moments from his grasp

by lilithiumwords

Summary

Yuuri dies in a tragic accident -- and wakes two years in the past. He can't go back home.

He has to decide whether he wants to live it all over again: Sochi, the Grand Prix Final, Viktor...

Viktor, who doesn't know him.

Notes

I've always wanted to write a time travel story. This story is a product of my love for a beautiful trope, long nights spent writing and daydreaming, and the group effort of my fantastic team of betas, who keep pushing me and nudging me to refine this into something worthwhile.

Thank you to my wonderful betas, without whom this story would not exist, and whose advice has been invaluable: @moonbelowsea, @vita_orlando, and @merigold. You all are amazing!

This story began as part of the Big Bang On Ice, but when it eventually grew to be too big to finish in time for that collaboration, I decided to continue it on its own. Many, many thanks and the utmost love to the BBOI discord, who cheered me on and sprinted with me.
in writing this frantically (and later, less frantically, but with no less determination). Without them, I wouldn't have made it this far.

I'm very proud of this story, and I hope you enjoy it. Please stay with me until the end, as we've got a long journey ahead of us. Thank you!

**Note:** Russian and Japanese text will have translations if you hover over the text with your mouse. This does not work on mobile or downloaded versions.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Yuuri's dreams end under the faint trickle of light through water, while darkness closes in around him. He is drowning, he thinks, but the cold digs into his skin, snaring his last thoughts and dragging them away.

He was walking, wasn't he? Running with Makkachin to meet Viktor and Yurio. The road was icy, wasn't it -- St. Petersburg seems like it's under a permanent layer of ice and snow, in January. Yuuri was on the sidewalk, but then there was a car...

The Neva is even colder than St. Petersburg.

He has one final thought, and it is this: *I hope Viktor didn't see.*

~*~

Yuuri wakes up choking, under the sensation of falling. He throws off his blankets and scrambles out of bed before the world can right itself, and he ends up by the closet, knocking over a laundry hamper and hitting his head on the wall. The pain sends him reeling, but it also snaps him back from the cold, stopping his blind panic in its tracks. For a moment, all Yuuri can hear is his own frenzied panting.

There is no water in his throat. It's not cold, either -- he must have had a nightmare. Thankfully he hasn't woken Viktor, though Yuuri is slightly surprised that his fiancé isn't already reaching for him, making worried noises about Yuuri's bad dream. For a few minutes, Yuuri simply breathes, holding each breath for five seconds until his heart rate has slowed, then slowly stands up in the
dark room, fumbling blindly for the bed.

"Viktor," Yuuri whispers, not wanting to wake his fiancé, but not wanting to be alone right now, either. He knows his limits. Viktor doesn't answer, so Yuuri reaches across the bed -- and his hand only meets emptiness.

Slowly, Yuuri draws his hand back. The bed is smaller than he remembers. The room is different, too. Yuuri realizes that there is light coming from the window, city light, but that the windows aren't the right size, and the light isn't the right color. He doesn't recognize the cityscape -- it isn't a part of St. Petersburg he has seen before.

*I don't know where I am,* Yuuri thinks, panicking. He sees a phone on the table beside the bed and grabs it, relieved to see that it is his phone, Vicchan in the background. He opens it hurriedly and goes to Viktor's number, the first one on his speed dial, then stops short when he doesn't see it there, nor in the contacts.

*Did someone go into my phone?*

Yuuri shakes his head, terrified by what this means. He doesn't recognize where he is, and he doesn't remember anything from last night. He had been dreaming of running through St. Petersburg -- or was that the last thing he did? Yuuri doesn't know. He doesn't understand what is happening.

He knows Viktor's number by heart, though. Quickly he taps in the number and presses *call*, putting it to his ear, his heart racing.

"Алло?" answers Viktor after two rings, and Yuuri falls to his knees, tears prickling his eyes in relief.

"Viktor," he whispers, trusting that Viktor will be able to help him. "I don't know where I am. Where are you? Can you come get me?"

There is a pause over the line, before Viktor answers. His voice sounds a little odd. "I'm sorry, but I think you have the wrong number. Who is this?"

Yuuri's heart leaps into his throat. He blinks and pulls the phone away, staring at the number on the screen, then puts it to his ear again. "This is... Viktor, right?"

"Yes. Who is this? How did you get this number, anyway?" Viktor sounds impatient now. He still has that odd edge to his voice -- maybe a little more polite than normal?

Yuuri reels a little. Viktor doesn't recognize his voice -- what happened? "I... it's *me*, Viktor."

"I'm sorry," Viktor says after a moment, and he does sound a little sorry -- but mostly he sounds like he wants to end the conversation. "You must have the wrong Viktor. Or if this is some kind of joke, it's a very poor one. I must go. Good luck, whoever you are."

Then he hangs up, and Yuuri is left sitting in a dark, unknown room, alone, with no idea where he is or what to do. His fiancé just hung up on him, and Yuuri is afraid.

Slowly he stands, grabbing onto the bed for support. He notices the shape of a lamp in the dim light. With a shaking hand, Yuuri reaches for the lamp and turns it on. When light floods the room, the hair stands up on the back of his neck. He isn't standing in his and Viktor's bedroom, nor any room in St. Petersburg.
He is standing in his bedroom in Detroit.

For a moment, Yuuri doesn't breathe as his world spins around him. He had been so sure that he was in St. Petersburg, asleep in his and Viktor's bed. But that's not right, either. Yuuri hadn't been in bed -- he had been on the way to meet Viktor and Yurio.

Who the hell is Yurio?

He knows who Yurio is. Yuri Plisetsky, his friend and rival, sixteen years old and full of teenage rage. He gave me katsudon pirozhki for my birthday.

Viktor doesn't recognize him. The calendar on his wall says that it is October 2014.

Yet Yuuri has never been more certain of the fact that it had been January 18, 2017 this morning. He had woken up when Viktor had left the apartment to fetch Yurio from the train station. He had kissed Yuuri goodbye slowly, teasingly calling him his 'sleeping beauty,' before making Yuuri promise to get up soon and meet them for practice.

Yet somehow, Yuuri is now in a place shaped out of a dream. He fumbles for his phone, pulling up his calendar. The date is listed as October 24, 2014, just the same as the paper one on the wall, and he has none of the events he remembers listed anywhere in future months.

Knowledge struggles to make sense in his head. Part of him understands that he had gone to sleep after the last of his midterms on Friday, but the other half of him has memories of waking up in St. Petersburg in Detroit. Yuuri is not sure which is true -- because he remembers both. His head hurts sharply from the effort to make sense of the memories. It's almost like his brain is being rewritten, and his sense of now is completely off-kilter.

Yuuri clearly remembers falling into the Neva. Had he somehow come back in time? Or was this the afterlife? Maybe this is his life flashing before his eyes, and in a few moments, he will die.

He closes his eyes, terrified. He can still hear the rush of water in his ears, but he isn't sure whether it is in his mind, or whether it is real. What should he do?

A soft knock at his door distracts him, and Yuuri flinches, not knowing what to expect. "Yuuri?" says Phichit from the other side, sounding tired. Knowledge comes to Yuuri slowly, as if dragged through mud. He remembers that midterms have just ended, and Phichit pulled more than one all-nighter to study for it. "I heard a noise, are you alright?"

It's October now.

It was January an hour ago.

Viktor doesn't recognize me.

"I'm okay," Yuuri says automatically. He is struggling to make sense of his memories, of the warring knowledge settling with itself in his head.

Phichit opens the door, rubbing his eyes. He blinks at the sight of Yuuri standing by his bed, staring at the sheets with a blank expression, and crosses the room to touch his shoulder. Yuuri must look sick, and he feels it, too. "Yuuri, you don't look okay. Do you want some tea? We still have a couple bags of your green tea left. We'll have to go to the Asian grocery store..."

"They'll be out," Yuuri says blankly, then covers his mouth. How does he know that? He feels dizzy. He remembers, though, going to the Asian grocery in a post-midterm haze and being
dismayed to realize that the store was out of Japanese tea.

Phichit draws back and stares at him, then frowns. "Tea, definitely."

Yuuri doesn't protest. While Phichit pokes the water kettle into productivity, Yuuri sits in the wobbly kitchen chair and stares down at his hands, where a gold ring used to sit -- but no, he has never worn a ring, and who would he want to marry, anyway?

**Viktor.** He proposed to Viktor, under the guise of something else entirely. But Viktor doesn't...

His head is hurting. Was it all a dream? Or did it actually happen, and this is the dream? Yuuri pinches himself when Phichit's back is turned. *Ow,* his mind supplies, and Yuuri has to bite down on his lip, his eyes growing hot. If this is real, and it wasn't a dream... then what is happening?

"Here you go," Phichit says, setting down a chipped blue cup covered in poodles. Yuuri's favorite cup, which will break in the middle of finals week next semester, stressing him enough to fail one of his classes. He has had it since he was a teenager.

Yuuri doesn't touch it. "Phichit... does the name Yuri Plisetsky mean anything to you?"

Phichit leans back in his chair, studying Yuuri for a long moment. His typical smile is gone, a comfort Yuuri could have used, and he must see how panicked Yuuri is. Despite the odd question, he humors Yuuri and gives him a straight answer. "He's that Russian juniors skater, isn't he? I didn't think you paid attention to the juniors league anymore."

"I don't," Yuuri says softly. So Yuri Plisetsky is real. He knows he has never heard of the name before today, and he knows that in a year, Yuri Plisetsky will win a gold medal for Russia in the juniors men's section of the GPF -- where Yuuri will compete against Viktor for the first time. (And lose miserably."

Phichit is waiting patiently. Yuuri thinks of all the things he could say -- *I traveled back in time, I'm not your Yuuri, I dreamed about the future, I've lost my damn mind* -- and he knows that he can trust Phichit. Despite that reassurance, Yuuri can't imagine telling anyone what is going on in his head. He doesn't know what happened, and he can't imagine even saying it, because of how insane it will sound.

*Time traveling. Isn't it the same plot as his movie?*

Phichit has made him watch *The King and the Skater* at least sixty-five times. Yuuri started keeping count when they watched it seven times in a row once when they got snowed in and couldn't go to the rink.

Yuuri takes a deep breath. "I don't think I'm supposed to be here," he says slowly. He doesn't look away from his tea, which is steaming gently as the *sencha* steeps. "Last night, I went to sleep in St. Petersburg with Viktor. Today I was supposed to meet him and Yurio -- um, Yuri Plisetsky -- for training. It's January 18, 2017..."

"That's two years from now," Phichit says slowly. "Yuuri... did you have an Arthur dream? I have those a lot, you know."

Yuuri bites his bottom lip. Arthur is the protagonist of Phichit's favorite movie, and ironically, also a time traveler. Even just thinking about the idea that he traveled back in time sounds insane, and Phichit is giving him a weird look. "Um, yeah, a dream. It was like, I was really in St. Petersburg, and I'd been with Viktor for a year. He was my coach," he adds in a small voice, knowing full well that Phichit has already heard of that secret wish. How many times has he drunkenly confessed his
feelings about Viktor to his best friend?

He realizes his hands are shaking and clasps them together tightly. "I was running on a bridge. A car hit some ice and it spun out of control... I think it hit me." He digs his thumbnail into his wrist, remembering cold water and knowing, without a shadow of a doubt, that he had been drowning not long ago. Or two years from now. "I fell in the river. And... then I woke up here. Now." His voice is high and reedy now, his anxiety stretched thin between his disbelief and his fear.

Either it didn't happen, or it did, and I came back in time. And Viktor doesn't recognize me.

Phichit is staring at him. "That... doesn't sound like a dream, Yuuri."

Yuuri can't help but laugh. It sounds a little hysterical. "Yeah, it doesn't. It wasn't. Which is crazy, right? I'm sitting here in Detroit talking to you now, but last night, I definitely fell asleep watching Amélie with Viktor. But that sounds crazy... it must have been a dream. Or maybe this is a dream."

He bows over his hands, the crushing weight of his new reality sending his anxiety spiraling. Phichit must think him insane. Yuuri feels like he is going insane. Maybe this is a nightmare, and he will wake up to Viktor kissing him good morning.

"I want to wake up," he whispers. Viktorm.

A warm hand reaches into his vision and wraps around his hands, gently prying his fingers off his wrist. Yuuri stares down at the indentation his thumbnail left, then looks up at Phichit, who is leaning forward over the table, worriedly watching Yuuri.

"It's okay, Yuuri. Take a deep breath."

Yuuri obeys, and the action loosens his shoulders a little. He unclenches his jaw and realizes how tense he is, then takes another breath, until the oncoming edge of panic has calmed a little. Belatedly, Yuuri realizes that his eyes are wet, and he reaches up to wipe at them with his arm. "Sorry," he whispers.

Phichit shakes his head. "Don't be. Tell me more about it, if it's not going to upset you more."

Yuuri hesitantly looks up. "You believe me?" Some part of him relaxes a little when Phichit smiles, squeezing his hand.

"If it was just a dream, it sounds awful. But if it's really the future, then we should try to figure out why you came back. I doubt it was to introduce a popular trading card game to save the Thai Kingdom," Phichit jokes, and Yuuri cracks a tiny smile.

"Okay."

He tells Phichit almost everything. About going to the Grand Prix and losing both his pride and his inhibition, thus dancing his way into Viktor's arms. Phichit believes that part readily, because he has witnessed Yuuri's absolute failure at being a normal human being when he is drunk, as well as Yuuri's marked increase of intensity about Viktor. (Yuuri once made a drunk powerpoint. It had 184 slides about Viktor. Half of them were about his hair alone.)

"So you humped him in the middle of the banquet and begged him to be your coach. And you did a pole dance for him?" Phichit is laughing at his pain, and Yuuri sighs deeply, hating his life. "That's filthy, Yuuri! Shame!"

"Shut up," Yuuri grumbles. "I was drunk and in Viktor's proximity. It's a miracle I didn't try to kiss
him. I didn't even remember it afterwards, either," he groans. That sets Phichit off again, peeling laughter echoing across the kitchen, and Yuuri waits him out patiently. When Phichit is calm again, only a small smirk lingering, Yuuri continues.

He tells Phichit about that long summer of training, of growing closer to Viktor, of becoming someone who could look Viktor in the eyes without flailing. He tells Phichit about Beijing and Moscow and Barcelona, though he doesn't mention who the other finalists are, especially not that Phichit himself was in the Grand Prix Final. He tells Phichit about the engagement rings, and Viktor's challenge, and the decision to move to St. Petersburg to train with Viktor.

