mickey off to the side. Sara had her face
hidden in her hands.

Mila sighed. “I mean, yeah. I’m thinking someplace on the boardwalk, or maybe around the
college.”

“You should seriously apply at Chihoko’s, Minako could use some more help on the weekdays.”
Phichit fanned himself. “Yuuri and Seung Gil and I are all back to school, of course, and there are
only, like, two people who aren’t.”

“Uh, I’m at school too?” Mila reminded him.

“Yeah, but this is college. You don’t have to do a Monday-to-Friday seven-to-two schedule. Don’t
you have any free weekdays?”

Mila considered it. “I mean, I do have Fridays completely free.”

“See?” Phichit nodded. “I can grab you an app. Do you have a resume?”

“Uh, the ones we mocked up in high school? But I’ve never had a job before, so it’s kind of empty.”

Phichit shrugged. “So was mine when I applied, but it’s really simple. A good starter in customer
service.”

Mila had a sudden thought. “How often do you get spilled on?”

Phichit stared at her. “Daily.”

“Yikes. That sounds like a deal-breaker.”

“You get a uniform,” Phichit said. “Well, you get a polo shirt and you just wear khakis on the
bottoms. Get good ones and they’re easy to clean. You’re not sacrificing any nice clothes.”

Mila smiled weakly. “Good point. I’ll think on it.”

The instruction resumed for another half hour, and then there was a little dance-off. The club
president turned on a Parov Stelar playlist and Phichit tugged Mila into the center of the clapping
crowd. They didn’t attempt any crazy throws, but they still had fun whirling around in sync, and
Mila’s kicks had improved from the previous year. They cleared out for one of the advanced
championship pairs, and Mila high-fived Amy and Sara once they rejoined the rest of the club.

“That was awesome,” Rowan said enthusiastically, clapping Phichit on the back. “Please tell me
you’ll start doing throws soon.”

“I want him bulking up before he even thinks about throwing me,” Mila retorted, and Phichit stuck
his tongue out at her.

“Mickey, do you want to try doing throws?” Sara asked her brother, who blanched.

“If you want to.”

Phichit and Mila snickered but then the next pair took center stage and they all started to clap along
to the music.

Eventually, the music ran out, and the president called an end to the meeting. The club began to
disperse, and Mickey took off like a shot.

“He’s been weird lately,” Sara said, rolling her eyes. “Since I went to Last Bash without him.”

“Dude,” Rowan muttered, but Amy elbowed him and he dropped it.

“Anyway,” Sara added, swinging her bag over shoulder and adjusting her ponytail. “I’ve actually
got a class at five-thirty, so I gotta jet.”

“Good seeing you, Crispy!” Phichit waved. “I’ll see you Friday?”

“You got it!”

“I’ll walk with you,” Mila said, grabbing her things as well. “My scooter’s in the main building
parking lot.”

They set out from the Ariel, crossing the quad as the sky slowly got dimmer.

“So,” Mila said eventually. “You think Mickey’s going to come back for the next practice? He didn’t
look like he was having fun.”

“It’s not what he’s used to,” Sara hedged, grimacing. “And, I mean… I don’t know if I can convince
him to not come; he’s convinced some dude’s gonna cop a feel on me.”

“Does he not know how ballroom dancing works?”

Sara sighed and rolled her head, sending her long ponytail swinging. “I know. I know. Trust me, I
know. But…”

“You seriously gotta set some boundaries with him,” Mila insisted. “You’re both in college, and at
some point you’re going to move out and start a life of your own. Right?”

Sara rubbed her forehead. “Right. You’re right. It’s just…”

Mila waited as her friend searched for the right words.

“It’s just… I dunno, we’ve been so close for so long, and we’ve spent so much of our lives together,
you know?”
“Hmm.”

Sara winced. “I know, yeah. I’ll… I’ll work on him. I’ll try and keep him from following me to the next swing club meeting.”

“I’d say that he doesn’t have to stay away from swing, but he clearly wasn’t having any fun today,” Mila said.

“Yeah.”

They walked on in silence for a bit, and then Mila stretched with a groan, her shoulder popping loudly. “So.”

“So?”

“I’m looking for a job, and I’m thinking maybe I stay away from food service.” Mila pursed her lips as she considered it. “Yeah, better safe than sorry. But there’s tons of retail work on the boardwalk, right?”

“Dude, I could get you a spot at Splash Dream,” Sara said, referring to the swim boutique on the boardwalk that she worked at. “Just say the word. The hiring manager trusts my picks.”

“I might have to take you up on that,” Mila agreed. “And I do have Fridays free.”

“Sweet, I’ll mention that,” Sara nodded, smiling. “It’d be so cool if we could work together!” She bumped Mila lightly with her shoulder, and then they were ducking into the main building and out of the summer heat once more.

Chapter End Notes

Swing dancing is super fun and if anyone wants to draw Phichit and Mila doing the Lindy hop I might literally fall over and cry.

Thank you to Masha for help with the Russian pet names! “Milaya moyu” means "my dear" and Masha suggested using it as a pun on Mila's name, WHICH I DECIDED TO DO THANK YOU MASHA. It's also a Russian folk song, so when Uncle Erik starts singing 'her song' he's actually singing this one.

When Mila said "doing some maintenance" she was using a code word for "body hair removal" lol, my mom taught me that one. (Nowadays, I just say "shaving" and let the boys get grossed out.)

I've had some people comment on how the non-YOI characters seem familiar... well, that would be because I'm still using cast members from H2O and Mako Mermaids as third-and-fourth-tier characters! But, we also have some names pulled from Mermaid Melody Pichi Pichi Pitch because I can't help myself. It's a cute show! Check it out if you can!

As usual, come talk to me on Twitter and Tumblr!

Remember! Double update, there's another chapter here for you! See you there!
I wanna watch the way you take the stage by storm

Chapter Summary

Mila’s week gets weird as she and her friends go out to see Leo’s band play a live show under the full moon...

Chapter Notes

Title pulled from *Dear Maria, Count Me In* by All Time Low.

**DOUBLE RAINBOW UPDATE WHOOOOO!** I hope you enjoy it!

Gigantic thanks to Gab again, she cleaned up this chapter for me JUST LAST NIGHT. She’s about to update her cute teen! Vitya story, be on the lookout for that!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Wednesday was mostly uneventful - save for the random restlessness that reared its head around lunchtime - until Mila’s last class of the day: Bio’s introductory lab. She immediately sought out Otabek and claimed the empty seat at his lab table.

“Smooth,” Beka said in Russian, shooting her an amused look.

“Anything involving moisture is your duty,” Mila retorted, shifting on her stool. “Got it?”

Beka shrugged.

“Hey, guys!” Leo slid onto a stool at the table behind them. “Guess who got the band back together?”

“You have a band?” Beka asked blandly.

Leo winced. “Savage, man.”

“Wait, you mean that weird hipster cover group that Rowan was bothering you about last year?” Mila raised her eyebrows. “So is it just you two?” She realized she was jiggling her leg and tried to stop, but she felt like she was vibrating out of her skin. The jiggling resumed.

“Nah, we got Angus on drums and a new guy on vocals.” Leo grinned and rocked on his stool. “Our debut is tonight! The Treasure Box is letting us perform for their evening crowd, you guys wanna come?”

“That sounds like fun!” Mila said, perking up. “I’m in!”

“Awesome! What about you, Otabek?” Leo turned to Beka expectantly.

“Maybe,” Beka hedged, looking away.
Leo’s face fell. “I mean, if you can’t make it, it’s cool,” he said quickly. “Do you have, like, work and stuff? Or is it just that Yuri’s parents won’t let him go out on a school night and you don’t want him to feel bad?”

Mila barely kept herself from facepalming. “His parents let him go out,” she argued, drumming her fingers on the lab table.

Leo gave her a Look. “Yeah? Remember what happened for Homecoming?”

Mila winced. “That was last year.”

“So?”

“Look, I’m not going to talk about someone who isn’t here,” Mila said, turning back to face the front. “It’s not fair of us.”

“I mean,” Leo groaned. “You’re right. But, man, I try to include him in stuff and it’s all for nothing, you know.”

“He’d want to go,” Beka said. “You can certainly ask him.”

“How late is your set going to run?” Mila asked.

“Only from six until around nine.”

“That’s not bad,” Beka mused.

Leo didn’t seem convinced, but then his new desk partner sat down, and the instructor walked in. The rest of the period was dedicated to going over lab rules and protocol, and the three of them only ended up listening with half their attention as they messed with WhatsApp under the lab table.

HANON SUXX SQUAD

(2:22 PM) Leo: BAND’S BACK, Y’ALL

(2:22 PM) Leo: 6PM 2NITE AT TREASURE BOX

(2:23 PM) Leo: wHO’S IN

(2:24 PM) Guang Hong: omg

(2:24 PM) Yuri: that’s cool i guess

(2:25 PM) Mila: I’m going

(2:25 PM) Kenji: OMG I WANNA GO ;A;

(2:25 PM) Ivy: DUDE

(2:25 PM) Amy: omg that’s awesome!

(2:26 PM) Kenji: I don’t think I can make it tonight but I know you’ll do great!
(2:26 PM) Lucy: I’ve got lessons tonight, sorry

(2:26 PM) Lucy: let me know next time and I’ll come, I need advance warning you nerd

(2:27 PM) Leo: fine, nerd

(2:27 PM) Ivy: I’m coming just to make fun of you guys

(2:27 PM) Ivy: are you guys still doing covers

(2:28 PM) Lucy: did angus finally get to do original stuff yet

(2:28 PM) Leo: we’re doing covers tonight because we want to ease the new guy into it

(2:28 PM) Guang Hong: oh boy

(2:28 PM) Ivy: I’m bringing popcorn

(2:28 PM) Leo: we’re gonna knock your socks off

(2:29 PM) Beka: @Yuri you want to come? you can ride with me

(2:31 PM) Leo: it’d be fun

(2:33 PM) Yuri: I don’t know

(2:34 PM) Yuri: it’s a school night

(2:36 PM) Mila: you can leave before it gets too late

(2:36 PM) Mila: Leo won’t be mad if you go home around 8

(2:36 PM) Mila: right Leo?

(2:37 PM) Leo: Mila is literally giving me a death glare in class

(2:38 PM) Lucy: lmao

(2:39 PM) Yuri: I do wanna go tho

(2:41 PM) Leo: all the good stuff is in the first set

(2:44 PM) Yuri: ok

(2:44 PM) Yuri: I’ll ask my dad

(2:45 PM) Yuri: I have violin tonight at the Ariel

(2:46 PM) Beka: I’ll hang around after class and give you a ride

(2:50 PM) Mila: Sara says she’ll come too!

(2:51 PM) Lucy: and that means so will Mickey lmao
Come three-thirty, Mila and Beka were hanging around the Ariel practice rooms when Yuri showed up for his lessons, violin and school bag in tow.

Mila stopped pacing when she caught sight of the younger teen. “You need to grab Lilia?” she asked, but Yuri shook his head.

“I’ve got a pianist for the Showcase,” he said, shifting his case from one hand to the other, like he wasn’t sure which to hold it with.

Beka raised his eyebrows. “Not Viktor?”

“He’s busy,” Yuri grumbled. “Actually, I think Amy’s working with him tonight.”

“Oh, that makes sense,” Mila agreed. “Who’s your pianist?”


Mila peered over Yuri’s shoulder at the screen; when she saw the name in Lilia’s email, she burst out laughing. “Small world!”

Beka frowned. “Who’s the pianist?”

“Yuuri Katsuki!” Mila giggled, just as the man in question poked his head out into the hallway.

“Oh, hi,” he said, blinking behind his blue glasses. “Uh--”

“Yuri and Yuuri, this could get confusing,” Mila added, and Yuri shot her a pissy glare.

“Oh--” Yuuri blinked in confusion.

“You’re my pianist?!?” Yuri demanded, turning scarlet.

“Y-yeah?”
Yuri narrowed his eyes at his name-twin. “Are you any good?”

Yuuri’s eyes flicked up to Mila, who was still giggling, and a blank-faced Beka. “I mean, I’m okay…?”

“Shit,” Yuri groaned, hefting his violin. “This is gonna suck.”

“Well, I’m working with you,” Yuuri said, brows drawing together. “You can take it up with Miss Baranovskaya if you’d like.”

Yuri looked aghast. “Uh, no,” he said, shoving his way into the practice room and setting his violin case on the empty chair. “You don’t just do that.”

“That’s what I thought,” Yuuri muttered. He eyed Mila and Beka. “Uh, there’s not really a lot of space in here—”

“Nah, it’s all good,” Mila said, waving him off. “I’m heading out. Yura, see you guys at the venue?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Yuri called distractedly as he pulled his violin out of the case. Beka waved as Mila set off down the hallway towards the front of the building, now on a mission to bug Viktor in person.

The Ariel was a large, dome-shaped structure that was separated from the main Anderson building by a large courtyard and a picnic area. Mila had taken her piano lessons in the Ariel’s practice rooms, so she knew the layout of the building fairly well. She checked all the soundproof rooms, but it wasn’t until she poked her head into the administrative offices that she found Viktor.

She blinked when she saw Viktor behind the receptionist’s desk, sorting through a pile of papers. “Uh, what are you doing?”

“Mila, hey,” Viktor said distractedly, tearing open an envelope and pulling its contents out. “Just… housekeeping.”

“Did Yakov hire you as his secretary?” Mila asked, making a face.

“No, I’m just doing him a favor.” Viktor shot her a tired smile.

Mila opened her mouth to respond, but was gently pushed aside by someone from behind. She watched in even more confusion as Yakov’s elderly receptionist shuffled into the office clutching what looked like a plastic flamingo.

“Oh, Mrs. Stimler,” Viktor groaned once he caught sight of the old woman. “Where did you get that?”

“I just found him,” Mrs. Stimler sniffed.

“In someone’s yard?”

“Outside,” Mrs. Stimler said, setting the flamingo down next to the desk. “His name is Harold and I’m keeping him. He’s a good dog, you hear?”

Viktor eyed the flamingo. “Okay then.”

Mila was struggling to hold in laughter as Viktor surrendered the desk to Mrs. Stimler, who pushed all the mail he’d been carefully been sorting off to the side and poked the computer keyboard.

“I’ll just—” Viktor edged around the desk, avoiding the flamingo, and chivvied Mila out of the office.
before shutting the door behind him. “Well, I got through most of it,” he muttered, rubbing his forehead.

“Uh.”

“Don’t. Ask.” Viktor gritted out before shaking his head and slapping a more cheerful expression on his face. “So hey, how’s syllabus week going?”

“It’s fine,” Mila said, still looking through the window at the elderly receptionist. She’d pulled the flamingo onto the desk and was brushing the dirt off of it, getting it all over her workspace. “Just fine.”

“Great!” Viktor said, tugging her down the hall. “Glad to hear it! Things are gonna get busier, though!”

“I figure,” Mila agreed. “That’s why I’m going to Treasure Box tonight, Leo’s band is playing.”

“Who?”

“Leo de la Iglesia, remember? Bassist?” Mila poked Viktor’s shoulder. “He graduated high school with me and Beka and Amy?”

“Oh, right, he was in the jazz band,” Viktor nodded. “Is he doing jazz tonight?”

“Nah, I think it’s more hipster rock,” Mila giggled. “They found a new singer, so that should be interesting.”

“Hm.” Viktor made a face.

“Anyway. Guess which pianist Yura got paired with?”

Viktor blinked. “Not me, I’m pretty sure.”

“Nope,” Mila said, popping the ‘p’ with a grin. “Your Yuuri.”

Viktor stared at her, and then burst out laughing. “Oh, you’ve got to be kidding me.”

Mila shook her head. “I’m not, I literally just left them in practice room 3A.”

“Wow, small world.”

“I know, right?”

Viktor wiped at his eyes for a moment and then suddenly slumped forward. “Well, I’m not going to go and bother them if Yura is the one he’s working with.”

“I mean, he’d probably appreciate a buffer,” Mila pointed out. “Beka’s there, though.”

Viktor sighed. “Maybe another time. I dunno, I feel… antsy. You know?”

Mila was about to say no, she didn’t, but then she stopped to consider how fidgety she’d been all day. “Yeah, I kinda do.”

“I feel like something big’s going to happen and I’m all psyched for it, but…” Viktor made a face. “Nothing’s going on. Literally. I’ve got Amy’s session in, like, five minutes and then I’m free for the evening. Nothing happening.”
“Like… like you’re anticipating something exciting?” Mila asked, playing with her bag. “Yeah, I’ve been feeling that all day.”

Viktor frowned. “Weird.”

“Yeah.”

They walked in silence for a bit, and then Viktor rolled his shoulders and tossed his head. “Okay, I’m gonna just get my head in the game and power through the day.”

“Cool,” Mila said, but she still felt… nervous. That was a good way to put it. “I’m gonna. Head out? I guess?”

“All right,” Viktor agreed, and they split up so Viktor could head down to the practice rooms and Mila could duck out the exit.

Weird, she thought as she revved up her scooter and pulled out of the campus parking area. I wonder if it’s a mer-person thing? Because even as she settled onto her scooter seat and tried to focus on the road, she could still feel that almost frantic energy running under her skin.

Maybe it’s just back-to-school nerves, she reasoned. We’re probably just over-analyzing things.

“I’m fine,” she said aloud as she came to a red light stop in the bike lane. “I’m fine.”

With that thought firmly affixed in her head, she continued west towards the boardwalk.

The Treasure Box was already fairly busy despite it being the middle of the week. Mila assumed that the families crowding the restaurant downstairs were out-of-town vacationers, but it was early September and school had to have started elsewhere. These people were probably stragglers.

“Good crowd today,” Sara said, sipping at her Coke and watching the guys setting up their equipment on the rooftop stage. “I hope the guys picked out appropriate songs for the set.”

“This isn’t Nashville; they’re not limited to one style of music,” Mila pointed out, and Sara snorted at her.

Mickey thankfully wasn’t there because he was working his shift at Lina’s Passaggio, the same restaurant that Beka worked at on weekends. Sara seemed to be much more relaxed, and as their friends trooped in and clustered around their table, claiming the seats on either side of the girls, she seemed almost relieved.

Mila on the other hand was still shaking and fidgeting, like she needed to go run off some excess energy. She instead shredded Sara’s straw wrapper and several napkins.

“Are you okay?” Ivy asked as Mila started on another napkin.


Ivy gave her a weird look. “Just antsy? You look like you’re about to throw up.”

“I dunno about that,” Burgess said, peering at Mila. “But yeah, you are acting weird.”

“What would you know about Mila’s normal?” Cariba asked, pinching Burgess’s shirt.
“She hangs out with you enough that I’m an expert on all of your friends,” he said sweetly, and Cariba gagged. In an affectionate way.

Amy popped up shortly after that and grinned as she slid into her seat next to Sara. “I’m excited!” she said, bouncing. “The guys haven’t played together in almost a year!”

“Not to the public,” Phoebe said knowingly, tapping her forehead.

“And?” Guang-hong asked, draping himself over the back of Chai’s chair. Apparently the invitation had been passed along to the general orchestra squad, because Chai and his girlfriend had shown up, along with Dom and a girl Mila knew vaguely from Neptune High’s audition orchestra. “How’re they?”

“I mean, our guys are good,” Phoebe said, shrugging. “But the new guy, he’s something else.” The expression she made was… interesting.

“New guy?” Chai’s girlfriend asked, wrinkling her nose.

“Yeah, rhythm guitarist and lead singer. He said he played in a band back where he came from, in Canada.”

“Ohmigosh,” Sara said, eyes widening. “Is it Isabella’s boyfriend?”

Phoebe blinked. “I… dunno?”

“I guess we’ll find out.” Mila peered at the evening crowd. The sky wasn’t even getting dark yet, but she could feel this urge to… run… and it was building up in her gut and shaking her legs like an earthquake.

“Hey, Mila,” Amy said sotto voce, leaning in. “Viktor was acting really weird today. Like he was gonna have an anxiety attack. Is everything okay with him?”

Mila shrugged. “I hope so.”

Amy frowned and sat back, eyeing the pile of shredded paper in front of her. “Mmkay.”

Claire showed up with her boyfriend Craig after that, and they brought a pitcher of agave lemonade and stacks of plastic cups with them. Mila kept an eye on the drinks, but otherwise settled in for the show.

Otabek and Yuri arrived a few minutes later, and Mila was surprised to see Chai high-fiving Yuri, but he went along with it, stuffing his violin under his chair and collapsing onto it. Beka stole a chair from a vacated table and scooted in next to Amy.

“How was violin?” Mila asked Yuri, who was shifting in his seat.

Yuri shrugged. “I couldn’t concentrate,” he grumbled. “So it kinda sucked.”

Him too? Now that’s really weird, Mila thought, and was about to voice that concern when Sara made a noise.

“Oh, hey, there’s Isabella,” she said, waving their fellow Orchesis dancer over. Mila’s eyebrows went up as a tall tanned guy with an undercut followed along, and Sara whistled. “Yep, that’s her boyfriend.”

“That’s JJ, he’s the new singer!” Phoebe said at the same time.
“The Canadian boyfriend,” Mila breathed, like they’d witnessed the uncovering of the Arc of the Covenant.

“It’s all coming together now,” Cariba said, rolling her eyes. “Amazing.”

“The mystery is solved,” Ivy deadpanned, and they high fived. “Does this make you Sherlock Holmes?”

“Fetch me my violin, Watson!” Cariba said in a terrible British accent, and Yuri started laughing.

“Hi everyone, glad you could make it!” Isabella waved as she drew up next to the table, her boyfriend in tow. He looked like he was having the time of his life. “I know Sara and Phoebe have met him, so may I introduce Jean-Jacques to the rest of you?” She gestured grandly at the guy, who grinned like a typical frat boy and wrapped his arm around her waist.

“JJ for short,” he said, and Isabella looked up at him in adoration. “This is gonna be an epic debut,” JJ added with almost too much confidence. “Trust me, you’ll all be so glad you came.”

He winked, and Mila’s eyebrows went up even higher while Yuri made a weird wheezing sound.

“Excuse me?” he sputtered.

“You’re right,” Phoebe said in a faux-innocent voice. “Angus is so excited, and the guys have been working so hard over the past year to find their sound. It’s so nice that they finally get their day in the spotlight!” She fluttered her eyelashes at JJ, who seemed oblivious to her pointed sarcasm.

“Yeah, but we all know that it takes a good frontman to bring it all together,” JJ smirked and did a weird finger-pointing gesture. “It’s JJ-style!”

Everyone stared, and then Mila got it. “Oh, ohhh,” she said dully, pointing. “See? They’re-- his hands are the ‘j’s’. Like. The actual letter.”

“Oh,” Cariba echoed, the look on her face almost too hilarious to exist. “That’s… something.”

“What the fuck,” Yuri whispered on Mila’s other side. He sounded like he’d been socked in the gut.

“Dude,” Angus called, and JJ looked over his shoulder at the band’s drummer. “C’mon, we’re gonna start.”

“Got it!” JJ yelled back, and pecked Isabella on the cheek. “See you from the stage, babe.”

Isabella cooed and waved as he wove his way back to the stage, where the other guys were messing with their instruments. They’d done their soundcheck while Mila had been waiting with Sara.

“Wow,” Craig said in the aftermath of that bombastic introduction.

“He’s the best,” Isabella breathed, taking the open spot next to Phoebe. “I’m so glad he decided to come down here. He’s so sweet and funny, and super supportive!” She clasped her hands over her heart. “We met four years ago and it’s been long-distance ever since, but I’m so happy he’s here.”

“He’s a jackass,” Yuri said in Russian, and Beka shushed him. “Don’t shush me, I’m right!”

“Don’t talk in Russian when no one else understands you,” Gemma chided him, grinning. “Geez, Yuri. Share with the class.”

Yuri stuck his tongue out at her, and then JJ was talking into the microphone and the chattering
crowd fell silent.

“Whaddup, we are Moldy Stardust, and we are here to rock your world!”

“I can’t believe they kept that name,” Ivy said over the responding cheers. “Moldy Stardust, who came up with that?”

“Some girl in Angus’s linguistics course said something that another classmate misheard,” Phoebe answered. “The first classmate looked right at him and said, ‘this is a perfect name for a hipster cover band, Angus. Use it.’ Word for word, that’s apparently what she said.”

“Amazing,” Ivy deadpanned.

Isabella whooped as JJ hefted his guitar and started to sing.

“I got your picture, I’m comin’ with you

Dear Maria, count me in--

There’s a story at the bottom of this bottle,

And I’m the pen--”

Mila’s eyes widened without her input as Cariba whistled. “This is a throwback,” she said, waggling her eyebrows.

“This goes out to some very special ladies out there,” JJ called, pointing with his pick at their table as band really got going. The crowd went wild.

“Oh Jesus fuck,” Cariba wheezed, doubling over in laughter.

“Uh, did he just call out Phoebe and Bella as strippers?” Mila asked Beka in Russian.

Beka was actually biting his lip. Yuri, on the other hand, howled with laughter.

“Is it seriously about strippers?” he demanded, wiping his face. “Seriously?”

“A stripper,” Mila confirmed. “I remember when the music video premiered.” She glanced at Phoebe, who had buried her face in her hands. “Feebs,” she added in English. “You know Angus wouldn’t.”

“You’re right, he wouldn’t,” Phoebe agreed. “Because I’d maim him.”

Cariba actually squeaked, unable to giggle any louder.

The band played on, and the crowd was into it, for sure. Despite the initial absurdity that had swept their table, the guys did sound really good.

“They actually sound great,” Amy said, echoing Mila’s thoughts. “You’d never know that JJ only just joined up.”

Isabella was too busy singing along to join the conversation, and Mila wondered if she even knew
the context of Dear Maria, Count Me In, but ultimately decided it didn’t matter. When she’d first heard the song, she’d thought it was written for a dancer. And it was, in a way.

Every time the guys got to the chorus, JJ actually backed away from the mic to let the crowd sing the refrain back at them.

“We are all emo today, every one of us,” Burgess said with a straight face, and Cariba fistbumped him.

“What,” Yuri started to say.

“Oh, you sweet summer child,” Cariba said, patting Yuri’s shoulder. “You would have enjoyed the emo years.”


“I remember the emo years!” Yuri insisted.

“Am I wrong?” Cariba asked, turning to Yuri and crossing her arms.

Yuri pouted at her.

“Thought so.”

“I still can’t get over the fact that they kept the name Moldy Stardust, how do you even get that?” Ivy said, slamming back another cup of lemonade. “Give me that linguistic girl’s name, I need to find out how stardust can be moldy. It is not gonna leave me.”

Claire and Amy both rolled their eyes.

“Do they take requests?” Dom wondered. “How many of you would throw your drinks at me if I yelled ‘Freebird’?”

“I’d dump the pitcher on you,” Yuri said.

Dom flashed a shit-eating grin at Yuri, clearly calling his bluff.

Claire leaned in, fixing both of the boys with her patented Death Glare. “You do that, you’re paying for a new one.”

They both shrank back, and Mila snorted.

“What do you think, Otabek?” Guang-hong nudged the silent member of their group.

Beka scrutinized the setup and shrugged. “They could use a better sound mixer.”

“Are you gonna volunteer your services?” Mila asked, raising her eyebrows.

Beka shrugged again. “I’m busy enough and it’s not really what I do.”

“But you probably know better than the idiots they have working here,” Yuri said.

A tiny smile flitted across Beka’s face, gone as quickly as it arrived, as Moldy Stardust wrapped up their debut song - they’d definitely vamped the guitar solo bit a lot longer than Mila remembered of the original song.
“You know what,” Phoebe said as the audience cheered and clapped for the guys. “There’s nothing wrong with strippers. It’s a job just like anything else, and why not get paid for a commodity you can provide? I’m not gonna shame any strippers of any kind, they’re hard-working people just like the rest of us.”

“She’s really getting into her feminist studies,” Cariba stage-whispered as Claire patted Phoebe on the back.

“That’s very progressive of you, Feebs,” Burgess said.

Phoebe tilted her chin up. “We all have to stick together.”

“She’s really getting into her feminist studies,” Cariba stage-whispered as Claire patted Phoebe on the back.

“Hear hear!” Gemma cheered, raising her cup so Phoebe could toast with her.

“You know,” Amy said, regarding the band with a thoughtful expression. “They don’t really sound all that hipster.”

“Or maybe hipster’s gone mainstream,” Craig said in a spooky voice.

Everyone shuddered as JJ stepped up to the mic again. “Here’s another throwback for you all,” he said as Rowan began strumming some very familiar chords.

“Hey
Don't write yourself off yet
It's only in your head you feel left out or looked down on
Just try your best
Try everything you can
And don't you worry what they tell themselves when you're away!”

Isabella grabbed Sara and Claire, squealing as she dragged them out onto the floor where other members of the audience were already dancing along. Sara laughed and caught Mila’s wrist, tugging her along as Phoebe and Cariba hopped off their seats as well.

There were quite a few other people that Mila knew from school, both Neptune High and Anderson, and they waved when they saw her. The Treasure Box was equally a local hangout and a tourist trap - anyone who was an actual local didn’t order anything except drinks off the menu - so the out-of-towners mostly tended to stick to the interior pirate-themed restaurant downstairs. Thus, most of the crowd on the rooftop were teenagers and college students.

It was fantastic.

Mila finally could let loose with that weird energy that had been building in her all day, and she danced with abandon as the band went wild on stage. Soon, everyone from their table save for Yuri and Beka had joined them on the dance floor and were jumping along to the beat.

They wrapped up The Middle and immediately went into another song, this one took a little longer for Mila to recognize before she picked up on the lyrics.
“Far away
The ship is taking me far away
Far away from the memories
Of the people who care if I live or die”

JJ was really into his performance, and he was delivering in Mila’s book. Isabella had a distinctly starry-eyed expression on her face and blew kisses in his direction every time he looked at her.

“That’s so fucking cute,” Mila yelled in Sara’s ear, and Sara nodded in empathetic agreement.

“That’s you!”

From Starlight they went into a more punk cover of Ain’t It Fun, and then the guys took a water break while they interacted with the crowd a little bit. Mila and her friends had danced hard enough that Mila was definitely sweating buckets, but she still felt antsy and fidgety. “So weird,” she muttered as she fanned herself.

I almost want to… go take a swim in the sea… BAD IDEA BAD IDEA! Sara feigned slumping back against her as Mila grappled with the very sudden and very pressing urge to throw herself into the ocean, just a hundred and some-odd feet from where she was standing right then.

The boys started up another set with Shut Up And Dance, but Mila couldn’t bring herself to clap along with. She instead gestured at Yuri and Beka before making her way back to the table.

One look at Yuri told her all that she needed to know: this was definitely a mermaid/merman thing. Yuri looked like he was having a premature heart attack, and Beka looked lost as he kept a hand on the younger teen’s arm.

“What’s going on?” Mila asked, even so.

“I don’t feel well,” Yuri said shakily. “Like…”

“Like you wanna jump in the sea?” Mila supplied, and Beka’s gaze snapped to her, eyes widening in concern.

Yuri nodded, paling even more than he already was. “I don’t feel safe,” he added, curling in on himself.

“We might need to get you both home,” Beka said, and Mila envied how calm and steady he sounded. “And call Viktor, maybe Chris. If you’re both feeling like this, it’s got to be a merpeople thing.”

“Yeah,” Mila agreed, her heart stuttering in her chest. “Yura, you hit the nail on the head. I don’t feel safe either.”

Beka’s thick eyebrows drew together. “Time to go home. We’ll text Leo and the others later.”

“No!”
Mila and Beka jumped in surprise at Yuri’s outburst.

The younger teen had curled his fists in his lap, his shoulders drawn up. “I’m okay,” he gritted out. “Seriously. I’m fine, I can deal with it.”

“You just said you don’t feel safe,” Beka pointed out.

“It’s just some weird kind of paranoia!” Yuri took a deep breath. “Look, if you wanna go, you can go,” he said, looking at Mila. “But… this is it. This is the only night out I’ll get for the week, maybe even longer. I can’t just ditch because I feel weird.”

“Yes you can,” Beka argued, even as Yuri shook his head again. “Seriously, Yura?”

Yuri nodded stubbornly.

_Crap._ Mila rubbed her temples. “Well, I’m staying if you’re staying.” She looked at Beka, who seemed torn between frustration and worry. “You’ll look out for us?”

Beka sighed. “Of course.”

“Thank you, Beka.” Mila smiled weakly at him, even as she tried to steady her breathing to prevent hyperventilating. “We should-- we should text Chris and Viktor anyway, to warn them.”

“Mm,” Yuri agreed.
Mila: hey. you need to go over to viktor’s

Chris: why??? did something happen?

Mila: afaik nothing happened yet but yuri and i feel weird and viktor was acting weird today

Mila: i think he’s feeling it too

Chris: crap ok omw

Mila: thanks

[message conversation]

Mila: hey. you need to go over to viktor’s

Chris: why??? did something happen?

Mila: afaik nothing happened yet but yuri and i feel weird and viktor was acting weird today

Mila: i think he’s feeling it too

Chris: crap ok omw

Mila: thanks
yuu feels weird and jumpy too

we both feel like running into the sea

yep same. I feel all shaky and nauseous

so it's us 3 and we have no idea why

well its a fullmoon right now

some of the books I read mentioned it

what are we, werewolves?

an eclipse started all of this

i don't know

be careful

maybe you should go home

yura won't leave

fffffff ok is beka with you?

yes

good. stick together

for sure
Mila: yuri feels weird and jumpy too
Mila: we both feel like running into the sea
Viktor: yep same
Viktor: I feel all shaky and nauseous
Mila: so it’s us 3 and we have no idea why
Viktor: well its a fullmoon right now
Viktor: some of the books I read mentioned it
Mila: what are we, werewolves?
Viktor: an eclipse started all of this
Mila: i don’t know
Viktor: be careful
Viktor: maybe you should go home
Mila: yura won’t leave
Viktor: ffffffff ok is beka with you?
Mila: yes
Viktor: good. stick together
Mila: for sure

Eventually, their tablemates drifted back to their cluster of seats. Everyone picked up on Mila and Yuri’s weirdness and immediately showed concern.

“Dude, did you catch something?” Chai asked Yuri. “You don't look so good.”

“I'm fine,” Yuri insisted.

“Maybe it's a Russian thing,” Cariba said, nudging Mila. “Is it contagious?”

“Pretty sure it's not,” Mila muttered, but still scrounged up a smile.

Phoebe frowned and patted Mila’s shoulder. “Do you need a ride home?”

“Nah, I'll be all right.”
“If either of you blow chunks and get us banned from here, I'm gonna mock you forever,” Ivy said, prompting Amy and Gemma to shush her.

“I don't think my lunch will make a reappearance,” Mila said, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “You can put your phone away.”

Ivy snorted. “Mmkay, you guys just tough it all out. Show us how it's done.”

“Damn straight,” Mila answered, and Ivy fistbumped her.

They all stuck around for a bit, drifting back to the dance floor for a song or two and then coming back for their drinks or a rest. Mila did so as well, sticking close to Sara and only leaving the table for a few minutes at a time.

The weird restlessness only grew worse as the sun inched towards the horizon, and Mila decided that she was going to have to argue with Yuri to abandon his night of rebellion and go home early; something was seriously wrong, and this wasn't the time to stick it to his parents.

She weaved her way back to the table again and was greeted with the sight of Yuri frowning at his phone and turning to talk to Beka. Mila grabbed her purse off the table and scooted in. “What's going on?”

“Dedushka’s been blowing up my phone,” Yuri said, showing her his phone. The screen was filled with missed calls from his grandfather, less than a minute apart.

Mila’s eyebrows went up on their own when the phone blared to life with another call from Grandpa Plisetsky. “You better get that,” she said.

Yuri flicked the screen and turned away, covering his other ear as he answered the call in Russian. “Dedushka, what is it? What's going on?” He paused. “I'm at the Treasure Box. On the roof, why?”

He blinked, taken aback by the response. “What? why?” His face grew cloudy as his grandfather answered. “Just tell me! What’s going on?”

Mila and Beka exchanged concerned looks; Yuri’s grandfather was fairly easygoing and tended to dote on Yuri, but it sounded like he was pulling rank this time. Of course, Yuri’s grumpiness couldn’t be helping the situation.

“Fine!” Yuri snapped. “Fine, it's not even eight yet, but fine.” He angrily hung up and ducked under the table to grab his violin before shuffling out of his seat.

“What's up?” Guang-hong asked as Yuri hefted his school bag over his shoulder.

“Time for me to go home.” Yuri didn't even bother to not act surly as he headed to the door to the stairwell. “Sorry.”

“Hey, man, glad you got to come out,” Ivy said. “Good seeing ya.”

“I'll walk you down.” Beka held out his hand for the violin case, which Yuri willingly relinquished.

Mila eyed Sara, still hopping on the dance floor with Isabella and the others. “I'll be right back,” she said to Ivy and the other girl from Neptune High. She shoved her phone into her pocket and followed the guys downstairs.

Yuri was ranting to Beka, who let him vent as they made their way through the dinner crowd towards the front entrance. Mila had to duck around servers and diners, avoiding as much spillage as
she possibly could, to catch up.

“...don't get why everyone freaks out when I just wanna hang out with people, it's not like I'm failing any classes and nobody I know does drugs or breaks any laws, godfuckingdammit!”

Mila winced as the three of them pushed through the last of the crowd so they could exit the restaurant. The parking lot was largely devoid of people, so Yuri’s voice echoed off the brick walls of the surrounding buildings.

“It's not fair,” Beka agreed, surprising Mila. “But it's what your parents are going with, and you need to go along with it while you're living with them.”

Yuri made an angry catlike noise and kicked at the pavement. “This is bullshit!”

“If anyone gives you shit about it, you let me know.” Mila crossed her arms and leaned against the entrance to Treasure Box. “I don't know Chai and his friends so well but I won't hold back if they bother you about your curfew and stuff.”

Yuri shrugged, glaring at his shoes.

It seemed like it was barely five minutes before Nikolai Plisetsky’s silver Oldsmobile pulled to a stop in front of the restaurant. Yuri’s grandfather was out of the car in a flash, and Mila was shocked to see an almost frantic expression on the man’s face.

“I told you to wait inside,” he said in Russian, glancing at Mila and Beka. “It’s not safe out here.”

“What?!” Yuri demanded, going scarlet. “Why are you acting so weird?”

“Yurochka, please,” his grandfather held out his hands for Yuri’s things. “I never ask anything of you. Please, let’s just go home.”

Yuri narrowed his eyes. “What’s the rush?”

His grandfather looked away. “Your mother isn’t happy that you’re out on a school night.”

“What, are they fighting again?”

Mr. Plisetsky didn’t answer, and Beka and Mila exchanged concerned expressions.

In Mila’s pocket, her phone began to buzz. She pulled it out to answer the text, which was from Sara, as Mr. Plisetsky opened the back door to his car for Yuri to toss his stuff into. She looked up in surprise as Yuri snapped at his grandfather, who was chivvying him along like he was taking too long.

“Don’t take that tone with me, please. I’m trying to help you.”

“Yeah, helping me have zero social life,” Yuri grumbled.

Mila winced and looked back at her phone, which had gone dark, and then her eye fell upon something bright reflected on the screen.

The moon was beautiful and full, rising up over the top of the low-rise buildings of the boardwalk like a bubble in the sea…

*The sea.*
“Oh,” she said, as the phone slipped from her fingers and she turned to the boardwalk and the ocean beyond. “It… it’s calling.”

“Mila?”

“What’s calling?”

“The cove…” *I must swim to the cove.* She was stopped, held by the waist. “It’s calling me,” she insisted, squirming. *The cove… I must go to the cove!*

“What cove? *Blyad,* does she mean Sertori’s Cove?”

“Dedushka—”

“Yura, get in. Keep your head down and don’t look at the moon. Not even the reflection.”

“What? Why—”

“Because you’ll lose your mind like Mila. Otabek, were you on the island for the eclipse?”

“No.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Do you transform? Be honest with me, Yura. *Do you transform?*”

“Y… yes—”

“Then *do not look at the moo*— stop her!!”

She was running, and the smell of salt guided her. There was a barrier, coldness--

*Blyad,* she can’t get wet. Not tonight.”

“What? Mr. Plisetsky—”

“Keep hold of her— oh dear—”

Her legs were gone, and she couldn’t run. “The *sea,*” she cried out, and was shushed. “The *sea* is calling me!”

“You’re going to pass on that call, Ludmila.”

She was hefted up and carried *away from the sea.*

“But I need to go! *I need to swim!*”

“No.”

And there was nothing she could do.

Chapter End Notes

...oh my. :3
Congrats to Lily and Adele from the YOI Litmag for naming Leo's not-quite-hipster band! Yaaaaay! Yeah, "Moldy Stardust" literally did come from a conversation on that discord server (the term misread in question was "modly stardust") and Lily told me to put it in so HERE IT IS. TAKE IT AWAY, JJ.

The venue that Moldy Stardust is playing in here is based off of a few that I went to in Nashville. One of the inspirations actually has three levels, each with its own stage and sound setup, so it could host three different acts at once. (All of them country. Nashville is not my scene, even if one of my good friends lives near there.) Treasure Box is a mix of several themed venues and such, but the rooftop venue was the one that stuck out to me!

Yes, "Dear Maria, Count Me In" is apparently about a high school acquaintance of the band who ended up becoming a stripper after college. The music video Mila mentioned is an actual thing. Also, WELCOME BACK EMO YEARS. That song was released ten years ago. I've been out of high school ten years. I FOUND A GRAY HAIR YESTERDAY. [sobs]

The songs we see Moldy Stardust cover include:
--Dear Maria, Count Me In by All Time Low
--The Middle by Jimmy Eat World
--Starlight by Muse
--Ain't It Fun by Paramore
--Shut Up And Dance by Walk The Moon

Dasha did more LOVELY ARTWORK AND I FEEL MY SOUL EXITING MY BODY ;A; please check her out, and commission her, and send her love! Here's Viktor with Mila and Yuri in the waaaay back, and here's Yuri and Mila!

Next chapter will be a Yuri one, and we'll get some answers. I swear. I'll just be in this bunker over here. HUGE THANK YOU TO EVERYONE WHO PUT UP WITH MY WHINING AND EGGED ME ON TO FINISH! <3

As usual, come talk to me on Twitter and Tumblr! More material (including prompt fics and drabbles) are in the merman AU tag! If y'all REALLY wanna get nerdy, there is... a Pinterest page.
Chapter Summary

The full moon continues to ruin everyone's evening.