He doesn't tell Phichit that they were together. Phichit figures that out himself, his eyes going wide with surprise halfway through Yuuri's story. He has tears in his eyes by the time Yuuri finishes speaking, just as overwhelmed by emotion as Yuuri is.

Yuuri and Viktor. Two people who couldn't be more unlike each other, yet Viktor had fit into his life perfectly, and Yuuri hadn't even made the space for him. Not even years of following Viktor religiously though social media and magazines had prepared Yuuri for a life with Viktor Nikiforov, yet it had been all too easy, to accept Viktor as his coach, and then as more.

Viktor swept into his life and overwhelmed him immediately. The first few months were full of anxious fear that he was dragging Viktor down from the podium he had stood on all his life, but as Yuuri grew closer to him and came to know Viktor the person, versus Viktor the famous skater, he fell in love all over again. No longer was Viktor just his idol, but also his partner, his friend, and his lover.

His everything. And now Viktor is gone -- because none of that has happened, and Viktor doesn't recognize him, doesn't know him anymore.

Yuuri realizes that Phichit has come around the table to touch his shoulder when he feels tears hit his hands. He lets out a keening noise and covers his face, grief welling up in his throat. Sitting here in his kitchen with Phichit feels just as real as the past two years have felt, and somehow, Yuuri doesn't think he will ever get back to his own time -- to his Viktor.

Yuuri must have died. That is how he came back. "I can't go back to him," he whispers, choked, and Phichit wraps his arms around Yuuri, hugging him tightly. Yuuri barely feels it, barely notices anything beyond his own horror.

If he died, then that means there is no way for Yuuri to return. The thought comes back to him that this moment, right now, is the life flashing before his eyes before everything will fade away.

Yuuri pinches his wrist again. The pain feels real, and he isn't cold anymore. He shivers anyway, hearing the echo of water rushing past his ears.

He can't go home. The Viktor who just this morning had kissed him before leaving the apartment is gone. Dream or not, he only exists in Yuuri's head now, and Yuuri will never have that same connection with the Viktor who would eventually become him. Yuuri has already changed. Their relationship will never be the same, because Yuuri already knows Viktor intimately, and Viktor doesn't know him at all.

If this is permanent -- if Yuuri is meant to stay here -- then the past two years of his life are only memories. If he is to live his life normally as if that future never happened, then how can Yuuri go through with it again? Even if he were to do everything again exactly the same, there is no telling that events would fall out the same way. Yuuri can't arrange his life to such exact detail. He is a different person than he was two years ago, even a year ago. All because of Viktor...
Viktor, who does not know him any longer. Viktor, who does not have the same memories Yuuri does, and Yuuri has no way to recreate those memories for Viktor, to transform him into Yuuri's Viktor, except to live it again.

The sum of a person doesn't change just because the components do. Viktor is the same person, thrilling and whiny and petty and sweet, but Yuuri only got to know that side of Viktor because Viktor opened up to him. Not even all of Viktor's friends know those parts of Viktor, because he hides everything behind a smile. Yuuri doesn't even know all of him -- but that year of Viktor...

It had been perfect. Loving Viktor, knowing Viktor, every moment had been perfect. Yuuri wouldn't trade the world for it, but he had lost it anyway.

Viktor doesn't even know he exists, now.

There is a small cracking noise, but Phichit doesn't seem to notice it, and Yuuri realizes dimly that it must be his heart. Viktor will never know him, will never remember the months of training, of laughter and flirting and smiles and tears. He will never gasp in surprise at seeing Yuuri do a quad flip, nor will he ever blush when Yuuri slides a ring onto his finger.

Yuuri cannot bear a world without Viktor -- his Viktor, the Viktor who gave up everything to lift Yuuri up to his level. The Viktor who got to spend a year with Makkachin while romping around in Yuuri's hometown and pushing him, inspiring him, until Yuuri broke Viktor's own record.

They were going to get married. He was going to train with Viktor. He was going to compete against Viktor -- and it's all gone. Everything is gone. And Viktor doesn't know him, will never know him...

Yuuri closes his eyes to the world and mourns.

~*~

A long time later, Yuuri finds himself on the couch, a fluffy blue blanket tucked around his shoulders while Phichit texts furiously on his phone.

"There," Phichit says, sitting down on the couch and picking up the remote. "Emails sent to Celestino and all our professors."

Yuuri blinks slowly at him. "Our?"

Phichit flashes him a smile. "I'm staying home with you so that we can figure this out! Our official story is a cold. Don't you worry, Yuuri. We'll get everything sorted before Monday."

Yuuri says nothing, watching as Phichit navigates through the Playstation menu. He groans when he sees the title of the movie Phichit pulls up. "No, Phichit --"

"But this is exactly the situation that we need to review!" Phichit says. "Arthur went back in time so that he could save the King's life. Has anything bad happened in the next two years that we should know? Do you think you came back to save someone?"

Yuuri sighs, resigned to the inevitable music that begins to play from the TV. "I doubt it. No one in my family died or anything..."

He trails off. That's not really true. Phichit picks up on his silence and looks over at him, waiting, and Yuuri swallows slowly.
"Vicchan died," Yuuri whispers, and Phichit gasps, pausing the movie.

"No! Not your poodle! What happened? I mean, what will happen?"

Yuuri pulls out his phone, which shows a picture of Vicchan on the lock screen. Vicchan had died of natural causes, being almost twelve years old, though Yuuri had always thought he was a little too young when he passed away. He had hoped that Vicchan would still be there when Yuuri went home, but...

"It was a bladder infection. It made him lose too much weight too quickly, and he developed complications and passed away... will pass away next year. Around this time. It'll make me fail my exams and the Grand Prix," Yuuri says quietly.

Phichit makes horrified noises and has to go get his hamsters. Yuuri lets Phichit deposit two of them in his lap, gently petting the small creatures. He never went home in the five years he lived in Detroit, not even when he returned to Japan for competitions, though Minako-sensei always came to support him.

He could go home. He could see Vicchan and his family. If Yuuri is correct...

He pulls up the JSF website and checks the calendar. He already went home for the Chugoku, Shikoku, and Kyushu Championship, where he placed first. Yuuri had won gold in Nationals in the other future, and at Worlds in March, he had beaten both of the other Japanese competitors and placed high enough to be seeded for the next Grand Prix Final. (He hadn't met Viktor, at that Worlds, since they had skated in different groups. But he had worked hard, so that he could be seeded for the GPF.)

Yuuri barely remembers what his current programs are like. He only remembers failing for most of them.

After a few minutes of watching Arthur skate around morosely and flip through his cards, Yuuri pulls up his messaging program.

To: Katsuki Hiroko

Hi mom, I will be in Tokyo for the Nationals competition in December. Can I come home and visit at that time? Yuuri

It is the middle of the afternoon in Japan, but his mother answers within a few minutes.

From: Katsuki Hiroko

Of course, Yuuri! I'll clean your room for you (o^▽^o) Let me know what dates you will be here! Vicchan will be so happy to see you!

Yuuri's eyes tear up a little, but he closes the app with a smile, looking back at the screen. Arthur is walking home after a frustrating day at the rink; Yuuri understands that feeling all too well, though Arthur has already retired in the movie.

Viktor won't let me retire until I win five gold medals.

Yuuri absently moves the hamsters to his shoulders. One of them crawls up and along the back of the couch to Phichit, while the other nibbles on his hair. Yuuri won't win any gold medals now. Well, he could -- but it would be empty of the promise of marrying Viktor when all is said and done.

His Viktor is gone, after all. The promise means nothing now.
He and Phichit remain silent as Arthur is whisked away in his sleep to the ancient Thai Kingdom. The movie used special effects for the time travel, and seeing Arthur flailing as he sits up on the ground reminds Yuuri uncomfortably of the sensation of sinking through water. He closes his eyes with a flinch, and Phichit looks over worriedly.

"Yuuri, is this too much? I thought maybe it would have a clue, you know..."

Yuuri doesn't have the heart to tell him that it's just a movie, not based on anything real, and all the effects are fake. Phichit knows this, but he also wants to help, which Yuuri appreciates. "It's okay, we can keep watching."

He spends the movie thinking, not really paying attention to either the plot -- he knows it by heart, now -- or the homoromantic tension between Arthur and the King, which both he and Phichit have discussed at length on multiple occasions. (Phichit wrote fanfiction, too. Yuuri stuck with powerpoints.)

Yuuri came back two years into the past. His year with Viktor is gone, as is his stressful year leading up to the GPF in Sochi. He had been a wreck the entire time, worrying about whether his program would impress Viktor, what it would be like to skate against him, and so on -- and so Yuuri hadn't enjoyed the season at all. That had been part of the reason he had been considering retirement.

If he skates well enough at Nationals and Worlds, then he could go to the GPF next year and compete against Viktor. Then would come the banquet, and...

Yuuri closes his eyes, pulling his blanket tighter around him. He cannot imagine going into that banquet room and seducing Viktor with a carefree night of dancing again. He wouldn't be Yuuri's Viktor -- and it wouldn't be fair for Yuuri to take him from ice skating a second time.

His heart aches at the thought, but in the same moment, the tension drains out of him. The past year of his life has been full of regret over taking Viktor away from ice skating. Yuuri has always believed that making Viktor be his coach was slowly killing him as a competitive skater, no matter how amazing Viktor's return to the ice would be. Knowing how much Viktor had stressed over his return to the ice, how his relationships with his own coach and fellow skaters had fallen apart, how the entire world had gossiped and pointed fingers uncaringly -- how can Yuuri put Viktor through that again?

He had a lifetime with Viktor, the best time of his life, however short it was. Yuuri isn't selfish enough to demand a second life with Viktor. The thing that makes Viktor happiest is skating, not Yuuri.

He opens his eyes to watch Arthur invite the King onto the ice. The image reminds him a little of his pose to Viktor at the end of Yuuri On Ice, and Yuuri smiles a little, his heart aching.

The decision settles into his bones. Yuuri will not ask Viktor to be his coach, this time.

By the time the Thai Kingdom is saved, the King and Arthur smiling tearfully at each other, Yuuri's stomach is growling, and Phichit is sharing the characters' tears. Yuuri helps him fetch the hamsters from under cushions and blankets, gently dropping them into their cage and following Phichit into the kitchen.

"I suppose there's no telling what might have sent you back," Phichit ponders, rinsing out Yuuri's empty cup. Yuuri shrugs a little, crossing his arms more tightly over his middle. "You're here now, though. And you're still Yuuri, of course. It's not like you became somebody else."
"It doesn't bother you? There's no reason this isn't all in my head," Yuuri says quietly, but Phichit shakes his head.

"You know Yuri Plisetsky's name, and everything sounds far too detailed to be a dream. Dreams don't make sense when you talk about them afterwards, usually, but yours sounds perfectly normal. Other than Viktor Nikiforov standing naked in your parents' inn," Phichit adds cheekily, and Yuuri blushes. "Though his Instagram is full of pretty wild pictures..."

"Tell me about it." Viktor's Instagram is a source of great happiness and frustration to Yuuri. Over the years, Yuuri has had to watch Viktor take photos with beautiful people and burn with jealousy that he is not in them -- but he also gets to see lots of pictures of Makkachin and Viktor doing fun, interesting things. Viktor has always been extravagant, even before he walked into Yuuri's life naked.

"I guess what we should be figuring out now, is what you're going to do," Phichit says thoughtfully.

Yuuri thinks about it. He has made one decision already, but he is still in the prime of his figure skating career. He doesn't want to quit either, because he still loves figure skating, despite not believing he is good enough for it.

"Stop that. I broke Viktor's own record -- I know I'm a good skater."

"I guess I'll just keep going," Yuuri says slowly. "I can't go back... I don't think so, anyway. Not if I ended up drowning." Phichit doesn't say anything to that, and Yuuri winces slightly at the horror on his face. "Sorry. Oh, I can land the quad salchow in competition now. Maybe I should put that into my free program..."

Phichit's eyes widen dramatically. "In competition?!"

Yuuri nods absently, his mind already back to Viktor. At one point, Viktor had confessed to him that he had been unhappy with his career, that he had been unable to surprise people any longer and that he felt like he was getting too old for figure skating. Then when Yuuri and Yurio had swept in and taken both of his records, Viktor had felt the fire of competition again, renewing his love of skating. If Yuuri doesn't become his pupil, then Viktor will never feel that way...

...unless Yuuri gives him real competition, but earlier. Now, if he can.

Yuuri has the skills for it, at least in knowledge. He needs to practice his quads, but he is reasonably confident that he can pull them off, especially with a body that is two years younger. If he figures out his programs and tinkers with them, changes the composition around, his short program and free skate would be good enough to get him on the podium.

Maybe even good enough to be a challenge for Viktor. And wouldn't that give Viktor something to think about? A random challenger from Japan, someone who could give Viktor a run for his money...

Yuuri can't take Viktor from ice skating, not again, but he can give Viktor a reason to stay.

The decision cements itself in his mind. He looks over at Phichit, determined. "Phichit, can you pull up the training videos of my programs for this year? I need to change them. I can't go back, not to my own time -- but I can move forward."

Phichit stares at him a long moment, then smiles widely. "Sure can, Yuuri! Leave it to me!"
Celestino is pleasantly surprised when Yuuri shows him the proposed changes, though skeptical. Yuuri waits with his hands clenched at his sides as Celestino reviews the paper, wondering if he is being too ambitious, if he can even pull this off. He nearly reaches out to take it back; what if Celestino doesn't approve? Yuuri shouldn't be doing this after all.

Celestino ignores his nerves with an ease born of familiarity. "I hadn't thought of adding a quad salchow to your free skate. Do you think you can do it?" Celestino asks thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. Yuuri is aware of Phichit staring at them with wide eyes. He is even more excited about this than Yuuri is.

He swallows. "I can." The quad salchow is something he can definitely do, though whether or not he can pull it off in his program is unknown. He hasn't dared to tell Phichit about his quad flip. Now, the only two quads that he cannot do are the quad lutz and the quad loop. (Yuuri briefly wonders what it would be like to be able to land those jumps. Viktor can land all of them.)

Celestino nods. He has always wanted Yuuri to open up and be more confident in his skating. Yuuri is kind of surprised that Celestino is willing to let him change around the components; usually Celestino is a lot more strict about that, especially with Yuuri. Still, Yuuri wants to make him proud; he has always regretted not letting Celestino push him harder. "Let's see it, then."

Phichit gives him a thumbs up from the CD player, and the other skaters step off the ice, giving Yuuri curious looks as they pass him. Yuuri takes a deep breath, then skates out to the center of the rink, waiting for the opening notes to Symphony No. 9 in E Minor, Op. 95, B. 178. A fairly straightforward ensemble, and hadn't Phichit laughed at him when Celestino had chosen it for Yuuri, because it sounded like that famous shark movie? Even though he hadn't fought hard enough back then, now Yuuri thinks he can use the dramatic music for his own goals.

To be good enough to challenge Viktor.

When the music starts, Yuuri begins to skate, thinking of the power behind the song and how he wants to use it to impress Viktor. He needs to win Nationals with this program. If he doesn't fall apart, he could even place at Worlds with this. He has the skills, which Celestino, Minako-sensei, and Viktor have all hammered into his head.

As he skates, his old routine comes back to him in pieces. He skated this two years ago in his own timeline, and he had fallen too many times -- but the elegance and grace of his skating had gained him enough points to get a gold medal at Nationals. He has been comfortably at the top of the skating world in Japan for a year now, Japan's so-called ace, though Yuuri never saw it that way until Viktor showed him the light.

Yuuri doesn't know if he can get gold again, but he has to medal in order to get invited to Worlds. Once at Worlds, he has to get a high enough score to get seeded for the GPF. In his past, he had done all this despite his mental weakness. Yuuri knows he has the ability, and that in a way, he has always had the ability -- but he doesn't know if he can do it. Not again.

He has to try.

He and Phichit spent the entire weekend combing over videos of his routines, and Yuuri had rearranged the jumps to his own satisfaction. They even booked time at the rink on Sunday so that Yuuri could practice in secret. He has added the quad salchow to both of his programs, replacing the extra toe loops in hopes for more points.
It's not as intensive as his Yuuri On Ice program, or even Eros, but it does make use of his stamina, saving one of his quad toe loops for the end of the program. It's daring, just like his future free skate was -- most skaters would never put a quad at the end of the program, and both Phichit and Celestino must think him insane for daring to try.

Yuuri must show them he can do this.

The first part of the song is fast jumps and expressive dances, his renewed determination, and Yuuri throws in a little of his Eros flair, more than he knows he had when he first skated this program. The components are more difficult than how Celestino had arranged it, but he skated it well enough in practice in front of Phichit. After his quad salchow, Yuuri starts his step sequence, flipping around and showing off quick precision -- and here he skates more easily, thinking of the dance lessons with Minako-sensei years ago.

Then the song slows, and Yuuri's grace returns, bringing to mind his memories of Viktor, filled with light and love. The song builds, and Yuuri goes back to his jumps, more powerful than before. He lands all of his triples. Beautiful, Viktor says in his head, and with that warmth tucked away in his chest, Yuuri throws himself into his final quad, a toe loop.

*It'd be good as a flip, too. Maybe another time.*

He lands it, but barely. The song comes to an end, and Yuuri slows, lifting his arms up and thinking, *Viktor. One way or another, I'll make you happy.*

The song isn't a particularly emotional one, but Yuuri feels tears in his eyes all the same. Everything he does is for Viktor -- even the Viktor who doesn't know him, who will never know him. His entire skating career has been built from the ground up so that he could reach Viktor someday, and not even in his last life, in the two years Yuuri has yet to live, did he get to skate against Viktor properly. At Sochi, he had fallen apart mentally because of Vicchan's death, and then Viktor had taken a year off -- and finally, when they were working side-by-side for Worlds, Four Continents, and Europeans...

Yuuri had died. He had left Viktor alone, unable to complete their future together, unable to savor the thrill of skating against each other properly.

The least he could do, for both himself and Viktor, is to give him a challenge to relish. No matter what the world thinks of him, Yuuri wants to give that to Viktor, even if he has only two years to do it. He doesn't know what will happen -- Yuuri might die in two years no matter what he does.

Viktor, though... Viktor has a future, and Yuuri wants to see him happy. For the Viktor who fell in love with him and supported him for a year, who is two years away from him, whom he can no longer reach out and touch. For the Viktor who doesn't know him, who has never met him and will know a different Yuuri, a Yuuri who loves him more than anything.

Yet Yuuri cannot reach out to Viktor now. The Viktor he spoke to on the phone isn't and will never be his Viktor. To try and be with him would betray his feelings for *his* Viktor.

Even if Yuuri wants nothing more than to fall into Viktor's arms again, he can't, not ever again -- but he can give Viktor something else. A rival, someone who can put the spark back in his life, because Yuuri is the only person in the world who knows Viktor's secret doubts. He understands what Viktor needs -- a challenge.

Yuuri and Yurio were the only people to give Viktor a real challenge on the ice.
And maybe it's a little selfish of Yuuri, too -- because what else can he do, but keep skating? He wants to skate against Viktor. That has always been his life's goal. He wants to stand beside him on the podium. He wants the thrill of beating Viktor's long-held records, and he wants to inspire Viktor to try to beat him, too.

But he can't ever ask Viktor to love him again. To know that he will never fall asleep to Viktor's smile, that he cannot reach out and hold Viktor, breaks his heart. Two years of his life, gone. A year with Viktor, gone. The only person he has ever wanted to hold onto... gone, and Yuuri will never, ever see him again.

For all intents and purposes, his Viktor is dead, lost in a future that Yuuri will never be able to reach.

Yuuri closes his eyes, hearing applause from the other club skaters, alongside glee in Phichit's and Celestino's chatter. When he can open them without tears clouding his vision, he makes his way back to the wall, accepting his glasses from Phichit and looking hopefully at Celestino.

"I love it," Celestino beams, pounding Yuuri on the shoulder and making him wince. "Looks like your cold did you some good after all! Hopefully it worked wonders on Phichit, too," he adds, giving Phichit a doubtful look. Phichit grins sheepishly, his phone already in hand -- one of Celestino's everlasting headaches.

Yuuri merely smiles, his heart strangely light in his chest. He has made his decisions. This is what he can do.

~*~

Two weeks fly by. Yuuri somehow manages to deal with both his classes and his training without falling flat on his face. The déjà vu of going to his classes and repeating lectures, seminars, and homework is jarring, but after a while the discomfort fades to the background, strange but no longer upsetting. Phichit is a godsend, supporting Yuuri without once complaining, and even though Yuuri sometimes makes jokes that Phichit doesn't understand, or mentions memes that haven't even blessed the pages of the internet yet, Phichit is quick to roll with it.

Dealing with classes is interesting. Yuuri remembers the material, which means he does a little better on exams. His Russian classes are much easier than he expected, considering how much of the language he used regularly in St. Petersburg. Yuuri is so overwhelmed by his training and his growing mental problems that he needs all the help that he can get. He never had a problem with school, except that he always spent more time skating than studying.

Yuuri does make a point to talk to his family often. He thinks they might be a little weirded out by the change, considering he has barely spoken to them for four years now, but they all seem to appreciate it, even Mari, who was a little cold to him for a while. Soon, though, she's happily texting him pictures of Vicchan, who is beautiful and sweet in every single photo. Yuuri saves every one of them, not wanting to miss out on Vicchan's life any more than he already did.

Two weeks after Yuuri returns from the future, his new skate is put to the test at the NHK Trophy, to which Yuuri was invited by Japan. This year, the NHK Trophy is Yuuri's only qualifying event for the GPF, taking place in the middle of November, too soon for Yuuri to strengthen his program enough to place highly.

Minako-sensei and, surprisingly, Mari come to the NHK Trophy to cheer for him. Having that support goes a long way to soothe Yuuri's nerves before he skates. He only messes up two jumps during his short program, and his free skate is good enough to win him bronze at the end of the
competition.

Unsurprisingly, Yuuri does not qualify for the finale, but the single medal fuels his determination. He needs to reach Viktor again.

Minako-sensei corners Yuuri after the free skate to find out his schedule for Nationals. She promises to meet him the day before the competition starts to take him and Celestino out for dinner, and Yuuri readily agrees, glad for the support. He had taken his loved ones for granted for so long, unable to accept their support for him because he was too focused inward (and on Viktor) - but if this is a second chance, then Yuuri wants to give it his all.

He owes it to them.

He doesn't try calling Viktor again. He makes sure to delete the record of the call off his phone, to keep the temptation of contacting him as miniscule as possible. He might have the number memorized, but it helps that he doesn't make a contact entry for Viktor. Out of sight, out of mind. As much as he can, anyway.

Viktor is constantly on his mind, as is St. Petersburg. Both of them, plus the months he spent at Viktor's side, feature heavily in his dreams. The Neva also appears, as a deep, cold oblivion that wakes Yuuri to wide-eyed terror every time the nightmare surfaces.

Yuuri takes to avoiding the waterfront, which is unfortunate, because he and Phichit used to go walking by the lake when they didn't have anything better to do. Yuuri can't look at the Detroit River or even Lake Erie anymore without going into full-blown shivers. It doesn't help when the waterways start to ice over, either; it just reminds him more of the Neva, of the death that sent him back in time.

At one point, he tries writing down the dreams, because not long after he came to America, Yuuri looked up ways to cope with his mental weakness -- anxiety and depression, as the school counselor told him. That helps a little, so Yuuri writes down other memories that haunt him -- the shape of Viktor's smile, his favorite types of alcohol, the types of treats Makkachin prefers. He writes more about that summer in Hasetsu than anything else, even the kiss in Beijing, and the kisses that followed it, because that summer shaped the relationship between him and Viktor more than anything else in their lives.

The memories hurt a little less. Yuuri hides the journal under his bed and takes to pulling it out when he feels lonely, stroking his fingers over the ink spelling out Viktor's name. He adds little details that come to him in the darkness, things he said to Viktor that meant the world to both of them. The way Viktor looked at him. The way Viktor kissed him.

He misses him so much. Makkachin, too -- and how many nightmares has he had about Makkachin falling into the Neva with him? Sometimes it's Vicchan, and once it was Viktor -- and Yuuri hadn't slept for almost two days after that one, until Phichit had bullied him into taking a day off.

He knows he is depressed, but all he can do is continue to push forward, training harder every day and trying to deal with it as best as he can on his own. He should probably see a therapist about his problems. The list of resources on the school counselor's website doesn't cover I traveled back in time and lost my one true love.

Yuuri almost doesn't watch this year's Grand Prix Final. Other than the NHK Trophy, he has been ignoring the qualifiers ever since he came back, to give himself some space, but the whole skating club sets up a viewing party after practice one day since Celestino accompanied two skaters to it this year. In the end, Yuuri lets Phichit drag him to Andy Simpson's apartment.
Viktor is beautiful on Andy's widescreen television. Seeing him again gives Yuuri a small shock; he thought he would be used to it, since Viktor's posters are still all over his room, but seeing Viktor stepping onto the ice reminds Yuuri that he once spoke to this Viktor -- and that this Viktor is not his Viktor. The feeling makes him a little sick, anxiety twisting his stomach.

He wants to get up and run away. Instead, he sits and watches, his knees pulled close to his chest.

Yuuri hears several sighs around him and has to agree; the sleek, sexy ensemble for this year's short program rather suits Viktor. The costume is fit to his body and hugs every contour, and Viktor's hair is swept back messily, like he just had sex. Viktor has dressed himself like he is going clubbing, skating to Adam Lambert's *Pop That Lock* in a fit of pique that Yuuri hadn't understood two years ago.

He understands a little more, now.

*He's rebelling. Everyone sees him as something to covet, and the media wants to write him into a neat little box, but Viktor hates being told what to do. He's doing this for his own fun, and he wants everyone to know it.*

Yuuri shifts a little uncomfortably. Two years ago, this particular short program had become fuel for his sexual fantasies for months afterwards, and Viktor is no less alluring to an older Yuuri, who actually knows what it's like to have sex with him.

At that thought, Yuuri sits up a little with shock. *Shit, I'm a virgin again. Is that even possible?* Physically, maybe -- but not mentally, not in experience. He lost that not long after Beijing. Viktor had been rather thorough, too, teaching Yuuri through lips and hands what porn and fantasy had been unable to give him. Skating to Eros had been nothing compared to sex with Viktor, and Yuuri realizes he misses it.

He misses the intimacy more than anything. Viktor had been his partner, his companion, and they had lived together for months, settling into each other's habits without a backwards glance. Yuuri still finds himself reaching for a hand that isn't there; he still turns onto his side in bed, hoping for Viktor to wrap his arm around him to ward off the cold.

He shakes his head and keeps watching, ignoring his own discomfort. Viktor moves beautifully to the music, swaying his hips with the heavy beat and giving the audience dark, heated stares. He knows he is attractive and that every single person's attention is on him, and every movement is meant to entice.

Viktor had been just as erotic during sex, especially so to Yuuri who had very little experience compared to him. Dancing with a pole and drunken sloppy makeouts had not made him an expert at sex before he met Viktor, and truly, they had only been together a few times before Yuuri had died.

The thought sobered him a little. Yuuri will never know that intimacy again. He can't imagine being with anybody else but Viktor; to be with anybody else, even just for sex, would betray Viktor's memory.

When Viktor finally finishes, winking at the camera and sending a painful jolt through Yuuri's heart, he sighs a little with longing. It hurts more to see him than Yuuri had imagined, and that more than anything cements Yuuri's decisions.

He doesn't pay much attention to the other skaters; he rarely does, when Viktor is present. He does watch when Chris' turn arrives, eyeing his quads with a critical eye. Christophe Giacometti has
always been a major contender for the podium, and Yuuri will have to keep an eye out for him. Jean-Jacques Leroy, too, and if he isn't mistaken, Otabek Altin will make the podium at Worlds next year.

"Chris is sexy, isn't he?" Phichit whispers to him, giggling, and Yuuri rolls his eyes and pushes him away.

He is supposed to say, "Not as sexy as Viktor." He doesn't.

"He has a boyfriend," Yuuri mumbles instead. "Masumi... whatever his last name is. That half-Japanese man who did ice dancing for Switzerland a couple years ago."

"Wow," Phichit says, his eyes widening a little. "They're together?"

"Mm. Masumi's his choreographer, too. I think they've been together for two years now." He picks up his phone and sends off a text to Christophe, with Phichit leaning over his shoulder.

**To: Christophe Giacometti**
*Watching GPF. Nice routine this year. Tell Masumi I say hi*

"You were rivals with him in juniors, right?" Phichit asks, as Chris finishes his program and waves at the camera, his green eyes twinkling with contentment.