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from "I'm Only Joking" by the group Kongos (THANK YOU TO GAB FOR THAT ONE)

ALSO. THANK YOU TO GAB FOR YET ANOTHER BETA JOB (J^ 우^)/*: ·`
✧ Her fic Vitya Diaries updated! Go read it! Georgi and Vitya friendship!! ✧
(≥∇≤*) >

So I'm hoping, since it's MerMay, that I'll be able to provide more content... but hey, I've gotten 3 chapters out in as many weeks so I think I'm doing okay! _KeyDown

ONWARD! So quick note about Nikolai Plisetsky, when he's talking to someone who doesn't speak Russian - i.e. Christophe and Yuri's mother - he talks in heavily accented English. Otherwise, if he's talking in pretty complete sentences, he's talking in Russian.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do you transform? Be honest with me, Yura. Do you transform?”

Yuri jolted back as Mila struggled against Beka’s hold on her. Dedushka had him backed against the car, practically shouting in Russian, and all Yuri wanted to do was run away.

His grandfather fixed him with an intense look, and Yuri couldn’t bring himself to lie. “Y-yes,” he admitted, shrinking against the Oldsmobile.

Dedushka seemed to be an even mix of scared and serious as he caught Yuri’s chin and held his gaze. “Then do not look--”

Mila broke free of Beka’s grip and started running towards the boardwalk, towards the ocean.

“Stop her!” Dedushka ordered, and Beka took off after Mila. “Yura, get in the car and keep your head down. Do not look at the moon. Do not look at its reflection. Do not get wet. Understand?”

Yuri could only nod as Dedushka hurried away to help Beka. His eyes fell on Mila’s discarded cell phone, facedown on the pavement. Yuri took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and stooped over to grope blindly for the phone, shoving it in his pocket as soon as he had a good grip on it. He fumbled his way to the other side of the car, letting himself into the passenger seat and keeping his head ducked.

Mila’s personality change had happened in an instant, and it’d been kind of scary to watch. She’d gone slack and wide-eyed, like a zombie or something. And then…
The cove. The minute she’d mentioned the cove, Yuri had felt it too. The pull. Like there was an invisible string tugging him towards that stupid magic lagoon and that stupid magic rock.

Like maybe he’d be safe there.

Yuri gulped and shuddered, and his phone buzzed in his other pocket. He didn’t dare take it out, though. He had no idea where the moon was.

There was a weird shuffling noise outside of the car and Yuri couldn’t stop himself from looking out the window. He watched as Beka and Dedushka hefted Mila over to the car, and he gasped when he saw her tail flop out. Shit. Dedushka shook his head at him, and Yuri shrank back again.

Dedushka wrenched the door to the backseat open, and Beka quickly manhandled Mila into it. Mila did not help, whining and wiggling and generally trying to make trouble as Dedushka went around to the other side so he could help pull her in.

“What’s wrong with her?” Yuri demanded, his heart rate picking up in his chest as they shut her into the backseat and Dedushka practically threw himself into the driver’s seat and locked the doors.

“She’s moonstruck,” Dedushka said, resigned.

“The cove!” Mila wailed in English, thrashing around on the seat. “It’s calling.”

Yuri gulped again.

Dedushka looked over at him, his face drawn. “Is it?”

Yuri hesitated, but nodded.

Dedushka sighed. “I had my suspicions… blyad.” He started the ignition and put the car in gear.

“What about Beka?” Yuri asked, glancing back at Mila again.

“He said he would follow on his motorcycle.”

“He doesn’t have to,” Yuri muttered as Mila flopped and whined again.

“I think he’s worried about you two.” Dedushka turned on his blinker and waited for an opening in traffic. “There’s always three merfolk. Who is the third?”

“What?”

“Yurachka, please.”

Yuri shook his head. “Dedushka--”

“Yura. I know you were with Viktor Nikiforov and Christophe Giacometti on the island. Which one of them was the third?”

Yuri stared at his grandfather for a long moment before deciding that there was no way the situation could possibly be worse. “Viktor. Viktor’s the third.”

“I thought so.” Dedushka heaved another sigh. “Perhaps that’s for the best. Call ahead to him, tell him we are on our way to his building. We’ll have to sneak her in somehow.”

“I can dry her off--”
“Ah, so you have the heating power. No, Yura, it’s useless tonight. Once the full moon rises, you can’t transform back until it sets.”

“What?!” Yuri demanded, almost dropping his phone. “How do you know that?!"

Dedushka closed his eyes. “This is not my first time encountering merfolk.”

Yuri’s heart hammered in his chest, but then they were driving and he heard the sound of Beka’s bike behind them. He carefully unlocked his phone and pulled up Viktor’s number.

Viktor picked up almost right away. “Yuri? What’s going on?” He was speaking in English, Chris was probably there.

“Tons of shit,” Yuri groused, closing his eyes. “Mila looked at the moon and went crazy, and then she got wet and now she can’t change back.”

“What?!”

“I’ll explain when we get over there, Dedushka is bringing us.”

“Your grandfather? Wait, your grandfather knows—”

“Yeah,” Yuri cut him off. “We need a safe place to put her and we can’t take her to our place.”

“There’s a back entrance to the building, and I have a ton of linens we can wrap her in,” Viktor said quickly. “Oh god, wait, the moon did this?”

“Yeah.”

“Will the moon… will it do this to us too?”

“Most likely.”

Viktor swore, first in Russian, then in what sounded like French and Spanish. “Chris,” he said, his voice becoming muffled as he probably pulled the phone away from his face. “Yuri’s grandfather is bringing them over, but we gotta plug up all the windows. As in cover ‘em, we can’t let any moonlight in.”


“There’s duct tape under the sink. Shit, you’re going to have to let them in, I can’t go out.”

“Why?”

“I’ll explain in a minute.” There was a rustling noise and then Viktor came back. “We’re gonna prep my place, how far are you?”

“We just got off the boardwalk,” Yuri answered, closing his eyes as they passed a gap in the buildings and the sky peeked through. “Ten minutes.”

“Okay. We’ll be waiting. Who’s all coming?”

“Me, Mila, Beka, and Dedushka.”

His grandfather made a soft grunting noise, but nodded.
“Okay. See you in a few.” Viktor hung up, and Yuri put his phone away.

“Christophe Giacometti knows?” Dedushka asked. He’d clearly heard Viktor's side of the conversation.

Yuri winced and nodded.

“I suppose having more help is a good thing.”

“The sea,” Mila whispered from the backseat, like a possessed horror movie character. “We’re leaving it.”

“That's the point, Baba!” Yuri said, groaning.

“It’s calling!”

“Resist it,” Dedushka ordered. “If I lose track of you, I don't know what may happen.”

Yuri decided not to argue. He kept his eyes fixed on his hands as they slowly made their way through the evening traffic.

Dedushka was a careful driver, but even so it was a surprise when he suddenly pulled into what was probably a back alley and threw the gear shift into park. He flicked the hazard lights on and unlocked the doors. “The moon is blocked from view, Yurochka. It's safe to get out.”

Yuri looked up and breathed a sigh of relief, popping his door open and stumbling out. A few feet away, the building’s back door opened and Chris poked his head out. “Is everyone okay? Thank god. All right.” He motioned for Yuri to hold the door open and ran to the car, his arms loaded down with bedsheets with little paw prints on them.

Beka rounded the alleyway on foot a minute later - he had probably parked his bike somewhere legal - and helped wrangle Mila into a blanket burrito. She protested and wiggled the entire time, nearly kicking Yuri’s violin case out onto the pavement.

“Should have stuck that in the trunk,” Beka said, shoving Yuri’s bag and case back into the car as he and Chris hauled Mila out between them.

She was starting to calm down, and limply allowed herself to be carried into the stairwell. Her eyes met Yuri’s as they passed, and she let out a long sigh. “The cove,” she said.

Yuri gulped and fought down the urge to run west.

Dedushka ducked back into his car and put it into reverse. “What number is Viktor’s apartment?” he called over the engine.

Yuri held up three fingers and then one, and Dedushka nodded as he carefully backed out of the alleyway and onto the street.

“Yura, come on!” Beka's voice floated downstairs.

Yuri let the door shut behind him and he took the stairs two at a time. He ducked his head as he passed a window at the second landing, and then he hurried through the door to the third, slamming it shut behind him. He caught sight of Mila’s blanket-covered tail disappearing into Viktor’s apartment and ran to catch up.

“Where’s your grandfather?” Viktor asked as he finished taping his drapes shut. Makkachin was
hovering at his ankles, and he kept nearly tripping over her.

“Parking. What are you going to do with her?” Yuri gestured at Mila. She was slumped backwards in Chris’s arms, her tail flopping limply.

“Bathroom,” Viktor said. “She’ll have to hang in the tub while we figure this out.”

“She won’t change back until the moon sets,” Yuri added as Beka flicked the bathroom door open and he and Chris shuffled Mila in. “So we can't get wet either.”

“And then…” Viktor paused. “The moon.”

“Yeah, it turned her into a zombie. And she says the cove is calling her.” Yuri shuddered. “I feel it too.”

Viktor threw his hands up into the air. “Well. Our lives can’t get any weirder.”

“Don't say that,” Yuri yelled at him as Chris and Beka emerged from the bathroom. “We do not need anything else to happen!”

“Normally I’d call you paranoid but…” Chris made a face. “Well, we’ve got a mermaid in a bathtub.”

“I feel the pull too,” Viktor said. He crossed his arms and drummed his fingers. “Like. I feel exposed. Like I want to run and hide.”

“In the cove,” Chris said, and Viktor nodded. “Well geez.”

“So we can't go there for sure.” Yuri groaned and rubbed his forehead. He could feel a headache starting to form. “Dedushka was freaking out, he says he’s dealt with mermaids before.”

“So there are others,” Beka said. “Other people like you guys.”

“We’ll have to ask Kolya,” Viktor signed, sitting down on his couch and burying his face in his hands. Makkachin jumped up next to him and laid her head on his thigh, and he immediately began to pet her.

“I can't believe he knows.” Chris began to pace. “Did he catch you transformed ever?”

Yuri shook his head. “I've been careful. I think he figured it out.”

“If he’s dealt with this before, he must've recognized the signs,” Beka agreed.

Viktor groaned and flopped back against the couch cushions, and Makkachin crawled on top of him.

It was only another minute before the buzzer sounded. Chris checked the intercom, and Yuri heard Dedushka say in English, “Is Nikolai, open for me please?”

Chris buzzed him in, and unlocked the apartment door.

“Where is Ludmila?” Dedushka asked as soon as he was in, slightly winded from climbing three landings.

“We put her in the bathtub,” Chris said.

“Good,” Dedushka nodded. “She must not get away. I wish that she not run before, outside.”
“What?” Viktor frowned.

Beka sighed and raked his fingers through his hair. “She got weird and then started running towards the sea, but she tripped over a planter that someone had just watered and got all wet. We couldn't dry her off fast enough.”

“And now she's stuck transformed?” Viktor looked a little green.

“Until moonset,” Dedushka reassured him. “Then she will wake up and change back.”

“When is moonset?” Viktor asked the room at large.

Chris fiddled with his phone. “About six in the morning.”

“So there's no way we can send her home. Merde.” Viktor pressed his hands to his face, and Makkachin shoved her nose under his elbow. “Her aunt and uncle are going to freak out.”

“I have her phone here,” Yuri said, pulling it from his pocket. “If they call, someone can cover for her.”

“I vote Viktor,” Chris said, and Viktor rolled his eyes but caught the phone when Yuri tossed it to him.

“I hate lying, but we can say that she got food poisoning or something and we brought her here since it was closest,” Beka offered, eying the bathroom door down the hall.

“What’s all this ‘we’ stuff?” Viktor grumbled. “I’m the one on the hook here.”

“This is first full moon, yes?” Dedushka asked, slowly lowering himself down onto the loveseat next to the kitchen. “First full moon, always hard after first change.”

“What are they, werewolves?” Chris laughed, and Viktor threw a pillow at him.

“No, they are each Moonchild,” Dedushka said, and everyone fell silent.

“Moon child?” Yuri repeated in confusion.


“How do you know this?” Viktor asked.

Dedushka sighed heavily and leaned forward, resting his forearms on his knees. He took off his hat and set it on the cushion next to him. “Like I tell Yura, this is not first time for me.”

“So… you’ve seen other mermaids? On Islaluna?” Chris pressed.


Viktor visibly gulped, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. Yuri felt like he was going to throw up. A look at Beka and Chris confirmed that they were shocked too.

“I think we still need to know,” Chris finally said, “if the same thing is happening here.”

“Dedushka, you don’t--” Yuri started to say, but his grandfather cut him off.
“It was almost fifty years ago.” Dedushka closed his eyes for a moment. “My parents took me to Leningrad. Now Saint Petersburg. That summer, there was eclipse. Everything changed.” His shoulders slumped. “I saw full moon’s power over mermaids. Many times. Full moon grows weaker with time. Early, is strong.”

Viktor seemed to realize his leg was jiggling and he actually grabbed his own knee to stop it, and Yuri made himself stop pacing.


Suddenly, Yuri’s phone began to buzz. His mom’s ringtone started to play, and he couldn’t stop himself blanching.

“I gotta get this,” he muttered, and answered it.

Mom didn’t even wait for him to talk. “Yuri, where the hell are you?! It’s eight-thirty on a school night!”

“I’m sorry,” Yuri said, wincing.

“You’d better be home in half an hour or you are losing your computer, understand?” Mom hung up before he could even answer.

“We go home,” Dedushka said, slowly climbing to his feet. “Your mother is worried.”

“That’s one way to put it,” Chris said, and shrugged when Yuri glared at him.

“Right, one second,” Viktor said, and he got up and grabbed a kitchen chair, dragging it over to the bathroom door and propping it under the knob. “What are the odds that she’d go out the window?”

“Slim to none, hopefully,” Chris said, rubbing his forehead.

“The cove is calling!” Mila yelled, her voice echoing off the bathroom walls.

“Let it go to voicemail!” Viktor yelled back, shuffling back into his front room.

“This is our lives now,” Yuri said, shoving his phone back into his pocket. “Crap.”

“Come, I take you home now,” Dedushka gestured at Yuri, and Viktor made a noise of protest.
“But… the moon’s still up—”

“I will pull car up, Yura will keep head down,” Dedushka said briskly. “I have done before.”

The other three exchanged skeptical looks as Dedushka settled his hat back on his head and made to let himself out. He looked back at them and then at Yuri. “Yurochka. I will not let moonlight affect you. I promise.”

Every cell in Yuri’s body screamed that he wasn’t safe standing in Viktor’s apartment on dry land. He couldn’t stop the trembling in his arms, or the panicky thudding of his heart. But this was his grandfather.

“Okay,” he finally said.

“Be safe out there,” Chris said, uncharacteristically serious for once. “I’ll stay here with Viktor and Mila.”

“I can stay too—” Beka offered, but Viktor clapped him on the shoulder, a tense smile on his face.

“Do you have class tomorrow?”

Beka frowned.

“Go home and get some sleep. We’ll be fine, Chris can kick my ass up and down the block if it comes to it.”

“It’s true,” Chris added, smirking.

Beka gave in and nodded, and Viktor let them out.

Dedushka made Yuri wait in the hallway away from the outdoor windows, and Beka stayed with him. He watched Yuri pace back and forth in front of the other apartment doors, and Yuri felt his breathing becoming progressively harsher and harsher.

“Is it really that bad?” Beka asked.

Yuri stopped and tried to find the words. “It’s like… you know how when you go to see a movie and you suddenly know something bad is about to happen but the characters don’t? And you want to yell at the screen but you know they wouldn’t hear, so it’s useless? And you just have to wait for that bad thing to just happen?”

Beka’s eyes widened slightly. “Dang.”

Yuri nodded and resumed pacing.

Dedushka called once he’d pulled into the alleyway again, and Beka escorted Yuri back downstairs. Yuri pulled his jacket’s hood over his head and kept his eyes downcast, his hand gripping the railing like it was his only anchor in a wild storm.

Once they were outside in the cold dusk air, Dedushka unlocked the door and Yuri carefully climbed in, eyes still half-closed. Beka shut the door behind him and patted it, loud enough that Yuri could hear it. He chanced an upward glance to wave goodbye, and then Dedushka was pulling out of the alley and onto the street.
Getting into the house was an adventure and a half. Yuri’s house was only a twenty-minute car ride from Viktor’s place with good traffic, and it was almost nine PM on a weekday, so they made it home with barely enough time to squeak in under Mom’s deadline. Dedushka pulled into the garage, which thankfully had no windows, and Yuri grabbed his stuff from the backseat.

“Your mother is most likely still awake,” Dedushka said in Russian, while they were still in the garage.

Yuri groaned, but followed his grandfather into the house.

Mom was, in fact, still up. She was sitting at the kitchen table, her face in a cold, hard expression that ratcheted Yuri’s unease up even higher.


Yuri winced, but for the first time in his life he turned away from his mother and down the hallway to the stairs.

“Yuri Sergeyevich Plisetsky!” Mom snapped, and Yuri froze. His heart sped up, and he could feel the full moon climbing higher in the sky as he stood there.

The cove is calling. Mila was still in Viktor’s bathtub, still with a tail, and Yuri wanted to turn and run back towards where they’d just come from. It’s safe in the cove.

“Rachel, is my fault,” Dedushka said in English, putting his hand on Yuri’s shoulder. “I am so sorry. Mila Babicheva, she is unwell. I offer to drive her.”

Mom still stormed over to Yuri, her mouth pressed together in a thin line. “Yuri,” she said, her voice still harsh. “Did you go behind my back for permission to stay out late on a school night?”

“I didn’t mean to stay out late--”

“Did you or did you not go behind my back?”

Yuri’s mouth snapped shut. “I asked Dad instead of you,” he finally admitted, “because I wanted to go see my friend’s band play. But I told him everything - I told him where I’d be, who I was with, how late I’d be out--”

“That doesn’t excuse the fact that you stayed out late on a school night,” Mom said, her hands balled into fists. “And trying to loophole around house rules--”

Yuri was too tense to argue. “I’m sorry.”

“You are grounded for the next week. Except for violin lessons, you come straight home after school. No friends, no clubs, and I’m disconnecting your computer from the internet. No video games. Understood?”

Yuri swallowed down his protest and nodded. “I’m really sorry.”

“Sorry isn’t good enough when you know better,” Mom said. “You’re lucky I’m letting you keep your phone.” She stalked past him down the hallway and up the stairs.

Both Yuri and Dedushka flinched when the master bedroom door slammed, and Dedushka sighed heavily. “I’m sorry, Yurochka,” he said, switching back to Russian.

Yuri shook his head and hefted his school bag up onto his shoulder. “I’m just going to go to bed.”
Dedushka nodded, and slowly made the rounds in the kitchen to shut off all the lights as Yuri shuffled down the hall, adjusting his grip on the violin case. He kept his eyes on the hardwood, away from the windows - he was probably being too paranoid, but the vision of Mila going all zombie-like kept playing in his head.

Once he was safely locked in his room, he yanked the shades tight over his bedroom window and collapsed onto his bed with a sigh. Potya curled up next to his head, batting at his hair and meowing softly.

Yuri kicked off his shoes and properly climbed onto the bed, settling against his pillows with Potya on his chest as he fished his phone out of his pocket.

**HANON SUXX SQUAD**

(8:54 PM) Yuri: i’m grounded for the week

(8:54 PM) Amy: oh no

(8:54 PM) Amy: but you left so early

(8:55 PM) Leo: dude im so sorry

(8:55 PM) Yuri: its ok i wanted to go out

(8:55 PM) Ivy: you didn’t miss much

(8:55 PM) Ivy: unless you wanted to see the guys play jj’s very own theme song lmao

(8:55 PM) Kenjirou: it’s okay Yuri! I missed it too

(8:56 PM) Yuri: okay im not sorry i missed THAT

(8:56 PM) Beka: sorry yura. this is kind of my fault

(8:56 PM) Yuri: no its not and dont you fukin dare keep thinking that

(8:56 PM) Lucy: yuri ur mom is so strict tho

(8:57 PM) Lucy: sorry but i gotta say it

(8:57 PM) Amy: @Lucy drop it

(8:57 PM) Lucy: ok

(8:57 PM) Lucy: sorry

(8:57 PM) Amy: @Yuri did @Mila leave with you

(8:57 PM) Yuri: yeah she felt sick and then got wobbly outside so my grandpa drove her

(8:58 PM) Ivy: ok she left her purse behind and it has her scooter keys

(8:58 PM) Ivy: Sara has it
(8:58 PM) Yuri: cool she’ll see all this whenever she wakes up
(8:58 PM) Guang-hong: omg she’s knocked out???
(8:58 PM) Yuri: she fell asleep
(8:58 PM) Amy: omg now i’m worried
(8:58 PM) Yuri: don’t be she’s safe she’s in good hands
(8:58 PM) Amy: was it food poisoning?? we all had the same table!!!
(8:58 PM) Yuri: i dont think so. does anyone else feel sick
(8:58 PM) Guang-hong: I don’t feel sick
(8:59 PM) Ivy: I don’t either
(8:59 PM) Leo: I didn’t have any of the drinks
(8:59 PM) Lucy: DID SOMEONE SPIKE HER DRINK
(8:59 PM) Beka: yuri and i were there watching the drinks the whole time
(8:59 PM) Amy: oh thank god
(8:59 PM) Amy: thank you otabek
(9:00 PM) Beka: :thumbsup:
(9:00 PM) Yuri: i need to go to bed
(9:00 PM) Kenjirou: goodnight yuri!
(9:00 PM) Leo: thanks for coming out tonight, sorry you got in trouble
(9:00 PM) Yuri: no problem you guys sounded good even if your lead singer is a dick
(9:01 PM) Ivy: LMfAO

Merkids
(8:55 PM) Viktor added Mila, Yuri, Chris, & Beka
(8:55 PM) Viktor: here we go
(8:55 PM) Viktor: this app is cool
(8:56 PM) Yuri: seriously
(8:56 PM) Chris: this app is encrypted end-to-end
Sleep was *impossible*. 

After his mother knocked on his door and told him it was bedtime or else, Yuri slipped into a t-shirt and gym shorts and tried to lay down in bed. He felt like he was plugged into a live generator, and he ended up pacing the floor around his bed because his entire body felt like it was going to vibrate right out of existence. Potya curled up on his abandoned pillow and watched him for a while before she dozed off. *Lucky.*

Around ten, Mom let herself in again and grumpily told Yuri to get in bed and read until he fell asleep. He agreed just to get her to leave and close the door behind her, and then resumed pacing.

Eleven rolled around, and then Dad came in and sat down on the bed without a word. Yuri stopped pacing and waited.

Dad didn’t keep him waiting long. “Are you on drugs?”
“No,” Yuri snapped, fidgeting.

“Are you sure?”

Yuri stared at his father in shock. “Do you seriously think I’d take drugs?”

Dad looked him over and shook his head. “Not knowingly, no.”

“I’m not on drugs,” Yuri insisted, his hands balling into fists. “I don’t do drugs.”

Dad held up his hands in a surrender gesture. “I believe you. I’m sorry I asked.”

Yuri groaned and tugged at his own hair. “I’m just anxious.”

Dad raised his eyebrows and sat back a little. Potya got up and climbed onto his lap, purring loudly, and he stroked down her back.

Yuri started pacing again.

“What are you anxious about?” Dad asked, so calm that it actually got on Yuri’s nerves.

“Just anxious in general,” Yuri said under his breath.

“Is it school? Friends? Violin?” Dad’s eyes followed him as he moved. Yuri probably looked like a caged tiger, and he honestly felt like one.

“A little of everything,” Yuri admitted. *And then some.*

“Well, you’re doing very well in school. I mean,” Dad laughed softly. “It’s only the second week of your school year, you can’t have bungled it that badly.”

Yuri grumbled but nodded.

“But you’ve been doing well in school for the past few years, Yura. Sometimes I think you’re working *too* hard to stay on top of your assignments. You can afford to relax a little, you know.”

“Not according to Mom,” Yuri said pointedly.

Dad sighed. “Your mother has a different way of approaching things, but I’m trying not to argue with her too much.”

Yuri shrugged.

“Okay, how about your friends. Are they giving you a hard time?”

Yuri considered it. “No, not really. They’re understanding about my curfew and stuff. I just wish I could do more stuff with them.” He kicked at his clothes hamper. “One of these days they’re going to stop inviting me to stuff.”

His dad sighed again. “Well, I can understand that. I’ll talk to your mom about that, I think you deserve a little freedom, especially since you’re going to be sixteen in a few months. Speaking of which, we need to get you enrolled in Driver’s Ed.”

“School will offer it,” Yuri said, remembering Mrs. Amor’s announcement from the last week.

“How about you want to take it through the school?” Dad asked.
Yuri shrugged again. “I don’t care.”

“It’s up to you.” Dad scritched under Potya’s chin. “And violin?”

“Just. I have a new accompanist and he’s kind of a wimp.” Yuri couldn’t stop moving, and he had no idea how to explain it away to his dad, so he talked around it. “He’s super wishy-washy, Lilia gave us a choice on the showcase piece and every time I thought we’d agreed on the song, he’d get all weird and back off.”

“Maybe you come off a little strongly,” Dad said, raising his eyebrows.

Yuri snorted. “Maybe he’s a doormat that needs to grow a backbone.”

“Of course, that could always be it.” Dad said, smirking. “It’s late, Yura. Staying awake any longer won’t help you any.”

“Am I keeping you up?”

His dad chuckled. “Well, you’re not exactly quiet.”

Yuri groaned again and flopped back onto his bed. “Sorry. Don’t know if you know this, but being a teenager sucks.”

“You know,” Dad said with a bland expression, “I was a teenager at one point.”

Yuri made a face at his father. “That was before cell phones and the Internet.”

“Ouch, I’m wounded!” Dad rolled his eyes and picked up Potya so he could set her on Yuri’s chest. “You know, the Internet did get big when I was in school.”

“Mm-hm.”

“And we had cell phones back in the nineties,” Dad went on.

Yuri snorted. “Yeah, brick phones more like.”

“Fine. Sass me. I’m just saying, I had my share of teenage angst. Hell, I moved to a completely new country when I was just a little older than you.”

Yuri made a noncommittal noise that turned into an indignant one when his dad mussed his hair. “Hey!”

Dad snorted and got up, yawning as he made his way to the door. “Well, I hope you can get some sleep, little tiger. Don’t mess around with your phone, that really will help.”

“I’m not,” Yuri whined into Potya’s belly. He pointed at where his phone was obviously plugged into the computer on his desk.

Dad smiled at him wearily from the doorway and shook his head. “Goodnight,” he said, shutting the door behind him.

Yuri took a moment to lay there on his bed, Potya purring on his collarbone. “I hate this,” he told his cat, his entire body thrumming with the full moon’s energy.

After another few minutes of trying to stay still and fall asleep with half his body hanging off his bed, he got up to climb under the covers and faceplant into the pillows. “Maybe I can smother myself to
sleep,” he said, and Potya took advantage of his stillness to climb onto his back and drape herself over his shoulder.

“Oh, fine,” he said as she flicked him in the face with her tail. “I won’t move anymore.”

Even as he forced himself to lay in bed and tried to fall asleep, he couldn’t seem to manage it. After dealing with her pillow fidgeting for half an hour, Potya relocated to the foot of the bed. Yuri ended up tossing and turning for hours, unable to ignore the jitters that made his legs kick almost involuntarily under the sheets. He pummeled his pillow once before feeling really stupid, and tried to cover his head with it and somehow block out the moon. That obviously didn’t work, and he got sick of breathing stale air, so he threw the pillow aside and flopped over onto his front.

It wasn’t until around two in the morning that he sudden felt a shift in the night. As in, he knew that the moon had reached its highest point in the sky. Yuri threw his covers off and stumbled across his room, fumbling for his phone.

He unlocked it and found Viktor in his contacts, accidentally tapping FaceTime instead of voice call. Viktor still picked up, and he looked as shitty as Yuri felt. “Yuri.”

“You feel it?”

Viktor nodded, his face pale and drawn. “I… it says the moon’s at its zenith. The internet. And. Ah. Mila’s all quiet.”

“What about Chris?” Yuri asked, tugging on his hair in its ponytail.

“He’s asleep.” Viktor sighed. “I couldn’t… I couldn’t fall asleep at all.”

“I keep pacing,” Yuri said. “I can’t sit still.”

“Yeah.”

They both fell silent.

“Is… is she all right?” Yuri finally said, unable to picture Mila in Viktor’s bathtub, all spaced out.

Viktor sighed again and then he was moving, and Yuri saw the background shifting as Viktor made his way down the hallway. There was a quiet knocking noise, and Viktor softly called “Milochka? You okay in there?”

“The moon…” Yuri heard from far off. “Please. Let me go. The moon is over the cove.”

Yuri and Viktor both winced at the pleading tone, so different from the Mila they both knew.

“This is awful,” Viktor said, rubbing his forehead and leaning back against the wall. “I feel like I’m going crazy.”

“Yeah.” Yuri collapsed into his desk chair. “Dedushka said it would get better over time but… are we going to feel like this every month?”

“Well, we can relate to people with times of the month now,” Viktor said blandly.

Yuri grimaced.

They both fell silent as Mila sighed loudly from inside the bathroom, but she didn’t say anything.
“So.” Viktor eventually said. “Did you pick your piece for the Showcase?”

“What?”

“You’ve got a couple choices for it, right? Which one are you doing?”

Yuri groaned. “Don’t know yet. My pianist isn’t any help.”

“Yuuri Katsuki, right?” Viktor actually blushed, and Yuri stared at him.

“What was that.”

“Hm?” Viktor refused to meet his eyes.

“What. Was. That.”

Viktor coughed and turned up his nose. “Just. Nothing.”

“Why do you care who my pianist is?”

“No reason.”

Yuri was about to press the issue, but then something shifted again in the universe and he suddenly his eyelids were drooping against his will. “H-uh.”

Viktor seemed similarly affected. “Oh, that’s weird,” he said softly, pressing a hand to his forehead. “I feel like I’m going to fall over.”

Yuri actually yawned. “Well shit,” he muttered. The weird restlessness that had been fizzing up and down his body had suddenly disappeared, and he was starting to slump down in his computer chair.

“I… I think I can sleep now,” Viktor said in dull surprise. “I guess the moon is setting now.”

“Moonset isn’t for another few hours,” Yuri reminded him.

“But it’s going down,” Viktor seemed to have caught Yuri’s yawn. “This is bizarre.”

Yuri fought down one of his own. “I’m going to bed for real this time,” he said.

“Yeah. Me too.” Viktor nodded. “See you later.”

“Mm.” Yuri hung up and dropped his phone back onto his desk before dragging himself back onto his bed. He could barely work up the energy to pull the covers over himself, but was able to shove his feet under the comforter and settle against his abused pillow.

Potya got up and slowly made her way across the bed, rubbing her head up against Yuri’s shoulder and then curling up next to his head.

Yuri couldn’t even work up the energy to pet her, his eyes sliding shut of their own accord, and sleep overtook him as suddenly as the moon had hours before.

Chapter End Notes
...I promised backstory. *It's coming. I swear.* Update soon! I'm halfway through the first draft for ch12!!

ART HAWKING TIME!! I commissioned the sweet and lovely sugarlipx for some gorgeous Phichit-Mila swing dancing action! Aren't they cute?! Go get a commission done right now!!

I'm loving all the cute MerMay content online, honestly! It's such a great time to be a mer fanatic ╮(o♡o)/

So! Guys! Give me your theories on Nikolai's experiences with mermaids! What do you think happened in 20th century Saint Petersburg? What did you think of the kids' first full moon? Will they indeed get better? :3

As always, you can come and talk to me on Twitter and Tumblr! More SWM content on the merman AU tag. There's also a Pinterest board. Help.
Viktor was awakened at around six in the morning by a sudden yell from the bathroom.

Chris fell off the loveseat with a yelp. “Whuddafug-?!”

Viktor, already on his feet, scrambled down the hallway, and wrenched the chair out from in front of the bathroom door, throwing it open. “What happened? What’s wrong?”

“Where am I?!” Mila shrieked, thrashing in the tub. Her tail flopped dangerously close to knocking over his shampoo bottles on the nearby ledge.

“You’re at my place!” Viktor tried to calm her down while avoiding getting splashed. “Chill, Mila! Stop freaking out!”

“Why am I at your place?!”

“Long story,” Chris said from the doorway, eying the mermaid in Viktor’s bathtub. “Are you back with us?”

Mila made a face. “What’s that supposed to mean?!”

“You got a little zonked out last night.” Chris nudged past Viktor and crouched down next to the bathtub, plucking the plug out and letting the water drain. “As in, you looked up at the full moon and got hypnotized.”
“And why am I in the bathtub?” Mila demanded.

“Because you were trying to get to Islaluna and you were screaming about it,” Viktor said. “Also, you got splashed in public, and the others barely got you here before someone noticed.”

“Okay. Why didn’t you dry me off?”

“You weren’t going to change back even if we did,” Chris said, grabbing the clean towel from the rack.

“And how did you know that?”

Viktor sighed. “Well, you were dry once you got here and you still had the tail. And also Nikolai confirmed it.”

Mila blinked. “Nikolai?”

“Nikolai Plisetsky.” Viktor nodded. “Yura’s grandfather.”

Mila paled. “He saw me?”

“He already knows about mermaids,” Chris said, toweling off what bits of Mila that he could reach. “Said he’s encountered them before. Didn’t get to tell us much, because Yuri’s mom freaked out at him and they had to leave.”

“Oh my god.” Mila pressed a hand to her mouth. “Oh my god, what are my aunt and uncle--”

“I already took care of that,” Viktor said, cutting her off before she could get hysterical. “They called while you were out of it and I told them you got food poisoning and crashed here. They just want you to let them know you’re okay, and to make sure you get to your classes today.”

“Oh my god,” Mila said again. “I… my purse? My scooter? I don’t have anything!”

“We’ve got your cell phone; it was buzzing all night,” Chris reassured her. “I’m sure one of the others got your purse for you.”

“What the hell even?!” Mila groaned and took the towel from Chris. “What a fucking disaster night!”

“You wanna know the worst part?” Chris gave her a flat look. “We haven’t been able to pee for hours. This is the only bathroom.”

“Oh, how tragic,” Mila muttered. “You can, like, pee in a bottle, right?”

“No,” Chris and Viktor said in unison.

Mila rolled her eyes and buried her face in the towel. “Fine. Your night was so much worse than mine.”

“This is not a contest,” Viktor said. “Yuri and I definitely felt the weirdness from the moon last night.”

“But you two didn’t get ‘zonked,’ did you?” Mila raised an eyebrow at him.

Viktor shook his head. “Chris and I taped up the windows before you got here.”

“Well, your introvertedness saved your ass,” Mila said, rubbing at her arms and waist. “Okay, I need
Chris ended up hauling her up and out, lowering her down to the rug so she could roll onto her stomach. He took the towel from her and helped wipe down her back. It took a few more minutes but finally, **finally**, she transformed again.

“Holy shit,” she said, wobbling to her feet. “That has to be the longest time any of us has spent with a tail.”

“Yep, you win the record.” Viktor ushered her out. “Chris, do your business. Milochka, we’ve got your phone over in the front room. You can help me untape the windows.”

“Blergh,” Mila said, stretching as she followed him down the hall. “Ahh, Makka baby!”

Makkachin jumped up on her, trying to get at her face, and Viktor had to grab his dog’s collar and pull her away before she knocked Mila down. “Good grief, it’s like you have no manners!”

“You probably ignored her all night,” Mila snickered, making for her phone once she spotted it.

“I spent all night pacing and she watched from the couch,” Viktor groused. They both quickly made short work of the sheets taped over the windows as Makkachin made a nuisance of herself underfoot. Viktor eyed her leash, hanging from the coat rack by the door. “I should probably take her out.”

“Hey, no worries, I’m going to go through my missed notifs and get my excuses nailed down,” Mila said, waving him off. “Go take care of your princess.”

Viktor slipped his shoes on and clicked his tongue to catch the poodle’s attention. “All right, here we go. Outside?” he said to Makkachin, who barked excitedly and spun around. “Yep, outside.” He caught her again and clipped her leash on before unlocking his apartment door and letting them out into the hallway. He didn’t bother grabbing his building keys, opting to just follow Makkachin down the stairs and out the door.

Makkachin quickly relieved herself and waited for Viktor to pick up after her before pawing at the front door again – Viktor had kept her up all night with his pacing, and he figured that she most likely wanted to nap some more. He tossed her poop bag into the convenient trash can by the entrance and buzzed his own apartment. It was only a few seconds before either Mila or Chris buzzed them in, and then he and Makka were running up three flights of stairs.

“Okay, let’s get you some food,” he said as he let them back into the unit, and Makkachin perked up again at the word ‘food’. Chris and Mila were both on the couch, and they laughed as Makkachin twirled into the apartment.

Viktor grabbed some hand sanitizer from the little bottle he had on his kitchen counter before pulling open a cabinet door that he’d had to install childproof locks on to keep Makka out of. He scooped a generous helping of her dry food into her bowl and left her munching on it as he flopped onto the loveseat. “So,” he said, looking at Mila.

“Got ahold of Uncle Erik,” she immediately answered. “He wants to know what I ate that gave me food poisoning. I think he’s going to go after the Treasure Box kitchen.”

Viktor winced. “That could be a problem.”

“I had lunch in the cafeteria at Anderson, so I can blame them instead,” Mila said, flapping a hand.

Viktor frowned at her. “That’s still not nice.”
“Yeah, but Anderson’s cafeteria food sucks ass.” Mila waggled her eyebrows.

Viktor conceded to her and yawned. “So do you know who has your stuff?”

“Sara does, and she’s going to meet me outside and drop it off so I can go get my scooter. My first class is at ten, so I’m going to run home and change clothes.” Mila yawned too. “Dammit, Vitya, you gave me your yawn.”

Chris snickered. “I’ll drive you to the boardwalk, I need to stop home and prove I’m still alive. Masu says he missed me. I’m assuming it’s because he wants me to be the one to clean out Julia’s litter box.”

“One of these days, your boyfriend is going to start getting suspicious of you cheating on him or something,” Mila said as her phone buzzed. “Ah,” she added as she checked it. “Sara’s almost here. I feel bad, dragging her out so early.”

“We’re going to try and talk to Nikolai today, after classes wrap up. See what he knows,” Viktor said.

Mila raised her eyebrows. “That could be interesting.”

“Yuri’s going to bring it up with Nikolai. I’m hoping he’s game.”

“Well, I’m game,” Mila said, hopping to her feet. “I want to know why the hell last night went the way it did.”

Chris stretched, his back audibly popping. “I have a surf class and then closing shift at the shop, so I’ll have to pass. Fill me in, though,” he added, gesturing to Mila. “C’mon, Merit. Let’s get you to your valiant steed.”

“Bathroom’s all yours,” Mila tossed over her shoulder at Viktor, who snorted at her before getting up to let them out.

The sun had already been already rising when Mila had woken them all up, so Viktor took advantage of the time to cook himself a breakfast that would get him through the morning and then locked himself in the bathroom for a quick bath.

He typically headed in to work at nine, so once he’d dried off and dressed for the day, he took Makkachin out for the last pee of the morning and then caught a bus to the campus.

“You look like you had a rough night,” Yakov said as soon as he walked into the music department offices at the Ariel. “Are you all right?”

Viktor waved it off. “I had a hard time falling asleep last night, but no worries. Just too much to think about.”

Yakov narrowed his eyes. “Are you feeling alright? You’d tell me if you were feeling overworked…”

“Yakov, don’t worry about it,” Viktor said, dropping his bag on one of the waiting room chairs and rolling his shoulders. “It’s been a weird summer.”

“Hmph,” Yakov sniffed. “You’ve been acting strange ever since you started up work again. And
here I thought a vacation would be good for you.”

“It was good for me,” Viktor said. “I just started going a little stir-crazy while sorting through a week’s worth of mail.”

Yakov winced. “I can take over handling that from now on.”

Viktor raised his eyebrows. “Uh, no you can’t. Isn’t that why you hired a receptionist?”

“Well, yes… but--”

The door to the office swung open and Mrs. Stimler shuffled in wearing a yellow raincoat with pink and turquoise polka dots. It was hideous to look at.

Yakov made a garbled noise and didn’t finish his sentence.

“Mrs. Stimler,” Viktor said slowly. “Why are you wearing a raincoat?” He then realized she had a hairnet on as well.

She blinked at him. “Oh?” Then she beamed. “Yes!”

Yakov buried his face in his hands. “You’ve made your point,” he said, his voice muffled.

Viktor picked up his bag as Mrs. Stimler took her seat behind the desk and pulled Harold the Flamingo/Dog out from underneath it. Yakov eyed the flamingo with a distasteful expression but eventually threw his hands up into the air and disappeared into his office.

The morning picked up from there on out, with Viktor making his rounds to the various choirs doing their rehearsals - Viktor and Georgi typically split the workload during the school year, but this year Georgi had been asked in as a substitute accompanist at Hanon due to the regular pianist’s maternity leave. This meant that Viktor was accompanying for the bulk of the choirs at the Ariel, plus all of his one-on-one students. It left him with barely any time to stop and breathe, much less check his messages. He finally got a chance after the freshmen women’s choir wrapped up their rehearsal.