Yuuri considers it. "Sort of. I never beat him, if that's what you're asking, but we got along well enough. He's the one who talked me into joining that pole dancing class."

"Ooh, scandalous. I'd love to meet him. I bet he's a riot at parties," Phichit says with a laugh. Yuuri resolutely refuses to comment on that; he still doesn't know exactly what happened at the Sochi banquet, and he is glad for it.

"He'll be strong at Worlds," Yuuri considers, then reluctantly adds, "Viktor, too."

"I can beat both of them," JJ boasts from the couch, and Yuuri hides a groan. For the past two months, he has done his best to ignore Jean-Jacques Leroy, who is as arrogant as he will be in two years. Yuuri will be glad when he goes back to Canada after this year so that he can start college.

"Keep dreaming, Leroy," somebody snarks back, and Phichit and Yuuri descend into giggles with the rest of the room.

Viktor, of course, gets first place after the short programs end, but Chris is close behind him. Yuuri savors the repeated clip from Viktor's short program, guiltily thinking that he will have to find it online later. While Phichit grabs their coats, Yuuri pulls out his phone and finds a message from Chris.

**From: Christophe Giacometti**
*Thanks love  ♡ Masumi says hi. Did my program make you feel good? ;)*

"Shameless flirt," Yuuri mutters, a small smile touching his lips. He's glad that Chris never changes.

**To: Christophe Giacometti**
*Sure, keep thinking that*

**From: Christophe Giacometti**
*I bet not as good as Viktor's did though ;)*
To: Christophe Giacometti

Shut up!

Yuuri puts the phone away, his face turning red. He will always be affected by Viktor, it seems, and Chris had figured out his worship of Viktor years ago. It's not like Yuuri really did anything to hide it, but Chris had honed in on that particular part of him like a moth to the light. The fact that Chris tends to send him some of the selfies he takes with Viktor, the ones that never see Instagram, is part of the reason Yuuri lets him get away with the teasing.

Something cold touches the back of his mind. Yuuri shouldn't be saving pictures or videos of Viktor anymore. He's not his Viktor.

"Alright?" Phichit asks, holding out Yuuri's coat. Yuuri nods and pulls it on, determined not to think about Viktor any longer.

When Chris texts him a picture of Viktor at a bar, laughing as he tips his head back, Yuuri can't stop himself from saving it.

~*~

For the entire flight to Japan, Yuuri struggles not to work himself into a panic, his headphones firmly in his ears while Celestino snores in the seat next to him. Not even his most soothing playlist can take the edge off his anxiety. Sleeping is useless as well, because every time Yuuri closes his eyes, he finds himself thinking of all the ways he could destroy his programs.

All he can think about is failing and missing his opportunity to get into Worlds and the GPF. He has to reach that goal, or else everything he has been working toward will be meaningless.

Japan's Nationals competition always takes place in Tokyo. When Yuuri was in juniors, Minako-sensei escorted him as his official coach, and she still takes the time to come cheer him on at every local competition, plus the majority of the international ones, too. Yuuri unfreezes his face a little when he sees Minako-sensei waiting at the baggage claim, smiling widely.

"Yuuri," Minako-sensei croons, taking his hand and spinning him around. "Look at you! Hiroko-chan is so happy you're coming home to visit!" She gives him a piercing look, as if trying to see his intentions, and Yuuri shifts uncomfortably. Of all the people who know him, Minako-sensei is the most likely to sense the change in him. He stares back at her until Celestino distracts them both.

"Ms. Okugawa! It's nice to see you," Celestino booms, and Yuuri dutifully follows them to gather his bags, sighing a little as Celestino distracts Minako-sensei from her interest in him.

He feels her attention throughout the day, though. Maybe his mother has gushed a little too much about his messages recently, or maybe she knows him too well. He wonders what he could possibly tell her. Minako-sensei is well traveled, but she isn't nearly as fascinated by the supernatural as Phichit is, nor is she particularly religious, so would she even believe him? She might try to make him attend therapy, or she might tell Celestino.

Yuuri broods. Then he realizes that he doesn't need to worry too much about it; he is still the same person as when he left Japan four years ago. Viktor had changed him for the better, made him happier, but Yuuri is still as much an anxious wreck as he was before. He doesn't behave too differently, even though everything inside him has changed. As for his family, he can say truthfully that he had a wake-up call about his behavior. Minako-sensei will believe him.

She does, though she waits until Celestino is well into his cups before pouncing on him.
"Something's different about you, Yuuri," Minako-sensei says, tapping a long nail against her cocktail glass. Yuuri meets her gaze briefly, then looks past her to the mural on the wall behind their table for a distraction. His calm expression belies the roiling nausea in his gut. "You haven't visited your family in four years. You've barely spoken to them outside of birthdays and New Years. What's changed?"

Yuuri traces the edge of the mural with his eyes, considering. "I had a dream that Vicchan died," he says quietly, and Minako-sensei sits up in surprise.

"Died? He's fine, though," she assures him, and Yuuri nods, his shoulders sinking slightly.

*He won't be in less than a year, and I can't take him back to Detroit,* Yuuri doesn't say.

Instead he shrugs. "It made me think about my family. I realize I've behaved badly, and... I want to make it up to them. I miss them."

Minako-sensei's expression softens, and she gives him a small smile, reaching over to wrap her arm around his neck. "You're a good boy, Yuuri. They're proud of you, you know."

Yuuri's eyes sting a little, but he manages a smile. "I know. Thank you, Minako-sensei."

Walking into a building full of Japanese skaters, several of whom have competed against him and won, is more than a little terrifying, but Yuuri manages to keep a placid expression as he follows Celestino to the sign-in table. If Yuuri has his way, he will beat all of them today. He has to, so that he can go to Worlds and the GPF.

Yuuri spots Minami Kenjirou, though he is still in juniors, and his enthralled stare is hot on Yuuri's back as he walks through the stadium. Yuuri unbends from his tension enough to give Minami a small smile, which makes the boy's face light up with delight.

Yuuri still doesn't believe he has fans, sometimes.

Despite every intention otherwise, Yuuri still draws first. He thinks he might be cursed.

Warm-up is miserable. Yuuri can't stop worrying, and the one time he tries a jump, he completely fails it. He can feel Celestino watching him worriedly. Yuuri is sure that both he and Minako-sensei have been waiting for Yuuri to fall apart mentally. Two years ago, he definitely would have, but the last thing Yuuri needs is to have a mental breakdown in the middle of an important competition, not when so much rides on his determination. Yuuri can fall apart later, when he is alone in his hotel room.

Steel slides into his heart. If Yuuri does not do well, then he will never skate against Viktor. That, he simply cannot accept. With great effort, enough that it strains him, Yuuri locks away his worries, instead picturing Viktor's face when Yuuri started crying in the parking garage at Beijing. If Viktor were here, he would be trying to calm Yuuri down, and Yuuri wants to be calm enough that he wouldn't need Viktor right now -- because he doesn't have him anymore.

When at last Yuuri takes his place on the ice, his eyes closed with his head and arms tucked close to his body, he thinks of his death. Dragged into the past with no idea how it happened, nor any way to return to the life he left behind -- a cursed existence.

His anxiety will always stay with him, an unfortunate life partner that Yuuri will never be able to leave behind. Once, Viktor had been able to deal with it, having refused to see for months that Yuuri was a wreck. Yuuri's lips twitch slightly, his mien softening, and some of the pain inside him seeps away.
You don't have to say anything. Just stay by my side and believe in me.

Viktor isn't here to believe in him anymore. Yuuri has to believe in himself without Viktor's support.

The music for his short program begins, a rendition of *Swan Lake* Op. 20, Act II: 12, and Yuuri starts to skate. No longer is the story about Odette and her curse, but about Yuuri and his curse, of being dragged back in time to a world that is cold and empty to him, devoid of understanding or acceptance. His friends, his family, his fellow skaters -- none of them will ever be able to understand what Yuuri has lost. Phichit is the only person who comes close, but Yuuri has still kept so much from him, unable to open his heart and let in anything other than sharp, miserable pain.

He wants to be free of it. He wants to go home to Viktor. He wants to live again, but he is trapped in this time, with no way forward except to live differently, which means he will never have the same future.

By the time Yuuri looks up, drawing himself out of his misery, he is reaching out for a familiar hand -- but Viktor is not there, and Yuuri will never reach him.

His short program grants him a new personal best and sets him near the top of the competition. As he listens to Celestino's feedback, Yuuri realizes that he barely missed any jumps, which is a relief. Celestino is pleasantly surprised, and Minako-sensei is ecstatic when she reaches them afterward. Yuuri just pastes on a smile, numb after his performance.

He swears he will not cry in public again.

Somehow, Yuuri manages to hold himself together through the rest of the day after his short program, but he has a minor breakdown when he gets back to the hotel. Celestino sees his face crumple and pats his shoulder consolingly, then distracts Minako-sensei with an invitation to drinks, giving Yuuri some space to be alone with his thoughts.

Skating reminds him so much of Viktor. Even here in his homeland, Yuuri cannot escape him; and he just knows that when he goes home, he will take one look at the old banquet room where Viktor slept and start crying. Hasetsu is filled with memories of Viktor, of an eternal summer of bliss and new beginnings, and Yuuri is sure he will see Viktor wherever he looks.

The bittersweet feeling that wells up in his throat makes him ache. He needs to let go of this -- but Yuuri knows in his heart that he can never let go of Viktor. They had been together for a year, and Yuuri has looked up to him since he was a child. Viktor has shaped nearly every part of his life by now.

He goes to bed with a heavy heart, dreaming of reaching out for a hand that disappears beyond the water's surface. He wakes up with damp eyes, and as he rubs the tear stains off his cheeks, Yuuri gives in and opens his folder of Viktor pictures.

He taps on the most recent gift from Christophe -- a picture of Viktor leaning against a balcony looking over Paris, a small smile on his handsome face. Yuuri strokes one finger down the edge of Viktor's cheek on the screen, wishing he had something from the future other than his memories. He wants the picture of Viktor at the beach in Hasetsu, lifting Makkachin up as she wags and sprays water all over him. That picture is his favorite in the world, because of the bright happiness in Viktor's smile.

Yuuri smiles a little and closes the picture app, then forces himself out of bed. He can't sit here wallowing in memories. He has a competition to win.
And somehow, miraculously, amazingly -- Yuuri wins. The gold medal sits on Yuuri's chest hours later, and Celestino and Minako-sensei keep taking pictures and excitedly talking about Yuuri's free skate. Yuuri has already sent a selfie to Phichit as well as posted it on Instagram, his one concession for not bringing Phichit with him.

It has a hundred likes by the time Yuuri leaves the arena. When he gets to Hasetsu, it will have thousands.

"I'm so proud of you," Minako-sensei cries to him, after they accompany Celestino to the airport and see him off. Yuuri is still a little proud of himself, too; he had hoped, but he hadn't actually expected to win gold.

He still isn't sure how he did it. Somehow, Yuuri has turned his anxiety into a weapon, using it to push himself ever harder. It doesn't work as a shield, not against his own misery, but it fuels him just the same, propelling him forward into a future unknown.

He is now the top skater in Japan, and it's more than a little daunting.

~*~

When Yuuri calls out tadaima, his mother nearly trips in her haste to reach him, beaming smile on her face. Yuuri can't help but smile at the sight of her, setting down his bags and toeing off his shoes before climbing up to give her a hug.

"Oh," Hiroko says, before hugging him back tightly. "Welcome home, Yuuri!"

Yuuri lets go of his mother and opens his mouth to reply, when he hears the sound of skittering nails from down the hall, followed by high pitched yipping. He gasps and turns to see Vicchan flying down the hall, barking excitedly and running straight to Yuuri.

"Vicchan," Yuuri sobs, reaching out to catch Vicchan as he leaps up, accepting the puppy kisses with a wet laugh. Vicchan squirms to get as close to him as possible, whining and barking and licking until Yuuri just hugs him tightly, overwhelmed. He hasn't seen Vicchan in so long, and the guilt wells up, threatening to choke him. How could he leave Vicchan alone for so long? It had always been Yuuri's greatest regret, not going home to see Vicchan before he died, and now to hold him, to see him alive...

"I love you so much," Yuuri whispers into Vicchan's curls, laughing when Vicchan starts licking away his tears. "I'd take you back to Detroit with me if I could. You're such a good puppy, such a good Vicchan." I'm so sorry, he can't say, because the words stick to his throat, hot and heavy and miserable. I'm sorry I left you here. I'm sorry I didn't come back sooner.

He notices that his mother and Minako-sensei have retreated to the dining room, and Yuuri stands up to follow, wiping his face and shifting Vicchan in his arms.

"Let's go say hi to everyone," he tells Vicchan, who barks happily and licks at his chin.

A party awaits him. Mari grins at him and ruffles his hair, telling him she knew he could do it. The locals all welcome him with a toast, and Minako-sensei gets roaring drunk, shouting to everyone who will listen that her Yuuri won a gold medal. Yuuko and Nishigori show up with the triplets for a little while, and isn't that a shock, seeing the girls so small? They are already his fans, though, and they demand to take pictures with him, marveling over the gold medal that still hangs around Yuuri's neck.

All the while Vicchan never leaves him, taking up residence in Yuuri's lap and basking in his
Yuuri can't stop petting him, taking bits of fish and meat from the table and feeding them to Vicchan, patting his plump belly with a smile.

He's so happy to be home. Dying and losing Viktor nearly destroyed him, and Yuuri is still having nightmares about his own death, about the life he will not live. It has taken him months to process what happened, and Yuuri still isn't over it. He doesn't think he will ever heal from what happened.

Seeing Vicchan again, though, holding him and cuddling him... this is one thing that makes his ordeal a little easier to handle. This is one silver lining out of everything else that happened to him.

When the party has wound down and most everyone has left or gone to bed, Yuuri is still sitting in the same spot, absently scratching Vicchan's ears while he snoozes, snuggled against Yuuri's belly. His father has retired upstairs, but his mother comes over to sit beside him with a sigh, reaching up to untie her apron and looking over at him with a warm smile.

"That was a good party," Hiroko says, and Yuuri nods, his eyes on Vicchan. He is thinking of Vicchan's death in less than a year, and he cannot bear the thought of it again, when Vicchan is alive and resting against him.

"Mom... Vicchan is doing okay, right? He's still eating well and everything?"

Hiroko blinks a few times, tilting her head. "Of course. Why, does he seem different?"

Yuuri wets his lips a little. Twisting the truth like this never felt worse, but he is determined. "I didn't tell you before, but... I had a dream about Vicchan dying, and it really upset me. Since he's getting older, I wonder... maybe the vet should do some blood work more often? Just to check for anything. His checkups are regular, right?"

Hiroko considers this for a moment. "We could do that. He's due for his shots soon, anyway. I'll have a talk with the vet."

Yuuri nods, accepting the promise. He doesn't know if they can catch the infection early, but he wants to believe that they can save Vicchan. "Thanks."

"I'm glad you came home, Yuuri," Hiroko tells him quietly. She glances at his medal, and her smile widens with pride. Yuuri puts his guilt aside for a little while and returns the smile, then gently takes the medal off and holds it out to her.

"It's taken me four years, but I finally brought you a gold medal. The next one will be for Japan," Yuuri promises, and Hiroko takes the medal to admire it for a few minutes.

She sets it down on the table gently, her gaze returning to his face, and Yuuri belatedly realizes that Minako-sensei isn't the only person who knows him too well.

"Something happened, didn't it?" his mother asks quietly, and Yuuri's face crumples a little. Lying to Minako-sensei is one thing, but Yuuri can't lie to his mother. Not about this. He can't tell her the truth, either... not the whole truth, anyway.

"I fell in love with someone. He made me happy," Yuuri finally whispers after the silence goes on a little too long, swallowing against the knot in his throat. *He liked to sit in this spot and help you fold towels. You adored him.* "I can't be with him anymore, though. Losing him... it made me think about all of the people in my life I've taken for granted. You and dad and Mari. Minako-sensei. Yuu-chan and Nishigori. Vicchan, too." He rubs his fingers behind Vicchan's ear, smiling sadly when Vicchan snuffles into his shirt.
"Oh, Yuuri," Hiroko whispers, drawing him close for a hug. Yuuri hides his face in her shoulder, soaking in her love and hating himself for being such a bad son before. He will do better this time.

Hiroko sends him off to bed with a gentle nudge, and Yuuri climbs the stairs slowly, Vicchan following at his heels. He pauses at the end of the hallway, his gaze going to the closed banquet room doors, where Viktor had slept for months. He knows it will be full of junk, boxes of old pottery sets and cleaning supplies, and not Viktor's bed or his pictures or his couch.

They had moved everything to St. Petersburg, anyway.

Just as he expected, tears begin to trickle down his cheeks, but Yuuri doesn't bother wiping them away. He wants to hold onto this feeling for a little while, love swelling in his chest, echoed by desolation.

Yuuri cannot resist trailing his fingers along the edge of the door, imagining opening it and seeing Viktor in bed, reading with Makkachin. He imagines sitting down beside him and putting Vicchan on top of Viktor's book. Viktor would react with delight and cuddle Vicchan immediately. He would have loved Vicchan.

Vicchan butts his head against Yuuri's leg, and Yuuri gives in and scoops him up, cuddling him close. "He's gone, Vicchan," he whispers, and the melancholy ache stays with him through his dreams.

~*~

Seeing Vicchan and his family heals some of the raw pain that Yuuri has carried for months. He goes back to Detroit with a lighter heart, taking packages of sweets and food to introduce to Phichit, as well as promises from his mother that she will keep an eye on Vicchan for any sign of illness.

Life goes on. Yuuri trains for hours, refining his programs and thinking about the future. If he gets seeded for the GPF again like he intends, he will need a better program than what he performed in his other future. He considers his quads; JJ can do the lutz, and both Seung-gil Lee and Emil Nikola will do the loop one day in the future. He thinks about the mythical quad axel, then shakes all the quads from his mind. Something to worry about for next season.

Yuuri goes to Four Continents, but he doesn't place. Instead, he loses silver to JJ's more difficult program, while a skater from China takes gold. Yuuri ekes out a spot just under the bronze winner, after flubbing two of his jumps in his free skate, which makes him work twice as hard when he gets home.

Finally, Worlds approaches. This year it is in Boston, which is a ten hour drive from Detroit -- or a two hour flight, which Celestino eventually chooses. Phichit is attending Worlds, which is a relief to Yuuri -- he doesn't think he could handle traveling with only Celestino and JJ. The Canadian skater has been irritating him lately, keeping a close eye on him during practice and taunting him at times when Celestino is out of earshot. Yuuri has seen JJ act like this before, but at Yurio, and he wonders if JJ sees him as a rival.

He had better. It's not going to be JJ on the podium with Viktor, after all.

The night before they travel to Boston, Yuuri has a long dream, and it stays on his mind throughout the entire competition.

~*~

Yuuri opens his eyes to find himself in a large room filled with rows and rows of pews, all facing a
small empty altar. His clothes are wet and cold, and the edges of the room are dark, the light breaking through the air oddly, as if shining through water.

The room is empty of people, but there lingers a heavy scent of flowers, lilies and hydrangeas. It reminds him a little of a church, the kind he would like to get married in, though the pews are decorated with black shawls. Yuuri looks around but sees nothing, no one that can tell him where he is -- but then his eyes catch on a figure sitting at the front of the room.

The silver hair is a shock to his system. Viktor is dressed in all black, and he has his head bowed, his lips pressed tightly to his hands. When Yuuri walks down the aisle, he realizes that Viktor is crying, harder tears than the ones Yuuri caught with his fingers in Barcelona.

"Viktor," Yuuri whispers. Viktor doesn't look up.

"I can't do this without you, Yuuri," Viktor says, the words muffled by his hands. Another shock runs through Yuuri. He steps closer and tries to peer into Viktor's face, but Viktor has his eyes closed, and he doesn't seem to sense Yuuri at all.

"I'm trying. I really am. It's so hard, though. It was never supposed to be like this," Viktor whispers, a sob catching in his throat. "We were supposed to live together forever. You weren't supposed to leave me."

Yuuri's heart clenches. This is his Viktor -- he is certain of it. Slowly, he kneels down before Viktor, wanting to reach out and hold him, but something tells him that Viktor would not be able to feel him.

Viktors breathes in deeply. "But I'll keep trying," he says softly, opening his eyes slightly. The tears have filled his vision, and Yuuri can't resist reaching up to brush his cold fingers over the redness under Viktor's eyes. Warm tears spill over his fingertips, and Yuuri gently wipes them away, though Viktor doesn't seem to feel his touch for a moment. Then he closes his eyes and leans against Yuuri's hands, making him hold his breath.

"I'll look after Yurio and Makkachin. I'll keep going. I'll win gold for you, and then... and then I'll retire and try to live in a world without you. I don't know if I can... but I'll try."

Viktor opens his eyes, and a smile touches his lips. "I love you so much, Yuuri."

"I love you too, Viktor," Yuuri says quietly. He is crying, too, and he wants badly to take Viktor into his arms, to soothe his pain. "I'm so sorry I left you. I'm sorry! I wanted to spend the rest of my life with you, too." He inhales tightly, bowing his head to rest on Viktor's knee, a tiny bit of Viktor's warmth seeping through the black slacks. "I miss you so much. I want to come home."

"Yuuri," Viktor whispers, and Yuuri lifts his head to find Viktor staring at him, eyes wide. Viktor lifts a shaking hand, and Yuuri feels his touch on his cheek, seconds before Viktor falls off the chair and throws his arms around him, sobbing.

"It's you, it's really you," Viktor says, over and over, and Yuuri buries his face in Viktor's shoulder. They sit like that for a long time, just holding onto each other, and somehow, Yuuri knows it cannot last. This room is a liminal space where they can meet each other, but only for a little while.

He tightens his arms around Viktor, not wanting to let go.

"You're dead," Viktor whispers into his hair. "I know this isn't real. They pulled your body out of the Neva."
"Not really," Yuuri whispers back, before he can stop himself. Viktor lurches back and grabs his shoulders, staring into his face with a manic energy that makes Yuuri flinch.

"You're alive? You're okay? Where are you, Yuuri? I'll find you, I'll do whatever it takes, I'll bring you home even if I have to make a deal with the devil --"

Yuuri gently reaches up to take Viktor's hands, shaking his head slowly. "You can't find me, Viktor. It's not a place -- it's a time. I... I went back. To the past, to a past where we didn't know each other." His eyes well over with tears again. "I woke up in Detroit, and I tried calling you. You didn't know me. You... the Viktor here, he's not you. I can't come home to you, I don't know how to travel through time." He smiles tremulously, reaching up to stroke Viktor's limp hair away from his face. "I'm so sorry. I don't think I can come back. Not... not if I'm dead."

"Time travel," Viktor repeats blankly. Then he seizes Yuuri's hands again, kissing his fingers, then leaning over to kiss him. "Then you'll come back to me eventually. The future will happen again. I'll keep you safe, I won't let you die like you did."

Yuuri shakes his head, clutching Viktor's hands tightly. "No, Viktor, I can't. How can I? I've already changed the past. I've done things that never happened for me before. It won't happen the same way, meeting you, loving you --"

"I don't care," Viktor says fiercely. "I'll love you no matter what happens. Find me, Yuuri. Tell me everything --"

"But it's not you!" Yuuri cries, and that shuts Viktor up. "He's not you. He doesn't know me, he doesn't remember me. What should I do, dance with him at the banquet again? Take him to Hasetsu and try to recreate our life together? I can't do that, Viktor. I can't pretend with him, I can't pretend that he's you. He's not! He'll never be you!"

For a long moment, Viktor is silent, before he gently brings Yuuri's hand up and kisses his ring. "But he is me, Yuuri. Another me, maybe, but it's still me, and you're still you. We're meant for each other."

Yuuri's breath catches on a sob, and he wraps his arms around Viktor tightly. He thinks of staying here forever, lingering in Viktor's life as a ghost, but he knows he cannot. He can feel it, now; the cold of the Neva, clinging to him, threatening to drag him back into darkness if he stays here. He doesn't want to go back to that past that is empty of Viktor, but he cannot stay in a place where he is dead, either.

"How can I fall in love with someone who doesn't remember what we have? He's not my coach. He didn't kiss me at Beijing. He didn't sit with me at the beach and tell me I'm not weak. He's not..."

Viktor gently pushes Yuuri back and takes his face in his hands, looking into his eyes. The tears are gone, replaced by familiar determination, and the fierce blue of his eyes takes over Yuuri's vision, silencing him. "Then you can make different memories. I will still love you, Yuuri. A thousand lifetimes, a thousand repeats, and I will fall in love with you every time." He finally smiles, and it looks sharp, brittle with the edge of grief. "Trust me."

Yuuri doesn't know if he can. "What if... what if he doesn't become you? What if you're still alone here?" A separate future, one he can't ever reach -- he can't bear leaving Viktor alone.

Viktor shakes his head, then leans up to press a soft kiss to Yuuri's forehead. "But you'll be alive, and you'll be with me. If I know that, then I'll be okay. Even if I can't meet you again, at least another me will. And you'll be safe. You'll be alive. That's more important than anything else,
Yuuri.

Yuuri closes his eyes against the tears. "I miss you. It hurts so much, Viktor, I keep having dreams about drowning --" His voice breaks. He is trembling hard, now, the cold overbearing, and he can hear the water rushing in his ears.

"Oh, Yuuri." Viktor wraps him up in his arms again, and now Yuuri can feel his warmth, easing away the cold that is gripping his entire being. He closes his eyes and relaxes into Viktor's arms, until the last of the shivers fade away. The Neva is far away, now. Viktor will be far away, too -- and that hurts worse than his death.

All too soon, he feels a strange pull, and he burrows tighter into Viktor's arms. "No, I don't want to leave," he begs, not knowing who or what might be listening, but the sensation tugs harder.

He is going back.

"I guess you can't stay here forever," Viktor says softly, and the sadness in his voice is a physical weight against Yuuri's heart, dragging him down into desolation. "It'll be okay, Yuuri. I'll find you again, and I'll protect you. Trust in me."

"Viktor," Yuuri says helplessly, and he leans up to give Viktor one last kiss. One last promise. Viktor kisses him back desperately, and though they cling to each other, Yuuri knows he has to leave.

"I love you," he says, before everything fades away to white.

~*~

The dream stays with him all through the flight to Boston. They go to the airport at the crack of dawn, and Yuuri retreats into himself, to hide the bags under his eyes and the ache in his heart.

No one really questions his quiet mood; Yuuri is usually like this before competitions, though typically wrought with panic and anxiety, which is still true, and he uses that assumption as a shield. JJ spends most of the trip talking to Shasta Nguyen and Amelia Hart, and Phichit reads a book on his phone. Yuuri slouches in his seat and stares out the plane window with his headphones in, listening to Adam Lambert and Darren Hayes and Mumford & Sons until the only feeling inside him is halcyon and soft.

He left Viktor alone. He knows without a doubt that the dream was real, just as he knows that his memories are real. Somewhere in the future, Viktor is crying, but when Yuuri had left him, there had been peace in Viktor's mien, acceptance that Yuuri doesn't think he would have reached on his own.

At least he gave Viktor that. Otherwise, Yuuri wouldn't be able to live with himself.

By the time they reach Boston, Yuuri has come to peace with the dream. He doesn't know if he can do as Viktor asks. He still cannot imagine being with Viktor as he is now, a Viktor who never shared Hasetsu and the GPF with him. His decisions come back to him; he will do his best to make Viktor happy, no matter what happens between them. Even if Viktor never falls in love with him again, Yuuri will be whatever Viktor wants him to be, so long as he never has to see Viktor cry again.

After a while, JJ starts wearing on his nerves. He is either excitedly talking about his choice for college in Toronto, prattling about his parents choosing to coach him for next season (while ignoring Celestino's quiet huffs about that) or boasting about the gold medal he wants to take home
from Worlds. Yuuri does his best to drown him out with his music. Two hours later, Yuuri tucks his headphones away and stumbles off the plane, following the rest of his rinkmates to baggage claim with a heavy sigh.

He just wants to go to the hotel and sleep. He's also starving, which is never good, because it makes Yuuri irritable.

Checking in and getting badges takes a little longer than normal, because there is a complication with Phichit's badge. Celestino leaves Yuuri and the others sitting in the lobby, and for a while, there is silence between them. Amelia and Shasta have their heads bowed over a video, and JJ is watching the skaters arriving, likely scoping out the competition. Yuuri sits curled up in a chair, flipping through his Instagram.

Viktor has posted a picture of the Boston cityscape from his hotel room.

v-nikiforov: Ready to meet me, Boston? #worldscompetition #figureskating #hereiam!