Merkids

(10:24 AM) Viktor: how’s everyone holding up

(10:25 AM) Yuri: I hate my life

(10:25 AM) Mila: mood

(10:25 AM) Chris: you guys are so dramatic

(10:26 AM) Yuri: I got grounded

(10:27 AM) Mila: everyone is freaking out at me asking if i’m ok and not dying

(10:27 AM) Otabek: well you did leave suddenly without your stuff

(10:28 AM) Yuri: fucking magic

(10:31 AM) Viktor: did you ask your grandfather?
(10:34 AM) Yuri: yeah he said he’d meet us at our house

(10:34 AM) Yuri: after school before my parents get home at 6

(10:34 AM) Yuri: he's got a department meeting today until 5

(10:35 AM) Mila: my last class ends at 3

(10:35 AM) Viktor: I have a rehearsal until 4:30

(10:36 AM) Otabek: I’ll have to catch up with you guys after. I have class until 6

(10:38 AM) Chris: well there’s always this chat ;)

(10:38 AM) Viktor: otabek you’re so responsible

(10:39 AM) Otabek: I’m on scholarship

(10:39 AM) Yuri: shut the fuck up viktor

(10:40 AM) Mila: we’re all terrible students

(10:42 AM) Yuri: speak for yourself im gonna get straight a’s this year

(10:43 AM) Otabek: then go to class and put your phone away :)

(10:43 AM) Mila: OOOOOOHHHHHHHHH

(10:45 AM) Viktor: I need more adult friends

Just after noon, Mila poked her head into the practice room where Viktor was cleaning up the sheet music from his last vocalist’s lesson, looking a bit more put-together than she had upon leaving Viktor’s apartment that morning.

Viktor looked up from the piano. “Hey, all good?”

Mila made a noise that sounded like a strangled elephant.

Viktor winced in sympathy.

“My aunt wants to sue the cafeteria for giving me food poisoning,” Mila groaned, collapsing on the abandoned chair next to the piano. “I may have made a mistake.”

“I told you.”

“You did.” Mila yawned and leaned back against the backrest. “When’s your next rehearsal?”

“Audition upperclassmen choir at 3:30,” Viktor answered. “I was going to try and help in the office until then.”

Mila raised her eyebrows. “Is Yakov paying you for that? Because he should be.”

“Have you been talking to my dad?” Viktor cut himself off as he caught Mila’s yawn. “Dammit.”
“I’ve been yawning all day,” Mila whined. “Did I not sleep at all last night?”

“I mean, we all got sleepy around two in the morning,” Viktor said. “I’m guessing that anyone else would know about the full moon in advance and take these two days off to deal with it and then recover.”

“Anyone else?”

Viktor nodded at Mila’s confused expression. “Yeah, all that research on the island points to there being more merpeople here at some point in history. At least a couple.”

“And Nikolai said that he knew mermaids in Russia at one point,” Mila said slowly. “Which means that there could be more magic coves around the world.”

“I didn’t think this was an isolated incident.” Viktor shrugged. “But it’s probably rare, because some of the stuff I’ve read about doesn’t match our situation at all.”

“Like?”

“There’s like, this weird story about Irish mermaids.” Viktor made a face as he tried to remember it. “They have red hats, or capes, or swimming caps or something, and it lets them dive down deep to their underwater cities?”

Mila’s eyes widened. “But we can go pretty deep, and we breathe underwater.”

“Yeah, but I’m pretty sure we couldn’t go off the shelf and dive down a trench,” Viktor said. “The pressure would crush us.”

“At what point does science take a backseat and smoke a blunt, I wonder?” Mila said, and that made Viktor snort. “No, I’m serious. Viktor. We grow tails.”

“Yep,” Viktor agreed. “It’s wild.”

“Whatever,” Mila said, rolling her eyes and getting to her feet. “I’m going to go to the library and try to get some homework done before Essay Writing.”

“Is Kolya in the library?” Viktor asked, frowning. “Regularly, I mean. I know he’s got that department meeting, but is he usually in the Anderson library?”

“Nah, he works in the archives, in the basement.”

“Right.” Viktor considered it for a moment as something wiggled loose in his memory. “He told Yura that someone was looking in the archives for documents about mermaid sightings on Islaluna, right after the eclipse.”

Mila froze in the doorway. “Someone?”

“Didn’t get a name.” Viktor thought back to the weird encounter at the city library that previous weekend. “And there was that guy who tried to take the Islaluna book from me…”

“The Corned Beef guy?”

“Yeah. Kornblue, I think?”

Mila hummed and drummed her fingers on the doorway. “So this Kornblue guy might be poking around for info on the island… maybe we should track him down and pump him for information.”
“Uh, that sounds like a terrible plan,” Viktor said. “Might as well say, hey! We’re merpeople! Do what you will!” He added jazz hands for effect.

Mila snorted. “Point.” She rolled her head on her neck and settled her bag on one shoulder. “I’ll see you at Yura’s place.”

“Mmkay,” Viktor waved as she left, disappearing to the left and presumably heading towards freedom.

Once he was alone, he was able to clean up fairly quickly and stick all the loose sheet music into his Professional Binder, which was really just a plain black binder that he had specifically for work. He checked that the room was tidy, shut the keyboard case on the upright, and flicked off the lights before leaving the room vacated.

As he let himself into the music department offices, he noticed Mrs. Stimler was seated at her desk, trimming the edges off of envelopes. “Mrs. Stimler, should you be doing that?”

“How am I going to get the letters out?” she asked in an entirely reasonable voice.

Viktor sighed and edged his way around the desk. “Can I borrow the hole punch?”

“I don’t know, can you?” Mrs. Stimler answered in a sing-song voice.

Viktor took a deep breath. “May I borrow the hole punch?”

“What for?”

Viktor wagged the binder at her. “Sheet music.”

Mrs. Stimler frowned. “Only if you return it.”

“Can do,” Viktor said, grabbing the tool off of the desk and retreating to an empty office.

Getting the sheet music neatly hole-punched and arranged in his Professional Binder took less than five minutes, and he made sure to return the puncher to Mrs. Stimler before snagging a pile of last week’s mail from her desk while she was distracted. Thankfully, it appeared that the mail she was massacring was mostly spam. Viktor still made a note to get Yakov out there when he got back to the offices; he was most likely teaching music theory at the moment.

Viktor spent the next couple of hours sorting through the rest of the snail mail backlog, sorting the official letters and forms out of the crap and piling up various checks for the department’s accountant to deal with. He finally got to the bottom of the stack and was shocked to see that it still was not yet time to head over to the choir rooms.

Well, he thought, scooting his desk chair back so he could dig through his bag. I don’t have anything else to do…

He pulled The Lost City out of the bag and flipped it open to his makeshift bookmark, finding his place on the page and picking up where he’d left off.

**CHAPTER ONE: SEA LORE AROUND THE WORLD**

...
The Tani legends are not the only place to find tales of watery shapeshifters and halflings, as the spirit of the mermaid can be seen throughout the world. One could even surmise that every culture of the world, whether it exists still or has long since faded from the pages of history, has had encounters with the fish-tailed seductresses and goddesses of the deep. From the Irish Merrow, with the pig-snouted males and the inhumanely beautiful females, to the Mami Wata from several African-based voodoo practices, the mermaid has tantalized land-dwellers since the very beginning of civilization.

Also common throughout the world are tales of the sea-wives; maidens who rise from the sea like Venus to take human mates. Whether it be willing or not, the sea-longing soon overtakes the sea-wife, who abandons her land family and returns to her origins. Very rare is the sea-wife who resists the call of her homeland and remains with her husband.

The story of Lutey and the Mermaid depicts an encounter that resembles the meeting of man and genie, in which an elderly man aids a despairing mermaid and receives three wishes in return. However, the mermaid is so charmed by her savior that she attempts to persuade him to returning to her underwater home with her, but he resists so as to stay with his wife. The mermaid vows to claim him again in nine years, and every decade hence it is said that one of Lutey’s descendants shall be claimed by the sea.

There are countless tales of an undersea paradise, such as the sunken cities of Atlantis, Lemuria, and the Tani’s Shiirta-Ea. Depicted in Hans Christian Andersen’s fairy tale of ‘The Little Mermaid’ and subsequent visual adaptations, Princess Marina’s home is ruled over by a tempermental Sea King and is filled with merfolk of all sorts. It is thought that these cities are filled with treasure from all over the world, of sunken ships and lost bounties from throughout human history.

Are these all stories of one oceanic city? Or are there many of them? The only ones who know may be long gone, but most of our planet is covered by the sea. It may not be much of a stretch to say that there could be as many of those merfolk cities as there are of ours.

Viktor was able to finish off the chapter, scribbling down a few pertinent points in his faithful notebook, before it was finally time for him to power-walk down to the rehearsal rooms.

Celestino Cialdini was the director in charge of the upperclassmen choirs, and he’d previously worked with a collegiate choir out in Utah, so working with him was usually a very smooth and professional experience. The audition choir met twice a week, on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and they’d spent that first day going over the syllabus and handing out sheet music for the Showcase. There was a small portion of Handel’s Messiah, a version of Ave Maria, and one contemporary piece by a still-active Japanese composer, called Return to the Sea.

Viktor had already learned the piano accompaniment parts for all three songs, so his duty was to provide backup as Celestino led the ladies through each of the three vocal parts, starting with the altos and working across the choir towards the sopranos. On the piano, he previewed how it was supposed to sound, and the altos either learned the harmonies by ear based off Viktor’s playing, or they attempted to sight-read their sheet music. The rest of the choir waited patiently while Celestino drilled the altos until he was satisfied with their progress before moving onto the basses and tenors.

Viktor was thoroughly bored of the Handel by the time Celestino wrapped up on the first sopranos and finally indicated a run-through with all the vocal parts. The nice thing about these kids was that many of them were serious vocalists and had been singing chorally for a long while. Viktor wasn’t conducting at all, but he still felt a swell of pride when the very first run-through sounded quite decent.
The next song, *Ave Maria*, was a more familiar piece and most of the choir at least knew the melody. Celestino only spent a little time on the sopranos before working on the lower parts. The initial run-through for *Ave Maria* definitely was promising; the sopranos mostly had a handle on their part, and the nice thing about Caccini was that he tended to write blocks of chords for his choirs. Once the students had the rhythm down, it was all about staying in tune. The piano part was fairly steady and slow, almost plodding, and Viktor wasn't really being challenged with it.

There were a few stops and restarts, and by the time the end of their allotted practice time rolled around, they had managed to get through the piece twice in full. Celestino announced that they would be tackling the third piece on the following Tuesday, and then he released the kids to whatever their Thursday schedules had in store for them.

“Well, I think we have a good start on things,” Celestino commented as he cleaned up the conductor’s podium. “Between these kids and the chamber chorus, this crop of singers is pretty promising. How are the freshmen doing?”

“Oh, we got a great bunch,” Viktor said, shutting his binder and shaking out his wrists. “Lots of diamonds in the rough.”

“Excellent, I can't wait to see.” Celestino checked his watch- his actual wristwatch -and grimaced. “I've got to run; private lessons. There seem to be a lot more of those this year.”

“We might need to hire more instructors.” Viktor flexed his hand before stretching out his wrists again. He noticed Celestino going quiet and looked up.

Celestino was looking at him with a thoughtful expression. “Viktor, have you ever thought about teaching? Instead of just accompanying, I mean.”

Viktor made a face. “Uh. No, not really? Wouldn’t I need to get a degree for that?”

“It wouldn’t be difficult,” Celestino said. “It’s more of a certification. And you have plenty of experience in a school environment, you’d be able to get tenure if you were brought on as a full-time instructor.”

“I’m sure it’s more complicated than that,” Viktor said. “But it’s definitely something I haven’t thought about, to be honest.”

“It’s worth a think,” Celestino said, tapping his temple. “Okay, I really do need to run. I’ll see you on Monday for the sophomore ladies rehearsal.” He stuck his binder and papers under his arm and ducked out of the practice hall.

Viktor quickly followed after tidying up after himself, and he flicked the lights off and locked the choir room behind him. Then, it was a quick detour to the music department office so he could check in with Yakov before he headed to the campus bus stop to catch the neighborhood route bus out to where the Plisetsky home was located.

Yuri’s parents had settled in a thoroughly suburban area, located fairly close to the schools. These were letting out, and the bus was stopped at almost every crosswalk while kids were ushered across by their parents and guardians. Viktor got off a couple blocks away from his destination and walked the rest of the way.

He came to a stop in front of the Plisetsky home; it looked like he’d beaten Nikolai there. He was contemplating hitting up the In-N-Out a few blocks away when his phone began to buzz with his mother’s ringtone.
Viktor thumbed the *pick up* button and ducked into the shade of a nearby tree. “Hey Mom.”

“Hello, my darling *zaichik*, are you too busy?”

Viktor snorted. “You really need to drop that.”

“What? You *said* you have a life,” Mom retorted, but he could hear the grin in her voice. “But seriously, am I interrupting you? Do you have a student or something?”

“Eh, not at the moment. I’m doing that ‘hurrying up to wait’ thing; I’ve got a few minutes. What’s up?” Viktor pushed his bangs off his forehead where they were starting to stick. He’d started sweating almost immediately after stepping off the bus.

“Oh, nothing much,” Mom said. “Just wanted to check in on you, make sure you were doing okay. I know school started up for you too, but I hope you’re not stressed–”

Viktor made a face. “Did Yakov call you?”

“What, am I not allowed to chat with my friends?” Mom sniffed.

“*Mom.*”

“Fine. Yes, he called and said you’d had a rough night.”

Viktor sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yeah, I did. I had nightmares about sorting the music department’s mail for *hours.*”

Mom let out a bark of laughter, and then she must have covered her phone with her hand because her giggles were muffled. Viktor cracked a smile at that.

“Hey really ought to up your salary for that,” Mom finally said after she’d regained control of her breathing.

“Well, Celestino Cialdini seems to think I could get certified to teach,” Viktor said.

“That would be perfect! You’d be a great teacher, babydoll!”

“Maybe.” Viktor rolled his shoulder, which was still a little stiff from his stint of sleeping on the couch. “I dunno. I’ve never really been one to teach before.”

“You’ll never know unless you try!” Mom sang out. She fell silent for a long moment, and Viktor felt his stomach flip in a spike of nerves. “Darling,” she finally said. “For real, though. Are you doing all right?”

“I swear, I’m fine,” Viktor insisted. He took a deep breath, and got a whiff of the fragrant bushes in a neighbor’s yard. It was strangely grounding. “Last night was just a weird night, and I just rolled through it. I promise.”

“If anything happens, you can tell us, Vitya.” Mom sounded completely serious. “Or, if you don’t feel like telling us, you can always call Dr. Gilbert.”

“Yep. I know.”

“I mean it.”

“I know you do.” Viktor had to smile again. “Thanks for being there for me, Mom.”
Mom tutted in his ear, but it was a fond noise. “Well, anything fun to share?”

“Just more… shenanigans with Mrs. Stimler,” Viktor said with a groan. “Some days I swear she’s with it and then she goes and does something out of a Monty Python skit.”

“Yikes…”

The sound of a car on the road made Viktor look up. “Yep,” he said as he caught sight of Nikolai behind the wheel of the silver Oldsmobile pulling up the driveway to the Plisetsky house. “You said it. Hey, sorry, but my appointment just showed up.”

“No, no, I won’t keep you,” Mom said. “Have a good rest of the day, sweetheart. Remember dinner on Sunday.”

“You got it, for sure.”

“Bring Makkachin. Bye, Vitya.”

“Yep. Love you, bye!” Viktor hung up and shoved his phone into his pocket as the garage door clanked open and the car rolled in. He started to follow up the driveway when the front door slammed open and Yuri poked his head out.

“Where’s Mila?” Viktor asked.

“She’s already here.” Yuri held the door open to let Viktor in. “What took you so long?”

“I had a phone call. Your parents get home at… when?”

“Six,” Yuri said. “Give or take. If Dad gets home first he won’t be too pissed, but Mom will.”

“Right. Let’s do this quickly.” Viktor slipped his shoes off and followed Yuri into the family room.

Mila was sitting cross-legged on the stiff leather couch, scrolling through her phone. She looked up when the guys entered. “You survived chamber choir?”

“Wasn’t chamber today, but yeah. I thought I was going to go insane with the Handel,” Viktor said, collapsing onto the ottoman. “How did you guys do today?”

“I mean, I was fine,” Yuri said, flopping onto the floor and burying his face in a discarded decorative pillow. “I didn’t have any homework or anything. Everyone was asking about Baba.”

“Ivy keeps teasing me because I ‘got food poisoning from soft drinks.’ I’m letting everyone think it was the cafeteria food that did it, it’s just easier.” Mila finished up whatever she was doing on her phone and tossed it into her purse. “Essay writing 101 was fine, and tomorrow’s my day off from classes. I’ll sleep the hell in and try to catch up on my sleep debt.” She yawned again, and Yuri kicked her.

“Stop doing that, I’ll catch it next.”

Viktor snorted before getting cut short by a jaw-cracking yawn of his own. “Jeez, this sucks.”

Yuri growled into his pillow as his grandfather finally made his way down the hallway from the kitchen.

“Kolya,” Viktor said as the elderly man lowered himself into the easy chair in the corner of the room. He switched to Russian. “Did your department meeting go okay?”
“Mostly,” Kolya answered, visibly relaxing. “There was a lot of budget talk.”

“Eew,” Mila said, making the old man laugh.

“Whatever,” Yuri said, rolling onto his back and sitting up. “Dedushka, what happened to us?”

“Last night?” Kolya asked, raising an eyebrow. “I told you. The full moon affected you.”

“No, I mean--” Yuri waved a hand vaguely at himself. “I mean. On the island.”

“Ahh, the eclipse.” Kolya sighed. “I never thought I’d see it happen again. Like this. And I did not think it would happen so close to me again.”

“So you knew other mermaids back in Russia?” Mila asked, leaning forward. “Where are they? What happened to them.”

“You said this always happens in threes,” Yuri added. Viktor had to frown, as this was news to him.

“In my experience, and according to my research into lore, yes.” Kolya nodded. “Magic comes in sets of three, with very rare exceptions.”

“So… this is definitely magic,” Viktor said slowly. “For sure.”

“Well, we humans have called this sort of thing ‘magic’ for many, many centuries,” Kolya answered. “It certainly fits the popular description.”

“You said you’ve done research into this,” Viktor pressed. “I’m not very far into the books I’ve picked up, but I can already tell some of the stuff I’ve found doesn’t apply to us.”

“What have you found?” Kolya asked, sounding interested.

Viktor shrugged. “Lots of weird stuff about weather control and premonitions, stuff like ‘harbingers of doom’ and so on. And then lots of mention of Shiirta-ea.”

“Ah.” Kolya nodded. “Yes, Shiirta-ea is a good start. Any book that mentions that is a good resource. Shiirta-ea most likely existed at one point.”

“In Russia?” Mila made a face.

“No, it was closer to here. Regardless, it’s certainly closer than some of the other legendary sunken cities in mythology. And there’s less evidence in favor of those places.”

“ Mythology is interesting and all, but I don’t care about that,” Yuri interrupted. “How do we stop this from happening?”

Kolya shifted in the chair, making it squeak, and he resettled with a groan. “Ah, Yurachka, if only I knew the answer to that. If such a thing is possible, I have not come across it in all my years of research.”

“How long have you been looking into this?” Viktor asked, reflecting that it had only been a couple weeks since the eclipse.

“Almost fifty years,” Kolya answered, and they all exchanged surprised looks at that statement. “I first encountered mermaids when I was only a little bit older than Yura.”

Viktor glanced at the others, who both seemed hesitant to push any further. “I think we need to know
what you went through,” he finally said. “As much as you can tell us.”

Kolya sighed again. “There is not much to tell.” His gaze grew unfocused, as if he were searching for something in the distance beyond the walls of his home. “It was the height of the Cold War, and my family was well-off enough that we could move to Leningrad. I was sixteen.” He closed his eyes. “There was an eclipse, in 1969. I remember that my teachers were all very excited about it. It fell on our summer vacation, and… there was a girl.”

Viktor and the younger kids were completely silent, and Viktor had to remind himself to breathe.

“A girl?” Yuri repeated.

“Well, three.” Kolya smiled, a tad sadly. “And the sea, of course.”

Viktor’s eyes widened. “Was there a… a lagoon? Like Sertori’s Cove?”

“No,” Kolya said. “The Baltic isn’t really the environment for that. But there was a sea cave, and it was flooded. At least, that’s what I was told.”

Mila made an unreadable noise.

“We weren’t able to find it again, after.” Kolya rubbed the bridge of his nose. “Perhaps it flooded just for the eclipse. Stranger things happened that year.”

“The girl,” Yuri said, leaning forward. “Who is she?”

Kolya’s expression dropped, like water sliding off an oiled cloth. “Her name was Zhenya,” he said. “No, she was not your grandmother.”

Yuri’s mouth dropped open. “So… who--”

Kolya shook his head. “I… she was in my classes,” he finally said. “I only knew her in passing for the longest time. We lived in the same apartment block, I saw her at every meal. She was radiant, and I grew to care for her. And then the eclipse happened, and she began to act strange.”

“The magic,” Mila guessed.

Kolya nodded. “I found out by accident. It was late at night, and she was alone in the communal kitchen after everyone else had gone to bed. She stumbled, and splashed water down her front. I saw her transform. She cried and begged me to not tell anyone, because she was terrified of what could happen to her. I had to pick her up and carry her into a closet so we could dry her off.”

“Which power did she have?” Mila asked.

“The power to move water and shape it,” Kolya said, waving his fingers. “It defied my understanding of physics.”

“So there were others, then?” Viktor tried to get them back on track.

Kolya nodded again. “She and her friends stumbled upon that sea cave, and it was very warm that day, so they took the opportunity to swim and refresh themselves, away from the dangerous undertow that prevents people from swimming in the Baltic. They were in the water when the eclipse happened.” He eyed the three of them. “I think you know what that was like.”

They nodded, wordlessly.
“Her friends were frightened when they found out that I knew their secret, but I swore never to tell anyone. I began to try and discover how this had happened, pouring over every book I could find that seemed relevant. I didn’t find much at all that way,” Kolya admitted with a wry smile. “Just fairy tales, for the most part. I learned more from observing the girls, watching them practice with their new powers. They were truly remarkable, their tails were strong enough to overpower the undercurrents in the sea. We talked about possibly trying to travel to a true ocean, perhaps when we went to university.” Kolya’s gaze grew misty. “Zhenya and I grew close, and I don’t think I could have imagined being happier as a boy coming of age.”

He slowly slumped forward, his expression falling, and Viktor felt a cold spike of fear. “Kolya,” he said in as steady a voice as he could manage. “What happened?”

Kolya’s brow crinkled, like he was remembering something painful. “It was not to be,” he finally said. “It… it all went wrong with a full moon.”

Yuri gasped, a sharp intake of breath, and Mila covered her mouth with her hands. “What do you mean?” Viktor pressed.

“It… it was our fifth full moon. After the first one, it was decided that I would be their caretaker and guardian every month, when the time came. I was the only one left rational when the moon rose, and I learned to recognize the signs. The restlessness and the anxiety. The desire to run into the sea. We were careful, took every precaution.” Kolya took a deep breath. “And then, it wasn’t enough. We thought the power of the moon was decreasing, but it was still strong. All three of them were moonstruck, and while I kept them from going to the water, one of them still ended up splashed. And then a stranger happened upon us.”

“Oh no,” Mila whispered.

“He somehow figured out who the girls were, and then one day at school the three of them were summoned to the administrator’s office. They were taken to a nearby natural history museum by a group of army officers, and no one would tell them what was going on. Then, the man from that night showed up and threw water on them. They were detained, thrown in a tank for observation.” Kolya buried his face in his hands. “No one was told where the girls were. Their parents were terrified. My worst fears were coming true, until they finally stumbled home.”

“So they escaped,” Viktor said, breathing a sigh of relief.

“Barely,” Kolya answered. “They were able to displace the water in the tank and create enough confusion so they could dry off and escape. They had to use their powers, which made the army officers more determined to recapture them.” His shoulders drew up in a hunch. “They told me this when we were all able to reunite, down the shore from the city. But they knew it was only a matter of time before the military showed up at our homes to take them away again. We had already tried all sorts of methods to stop the transformations or remove them entirely, but nothing had worked. We knew so little… it was the absolute worst feeling, complete helplessness.”

“Could they have… gone to their parents?” Mila asked.

“We considered it, but that would have made their families complicit in keeping them out of the government’s hands. The Soviet Union was very serious in the arms race, and any advantage they could get over the Americans was worth killing for. If the girls’ families had hidden them, that would have been considered akin to treason.” Kolya’s voice hitched. “So… we realized that they had to run.”

It became so silent that Viktor could swear he was hearing the buzzing of the universe in the room.
“R...run?” Yuri finally asked in a small voice.

“They said their goodbyes to their families, telling them nothing -- like it was just an ordinary day -- and then we went to the sea. Zhenya gave me one final kiss, and they walked into the water forever. They said they were going to swim up past the Danish islands and try to reach open waters. I… I don’t know if they made it.”

“No…” Mila breathed, her hands clasped over her mouth.

Kolya nodded, his face crumpling. “I never saw any of them again. Their families were heartbroken, and the military interrogated our class. No one except me ever knew why the government was so determined to find these three runaway girls. They had to give up after a year of fruitless searching, and the year after that was when my family moved back to Moscow.”

Viktor was numb. “But… you kept searching.”

Kolya sighed. “I… I found mention of underwater cities in my studies in Moscow, during my university years. I focused on becoming an academic as best as I could with the limited resources, so I could keep searching for something, anything that could explain what had happened that summer. It wasn’t until I traveled outside of Russia that I discovered Shiirta-ea. I became obsessed with finding out where it was. It was my secret pet project for decades, even as I married and became a father. And a grandfather,” he added, smiling at Yuri. Yuri didn’t even react, his already-pale face even whiter than usual. “It’s no coincidence that I became a librarian at Anderson, so I could continue the search. I was transferred into the archives a few years into working here and that was when I discovered Dr. Chadwick’s works.”

“Richard Chadwick?” Viktor interrupted, shocked. “The Lost City? I have that book, I picked it up from the library last week.”

“Yes. Dr. Chadwick was the one who got the closest. Perhaps he also knew of some merfolk, created by the last eclipse in this place.” Kolya looked up at them. “He came to the same conclusion as me-- that Shiirta-ea was rumored to have been nearby, just off this coast. And that the Sea Folk of the Tani folklore were connected to Islaluna. Imagine my shock, to discover that my son had settled in a town so closely connected to the merfolk mythology and what I came to know as the Moonchildren.

“But Dr. Chadwick was just one voice out of many when it came to sea folklore, and he was drowned out by those other, more fanciful voices. Tales of besotted sea princesses living happily ever after… His work became buried in other more pressing issues, forgotten in favor of species discoveries and environmental activism. And I realized, after a long time, that that was for the best.” He heaved another great sigh. “After all, how is the American government any better than the Soviets? Could you imagine how the military would react to the discovery of real magic in this world?”

Viktor shuddered, as did Mila and Yuri.

“Exactly. Better to leave the knowledge at rest, forgotten.” Kolya frowned. “Until this eclipse. That man, the one who demanded I turn over all of the archived works from Dr. Chadwick, he was the first in a long time to even bring up that name.”

“Kornblue?” Mila asked.

Kolya blinked at her. “I’m afraid I did not get the man’s name. But he was quite loud and flustered, and attempted to argue with me many times.”
“Sounds like Kornblue,” Viktor agreed.

Kolya frowned. “You… you’ve encountered him?”

“He tried to take Dr. Chadwick’s book from me at the library,” Viktor said.

“That’s… that’s not a good sign,” Kolya said as Yuri’s phone began to buzz.

Yuri checked it and grimaced. “Mom’s on her way back, and she wants me to start dinner,” he grumbled.

“Crap,” Viktor muttered as they all got to their feet. “There’s still so much to go over--”

“Find me in the archives,” Kolya told him. “We can discuss more. I will share everything I know with you three. And your friends.” He looked at them each in turn. “Who else knows?”

“Just Chris and Beka,” Mila said.

“And you trust them?”

“I trust Chris with my life,” Viktor said. “And you’ve known Beka for a while.”

Kolya nodded in satisfaction. “We must keep this knowledge confined to as small a group as possible. Too many people knowing could be very dangerous.”

“Loose lips sink ships,” Mila quipped.

Yuri and Viktor rolled their eyes, but Kolya laughed. “That’s the right idea,” he said as Yuri began to shepherd Viktor and Mila out into the foyer.

As Viktor and Mila were putting their shoes back on, Yuri leaned against the door. His face was drawn in deep contemplation, forehead furrowed.

“Well,” Mila said. “That was informative.”

“There’s a Navy base nearby,” Yuri said. “And an Army base up north.”

Viktor and Mila both looked up at Yuri in unison. “Yep,” Mila said carefully.

“What if—” Yuri began to say, but Viktor shook his head and cut him off.

“Yura. This isn’t the Cold War. And this is a vacation hotspot, it’s not like we’re going to have Navy patrols in the waters.”

“But that doesn’t mean something bad won’t happen,” Yuri insisted, fidgeting. “You heard Dedushka’s story.”

“We’ve got three people looking out for us,” Mila reminded him. “And we’ve got a little more information on our side now. We’re gonna be all right.”

Yuri didn’t look convinced, but he still ushered them out so they could start heading towards the nearest bus stop.

“Well,” Viktor said as they meandered down the block. “That was…”

I’m at a loss.”

“Definitely worth processing,” Viktor agreed. “I’m kind of at a loss too. This is… wild.”

“And I thought the whole ‘grow a tail when we get wet’ thing couldn’t get weirder,” Mila said. “What next?”

“Well… I could comb the Dr. Chadwick book and see if Kolya confirms with anything I find,” Viktor dug in his bag for it. “I’m still working on getting to the good stuff, but I think Dr. Chadwick’s setting up a comparison.”

“What? A comparison?” Mila made a face at him.

“I’ll explain in the chat,” Viktor decided, flipping through the little hardcover book. “But if Kolya says this book is accurate, I’m going to mine every bit of useful info out of it that I can.”

“Get down with your bad self,” Mila said, patting Viktor’s shoulder. “Nerd.”

Viktor sniffed at her, indignant, and she snorted as she left him at the bus stop, since she lived fairly close by. As she disappeared down the street, Viktor settled against the sign post and flipped the book open, finding his marker and picking up where he’d left off.

By the time the bus arrived to take him back downtown, Viktor had made some headway into chapter two- “THE MYTHOLOGY OF THE MOON ISLAND” -and read about the Tani creation myths. While it was fascinating from a folklore standpoint, it didn’t really talk about merpeople much. Viktor was eager to get to that part, but he stuck his bookmark back between the pages so he could board the bus and head home.

(7:23 PM) Viktor changed chat name to Moonchildren

...

(7:46 PM) Viktor: and that’s all dr chadwick said so far about mermaids in other myths

(7:47 PM) Viktor: but kolya said something about this book being accurate and he was there. he’s seen this before. I say we can trust his word

(7:47 PM) Viktor: so what are we all thinking

(7:47 PM) Mila: it’d be cool to control the weather :3

(7:47 PM) Viktor: oh my god that would be the last thing we need

(7:48 PM) Yuri: this is insane

(7:48 PM) Yuri: and!!! iT TURNS OUT!!!! DA N G ER O US

(7:49 PM) Chris: this is wild man

(7:49 PM) Otabek: I’ve been to the Baltic, mad props to those girls if they managed to swim it

(7:49 PM) Mila: omg i’ve heard stories
(7:49 PM) Viktor: ??????

(7:50 PM) Chris sent a photo

(7:50 PM) Chris: wow that looks gnarly af

(7:50 PM) Otabek: yep

(7:50 PM) Otabek: kudos to anyone that can navigate that from underwater

(7:51 PM) Mila: well maybe the undertow would help?

(7:51 PM) Yuri: I FEEL LIKE WE ARE IGNORRING THE REAL PROBLEM HERE

(7:51 PM) Yuri: MAINLY THAT THEY GOT CAUGHT

(7:51 PM) Yuri: AND WE LIVE NEAR AN ARMY BASE

(7:52 PM) Mila: yura please chill for a second

(7:52 PM) Mila: think about it. why would the army be looking for mermaids?

(7:52 PM) Yuri: okay fine the NAVY

(7:52 PM) Chris: i’m inclined to agree with yuri here

(7:52 PM) Chris: mr plisetsky also said there are records in the archives right? someone official has DEFINITELY seen them

(7:53 PM) Viktor: tomorrow I’m going to visit Kolya in the archives and see what else is there

(7:53 PM) Viktor: i’ve been meaning to do that and i’ll have a ton of free time tomorrow afternoon

(7:53 PM) Chris: hey!!!!! what about that necklace!!!!

(7:53 PM) Mila: ??????????? necklace????

(7:53 PM) Otabek: ?

(7:53 PM) Yuri: what?

(7:54 PM) Viktor: oh shit i completely forgot about that

(7:54 PM) Chris: lol typical

(7:54 PM) Viktor: shut up

(7:54 PM) Chris: just saying

(7:54 PM) Yuri: WHAT NECKLACE

(7:55 PM) Viktor: I found it in the lagoon

(7:55 PM) Viktor: and it does have a moon on it
(7:55 PM) Yuri: HOW THE FUCK DO YOU FORGET THAT

(7:55 PM) Viktor: a lot of stuff happened stfu

(7:55 PM) Mila: yuri katsuki happened lmao

(7:56 PM) Chris: omg look at how much he’s typing

(7:56 PM) Otabek: yura

(7:57 PM) Yuri: WHAT THE FUCK VIKTOR STOP THINKING WITH UR DIK

(7:58 PM) Viktor: im going t bed


(7:58 PM) Mila: AMAZING

(7:59 PM) Viktor: GO TO BED GOODNIHGT

(8:00 PM) Otabek: :thumbsup:

(8:00 PM) Yuri: YOU DUMBASS

(8:00 PM) Chris: yea go to bed kids

(8:00 PM) Yuri: FUCK YOU

(8:00 PM) Otabek: yura calm down

(8:00 PM) Mila: yura chill

(8:01 PM) Yuri: MAKE ME

(8:02 PM) Viktor: I’ll go to the archives tomorrow i’ll bring the necklace GO THE FUCK TO SLEEP

(8:02 PM) Mila: i just heard that in sam jackson’s voice :laughing:

(8:02 PM) Viktor: i give up. goodnight.

Chapter End Notes

Okay okay how we all doing? Good? Good. I'm so happy to be here with you all. What did you all think of the concert? Amazing, right? :D

SO I WOULD LIKE TO GIVE A BIG THANKS TO SOME FOLKS. Firstly, Dasha/dyeingdoll and Masha for their irreplaceable help with the Soviet Union stuff, even though I didn't end up doing an actual flashback like I thought I would. Still, I got to learn a lot and I'm glad for it!
Secondly, to some LOVELY INDIVIDUALS who drew art for me, I AM SO BLESSED!

Here's my ABSOLUTELY GORGEOUS AND EPIC commission from Mary, AKA my sea-wife. Please go commission her, or give her your money in general.

ART FROM MY LOVELY AMAZING BETA, GAB. Doesn't Mila look wonderful? She looks like a Disney princess! ;A;

Some HILARIOUS art from my sweet friend Flei, and I can't say too much about it because... I'm writing it in. Later. SHHH. DON'T LOOK AT ME.

You might notice that this is now a series! The second fic is a collection of shorts I've written both on Tumblr as prompts (which I still take!) and now some original ones! If you'd like to prompt me, feel free! Leave a comment here on AO3, or come and talk to me on Twitter or Tumblr! (Be warned that Tumblr has been eating asks, but you can always respond on posts and I'll see them!)

For more content, check out the official AU tag or even the Pinterest page.

I'm already started on the next chapter (along with a few OTHER exciting projects) and I'm looking forward to what the rest of this month may bring! (Other than... me getting another year older...) Please leave me your thoughts in the comments, I love reading what you have to say!

Until next time, I'm going to be over here screaming about ICE ADOLESCENCE BYE

Next time on Saltwater Melodies: Viktor takes the necklace to Kolya. Shenanigans ensue. WHAT COULD IT BE? Find out by poking me for updates!
makes you wonder why you even try

Chapter Summary

Yuri thinks he's getting back to his regular life. He's very wrong.

Chapter Notes

MAN this took a long time to write. Thank you to everyone who's been with me since the beginning and those of you who have just found this fic, thank you for your patience and your support, and extra thanks for all the kind words and comments!

Shout-out to the awesomest beta, Gabapple!! Check out NLA and Vitya Diaries for canon goodness!

Chapter title pulled from Hard Times by Paramore

See the end of the chapter for more notes

HANON SUXX SQUAD

(2:55 PM) Leo: I have discovered the Worst Thing Ever

(2:56 PM) Lucy: pics or it didnt happen

(2:57 PM) Leo sent a photo

(2:57 PM) Guang-hong: i actually had those before n theyre actually good

(2:58 PM) Yuri: UHHHHHHHHHHH

(2:58 PM) Yuri: that is NOT a combination i wld willingly put in my mouth

(2:58 PM) Ivy: @Leo I DARE U TO BUY THAT AND EAT IT

(2:59 PM) Leo: lol not falling for that

(2:59 PM) Lucy: I double dare you

(2:59 PM) Leo: hell no

(3:00 PM) Guang-hong: popcorn.gif

(3:00 PM) Amy: buy them and bring them to me, i’m starvinggggg

(3:00 PM) Lucy: seriously
“Oh my god,” Izzy said as Allie turned into the Anderson/Ariel parking lot. “I can’t believe there are still tourists hanging around, clogging up the roads and everything.”

“How can you tell they’re tourists?” Allie asked.

The car pulled to a stop and they all waited for college students to cross in front of her - a good dozen feet away from the actual crosswalk, which had an actual stop sign in front of it, Yuri noted.

“You just know,” Izzy grumbled, drumming her fingers on the dashboard.

On Yuri’s left, Linda - a trumpet player in the same audition band as Izzy and Allie - snorted. “I mean, they generally kind of wander around with a confused look on their faces.”

“And take pictures of everything. And pose next to surfboards. And only ever shop at tourist traps,” Izzy added.

Linda nodded sagely. “Plus, the way some of them dress screams ‘from a state that starts and ends with a vowel,’ you know?”

Yuri made a face as Izzy turned around in her seat. “Uh, there are only, like, two states that might fit that description,” she said.

“Three,” Allie said. “Idaho, Ohio, Iowa… wait, Indiana--”

“Why are we talking about this?” Yuri cut in. “Who cares? There are tourists every year, you get used to it.”
“Alabama!” Allie exclaimed.

“Alabama is terrifying and they wouldn’t come here anyway,” Linda said. “Florida’s right there, and they sell ‘possum on a stick next to the highway.”

“Eew,” the other three all yelled at once, and Yuri threw a wadded-up napkin at Linda.

“I’ve seen it,” she insisted. “It smells just as bad as you’d think.”

“Change of topic!” Allie said, pulling into the parking lot and circling around, looking for a space. “Goddammit--”

“Let us out by the entrance and we’ll take your case in,” Izzy said, and Allie pulled up next to the Ariel just like she had the last couple of times that Yuri had driven with her.

“This won’t get better when I’m finally going here, will it?” Allie groused as she popped the trunk so everyone could grab their instruments.

“Probably not,” Yuri said as Izzy shut the trunk and gave it a pat.

Allie sighed and rolled her windows up as she pulled away.

“Inside,” Linda said, taking off for the front entrance. “Inside, inside, inside inside--”

“She spent the summer in Shanghai,” Izzy said to Yuri as they followed after her. “I guess it’s even hotter than here.”

“That makes absolutely no sense,” Yuri pointed out as they dodged college students exiting the building. “She should be able to handle this heat better.”

“They don’t really do air conditioning in a lot of Asia,” Izzy said. “At least, as far as I know.”

“Oh, god,” Linda said as they caught up with her in the stone doorway to the conservatory, right by the entrance to the auditorium. “It’s so hot.”

Yuri rolled his eyes as they pushed the doors open and stepped into the atrium, where the air conditioning hit them like a wall of ice. Linda sighed in relief, but then quirked her head as they all heard soft piano music drifting out into the round hall. “Is that Yuuri playing? Sorry, the other Yuuri.”

Yuri frowned. “Seriously? Why is everyone obsessed with that nerd?”

Izzy was about to argue with him when Linda returned, looking shocked. “That is Georgi,” Linda said, dazed. “Holy crap, I didn’t think he could play like that.”
“Play like what?” Yuri rolled his eyes.

“All… soft and sweet, like. Romantic songs.”

That could only mean one thing. “Oh, shit. He’s in love again.” Yuri groaned, a full-body motion that had him sagging backwards on his heels. “I hope Yakov knows about this.”

“That bad?” Izzy asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Every time he has a bad breakup, he goes all Dramatic Goth on us and completely loses his mind.” Yuri shoved Linda’s trumpet back at her. “It was funny the first couple of times, but now it’s just annoying.”

“That actually explains a lot,” Izzy said.

“I hope this time lasts longer.” Linda made a face that clearly said she didn’t think it would.

Yuri snorted and they set off towards the practice rooms. “Well. I could have told you that wasn’t Katsuki. He’s my accompanist for the showcase, and I’m supposed to meet him in a few minutes.”

“Lucky!” both Linda and Izzy said, making him jump in surprise.

“Listen, Yuuri is the best,” Linda added. “He’s super sweet and easy to work with, and he doesn’t ogle me when he’s accompanying me.”

“That’s because you’re totally not his type,” Izzy giggled.

“Easy to work with?” Yuri said, rolling his eyes. “Ugh, he’s such a doormat.”

“You be nice to Yuuri Katsuki, he’s a departmental treasure and I will fight you if you make him cry.” Izzy gave Yuri a very serious Death Glare. “I know how to take down a dude.”

“Seconded,” Linda added.

Yuri stared at them both. “It’s like you’re brainwashed alien drones or something.”

“I gotta go, my lesson starts soon,” Linda said, saluting them before turning and heading further into the practice room block.

“I’ll just wait for Allie, like usual,” Izzy said, sitting cross-legged against the wall and setting the two cases down next to her. “Maybe the school should add more parking.”

“Maybe they should do like a parking structure, for students and campus guests only,” Yuri suggested only half-sarcastically. He hefted his case and jerked his thumb down the hallway that Linda had taken. “Have fun waiting.”

“Be nice to Yuuri!” Izzy shouted after him, and he rolled his eyes as he walked.

They had agreed to meet in the same practice room as they had on Wednesday… and it had only been two days since that full moon fiasco, but Yuri was determined to get his life back to normal. Even if it meant dealing with wussy pianists after school.