Yuuri lingers on his name, then scrolls past it. Phichit and JJ have already updated their Instagrams, and Yuuri probably should, too; maybe when he doesn't feel like a hobgoblin. With a sigh, he sits up and rubs the back of his neck, looking past JJ to see if Celestino and Phichit are back yet.

"Alas, they're not done yet," JJ says with an elaborate sigh. "Pity, isn't it? It's nice to see everyone arriving, though."

Yuuri debates not answering. JJ will probably try to be annoying if he doesn't. "It's always like this the first day," he finally says. Small talk, boring enough that JJ will hopefully stop bothering him.

JJ laughs. "And it will only get busier! Look at all of them, Yuuri. Waiting for their new king, no doubt."

Oh, no, here he goes again. JJ has been going on for a while about how the ice skating world needs a new king, as if Viktor Nikiforov could ever be dethroned. Yuuri knows Viktor's future, and it does not involve losing to JJ, of all people.

He has noticed that JJ has a habit of talking down to people, not unlike his future self. His insults are usually disguised as compliments, but Yuuri perfected the art of lying to one's face years ago, and he knows how to spot a nasty comment. JJ usually limits his smiling disparagement for Yuuri and his rinkmates, but when he starts on Viktor...

"Can you just stop for one minute?" Yuuri says without thinking, and after a long moment, JJ turns to stare at him, his smile gone. Amelia and Shasta look up at them, blinking in surprise.

"Run that by me again?" JJ asks, his voice as pleasant as can be. Yuuri looks up and glares back, his temper stretched thin by his exhausting night and the early flight. He has no patience for JJ's arrogance. Slowly he stands, stretching his back with a faint crack, and turns to face JJ.

"Stop it. For one whole minute, JJ. You've been harping about Viktor for hours, and I'm sick of it."

JJ scoffs. "Oh, right, you're his fan. He's never going to look at you, you know."

Yuuri lets the insult slide off him. Yurio has told him far worse. "First of all, there is no way that you will beat Viktor Nikiforov. That is a fact. He's the best in the entire skating world. Second of all, before you worry about beating Viktor, you should worry about me." He narrows his eyes, his competitive spirit rising up. He usually doesn't get involved with tiffs like this -- but he is irate, and
JJ is being annoying.

JJ steps back, surprised by Yuuri's fervor, then laughs loudly and mockingly. "You? Why should I worry about someone like you? Twenty-two and you've never even medaled internationally. Someone like you could never hope to reach the podium."

In two years, JJ will not be this rude. He will be charming and abrasive, but he won't tell skaters to their faces that they will fail. Yuuri snorts, unimpressed by JJ's view of him, though it stings a little. He gives JJ a flat look. "Then why have you been watching my practices so closely, hm? Worried?"

JJ has nothing to say to that. Yuuri holds his stare, then turns around to see if Phichit or Celestino have returned, thinking that if they haven't, he can try to find a vending machine or something to escape JJ's attention.

He stops short, though, when his eyes meet blue. His heart drops to his stomach.

Viktor Nikiforov is staring at him from a few feet away. He is standing with the rest of the Russian contingent, though only Viktor is focused on him. JJ makes a noise behind him, and Yuuri wildly wonders if Viktor overheard the argument. Quickly he averts his gaze, his heart beating fast.

Seeing Viktor hurts. He looks younger than the Viktor in his memories, and seeing him so soon after his dream last night rips open the raw wound that Yuuri nursed for the whole trip. He is achingly beautiful, his hair cut a little shorter than his normal style, and Yuuri wants more than anything to run into his arms, forget about his dream, and just let Viktor's warmth soothe away his pain.

He can't, though, because Viktor doesn't know him.

Viktor says nothing, still watching Yuuri curiously. After a moment, he glances beyond him, and a second later Yuuri feels a heavy arm land on his shoulders. "Viktor Nikiforov!" JJ says loudly, drawing attention from around the room. "We were just talking about you --"

Oh, no. He is not doing this. "Stop," Yuuri says, before he slips out from under JJ's arm and steps away from him, fixing him with a glare. "I'm going to find Celestino." He walks away without waiting for a reply, using his speed to cross the room in moments. He spots Phichit coming toward him and nearly melts in relief, going to meet his friend. He doesn't care what JJ does or says to Viktor, and Viktor will probably ignore him, anyway.

At least, Yuuri hopes so.

To his relief, JJ shows up with the girls a moment later, eyeing Yuuri with something like irritation. Yuuri ignores him and takes his badge from Celestino, then leans over Phichit's shoulder to look at the schedule.

The ISU always sets up two days of practice before the actual competition begins on Wednesday. The men's short programs are taking place on Wednesday. Then Thursday will be another practice day, with Friday the main event for the men's finalists. Sunday will be the exhibition skate and the banquet.

Yuuri will cram in as much practice as he can, just as Phichit will. They also have meetings and interviews, and Yuuri doesn't look forward to those. His popularity in Japan has risen exponentially after winning at Nationals, and he expects Morooka Hisashi to hunt him down and grill him within an inch of his life about his sudden increase in ability.
He sighs heavily, then straightens with determination. He didn't come all this way to fall apart now.

"Why is JJ staring at you like you murdered his skates?" Phichit whispers to him, peeking over his shoulder.

"I'll tell you later," Yuuri whispers back, knowing that JJ is staring at the back of his head. He isn't sure what he has done this time to get JJ's attention so quickly; in the other future, JJ usually ignored him whenever they saw each other, both during their training in Detroit and after.

As Yuuri follows the rest of his team out of the room, he feels eyes on the back of his head and hesitates by the door, turning slightly to see who might be watching him.

Viktor is staring at him again. Yuuri meets his gaze briefly, then disappears out the door.

~*~

"I can't believe he said that to you," fumes Phichit the next day, frowning at JJ from across the ice. The three of them are at practice, and luckily enough (or unluckily for Yuuri, who is still stuck with JJ) they were put in the first group together. Yuuri shrugs, turning backwards on his heel and wondering if he could get away with a quad while Celestino isn't looking. He was warned off them for today, which irritates him.

"JJ is a brat, you know this," Yuuri says with a sigh. On the other side of the rink, JJ raises his head as if sensing that he is the topic of their conversation. Thankfully, JJ hadn't said another word to him for all of yesterday.

"It's not right, though!"

Yuuri doesn't bother telling him that it doesn't matter. JJ will do whatever JJ wants to do, and there is little Yuuri can say to convince him otherwise. The insults mean nothing to him; Yurio once called him twelve variants of 'fatso' without taking a breath, each worse than the last. Yuuri is no stranger to the types of comments one gets on the internet, either.

For a moment he considers Yurio and his insults, which never once managed to get under Yuuri's skin. He once walked around a museum with Yurio, and every moment was filled with insults, disparagement, and diatribes about how Yurio was better than him and that he would wipe both Viktor and Yuuri off the map of the skating world.

Yuuri's lips twitch slightly. Yurio's insults never bothered him, not even when the younger boy would start in on Viktor and call him rude names. Most of the time, he would insult Viktor's age, his hair, his forgetfulness -- he called Viktor an idiot all the time. Yet none of it had bothered Yuuri, because he had seen through Yurio's bravado with ease.

He misses Yurio. He wonders how he is doing in Russia.

When JJ insults him, though, Yuuri can't help but be irritated. Therein lies the difference -- JJ is not Yurio, nor is he Yuuri's friend. He doesn't have any respect for Yuuri, and he truly thinks himself better than everyone around him. Yurio might have put on a strong mask, but he was doubtful of himself, and he never stopped admiring Viktor or Yuuri despite his intention to beat both their records.

It infuriates Yuuri when JJ starts mocking Viktor. Nothing has ever made him angry faster.

It's his own fault for losing his temper at JJ. He's a little better today, but that ugly feeling is
simmering under his ribs, ready to lash out if JJ so much as says Viktor's name. He has to hold onto his patience, lest he actually lose his temper and cause a scene much larger than yesterday's little argument.

In front of Viktor, no less.

**Viktor.** Yuuri still can't believe that Viktor had been standing there. Listening, likely overhearing that Yuuri is his *fan*, hearing Yuuri defend him to a younger skater. Just the memory of him brings his humiliation back to the forefront of his mind, and Yuuri sighs heavily. He wants to crawl in a hole and forget that any of this ever happened.

He wonders what time Viktor is practicing. He is determined not to see him for the rest of the competition, any more than he can help.

"Uh oh, Ciao Ciao wants to talk to me," Phichit says in trepidation, and Yuuri smiles a little, watching him skate over to their coach. He focuses on his practice, moving through the second part of his short program. It uses his grace and step sequences to entice the audience, and Yuuri has to admit he once found it a little conventional. Now he throws himself into the art of it, thinking of Viktor telling him, "*Skate like you are the most beautiful person on the ice.*"

He wishes Viktor would look at him like that again.

He needs to stop thinking about Viktor -- yet all Yuuri can think about is the way Viktor watched him yesterday. After his glimpse into his original future, the thought of Viktor paying extra attention to him sends shivers down his spine, a chill reminiscent of the Neva. He wonders, a little hysterically, if Viktor had a similar dream -- if Yuuri's Viktor reached out to him, to guide him to Yuuri.

**Absolutely not, Viktor!**

It's impossible, anyway.

"Too bad Celestino won't let you do quads today," sings JJ as he passes Yuuri, and Yuuri drags himself out of his thoughts to give him a blank stare.

"You're not allowed to do them, either," Yuuri returns evenly, then turns his back on JJ and focuses on his program. A quad toe loop coming up, which means Yuuri has to make it a triple today.

"I could do them if I wanted. He only keeps you from doing them because you'll mess them up," JJ says with an uncaring shrug, and the words grate on Yuuri's nerves. He can ignore JJ, and the Canadian man will eventually go away, and Yuuri will be able to escape practice with only a small headache, instead of the migraine that is threatening to bloom behind his temple.

He doesn't bother replying. This seems to displease JJ, who switches to a different track. "I think it's amazing that you can even do the salchow now, you know," JJ says, a little louder than he should, twisting to skate beside Yuuri.

Yuuri throws a desperate look over at Celestino, but his back is turned as he talks to Phichit, who hasn't noticed his dilemma either. "Can we just practice?" he asks pointedly, and JJ laughs, with that same mocking edge from yesterday.

He really pissed JJ off. Yuuri is kind of amazed at himself for managing it -- JJ usually brushes off criticism, maintaining a constant belief that he can do no wrong, and he rarely acts spitefully to the other skaters despite his arrogance. Yuuri sighs again. "Look, JJ --"
"You know, it's too easy to learn these quads," JJ boasts. "I've already got the lutz down, and next is the flip. What about you? Oh, that's right. Just the salchow and the toe loop." He clicks his tongue, and Yuuri narrows his eyes, wondering where JJ is even going with this. "Only the best can make it to the top, Yuuri, and the best always know more than two quads."

Ah. That is probably JJ's goal, to tempt him into doing a quad and getting in trouble with Celestino. To Yuuri's dismay, it's close to working; he really wants JJ to shut up. "That's ridiculous. Most skaters can only do two quads, anyway."

"Mm, and none of them are guaranteed winners," JJ returns, meeting Yuuri's eyes. "You can try all you like on this week, but you only know two quads. It won't be enough for the judges." JJ sighs dramatically, and that's when Yuuri's temper snaps.

"I know three quads, thanks," Yuuri says before he can stop himself. Then he claps a hand over his mouth, shocked that he gave in to JJ's taunts, and glares at JJ before skating off to the other side of the rink.

Shit. He doesn't want anyone to know he can do the quad flip. He hasn't even shown Phichit, because as understanding as Phichit is, he will push Yuuri to announce it to the world. Yuuri wants to hold that ace up his sleeve for as long as possible. It was an amazing feeling, using that to surprise Viktor, and a small part of him wants to save it, in case events do fall together in the same way as his first future.

The quad flip had earned him his first kiss from Viktor. It's special to him in a way no other jump is.

His outburst seems to shut JJ up for a little while, because Yuuri finally gets to focus on practice; however, he's too agitated to do as well as he wants. By the time practice draws to close, Yuuri is wound more tightly than a spring, and all he wants to do is run away again.

Once again, JJ refuses to let him back out.

"Yuuri," JJ calls from across the ice. Yuuri squares his shoulders and turns to face JJ, who comes to a stop in front of him with a smooth glide. His smile is in place, but something is glittering in his eyes, a challenge. Yuuri takes a deep breath and waits, and JJ's smile widens. "Show me the third quad you can do. Or are you a liar?"

Yuuri bristles. "I'm not a liar. You know we're not supposed to do quads today. Are you trying to get me in trouble?"

"Who, me?" JJ raises his hands, adopting an innocent expression. "You could just tell me what it is."

Absolutely not. "No," Yuuri bites out, turning away. He hasn't done the quad since he came back in time. A moment of doubt strikes him; what if he cannot do it anymore? It's been months since he last made the jump, and that was in another life, when Yuuri was glowing under Viktor's guidance.

What if he can't do it?

JJ's next words set his teeth on edge. "Then I'll tell everyone you're a liar. Trying to put yourself at my level? You just don't have the skill."

His frayed temper snaps again, and Yuuri glares over his shoulder. "You want my third quad? Fine. But I'm throwing you under the bus if Celestino sees." He skates away to the emptiest part of the rink before he can see JJ's satisfied expression, thinking of the very end of Yuuri On Ice and
pulling that feeling into his heart, a temporary salve against the rage and anxiety burning in his chest.

He has to do this. He has to know if he can still land the quad flip.

He forces himself to slow down before he hurts himself, sliding into the final steps of his future free skate with ease. He meets JJ's eyes across the ice, and then he turns.

He lands the quad flip perfectly. The final spins are beautiful and familiar to his body, like sliding on a favorite sweater, and Yuuri gathers that feeling close around him, relishing in the warmth it evokes. This was his and Viktor's song -- and that flip is Yuuri's now, given to him by Viktor. He comes to a stop and lifts his hands, then points at JJ and glares.

"Gonna call me a liar now?" Yuuri calls out, his voice ringing across the ice, and that's when he realizes that the entire rink is staring at him.

Oh, shit.

Yuuri freezes in place, the attention shocking him. JJ is staring at him open-mouthed, stunned by his action, and everyone else is wide-eyed with amazement. Nobody else in the skating world can do a quad flip at this point except Viktor, and Yuuri winces, closing his eyes for a moment.

Damn his temper. He had not wanted his quad flip to be revealed like this.

"Yuuri Katsuki," Celestino booms, and Yuuri flinches again at the realization that he was caught. "Jean-Jacques. Both of you, to me."

Yuuri skates over to him silently, not looking at JJ again. Phichit is staring at him with wide eyes, and only Celestino's thunderous expression keeps him from asking every question on his mind.

Yuuri accepts the skate guards silently and follows Celestino off the ice, hearing whispering from the other skaters and coaches.

"We're going to have a thorough talk about what I just witnessed," Celestino is saying, but when Yuuri looks up from his feet, Celestino's voice fades away, as does all other sound.

Viktor is standing in front of him again -- and now his eyes are wide with shock as he stares at Yuuri. Yakov and the other Russians are similarly speechless, and Yuuri's stomach drops to the floor, horrified that Viktor is even here.

He saw my quad flip. I can't surprise him anymore.

Abruptly, tears well up in his eyes, but Yuuri looks away before Viktor can see them. He hurriedly wills the tears away and somehow manages not to cry in front of Viktor and the rest of their peers. After a brief moment, he looks back at Viktor and nods a little, then steps around him to follow Celestino.

"Wait," Viktor says behind him, but Yuuri is already leaving the rink. He doesn't think he wants to hear what Viktor has to say anyway.

Celestino pries the entire situation out of Yuuri and JJ. Yuuri admits to his own behavior with reluctance, and just like he promised, he wastes no time in throwing JJ to Celestino's displeasure. JJ doesn't bother lying, saying that he wanted to see if Yuuri could actually do it, but Celestino glowers at all three of them, even Phichit who had nothing to do with the situation.

JJ is restricted to the hotel for the rest of the day. Phichit escapes punishment by virtue of being
innocent in all this, but Yuuri gets a long lecture on the importance of telling one's coach when one is practicing dangerous jumps alone. At the end of it, Celestino takes one look at Yuuri's miserable face and lets the three of them go shower and change, deciding only to give Yuuri a curfew.

Yuuri accepts it without complaint. He deserves it for letting JJ get under his skin and breaking Celestino's trust.

Phichit tries to convince him to go walking, but Yuuri takes one look at the light glinting off the Charles River, running beside the TD Garden where the competition is being held, and heads back to the hotel alone. He retreats to his and Phichit's hotel room and closes the curtains, turns off the lights, and burrows himself into his bed.

Then he falls apart.

It isn't fair. Yuuri is supposed to be strong enough to handle this, but with Viktor here, all of his plans and decisions are turning to dust before his eyes. Yuuri couldn't even hold onto the one piece of proof that Viktor had coached him for a year -- the quad flip, the most important jump of his life. His anxiety and temper had ripped it out of his hands as if it meant nothing.

Viktor saw it. Yuuri cannot surprise him anymore.

A sob catches in his throat, and Yuuri swallows convulsively against the hot knot of anger and humiliation. How could he ever hope to reach Viktor's level the way he is? He hasn't changed at all. He is still the same anxious wreck of a person as he was before Viktor danced his way into Yuuri's life, taking him by the hand and showing him light and warmth that Yuuri will never, ever feel again.

He wants to go home. He wants to go to Viktor. He wants to go back to that room where Viktor was crying and stay there at his side; he can take being a ghost, so long as he can be close to his Viktor.

After a long while, Yuuri struggles to stop his tears. He can't cry like this; he has to be strong, has to keep going, otherwise he will never get seeded for the GPF. Yuuri's tears fall harder at the thought.

It isn't fair. Why can't Yuuri be stronger than this?

He stays in bed for hours, until the sky outside is beginning to darken. Phichit returns to the room then and gently pries Yuuri out of bed, silently handing him a towel and picking out some jeans and one of Yuuri's favorite hoodies while Yuuri washes his face, pressing the cold towel to the reddened skin under his eyes.

"Carbohydrates and seafood?" Phichit offers, and Yuuri nods.

"Definitely."

Yuuri stays quiet beside Phichit as they walk away from the hotel. The sky is cloudy with a threat of rain, which matches Yuuri's mood perfectly. While they wait for the light to change, Yuuri stares down at his feet, thinking darkly of all the things he could have said to JJ but didn't. He knows JJ is just testing him, sizing him up as a competitor, but it bothers Yuuri that he let himself be riled up so easily.

He knows that it is partly because of the dream he had of Viktor, and because of meeting Viktor himself. Everything has been ruined now, though; if everybody knows about his quad flip, then Yuuri cannot use it to surprise Viktor in the future. There is no way to get back the future that he
has lost. All because Yuuri couldn't control himself.

Phichit leans into his side. "Purple elephants on a bus," he says quickly, and Yuuri is so flummoxed by it that he turns to stare at Phichit -- only to get caught and pulled into a selfie.

"Ha!" Phichit says, quickly uploading the picture to Instagram. "I got you good!"

Yuuri stares at him another moment, then finally smiles. Phichit grins and tugs him across the street, waving his phone a little. "You're all over the internet, you know."

Yuuri groans, his laughter fading. "Don't tell me that. I don't even want to know what they're saying."

"Oh, just something about you being the next Viktor Nikiforov..."

"What?!" He covers his face for a moment, debating going back to the hotel room to hide, but Phichit sees right through him and hooks his arm through Yuuri's to keep him from escaping. Yuuri leans into him with a sigh, tilting his head back to look up at the sky. "I can't believe he saw it. I can't believe he was there..."

"Talk about the worst timing," Phichit agrees. After a moment, he nudges Yuuri's side. "What was it like, seeing him?"

Yuuri doesn't answer for a moment, his eyes tracing the line of the tallest building above them, before he lowers his gaze to the ground. "Terrifying. I keep thinking that it's him... but it's not him. It's confusing. I'm afraid that if he starts talking to me, I'll say something horribly wrong, and he'll never look at me again. But I'm also afraid of him even looking at me."

Phichit squeezes his arm reassuringly. "He's nice to everybody, though. I don't think he would ever treat you like that. Especially not from how you've talked about him, you know... in the future," he whispers, glancing around them.

Yuuri smiles without humor. "Maybe. I don't know how I'll handle it. I guess that's something to worry about later." After a moment, he decides to pull out his phone, absently turning it off airplane mode.

Yuuri had turned off his phone while he was hiding in the hotel room. He stops short when he sees several messages on his phone. Half of them are from Minako-sensei, which makes Yuuri wonder how widespread her information network is, and the others from his rinkmates back in Detroit.

The last message is from Chris.

From: Christophe Giacometti
Heard about what happened. Are you alright?

"Chris is texting me," Yuuri mutters, and Phichit obligingly pauses to lean against a storefront nearby.

To: Christophe Giacometti
I don't want to talk about it.

From: Christophe Giacometti
That's fine. Want to go eat with us? You can bring your friend :)

Yuuri glances up at Phichit. "Chris is inviting us to dinner. He must have brought Masumi with
him. Want to meet them?"

Phichit lights up. Chris is one of the skaters he looks up to; Viktor is another. "I'd love to! Where
do they want to meet?"

To: Christophe Giacometti
Ok. Can we get seafood?

From: Christophe Giacometti
Sounds great. Meet us in front of Atlantic Fish Co in twenty :)

"A restaurant called the Atlantic Fish Company," Yuuri says dutifully, and he and Phichit spend
the next few minutes pulling up maps and menus. The restaurant is thankfully within walking
distance, so he and Phichit set off together. Yuuri listens with a small smile as Phichit talks
excitedly about getting to meet Chris. He's more interested in the menu, truthfully -- all the seafood
Yuuri could ever want.

The afternoon is dipping toward evening, and beyond the clouds, Yuuri can see hints of pink and
orange. Yuuri lets the chatter of Phichit and the crowd around them soothe away some of his
misery, looking forward to talking with Chris and Masumi. Ahead on the street, he notices Chris
standing in front of the restaurant, wearing casual jeans and talking to --

Yuuri pales. That's not Masumi.

He grabs Phichit and drags him into the doorway to Starbucks, out of sight of Chris and his
companion. His life is falling apart in front of his eyes, and Yuuri can't do anything about it. "Chris
brought Viktor here," he hisses to Phichit, hysteria building up in his throat. Phichit's eyes go
round, and he starts to lean out of the door so he can look, but Yuuri pulls him back before he can
get them noticed.

He whips out his phone.

To: Christophe Giacometti
YOU BROUGHT VIKTOR?

From: Christophe Giacometti
I'm sorry! Masumi had to go to a meeting, and Viktor was already with me. Please come?

To: Christophe Giacometti
How could you do this to me???

From: Christophe Giacometti
It's okay, he's not mad, just come eat with us? Please? It'll be fine

"Noooo," Yuuri whimpers, covering his face. "Viktor is going to eat with us." He slumps against
the glass face-first, defeated, his phone hanging limply in his hand.

Phichit is beside himself. "Oh my god, we're going to eat with Viktor Nikiforov?"

"Yeah." A beat passes. Yuuri wonders if it's too late to run away. "I give up, Phichit. I'm going to
end it all."

Phichit fixes him with a startled look. "Yuuri --"

Yuuri doesn't look up from the ground. "I'm going to pack everything up and move to Wisconsin
and become a potato farmer. Potatoes are important, right? More important than my dismal skating career and every crap decision I've made in the past five months. You can make a lot of things with potatoes, you know. Fries. Croquettes. Curry."

"Vodka," Viktor adds helpfully.

Yuuri nods against the glass. "Right, vodka, that one's pretty important. See? Potato farmer it is."

Yuuri's brain catches up to what he just heard, and he whirs around to see Viktor watching him with a little grin, Chris standing behind him looking like he wants to laugh at Yuuri's misery. Phichit has his hands over his mouth, and for a moment everybody just stares at each other.

Then Phichit clears his throat. "Isn't Wisconsin next to Canada? You'd still be neighbors with JJ."

Yuuri blanches. Chris and Viktor crack up, and after a moment, Phichit joins in. Yuuri manages a weak laugh, too, his mind whirling. The door to Starbucks opens, and Yuuri reluctantly shuffles out of the way, joining Viktor and Chris on the sidewalk.

Chris grins at him, wrapping an arm around Yuuri's waist and sliding his hand down. Yuuri yelps and gives him a dirty look, and Chris winks, gently leading Yuuri away. "Let's get some food. I'm famished, aren't you?"

"Yuuri, did Chris just touch your butt?" Phichit whispers, and Yuuri sighs heavily.

"It's like saying hello for him," Yuuri says flatly, and Chris just laughs, while Viktor watches them curiously, his gaze lingering on Yuuri.

Yuuri tries not to look at him too much. The only contact he has had with this Viktor is that phone call the night he arrived back in the past, and he has no idea if Viktor will recognize his voice. So far, Viktor doesn't seem to think badly of him, only showing curiosity and polite interest.

He has no idea what Viktor must think of him, after seeing that quad flip.

Once in the restaurant, Chris expertly maneuvers them into a booth so that Yuuri is sitting across from Viktor and next to Phichit. Yuuri is pondering exactly how to murder Chris without getting caught when their server arrives, and since Yuuri is at his wit's end, he orders a beer.

"Sam Adams draft, please," he requests, pulling out his ID. He watches from under his eyelashes as Viktor orders an Amstel Light, and Chris takes advantage of the cocktail menu. Phichit is left with water, which makes him sulk, and Yuuri finally manages a smile.

"It's not fair," Phichit whines. "American laws are so strict."

"You can't drink in Thailand, either," Yuuri reminds him, grinning a little when Phichit pouts at him. He will have to make it up to Phichit later; right now, he needs something to take the edge off this disaster of an evening.

When he looks at their table companions, Yuuri finds Viktor watching him again, and he can't help but flush under his attention. Viktor's smile widens a little.

"You're different than what I expected," Viktor tells him, and this pulls Yuuri up short, making him blink at Viktor. He hadn't even thought Viktor knew who he was, let alone what he was like.

"Um, okay," Yuuri mumbles, glancing at Chris, but Phichit has already drawn him into conversation. Traitors, he thinks mutinously.
This is the first time he and Viktor are talking face to face in this timeline. It's almost a year earlier than Yuuri originally expected, and meeting Viktor like this would have been hell on Yuuri's younger self. It's still hell on Yuuri's nerves, but for entirely different reasons.

He has never experienced this before. This encounter between them is entirely new.

*You can make different memories.*

Yuuri closes his eyes briefly, thinking of his Viktor. Then he meets Viktor's gaze evenly, deciding that since he cannot escape this situation, he might as well let it happen. "I didn't think you'd have an opinion of me. We've never met before."

Viktor's smile widens a little. "I've heard about you, though. You nearly got bronze at Four Continents, didn't you? Then you won your Nationals back in December."

Yuuri stares at him. *How does Viktor even know that?* "I suppose," Yuuri admits. "I just didn't think you'd look me up." Four Continents had been a disaster, but it had only fueled his resolve to work harder.

Viktor shrugs a little. "My rinkmate, Yuri Plisetsky, started watching your programs after someone linked him because you two share a name. You caught my attention." He smiles again, the expression a little sharp, and a lot cooler than any smile Yuuri remembers from his Viktor. The realization chills him a little. This isn't his Viktor; he needs to keep that in mind.

Then he catches Viktor's meaning. He wonders how Yurio is doing, and why he is watching videos of Yuuri. The thought warms him. "Yuri Plisetsky," Yuuri says carefully. "He's in juniors, right?"

"Mm," Viktor agrees. "I'm sure you'll meet him sometime. I'll have to thank him for bringing you to my attention, because it's definitely proven worthwhile." He flashes his teeth, and Yuuri has the sudden epiphany that Viktor is sizing him up as a competitor.

He can do Viktor's quad flip. He is somebody who could be a challenge to Viktor, and Viktor already senses that, even this early. It sends a little thrill through Yuuri, and he can't help but smile, quietly pleased that Viktor is paying so much attention to him.

Their server brings them their drinks, and Yuuri takes a drink of his beer with a relieved sigh. He hears Chris ordering some appetizers, but his attention remains mostly on Viktor, who is tasting his bottle of beer, licking his lips afterwards. Yuuri has to avert his gaze after that.

"You can do the quad flip now," Viktor says, catching Yuuri's attention again.

He sighs. There is no escaping this, now. "Yes. I haven't performed it in competition, though."

"Why not?" Chris asks, and Yuuri realizes that he and Phichit are paying attention to their conversation now. "From what I heard, you landed it perfectly at practice today."

Yuuri shrugs a little. "I haven't been sure about the landing," he mumbles, then moves on quickly past the lie. "My coach didn't know I had it down. I kind of hid it from him." The admission makes Viktor's eyes widen a little, and Chris raises his eyebrows.