Mom was still pissed at Yuri for going out, so Yuri was quietly living with his punishment until she’d decided that he’d been disciplined enough. It could end up being a week… or longer. Yuri didn’t want to push things, so he just grit his teeth and bore it.
No video games, no friends, and no internet meant that Yuri had a lot of free time. He’d finished his AP History and Spanish assignments for the next week or so, gotten ahead in the assigned reading (*Lord of the Flies* was awful and full of asshole characters; knowing the ending didn’t make it any better), and practiced his violin parts until his fingers bled. Mom had ended up pounding on his door to tell him to stop playing around eight at night, and then he’d played Candy Crush on his phone until he began to feel sleepy. It was *boring*, and honestly Yuri had no idea how people had survived without the internet before.

*Probably made being grounded even worse,* he realized, and he had to shudder at the thought. He found the practice room and knocked, and was only a little surprised when he heard Lilia’s voice telling him to enter.

“Good afternoon, Yura,” Lilia said as Yuri let himself in. “Are you prepared to begin rehearsals today, or do you need a bit of assistance in the process?”

Yuri eyed the other occupant of the room, the ‘other Yuri’ already seated at the piano with his little dog curled up on the floor next to the bench.

“Hmph,” Yuri said instead of giving a real answer.

Katsuki winced.

“It’s only your second session together. I’m not expecting you to be incredibly prepared yet,” Lilia said as she took the empty seat next to the door. “I have a selection of songs if you are having trouble—”

“It’s not that,” Yuri interrupted her, and she raised her eyebrows at him. “Every time we pick something, he changes his mind.”

“I do?!”

Lilia snorted. “Have you narrowed it down at all?”

Katsuki opened his mouth to answer, but he was stopped by a knock at the door.

Yuri wanted to scream when Viktor was the one who poked his head in, blinking when he saw the occupants. “Oh. Yura, hey.” His blue eyes fell on Katsuki, who immediately stiffened. “Yuuri! Hi again!”

“Viktor, did you just come in to visit?” Lilia asked curtly, crossing her arms.

“Oh, no, of course not,” Viktor said, pushing the door all the way open. “Yakov has a thing. Stuff related to the harpsichord program, or something related to the harpsichord. I forget.”

Lilia rubbed her temples and gracefully rose from her seat, brushing past Yuri and nudging Viktor aside. “Maybe you can assist them in choosing their Fall Showcase music. I’ll be back shortly.”

She disappeared into the hallway, and Viktor stepped into the practice room with a blank look on his face. “You haven’t picked out your piece yet?”

“Yeah,” Yuri grumbled, setting his violin on his chair so he could unlatch the case and start getting it ready.

“Wait, you *have* picked out your piece?” Viktor blinked. “Or…?”
“Have not,” Yuri said.

“Why not?” Viktor asked. “You had, what, two hours to figure it out?” That was typically how long it took for Yuri to decide on a piece when Viktor was accompanying him.

“Is that really enough?” Katsuki muttered from behind Yuri. There was a little tinkling noise as his service dog shifted and his tags clinked together.

“Look,” Yuri said, whirling on the pianist. “How many times did we decide on something only for you to get cold feet and try something else?”

“Look,” Katsuki echoed him, poking one of the upright’s keys. “I can’t help but hear the same four chords every time I play through some of these pieces over and over again. I can’t live with myself if I perpetuate the Four Chords of Pop.”

“The what?” Yuri and Viktor said at the same time, probably wearing the same expressions.

“The Four Chords of Pop,” Katsuki repeated. “You know.” He spread his fingers over the keys and played four very familiar chords.

“That’s… that’s a song,” Yuri squinted.

“That’s *Don’t Stop Believin’*,” Viktor said, snapping his fingers and making Katsuki’s toy poodle look at him.

“No, that’s not it,” Yuri rolled his eyes.

“It probably *is* both of the songs you’re thinking of,” Katsuki said, playing the chords again in a different order.

“That one Rihanna song,” Yuri realized. “That’s what it is.”

“It’s every song ever,” Katsuki said, switching up the chords again.

“That’s… that’s Pachelbel’s *Canon in D,*” Viktor blinked, tilting his head. “Isn’t it?”

“It’s half of it,” Katsuki hummed. “Those four chords are in almost every majorly popular song on the radio and once you hear it you can’t unhear it.” He stopped playing and ducked his head, like he was embarrassed. “I actually stole most of that joke, to be honest.”

“Joke?” Viktor repeated in confusion.

Katsuki dug around in his pocket and pulled out his phone. “One second,” he said, waking it up. “You’ll get a kick out of this.”

A few minutes later, and the three of them were all crowded around the piano, peering at the tiny screen as a college-age dude with a guitar lost his mind on stage over Pachelbel’s *Canon in D.* And, because they were all musicians, it was *hilarious.* Because it made sense.

“Oh my god, this is so true,” Yuri said, pressing his fist to his mouth to contain his laughter. “This is so legit.”

“This video is over ten years old,” Katsuki said. “I have heard at least one song per day with the Four Chords of Pop in it. I cannot escape it. I will *never* escape it.” He slowly looked up at Viktor and Yuri, his face creepily blank. “And now, neither will you.”
“Oh fuck, this is some of that The Game bullshit,” Yuri realized, glaring at Katsuki. “Fuck you, I was minding my own business here, staying in my lane, and you dropped this on me.”

Katsuki snickered.


“Don’t ask,” Yuri said, cutting Katsuki off before he could presumably explain. “It’s stupid.”

That apparently made Viktor even more curious, but before he could ask again Lilia was opening the door and letting herself back in. “Vitya, Yakov needs you now.”

Viktor eyed her warily. “...why?”

Yuri flashed back to Mrs. Stimler and the scissors, but Lilia shook her head. “Spanish-speaking parents,” she said, and gestured out the door.

Viktor sighed and squatted down to pat Katsuki’s dog on the head before straightening up, and Yuri heard his back crack a couple times as he did. “Fine,” Viktor grumbled as he left, Lilia shutting the door behind him.

Yuri stared at the closed door, and Lilia frowned at him. “Yura, what is that expression? Why are you making that face?”

“Is he acting weird lately?” Yuri asked in Russian, and Katsuki blinked up at him in confusion and a little annoyance.

“I suppose he has been, but it’s Vitya. Back to English,” she went on, switching languages. “It’s rude, Yura.”

Yuri cast a narrowed-eyed glare at Katsuki, who looked even more bewildered. Somehow, though, Viktor was acting weird because of the other pianist.

He had asked about Katsuki on the night of the full moon. And gotten flustered.

The memory of Georgi playing soft romantic music just a few minutes earlier hit him. Oh god. Two Russian idiots falling in love?

This semester was going to be awful.

“Right, despite your reassurances that you don’t need my help with piece selection, I retrieved a few acceptable ideas from my office,” Lilia interrupted his thoughts, brandishing a folder of sheet music.

“You know what would be cool to do,” Yuri said, picking up his violin and settling it against his shoulder. “The Devil’s Trill Sonata.”

“All seventeen minutes of it?” Katsuki asked, raising his eyebrows and adjusting his glasses.

“No, out of the question,” Lilia said, cutting off any potential answer from Yuri. “An excerpt, maybe, but not the whole composition.”

“No Four Chords of Pop in that one,” Yuri added, bracing his chin on the chinrest.

Katsuki snorted, and Lilia raised her eyebrows.

“It would be in time for Halloween, too,” Yuri said, fiddling with the tuning. “Just sayin’.”
“Well, Mr. Katsuki,” Lilia turned to the pianist. “Would you be willing to accompany that? It seems Mr. Plisetsky is set on it.”

“I’m fine with learning the accompaniment,” Katsuki said.

“Well, that makes everything a lot easier,” Lilia sat down again. “I do not have an arrangement of *The Devil’s Trill* in my possession right now, but I can obtain one. Which section of it would you both be willing to learn?”

“The part that everyone knows,” Yuri said.

Katsuki raised his hand. “There are a few of those.”

“The fast part.”

“Again, there are at least two parts that I can think of,” Katsuki said.

Yuri glared at him and grabbed his bow, sloppily scraping out the memorable violin part that he had been thinking of. Katsuki’s service dog looked up at him in confusion at the sudden noise.

“That part,” Yuri said once he’d finished, lowering his instrument.

Katsuki held up his hands in surrender and his dog settled back down. “Okay, I can learn that.”

“That selection tends to run between three and four minutes depending on the violinist,” Lilia said. “That will fit in the schedule for the showcase.”

So they now had the Lilia Baranovskaya Seal of Approval. Yuri grinned. He’d been wanting to learn *The Devil’s Trill* since he’d heard it a couple years ago, and had mostly learned what he already knew either by ear or self-teaching off the internet.

Lilia snapped him out of his gloating. “However, I do want you to have alternates. Just in case.”

“In case of what?” Yuri demanded.

Lilia shrugged as Katsuki spoke up. “I have a few ideas of songs that can be adapted, if you’d want to--”

“Adapt?” Lilia asked.

“I’ve transcribed music before, and there are a lot of really good songs with vocal parts that can easily be switched over to violin. Lindsey Stirling does it all the time.”

Yuri sat up in his chair. “Oh my god I could totally learn a Lindsey Stirling song.”

“Yura, you already did one last year,” Lilia said. “Variety, please.”

“But!” he whined.

“There’s Emilie Autumn,” Katsuki cut in, pulling out his phone again. “She’s usually more industrial, but her first album was more traditional and she did an instrumental one too--”

“Who?” Yuri wrinkled his nose as Katsuki’s phone began to play a song by an artist he’d never heard of before.

It certainly sounded interesting, but that was because of the singer and her style. Yuri glanced at
Lilia, whose blank face could have meant either distaste or approval; he wasn’t really that good at interpreting those expressions yet.

“No?” Katsuki asked, and Lilia shook her head. “Okay, there’s one other I had in mind?”

Lilia raised her eyebrows, and Katsuki tapped his phone’s screen to switch songs.

This one started off with a piano bit, and the violin that came in was… haunting. Yuri found himself liking it against his will, even if the lyrics were a bit too girly.

“I still want to do Devil’s Trill,” he said, though.

“We can do that,” Katsuki agreed.

“Discuss alternatives, just to be safe,” Lilia said, gathering up her sheet music. “I’ll find the sonata for you, Yura. Mr. Katsuki, if you’d like to give me a copy of whatever you’ve already gotten written, I would appreciate it by the end of next week.”

“Of course, ma’am,” Katsuki nodded.

“But it sounds like you’re going with The Devil’s Trill, then?”

“Since I’m the one performing in the Showcase, isn’t it up to me?” Yuri said, making a face.

“This is a joint assignment between you two,” Lilia said, raising her eyebrows. “Did Mr. Katsuki not explain that to you?”

“We kind of skipped introductions and got straight to business last time,” Katsuki said, putting his phone away. “And Yuri wasn’t feeling well.”

“I was fine,” Yuri muttered, grimacing at the memory of the full moon mania.

“Well, okay.”

“In any case,” Lilia fixed Yuri with one of her patented You’d Better Listen glares. “Mr. Katsuki here is accompanying you as extra credit for his music classes, Yura. So of the two of you, he has more academic investment in this collaboration. I expect you to treat it like your own assignments that you would receive from Ms. Atkinson.”

Yuri only barely kept himself from rolling his eyes. As long as he got to play The Devil’s Trill, he’d be willing to play ball with Katsuki. “Yes ma’am.”

“Very well. Since I don’t yet have your chosen sheet music, I think you can safely end this session early for today unless you’d like to go through what I have.”

“Can’t hurt,” Katsuki said agreeably. “I don’t have anything important to do.”

Yuri considered it: he could cut his free time short and either take a bus home or go and wait for Dedushka to finish up work in the archives… it wasn’t like he’d be allowed to do anything else until he had his mom’s permission, and Beka was already at work for the night anyway. Mila had the day off, and all his other friends were off-limits until he was ungrounded.

“I guess we could go through the other sheet music,” he said, only a little grumpy.

Lilia handed the folder over to Katsuki and took her leave, closing the door behind her.
“No Mozart,” Yuri said immediately. “I’m already doing that in Orchestra.”

Katsuki thumbed through the folder and shook his head. “No Mozart.”

“Good.”

“There’s some Bach,” the pianist went on. “Tchaikovsky, hm. That might be fun. Oh. Oh.” He pulled out one and stared at it. “No.”

Yuri put down his violin so he could step up next to the bench and look at the sheet music. “Oh my god,” he said when he read Canon in D, Johann Pachelbel. “Nope. Hard pass.”

“Hard pass,” Katsuki echoed, shoving the violin music along with the accompanying piano sheet into the back of the folder. “See? We will never escape.”

“Ugh,” Yuri said, moving back to his violin. “Seriously. You ruined my life.”

“Sorry,” Katsuki said, not sounding sorry at all. “Ah! This Schumann might be nice…”

It turned out that Katsuki was pretty good at sight-reading music, and he demo’d a few of Lilia’s songs, playing the violin’s part first and adding in bits of the piano. They were all pretty basic, and not awful or anything, but Yuri had been playing stuff like that for years. At least The Devil’s Trill was spooky and kind of dramatic. Viktor would have had a ball with the piano part for that.

Still, when Lilia came back at the end of their allotted time, they’d set aside one piece - the Tchaikovsky - as a ‘maybe’. She was pleased with that and released them with both that piece and the promise of having The Devil’s Trill for them the following week.

“We’re lucky that everyone is so relaxed about student choice here,” Katsuki said as he shouldered his bag and clipped the leash onto his service dog’s harness. “My cousin hasn’t been allowed to pick out her own music ever.”

“Where does she go?” Yuri asked, only a little distracted with putting away his violin.

“Oh, she’s in school in Japan,” Katsuki ducked his head. “In Hasetsu, Kyushu.”

Yuri snorted. “That explains it.”

“It’s not always like that, I think. I mean, I wouldn’t know…”

“Whatever. This is extra credit for you, anyway.” Yuri made a face at him. “Why would you do extra work? Are you failing your core classes?”

Katsuki shook his head. “I’ve done accompaniments since freshman year. I like doing it. Besides, I’m minoring in music. Might as well get involved in the department.”

Yuri made a face. “Yeah. Sure.”

Katsuki raised his eyebrows. “Do you even like playing violin? Or is it an obligation for you?”

“I like it fine, I just like picking my own pieces, is all.” Yuri hefted his case off the chair and slung his school bag over his shoulder. “My mom especially prefers some stuff over others. Like Mozart over Lindsey Stirling.”

“You’re a fan, huh?” Katsuki asked, wrapping his dog’s leash around his wrist.
Yuri glared at him. “Uh, yeah? Why wouldn’t I be?”

“No offense, I like her too!” Katsuki held up his hands again, and Yuri backed off a little. “I think it’s pretty cool that she can dance and play violin at the same time. God knows if I tried that with my ukulele, I’d mess up.”

“Your what?”

Katsuki repeated the name of the instrument. “Ukulele.”

Yuri blinked at him. “What the fuck is that?”

Katsuki mimed strumming a guitar. “Hawaiian string instrument.”

“Ukulele? How the hell did you say it?”

“It’s pronounced oo-koo-le-le.”

Yuri blinked. “Then why does everyone say it like ‘yooka-laylee’?”

“Because white people,” Katsuki answered, smiling angelically.

Yuri thought about arguing, but decided against it. “Whatever.”

“So…”

Yuri looked at the pianist expectantly as he waffled for a minute. “Yes?” he finally asked, only a little sarcastic.

“I heard you guys went out to Islaluna last week, during the eclipse?” Katsuki played with the leash in his hand. “What was that all about?”

Yuri groaned and rolled his eyes. “Viktor got it in his head that it would be fun, and Chris Giacometti has a boat. Boat broke down and we got stuck for a while. Why, did you want to come too?”

Katsuki actually shuddered. “Uh, no. I don’t mess with the ocean.”

Yuri stared at him. “You don’t… mess with the ocean…?”

“I don’t go in it, I try not to go near it, I leave it be.”

“Are you afraid of it?” Yuri could feel an evil smile twisting his face. How fucking ironic.

“N… well--” Katsuki hunched his shoulders. “Look, I don’t go out on it in boats, is all.”

“You are afraid of it!” Yuri laughed. “Holy shit, do you live in the wrong place!”

“Shut up,” Katsuki grumbled. “Thalassophobia is a real thing.”

“Thassa-what?”

“Phobia of the ocean, or deep bodies of water,” Katsuki said. “It freaks me out, okay?”

“So are you, like, afraid of bathing?” Yuri snickered. “Does someone have to hold your hand in the shower or something?”
“I’m not afraid of water,” Katsuki said, rolling his eyes. “I do bathe, you know. It’d be gross to not.”

“Right. Well.” Yuri shrugged. “You have good reason to fear the ocean. It’s full of sharks--”

“Sharks don’t freak me out at all,” Katsuki said. “My mom works with them.”

“And yet you’re afraid of the ocean.”

“It’s deep, it’s unpredictable, and you can die trying to cross it or even swim in it. I don’t fuck with it.” Katsuki eyed him. “Aren’t you afraid of anything?”

“Hah, nope,” Yuri tossed his head, making his hair flip over his shoulder. “I’m not a wuss.”

“Suuuuuuuuure.” Katsuki said, and whistled for his dog. “Well, see you next week.”

“Don’t let the scary sea get you!” Yuri called after the pianist as he retreated deeper into the Ariel.

Katsuki actually looked over his shoulder at Yuri and stuck his tongue out, like a four-year-old.

“Super mature, dude!” Yuri said, mimicking him.

Maybe the guy wasn’t so bad after all.

The run across the quad from the Ariel to Anderson was ridiculously hot. Yuri was sweating buckets by the time he burst into the atrium and groaned in relief as the air conditioning hit him with a blast of cold.

Swearing under his breath, he set out in the direction of the library.

Anderson was pretty big for a private college, and Yuri wandered through the empty hallways for a while before he found the entrance to the library. There was an elevator and a set of stairs next to the door, so he let himself in and poked the DOWN button. The elevator took its sweet time getting to him, but eventually shuddered and slid the doors open.

Going into the archives was always a bit spooky, in Yuri’s opinion. Something about how quiet it was, away from all the students that were hanging out in the study areas and chatting, and how the air seemed to press in on him. There were a few people poking around on the way back to where he usually found his grandfather, but they ignored him and he didn’t bother with talking to them anyway.

He found Viktor before he found his grandfather, and made a face when he saw the pile of books and documents. “How long have you been down here?”

“Hm?” Viktor looked up from the book he’d buried his nose in. “Oh, Yura, how did your session go?”

Yuri dropped his bag on the table and glared at Viktor. “Fine. Katsuki and I are doing The Devil’s Trill. Speaking of Katsuki, are you crushing on that piggy?”

Viktor went scarlet.

“I knew it,” Yuri hissed, putting his violin down. “I swear to god, Viktor--”

“What?” Viktor protested, shutting the book in his hands. “What’s it to you if I like someone?
Seriously!"

“Yeah, but he’s my accompanist!”

“So?!”

Yuri narrowed his eyes at Viktor. “Look. Georgi’s crushing on someone too, so if the two of you end up heartbroken then we’ll have two useless pianists.”

“Who’s to say we’ll both be heartbroken?” Viktor muttered. “But Georgi’s in love again? He only broke up with the last girl a couple weeks ago.”

“It’s Georgi,” Yuri said, collapsing into the other empty chair. “Anyway, don’t be an idiot.”

Viktor raised his eyebrows. “I don’t think it’s any of your business,” he said, turning away.

“Whatever. You find anything?”

“Your grandfather got me started,” Viktor nodded at the pile of stuff on the table. “They keep so much stuff down here that can’t fit in the library, it’s amazing.”

“Or you’re a fucking nerd,” Yuri said, reaching for the book at the top of the pile. “What even are these?”

“Stuff that backs up Dr. Chadwick’s research, and some of his original sources. I have a litho of an anthropological study from 1892 in here,” Viktor added, eyes wide. “It’s kind of cool.”

Yuri rolled his own eyes. “Nerd,” he repeated.

“To each his own,” Viktor said.

“Where’s that necklace Chris mentioned?”

“Hm? Oh.” Viktor looked up from the book again. “Your grandfather has it.”

“Where is he?”

Viktor shrugged. “It’s like a maze down here. He said he’d be back.”

Yuri laid his head down on the table and sighed. “Whatever.” He pulled out his phone to try and pass the time somehow, but the signal downstairs was absolute crap and the Wifi didn’t extend into the archives. All the computers were literally wired into the walls, if he remembered right.

Yuri sighed and breathed out through his nose. The archives tended to smell musty, like old books. Some people actually liked that smell.

Some unknowable amount of time later, his grandfather was moving creakily back into the little alcove that Viktor had set up camp in. “I couldn’t find this exact design,” he said, handing a shiny gold coin to Viktor. “But I did find this.”

He held up a regular manilla folder, and Yuri sat up.

“What is that?”

“Ah, Yura, did you have a good day?” Dedushka smiled at him. “Feeling better?”
Yuri shrugged. “Let me see that,” he said, shoving his chair back and making a beeline for Viktor.

“Ah, hold on a second,” Viktor held the coin out of Yuri’s reach. “Seriously? Act your age, Yuri!”

Yuri made to kick at Viktor’s ankles, but his grandfather handed him the folder. “Hold this for me, Yura. I’ll be right back.” He disappeared into the shelves again, and Yuri sat back on his heels as he re-adjusted his grip on the folder.

“What’s in that?” Viktor asked, and he lowered his arm enough that Yuri was able to snatch at the coin in his hand.

“I dunno.” Yuri thrust the folder into Viktor’s chest and turned the coin over in his palm. “You found this in the lagoon?”

“Yeah,” Viktor said, pouting. “It’s real gold, as far as we can tell.”

“What?” Yuri stared at him, mouth dropping. “How much do you think it’s worth?”

“We’re not going to pawn it, Yura.”

“Fine.” Yuri squinted at the engraving on the coin, which he noticed did have a loop for a chain. “This isn’t even all that impressive, though…”

“It has the moon on it, and I found it in the water by the rock that was glowing during the eclipse. I’m gonna go ahead and say it’s important.”

“Meh.”

Viktor flipped the folder open and made an interesting noise. “This is the stuff from the missionaries that I read about. Oooh.”

Yuri made a face at him. “What?”

“When the Spanish settlers started moving in here, they started trying to convert the natives to Catholicism,” Viktor said, turning the folder and squinting at whatever was on the page. “They wrote down tons of legends from the Tani tribe who were living here.”

“Weird,” Yuri said, examining the back of the necklace thing. It was blank, and mostly smooth - it looked like someone had hammered it while it was still hot.

“This isn’t Spanish,” Viktor said, frowning.

Yuri looked up from the necklace and shuffled around Viktor’s side so he could peer at the printout. “How can you tell?”

Viktor rolled his eyes. “Does that look like Spanish to you?”

“I dunno, I’m not taking it.”

“Don’t they require a foreign language to graduate?”

“Yeah, I’m taking Latin.” Yuri looked over the weird lines at the bottom of the page.

“Latin is literally the root language to Spanish and like a bunch of others.” Viktor tilted his head back. “But this is absolutely not Latin or any Romance language, the structure is too weird.”
“Whoever wrote this has the worst handwriting ever,” Yuri said, scrunching his nose. “Wow, they sucked.”

“I can’t read this at all,” Viktor agreed.

“It’s like… hm.” Yuri pushed on Viktor’s arm so he could get a better look. “Prath,” he said, making a face. “Iruzkt… mior… man?”

“I don’t think—”

Yuri kept going. “Ka’le ton pruz moyne liw neet?”

A couple things happened then:

The lights flickered overhead. Yuri’s heart began to race.

A strange breeze rushed through the archives, making several people yell out in surprise.

And the necklace-coin thing began to pulse with some strange kind of energy.

“Uh—” Yuri said, and that was all he managed to get out before what looked like electricity shot out of the necklace and zapped him in the chest, and that was the last thing he remembered.

Chapter End Notes

...yep.

First things first, here's the Pachelbel Rant video that Yuuri shows Viktor and Yuri. It's legit. This is coming from a former music nerd. (And yet I still love Canon in D. Oops.) Also, here's more Four Chords of Pop.

I commissioned the AMAZING, FABULOUS Crimson-Chains for some art of Viktor and Chris hanging out! Please check it out, and give CC a follow and some more commissions!

Just a heads-up, I will try and get the next chapter written as quickly as possible! I'm participating in a few writing events (and I even have a super cool thing coming up that should be announced soon, keep an eye out for me yelling about it!) and those things kind of take priority over this just due to the fact that I have due dates. Still, this fic is my baby and I'm not gonna forget it!

Of course, if you want more from this universe, you could always mosey on over to Moonlight Harmonies for some side stories. Just sayin’. I also still take those prompts occasionally. :3

Also huge thing that I should mention: I have developed tendinitis in my dominant arm, specifically the wrist and elbow. My doctor has basically told me to limit activity of any kind with that arm so it heals, and I do have a gauntlet of a brace to wear that makes it very tedious to type or write for too long, so I might take a little longer over all to do stuff. Hopefully this inflammation clears up soon so I can come back full throttle.

In the meantime, if you want to check up on me, you can find me over on Twitter and
Tumblr! This AU also has a Pinterest page and a dedicated tag on my Tumblr.

If you like this fic, consider reblogging the post for it on Tumblr, or retweeting it on Twitter! I'd really appreciate it!
when you're on your own in the real world

Chapter Summary

Kolya and Viktor search for a fix to Yuri's amulet problem, and Viktor runs into an old classmate.

Chapter Notes

WE. ARE. BACK. Wow, it's been a while. Thanks to everyone that stuck around while I wrapped up the LLYBB and Shifty fics, I hope the last few months have treated everyone well!

Chapter title is from Ain't It Fun by Paramore again. It's a good song.

Special thanks to Gabapple for the beta work on this chapter, she really helped me beat the last part of it into shape and she deserves everything on her wish list for Christmas. (Hey, that's coming up...)

Back to the action! Sorry, Yura!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Yuri collapsed like a sack of potatoes, and Viktor yelped as he caught the teen. “Oh my god. Oh my god. Yuri? Yura? Oh my god.” He dropped the folder he’d been holding, sending papers scattering while the amulet rolled off somewhere under the desk, but Viktor didn’t pay attention to that. He was too busy panicking as Yuri’s head lolled forward, face slack. “Oh shit,” Viktor said, laying Yuri down on the floor. “Oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit oh shit. Oh shit.”

“Viktor? What’s wrong?” Kolya asked, coming back into the alcove. He stopped in his tracks when he saw his grandson laying on the ground, out cold. “What happened?” he demanded, dropping his files on the table and then crouching down by Viktor.

“He was reading off some of the writing we found, and he was holding the medallion, and it zapped him--” Viktor was babbling now, truly freaking out. “I swear to God I didn’t do anything to him--”

“The medallion?” Kolya tapped Yuri’s cheek, trying to rouse him. “Blyad. What did he read?”

“I don’t-- I don’t even remember, I don’t even know if he read it right--”

“Viktor!” Kolya grabbed Viktor’s chin and held his head steady. “Focus. Which paper were you reading?”

Viktor glanced around him at the mess of printouts. “I… I can find it.”

Kolya nodded. “Okay, help me carry him into my office.”

It was then that Viktor remembered how exposed they were in the archives, and he quickly picked
Yuri up under the arms. Kolya took the teen’s legs, and together they shuffled deeper into the archives.

Viktor kept thinking that they’d run into someone - he’d heard other people yelling when that weird wind had swept through the shelves, after Yuri had read out whatever had been on the printout - but they miraculously made it into Kolya’s office without encountering anybody. Thank God.

“Lay him down here,” Kolya said, stripping off his cardigan and folding it into a makeshift pillow. “We need to get all that research out of there before someone else stumbles on it.”

“That one guy, Corned Beef?” Viktor asked.

“Or someone else,” Kolya agreed, and they left Yuri for a moment to gather up all the files Kolya had pulled and copied for Viktor. It took a hot minute, and Viktor retrieved Yuri’s school bag and violin as well. Then, he doubled back to crawl under the desk and find the dropped amulet. It didn’t zap him or do anything - just glinted innocently in his palm - but he still stuck it in his back pocket right away for safekeeping.

“Okay,” Kolya said, once they were both back in his office and the door locked behind them. “Which page was it that he read from? Sooner rather than later, Viktor.”

Viktor snatched up the nearest printout and checked it before tossing it onto the desk. He did that a few more times until he noticed a sketch in the corner of one.

“This one!” he said, holding it up in triumph. “This one is it!” He looked it over. “Yeah, this was the one. It had this sketch of the amulet in the corner.”

Kolya scanned the page, squinting. “My knowledge of Latin isn’t helping me here.”

“It’s not Latin,” Viktor said. “It’s not any European language I know. But the notes are in Spanish.”

“How good is your Spanish?” Kolya asked, raising an eyebrow.

Viktor made a face. “Decent,” he said honestly. “Not as good as my French, but they’re both similar enough that I can fake it.”

“Okay, then, between the two of us we should be able to decipher this.”

Viktor slapped the sheet down on Kolya’s cleared-off desk and they both examined it. “These are transcribings of Tani phrases,” Viktor slowly said, trying his best to read the missionary’s scratchy handwriting. “No real translations for them. He thought they were the Tani version of psalms.”

“Or else some kind of devil worship,” Kolya said with a dark laugh. “Good grief, Catholics. There’s nothing else on this page,” he concluded.

“There were more,” Viktor said, grabbing the folder and flipping it open. He took half of the remaining printouts and handed the rest to Kolya, and they both fell silent as they began to read - or, at least, attempt to read. Viktor heard Yuri’s grandfather sounding out the words as he read, and had to hum to himself to block it out.

They both went through several pages each before Viktor spotted another drawing of the amulet and yelled in triumph. “Pay dirt!”

Kolya tugged the page out of his hand and frowned as he examined it. “What makes you say that?”
“More weird writing, and another drawing of a coin like the one I found,” Viktor said. “And it mentions the moon.”

Kolya’s eyebrows drew together. “Hm,” he said, adjusting his bifocals. “So it does.”

Viktor squinted. “‘Los rituales arcanos de los Tani abarcan la luna.’ The… arcane rituals of the Tani!” He kept reading. “‘Abarcan’… I do not know that word.” He yanked his phone out and pulled up Google Translate. “‘Encompass,’” he eventually said. “The arcane rituals of the Tani encompass the moon.”

“This is promising,” Kolya said.

They pored over the page, and then Kolya read, with a stumbling accent, “‘El mar puede curar todo lo que está dañado.’”

“The sea can… cure?” Viktor consulted Google Translate. “Cure. Yes. The sea can cure all that is…” He typed in the last word. “Damaged. The sea can cure all that is damaged.” The meaning of those words in a sentence together smacked him in the face like a two-by-four. “Wait. The sea can cure all that is damaged.”

“Does that mean… the water can undo this?” Kolya glanced at his grandson, who was still out like a light on the floor.

“Worth a shot,” Viktor said, handing Kolya the printouts and dropping to his knees so he could dig in his bag. He emerged with his water bottle, one of those athlete squeeze water bottles that he’d gotten years ago from a Detroit Red Wings game.

“Wait—” Kolya said, and he was re-reading the page. “Viktor, this says—”

Viktor was already squirting Yuri with the water still left in the bottle. “Uh,” he said, as Yuri transformed but definitely did not wake up. “I… missed something.”

“It says the sea can cure all that is damaged,” Kolya said, and when Viktor looked up at him, the old man looked thoroughly unimpressed. “Not just water, unless you’ve been drinking literal ocean water all day.”

Viktor winced. “Uh.”

Kolya pushed his glasses up onto his forehead so he could pinch the bridge of his nose. “We need to get him to the ocean.”

“Okay, let’s dry him off,” Viktor said.

And then Yuri’s phone began to ring in his bag.

Viktor frowned, and Kolya winced. “That would be his mother’s ringtone.”

Viktor blanched. “Okay, okay, she’s probably still mad at me so… can you buy us some time?”

Kolya was already pulling the phone out of the bag pocket and swiping to answer it. “Rachel,” he said in English. “I sorry, is not good time.” He fell silent, and Viktor could hear Yuri’s mom’s response. It sounded loud. “Yura is busy,” Kolya finally answered. “In bathroom. I will tell him.”

“Tell him what?” Viktor asked warily as Kolya hung up and put the phone back to sleep.

“He’s still grounded,” Kolya said. “His mother wants him to go straight home, now.”
Viktor blanched again, *harder*. “Okay, we need to drop him in the ocean.”

They looked down at Yuri, still unconscious, but now with the addition of his long yellow fishtail.

“I can get my car,” Kolya said. “We can go to the southern docks. Pack everything up. Leave the research here, I’ll lock up my office and you can retrieve it later.”

Viktor quickly moved to clean up the mess of papers as Kolya disappeared out into the archives again, and returned a few minutes later with a huge bolt of cloth.

“What is that?” Viktor asked, frowning.

Kolya unfolded the sheet. “Just a dropcloth, one of the life drawing students left it here. Quick, help me wrap him up.”

“If I get wet, I grow a tail too.”

“Then don’t get wet.”

Carefully, they put Yuri onto the dropcloth, and then rolled him up like a burrito. The dropcloth wasn’t quite big enough to completely burrito Yuri, but they got his tail covered and that was all that counted. The top of his head poked out of the roll, and so did his hair, but no one would see that he wasn’t exactly human anymore.

“You’ll have to carry him,” Kolya said. “I’ll take his bag and violin and pull the car up.”

“Right. Okay.” It would look suspicious, carrying an unconscious teenager wrapped in a dropcloth through the parking lot. *Not that it wouldn’t look suspicious carrying an unconscious teenager wrapped in a dropcloth anywhere.* “Can you handle all that stuff?”

“I’ll be fine,” Kolya said, already slinging Yuri’s bag over his shoulder. Viktor did the same with his own, and then they both maneuvered Yuri into Viktor’s arms. Kolya folded the end of the sheet under, to keep it from flapping open and revealing Yuri’s fins.

“All set?” Viktor asked as Kolya gave his office one last once-over.

“Yes,” Kolya finally said, shutting the lights off and letting them out into the archives again. He dragged his own suitcase and Yuri’s violin case out, flipping the sign on his door over to read ‘out of office’ and locking it up.

“All set?” Viktor asked as Kolya gave his office one last once-over.

“Yes,” Kolya finally said, shutting the lights off and letting them out into the archives again. He dragged his own suitcase and Yuri’s violin case out, flipping the sign on his door over to read ‘out of office’ and locking it up.

“Okay,” Viktor said, and they set out into the archives, emerging a few minutes later at the elevator banks. “This doesn’t look weird at all.”

“This is a liberal arts school,” Kolya muttered. “Don’t call attention to it and no one will notice.”

Viktor very much doubted that, but he swallowed his protests and followed Kolya into the nearest empty elevator.

They did get a few odd looks as they made their way to the side entrance, which were the doors closest to the staff parking lot. Viktor ignored them all, but internally he had resigned himself to fielding weird questions on Monday. As they passed through the atrium and Kolya let them out through the doors, the heat slammed into them like a physical wall.

Viktor immediately began to sweat, and he winced, trying to stay out of the direct sunlight as best as he could. Kolya peeled away from him at the curb, and left Viktor standing there with an armload of
unconscious teenage merman.

Viktor hoped Kolya had been able to park close to the building - maybe he had a handicap placard or something? - and he readjusted his grip on Yuri so that his tail wasn’t slipping. The dropcloth was starting to part around Yuri’s face, so Viktor attempted to re-cover it. At the very least, Yuri deserved protection from the sun.

He heard an odd noise from behind him and went stiff.

There was a dark-haired young man, probably a student, staring at him. He was clearly also waiting for a ride, and the look on his face was… worrying. Also, was that a *Forensics 101* textbook under his arm? *Does this school even have a forensics course?!*

Viktor suddenly realized what he looked like.

“He’s alive!” burst out from Viktor’s mouth before he could really think. “He’s just unconscious. *Asleep!* And naked! I swear to god I’m not a serial killer!”

The student’s eyes narrowed as Kolya pulled up in the carpool lane.

“I’m pretty sure that kid thinks I’m some kind of murderer,” Viktor griped in Russian as he got Yuri settled in Kolya’s backseat and threw his bag into the passenger seat.

Kolya only shot one glance at the student, still watching Viktor as he maneuvered Yuri’s tail out of sight, and sighed. “Well, we’re basically dropping him into the sea at the docks…”

Viktor froze. “Oh my god someone’s going to think we’re dumping a body *how is this my life?!*”

“Viktor. Focus.”

Viktor stopped talking and made sure Yuri was set before shutting the door on him and climbing into the passenger seat.

“This is not how I expected to be spending my Friday afternoon either,” Kolya said as Viktor secured his seatbelt.

Viktor glanced one last time at the student on the curb, but the guy was climbing into his friend’s waiting car. Still, he was probably watching them even then. “I’m going to get *so drunk tonight,*” he groaned.

Kolya sighed and put the car in gear so he could pull out of the carpool lane.

The southern docks were, as usual, not very populated as they pulled into the tiny parking lot. They left everything in the car, and between the two of them they were able to maneuver Yuri out of the backseat. He’d dried off during the ride over, so they left the dropcloth in the car as well.

“This *really* doesn’t look suspicious,” Viktor grumbled as they carried Yuri between them over to the empty pier.

“If you keep talking like that, someone *will* get suspicious,” Kolya said, clearly as done with the whole situation as Viktor was.

Together, they carefully shuffled out onto the docks over the water. Viktor could see some of the smaller fishing boats in the distance, but no one was coming in quite yet.
Still, this needed to be fast.


They threw him, and he landed with a splash. A big one.

Viktor yelped as the water splashed back on him and soaked his jeans and half of his shirt. “Goddammit!” He jumped in after Yuri as the fairy lights swept over him as well.

Underwater, Viktor got his bearings and began to swim up to the surface again. A few meters away, he saw Yuri blinking awake in confusion. They both popped up next to the dock, and blinked up at Kolya looking down at them.

“What the fuck happened?” Yuri finally demanded, glaring at Viktor.

“I have no clue, why are you getting mad at me?!” Viktor snapped. “You’re the one who read the magic spell thingy out loud while holding the magic amulet!”

“Both of you need to get out and dry off,” Kolya said. “Yura, your mother is expecting you home soon!”

Yuri groaned and ducked back underwater, and Viktor took a deep breath for patience before following.

Kolya found them further south, having dragged themselves onto the rocky beach away from the pier. Yuri was using his powers to dry himself off, and he begrudgingly agreed to do the same for Viktor. Since Yuri seemed destined for a bad mood no matter what he said, Viktor was just waiting silently for him to finish steaming the water off himself.

“Where did you leave the amulet?” Kolya asked, taking a seat on a nearby rock.

“I had it in my pocket,” Viktor said as Yuri finally transformed back again and stood up to brush the sand off his pants. “Didn’t think it was a good idea to leave it in the archives.”

“That thing should be locked up in Fort Knox,” Yuri grumbled, crouching down next to Viktor and holding his hand over Viktor’s tail. “Or thrown back into the ocean where you found it.”

“Clearly not,” Viktor said tiredly. “What if someone else had found it?”

“Why don’t you just go back to the lagoon and leave it there again?” Yuri snapped at him. “No one seems to be able to find that place anyway.”

“Because I’m curious about what else it’s capable of,” Viktor said. “And you don’t have to touch it ever again.”

Yuri made a disgruntled noise and clenched his hand into a fist, and Viktor felt the water on his tail starting to heat up and evaporate off.

Once Viktor was dry, he climbed to his feet and slapped the sand off his jeans. “Here,” he said, reaching into his back pocket where he’d left the amulet.

He found nothing but a hole at the bottom.
“Uh.”

Kolya and Yuri both stared at him.

“Uh.” Viktor said, trying the other pocket. “Uh.”

“You lost it,” Yuri said in a flat voice.

“No!” Viktor said, frantically searching his other pockets, even though he knew he’d put it in one of the back pockets. “It-- I--”

“Maybe it’s in my car,” Kolya said.

They immediately set out towards the pier parking lot again, and in about ten minutes Viktor was frantically searching the passenger seat for the amulet. Yuri took the backseat, and neither of them found it.

“I… lost it?” Viktor whined, burying his face in his hands. “I never lose stuff!”

“Well, you lost the magic amulet,” Yuri yelled, stomping on the pavement. “I sure hope no one finds it and dies!”

“I doubt it will kill anyone,” Kolya said. “Especially since Viktor and Christophe handled it without any trouble. It only activated when Yura attempted a Tani incantation.”

“Oh, so it’s my fault?!” Yuri went scarlet.

“It was an accident, Yurochka,” his grandfather said in a patient voice. “It was no one’s fault. Come along, now, we need to get you home.”

Yuri growled and threw himself into the passenger’s seat, glaring up at Viktor as if daring him to object.

“I can just take my bag and catch a bus from the stop over by the pier,” Viktor said. “I should get home and take Makkachin outside.”

“Are you working tomorrow?” Kolya asked.

“Only in the morning.”

“Okay. I’ll meet you in the archives around noon, then.” Kolya climbed into the driver’s seat and started the engine. “We can finish what we started today, even if we don’t have the amulet.”

“Sounds good,” Viktor agreed. “Yuri?”

“Count me out,” Yuri said, sneering. “I’m grounded.”

Viktor winced, and Kolya shot him a sympathetic look as he fetched his bag from the backseat and slung it over his shoulder. “Okay, well, have a good night,” he said, waving.

Kolya waved back, and Yuri glared at him as they pulled away.

The bus downtown wasn’t due until around 5, and Viktor’s stomach was definitely empty. He nibbled on a Nutrigrain bar to stave off the hunger pangs, texted his dad a bit, and played around on
his phone in the meantime.

Moonchildren

(4:46 PM) Viktor: so we have discovered a thing

(4:47 PM) Yuri: FUCK YOU

(4:47 PM) Chris: oh do tell

(4:47 PM) Mila: oh no

(4:47 PM) Viktor: so the amulet i found in sertori’s cove might have knocked yura out

(4:48 PM) Chris: clearly not seriously because he’s swearing at you

(4:48 PM) Yuri: FUCK YOY

(4:48 PM) Otabek: holy shit are u ok yura

(4:48 PM) Viktor: WE FIXED IT HES FINE

(4:48 PM) Mila: clearly he is

(4:49 PM) Yuri: VIKTOR THREW ME OFF THE DOCKS

(4:49 PM) Yuri: FUCK. YOY.

(4:49 PM) Yuri: YOU

(4:49 PM) Viktor: WE FIXED YOU SHUT UP

(4:49 PM) Viktor: IT WASN’T EVEN MY IDEA OKAY

(4:49 PM) Yuri: YOU THREW WATER ON ME IN THE ARCHIVES YOU DUMBASS

(4:49 PM) Viktor: I WASN’T THINKING I WAS PANICKING LEAVE ME ALONE

(4:50 PM) Chris: I’m almost sorry I missed all of this

(4:50 PM) Viktor: i haet uyo all

(4:50 PM) Mila: vitya no

(4:50 PM) Viktor: anyway yeah YURA screwed up and read a random ass tani incantation and ZAPPED HIMSELF like a DUMBASS

(4:50 PM) Yuri: FUCK YOU THAT WAS YOUR FAULT

(4:50 PM) Viktor: HOW WAS THAT MY FAULT

(4:50 PM) Yuri: YOU FOUND THE FUCKING COIN
(4:51 PM) Yuri: AND THEN YOU FUCKING LOST IT
(4:51 PM) Viktor: I DIDN’T READ THE INCANTATION
(4:51 PM) Mila: wait u lost it?????
(4:51 PM) Chris: WOW VIKTOR
(4:51 PM) Chris: that was fast lol
(4:51 PM) Chris: you didn’t even get to do much with it
(4:51 PM) Viktor: mightve dropped it in kolyas office I’ll check tmrw
(4:52 PM) Otabek: but yura you’re sure you’re ok right
(4:52 PM) Otabek: no lasting effects right?
(4:52 PM) Viktor: kolya and i found th e cure which is seawater
(4:52 PM) Chris: of course it is
(4:52 PM) Viktor: the missionary journal said that the sea cures all damages so hopefully it’s all good now
(4:52 PM) Yuri: yea sure were gonna trust some random fuckwads diary entry from 200 years ago
(4:52 PM) Yuri: SURE NOTHUNG CNA GO WRONG
(4:52 PM) Viktor: you’re awake amt you
(4:53 PM) Viktor: maybe we should have left you out cold :U
(4:53 PM) Yuri: FUCK!!!! YOU!!!!!!!!

Viktor snorted, and then Mila pinged him in a private chat.
Mila: hey guess who im seeing 2nite
Viktor: why am i guessing
Viktor: okay fine who
Mila: Yuuri :eyes:
Viktor: why?
Mila: orchesis meeting :)
Viktor: ah cool
Viktor wondered how Yuuri would dance. The way he’d moved on the night of the bonfire… but Orchesis was a more artistic style of dance, and required actual discipline, according to Mila.

Yuuri had to be so fit. Viktor suddenly realized how long it had been since he’d worked out at the Y, vaguely aware of how little he’d attempted to be active since the whole ‘get wet, grow a tail’ thing had started.

Note to self, he thought as Mila pinged him again. I need to make use of my freaking membership.

Mila: just “cool” huh?
Viktor: today was very stressful
Mila: that doesn't stop the thirst :)

Viktor: ha ha ha very funny

Then the bus showed up, and Viktor shoved his phone back in his pocket to retrieve his bus pass and start his trek home.

The amulet was not in Kolya’s office. Viktor turned the place inside out (with Kolya’s blessing and eventual help) but nope. The amulet was not in there.

It wasn’t in the general archives, either, and while Kolya agreed to ask his coworkers to be on the lookout for it, Viktor was already kind of mentally resigning himself to the loss.

Crap.

Viktor left the campus shortly after noon, annoyed and disconcerted. He was starting to think that Yuri had had a point the previous day; what if someone found the amulet and managed to activate it somehow?

*I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it*, he eventually decided. For all he knew, the amulet would pop up again and everything would be fine.

He was tempted to grab a bite to eat, but he still had leftovers from his linguini night earlier in the week. If he was going to start working out again, he might as well get rid of all the carbs still in his fridge…

*Who am I kidding, I can’t live without carbs.* He ended up getting off at the stop nearest to his building and trooping on home.

Makkachin deserved a nice walk, so he dropped off his bag at his apartment and got Makka leashed up. As they set off down the block and towards the more residential area, Viktor plugged his earbuds into his phone and opened up Spotify. His Discover playlist had a lot of interesting songs this week, and he ended up checking out a few artist’s profiles as he walked.

Makkachin did her business fairly quickly, and Viktor was able to toss her poop bag in a nearby garbage can almost right away, but they kept walking for a while longer. It was nice to not have to think too hard and just be with Makkachin and listen to random music for a while, even if it was still pretty hot out. Makkachin only lasted about forty-five minutes in the heat, and that was enough time to loop several blocks before Viktor was letting them back into the building again.

Once back in the apartment, Makkachin drained her water bowl and whined until Viktor carefully refilled it. He was smirking when he pulled his mostly-empty ice tray - well, that was easy enough to fix, wasn’t it? He added more water to it and then brandished his hand at it.

The water froze immediately, which was *so cool* to watch, and Viktor was able to pop a few of the cubes out to drop in Makkachin’s bowl. The poodle eagerly snapped one up and disappeared into the hallway to chomp on it, and Viktor left her to it.

His phone chimed as he was cleaning up after his lunch, and when Viktor picked it up he was surprised to see Georgi’s ID flashing at him.
“Gosha,” he said when he answered. “What’s up?”

“Hey, Vitya!” Georgi sounded undeniably cheerful. Maybe there was something to Yuri’s remark from the other day. “Deya and I were going out for drinks tonight, do you want in?”

Viktor blinked. “Oh! Drinks?”

“Yes, just a casual thing, you know?” Georgi said. “It’s a Saturday, let’s live a little, right?”

Viktor thought about it. Drinks meant liquid. But…

But Mila had gone out dancing and avoided trouble. What were the odds that he’d get spilled on?

_I’m going to jinx myself at this rate._

“Where at?” he asked.

“We’re thinking lowkey, Piece of Love?”

Piece of Love was a pretty small bar further inland, nestled in the entertainment district. It was close enough that Viktor could walk there. God knows after a day like he’d had, he deserved a night out.

“What time?”

“Probably around six or seven. Wait, are you in?” Georgi sounded shocked. “Did I break you out of your slump?”

Viktor snorted. “Yes, Gosha, you did. You get a cookie.”

Georgi made a huffy noise. “It’s just. Vitya, you’ve been kind of a homebody lately.”

“Sue me, it’s been wild over here in Nikiforov Land.” Viktor flopped down on his loveseat and smiled at the sound of Makkachin lapping at her water bowl again. “Anyway, who all else is coming?”

“So far, I’ve called you and Charlotte. You remember her?”

“Of course I remember Char,” Viktor said. She’d had a crush on him all throughout high school, and finding out he was gayer than Christmas had made things awkward in their senior year. Hopefully, both of them had grown past that.

If not, it would make for a good excuse to dip out.

Georgi clearly had the same thing in mind. “Well, she moved back home and reached out. Have you been on Facebook?”

“No,” Viktor said.

Georgi laughed. “Of course not.”

“Gosha. Facebook is hell.”

“Right. So. I’m thinking seven at Piece of Love, sound good?”

Viktor couldn’t see any reason not to go. It would beat sitting around and worrying about that amulet. “Sure. I’ll meet you guys there.”
“Sounds good!”

They said their goodbyes and Viktor hung up feeling oddly… social. He even texted his mother that he was going out that night (and received an enthusiastic, encouraging response filled with a lot of exclamation points and excited emoji.)

“Makka,” he said as his beloved poodle tried to get to the bottom of her water bowl. “Am I turning into a homebody?”

Makkachin looked up, her muzzle dripping with water, and then bounded at him, her nails skidding on the linoleum floor.

“W-wait!” Viktor yelped, scooting away, but he wasn’t fast enough. Makkachin hopped up on the couch and covered his face in kisses and excess water.

Viktor sighed as the lights swept over him again and his tail reappeared, flopping onto the coffee table. “You’re lucky you’re cute,” he told Makkachin, who snuggled up to him in response.

Piece of Love was fairly packed when Viktor arrived, and it took him a moment to spot Georgi in the crowd.

“Hey! Look who it is!” Faddei shouted over the din, and he was grinning. “The Piano Prince is gracing us with his presence, all hail.” He did an exaggerated bow, and Viktor snorted.

“Cool it, funny man,” he said, sliding into the booth that the Popovich brothers had claimed. There were a few other people present, a couple of whom Viktor recognized, and a few girls he didn’t. One of them was hanging off of Georgi, which meant that Yuri had been dead-on after all. Huh. Even Georgi has more game than I do.

“Viktor!” Charlotte said brightly from next to him. “Long time no see!” She tugged him in for an awkward side-hug.

“Yeah, that’s right, you went to New York,” Viktor said. “How was it?”

Charlotte made a face. “Ugh. Dirty and too loud.”

“I liked NYC,” said another one of their former classmates, a dark-haired girl named Sonja. “Granted, I wasn’t trying to live there--”


“So you’re back for a while?” Viktor asked as Georgi pushed an empty glass over to him and gestured for one of the pitchers of beer.

“Back for good, if I can find a job.” Charlotte pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m kind of stuck living with my mum until I figure out what I’m doing.”

“Wait.” Viktor sat up. “Wait. Idea. How opposed are you to office work?” Okay, they had a bit of an awkward history, but surely they were both mature enough to move past it in pursuit of a greater good?

Charlotte made a face. “Uh, a job’s a job. I know how to work a fax machine, though.”
“Idea.” Viktor said again. “Yakov needs another receptionist. Mrs. Stimler… uh.”

“Oh god, Mrs. Stimler,” Georgi groaned. “She dragged another lawn ornament into the office yesterday.”

Viktor sighed. “So that’s where that gnome came from.”

“I think it looks more like a Keebler elf.”

“Wait, what?” Charlotte frowned. “What’s going on with Mrs. Stimler?”

“You don’t wanna know,” Georgi and Viktor said in unison.

“No, I wanna know,” one of the other girls said. She had curly, strawberry-blonde hair, but Viktor couldn’t recall her name for the life of him. “What’s going on with Mrs. Stimler?”

“Who’s Mrs. Stimler?” another one of their old classmates asked. She’d dyed her hair tomato-red, but her dark roots were very visible, even in the bar’s dim light.

“She’s Yakov’s current receptionist,” Georgi said. “Oh, Yakov’s our boss,” he added when the redhead gave him another weird look. “He runs the Ariel music program.”

“I remember Yakov being pretty high-strung,” the blonde girl grinned. “So what’s up with Mrs. Stimler?”

“She’s… just… um?” Viktor tried to find the words as he poured himself a glass of what was probably very cheap, low-calorie beer. “I mean, she’s not very… uh--”

“She keeps doing weird stuff because her brains got scrambled over summer,” Faddei said, and Georgi smacked him. “What? It’s true.”

“Be nice.”

“It’s true, though,” Georgi’s date said, making a face. “Gosha, you were there when she refused to hand over the showcase paperwork to me.”

“Y-yes,” Georgi admitted. “But she was just confused.”

“She thought you were her dead husband,” his date pointed out.

Viktor blinked - this was news to him, but not really all that surprising - as Deya burst out laughing.

“Wait, what?” the elder Popovich said, whirling on his brother. He was still grinning, like Christmas had come early. “Gosha, don’t hold out!”

“It was nothing!”

Deya snorted and mussed Georgi’s carefully-gelled hair, making his brother yelp. “Anya, dish!”

Anya rolled her eyes. “Not much to dish. She thought Gosha was Mr. Stimler and got mad at him for having me with him. Accused him of cheating on her. I think she cussed him out in Yiddish.”

Viktor choked on his mouthful of beer. Charlotte had to pound him on the back a few times.

“Yakov had to come out and calm her down,” Georgi said with a sigh. “She forgot about us after a few minutes.”
“Yikes,” Charlotte said. “Uh.”

Viktor managed to get his throat cleared. “So yeah, Yakov needs a new receptionist.”

Charlotte nodded. “I can agree.”

“It’s a job.”

Charlotte raised her well-maintained eyebrow at him. *Well, that hasn’t changed since high school.* “So what, should I just show up at the Ariel and be like, ‘hello, Yakov! Remember me? I need a job’ and he’ll just give it to me?”

“That’s literally how I got hired,” Georgi said.

“He’s a softie, you know it,” Viktor added.

“Man, makes me wish I went into the music program,” the redhead said wistfully. “You guys all seem like such a big happy family.”

“What did you end up doing instead?” Viktor asked, and she grimaced.

“Pre-law,” she admitted. “But I had to drop out. It was just too much.”

“No shame,” Viktor said, mentally toasting himself for successfully socializing as long as he had been. “I barely managed to get my Associate’s.”

“Cheers to mediocrity,” the redhead said, raising her glass. Viktor mimicked her, and took a sip.


Well, that was awkward. “I try not to think about that time,” Viktor said. “I was *not* taking care of myself then.”

“Awh,” the redhead said, patting his arm across the table. “But you’re doing okay now?”

“Oh, that’s right,” Deya said. “You weren’t here for the brea--”

Georgi shoved a napkin into his brother’s mouth, effectively shutting him up. Viktor appreciated that.

“The what?” the redhead frowned.

“Never mind,” Georgi said. “For real.”

“Well,” Charlotte said slowly, eyeing Viktor with an unreadable expression. “I can definitely swing by the Ariel on Monday.”

“Oh, thank god.” Viktor took another sip of his (definitely watery) beer, mildly relieved that they’d moved past Deya’s slip. “Yakov will be so happy to see you, too. He just won’t show it.”

“I remember *that,*” Charlotte laughed. “Is he still married to Lilia?”

“No, they got divorced a couple years ago, but they’re still amicable,” Georgi said. “Lilia just got the Ariel a harpsichord.”

“If that’s not a sign of true love, I don’t know what is,” Deya said, snorting.
“And what have you been up to, Faddei?” Charlotte asked, whirling on him.

“Bartending,” Deya said, wagging his eyebrows. “It’s a living.”

“He broke my board a couple weeks ago,” Georgi said, taking a long drink. “Wasn’t even out on the water, too.”

“Will you let that go?”

“Absolutely not.”

Anya blinked at Deya. “You surf?”

“Barely,” Georgi muttered.

“I can surf!”

“I really want to see that,” Viktor said, toasting Deya with a smirk.

The elder Popovich glowered at him. “Vitya, you’re off my Christmas card list.”

“Oh no, the horror.”

Charlotte snorted.

The talk shifted to a new subject, and Viktor tuned out a little bit, sipping at the cheap beer and thinking back to his frantic shuffle through the archives that morning. The odds of the amulet resurfacing couldn’t be all that high, but then again he’d never been much of a statistician…

The janitorial staff could have skipped the archives the previous night, for all he knew. Which would mean that the amulet had to have been picked up… good God, what if Yura was right and someone activated it? If someone else sprouted a tail, what could happen? Surely it would make the news. Oh my god… nope, bad thinking, bad thoughts, redirect--

“Viktor?”

He blinked and rejoined the conversation. “Sorry, what was that?”

“Where did you go off to?” the blonde asked, raising an eyebrow. “La-la Land?”

“Probably,” Viktor said, forcing a bland smile onto his face. “What’s going on?”

“Well, we were talking about that new club going up on the north side,” the redhead said, tugging the pitcher back over to her. “Holly’s editor wants her to investigate it.”

“What new club? Don’t look at me like that,” Viktor added when they all blinked at him. “I live under a rock. You all know this. Come on.”

“It’s twenty-one-and-up, as far as I know,” the redhead said. “And it’s being built up north.”

“Isn’t the owner calling it something ridiculous?” Sonja tapped her chin. “The Gold, or something.”

“Wow,” Anya said. “That… is not a catchy name.”

“I would have liked a nice pun,” the redhead agreed.

“No more puns,” the blonde - that had to be Holly - groaned, burying her face in her hands. “God,
please, no. There are so many establishments with puns for names.”

“Hey, if puns are what makes the money, that’s what we’ll get,” Deya said.

“I regret everything I’ve ever done in my life, ever,” Holly said in a hollow voice.

“Mood of the year,” Viktor said in sympathy.

“What have you done this year that you regret?” the redhead asked, making a face.

“Well, for starters…” Viktor contemplated his glass. “Absolutely nothing, to be honest. As in, I’ve done nothing and I regret that.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Charlotte said, frowning.

Viktor laughed and shrugged.

“Anyway,” Deya said, snapping everyone back to the topic of the new club. “What are the odds that this new place stays open longer than a year? I swear that strip on the north side is cursed.”

Viktor sat back as everyone went back to the previous conversation, but he couldn’t help noticing Charlotte giving him contemplative looks. Oh dear.

But she didn’t press him, and he allowed himself to relax a bit… barring the hyper-awareness towards possible spills, which never actually managed to materialize. He tried to stay mentally present and participate a little in the conversation, which had already veered into territory that he wasn’t really familiar with. Still, this outing was meant to serve as a break from all the mer-weirdness, right? Surely he could take a breather from worrying about the amulet… or whether Yuri was actually completely cured from being zapped… but Kolya had said that Yura was doing fine that morning, so maybe…

“Viktor?”

Viktor snapped out of contemplation again. “I’m sorry,” he groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose. “I’m spacing, it’s been a week.” He glanced up at the booth. “What’s up?”

“You looked like you were spacing,” Holly said. “In what way has it been a week?”

“Well,” Deya said, waggling his eyebrows. “It was a full moon on Wednesday.”

Shiiiiitt. “What do I look like, a werewolf?” Viktor said in his dryest tone. He caught sight of the mostly-empty pitchers. “Here, let me grab a refill.”

The redhead pushed the one nearest her over to him, and he scooted out of the booth so he could bring them across the room to the bar. While he was waiting for the bartender to refill the pitchers, Charlotte popped up next to him again.

“So,” she said, not looking at him. “How’s the dating life going?”

“It’s not,” Viktor said, a little ashamed. Then he frowned. “Why?”

“Nothing, really,” Charlotte said, shrugged. “I just… I hoped--”

“Nothing’s changed,” Viktor said, already tired. “I’m still into men, Char.”

about… the rehab thing.”

Viktor felt his blood run cold. “Great,” he said, smiling tightly. “That saves me from needing to talk about it.”

“Viktor,” Charlotte touched his arm. “I was hoping that… after all of that had gone down, you’d start… you know. Hitting some luck.”

Viktor traced the wood grain of the bar with his fingernail. “That kind of stuff happens in movies,” he pointed out. “This is real life. I’m lucky to still be alive, to be honest.”

Charlotte sighed. “You know, I think we both deserve some good shit in our love lives,” she said. She motioned to the bartender and ordered two appletinis.

Viktor searched her face. “So… I’m avoiding Facebook. What happened in New York?”

“The usual. Rent kept going up. Lost my job. Boyfriend broke my heart.” She shrugged again. “There wasn’t much keeping me there.”

“Jeez,” Viktor said. “That’s a lot to happen at once.”

“Yeah. It really sucked. Like I said, I guess I kind of hoped that you would have had better luck.”

Viktor barked out a harsh laugh. “Charlotte, trust me. I’ve had a dry streak for the better part of this year. The closest thing I have to a love of my life is my dog.” Then he paused. “Except—”

She looked at him with interest. “Except?”

Viktor blushed.

“Oh my god,” Charlotte said, reading his face correctly. “Oh my god, who is he? What’s his name?”

Viktor shook his head. “You wouldn’t know him.”

She narrowed her eyes at him. “Is he… at the Ariel?”

Viktor refused to answer.

“Well,” she said, smiling wickedly. “If I manage to convince Yakov to hire me, I guess I’ll meet him, huh?”

“I don’t even know if he’s actually interested in me,” Viktor said, wincing. “I mean, he kind of came onto me while he was really drunk, but that doesn’t mean much.”

“Huh,” Charlotte said. “I mean, maybe. Have you tried talking to him sober?”

“A little. He acts weird around me, though.”

“Even so, there might be something there. Which means there’s hope for the rest of us,” Charlotte added with a wink.

Viktor rolled his eyes as the bartender slid one refilled pitcher and Charlotte’s appletinis back over to them. “Listen.”

“Mmhmm.”
“It would be nice and all, but I have my Makkachin. If it turns out that there’s… nothing there at all…” Viktor paused. It would suck, because Yuuri was the first person Viktor had been interested in almost literal years. He’d long accepted how fickle he was when it came to anything romantic. If Yuuri wasn’t really interested in him, he’d just… have to move on. Besides, he had bigger fish - hah! - to fry. “If there’s nothing there at all,” he repeated, “I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, we can go be two sad old maids together,” Charlotte said, taking a sip from one of the appletinis. “C’mon, one of these is for you. Let’s go mope and get tipsy.”

And, well. He’d been planning on doing that anyway. He picked up both of the refilled beer pitchers and followed Charlotte back to the booth, where he tried not to think about the amulet or any of the other Islaluna stuff for the rest of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Next time on Saltwater Melodies, JJ is back with some shenanigans! Sort of.

That guy who saw Viktor while waiting at the curb went on to co-write a successful mystery novel series about an FBI agent chasing a serial killer. (Hi, Wrath!)

Sorry for disappearing like I did, y’all. A lot of stuff has happened: I became an aunt right before Halloween, and then I lost my job right around Thanksgiving, so there’s still quite a bit going on right now. I’m also participating in two zines, which I’m very excited about!

You can always check in on me at Twitter. I do have a Tumblr account but... [DEEP SIGH] Tumblr. If I migrate to any other social media sites, I'll add them to any endnotes I can. But for now, Twitter is for sure a good place to find me. In the meantime, there's still the side stories (I just added one for Yuuri's birthday) and the Pinterest board (because I can't help myself). And of course, I always check my inbox here.

That's all I got for now, so I'll see you guys on the next one!
Mila felt like she was floating as she and Sara ducked into Chihoko’s, giggling and hopping a little. “Barkeep!” she called to Seung Gil, who looked thoroughly unimpressed. “Two of your finest, top-shelf smoothies!”

Seung Gil’s expression didn’t change at all, and he went back to whatever he was doing with the cappuccino machine.

“Whoa, you seem cheerful,” Phichit said as Mila and Sara dropped onto barstools. “What’s the occasion?”

“Mila got herself hired at Splash Dream, and I get to train her!” Sara said, whooping and high-fiving Mila. “It’s going to be awesome. And with any luck, this’ll help me get a promotion over Brittany.”

“Has she trained any energetic Russians?” Mila added, wagging her eyebrows.

“Awh, so you won’t be joining us here at the cafe?” Phichit pouted. “I feel betrayed.”

“Phichit, for the love of god.”

“I mean, I guess I can whip up some celebratory milkshakes for you or something,” Phichit said, continuing with his fake mopey act.

“That’d be so sweet of you,” Sara said, batting her eyelashes.

Phichit snorted and tugged his notepad out of his apron. “Okay, what’ll it be? We have the usual flavors.”
“Strawberry-banana for me,” Mila said, grinning.

“Just chocolate for me,” Sara added. “We might grab food here, too.”

“Cool beans,” Phichit said, winking. “Behave yourselves, ladies, while I get you your milkshakes.” He bustled off, and Sara giggled again.

“Ohmigod, today is turning out so well,” she said, bouncing on her stool a little.

“Yeah, especially after how weird last week was, geez,” Mila agreed.

“Legit, though. Still, I’m glad you got hired!” Sara clapped her hands in excitement. “You get discounts right away, and it works during sales and for clearance!”

“Sweet,” Mila cheered. “Cheaper stuff is always good!”

The door dinged open, and Mila caught sight of the person walking in. “Hey, Yuuri!”

The older student glanced up at her and waved, his little service dog at his side. He set up shop at a table by the window, near an outlet, and pulled out his laptop as the tiny poodle curled up under his seat.

“Oh, crap,” Phichit said as he dropped off the milkshakes. “I bet the internet has gone down for our building again. Stupid Comcast.” He disappeared into the back room to fill another order, probably, as Mila took a sip of her milkshake and hummed in approval.

“I had a thought,” Sara said. “And don’t make a face at me, it’s a good thought. You ready?”

Mila raised her eyebrows.

“So they just opened up a Sephora over on Playa, and I have been dying to check out the Benefit brow bar stuff. Let’s go take advantage of the free makeover consultant stuff this weekend and maybe get some freebies?”

“Ooh, Cariba might have mentioned that.” Mila nodded. “We should see if anyone else wants to go.”

“Yes, it’ll be so much fun!”

“I wonder if Mickey will try to come along too,” Mila added, wagging her eyebrows.

Sara snorted. “The very thought of makeup may repel him.”

“You sure?”

“Maybe.”

“Mmhmm.”

“I’m working on him,” Sara said, and she rubbed her forehead. “Mom has my back, but Dad’s doing that whole ‘gotta protect my baby girl’ thing and it’s basically a draw.”

“Dang, that sucks,” Mila said, patting her friend’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, I’m sure someone will realize that you’re capable of defending yourself.”

Sara snorted and sipped at her milkshake. “I didn’t buy that pepper spray for nothing.”
They eventually decided to join Yuuri at his table, and he allowed them to bother him as he worked on his homework. The internet at his and Phichit’s apartment had indeed gone out, and he hadn’t been willing to go to the library - “There’s this one librarian that really doesn’t like Vicchan being with me, no matter what I tell her,” - so he’d caught a bus out to the boardwalk to hang out at the cafe while Phichit finished his shift.

“You know what,” Mila said as she finished up her milkshake. “I kind of do regret not getting hired here.”

“Don’t say that in front of me,” Sara said, making a face. “We’re going to hang out at work.”

“Yeah but… imagine all the milkshakes I could have here,” Mila said dreamily.

“You probably shouldn’t have too many unless you start adding whey to those,” Yuuri said.

Mila narrowed her eyes at him. “Yuuri, I liked you.”

“I’m serious. It tastes terrible but it at least adds protein and cancels out some of the sugar.” Yuuri actually smirked at her. “Just saying.”

“Okay I take it back, I’m happy at Splash Dream,” Mila said, and Sara giggled.

“Right,” Yuuri said, going back to his homework. “Enjoy that milkshake. All of it.”

Mila narrowed her eyes at him again and Sara openly laughed.

The door next to them tinkled open, and Sara waved at whoever was stepping through. Mila scooted around in her seat to see Isabella and her loud Canadian boyfriend entering the cafe, looking adorably in love and coupley. Their faces lit up, and they made a beeline for the table.

“Oh, I feel like we might have ruined your study afternoon,” Mila said as Yuuri sighed.

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna--” he closed up his laptop and grabbed his bag just as Isabella and JJ made their way over.

“Oh, you don’t have to leave,” Isabella said, but Yuuri shook his head.

“Sorry, I kind of have work to do,” he said. “And there’s getting to be too many people.”

“No worries, brah!” JJ said, catching Yuuri’s arm. “No one will be offended if you put headphones in, or something.”

Yuuri’s face went very, very blank, and his service dog pawed at his leg. “I’d rather just go grab a chair,” he said.

“Hey, it’s fine,” Sara said. “We did kind of interrupt him, and he did come here to do homework. It’s all good.”

JJ let him go, and Yuuri gave the Canadian a frosty look before taking his leave, his little poodle following.

“What’s his deal?” JJ asked, looking a little mystified.

“He’s pretty… not-social,” Sara said. “Like, he really needs to know you in order to hang out with
you. It’s nothing against you, he just doesn’t know you well.”

JJ frowned, but he dropped himself into Yuuri’s deserted chair anyway and pulled Isabella down onto his lap. “You guys eating?”

“You paying?” Mila asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Maybe,” JJ said, shrugging.

“Ooh, you look like you just want to spit something out,” Sara said, chin in hand. “What’s got you in such a good mood today?”

“Oh, nothing,” JJ said, grinning. “Just managed to find the first proof that my thesis might be for real.”

Mila and Sara both blinked. “Thesis?” they asked at the same time.

“Yeah, it’s so perfect,” JJ hugged Isabella close. “I met Bella through an archeology forum, and she told me all about Shiirta-Ea and the local legends here. So when I decided to transfer down here, it only made sense to make my history major big project based around that, you know?”

“Shiirta-Ea?” Mila repeated, frowning. “What’s that?”

“It sounds familiar...”

JJ’s entire face lit up. “Only the coolest bit of lost history ever,” he said, leaning in.

“Yeah, I did a project on it in middle school,” Isabella said. “Basically, it’s like our own Atlantis. The Native American tribes out here all had stories about it.”

“Best part? There’s archeological evidence of a city like that actually having existed!” JJ’s eyes sparkled. “Smashed pottery, metalwork, sunken boats...”

“Couldn’t that have been from the local tribes?” Mila asked, trying to keep a straight face as her mind whirred.

JJ shook his head, grinning. “Doesn’t match verified Tani artifacts at all.”

“Hmm.” Mila pulled her phone out, opening the merkids groupchat and trying to scroll up in the conversation. “That sounds like some Indiana Jones kind of stuff.”

“Totally,” Isabella said, sharing in her boyfriend’s excitement.

“Even better, Josh Gates did an Expedition Unknown episode on Shiirta-Ea,” JJ added.

Mila vaguely remembered that happening. “Wild,” she said as she quickly tapped a message to the groupchat.

Moonchildren

(5:02 PM) Mila: vitya what was the name of the underwater city the tani said the sea ppl lived in

(5:02 PM) Mila: i cant find i when i scroll back up @Viktor

(5:03 PM) Beka: i think its sherta-ia or smth?
“So okay wait, what does this mean?” she asked, looking back up.

JJ shrugged. “At the moment, I’m raiding the archives at Anderson, but I hope to get out to Islaluna and start poking around. That’s where all the artifacts were found, after all.”

Mila’s eyebrows went up. “No one goes on Islaluna.”

“You did, though,” Isabella said.

“By accident. Do you remember me talking about that signal fire? We were basically marooned.”

“Did you find anything interesting when you were there?” JJ asked, leaning in.

Mila shook her head right away. “Just a lot of sand and trees, man.”

“Mm, didn’t you find like a weird little pool?” Sara asked, her forehead wrinkling as she tried to remember.

“There was a stream, which was kind of weird,” Mila said, mentally running in circles to downplay her previous statements. “And yeah, tiny pool in the forest. But other than that, it’s just a bird and bug paradise.”

“Still, you weren’t looking with the benefit of years of research guiding you,” JJ said, winking. “I’ve triangulated some likely spots to start investigating. You never know, you might see me on the news one of these days. I’ve got a good feeling about this adventure.”

Mila’s eyebrows went up without her permission. “Wow,” she said. “You seem awfully sure of yourself.”

“I totally got this,” JJ said with all the confidence of an average white guy. Isabella beamed and pecked him on the cheek.

“Sounds cool,” Sara said, bracing her elbows on the table. “But you know that the island is, like, cursed, right? There’s a reason no one goes there except by accident.”

“Cursed?” JJ frowned. “You mean all those rumors about freak storms and missionary deaths?”

“Well,” Sara made a face as she thought. “I mean, my mom’s family has lived here in this area for generations, and there are all these stories about this rich dude from, like, the east coast coming out here to build a hotel on the island. He literally got struck by lightning and died.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard about that one,” Mila said.

“Well, that was a coincidence,” JJ said breezily. “I mean, come on. Getting struck by lightning is a statistical minority, or something.”

“You have a better chance of getting struck by lightning than winning the lottery,” Mila pointed out. “Plus, I’m pretty sure the island is protected property. You’re going to have to go through official stuff to mess around there.”
“Oh, I’m already on it,” JJ said. “My professor’s even helping me.”

Mila barely fought a grimace and instead managed to wrangle her expression into a blandly impressed one. “Well, be careful. The sea can be unforgiving.”

“I’m not worried about it,” JJ said.

Meanwhile, Mila’s phone had been buzzing the whole time and was going off again, so she checked it.

Moonchildren

(5:03 PM) Viktor: what

(5:03 PM) Chris: oh dear

(5:04 PM) Viktor: mila what

(5:04 PM) Yuri: BABA WHAT

(5:04 PM) Viktor: mila??

(5:04 PM) Chris: guys she might be busy

(5:05 PM) Yuri: I KNW THIS COULD HAPPEN

(5:05 PM) Yuri: THAT CORN BLUE GUY FOUND US OUT

(5:05 PM) Yuri: OR THE NAVY

(5:05 PM) Chris: dude chill please it could literally be anything

(5:05 PM) Yuri: CHILL???? UR NOT THE 1 WHO COULD BE DISSECTED

(5:05 PM) Viktor: yura please let’s just wait and see what mila says

(5:05 PM) Yuri: BABA WTF IS GOING ON ANSWER

(5:08 PM) Mila: sorry was doing mental gymnastics just now omfg

(5:09 PM) Mila: but remember isabella yang’s bf from last week with the band?

(5:09 PM) Beka: vaguely

(5:09 PM) Yuri: the canadian asshole

(5:09 PM) Mila: he’s a history major and he’s basing his thesis around shiirta-ea

(5:09 PM) Mila: and he’s talking about going to islaluna to poke around

(5:09 PM) Viktor: oh no

(5:09 PM) Yuri: FUCKEUCKDCUKCFUKGUKCEKDUCK
“Anything good going on, Mila?” Sara asked, jerking Mila out of her reverie.

“Yurochka is being a brat,” she said, re-locking her phone and sticking it in her pocket. “Are you still thinking of getting food here? I’m actually thinking my aunt will be making dinner tonight.”

“Oh, well, we don’t have to eat here,” Sara said. “Do you have to head back now?”

“Let me check, but I think I’ve got some wiggle room.”

Auntie was, in fact, making dinner, and did, in fact, want Mila to be home sooner rather than later, since this was one of the only nights this week that Uncle Erik would be home for dinner. Mila decided she could hang out with her friends until 5:30, and then she paid for her milkshake and said goodbye to everyone before taking her leave.

Sara walked her out to where they’d left their scooters, and hugged her again. “I’m so excited,” she said, almost vibrating. “I can’t wait to work with you!”

“It’s gonna be great,” Mila agreed, and then she had to rev the ignition and head on home for the night.

Tammy was at a friend’s house until eight, so Mila ate a low-key dinner with her aunt and uncle. She couldn’t help but tune out their talk, replaying the conversation with JJ over and over in her mind. She could feel her phone buzzing in her pocket, but other than the last little update to the groupchat, she hadn’t really checked it since she’d gotten home.

Still. While they were all teasing Yuri, he had a point. What kind of disastrous discoveries could JJ make, poking around the island?

She could think of way too many.
The adults seemed to pick up on her preoccupation, and kept trying to nudge her back into their conversation, but eventually let her be as the meal winded down. After dinner, she helped them clear the table off and put away leftovers. By now, a couple weeks into the don’t-get-wet-in-public thing, Mila managed to avoid getting splashed or dripped on the whole time. Uncle Erik then settled into the living room to watch TV for a bit while Auntie ducked into the den to finish up something for her office. Mila took the opportunity to head upstairs and claim the bathroom before Tammy got home.

**Moonchildren**

(6:38 PM) Mila: okay im free do we have a plan

(6:38 PM) Beka: not really. yura is at dinner now and i think viktor is afk

(6:39 PM) Chris: he has a late session tonight, concert stuff

(6:39 PM) Mila: ok cool cool cool cool ok cool

(6:39 PM) Chris: mmhm

(6:40 PM) Mila: so we are looking at an issue here

(6:40 PM) Beka: im off work in 20 let me punch out ok

(6:40 PM) Mila: ok cool

(6:41 PM) Chris: coolsies

Mila set her phone on the counter and plugged up the tub, flipping on the water to start filling it. She quickly disrobed and grabbed her towel, setting it on the closed toilet and moving her phone on top of it so it was within arm’s reach once she’d gotten her tail. She grabbed the bubble bath - because why not, she’d gotten a job that day - and dumped a capful of the lavender-scented formula into the water.

Once she’d climbed into the tub and gotten settled with the her tail, she grabbed her phone again and leaned back against the side of the tub.

**Moonchildren**

(7:01 PM) Beka: im off

(7:01 PM) Mila: awesome

(7:02 PM) Mila: looks like chris went offline

(7:02 PM) Beka: well everyone can catch up when they’re free

(7:02 PM) Mila: right cool

(7:03 PM) Beka: so. sabotage.
(7:03 PM) Mila: how the hell are we supposed to sabotage this dude

(7:03 PM) Beka: just throwing it out there

(7:04 PM) Beka: there’s got to be a way to make trouble and keep him from finding anything

(7:04 PM) Mila: well sara and i couldn’t get him freaked out by all the curse stuff

(7:05 PM) Beka: curse?

(7:05 PM) Beka: did i miss smth?

(7:06 PM) Mila: lol one of the first things we found out abt islaluna was that anyone who tried to build stuff on the island ended up mysteriously dead af

(7:07 PM) Beka: uh. Yikes.

(7:07 PM) Beka: okay brb gotta head home

(7:07 PM) Mila: drive safe

Mila put her phone aside so she could grab her bath brush and squeeze some shower gel onto it. Her brush had a bamboo handle and soft bristles, so it didn’t scratch up her back. She rolled onto her front for a little bit, her tailfins flopping out over the side of the tub, and blew some suds out of her face.

JJ had to be pretty sure of where he wanted to search on Islaluna, based off what he’d been saying. And considering he was working on getting permits to possibly dig or whatever on protected park property--

“Mila!” Her cousin’s voice shattered the silence and jerked her out of her thoughts.

Mila groaned and grabbed onto the sides of the tub so she could lever her torso out of the water. “What?”

“What’s it to you?”

Tammy made a screechy frustrated noise. “I need to shower!”

“Okay, you can shower after I’m done,” Mila said, and then buried her face underwater to drown out her cousin’s answer.

Eventually, she heard the distant echo of Tammy stomping down the hall into her room, and she pulled herself back out of the water. Can’t even take a half-hour bath. But if she was going to be fair, she was taking a bath every other night or so. There was only so much that dry shampoo and deodorant could cover for.

Mila brushed her wet hair out of her face and wiped her hand on the towel before reaching for her phone again.
Moonchildren

(7:19 PM) Mila: we have GOT to figure out a way to hold off transforming long enough to shower
(7:19 PM) Mila: or else tammy is going to rip my head off one of these days
(7:20 PM) Yuri: tell her to fuck off
(7:20 PM) Mila: it’s tammy. that wont work.
(7:20 PM) Mila: hey did you finally get ungrounded?
(7:20 PM) Yuri: yea last night
(7:21 PM) Mila: yay!
(7:21 PM) Chris: good for you
(7:21 PM) Chris: so sabotage
(7:21 PM) Yuri: blow up his boat
(7:21 PM) Mila: that is also illegal
(7:22 PM) Beka: ok im home also no illegal stuff yura
(7:22 PM) Yuri: okay genius wat do u suggest
(7:22 PM) Beka: well i had time to think on the way home and i might have an idea
(7:22 PM) Yuri: put a virus on his computer
(7:23 PM) Beka: no
(7:23 PM) Beka: but heres the thing, you 3 cant go near the island. bsides the whole water=tail thing theres the full moon stuff and we just cant be sure what might happen
(7:23 PM) Mila: the three of us went there the day after the eclipse and we were all fine
(7:24 PM) Beka: im just trying to be pragmatic
(7:24 PM) Chris: that doesn’t mean anything tbh
(7:24 PM) Chris: just because you didn’t notice anything changing doesn’t mean nothing changed
(7:24 PM) Yuri: im never going near that island again holy fuck
(7:25 PM) Beka: well if we play our cards right then you wont have to
(7:25 PM) Mila: okay but what cards do we have
(7:25 PM) Beka: the cards of me and chris tagging along to sabotage instead
(7:25 PM) Chris: chris does what?
(7:25 PM) **Beka**: its a long con

(7:25 PM) **Beka**: i will find a way to insert myself into this little adventure and then suggest you as a guide to islaluna

(7:25 PM) **Beka**: that way we will have 2 ins

(7:25 PM) **Beka**: and youre never supposed to go out on these kinds of boat trips alone, its common sense right?

(7:25 PM) **Chris**: i mean true

(7:25 PM) **Mila**: this is still super heavy on your ends tho

(7:25 PM) **Chris**: i see otabek’s point even if i don’t know how helpful i can be between work and classes and lifeguarding

(7:26 PM) **Viktor**: ok what did I miss

(7:26 PM) **Chris**: backread

(7:26 PM) **Mila**: yeah thats the thing, you and beka both work

(7:26 PM) **Mila**: we cant ask you guys to give up all your free time for this

(7:26 PM) **Beka**: if it means keeping you 3 safe from discovery ill do whatever it takes

(7:26 PM) **Yuri**: BABA SRSLY

(7:26 PM) **Yuri**: if that asshol findsa NYTHING that could lead him 2 us thats BAD

(7:26 PM) **Viktor**: I’m sure theres a way for us to help somehow tho, maybe we can use our powers to sabotage equipment or something

(7:27 PM) **Mila**: yea lets use our magical water powers to sabotage… shovels and pickaxes

(7:27 PM) **Chris**: lol well while you’re working on that I will figure out when I’m available for operation mermaid sabotage

(7:27 PM) **Beka**: i can start talking to jj in class, i have essay writing with him

(7:27 PM) **Beka**: i can probably mention that mila told me about his islaluna thing

(7:28 PM) **Chris**: don’t be TOO interested, that might look suspicious

(7:28 PM) **Beka**: yea ok

(7:28 PM) **Mila**: i cant believe this is my life now

(7:28 PM) **Yuri**: UR LIFE? HELLO

A sharp rap on the bathroom door interrupted Mila replying to Yuri, and she heard her aunt
“Mila, dear, you’ve been in there long enough.”

“Okay,” Mila called, and she pulled the plug on the tub and flipped the spigot on the water so she could wash her hair and face real quick. “What I wouldn’t give to have Yura’s heating power,” she grumbled as she hauled herself out of the drained tub and lowered herself carefully to the bath rug so she could dry off her tail and torso. She worked a little leave-in conditioner into her hair and then towelled off her face, finally transforming back. She finished her skincare routine and put on her bathrobe and slippers, hung up her towel to dry, and grabbed her phone and dirty clothes off the floor.

“ Took you long enough,” Tammy grumbled, shoving past Mila as soon as she opened the door.

Mila rolled her eyes and stretched, making her collarbones pop a little, before crossing the hallway back into her room.

Moonchildren

(7:38 PM) Viktor: more fun mythology stuff courtesy of Kolya and the Anderson archives

(7:38 PM) Viktor: apparently the moon goddess was the one who created the magic lagoon on Islaluna to protect her chosen people and give them a paradise in Shiirta-Ea

(7:39 PM) Viktor: her name was Sen’a and she appeared to the people of Shiirta-Ea as a mermaid whose skin and tail were so white it was like the moon had come onto the land

(7:39 PM) Mila: white?????

(7:39 PM) Mila: uhhhhhhhh??????

(7:40 PM) Viktor: that’s what the book says mila

(7:40 PM) Mila: weren’t the sea people of islaluna supposed to be like native american or something?

(7:40 PM) Viktor: i mean that would be a sound assumption but we have no idea what the sea folk actually looked like, only that the Tani encountered them super way back long ago

(7:40 PM) Viktor: for all we know they had green skin and fins for ears

(7:41 PM) Chris: tell you guys what, we might learn something from this jj guy

(7:41 PM) Viktor: like this was when the mayans were running around

(7:41 PM) Mila: lol did the tani have 2012 legends

(7:41 PM) Viktor: oh my god don’t start

(7:41 PM) Chris: could you imagine if the eclipse had happened in 2012

(7:42 PM) Chris: everyone’s hair would be on fire
They didn’t even have to wait until Beka’s writing class on Friday.

Mila and Beka were hanging out in the student co-op with Leo and Isabella when JJ tossed his bag onto the bench next to his girlfriend and collapsed down next to her.

“Hey babe,” Isabella said, pecking him on the cheek. Her lipstick left a red mark on his face. “Rough lecture?”

“Nah, just boring,” JJ said, and he put his arm around Isabella’s shoulders. “It’s like… I already speak French, why do I have to learn Spanish?”

“Because Baja is to the south and you can get there in less than a day?” Mila said, and Leo nodded. “Also with the sheer amount of Spanish-speaking people in this state, it’s probably a good idea?”

“French and Spanish are basically the same,” JJ said, which made Isabella snort.

“Babe,” she said. “They’re similar, sure, but you admitted you don’t understand most of what you hear in Spanish.”

“You’re already bilingual,” Leo said, taking a swig of his soda. “A third language isn’t gonna stretch your brain much.”

“Meh,” JJ said. “It’s not what I’m here for, but my degree has a language requirement.”

“Most of them do.” Mila’s definitely did, and she was taking her language class in her sophomore year instead of this one. “At least you’re able to take classes for your major right now.”

“Ah, the joys of freshman year,” Isabella said, winking.
JJ grumbled something about “remedial essay writing” and Beka finally spoke up.

“Hey, don’t you have that class with Dr. Choi?”

JJ nodded, and blinked as recognition flashed in his eyes. “Yeah. Hey, aren’t you in my class?”

Beka raised his eyebrows. “That’s why I asked.”

“So do you have your subject picked out for the midterm project yet?” JJ asked, leaning in. “I think it’s bullshit that we have to write two shorter essays instead of an actual decent long one.”

“I don’t know, six-hundred words in three months isn’t that bad,” Beka said.

“Yeah, well,” JJ reached into his bag with his free hand so he could pull out a stainless steel water bottle. “I only have one thing that I want to write about.”

Mila saw her chance and took it. “You mean your treasure hunt on Islaluna?”

Beka’s eyes widened. “Treasure?” he asked, playing along. To anyone who hadn’t been hanging out with him for years, he sounded barely interested, almost dismissive.

JJ’s eyebrows drew together. “Not quite treasure,” he said in a defensive tone. “More like… artifacts. I’m not looking for, like, chests of gold bullion or anything. I’m looking for history, man.”

“A regular Indiana Jones,” Mila said.

“And you think there is some on Islaluna?” Beka pressed.

Leo laughed. “Otabek, you’re not buying this, are you? That place is cursed.”

“Everyone keeps saying that,” JJ said before uncapping his water and taking a swig. “I bet it’s all just superstition and hysteria.”

“A dude died out there,” Leo said. “Legit croaked. There’s records of it and everything. Lightning hit him in the middle of a clear day. My abuela says it’s brujería.”

“Yeah, that’s the third time I’ve heard that one,” JJ said, rolling his eyes. “One freak accident doesn’t make a curse.”

“I’m kind of with JJ on this one,” Beka said. “Sorry, Leo, but science isn’t exactly on your side here.”

Mila smothered a giggle in her hand. “You sound like Chris.”

JJ zeroed in on her. “Chris?”

It was almost too easy. “Our friend,” Mila said. “He’s a surfer, he goes out to the island sometimes. I think he’s crazy,” she added as JJ’s face lit up. “There’s no cell reception out there, and all kinds of bugs. Did I not already mention the bugs?”

JJ looked at Beka. “How well does he know the island, this Chris dude?”

“Better than any of us do,” Beka said. “He has his own boat and everything.”

“He was the one that took Mila and the others out to the island for the eclipse,” Isabella added. “He’s pretty chill, I bet he’d be down to explore the island.”
JJ swiveled to look at Beka. “Oh--”

“I dunno,” Mila said. “He’s pretty busy.”

“Can I at least get you to ask for me?” JJ actually put on a pretty compelling puppy-dog face, the likes of which Mila had only seen done by Makkachin when she was trying to bum snacks off visitors. “I’d be willing to compensate for his time.”

“He might be down to search for historical artifacts,” Beka said. “Frankly, I don’t buy any of the magic nonsense. I kind of want to prove it wrong.”

“On your own head be it,” Leo said, biting into his sandwich. “Don’t come crying to me when you get zapped by whatever weird shit’s going on at that place.”

“I’m willing to bet I’ll be fine,” Beka said dryly, and Mila had to laugh at that. Of course he would be - the full moon was over with.

Hopefully there weren’t any other celestial events that could cause weird stuff to happen.

“Sweet! Maybe we can go out and survey the area this weekend? This is kind of my thesis for my entire academic career, to be honest,” JJ was grinning so wide, Mila thought his face would split. “I want to strike while the iron’s hot.”

“I’ll text Chris and ask him,” Beka said, pulling his phone out. “He does a ton of odd jobs so he’ll have to clear a time.”

“Awesome.”

I can’t believe this, Mila thought as her phone buzzed with a WhatsApp notification. This is too easy!

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**Moonchildren**

(1:43 PM) **Beka:** the eagle has landed

(1:44 PM) **Mila:** can confirm :thumbs_up:

(1:44 PM) **Viktor:** this is good

(1:44 PM) **Viktor:** right?

(1:44 PM) **Mila:** yes

(1:44 PM) **Mila:** it’s good

(1:44 PM) **Viktor:** ok cool

(1:45 PM) **Chris:** am i up?

(1:45 PM) **Beka:** i’m supposed to be asking for your help

(1:45 PM) **Chris:** mkay my saturday morning is open before grom surfing lessons at 1

(1:46 PM) **Mila:** jj said he’d pay you
“(1:46 PM) Chris: hot diggity dog
(1:46 PM) Mila: wtf :’D
(1:46 PM) Chris: listen. ya boy needs coin.
(1:46 PM) Chris: we got mouths to feed and i don’t want to be a sugar baby
(1:47 PM) Yuri: gross
(1:47 PM) Beka: put ur phone away yura
(1:47 PM) Viktor: i can’t deal with you all

“He’s in,” Beka said out loud. “Saturday morning works. You hooked him with science.”

“Awesome,” JJ pumped a fist. “This is great.”

“Oh my god, you’re actually doing this,” Leo said, deadpan.

“Let them live their best lives, Leo,” Mila sang, and Isabella snorted.

“Tell him we’ll meet up at first light,” JJ said to Beka, whose eyebrows went up.

“Asscrack of dawn?” Mila asked, feeling laughter bubbling up from her belly. “Ooh, boy, that sounds like a great way to spend a Saturday morning.”

“Yeah, count me out,” Isabella said. “I’m opening on Saturday.” She actually looked disappointed.

“No problem, you can join me another time,” JJ said. “We’ll make a date of it, how about that?”

“If you find anything cool, you gotta hold onto it long enough so I can see it before you ship it off to some lab,” Isabella said, poking her boyfriend on the nose.

JJ caught her hand in his and kissed her finger, and Mila had to cough loudly at that.

“Get a room,” Leo said, and Isabella flipped him off. “Oh, that’s really mature, Bella.”

“Live with it, dude.”

“Yeah, not that I want to miss out on this touching romance, but I need to start heading out for my next class,” Mila said, scooting off her bench and scooping up her bag. “You kids behave while I’m gone.”

Beka shot her the thumbs-up, and Mila nodded back to him before she took off.

Moonchildren

(1:56 PM) Beka: it’s gonna be fine
(1:56 PM) Yuri: i srsly dont trust him
(1:56 PM) Chris: no. u dont say.

(1:56 PM) Yuri: fuck u

(1:57 PM) Viktor: yura please

(1:57 PM) Viktor: chris & beka we’re counting on you guys

(1:57 PM) Yuri: I dont LIKE this

(1:57 PM) Mila: hey guys im about to start class but im guessing we’re all on the same page?

(1:58 PM) Beka: yep. 6am saturday morning.

(1:58 PM) Chris: this is gonna be fun. don’t any of you fishtails follow us ;)

(1:58 PM) Viktor: are you going to have fun with this??

(1:58 PM) Chris: look you can either laugh or cry at life and i choose to laugh

(1:58 PM) Chris: besides i can poke around some more and see if there’s any more stuff to do science on ;)

(1:59 PM) Yuri: i dont like any of this holy shit

(1:59 PM) Mila: not surprised

(2:00 PM) Yuri: tell me this is a good idea

(2:00 PM) Yuri: we shouldnt be letting them go alone

(2:00 PM) Chris: we are literally not all going alone at all

(2:00 PM) Chris: literally.

(2:01 PM) Beka: yura we will be fine i promise

(2:01 PM) Viktor: listen. yura and mila. we need to stay on the mainland on saturday

(2:01 PM) Viktor: period. no buts. I need to go. YURA SRSLY.

(2:02 PM) Yuri: look

(2:02 PM) Yuri: I still say we sabotage his boat

(2:02 PM) Chris: uh we are taking MY boat and if you do anything to it i will exact my revenge

(2:02 PM) Yuri: FINE SOMETHING ELSE THEN

(2:02 PM) Beka: yura pls focus on class

(2:02 PM) Yuri: free study period :P

(2:03 PM) Mila: mkay i have class now. pls behave
(2:03 PM) Beka: i swear im an adult mila

(2:03 PM) Mila: you know what I mean

(2:03 PM) Mila: :waves:

Chapter End Notes

How does Mila's first day of retail go? Find out in *Moonlight Harmonies*!

Chapter 16 is already partially written, this time we're following Otabek on his first adventure out to the island. Get hype!

If you want updates on the writing process, PLEASE FEEL FREE to come yell at me on Twitter, Tumblr, Dreamwidth, and Pillowfort! If you're so inclined, check out the dedicated pinboard on my Pinterest!
turn your magic on, Umi she'd say

Chapter Summary

Otabek and Chris join JJ on his expedition to Islaluna, and magical weirdness ensues. (Of course.)

Chapter Notes

Chapter title yoinked from Coldplay's *Adventure of a Lifetime*.

Super-sized gigantic thank you to Gabapple for the beta on this one! She's the only reason this is still readable. BLESS.

I'm posting this from not-so-great wifi right now, fingers crossed that it goes up okay!

Quick note, because Gab was confused about the term "grom" - it's the shortened form of "grommet" which is a term for young/inexperienced surfers. Chris is teaching kiddie surfing lessons. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Otabek immediately regretted agreeing to get up at the crack of dawn on a Saturday when he woke to his blaring alarm clock, strategically placed across his bedroom. He sighed and rolled out from under the covers so he could shuffle over to his dresser and shut the shrill beeping off.

*I wonder if JJ has to drag himself out of bed on days like this.*

The Canadian transfer student had already proven to have more energy than an average college student, but Otabek figured that since if he wasn’t interested in fraternities, he had to find outlets somewhere.

Still, JJ had been pretty excited to get out to the island at the literal earliest possible time, and they’d be heading back to port around noon so Chris could grab lunch before running off to teach grom surfing lessons.

Otabek had already resigned himself to a day of warm humidity and sun exposure, but he kept reminding himself of his mission: if JJ discovered the magical pool that Yura and the others had found, there was almost definitely going to be some trouble. Otabek absolutely could not allow JJ to find the lagoon.

He quickly put on the clothes he’d laid out the previous night; it was stuff he’d worn when he’d gone hiking with his sisters before they’d moved out of the state. His backpack had been repacked with bottled water and plenty of high-energy, high-fiber snacks. He’d even packed extra sunscreen just to be safe. Chris would be bringing his boat kit, and while Yura tended to speak derisively of the surfer, Otabek had to admit that Chris knew more about exploring the island than anyone else did.
He let himself out of his apartment and locked it up behind him before checking in on the group chat; everyone else seemed to still be asleep. Which made sense, and he totally wasn’t envious.

It was early enough that he didn’t encounter all that much traffic on his way to the pier where Chris kept his Zodiac and they’d all agreed to meet. Otabek took his motorbike, relishing the relatively cool morning breeze coming off the sea as he got closer to the shore. It would be a few months before the rainy season started up, and even then the rainy season didn’t tend to last long in the area. That was probably a good thing, considering that it would also be around finals time.

*Yikes. We’d better find a cure or something.*

He parked his bike in the pier parking lot and looked around as he took off his helmet. A figure waving from far off caught his attention, and he joined Chris at the end of the pier.

“You have to work tonight, don’t you?” the surfer asked as Otabek tossed his backpack into the Zodiac. “This is supposed to be your day off.”

“The greater good,” Otabek intoned, and Chris snorted.

“Well, if this JJ guy doesn’t show up in the next ten minutes, I’m calling this off.” He flipped his aviators down over his eyes. “He was the one demanding we get out here at six.”

“He’ll be here,” Otabek said. “This is the most important thing of his academic life.”

Sure enough, JJ showed up shortly after. He pulled his (admittedly nice-looking) car into the spot next to Otabek’s bike and whooped as he got out. As he hauled a giant duffle bag out of his backseat, it became very obvious very quickly that he was taking this expedition very seriously.

*Very.*

“All he’s missing is a pith helmet,” Chris muttered, but he was all smiles as JJ jogged over to them.

JJ was wearing sturdy khakis and hiking boots along with what looked like a linen shirt, so unlike his stage persona that Otabek almost laughed. He managed to not do that, and accepted JJ’s manly handshake greeting as they all climbed aboard the Zodiac.

“This is a nice boat, man!” JJ said as Chris got the engine revved up.

Chris smirked. “Thank you.”

“It broke down a few weeks ago,” Otabek said, and Chris shot him a sour look.

“That just means she gets a lot of use,” JJ said, grinning. “All right, we need to get to the north end of the island, Eastern-facing side.”

“What do you think you’ll find there?” Chris asked as he eased the Zodiac out of its stall and guided it down the way to open waters. The commercial fishing boats were already long gone, and there weren’t a lot of pleasure crafts out as early as it was, so it was easy going.

“See, that’s the exciting part,” JJ said, stretching. “We could find anything. We might find some of the same pottery that they’ve found over on the mainland. We might find gold. We might even find burial sites… who knows?”

“I’m not messing with burial sites,” Chris said. “If we find any bones, we call the authorities and let them deal with it.”
“You superstitious?” JJ asked, raising his eyebrows.

Chris shrugged. “I’m cautious.”

That was smart, especially considering that merpeople existed. For all they knew, burial site curses were totally legit… but Otabek kept that to himself.

There was an odd splash off to the side of the craft, startling all three of them, but when they looked there was nothing there.

A flash of gold caught Otabek’s eye towards the back of the boat, but… no. Couldn’t be.

Yura wouldn’t.

…actually, he would. Dammit.

“Let’s get going,” he said aloud. “We’ve only got six hours before we lose our ride back, JJ.”

“That was probably a seal or a porpoise,” JJ said as Chris sped up, finally clearing the jetty and veering towards the island. “Right? You guys have them around here.”

“Probably,” Otabek agreed, but he couldn’t help keeping an eye out for any more signs of meddling mermen.

Well, Yura’s mom had just lifted the grounding… dammit, Yura!

“Oh boy,” Chris said. “You’re really in for glory, huh?”

“I’m in for adventure,” JJ said, his eyes sparkling in the early morning light. “The glory is just a nice bonus.”

Chris raised his eyebrows, but didn’t comment.

It took about twenty-five minutes to get across the stretch of ocean that separated the island from the mainland. The sun was rising fast, and was just cresting the horizon to the east once Chris brought them to the northernmost tip of the island. They could still see the mainland from where they dragged the Zodiac onto the beach, and thankfully Otabek hadn’t spotted any more “dolphins” on the way.

For all of his bravado and overconfident attitude, JJ actually knew what he was doing. Both Otabek and Chris had to agree on that. JJ had brought a tape measure, a bunch of wooden stakes, and string; he handed all of that to Otabek as he unloaded his duffle and pulled out a high-tech metal detector. “I’ll sweep the beach if you guys can set up a basic grid system a little higher up. If you see anything unusual, tell me right away so we can focus on the immediate area!”

They split up to do that, and as soon as they were out of JJ’s earshot, Otabek pulled Chris aside. “I’m pretty sure Yura followed us.”

Chris groaned. “I had a feeling he did. That stunt by the docks wasn’t exactly subtle.”
“I’ve never been here before,” Otabek added, absently untangling the string as Chris picked a spot to jam a stake into. “Is there a spot where he could surface safely?”

“Yeah, the lagoon,” Chris said. “He’ll know how to get there, and it’s hard to access from sea unless you’re actually swimming.”

“How easy is it to find from land?”

“Pretty hard, believe it or not. I got lost a ton when I came here with Viktor, and that’s not me having a shit sense of direction for once.” Chris stood up and stepped on the top of the stake, putting a majority of his weight on it until it sank into the sandy soil. “Like, I knew where it was on the map, I could see it on Google Earth, but actually getting to it was like navigating a hall of mirrors.”

“So… it’s like the lagoon is protecting itself,” Otabek mused, handing Chris another stake.

“Yeah,” Chris agreed as he measured out a meter with the tape measure to place the stake. “Ugh, magic. And now I feel the need to flog myself.” He stuck the stake into the ground.

“Please don’t,” Otabek said as Chris got it secured.

“Don’t worry, I’m not much of a masochist.” Chris winked.

Otabek rolled his eyes as they continued on with their sectioning, keeping JJ in their sights as they worked.

They’d managed to get a good chunk of the ground divided with stakes and strings when Otabek heard a pronounced hissing noise from the trees.

“Oh my god, this is actually happening,” Chris said as Yura poked his head out from behind a nearby tree. “I can’t believe you’ve done this.”

“What’s he doing?” Yura whispered, ducking behind a tree that was closer and angling so that JJ couldn’t see him. “He looks like an idiot.”

“That’s a high-grade metal detector,” Chris said, pointing a stake at Yuri. “And you aren’t supposed to be out here. We told you we were handling it.”

“Yura, seriously,” Otabek said. “How are we supposed to explain you being here?”

“Cut me some slack.” Yuri pouted. “I woke up early to do this.”

“Yuri. Oh my god.” Chris pinched the bridge of his nose. “Well, go home. Stay out of sight. JJ is literally combing the beach and doing grid searches in the dirt. We’re not even going to get close to the lagoon today, we’re heading back to the mainland at noon.”

“Yeah, things are gonna go exactly as we planned,” Yuri said, rolling his eyes. “That’s always how things go.”

“Well, your coming out here isn’t going to help,” Otabek said. “You might accidentally set something off just by being on the island. It might react to having a merperson around.”

“Oh, so it’ll be my fault again?” Yuri demanded, going scarlet.

“That’s not what I said, I said it might be the island’s fault,” Otabek countered smoothly, cutting off Yuri’s impending tantrum with the ease of practice. “We literally don’t know what could happen.”
“Well, what if the island does something to you?” Yuri fired back.

“That’s why we’re teaming up,” Chris said. “Yuri, we mean it. Please, go back to the mainland. We’ll be done by noon.”

Yuri lifted his chin. “You can’t make me.”

Chris groaned and hung his head. “Altin, you talk some sense into him. I’ll cover for you.”

Otabek nodded and tossed Chris the rest of the string. “C’mon, Yura.” He grabbed the younger teen’s arm and led him deeper into the trees.

“Seriously?” Yuri hissed as they drew away from the shore and Otabek lost sight of Chris and JJ. “Stop treating me like a kid, Beka!”

“One, you are a kid and I’m barely not, so shush.” Otabek turned to face his friend, trying to keep his concern from showing on his face. “Two, we told Mila and Viktor the same thing. It’s not like we’re picking on you.”

Yuri made a face and picked at the hem of his t-shirt. “Well, you still can’t make me leave.”

Otabek sighed. “No, I can’t, but we’re literally doing this to protect you three. We keep telling you, Yura.”

Yuri didn’t answer, just turned away from Otabek and scuffed his board shoes on the forest floor.

_Crap._ Otabek had been expecting Yuri to be stubborn, but usually Otabek was able to talk sense into him. Still, the whole full moon thing and getting zapped by that amulet had to have frightened Yuri. Otabek couldn’t blame him for wanting to keep on top of all the magical weirdness.

“Yura, please--”

Yuri cut him off. “Hey. Do you see that?”

Otabek frowned and followed Yuri’s pointer finger along the leaf-covered ground. “What do you mean?”

Yuri kicked at the leaves, but this time with intent. _Now_ Otabek could see something peeking out from underneath all the foliage.

“That,” Yuri said, pointing at the stone he uncovered. “That… that’s like the one that Viktor and Chris found, right?”

Otabek dug in his pocket for his phone and squatted to take a picture of the square stone that Yuri had found. “I… I’m not sure.”

“There’s no trident on it,” Yuri said, tilting his head as he examined it. “It’s a fish or something.”

“It reminds me of a whale,” Otabek said. “But look at how it’s shaped. It’s too perfect to have been naturally-occurring. I think this stone was cut.”

“By Native Americans over five hundred years ago?” Yuri squinted at the carving, his forehead crinkled. “Or aliens?”

“Yeah, that would explain a lot,” Otabek said, laughing. “Not like a wizard did it.”
“It’s more likely than a moon goddess mermaid lady,” Yuri retorted.

Otabek snorted. “Okay, let’s cover this back up. I’ll try and mark where we found it, we can try and figure this out later on when JJ isn’t literally a few hundred feet away.”

Yuri nodded and bent down to start pushing the leaves back over it, but as soon as his bare fingers brushed the stone a sound like nothing Otabek had ever heard before rang out through the forest.

“What the fu—”

“Oh no,” Yuri said, staring down at the stone. It had begun to glow, a bright orange that reminded Otabek of the younger teen’s tail. “Oh shit.”

Otabek fought down his panic. “What’s happening?”

“I don’t know,” Yuri said, clearly doing the same.

The sound rang out again, and this time Otabek could hear Chris and JJ yelling in the distance.

“You need to get to the lagoon,” he said, pushing Yuri away. “I’ll cover this thing up, go and hide.”

“No!” Yuri said, his eyes wide with fear. “This thing’s doing something.” He grabbed onto Otabek’s forearm, clearly trying to shrug him off.

That’s when the ground… melted around them.

“Beka!” Yuri cried out, clinging to him as they began to sink into the forest floor like it was quicksand.

“Yuri, calm down,” Otabek said - or, rather, he tried to say as they suddenly… poked through.

Suddenly, there was nothing but air under Otabek’s feet, and he could tell Yuri was feeling the same terrifying lack of ground underneath him as well, and they were sliding down into the ground like they were going down a waterslide. Their heads submerged in seconds, and then they were falling.

Yuri openly screamed and Otabek definitely made some kind of scared noise as they tumbled into almost complete darkness, and then they were blindly rolling down some kind of hill until their momentum ran out and they skidded to a stop.

“Oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god oh my god--” Yuri half-screamed, hyperventilating.

Beka tugged him into a tight hug. “Yura!”

Yuri went silent, but he was shaking.

“Breathe with me. In.” Otabek took a deep breath. He shook Yuri a little. “Breathe.”

Yuri breathed.

“Out, slowly.” Otabek silently counted to ten as he exhaled, Yuri copying him after a minute. “Again.”

He kept Yuri breathing steadily until he felt the tension draining out of the younger teen’s body. “Are you getting enough air?”

“You’re squeezing me too tight,” Yuri said with a shade of his usual attitude.
Otabek sighed in relief and loosened his grip, but Yuri didn’t draw away. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, whatever this stuff is really cushioned our fall.”

Otabek let go of Yuri to dig in his pocket for his phone, praying he hadn’t crushed it in the fall. “Let me get a light going,” he said, waking the iPhone up.

“Okay,” Yuri said, sounding as shaky as Otabek wasn’t letting himself feel.

They both deflated in even more relief when Otabek’s phone lit up, still in one piece. “Okay,” Otabek said, activating the phone’s flashlight function. “Let’s get an idea of where we are and then try to conserve the battery.”

“Is it in airplane mode?” Yuri asked as they both carefully pushed themselves into sitting positions.

Otabek raised his eyebrows and flipped his phone into airplane mode. “Thanks for the suggestion.”

“No problem.”

They were still sideways on an incline, so they maneuvered themselves into positions that let them brace their feet against the stuff that the hill was made out of and keep themselves from sliding further down. Once Otabek got his phone flashlight working, they were able to see that they were at the foot of an incredibly steep hill.

“It’s sand,” Yuri said, scooping up a handful of it. “But it’s not the same kind that’s on the beach.”

“White sand,” Otabek said. “Like they have in the Caribbean.”

“This is freaky,” Yuri said. “Should we try to climb up?”

“Let’s try,” Otabek agreed, and they both rolled onto their stomachs to start crawling upwards.

The sand was too silky to make any sort of meaningful progress, they found. Yuri slid back down the hill three times before he gave up. “What the fuck,” he growled, punching the hill in frustration.

“Well,” Otabek said, pushing himself into a stand at the base of the incline and pulled out his phone again to sweep the surrounding area. “It looks flat enough up ahead. Let’s check it out and see what we find.”

“I dunno,” Yuri muttered, and Otabek felt his friend’s hands finding their way around his free arm. “I dunno if I wanna find out.”

“What other choices do we have?” Otabek asked, not commenting on Yuri’s clinginess. “C’mon, we’ll be okay. If we run into any aliens, you can melt their faces off.”

Yuri snorted, a tiny little thing, and they set off.

As they walked into what turned out to be a long, seemingly-endless tunnel carved out of stone, Yuri didn’t let go of Otabek’s arm. He seemed to be grimly fixated on some point in the darkness, far ahead of them.

Otabek, on the other hand, realized a few feet into their trek that they no longer needed the flashlight. Yuri hissed at him when he flicked it off and put his phone safely into his pocket again.
“What are you doing?”

“Look,” Otabek said, pointing at the rough ceiling.

Yuri looked up, his eyes widening when he saw the strange, glowing patterns dotting the ceiling, like a million greenish constellations compressed into a dimly glowing path above them. “What is that? Is that some kind of mold or something?”

“It looks like crystals,” Otabek said, peering at the ceiling. “And it’s pretty bright for being underground like this.”

“I don’t like it,” Yuri said immediately.

“Well, it hasn’t done anything to us yet,” Otabek said. “If it ends up giving us creepy mutations, you can hold it over my head forever.”

“It’s pointing somewhere,” Yuri said, squinting. He looked up at Otabek, and Otabek had the distinct impression that Yuri was going paler than he already was. “Sh… should we follow it?”

Otabek thought about it. “Well, we can’t really do much going back the way we came. Might as well.” He patted Yuri’s arm, and they kept going.

“Does it seem to be getting brighter the further we go?” Yuri asked after a few dozen yards.

“Yeah, it’s more concentrated here,” Otabek agreed.

“Well, it saves your phone battery,” Yuri said, and then they suddenly stepped out into a wider cavern. “Whoa,” he said, his eyes widening.

The transition had been sudden - they’d been standing in a fairly small passageway and then the walls had suddenly veered away without any warning. The ceiling swooped upward even further, and now Otabek could actually see what looked like massive shards of glowing crystal embedded in the rock.

“What… is this?” Yuri wondered.

“It must be tied to the island and the moon magic,” Otabek said. “Otherwise, it wouldn’t have reacted to you.”

“Fucking magic,” Yuri grumbled.

Otabek was halfway tempted to agree, but he edged further into the cavern, Yuri still clinging to his arm. The light was bright enough that he could see a few feet in front of him without too much trouble, but muted enough that they couldn’t see all that much beyond that. The ground was still that soft white sand from the entrance, and they didn’t make much noise as they moved out of the entryway.

“Hello?” Yuri called, his voice echoing off the stone walls. “Is anyone here?”

Nothing answered.

“Well, that’s a relief,” Otabek said. “I’d’ve probably pissed myself if something said ‘yeah, I’ve been here for eighty-four years’ or something.”

Yuri burst out into laughter, and quickly worked his way into hysterics. Otabek had to lower him to the ground as his knees seemingly gave out.
“C’mon, Yuri,” Otabek said, patting Yuri’s back. “Get a grip.”

“W-wh-what the f-f-f-fuck is my life?” Yuri managed to gasp out, curling into a ball. “This isn’t fair, I didn’t want any of this!”

Otabek sighed and let him work out the tension he’d probably been wrestling with ever since the square stone up top had started glowing. After a few minutes of helpless wheezing, Yuri fell silent again.

“You feeling better?” Otabek asked.

Yuri groaned. “More like drained, to be honest. I could honestly just pass out on the ground right here.”

“Let’s not do that,” Otabek suggested, tugging him to his feet.

“I don’t wanna scream anymore,” Yuri said, which was a relief.

“Good.”

They took a moment to get their bearings, peering around the chamber, but neither of them spotted another exit besides the one they were standing in front of. Once Otabek’s eyes adjusted, all he could see was a featureless stone wall all the way around.

“Well, we just wasted a ton of time coming down here,” Yuri grumbled, kicking at the sand again. “It’s just a big round space.”

“Hm.” Otabek frowned and rubbed his chin. He had to agree; it was looking more and more likely that they’d have to try again to climb up that sandy hill they’d fallen down before. “So what’s the point of this chamber?”

“Who cares?” Yuri retorted. “I’m more interested in how we can escape.”

“Let’s see if there’s anything in here other than just an empty cavern.” Otabek pushed off the wall and looked up at the ceiling. “Actually, it’s kinda funny…”

“What?”

“It looks like a spiral,” Otabek said, pointing at an odd pattern on the floor. “Like a labyrinth, you know?”

Yuri wrinkled his nose. “A what?”

“A Celtic maze.”

“What’s a Celtic maze doing in California?” Yuri said, crossing his arms. “They never sailed around the world to the Pacific, right?”

“It does remind me more of the spiral pattern from Moana,” Otabek said. He stepped into the cavern, and Yuri sullenly followed him as he approached the outermost arm of the spiral to study it up close.

The spiral was made up of a substance much sturdier than the sand they’d been walking on, maybe some kind of clay, and it was so dark that it stood out starkly against the rest of the flooring.

“Maybe don’t touch it yet,” he said to Yuri, who snorted at him. “Seriously. It might activate and suck us into the Mariana Trench.”
“Good point,” Yuri agreed, a little sulkily. “It’s huge, it’s, like, almost the entire floor.”

“I… hm. I think the reason this room exists is for this pattern on the floor,” Otabek said.

“Look at the ceiling,” Yuri said, and Otabek did.

There was indeed something on the ceiling; a smaller spiral pattern that was positioned exactly over the center of the one on the floor.

“I’m gonna go ahead and say we should probably not walk over there,” Otabek said at last.

“Great. I agree.” Yuri edged back against the wall, scowling. “Well, if there’s no other way out, we’d better go back the way we came.”

“Yeah.” Otabek got to his feet, brushing his hands off on his cargo pants. “Let’s get going, maybe we’ll have a better shot of climbing back up this time.”

Yuri groaned, but followed Otabek into the passageway once more.

This time, Yuri didn’t cling to Otabek’s arm as they followed the stone corridor back towards the sandy hill they’d fallen down. Their eyes were adjusted enough that Otabek didn’t take out his cell phone again, and Yuri didn’t ask for it.

They reached the incline again, and now Otabek had to pull his phone out; the weird glowing on the ceiling had faded away.

“Hey,” Yuri said suddenly. “Was that there before?”

Otabek followed Yuri’s finger and blinked when he saw something long and pointy sticking up out of the sand, much further up.

“What is that?”

Yuri was already trying to scramble up the hill again, and this time he was much more focused. Otabek was impressed as the younger teen managed to heave himself up a few feet, and had to stand back when Yuri began to kick a spray of sand in his efforts to climb.

Yuri let loose a triumphant yell when his hand closed around the mysterious item, and he heaved it free of the hill of sand before sliding back down the hill.

“Whoa,” Otabek said, unable to disguise his surprise as he got a good look at Yuri’s prize. “That’s…”

“I got sand up my ass,” Yuri grumbled as he tugged at his pants, grimacing. “Fuck.”

“Yura, look at what you’re holding!”

Yuri blinked and held out the thing he’d pulled out of the sand. “What is this thing? It looks like a pitchfork.”

“It’s a trident,” Otabek said, holding out his hand. Yuri relinquished the trident to him, and Otabek spun it in his hand so he could examine it.

It looked like something out of a fantasy movie, or a comic book: the staff was about three feet long, and the elegantly curved forks added another foot or so to its overall length. There was what looked like a massive jewel set into the area where the staff met the forks, and the whole thing was fairly
“Wow,” Otabek said, handing it back to Yuri. “That’s… this is a huge find.”

“And we found it,” Yuri said, grinning. “Not that Canadian douche.”

Otabek sighed.

“Of course, that doesn’t mean anything if we can’t get out of here,” Yuri went on, his smile sliding off his face.

Otabek opened his mouth to respond, but then the jewel on the trident began to glow.

“Aww, hell no!” Yuri groaned. “I am so done with glowing shit--”

The ground under them began to shift, the sand falling away as something began to rise out of the hill behind them. Both of their jaws dropped as stone steps rose out of the sand, and then everything fell silent.

“Are you kidding me,” Yuri said, and he immediately moved to put his foot on the bottom step.

Otabek waited until Yuri had made it up a few stairs before following, satisfied that the stairs wouldn’t sink down while they were climbing them.

They climbed in silence for a while, Yuri still clutching the trident and Otabek lighting the way with his phone. After what felt like several dozens of stairs, surely a few landings at this point, Yuri suddenly yelped in surprise and frustration, taking the next set of stairs two-by-two. “What the fuck,” he screeched as Otabek’s flashlight fell upon a small platform up against a smooth wall. “What the fuck, I am so sick of dead ends! Who the fuck puts in stairs to nowhere?!”

“There’s something on the wall,” Otabek said, raising his phone so that the beam of light swept upward. “Look, Yura.”

Yuri looked up, still frowning, and his frown deepened when he caught sight of the carving about a foot above his head. “What’s that?”

It was similar to the spiral from the chamber they’d encountered, but it appeared to be surrounded by… rays?

“I think that’s meant to be the sun,” Otabek said.

“Why--”

The trident began to glow again, and then the wall lit up in a warm, golden glow. Yuri yelped again, and Otabek felt his body tugged forward by an unseen force. Suddenly, he was falling forward, and so was Yuri.

They landed on sand again, and skidded a few feet before they came to a stop. Otabek sat up as Yuri cringed and covered his eyes with his free hand. “What the fuck--”

“We… we’re on the surface,” Otabek realized as he was hit with the full force of the risen sun and the daytime heat. “Yura, we made it back!”

Yuri slowly withdrew his hand, squinting. He shot to his feet, cheering when he saw that they were on the beach, just a few dozen feet away from the treeline. “Yeah! Take that, you stupid magic island!”
“Keep your voice down, JJ might be around here,” Otabek hissed.

Yuri grinned at him. “Yeah, and I’ve got a fucking magic pitchfork. See if that fucker tries to do anything to us!” He spun it, only barely managing to keep ahold of it.

Otabek stared at him. “Yura. No.”

“Hey! There you guys are!”

They looked up as Chris burst out of the forest, hurrying down the bank towards them. “Holy shit,” he said, skidding to a stop next to them. “JJ and I have been looking for you for an hour, where the fuck have you been? And what the fuck is that?” he demanded, catching sight of the trident in Yuri’s hands.

“A magic thingy that I actually like,” Yuri said, showing it off. “Check it out, this thing was hidden underground.”

“Wait, you went underground?” Chris stared at them. “How?”

“Probably magic. Where’s JJ?” Otabek asked, scanning the beach and the treeline around them.

“He went south. I told him you ran off to take a piss and might’ve gotten lost.”

“Where’s the Zodiac?”

Chris pointed. “Just over there, actually.”

“So the grid’s nearby?”

“Yeah.”

“We reappeared near where we disappeared,” Yuri said, catching onto Otabek’s train of thought. “So… is it right underneath us?”

“Maybe,” Otabek said, frowning. “But… I dunno, this is an island, a secret cavern doesn’t seem plausible.”

“I think it’s deeper in, away from the beach,” Yuri looked back at the treeline. “I mean, we found the magic stone deep into the forest.”

“Wait, you found another stone?” Chris asked, eyes wide. “In the forest?”

“Yeah, I can probably find it again,” Otabek said. “Yura touched it, and then that sound rang out and the ground sucked us in like quicksand.”

“Th-- okay first, I thought someone was blasting a whale song above water,” Chris said. “That’s what the sound seemed like.”

“The stone had a whale carving on it,” Yuri said, poking Otabek’s shoulder. “Show him, Beka!”

Otabek unlocked his phone, flicking the flashlight off and opening his photo album. “Here,” he said, pulling up the pic he’d snapped of the stone before Yuri had put his hand on it. “That’s it.”

“It’s square,” Chris said, his expression unreadable. “That stone was definitely cut. Did you get a sense of how big it was underneath? Was it set into the ground? The one that Viktor and I found was mostly hidden in the ground.”
“We didn’t think to check,” Otabek admitted. “Everything happened so fast.”

“But yeah, that does look like the trident stone we found.” Chris eyed the real-life trident in Yuri’s hands. “I wonder if that’s connected to the other stone…”

They all pondered it, but then Yuri made a satisfied noise and hefted the trident again. “This is so cool,” he said. “I feel like a superhero with this.”

“You know you can’t take that home with you, right?” Chris said dryly.

Yuri glared at him. “Fuck you.”

“Oh wow, original.”

“Yura, think about it,” Otabek said. “Your mom would probably find it.”

Yuri deflated. “You’re right,” he admitted in a reluctant tone. “I wouldn’t put it past her to be poking around my room while I wasn’t around.”

“Speaking of your mom,” Otabek added. “Did you at least leave a note for where you were going this morning?”

“I left a voicemail for Dad,” Yuri said, fiddling with the trident. “I said I was going for a walk.”

“You’ve been gone a while, the sun’s up.” Otabek shaded his eyes. “You might want to head back before your mom calls out the water police to search for you again.”

Yuri groaned. “But what will we do about this?”

“I can hide it in my van,” Chris said, holding his hand out for the trident. “I’ll hide it in the tarp on the Zodiac, and as soon as JJ is gone I’ll put it in my trunk.”

Yuri reluctantly handed it over. “Okay, fine.”

“Maybe we should stow it at Viktor’s, since he’s the only one who lives alone and has actual storage space,” Otabek said, reflecting on his tiny studio apartment and its utter lack of decent hiding places.

Yuri rolled his eyes. “Ugh, fine.”

“Don’t worry,” Chris said, snorting. “I won’t let him lose this.”

“You’d better not,” Yuri grumbled. He sighed and grabbed Otabek’s arm so he could check his watch. “Shit. Okay, I’m gonna go.”

“Yeah, I’ll text you when we get back to the mainland,” Otabek said, nodding.

Yuri shot him a thumbs-up, and turned on his heel to run into the surf. As Chris and Otabek watched, an orange-gold tail popped up a dozen yards out from the beach before disappearing beneath the waves.

“Quite a dramatic exit,” Chris remarked dryly. “C’mon, let’s get to the Zodiac and hide this bad boy. If we can shake JJ again, I wanna see if we can find that stone again.”

“Right.”
They were able to conceal the trident under the aforementioned tarp and boating kit, and then Otabek led Chris into the forest again to find the stone.

It took a little bit of searching, but eventually Otabek spotted the stone half hidden under some fallen foliage. “There it is,” he said, and Chris brushed the leaves off to get a good look at it in person.

“Yeah,” Chris said after a bit. “Wow, this is remarkably similar. Hm.” He dug his fingers around the base of the stone and felt around for a bit. “It goes a lot deeper,” he confirmed. “Just like the other one.”

“So it’s set into the ground.”

“Yep. Describe that cavern for me again?”

Otabek pursed his lips as Chris re-covered the stone with the leaves and they headed back to the grid they’d set up earlier. “It was pretty big, and the ceiling was high. There was a two-armed spiral set into the floor with clay, and a smaller version of the spiral on the ceiling right over the floor’s centerpoint.”

“And the passageway had some kind of… glowing crystal substance on the ceiling?”

“It got fainter the further away we got from the cavern.” Otabek scrubbed at his forehead, marveling at how sweaty he still was even though they were in the shade. “And then once Yuri pulled the trident out of the sandy hill, the stone stairs appeared.”

“This is wild,” Chris said. “You guys literally teleported, I think.”

“Yes,” Otabek stared off into the distance. “I think… that stone was a portal that Yura activated.”

“So… only merpeople can use it?”

Otabek nodded. “I mean, it didn’t react to either of us. It started glowing when Yura touched it.”

“That would make sense,” Chris said. “But the one Viktor and I found didn’t do anything.”

“Maybe that trident is the key,” Otabek mused. “It did glow when the stairs appeared.”

“That big gem in the middle? Hm.” Chris stroked his chin as he thought. “I don’t know how to science this.”

“If Mila were here, she’d say that science passed out an hour ago and might be dying of alcohol poisoning,” Otabek said wryly, and Chris snorted.

“Hey! You found him!”

They looked up to see JJ picking his way over to them through the brush. He was grinning as he drew closer. “Dude, we were so freaked out when that crazy noise happened, and then we couldn’t find you. What happened?”

“I got super lost,” Otabek said, putting on his best poker face. “I got turned around and ended up way down the island, and I had to find my way back.”

“Huh, I wonder why I didn’t find you first,” JJ said. “I headed down the shore.”

“I was in the forest.”
JJ pursed his lips, but ultimately shrugged. “Well, I’m glad we found you. I’d’ve hated to have lost you on your first expedition!”

Otabek nodded. “Yeah, right? Luckily, I just kept walking until I saw the Zodiac again.”

“Awesome, I’m glad.” JJ nodded, his smile coming back. “Did you find anything worth investigating while you were out there?”

Chris raised his eyebrows as Otabek kept his expression neutral. “Nope.”

“Aw, that’s a pity. Well, it’s just day one,” JJ said. “We can’t give up after just a few hours.”

Chris waggled his eyebrows at that, and Otabek nodded with all the seriousness he could muster.

“Yes,” he agreed. “You’re right.”

_You just don't know how right you are._

__Moonchildren__

(1:21 PM) Viktor: holy shit, that’s insane

(1:21 PM) Mila: man i’m almost sorry i missed out

(1:22 PM) Yuri: dont be

(1:22 PM) Mila: i bet it was freaky, huh

(1:22 PM) Yuri: i had to climb up a sandy hill

(1:22 PM) Yuri: it sucked ass

(1:22 PM) Otabek: I feel like it’s worth investigating without jj being around but it would mean 1 of you guys would need to come with us

(1:23 PM) Mila: yeah but there’s a way to get out, at least

(1:23 PM) Yuri: idk…………

(1:23 PM) Mila: we’ll be careful

(1:24 PM) Viktor: I want a look at that trident

(1:24 PM) Otabek: chris said he’d drop it off with you after his surfing classes

(1:24 PM) Viktor: excellent

(1:25 PM) Yuri: remember *I* found it

(1:25 PM) Yuri: and *I* got it to work

(1:25 PM) Viktor: of course, yura
Mila: im glad it didn’t do anything to you like the amulet did

Viktor: yeah that’s also true!

Yuri: shut up baba

Mila: i mean it, jerk

Otabek: yura was very careful in the cavern, but yea

Otabek: there is definitely some force on the island that you 3 can tap into

Otabek: or else it reacts to you 3

Mila: this is kind of exciting

Viktor: I wonder what else is on that island waiting for us

Yuri: whatever it is, im gonna make it my BINCH

Mila: lol yura

Otabek: did you get home okay?

Yuri: yea my mom didnt even get mad at me

Otabek: good :)

Viktor: what did you tell her?

Yuri: that i drove my scooter over to the beach to make fun of tourists

Viktor: ...okay i guess

Mila: valid

Viktor: if you guys are able, feel free to come over to my place tonight

Viktor: otabek I know you have to work

Otabek: yea. dj gig :sunglasses:

Mila: NICE

Otabek: so its okay, just text me with updates n i can check. I already saw it in person :thumbsup:

Viktor: we will keep you in the loop :thumbsup:

Yuri: have fun tonite beka

Otabek: :thumbsup:
First Otabek POV in the main fic! He's a delight. I can't wait to write him again.

Side note: I basically marathoned Josh Gates' *Expedition Unknown* while planning and writing this bit. I love that show and I highly recommend it to everyone who enjoys a good adventure and sometimes treasure hunt.

For those of you who recognize some of the plot elements I've dropped in here... :) For those of you who are not familiar with the inspiration material, what do you think it all means? (Please tell me! I love reading theories!)

Next chapter: more lunar lunacy! We all know what the full moon does to the merkids, but what about the other phases?

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Real world notes time: so I'm in the middle of figuring out my living situation (it ain't going smoothly) and it's pretty... not great. (Shout-out to all my friends who have kept me sane for the past month! LITERALLY. I'd've lost my freaking mind without you guys.) So basically I'm taking advantage of all the free wifi that I can grab to update stuff so I can tide everything over while I search for a place to stay. No cause for alarm, it's just some difficulty. Bleh.

I've got the next *four* chapters planned out for this, the chapter 17 draft is started. I also have a *Solstice Lullaby* (baby!Viktor prequel fic) update in the works, alongside another unrelated YOI fic that will probably be my next posting. Writing is what's keeping me going, y'all. Send me caffeine.

If you'd like to check up on me, you can always find me on Twitter. I'm also on Tumblr, Dreamwidth, and Pillowfort. If you're so inclined, check out the dedicated pinboard on my Pinterest, too.
sometimes touch just isn't enough

Chapter Summary

Viktor is feeling a little under the weather, and the moon might have something to do with it...

Chapter Notes

Chapter title from Good Love by Aly & AJ and I am LIVING for that 80's sound.

HAPPY MERMAID! I'm going to try and update this sucker at least 3 times during the month. PRAY FOR ME.

Shoutout to Gab, my beta, who got this chapter fixed up a week ago and reminded me to post it (you're the best, Gab.)

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Are you sick?”

Viktor raised his head, blinking blearily at Charlotte from the spare desk. “I don’t think so,” he said, rubbing his eyes. “I mean, I got all my shots and everything last week. If I got sick after all the precautions I took, I want a refund on life.”

Charlotte pulled a sympathetic face. “I mean, you look a little peaky.”

“I’m just exhausted,” Viktor said, his eyelids literally starting to droop on their own.

One of the strings instructors, Mr. Lan, poked his head into the spare office over Charlotte’s. He stood a good couple of feet taller than her, so it wasn’t hard. His perpetual poker face didn’t crack.

“You’re sick?”

“I am not,” Viktor insisted, yawning. “I’m just tired.”

“It could be the flu,” Charlotte said. “One of the symptoms is lethargy.”

“You know your insurance plan covers flu shots,” Mr. Lan said.

“I got my flu shot,” Viktor said, groaning. “I’m pretty sure it’s not the flu. I’m just having an off day, everyone chill out.”

“Everyone chill out about what?” Lilia asked, brushing Mr. Lan aside. Her eyebrows drew together when she caught sight of him. “Vitya, are you sick?”

“No!”
“He used to get sick all the time,” Charlotte said. “Like, he always had a cold or something.”

“I’ve known him since his parents brought him home,” Lilia said. “Trust me, I’ve seen it.” She nudged past Charlotte and crossed the tiny office to put her hand on Viktor’s forehead. “You don’t seem to have a fever.”

“I told you,” Viktor muttered.

“Well, something is the matter,” Lilia said. “You do know you’re going to be late for the men’s choir practice if you don’t get ready to leave for the rehearsal room, yes?”

Viktor was up like a shot. “Oh my god,” he said, catching sight of the clock out above Mrs. Stimler’s desk. “How did I not--?”

“I was wondering that,” Charlotte said. “You’ve been on top of this stuff as far as I’ve seen.”

She and Mr. Lan stepped out of the way as Viktor bustled out of the spare office with his binder and jacket. “Is this...?” he heard her start to ask as he burst out into the hallway and took off at a speed-walk down the hallway towards the rehearsal rooms.

What is wrong with me today? he wondered as he walked. I got a full eight hours of sleep last night, I’m up to date on all my immunizations, I’ve been eating well, I’m halfway through all those probiotic yogurts that Mom gave me...

He didn’t have off-days anymore. It wasn’t that he refused to, he just… didn’t have them. At least, not enough that he could really recall, if that made sense. Usually, he could get himself jazzed up to work and then let himself crash at home.

Unless this was a… merman sickness. Did merpeople get sick? Should he have been eating… like, more seafood or something? Algae shakes? Uck. Maybe not that. Caffeine at least usually perked him up.

Well, there wasn’t much to it. He had to get through the day, and thus he had to drag himself into the smaller rehearsal room and set up at the piano as the guys were getting settled into their own seats. Maybe he could consult Kolya after office hours ended. God knew he was dropping in on Yura’s grandfather often enough that he was almost as familiar with the archives as he was with the Ariel.

Celestino didn’t handle the non-audition choirs for the most part; the director for the men’s choir was an instructor who had been more or less imported from Hanon, so Viktor already knew him. This was both good in that Viktor was familiar with his conducting and teaching style, and bad because this director knew how Viktor usually acted.

“Are you sick?” Mr. Remington asked while the guys were taking their sheet music from the director’s stand at the front of the room. “You’re looking kind of tired, Viktor.”

Viktor sighed and made a face at him. “You’re, like, the fourth person to ask me that today.”

“Most people would take a hint after three,” Mr. Remington said.

Viktor groaned. “Oh my god, I’m fine.”

“Oh, sure. Whatever you say.” Mr. Remington patted the top of the upright and went back to his singers.

The men’s choir had two pieces for the Showcase - a Latin American song specifically arranged for
a group of this size, and a showtune from a Broadway production that was still running. Viktor was already familiar with the showtune, and the Latin American song was fairly easy to pick up. He chugged a Coke he’d grabbed out of the vending machine in the hallway to keep himself alert and focused, but barely made it through the rehearsal with his usual smile on his face.

“If you need to go home, Yakov will let you,” said Mr. Remington as the men’s choir grabbed their stuff and streamed out of the room. “Seriously, he has a soft spot for all his old students.”

“I’ve been working for him for years,” Viktor said, laying his head down on the piano and displacing his sheet music. “I’m well aware. And I’m fine, Mr. Remington.”

The choir director sighed and shook his head. “I remember you getting bronchitis and not telling anyone, and then completely losing your voice in your sophomore year,” he said. “And then trying to force yourself past it. You’re lucky you didn’t destroy your vocal cords when that happened.”

“But I didn’t, and I swear I’m not sick,” Viktor said, closing his eyes. “I’m taking my vitamins and everything.”

Mr. Remington frowned. “Well, I hope it’s not some kind of superbug,” he said. “Please take care of yourself.”

“Mmmhm,” Viktor mumbled in lieu of answering.

The director left quickly after that - if Viktor remembered correctly, he had two small children at home (oh god what if Viktor was a contagion?) - and then he was alone in the rehearsal room.

He ended up back in the office again, downing a mug of coffee and helping Charlotte sorting the mail backlog-- yesterday, they’d found shopping bags full of more letters and possibly paperwork shoved in the closet and Yakov had locked himself in his private office to presumably scream and self-medicate with something alcoholic.

The previous week, they’d moved Mrs. Stimler’s desk into the empty space where the massive filing cabinet had been before they’d shoved it into Viktor’s usual haunt, and had given Charlotte the official receptionist spot. They’d even rerouted the phones so that Mrs. Stimler didn’t have to answer official calls anymore. She didn’t seem to notice that her phone wasn’t ringing as often, and happily just kind of scrapbooked at her desk while Charlotte wrangled the office.

Viktor had considered hiding in the spare office and doing more reading, but he wasn’t sure he could stay awake. He’d had to return Dr. Chadwick’s book to the library, and while he’d managed to finish it and gather a lot of information regarding the lore of Islaluna and Sertori’s Cove, there wasn’t a whole lot else that he’d been able to glean from it. He had been tempted to endlessly renew the book under his account, just to keep Corned-Beef-or-whatever-his-name-was from getting his hands on it, but he really didn’t want his library card frozen for overstepping his privileges. Instead, he finished reading *The Lost City*, along with *The Water Spirits* and *The Ocean’s Calling*, mined all three texts for notes, and then returned them to the library.

*The Water Spirits* had contained a plethora of information about other sea creatures, and Viktor had been fascinated by the mention of sirens - apparently sirens weren’t necessarily the same as mermaids and had varied appearances that didn’t resemble the half-human, half-fish forms Viktor and the others had. *The Ocean’s Calling*, on the other hand, was fascinating for another reason - it was more or less a manual for sea witchcraft, from what Viktor could tell. He was wondering if he, Mila, and Yuri could actually use some of this stuff; there were recipes for actual spells and step-by-step instructions to create talismans that actually seemed plausible. He’d even found an entry on tridents. Considering he still had the one Yuri and Otabek had recovered from the hidden chamber at Islaluna
all wrapped up in old bedsheets and hidden in his bedroom closet, he was *all over* that entry. So far, he hadn’t quite discovered all that much about it… and as of right then, the trident hadn’t done anything but sit innocently among his jackets and hangers. It hadn’t even glowed at him.

Still, Viktor hadn’t really gotten as deep into the archives as he had the public library’s resources. There was so much information just waiting for him to discover it. He had gotten to the point that his faithful notebook was now fully indexed and tabbed, and he was starting to prepare for starting another notebook - his current one was one of those three-subject ones from Five Star, so that was saying something. He *could* have gone over his notes, or something… but he’d written in English, and Charlotte would have gotten curious.

*Why didn’t I take learning Cyrillic more seriously?*

There was nothing to be done, and Charlotte raised an eyebrow at him but didn’t comment on his practically laying on her desk as he tore envelopes open.

As Lilia popped back into the office to gather some folders, she caught Viktor hiding a yawn again and stared him down. “*Are* you sleeping well enough, Vitya?”

“I’m fine,” Viktor repeated, weary. “It’s just an off day.”

“You don’t tend to have those,” Lilia said.

“First time for everything.”

“Oh,” Mrs. Stimler piped up from her desk - Charlotte was passing her all the spam mail to keep her occupied. “I just won a hundred dollars!”

Charlotte smothered a snort in her elbow. “That’s very interesting, Mrs. Stimler.”

Lilia looked up at the elderly receptionist, who was waving an advertisement in the form of an obviously fake certificate. She grumbled in Russian and then shot Viktor the ‘I’m watching you’ gesture as she disappeared into her office.

“Why is everyone so nosy?” he complained as he tore open another envelope addressed to Yakov and determined it was official mail. “I get a little tired and suddenly everyone’s acting like I’ve got the plague.”

“Mr. Lan said he’s never seen you take a sick day,” Charlotte pointed out. “Also, I really like Mr. Lan. He’s super polite.”

“You should meet his partner, he’s a riot,” Viktor chuckled.

“That’s always how it is, isn’t it?” Charlotte waved another envelope in his face, making him blink and scowl at her. “But yeah, if you’d never gotten sick the entire time I’d known you, getting a little sniffly would freak me out.”

“I’m not sick,” Viktor said, rubbing his forehead. “Just tired.” He *was* getting sick of telling people that.

“You’re not overworking yourself, are you?”

Viktor snorted and rolled his eyes. “This is literally the easiest job I could possibly have gotten, Char. I couldn’t overwork myself if I tried. Yakov made sure of that.”
Charlotte narrowed her eyes at him. “Yeah, but Georgi usually takes half of the accompaniment duties—”

“I guarantee you, if I start burning out, you’ll be the fourth to know.”

Charlotte raised her eyebrows at him, and Viktor winked back at her.

“First person I tell will be my therapist, then my parents.”

“Oh my god, you goober.” Charlotte threw a wadded-up paper at him. “Fine. I’m holding you to it.”

Half an hour later, Yakov also echoed the sentiment of the day: “Vitya, I’m worried—”

“No need to be,” Viktor groaned. Charlotte had reclaimed the spam from Mrs. Stimler and they were taking turns to feed it to the shredder. “Yakov, seriously. You’re, like, the sixth person to ask me today.”

“You’ve got dark circles under your eyes,” Yakov pointed out. “I’ve never known you not to care about your appearance.”

“I’ve just been a bit more tired than usual,” Viktor said, flapping a hand. “C’mom, don’t tell me you haven’t had these kinds of days.”

Yakov frowned at him and crossed his arms. “Maybe you should take the rest of the day off.”

“No,” Viktor protested, his voice slipping into a whine. “Yakov, I swear I’m fine—”

“I’m calling your mother.”

“Ooooooh,” Charlotte said under her breath, studiously keeping her gaze fixed on the shredder.

“Yakov, come on, how old am I?” Viktor scrambled out of his chair to follow his mentor into the back office. “Look, I’ve been taking care of myself, there’s nothing to worry about!”

Yakov’s expression didn’t change as he settled into his chair behind his desk. “You always say that, Vitya.”

“Is my work suffering?” Viktor asked, crossing his arms.

“You and I both know that doesn’t matter,” Yakov said. “You’d keep playing piano with both hands broken. Give me one good reason.”

Viktor sighed. “Yakov. I have Makka to think about.”

Yakov wasn’t convinced. “Hmm.”

“Okay, fine. Call my mother. I can deal with the fallout. I’m fine.” Viktor had to try very hard to not storm out of Yakov’s office, but he still plunked down in the chair he’d dragged around to Charlotte’s desk.

“Half of that was in Russian, which I still don’t speak,” Charlotte said as she fed more spam mail into the shredder. “You okay?”

“Everyone is meddling, it’s normal,” Viktor said, laying his head down on her desk again.

Charlotte didn’t take her eyes off the paper that was slowly disappearing into the shredder. “You
know, I’ve been avoiding bringing it up, but that whole breakdown-slash-burnout thing from a few years ago? That probably freaked everyone out, to put it lightly.”

Viktor groaned.

“I’m just saying,” Charlotte said over both him and the shredder. “It was bad enough that you needed rehab, right? That’s what Deya said.”

“Deya needs to keep his big mouth shut.”

“I agree, but still.” Charlotte patted his arm. “Viktor, I’m willing to bet you scared the crap out of your parents, and Yakov has known you for most of your life. Can you blame everyone for being concerned?”

Viktor blew a raspberry, and Charlotte rolled her eyes.

“Fine,” she said, poking him in the side and making him squeak. “It looks like you’ve become immune to caffeine, though.”

Viktor moaned and buried his face in his arms. “I lowkey kind of wish this was a bug so I could drink some tea and get over it,” he said into the desk.

“Why don’t you just drink some tea anyway?” Charlotte suggested. “We’ve got some bags of healthy tea over in the cabinet by the water cooler.”

“Mrs. Stimler got at them,” Viktor said without looking up.

Charlotte sighed. “Of course she did.” She went back to shredding the spam as Viktor’s phone buzzed in his pocket.

It looked like Yakov had followed through on his threat to call Mom. Viktor forced himself upright to pull his phone out of his pocket and check it.

Just got off the phone with Yakov

Are you sick????

nope

Then Why is Yakov worried
that's what Yakov does

Vitya

I'm just a little tired today

this week has been rough

Okay but you would tell us if something was wrong right??

Or Yakov

Or Dr. Gilbert

of course I would

I swear I'm not sick

I've just been tired all day, that's it

promise

I've just been tired all day, that's it

promise
Mom: Just got off the phone with Yakov

Yakov said he might send you home early

I don't need to go home early

You have sick days, why not use them?

because I don't need to?
I'm not sick

Mental health day then

it's only wednesday

Self-care knows no schedule

Mother. Please.

Makkachin would probably love to spend the afternoon with you!

that is a low blow

:)

You could bake something
Mom: Are you sick????

Viktor: nope

Mom: Then Why is Yakov worried

Viktor: that's what Yakov does

Mom: Vitya

Viktor: I'm just a little tired today

Viktor: this week has been rough

Mom: Okay but you would tell us if something was wrong right??

Mom: Or Yakov

Mom: Or Dr. Gilbert

Viktor: of course I would

Viktor: I swear I'm not sick

Viktor: I've just been tired all day, that's it

Viktor: promise

Mom: Yakov said he might send you home early

Viktor: I don't need to go home early

Mom: You have sick days, why not use them?

Viktor: because I don't need to? I'm not sick

Mom: Mental health day then

Viktor: it's only wednesday

Mom: Self-care knows no schedule

Viktor: Mother. Please.

Mom: Makkachin would probably love to spend the afternoon with you!

Viktor: that is a low blow

Mom: :)

Mom: You could bake something

Viktor raised his eyebrows at that last message. “Oh, I get it,” he said aloud.

Charlotte looked up in curiosity. “Hm?”
“That’s the only reason anyone keeps me around, I can bake stuff.”
Charlotte snorted. “Yes, that’s exactly it. We only like you for your baked goods.”
“I could bake cookies!” Mrs. Stimler offered from behind them.
“No thank you!” both Viktor and Charlotte said immediately.
Mrs. Stimler shrugged and went back to humming and doing… whatever she’d been doing. Viktor hoped it wasn’t too destructive.
“Anyway,” Charlotte said, frowning at the last bit of paper that she needed to shred. “You thinking of going to the homecoming game at Hanon? Just for old time’s sake?”
Viktor made a face. “Have I ever cared about football?”
“You don’t go for the sport,” Charlotte said over the shredder. “You go for the social experience.”
“Eh, no thanks.” Viktor sat back in his chair. “That’s a bit out of my wheelhouse.”
“Are you a sports elitist?” Charlotte asked, her grin betraying her affronted tone. “Too noble to mingle with the unwashed masses?”
“Do you even like football?” Viktor retorted, raising an eyebrow. “It’s going to be a bunch of high school kids.”
Charlotte shrugged. “I was just thinking of seeing how the old place is doing. You know. Homecoming.”
“I still work there occasionally,” Viktor reminded her. “Trust me, the school hasn’t changed all that much.”
“You don’t say?” Charlotte finished feeding the spam mail into the shredder and switched it off. “Well, it was just a suggestion. If you’re not up to the Homecoming game, we could always do a pub crawl.”
“On the boardwalk?” Viktor rested his chin in his hand and made a face at her. “With all the tourists?”
“It’d make things interesting.”
“I do not have the energy to deal with a bunch of out-of-towners,” Viktor said. “Mercy, Char.”
Charlotte tapped her chin, clearly thinking. “What about a movie night?”
“What movie?”
“Something nostalgic, maybe?” Charlotte’s eyes lit up. “We could do an old Disney Channel movie marathon!”
“Knowing you, you’ve probably got all of them already,” Charlotte said, poking him.
Viktor pouted. “One, I only have the first one of both of those, and two, they’re in my parents’
“Do you have Zenon, though?” Charlotte asked. “Ooh, what about the *Halloweentown* movies?”

“I might have Zenon on VHS, but not *Halloweentown*,” Viktor sighed. “Those are super old.”

“Oooh, what about *The Thirteenth Year*?” Charlotte snapped her fingers. “The one about the guy who starts turning into a merman?”

Viktor winced. *Too close to home.* “Eh, I could probably skip that one.”

“Mkay, then I’ll see what I can find.” Charlotte glanced over at Mrs. Stimler and grimaced, popping out of her seat. “Excuse me,” she said, tapping the old woman on the shoulder. “What’s that?” She pointed across the room, and while Mrs. Stimler was distracted, plucked what looked like Yakov’s mutilated planner off the older woman’s desk and shoved it into her cardigan.

“That’s the wall, dearie,” Mrs. Stimler said, patting Charlotte’s arm.

“Oh, silly me,” Charlotte said, settling back in her seat and wagging her eyebrows at Viktor.

“Good grief.”

“Why aren’t we putting her on administrative leave, at least?” Charlotte wondered, examining Mrs. Stimler’s latest handiwork. “I swear to God, Yakov cannot afford to lose any more hair.”

“It’s not up to us.”

Charlotte made a frustrated noise and tucked the planner under a file folder on her desk. “You think Yakov would listen to me if I had Lilia back me up?”

“Knock yourself out,” Viktor said. “But you know what a softie he is.”

“He has no immunity to Lilia.”

“Point.”

Charlotte’s face lit up in a familiar mischievous expression, and she hopped out of her seat so she could shuffle into Lilia’s office and shut the door behind her. Viktor silently wished her luck.

To the left, Mrs. Stimler began to hum something that sounded vaguely like “Happy Birthday” and tore a page out of the local supermarket’s circular.

Viktor sighed and fished his phone back out of his pocket.
so the only reason you still keep me around is because you like fresh cookies?

I see how it is 😈

😊

And your sweet dog

WOW

Recess is over, I have to go

okay, talk to you later

Listen to Yakov

LOL
Viktor: okay, talk to you later

Mom: Listen to Yakov

Viktor: LOL

Viktor looked up as Yakov’s door popped open and the man himself stepped out, looking tired and harried.

“Vitya.” The old man blinked and looked around the front office. “Where did Charlotte go?”

“She’s talking to Lilia,” Viktor said, fighting a laugh when his boss blanched. “I know. I’m preparing for the fallout.”

Yakov shuddered, seemingly pushing past it. “Did your mother call you?”

“No, she texted me. That’s a thing your phone can do as well, Yakov.”

“Too impersonal,” Yakov sniffed. “Whatever happened to human interaction?”

“I’m sure the initial critics of the email agree with you,” Viktor said, raising his eyebrows. “Or the snail mail letter. Whatever happened to traveling hundreds of miles to talk face-to-face?”

“Right, right, you made your point.”

Viktor smiled.

“In any case,” Yakov said, crossing his arms. “I’m sending you home early.”

“No can do, Bossman.” Viktor ignored Yakov’s indignant huff at the nickname. “I have private sessions tonight, and all of them are for the showcase.”

“I’ll send out an email and post notices on the doors,” Yakov said. “Viktor, you look like you’re about to fall over.”

“What? I do not,” Viktor protested, belatedly realizing he was listing to the side and mostly propped up against Charlotte’s desk. “I’m fine, I just need a little caffeine--”

“If you drink another coffee or cola, at least sixty percent of your blood is going to be caffeine.”

Yakov rolled his eyes. “Just go home and rest.”

“I literally got a whole eight hours of sleep last night,” Viktor whined. “I don’t need any rest, Yakov, I’m fine.”

“I’ll get Charlotte and Lilia to back me up,” Yakov said, raising his eyebrows.

“And me!” Mrs. Stimler piped up from her corner.

“And Mrs. Stimler,” Yakov added as Lilia’s office door opened.

“And your mother,” Charlotte said, poking her head out. “Are we ganging up on Viktor?”

“I hate you all,” Viktor muttered.

“Viktor, just go home,” Lilia said, mirroring Yakov’s pose. “You don’t have any more choirs
meeting today, and you only have two student sessions tonight. Amy and Callie will be willing to reschedule. I’ll handle it myself if it makes you feel better.”

“Why is no one listening to me?” Viktor demanded.

“Because you look like a Walking Dead extra,” Charlotte said.

“I do not.”

“If this is all you’re good for today, you are going home,” Yakov said. “I won’t even deduct any sick leave. Go. Home.”

Viktor pouted. “This is ridiculous.”

“Yeah, it is,” Charlotte agreed, patting his shoulder. “Look, go cuddle with that cute poodle of yours and do self-care.”

“Yes, think of Makkachin,” Lilia said. “Would she want you being unhealthy and unhappy?”

“Stop using my dog against me,” Viktor said, even though he himself had used Makkachin as a defense earlier.

Yakov huffed at him, clearly thinking the same thing.

Lilia’s expression didn’t change. “Well, you won’t do it for yourself.”

Viktor let out an aggrieved groan.

“You know who he reminds me of?” Lilia said to Yakov. “Yura. He reminds me of Yura.”

“Now that’s just low,” Viktor said, pulling a face.

“I have no idea who that is, but I agree,” Charlotte said, flashing Viktor a toothy grin.

“He’s the little blond violinist who looks like he wants to fight everyone,” Viktor said, narrowing his eyes.

“Oh, okay. Yes. Definitely, then.”

“Wow. Rude.”

“Vitya, if you don’t go home right this minute, I will call your grandmother,” Lilia said.

Viktor actually paled at this. “She’s got her own life to worry about, she’s in Michigan, leave her be!” He recoiled when Lilia’s lips twitched in a small smile. “Fine, fine, you win. I’m going.”

“Good lad,” Charlotte said, patting him on the head like she used to do when they were both in high school.

Viktor blew another raspberry at her as Mrs. Stimler clapped in the background. “Just let me get packed up and I’ll go.”

“Fine,” Yakov said, deflating. “And… there appears to be something you want to speak with me about…?” he said as Lilia and Charlotte whirled on him.

“Just a little,” Lilia said, and then Viktor was treated to the sight of the women marching Yakov back
into the office and closing the door behind them.

“Will you rat me out if I don’t leave?” Viktor asked Mrs. Stimler in the ensuing silence.

“Of course!” Mrs. Stimler said cheerfully, cutting out what looked like an advertisement for ham.

Viktor sighed and trudged back into the spare office to grab his bag and gather up his library books.

His current reading selection was on local history again, a few more in-depth surveys of the colonization of the area. It was an enlightening read, and while it wasn’t as lore-heavy as *The Lost City*, it was definitely useful with regards to all of the various… tragedies that took place around Islaluna. And, of course, strange happenings on the mainland that *had* to be more merpeople throughout the century and change since the town was founded.

Viktor had also stumbled upon other accounts of searches and archeological digs much like that of Mila and Otabek’s Canadian classmate, whatever that guy’s name was. The Sea Folk hadn’t made it into these reports, and everyone seemed to be operating under the assumption that this was some kind of predecessor tribe to the Tani people. Considering all that they’d found on the island thus far, Viktor wasn’t eager to correct any of those accounts.

*Wait. There’s an idea.*

Viktor finished packing all of his things and grabbed his jacket off the back of the desk chair, slumping out of the office - a bit overdramatically, all for show - before coming to a stop in front of Charlotte’s desk. She’d finished up whatever she’d been up to with Yakov and Lilia, and they were still shut into Yakov’s office.

“Happy?” he asked her, raising an eyebrow.

Charlotte grinned at him. “Yep. Send me more Makka-pics when you get home, yeah?”

Viktor stuck his tongue out at her, and she snorted.

“I’m handling your students for the evening, go focus on feeling better.” Charlotte mimicked Lilia’s ‘watching you’ gesture from earlier. “And I’ve got your mom’s email address, so don’t try any funny business.”

“You’re going to be a terrifying authority figure one day,” Viktor said, sighing. “Fine, I’m going.”

She waved him off as he left, and he trudged out of the administrative offices.

However, upon exiting the Ariel, he didn’t head towards the bus stop. He instead crossed the quad and ducked into the Anderson main building.

The route down into the archives was like second nature at this point, and Viktor recognized a few library staffers along the way. He easily made his way into Kolya’s office in the back, knocking gently on the door.

“Yes?” he heard Kolya call from within.

“It’s Viktor. Is it a good time?”

Yuri’s grandfather coughed. “Ah, Viktor. Come on in.”

Viktor let himself into the office, blinking at the sight in front of him. “Good grief, what is all this paperwork?”
“Part of the job,” Kolya answered wearily. “What brings you into my office in the middle of the day?”

Viktor sighed and collapsed into one of the chairs Kolya had for visitors. “Yakov sent me home because everyone thinks I’m getting sick. But I’m not, I’m just tired.”

Kolya squinted at him. “You do look unwell.”

“Seriously?”

“One moment,” Kolya said, tugging his desk calendar over to him. He groaned after checking it. “This explains Yura’s bad mood this morning.”

“So it’s not just me?” Viktor frowned. “Wait, is this a Moonchild thing?”

“Yes,” Kolya said, turning the calendar around and showing Viktor what it said. “Today is a new moon. New moons have an effect on merpeople just like full moons do.”

“What? This feels nothing like the full moon.” Viktor glanced over the calendar and, indeed, today was a new moon. “I feel like I haven’t slept in weeks!”

“Yes, because the moon has gone dark,” Kolya said. “You will notice your powers are weaker as well. Not the transformation, but for you, your ice powers.”

“Well, geez,” Viktor said, sighing. “I mean, not like I was going to freeze much today…” He sat up, a thought suddenly occurring to him. “Is this going to be another scenario like that full moon? Are we going to get zombified again?”

“No, there is no moonlight to get you moonstruck,” Kolya answered, chuckling. “And you shouldn’t be trapped in your merman form should you be splashed. But yes, an effect of the new moon and the lack of moonlight is the loss of energy and the short tempers. I remember it all too well from my days in Saint Petersburg.”

Viktor groaned. “Well, this sucks.”

Kolya made a sympathetic face. “Indeed. I’m sorry, I forgot to warn you three, what with all the research into that trident that we all have been doing.”

“I wonder if that thing will be affected,” Viktor mused.

“It would be interesting if we could experiment with that amulet.” Kolya raised his eyebrows at Viktor’s pout. “My apologies, I don’t blame you at all.”

“Hmph.” Viktor slumped deeper into his chair. “You said ‘short tempers’ and I can tell you, that’s looking true.”

Kolya laughed. “I’ll be honest, I was only a little concerned about Yura’s attitude this morning, but otherwise I didn’t suspect anything unusual.”

“Eh, that’s valid.” Viktor sighed, digging his phone out of his pocket. “I’ll tell everyone what you’ve told me, okay?”

“Sure,” Kolya said, turning back to his work. “I need to finish up these forms for the day.”

“Right. I won’t bother you, then,” Viktor said, heaving himself out of the chair and grabbing his things again. “Thanks for the info.”
“Take care of yourself, Viktor. Don’t overwork yourself today, you’re allowed to rest.”

“You’re not the first person to tell me that,” Viktor tossed over his shoulder as he let himself out again.

Moonchildren

(2:06 PM) Viktor: @Mila @Yuri so I just talked to Nikolai and if either of you are feeling like crap today, it’s more merperson stuff

(2:07 PM) Mila: oh thank god it’s not just me

(2:07 PM) Otabek: are you guys okay?

(2:07 PM) Viktor: yeah, it’s just the new moon

(2:07 PM) Yuri: GoDDAMMIT!!!!!!! I DO NOT NEED MORE MOON BULLSHIT!!!!!!!

(2:08 PM) Viktor: according to your grandfather, no moonlight means our energy gets sapped, plus our powers will be weaker so don’t try anything big

(2:08 PM) Viktor: WE DO NOT have to worry about being stuck transformed or getting zonked by moonlight, because there is none. no moon zombies tonight, but maybe avoid getting wet anyway

(2:08 PM) Chris: so you guys will feel better once the new moon sets?

(2:09 PM) Viktor: hopefully

(2:09 PM) Mila: im so pissed i spent money on TWO entire coffees today wtf

(2:09 PM) Mila: and it did NOTHING

(2:10 PM) Otabek: yikes

(2:10 PM) Yuri: this is so stupid i cant stay awake in class or anything

(2:10 PM) Mila: your classes end soon shush

(2:10 PM) Yuri: i have concert prep this afternoon baba fuck off

(2:10 PM) Viktor: ok as long as we are all aware

(2:10 PM) Viktor: yakov kicked me out of the office so I’m going to go home or something

(2:11 PM) Chris: take it easy, binktop

(2:11 PM) Viktor: dont test me :eyes:
you're going home right?

YES omg char seriously

look, I know you. Yakov knows you. Lilia knows you.

MRS STIMLER KNOWS YOU

you made your point ok

look. I'm home. proof.

awwwwwwwww she's so cute!!

was she happy to see you?

eye, she knocked me down

awww 😻😻😻😻😻
 😻😻😻😻😻
[text conversation]

Charlotte: you're going home right?

Viktor: Y E S omg char seriously

Charlotte: look, I know you. Yakov knows you. Lilia knows you

Charlotte: MRS STIMLER KNOWS YOU

Viktor: you made your point ok

[photo of Makkachin]

Viktor: look. I'm home. proof.

Charlotte: awwwwwwww she’s so cute!!

Charlotte: was she happy to see you?

Viktor: yep, she knocked me down

Charlotte: awww

Viktor was in the middle of his third episode of Brooklyn Nine-Nine when his phone began to buzz on the coffee table. Makkachin pawed at him as he leaned forward to grab it. He blinked when he saw his mother's icon flashing on the screen, and he swiped to answer. “Mom? Is everything okay?”

“Oh, yeah, everything’s fine!” Mom was almost yelling and the background noise was kind of muted, which meant she was driving and had her phone on speaker. “Yakov said you went home early, I’m glad you did!” She paused. “You did go home, right?”

“Yes, Mother, I’m home.” He held his phone out to Makkachin, who sniffed and snuffled into the mic. “See?” he said, bringing it back to his ear. “That was your grandpuppy.”

“Good.” She sounded smug. “So anyway, I’m off work, and I had a thought.”

“Oh, God save us from whatever you’re planning,” Viktor said, laughing.

“Do you still have a membership at the Y?”

Viktor blinked. “Y...yeah?” And technically he did, but it had been well over a month since he’d used it. “Why?”

“Well, I have my yoga class today and you’re gonna come with me.”

“Where did this thought come from?” Viktor asked, raising his eyebrows.

Mom hummed. “I just thought you might enjoy some mother-son bonding time. Unless you’re feeling too sick... do you think you’re contagious--”

“I know for a fact I’m just having an off day,” Viktor said, flopping back against the couch and
scratching under Makka’s ear. “I am definitely not contagious, it’s not the flu.”

“Have you thrown up?”

“Mother.”

“I need to know this stuff!”

Viktor sighed. “Nope. No throwing up, no cold symptoms, no fever. I’m just tired.”

Mom was silent for a moment, and Viktor could hear the clicking of her turn signal. “Well then, are you opposed to a little yoga? The class is open to all levels.”

“I didn’t know yoga had levels,” Viktor said, grinning as she huffed at him. “Sure, Mom. I could go for some yoga, when’s the class?”

“Five, it’s only about forty minutes, and I can drive you home!”

“Mom, I can walk to the Y,” Viktor said. “It’s literally a few blocks away. I’m fine.”

“Fine,” Mom echoed. “If you want to make it on time, you’d better get ready to head out.”

“Fine,” Viktor repeated back to her. “Just don’t embarrass me, Elastigirl.”

Mom snorted. “Oh, don’t worry. I’ll see you there, zaichik.”

After hanging up, Viktor ducked into his bedroom to change out of his work clothes and into some athleisure-wear that he could actually move in. He’d never really been inclined to do more than regularly work out so he could stay in shape, somewhat out of vanity, but at least he could dress the part.

He took Makkachin outside for a quick potty break before settling her back in his apartment with a rawhide chew, and then he set out for the YMCA.

It was located near the public park, which was about fifteen-to-twenty minutes away on foot. Viktor had thought ahead to bring a lukewarm water bottle with him, just to stay hydrated, but he was still a bit overheated when he ducked into the building and flashed his membership pass at the people working the front desk.

Suddenly, the weariness that he’d been powering through in order to get to the Y in time slammed into him like a sack of bricks. I’m sure going to be happy when the new moon ends, he thought as he slumped onto a bench in the lobby to wait for his mother. He was contemplating trying to catch a bus home after the class - and wow, that was pathetic - when she finally arrived.

“Oh yikes,” she said as soon as she caught sight of him. “Yakov wasn’t kidding.”

Viktor rolled his eyes as Mom dropped her gym bag on the bench next to him so she could fuss over him. “Well, I’m taking it easy,” he said. “So tell Yakov to quit worrying about me.”

“Yeah, fat chance of that happening,” Mom said. She pushed his hair back off his forehead. “Baby, you look so unwell. Have you been sleeping okay?”

“Yes, I have,” Viktor said, knowing it was a moot point by now. “I may not look like it, but I’ve been taking care of myself like a big boy and everything.”

“You think you can make it through yoga?” Mom asked.
“I should be able to,” Viktor said, yawning a little. “I need to work on my flexibility anyway.”

“If you fall asleep in corpse pose, I’m going to post it on Face-space,” Mom said, flicking his nose.

“Ugh, yeah, give Letty more reasons to make fun of me,” Viktor complained, letting his mother tug him to his feet and lead him into the gym. “You do know it’s called Facebook, right?”

“What’s the difference?”

Viktor sighed. “Never mind.”

The studio that had been designated for the yoga class was the standard dance studio, with a massive mirror for a wall, and hardwood floors that were probably very conducive to dancing. Viktor figured that the thin yoga mats wouldn’t do much to cushion him against the floor, and maybe being so uncomfortable would prevent him from dozing off.

Mom had her own yoga mat, but Viktor had to borrow one from the facility, so once he’d grabbed one, they scouted a spot and settled in.

“Do you need more Activia?” Mom asked as she crossed her legs and cracked her back. “I’m running to the supermarket tomorrow, I can pick up more.”

“I still have plenty,” Viktor reassured her.

“Is it helping keep you regular?”

“This is exactly what I want to be discussing with you in public,” Viktor said, making a face at her.

“This is important!” Mom insisted. “I was reading an article--”

“Mom, I love you, but I will pretend not to know you if you start talking about bowel movements in front of everyone else.”

She made a face at him as he sat back on the loaner mat. There were more people filtering into the classroom, ages ranging from PTA/soccer moms to high school students. Viktor was not relishing running into someone he worked with or accompanied, especially if his mother kept talking about regularity.

The instructor was just setting herself up at the front of the class when Viktor heard a familiar voice and a gasp.

Viktor turned, and of course Yuuri, his dog, and his coworker from the cafe were walking in. Phi--Phichit? That was his name, right? Viktor didn’t think Yuuri’s friend had classes at the Ariel. Even so, Viktor should probably actually learn his name.

But still, of all the days to run into Yuuri, it had to be on the day of a new moon? When Viktor looked and felt like he’d gotten run over by a truck?

Mom noticed that his attention had shifted and she followed his gaze. “Oh, who’s that?” She sounded interested. Oh dear. “Do you know him, Vitya?”

“Yeah,” he said. “He takes classes at the Ariel.”

Mom flashed him a knowing look. “Yeah? What’s his name?”
“Heyyyy, Viktor!” Yuuri’s friend called, catching sight of him. “We just keep running into you!”

Yuuri looked mortified as his friend dragged him and his little poodle over, and…

Viktor’s eyes were dragged downward, to Yuuri’s… distressingly tiny athletic shorts. That was the emotion he was feeling, right? Right? It didn’t feel like distress.

Gosh, those are tiny.

Viktor tore his gaze away from Yuuri’s impressively muscular thighs on display and blinked up at them both. “Hi,” he said, keeping his voice light and free of I was totally just staring at your legs and tiny shorts tone. “Uh, you here for yoga? Phichit, right?”

“Yep, and yep!” Phichit said in a cheery voice. He was wearing pants that were more appropriate for the class. “I haven’t seen you in here before, though. First time?”

“Not my first time at yoga, but I haven’t been to the Y in a while,” Viktor said, glancing at his mom. She was watching with avid interest, and he was starting to get suspicious. “Blame my mother,” he added, and she beamed.

“Oh, is this your mom?” Phichit’s expression lit up, and he nudged Yuuri. “Hi,” he added, waving. “I’m Phichit, this is Yuuri. Yuuri, be polite and say hi.”

“I need to go,” Yuuri said, looking mortified. “Phichit--”

“I dare you to go through all of this class in booty shorts,” Phichit immediately said.

“I will lock you out of the apartment.” Yuuri deadpanned. “Besides, it’s your class, I have to--” He cut himself off and suddenly blushed.

“Oh, yeah, that’s right,” Phichit said, his eyes widening in fake innocence. “You were going to go practice pole, weren’t you?”

Viktor’s mouth went dry and his brain grinded to a halt at the mental image of Yuuri, wearing even less clothes, dangling off a pole.

Error: Too Gay To Function.

His mom covered her mouth, probably to hide a smile.

“Phichit. If you find all of your things in the hallway when you get home tonight, don’t be surprised,” Yuuri said, his entire face now bright red. “Vicchan will get your bed.”

The little dog in question plopped down at his feet and panted, still in his vest.

“I sure hope Vicchan can pay my half of the rent,” Phichit said, grinning.

“He pays in loyalty,” Yuuri shot back, narrowing his eyes.

“I was gonna say,” Mom said. “I don’t know if hotpants are the best choice for a yoga class.”

“They’re great for pole, though,” Phichit went on shamelessly, ignoring Yuuri withering at his side. “The more exposed skin, the better. Gotta have grip, right?”

“Oh,” Viktor said faintly. “So… I see.”
“I’ve been thinking of trying out pole,” Mom mused, and Viktor’s brain finally broke.

“Mother.”

“What? Are you doubting my physical ability?” Mom was clearly having way too much fun.

“I don’t want to think about my mother pole-dancing, thank you,” Viktor said, burying his face in his hands.

“Your father would love it, though!”

“Therapy image therapy image therapy image therapy image the--”

“Oh no, I think we’ve caused trouble,” Phichit said, not looking sorry at all.

Yuuri glared at him. “We caused trouble?” He shot Viktor an apologetic look.

Viktor shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose. “It doesn’t take much to set her off.”

“You know you love me,” Mom said, patting his shoulder. “Hey, isn’t this better than talking about bowel movements?”

Viktor gave up and lay facedown on his yoga mat.

“Viktor, I think I love your mom,” Phichit said.

“You can have her,” Viktor said, muffled by the floor, and Mom burst into laughter.

Just then, the instructor clapped her hands and called out her welcome, and Yuuri took his opportunity to escape with his dog. Phichit ended up unrolling his mat on Viktor’s other side.

“Hey, we’re starting with Sun Salutations,” he said. “Not reverse corpse pose.”

“Leave me to die.”

“Vitya, be polite,” Mom said, and Viktor sighed before dragging himself to his feet.

The class itself was uneventful, and Phichit split off fairly quickly to go find Yuuri wherever he’d run off to.

“They seem nice,” Mom said, and dammit but she knew.

“I don’t really know them all that well,” Viktor said, unwilling to get up from the floor. His entire body felt like it was made out of lead. “All I know is that they work on the Boardwalk and Yuuri plays piano.”

“Yuuri is the one with the poodle, right?” Mom sounded amused. “He plays piano, just like you, and he has good taste in dogs?”

“Mother.”

“I’m just saying. Plus, he does pole-dancing?” Yep. She definitely knew.

Viktor sighed. “What can I do to get you to drop this?”
“I unno, maybe you should ask him out sometime?” Mom crouched down next to him as the rest of the class wandered out of the studio. “Can’t hurt, considering he’s interested in you.”

“You think?” Viktor looked up at her. “I mean, he usually acts really weird around me.” And yeah, that kind of hit his sore spots - he’d run into Yuuri a few more times around the Ariel ever since he’d popped in on the session with Yura and Lilia, and Yuuri had been as awkward and evasive as he’d been at the cafe. Viktor was starting to think that he was the issue.

“Yeah, probably because he has a crush on you.” Mom raised her eyebrows. “Honey, I am around preteen boys all the time. This is how lovestruck kids usually act.”

“I mean…” Viktor sighed. “I mean, he danced with me before, but he was kind of tipsy when he did--”

“He got you to dance?” Mom raised her eyebrows. “Ooh, I like him.”

“Please don’t scare him off,” Viktor begged. He paused. “Although I think you may have done that already, with your bowel movements talk.”

Mom snorted. “Well, if he’s willing to stick around after that, he’s a keeper. I approve.”

“That’s comforting,” Viktor said, and allowed his mom to roll him off the yoga mat so she could return it. Then she spent the next few minutes or so wearing him down until he gave in and let her drive him back to his apartment.

“So,” Mom said, after loading Viktor into her car. “I have interesting news.”

Viktor raised his eyebrows. He was leaning against the car door, his forehead pressed against the glass. “Is that your ulterior motive for taking me to your yoga class?”

Mom hummed. “Only a little. I also did want to spend time with you, because I’m your mom and I love you.”

Viktor sighed, too tired to really play along. “Love you too, Mom. What’s the interesting news?”

“Well… Uncle Tony got a job in Irvine.”

Viktor went very still. That was really close. Less than an hour’s drive, really. “And…?”

“They’re prepping for the move now,” Mom said, grinning. “They’ve got a bunch of rentals that they’ll be looking at in town, since we’re nearby. So, they’ll be coming up here next month to tour the properties and sign paperwork, and they’re bringing the kids for a little vacation.”

Viktor actually had to cover his mouth to keep himself from making embarrassing noises. At this point in this awful, awful day, his filter was gone. Besides, these were two of his favorite cousins. “Oh my god.”

“So yeah, surprise! Ty and Anita are going to be close by now.”

Viktor squeaked a happy squeak, and Mom had a content, almost smug smile all the way back to his building.

Moonchildren
(6:34 PM) Yuri: this new moon fucking sucks

(6:35 PM) Yuri: i cant stay awake to finish my homework

(6:35 PM) Mila: hey moon gods? thanks i hate it

(6:35 PM) Chris: you guys seem cheery

(6:35 PM) Yuri: i feel like im fuckin dying

(6:36 PM) Mila: big mood

(6:36 PM) Viktor: I made a mistake

(6:36 PM) Viktor: I let my mom drag me to the y for a yoga class

(6:36 PM) Viktor: I am never leaving my bed again

(6:37 PM) Chris: oh no poor you

(6:37 PM) Mila: no he’s legit

(6:37 PM) Mila: im just glad I dont have dance tonight

(6:37 PM) Mila: i wouldn’t have survived it

(6:38 PM) Chris: this is wild and a little hilarious

(6:38 PM) Viktor: Chris come on

(6:38 PM) Chris: what are you going to do, ice me?

(6:38 PM) Viktor: I’ll think of something

(6:39 PM) Chris: maybe sleep on it

(6:39 PM) Viktor: fuck you

(6:39 PM) Mila: holy shit

(6:39 PM) Mila: you’re turning into yura

(6:40 PM) Yuri: FUCK OFF_BABA

(6:40 PM) Chris: this is amazing omg :D

(6:40 PM) Chris: it’s like being the only sober person at a party

(6:41 PM) Viktor: i have a trident and i know where you live

(6:41 PM) Yuri: it’s MY trident

(6:41 PM) Viktor: it’s in my closet so there
(6:41 PM) Otabek: all of you go to bed and sleep this off please, I don’t want to have to bail anyone out of prison tonight

(6:42 PM) Chris: trust me they’re all too tired to commit murder :D

(6:42 PM) Otabek: until tomorrow morning

(6:42 PM) Chris: ...good point. I’m goign to bed. GOODNITE.

(6:42 PM) Mila: COWARD

Chapter End Notes

Who are Anita and Ty? They’ve popped up in the side story a couple of times, along with the rest of Mamaforov's massive family. [Here's the first of those short stories!](#) Anyone who has been stuck in a discord channel with me while I was writing Viktor's cousins probably knows how much I love writing them.

Speaking of writing about family, that conversation with Mamaforov before the yoga class? That's 100% based off of actual conversations I have had or was present for with my mother. Is it a mom thing to have absolutely no shame when talking in public? (I love you, Mom. Never change!)

Hey, remember that one Disney Channel movie *The Thirteenth Year*? I do! And I made Rosereleaseart watch it with me! It was fun!! Wow, I'm old. In the spirit of Mermay, you can actually buy this movie on YouTube/Google Play for around 6USD, [here!](#)

Again, shoutout to Gab for beta reading for me on this. And yelling at me about how much she didn't like Charlotte being friendly with Viktor. :3 (For those of you who have seen *H2O: Just Add Water*, especially the second season... it's all good, friends. No weird mermaid love triangles there. Charlotte already went through that romance story in New York and she's just here to be a side character.)

So some of you who follow me on Twitter may have noticed that I got into a little franchise known as *Mo Dao Zu Shi*. And those of you who did so as well may have noticed a certain someone appearing in this chapter, and another certain someone being mentioned. :3 Mr. Lan and Mr. Wei will be popping up again, for sure. In the meantime, come find me on Twitter to yell about the second season of the animation or the live action drama. :D

OTHER LIFE UPDATES: I got a job! Full-time, too! **How in the world am I going to manage 3 more chapters while working full-time oh my god--**

Thank you again to everyone who has supported me during these last few months. I genuinely would not have made it through all of that crap without you guys.

If you'd like to support my fic writing you can check out my Twitter, plus my Tumblr, Dreamwidth, and Pillowfort. If you're so inclined, check out the dedicated pinboard on my Pinterest, too.
Mila let herself back into the family townhouse, yawning. It had been a long day of classes, and then she’d helped her coworker Brit close up at Splash Dream. The sun had long since set when she punched out at 9:25; it was now ten to and she was exhausted. Plus, she had a class in the morning - well, late morning, but she still wanted to take a bath before heading out to school. So, bed. ASAP. Her pillows were calling to her as strongly as the island had been on that fateful full moon, maybe even more strongly. How did she know? She couldn’t remember that night, but still.

*Bed, bed, bed,* she mentally chanted, and then blinked when she realized the kitchen lights were still on. “Uh,” she said, poking her head into the hallway. “Who’s up?”

“Hey, milaya moya,” Auntie said, and that caught Mila’s attention.

“Auntie?” She edged into the kitchen, and blinked at her aunt and uncle, sitting at the table with what looked like mugs of tea. “Uncle Erik? What’s going on?” They looked at each other, and Mila’s heart jumped into her throat. “Did something happen?” She looked back at the front hallway, where the stairs were. “Is Tammy okay?”

“Tammy’s fine,” Uncle Erik said. “It’s just… someone came to your aunt’s office today.”

Mila frowned, dropping her bag by the doorway to the kitchen. “Who?”

Auntie sighed heavily and then tugged a plain white envelope towards her from across the table. “I’m not sure I want you to have to deal with this but… you deserve to know.”

Mila felt her forehead wrinkling as her eyebrows drew together. “Okay, listen, I’m almost eighteen. Please, stop dancing around whatever this is.”
Auntie met her eyes. “Your father.”

Mila’s mouth snapped shut and her mind went blank.

Auntie held out the envelope, and Mila felt strangely numb as she accepted it.

“He came into my office mid-afternoon,” Auntie explained as Mila turned the envelope over; it definitely had something inside. “He gave me that and asked me to make sure you got it.”

“He just showed up?” Mila glanced at her guardians, confused.

Auntie nodded, her nostrils flaring. “He’s lucky I didn’t call the cops on him.”

“For doing what?” Mila asked, frowning. “For trying to talk to you?”

“For everything he’s done to this family.”

Mila shut her mouth. She didn’t remember much about her father, but her aunt and uncle had held onto their feelings about him for almost sixteen years. “Right,” she finally said. She looked up at the people who had raised her. “Do you think I should open this?”

“It’s up to you, milaya moya,” Uncle Erik said. “Like you said, you’re almost eighteen. You don’t have to do anything with that.”

“You could toss that in the shredder without even opening it,” Auntie said.

Mila had to bite back a hysterical laugh at that. It would have definitely been inappropriate. She gently worked her finger under the envelope’s sealed flap. “Stay here,” she said, as she messily tore it open. “Just… let’s see what he has to say.”

_I need you with me_, she didn’t add.

Auntie’s lips pressed together into a thin line, and Uncle Erik pulled his glasses off to rub his nose, but they waited as Mila pulled the letter out.

The handwriting was almost illegible, but Mila had been interpreting Yakov’s chickenscratch for years. She still frowned as she unfolded the single-page letter and attempted to work out the brief message, written fairly neatly down the center of the paper.

*My dearest Ludmila - dammit, did he have to use her full name? - you have no obligation to answer this letter. I have spent the last decade rebuilding my life again, so that I could present myself to you as the father you always deserved of me. I regret not being there for you as you grew up, and I want to make it up to you.*

*I hope you’ll consider calling me at this number - he included a phone number with a nearby area code - so we can set up a time and date for a long overdue birthday dinner. If you don’t want this, I will understand.*

*Thank you for taking the time to read this.*

*Dad*

Mila blinked. It definitely didn’t read like a letter from a father to a daughter, if she were being honest - and she’d had a few weeks of writing composition classes by now. This letter was almost professionally distant.
But then again, he’d been on another continent for almost eleven years, and hadn’t attempted contact with anyone. Auntie would say that he didn’t deserve familiarity.

“Mila?”

Mila looked up at her aunt and uncle, feeling like a ship left unmoored. “I… I think he’s…” She scrunched her nose as she read over the same line a couple of times. It was surreal, how sure was she that she wasn’t dreaming? “He wants to treat me to dinner, for my birthday.”


“Shh,” Uncle Erik said. That was a petty point, and Auntie knew it. They both turned back to Mila.

“What do you want to do?” Auntie asked, gnawing on her lip.

Mila didn’t speak for a long moment. She just felt… empty. “Let me sleep on it,” she said at last. “It’s too late at night to be doing this.”

Her aunt and uncle exchanged unreadable looks, and then both rose to stand.

“Are you sure?” Auntie asked softly, her forehead creasing.

“Yeah,” Mila said. She folded the letter back up and slid it into the envelope. “It’s been years, Auntie. I can’t…”

“It’s up to you, milaya moya,” Uncle Erik said, squeezing her arm. The three of them made their way back into the hallway, Auntie taking a moment to flick off the lights for the night.

Once she was safely in her room, changed into her pajamas and under her blanket, Mila pulled the letter out again. The envelope was plain, with just her name - her full name, with her patronym and her birth surname - written out on the blank side. No postmark, no indication as to where her father was now living.

Mila didn’t remember her mother at all, but Auntie did - they had been close growing up, as siblings usually were. When Mila had gotten to be old enough to hear the whole story of how she’d come to live in California with her mother’s sister, her aunt and uncle had sat her down on the very couch that was still in the den, shut the door, and explained everything.

Mila hadn’t been born in the U.S. Like Viktor, she’d lived out her first year or so in Russia. Again, like Viktor, she barely remembered any of that time.

When she was around a year old, her mother had gone out to visit her relatives one weekend. Apparently, Mila and her father were supposed to have gone with as well, but Mila had come down with a mild fever and her father had opted to stay home with her. Thus, it had been her mother alone in the car.

Best guess anyone had, she’d encountered bad weather and lost control of the car. She’d died on impact. That was the only comfort; the fact that she hadn’t suffered. And someone had reported the accident fairly quickly, which meant the authorities had gotten to her before…

Mila didn’t like to think of her mother, a woman she only knew through old photos, being left in the twisted wreck of her car for so long that her husband had to wonder and worry. No one deserved that. She’d cried after learning how her mother had died; she’d known that her mother had been dead for as long as she could remember, but she hadn’t known how.
But that wasn’t where things ended. After all, her father was still alive. Within a few days after the police had shown up to inform him of his wife’s death, he’d… just vanished. A neighbor eventually heard a toddler crying and called the police to the apartment building again to find Mila abandoned and starving. She was almost shuffled into the state’s care when Auntie, having freshly flown in from America to bury her only sister alongside the rest of their extended family, had stepped in and claimed her. A long process of custody arrangements and other legal crap dragged things out, and Auntie and Uncle Erik ended up living out of Mila’s family’s apartment while everyone desperately tried to find her father, who appeared to have vanished off the face of the earth. When all attempts failed and a year went by with no contact, Auntie and Uncle Erik officially adopted Mila and took her back to their home in the United States.

Years passed until Tammy was born and then, only then, had they gotten a message from Mila’s paternal grandparents back in Russia; her father had come back into their lives. Apparently, he’d been living in a small village not far away from Mila’s birthplace with no one any the wiser until one of his former coworkers stumbled upon him and let slip that Mila had been taken out of the country. He’d dropped everything and shown up on his parents’ doorstep, demanding to know where his daughter had gone.

Mila had been too young to really understand it at the time, but Auntie had been furious at her sister’s husband resurfacing after almost six years of running away from his responsibilities, demanding access to the daughter he’d abandoned, and acting like he could pick everything back up again, like hadn’t left a sick toddler to fend for herself without telling anyone where he had gone. Uncle Erik had been only a tiny bit less angry, and considering that Auntie’s temper was legendary… well. Both of Mila’s guardians probably would have literally torn her father apart if he’d tried to push things.

Obviously, he’d picked up on the fact that he’d royally fucked up and indeed had no right to insist on access to his daughter, who didn’t even know what he looked like anymore. He’d come to California to try and make the first attempts at reconciliation, but Auntie had refused his requests to at least meet Mila in a neutral environment under supervision. She and Uncle Erik had handed Mila and Tammy over to a neighbor to babysit, and they’d gone to confront Mila’s father themselves. He’d left the States again shortly after that, and Mila hadn’t heard from him except sporadically through her paternal grandparents, never anything direct…

...until that weekend after the eclipse. Nothing had come of it, and Mila had been too busy or distracted to even think about asking Auntie for her father’s new address or phone number. In the grand scheme of things, her prodigal father ranked lower than the full moon madness, or the possibility being exposed for having magic powers.

For one absurd moment, she wondered if she was about to get sucked into an action movie plot. What if her father intended to kidnap her and snatch her away to Russia? What if he was in deep with the Russian mob? What if--

This is insane, she thought. Ridiculous. This is real life. Besides, if he tries to smuggle me back to Russia… I’ll just jump into the sea!

It was weird to think of her father’s possible motives as being more ridiculous than the fact that she regularly grew a tail, but that was her life now. And anyway, it was better than the coldness that crept into her chest when she’d first read the letter.

Mila placed it on her bedside table and burrowed under her blanket, and sleep overtook her very soon after that.
The thing was, she didn’t really have anyone to talk to about this. Her guardians had both left by the time she got up and started getting ready for class, she couldn’t talk to Tammy about it, and it felt weird to discuss with her friends. This wasn’t the kind of stuff that a college freshman typically had to worry about.

But then again, neither were magic tails and water-based powers. And… she knew someone who actually had experience with all of that, actually.

*Why didn’t I think of him?* She quickly packed up her notes and books, all mostly untouched and unread, before shoving them all into her bag. She’d been in the library to try and study, but all she’d done was stare off into space and twiddle her pen.

Cariba and Burgess looked up from whatever video they were watching on Cariba’s phone, their expressions varying levels of bemused, as Mila finished repacking her things.

“I just remembered something I need to do in the Ariel office,” Mila said quickly.

Cariba’s eyebrow went up. “Mmkay,” she said, and then the both of them went back to her phone.

Mila slung the bag’s strap over her shoulder and pushed her chair back in, ducking out of the student center and dodging around people loitering at the entrance.

The seasons were finally starting to shift, at least a little bit. As Mila stepped out of the main building into the quad, the temperatures were no longer as oppressively hot as they had been over the summer. It was still plenty warm, but not sweltering. Mila still sighed in relief as she let herself into the Ariel and felt the blast of the air conditioning.

Her first instinct was to check the main department office, but Viktor wasn’t there. The redheaded girl who had apparently taken over Mrs. Stimler’s main receptionist job told her that he was accompanying the men’s audition choir in one of the larger rehearsal rooms, and that it had just begun. Mila didn’t have anything else to do except coursework, and her next class wasn’t for another few hours, so she sat down in one of the visitors’ chairs and pulled her laptop out. She tried to focus on coursework, but couldn’t make herself focus.

Yakov walked in after about fifteen rather unproductive minutes and did a double-take when he saw her sitting in the office atrium. “Mila? What are you doing here?” His eyes narrowed. “Are you changing your major? Come crawling back to old Yakov, eh?”

Mila giggled. “Aw, Yakov, can’t I visit my favorite old teacher just for old time’s sake?” She batted her eyelashes at him, and he rolled his eyes.

“Of course you can, but I’m pretty sure you’re not.”

Mila shrugged. “Actually, I was here to ask Viktor for some advice,” she admitted. “But it’s nice to see you again.”

“What on Earth could Viktor possibly give you advice for?” Yakov demanded, making a face. “I’m constantly on the phone with his mother just to make sure he’s actually resting when I kick him out of the office for the day. It’s like I adopted him instead!”

“Well,” Mila said, because there it was. “I mean. He’s got *some* valuable experience in things.”

Yakov scoffed. “Right, I would have expected you to be giving him advice.”

“Ooh,” said the new receptionist, raising her eyebrows. “That’s saying something.”
“Not really, Viktor’s mostly a human disaster and we all know it,” Mila said.

The receptionist giggled and went back to what she was doing on her computer, and Yakov wandered over to pester her instead. Mila took the chance to return to her own work on her laptop, and another fifteen or twenty minutes passed as Yakov disappeared into his office after quizzing his receptionist on his afternoon schedule.

“Wait, you look familiar,” the receptionist asked after a while. “Are you Mila? Mila Babicheva?”

“Yeah, that’s me. I assume you’ve heard stories.”

“I just remember you hanging around Viktor after piano recitals,” she said, grinning back at her. “I’m Charlotte Watsford, I went to school with him at Hanon.”

“Oh! I think I remember you!” And she did, vaguely. “Cool, nice to see you again.”

“Yeah, wow, you got tall.” Charlotte nodded approvingly at her. “It’s wild to see how much things have changed.”

“Totally,” Mila agreed.

The door to Mila’s right swung open, and Viktor strode in. “Where did Mrs. Stimler go?” he asked, looking at the empty desk behind Charlotte’s.

“To the cafeteria, but it’s been a while.” Charlotte frowned. “I’m getting concerned, can you go check the quad for her?”

“Geez,” Viktor said, his shoulders slumping. “Yeah, sure.”

“Oh, and Mila dropped in,” Charlotte added, gesturing.

Viktor finally noticed that Mila had been sitting behind him the whole time. “Hey! Everything okay?”

“Sort of,” Mila said, quickly repacking her laptop. “I’ll walk with you. I need your help.”

Viktor’s surprise showed on his face for just a split second, but he quickly smoothed out his expression and held the door open for her as she led the way out of the office.

“Is it… *Moonchild* stuff?” he asked as soon as they were out of Charlotte’s earshot.

“No,” Mila said quickly, and he sighed in relief. “It’s… well.” She picked at the hem of her shirt. “My… my dad is back in the states.”

Viktor stared at her. “Wait. Wait, he’s here?”

“Yeah, I think he’s actually moved nearby, since he walked into Auntie’s office yesterday.”

Viktor ran his hands through his hair, his mouth twisted in a grimace. “Shit. That’s… yikes.”

“Is it, though?” Mila asked, keeping her voice as neutral as possible. “And I mean it. Because--” she reached into her bag and pulled out the letter. “He went to Auntie’s office to give her this. To deliver to me. And… well, he wants me to call him.”

Viktor’s face went eerily blank, and Mila suddenly realized what a shitty thing she’d just done. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what to do,” she said, her voice waver. “Viktor--”
“C’mon,” he said, and tugged her down the hallway. He rounded a corner and unlocked a practice room with his staff key, letting them in and locking the door behind them. “Sit.”

Mila lowered herself onto the chair nearest her, and Viktor took the other one. The room just had the chairs and a stand for an electronic keyboard, but no keyboard. *Budget cuts?* She realized she was clutching the letter from her father, and she forced herself to loosen her grip so she could smooth it back out. “I’m sorry,” she said again, still speaking softly. “I… I didn’t know who else to turn to.”

“No, don’t apologize,” Viktor said quickly. He patted her knee. “It’s okay, Mila. What do you need help with?”

“Should I call him?” Mila looked down at the letter, his phone number staring right back up at her. “I… what would you do?”

Viktor’s expression clouded, and he leaned back in his seat and looked to the right as if he was searching for an answer in the drywall. “I… I don’t know either,” he admitted after a long silence. “I try not to think about my… my *birth* parents. Because my mom and dad are amazing and I’m so lucky to have them. I don’t regret anything about this life I’ve lived.”

“Even the rehab?” Mila’s brain caught up with her mouth and she slapped a hand over it, but Viktor chuckled.

“Yeah, even the rehab,” Viktor said, smiling wryly. “It sucked, but everyone came together to remind me of how much I was loved. I met a few other people around my age in there, and a lot of them weren’t as fortunate. At least my parents *care* if I’m okay. And that’s it.” He fixed her with a very serious look. “Mila, I have a monthly therapy appointment. My therapist is programmed into my phone on speed dial. I’m still working on a lot of stuff that’s been hanging around me for all my life. It’s okay if you don’t know what to do, all that matters is that you know that it’s *your* choice to make.”

Mila blinked, surprised at how her eyes were stinging. “I’m kind of scared,” she said, ashamed. “I mean… I’m never scared of stuff, right? I’m not even really all that scared of the Moonchild stuff, honestly. But… I feel like I’m gonna faint.”

“People are a hell of a lot scarier than a giant space rock,” Viktor said sagely, and Mila burst out into laughter. He waited as she got herself under control again, smiling slightly as she wiped her face. “You feeling any better?”

Mila nodded. She took a deep breath and looked down at the letter again. “How’s the cell coverage in here?”

“It’s okay,” Viktor said. His eyebrows drew together and he leaned forward, as if he was about to stand. “Want some privacy?”

“No,” Mila said instantly. “Please.”

Viktor slowly, stiffly leaned back in his chair as Mila dug in her bag for her phone and carefully punched the number in. She hit the *dial* button and reached out her hand, and Viktor wordlessly took it.

The phone buzzed. “It’s ringing,” she said, probably a little redundant, and Viktor gave her hand a tiny squeeze. “Oh my god, what am I doing—”

The line clicked and she went silent. “Hello?” a man’s voice said, and she felt that coldness creep back into her chest again. *I don’t even recognize his voice…*
“Uh, hi,” she finally made herself say. “I… is this Anton Mikhailovich?”

“This is.” The man’s English was heavily accented, and his voice was deep and gravelly. But it was him. At least, so he said. “May I ask who is calling?”

“Th… this is Mila--”

The man - her father - gasped. “Dear god, you called me. Oh, oh Lord.”

Mila was starting to sweat, and Viktor leaned in, his face unreadable. “I-- I’m sorry, is this a bad time?”

“No, no, not at all!” Her father sounded choked up. “I just… I did not expect you to call me. I thought…”

“I… yeah,” Mila said, at a loss. “I didn’t know if I would, either.”

“I was worried your aunt would convince you to… not.”

Mila laughed weakly. “She wanted to, but… she left it up to me.”

“That was kind of her, I am not sure I deserve it.”

Wow. Mila didn’t know what to say to that. “So… yeah, this is my number, I guess.”

Her father laughed roughly. “Wonderful. And since I can, I will ask you. Did you… are you willing to meet me for dinner? For your birthday? I know it is soon.”

Mila breathed in. “I… when would work for you? My birthday isn’t for another couple of weeks.”

“I realize it is quite early,” her father said. “But I will be traveling for work starting next week, and I would rather celebrate it early than late.”

Mila blinked. That was awfully… un-Russian of him. Uncle Erik hated when people did that, and he’d been living in America since the late nineties. Personally, Mila didn’t mind it. “I guess that makes sense.”

He seemed to pick up on her train of thought and laughed again. “I am glad you think so.”

“So would this weekend work for you?” Mila asked, looking up at Viktor. He was watching with an unreadable expression, but smiled in encouragement when she met his eyes.

“Yes, it will. And I will come out to you, so you do not have to travel far.”

“I know a good restaurant in town,” Mila said. “Lina’s Passaggio, it’s part of the Blue Rose resort. Italian. Tourist-friendly.”

“That sounds perfect,” her father said. “Absolutely perfect. How about we meet there, on Saturday evening? Six o’clock?”

“Yes, I can do that,” Mila said, doing a mental check of her calendar. “At least, I think I can. Can I call you if something comes up?”

“Of course! Absolutely! This is my personal cell phone, I always have it with me. If I do not answer, please feel free to leave me a voicemail.”
Mila blinked. “Yeah, I will. Okay.” She took another deep breath to calm her thudding heart. “Lina’s Passaggio, Saturday at six. Okay?”

“Oh, okay.” Her father was silent for a moment. “If you would feel better bringing your aunt and your uncle with, tell them they are free to join us. My treat.”

“I’ll pass it along,” Mila said. Her strength was starting to flag. “I… I need to get to class. But… it was good to speak to you.”

“Yes, it was,” her father said. “I am so glad I could hear your voice today.”

Mila’s heart leapt into her throat. Oh. She opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

“I will see you on Saturday,” her father said. “Have a good afternoon, Ludmila.”

“You too,” she choked out.

“Goodbye, Ludmila.”

“Bye.”

She sat for a moment, still with her phone against her ear, as her father hung up and the line went dead. “He called me Ludmila,” she said, making a face. “Twice.”

Viktor chuckled, but his smile looked kind of weird. “Yikes. Unforgivable.” He nodded at their clasped hands, and Mila realized she was still clinging to him. “You okay?”

She let him go and put her phone down, breathing like she’d run a marathon. “I… I think I’m okay.”

“You did great,” Viktor said. “That was really brave of you.”

“I mean, it was just a phone call,” Mila said, rolling her eyes.

“Sure it was.”

Mila slumped in her seat as her racing heart began to slow down. “How pissed do you think Auntie Yulia is gonna be?” she wondered.

“She left it up to you, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then she can swallow down whatever she was gonna say and support you.” Viktor winked. “You’re almost an actual adult, you know.”

“God, I know,” Mila said, widening her eyes at him. “I’ll be able to vote and stay out past ten, scandalous.”

Viktor patted her arm, then stood. “C’mon, I should make sure Mrs. Stimler didn’t get lost on her way back from the cafeteria.”

“Wasn’t she supposed to go on administrative leave?”

“Yakov argued that she needed a stable schedule,” Viktor said, and Mila snorted. “Yeah, I did that too.”
“Did she bring any more lawn ornaments in?”

“There were wind chimes hanging in the empty office when I got in today,” Viktor groused as they let themselves out of the practice room. “I keep hitting my head on them. I swear to god--”

And Mila laughed all the way out to the quad, where they found Mrs. Stimler hauling eight orders of curly fries all tossed in a reusable canvas tote, three fountain drinks, and what looked like a hummingbird feeder back to the office.

“Thanks for doing that with me,” Mila said as she and Viktor helped Mrs. Stimler get her bounties back inside the Ariel.

“Anytime,” Viktor said, wiggling his eyebrows. “Us Russian almost-orphans gotta stick together, right?”

“Right.”

Viktor nodded, but Mila didn’t miss that strange, pained expression on his face.

_Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea to bother him after all…_

Her aunt and uncle took the news about Mila’s Saturday evening plans as well as she’d expected them to. Tammy hadn’t been interested in the conversation over dinner until Auntie’s tone changed, growing tense like it always did when Mila’s father came up. Now, the preteen was staring at everyone with a weird expression, like she wasn’t quite sure what was going on. “Wait,” she said, looking at Mila. “I thought your dad was dead.”

“More like dead to us,” Auntie grumbled in Russian.

“No, just my mom,” Mila said, pushing her salad around on her plate. “My dad’s been in Russia all this time.”

“Why aren’t you living with him, then?” Tammy asked, genuinely confused.

“Because your mom and dad adopted me and have legal custody of me.”

“But why--”

“Tammy, that’s enough,” Auntie snapped, and her daughter shrank away from her. “Do you want Mila to go live in Russia?”

Tammy’s mouth snapped shut and she looked down at her plate. “No,” she muttered.

Mila’s hand flew to her mouth to suppress the soft noise she’d almost made. On the other hand, Uncle Erik didn’t bother to even try not commenting on Tammy’s unexpected revelation. “Wow, Tamara, that was very vulnerable of you.”

Tammy glared at her father. “Don’t call me that!”

“It’s your name.”

“I hate it!”

“My father kept calling me Ludmila,” Mila said, cutting off Uncle Erik’s response. “Ugh, it’s so
weird to hear that directed at me. I feel like I’m in *Game of Thrones* when people use my full name.”

“Why couldn’t we have had *normal* names?” Tammy grumbled, and Mila shrugged.

Uncle Erik looked to his wife for backup, and she made a face back at him. “Those *are* normal names,” he said.

“In Russia,” Tammy retorted.

“We’re *Russian*,” Uncle Erik snipped back at her.

Auntie pinched the bridge of her nose and took a long sip of her wine.

“Anyway,” Mila said. “So. My father said that if it made me more comfortable, I could bring you guys with me to dinner.”

Her family looked at her all at once. “Do you want that?” Uncle Erik asked.

“Well…” Mila chewed on the tines of her fork. “Auntie probably wouldn’t want to come.”

Her aunt looked torn between relieved agreement and protesting, and Uncle Erik snorted. “So do you want me to go with you?” he asked.

“I can go!” Tammy yelled, raising her hand.

“You don’t need to go,” Auntie said immediately

“What if I want to?”

Auntie raised her chin. “*No.*”

Tammy crossed her arms. “He’s my uncle and I’ve never met him.”

Auntie grimaced, and Mila could feel her eyebrows drawing together. “I mean, I’m not opposed to it,” she said. “It’ll be an early birthday dinner, and it’s at Lina’s Passaggio. It’ll all be Italian food.”

“I like their breadsticks,” Tammy said. “Wait, will you get cake?”

Mila shrugged. “I dunno. He said he’d pay for it all.”

“How the hell is he able to afford that?” Auntie grumbled.

“Well, if Tammy wants to go, I’ll take you both,” Uncle Erik said.

“What, and leave me all by myself?” Auntie sat back in her chair and pouted. “Fine, I’ll stay on my best behavior. I’m going as well.”

“Oh boy,” Mila said.

“But if he even *thinks* about being an ass—”

“Auntie,” Mila said as her uncle said, “Yulen’ka.”

Tammy had an expression on her face like the circus had come to town and she’d gotten a front-row seat, Mila noted with a little twinge of a headache.

“He’ll be on his best behavior with you there, Auntie,” she said. “I’ll let him know that everyone is
“Girls, we’re going to have to pick out new outfits for you both,” Auntie said, with a sharklike grin. “Something nice, that all matches.”

“Sweetheart,” Uncle Erik said, putting a hand on Auntie’s forearm. “We do not need new ‘Matching Family’ wardrobes for one dinner.”

“It’s not going to be completely formal,” Mila added. “Please don’t go overboard.”


Mila sighed and went back to her salad.

“That’s gonna be fun,” Yuri said when they all met up at the cafe on Friday afternoon. He, Mila, Sara, Beka, Phoebe, and Claire were all sharing another taco platter and watching Angus try to beat some other guy whose name Mila didn’t know at the foosball table.

“Your aunt is gonna tear his head off,” Phoebe said, scooping up a bit of meat and beans with a corn chip. “I mean, she might actually eviscerate him.”

“That’s a ten-dollar word right there, Feebs,” Sara said.

“Oh boy,” Yuri looked at Beka. “Are you working tomorrow night?”

Beka shook his head. “Lunch shift,” he said.

“Aww, I was gonna ask you to spy on them.”

“C’mon, Yura,” Mila said, making a face. “This is kind of a big deal.”

“Yeah, it is,” Claire agreed, nudging Phoebe.

“I guess so,” Phoebe said, her face falling. “Sorry, Meels. I didn’t mean to make fun.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong,” Mila admitted. “My aunt is promising to behave but she’s also still really pissed at him.”

“And with good reason,” Claire said. “But that’s no excuse for getting the way of you reconnecting with your father.” She shot Mila a little smile. “I hope it goes well for you.”

“Thanks,” Mila said, smiling back.

“Mickey’s working the dinner shift,” Sara said, tapping at her phone. “I’ll tell him to keep an eye out for you, okay?”

“What’s he gonna do?” Yuri asked, raising his eyebrows. “Dump wine on Mila’s aunt’s head?”

“Oh my god please no,” Phoebe said, wincing. “The stains.”

“He’d lose his job, Yuri,” Sara deadpanned.

“So? He can get another job somewhere else.”

“No, Yuri. How’d you like it if, say—” Sara looked up and snagged Yuuri by the wrist. “If I had
Yuuri K here dump a milkshake on your head?"

"Yuuri K does what?" Yuuri demanded, getting flustered.

"I'd maim you both," Yuri growled, his face immediately darkening.

Yuuri actually hid behind his tray. "I wouldn't ever!"

At his ankle, his little service poodle barked.

Yuri bared his teeth at the waiter. "Good!"

"Guys," Mila said, rubbing her forehead. "Please."

"No dumping of any beverages on anyone," Claire said, raising her voice over the din. "Sorry, Yuuri," she added, tugging him out of Sara’s grasp and sending him on his way. "Give him a nice tip when we leave," she said to Sara, who flapped a hand at her.

"Here's a tip, don't dump anything on me if you wanna live," Yuri said, but he was deflating.

"I swear to god, it's like I'm babysitting four-year-olds," Claire muttered.

Mila chewed on a hangnail and tuned the rest of them out. She had class in the morning, and then a midday shift at Splash Dream before heading home at three. Then, she’d get ready and Uncle Erik would drive them down to the Blue Rose for dinner.

She actually felt kind of nervous again.

"Hey," Sara said, nudging Mila’s knee with her own. "You're gonna be fine. If your aunt doesn't fight your dad, I will."

Mila smiled weakly, and attempted to drown her nerves in her boba tea.

"There's never parking when you need it," Uncle Erik grumbled as they rounded the carpark a third time, all three of his passengers searching for an empty spot.

"Ooh, there!" Tammy pointed, and Mila could see the moment her uncle zeroed in on it. They all grabbed onto the nearest handholds as he accelerated and slid into the spot right before some dude in a Beemer could. The Beemer blared its horn at them, and Uncle Erik actually did the “talk to the hand” gesture as he turned off the ignition and pulled the key out. Auntie was scolding him as they all piled out of the car and the Beemer sped away to prowl the parking lot again.

"Animals," Auntie grumbled, grabbing her purse from the footwell of the passenger’s seat. "This is why we need to raise the driving age."

"That dude was older than either of you," Mila said. She’d gotten a glimpse of the Beemer’s driver, and he’d definitely given her Rich Old White Guy vibes.

"Hmph," Auntie said, and they all made sure the car doors were properly shut before Uncle locked it up and they all headed into the hotel.

When they reached the host stand, Mila gave the hostess her father’s name. The lady beamed at them and grabbed four menus before shepherding them along into the dining room.
The table that the hostess led them to was completely empty, and Mila was a little disappointed.

“Hey, what if that dude in the Beemer was your dad?” Tammy asked, and her father shushed her.

Mila said a silent prayer that that wasn’t the case.

“Well,” Auntie said, throwing her shawl over the back of one of the chairs. “If he takes longer than twenty minutes, we’re leaving.”

“Auntie.”

“Fine. Half an hour.”

“I’ll take it,” Mila said, sighing.

They all took seats, and once they were settled in, a restaurant employee stepped up to their table.

Mila lit up when she recognized their waiter. “Mickey! Did Sara put you up to this?”

“No, you’re actually in my area,” Mickey said, his voice mostly professional and only a little sour. “Do you want to order your drinks now?”

“Yes, please,” Auntie said. “Can I see your wine menu?”

“We are not getting the most expensive wine and sticking him with the bill,” Uncle Erik said.

“Okay, but I still want wine.”

Mickey raised his eyebrows and leaned in towards Mila. “Sara wasn’t kidding, huh?”

Mila sighed again and rubbed her temples. “Nope.”

“Crap. I kind of need to give them a drink menu.”

“I want a Coke,” Tammy piped up. Her eyes narrowed. “You guys have actual Coke here, not Pepsi, right?”

“Oh my god, you’re one of those too,” Mickey groaned. “Yes, we carry Coke products, please don’t call my manager over to complain.”

“She won’t,” Mila said. “Cokes for us two, please.”

Mickey sighed and scribbled the order down on his notepad. “I’ll be back with the Cokes and the wine menu,” he said, and fled.

“If we leave before Anton shows up, we have to foot the drink bill,” Uncle Erik said, and Auntie made a face at him.

But it wasn’t to be; maybe five minutes after Mickey delivered the sodas and the wine menu, the hostess reappeared, and Mila felt her stomach do a somersault.

It wasn’t like she really remembered what her father looked like at all, she hadn’t actually seen him since she was a toddler. But the moment she laid eyes on the man following the hostess, she knew.

He was tall, fairly thin and fit-looking, and what was left of his thinning hair looked to be the same
dark red that Mila’s natural hair color was. He had the same nose and chin that Mila saw in the mirror everyday, and the same high cheekbones… holy shit.

“Ludmila,” her father breathed, his eyes wide. His face split into a wide smile. “You have grown up so well.”

Mila suddenly realized she’d shoved her chair back and was standing, and out of the corner of her eye she saw her aunt and uncle standing as well. “Uh,” she said, suddenly at a loss for words. “Hello.”

“Anton,” Uncle Erik said, moving around the table to join Mila. “You look well.”

“Thanks,” Mila’s father said, and he seemed sincere. “I have been trying to take care of myself.”

“Hmph,” Auntie said, staying put.

“Yulia.” Mila’s father turned to her aunt, his expression a little more strained. “How have you been? I hope you have not been working too hard?”

Auntie didn’t answer, but Mila noticed she was digging her long fingernails into the leather cover of the wine menu.

“We work as we must,” Uncle Erik said. “We’ve been looking at the wine menu, pull up a seat?”

“Oh, one moment,” Mila’s father said. He turned around and gestured to someone, and then Mila saw a woman wave in response and stride forward.

What? Mila stood frozen as the woman headed their way. Wait… who is this?

Chapter End Notes

I'm already 2k into the next chapter, so look forward to it! (Planning on getting some more written on my vacation!!) Gab already has her guesses for who this mysterious lady friend is, what are yours?

SORRY FOR DISAPPEARING FOR SO LONG (;A; it's been hectic over here at Casa de Lii, I've got job shenanigans (what else is new) and I'm taking part in another Bang. But this fic is still happening... along with a bit more...

The side stories are not abandoned either! I'll have updates for those once I'm back home again on the 27th of July! Also... my birthday is coming up this week! I'm sure I'll be crying all over my Twitter on the day of, so don't miss out on that!

And as usual: if you'd like to support my fic writing you can check out my Twitter, plus my Tumblr, Dreamwidth, and Pillowfort. If you're so inclined, check out the dedicated pinboard on my Pinterest, too.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!