"You kept a secret like that from your coach?"

"He didn't tell anybody," pipes in Phichit. "We're all in the same skating club, and none of us knew that Yuuri had a third quad." He gives Yuuri a pout. "Not even me, your roommate! How could you keep this from me, Yuuri?"
With so much attention on him, Yuuri feels his nerves bubbling over, and he looks over at the wall, choosing to focus on the art. "I'm sorry. I wanted it to be a surprise," he finally says, and Phichit knocks their shoulders together. *Forgiven* is his silent message. (Yuuri expects a thorough questioning later, though.)

"Do you think you'll add it to one of your programs? Your free skate, perhaps?" Chris wonders, and Yuuri shrugs, wiping his finger down the side of his glass.

"I haven't thought about it. I'm in trouble with my coach right now, so..."

"Mm, that's disappointing. He should be praising you for landing it," Viktor says, which makes Yuuri startle and fix him with a disbelieving stare. How many times had Viktor lambasted him for learning the quad salchow in secret from Yurio? Yuuri's ears are still a little blistered from the lecture that Viktor gave him right after he had first performed Eros.

"Well, that's up to him," Yuuri replies, shrugging again. He can't control what Celestino accepts, though it is ultimately up to Yuuri to decide how he performs. He is unsure of actually performing the quad flip in his program this time, since he had been thinking of saving it for the future, for Viktor...

What if Viktor expects him to use it now?

Viktor hums in consideration, then takes another drink of beer, saving Yuuri from more conversation. He focuses on his beer, relieved for the moment of quiet, though soon his gaze returns to Viktor, still a little overwhelmed to see him in person.

*He's beautiful.*

He really is. Yuuri could look at him all evening and be perfectly content -- and he is really going to get Chris back for putting him across from Viktor. Chris gives him a knowing little smirk and engages Phichit in another conversation, likely about their pets, if Phichit's quick draw of his phone is any indication.

"How long have you been practicing the flip?" Viktor asks him after a moment, making Yuuri wonder how to answer. That is tied into his future, where Viktor had started teaching him the jump in June, five months before the Cup of China. It's been almost a year since Yuuri first learned it, in his own time, but...

He might as well just start counting from October, when he came back in time. "Five months," Yuuri finally says, watching Viktor's gaze sharpen with interest.

"That's very impressive, Yuuri," Viktor says, his smile widening, and the sound of his name on Viktor's lips sends a jolt through Yuuri. He closes his eyes briefly, unable to stop himself from savoring the sound. Viktor has always had a way of saying his name that makes him melt a little every time he hears it.

Even in this new encounter with Viktor, that hasn't changed. The thought hurts Yuuri a little.

"That means a lot coming from you, Viktor," Yuuri says quietly, opening his eyes to look at Viktor again. Viktor will take the meaning as it appears, that Yuuri is his fan and looks up to him, but Yuuri means so much more than that -- and Viktor will never know. Yuuri cannot tell him the depth of his feeling, but he is grateful that he can express at least this much.

Viktor stares at him for a moment, before his eyes warm with pleasure. "I'm glad."
Thankfully, food arrives a few minutes later, saving Yuuri from having to continue the conversation, and then they have to give their orders. Yuuri orders the salmon salad, mindful of Celestino's dietary requirements, but intent on getting his seafood. He needs the calories, too, because he intends to go all out, no matter what JJ might have to say about it.

Thinking about JJ sours his mood a little, and he distracts himself with rings of calamari, steamed mussels, and crab cakes. Phichit has to take pictures of the food, and Yuuri dutifully pulls out his phone as well, because the calamari is very pretty.

He notices that Viktor orders a salad, too, which is a little surprising. Viktor would always order new and interesting entrees whenever they went out to eat, though he would often restrict Yuuri's diet to salads and lean meats. He insisted on Yuuri maintaining his strict standards for nutrition levels, but never forced himself into the same restrictions.

*Oh.* Viktor wasn't competing when he was with Yuuri, so the diet wouldn't have been necessary.

The food is pretty good. It soothes both his stomach and his nerves, and his beer quickly disappears. He briefly debates another glass, before switching to water -- he doesn't want to lose control on alcohol, especially not with Viktor in the vicinity. Who knows what he might say without any inhibition?

For the rest of dinner, Viktor mostly leads the conversation with Chris, and Phichit is all too happy to chat with his two idols. Yuuri is a little more circumspect, still smarting over his mistake earlier and his fight with JJ, but Viktor manages to draw him out of his shell somewhat, with questions about Yuuri's life in America and, perhaps not surprisingly, Vicchan.

Viktor spots the picture of Vicchan the next time Yuuri pulls out his phone, and he happily engages Yuuri in a conversation about poodles. Talking about Vicchan is easy, once Yuuri gets over the embarrassment of telling Viktor his dog's name. Plus, Viktor shows him pictures of Makkachin.

"Isn't she beautiful?" Viktor croons, while Yuuri swipes through Viktor's Makkachin gallery, his heart aching to see his dear canine friend looking so happy and content. He misses her very much, and it's a balm to his grief to see Makkachin again, if only in pictures. "She's such a sweetheart. I miss her already." Yuuri nods in commiseration, touching his own screen where Vicchan's photo rests.

"It's hard to leave them behind. I hadn't seen Vicchan for four years, before I went home for Nationals a few months ago," Yuuri says with a sigh. "I'm glad she's doing well." Then he rethinks his phrasing, but it's too late, and thankfully Viktor doesn't seem to find it strange.

"Four years? Wow! I don't think I could stand to be apart from Makkachin for that long," Viktor says, taking back his phone.

Yuuri picks up his fork and pokes it through his salad, his shoulders sinking a little with old guilt. "I lived in a dorm for my first two years in Detroit, and they didn't allow pets. When I moved in with Phichit, I could have had him sent over because our apartment allows pets, but I didn't want to stress him out with a trip like that."

"That makes sense," Viktor agrees. "If I could, I'd bring Makkachin with me wherever I go. She's a little too old for travel now, though."

"Dog people," Chris interjects with a laugh, and Phichit grins in delight. Yuuri frowns at both of them, huffing.
"Cat people," he retorts, knowing full well that Chris' phone background is his cat. Viktor starts laughing, and Chris only smiles, winking at Yuuri before he goes back to eating.

At the end of the night, Yuuri is glad that he didn't run screaming into the heart of Boston to escape dinner with Viktor and Chris. Viktor was every bit as charming as Yuuri has ever known him, though the emotional distance between them still hurt. It was... nice, though.

With true regret, he and Phichit make their excuses, since Yuuri still has his curfew, though he doesn't tell Viktor and Chris about that. When they step outside, Viktor crooks a finger at Yuuri, and like a moth to flame, he can't help but go to him.

"Come here," Viktor coaxes. Viktor moves closer, into his personal space, and before Yuuri can protest, Viktor has brought up his phone to take a picture, putting an arm around Yuuri's shoulders.

His hand is a hot brand on Yuuri's skin, even through his clothes. When Viktor lets him go, a pleased hum escaping him, Yuuri stumbles a little, shaken.

"Perfect," Viktor says, tapping at his phone, and Yuuri's pocket buzzes with an alert. He opens his lock screen shakily, seeing that it is for a new photo from Viktor's Instagram.

Viktor posted the picture of the two of them together. Yuuri doesn't look half bad, for once, but he isn't smiling and he looks surprised, while Viktor is flashing a grin.

Vnikiforov: A lovely night with a new friend! #WorldsCompetition #figureskating

"Viktor, you have three hundred thousand followers," Yuuri says blankly, watching the likes count rack up -- alongside comments, mostly ranging along the lines of "Is that Yuuri Katsuki???

Then he flushes. Viktor called him his friend. They aren't even supposed to know each other yet, and Viktor is calling him his friend.

"Oh, you have Instagram, Yuuri?" Viktor asks curiously, then smiles brightly. "What's your handle?"

"Um," Yuuri says, unsure what this even means. Is Viktor going to follow him? He stares at Viktor closely for a moment, trying to see past his charming smile, but Viktor's motives remain frustratingly obscure. Finally he spells it out for Viktor, waiting for the notification on his phone for "v-nikiforov is now following you!"

The whole moment is surreal. Yuuri feels like he is in an alternate reality. In a way, he kind of is, and Yuuri looks down at his feet. "I guess this is really happening," Yuuri mutters to himself.

"It isn't that bad, is it?" Viktor asks wryly. Yuuri gives him a startled look, wondering where that comment came from. Viktor notices his expression and chuckles. "You ran away as soon as you saw me earlier. In fact, you've been running away from me all week, and it's only Tuesday."

Yuuri flushes and looks away, pulling his coat a little closer around him. "Can you blame me? Every time we meet, you witness something embarrassing happening to me."

Viktor watches him, and something in his blue gaze makes Yuuri want to drop everything and melt into his arms -- but this isn't his Viktor, and that is the tenth time tonight that Yuuri has had to remind himself not to think of this Viktor as his. "I didn't think any of it was embarrassing. That Canadian skater... he was rather rude, wasn't he?"

Yuuri grimaces. Inside, his heart is hammering a little harder. "I don't know why he has it out for
me. We're in the same skating club, but..."

"Sounds like he's jealous to me," Viktor says thoughtfully, making Yuuri stare at him. "You've improved so much in such a short time. He gets to see that firsthand, since he skates in the same rink as you, and it's making him very worried. Still, he doesn't need to be so rude about it."

It means a lot to Yuuri to hear that from Viktor. He still isn't sure exactly what he did to paint himself as a target for JJ, but Viktor's reasoning makes sense, and it soothes his lingering irritation a little. JJ doesn't deserve his attention like this -- he should focus completely on Viktor.

"Thank you," Yuuri says quietly. "I'll have to try to ignore him for now. I've got to focus on the competition."

"Good idea," Viktor says with a small smile. "I look forward to your short program tomorrow."

Yuuri meets his eyes. It's not Eros, and it's not anything Yuuri has really designed for himself, other than rearranging the jumps -- but he looks forward to showing off his skills for Viktor, anyway. He wets his lips, and to his shock, Viktor's eyes follow the movement of his tongue, before he seems to catch himself and looks up politely.

"If you can... I'd love for you to watch me perform," Yuuri says softly. Watch me, and only me.

In another life, another future, Viktor wouldn't be able to take his eyes off Yuuri. It might be selfish of him, but he wants it to happen again. He wants Viktor to look at him, and only him -- if just for a little while.

After a moment, Viktor smiles, and it is a slow, dark thing, with a little bit of challenge, and more than a little flirtation. "Okay," Viktor says, sending a hot shiver straight through Yuuri. "If you promise me you'll do the same. Watch my short program."

Oh. Viktor will be performing Pop That Lock, which is still Yuuri's guilty pleasure and half of his fantasy material. Yuuri feels himself blush to the tips of his ears and has to look away, knowing that his reaction is obvious, and not daring to say anything in reply.

Viktor seems pleased by his reaction, chuckling but not bothering him again. Yuuri wonders what the future will bring, if Viktor is paying this much attention to him this early.

He fears, for a little while, that he has done something irreversible, that by pushing himself this hard and improving so fast, that he is changing something momentous -- but that had been his intention in the first place, hadn't it? He wants to be a challenge for Viktor. He wants to give Viktor his love for skating back. If Viktor is this interested in him already, then Yuuri should use it to his advantage.

First, though, he has to make the podium. For that, he has to beat JJ and twenty-eight other skaters. And that includes Viktor.

~*~

JJ doesn't speak to him the next morning, which is a great relief to Yuuri. He puts in his hours at the practice rink and thinks about adding the quad flip to his free skate. When he brings this up to Celestino, his coach tells him he will think about it, since right now he wants Yuuri to focus on his short program.

So Yuuri does, and later that afternoon when the men's short programs are set to start, he goes into
the rink with a racing heart. His nerves are different than usual, not due to the fear of performing and messing up. Instead, he feels excited.

By sheer luck (and Yuuri spends quite a few minutes cursing his luck when he finds out), Yuuri gets placed into the same group as Viktor and JJ. His rinkmate only gives him a look, and Celestino takes care to keep them apart, knowing that tension is still simmering.

When JJ starts on Viktor, though, Yuuri can't help but tense up. Celestino is out of earshot, again, talking quietly with Yakov Feltsman about something. Yuuri shoots JJ a glare, but it doesn't deter him.

"It must be pretty disappointing, knowing you're not the only person who can do a quad flip anymore," JJ comments, when the section before them has already gone. Yuuri is set to go next, and JJ will follow him, with Viktor last. Viktor lifts his head from where he is doing stretches, raising a thin eyebrow at JJ. His pleasant expression never changes.

"I think it's something to be celebrated, actually. Shouldn't we all support each other as skaters?" Viktor says with a smile, and Yuuri is startled to realize how sharp that smile is, promising destruction to whoever crosses it. He has seen that smile before, and he knows full well how dangerous it is.

"Yes, yes, of course," JJ is quick to agree, glancing at Yuuri and grinning at him. "Still, it's a shame when some of us just don't compare to the rest."

"Hm? I can't imagine there's anybody like that." Viktor's smile is all teeth.

JJ laughs. Yuuri heaves a sigh and stands up from his bench, twisting to meet JJ's gaze with a flat stare. He says nothing, letting his silence speak for him, and JJ's smile fades a little, until finally he looks away.

"Yuuri, it's time," Celestino calls, and Yuuri dutifully unzips his jacket. His skating outfit is beautiful in ombre white, blue, and violet, with little pieces of fabric on his arms and back that produce an effect not unlike feathers. Perfect for *Swan Lake*. The five of them walk out to the rink, and Yuuri slides off his skate guards and hands them to Celestino.

"You can do this, Yuuri," Celestino tells him with a smile.

"I'll be sure to cheer you on, Yuuri," JJ says from behind his coach. Yuuri doesn't bother replying, and as he turns, his eyes catch on Viktor, who is watching him.

Viktor smiles and touches a finger to his lips. Yuuri holds his stare for a moment, then kicks off and makes his way to the center of the rink, holding his arm up in a wave when the audience cheers for him.

He can do this. He will prove himself to Viktor, and to the world. To give Viktor someone to strive against.

*Swan Lake* begins to play. He doesn't think of his goals, for once, nor of JJ's antagonism. Instead he thinks of his dream of Viktor, and of Odette's strange curse. In a way Yuuri has been cursed as well, stolen from his time and forced into a world that is changing too rapidly for him to make sense of it, and Yuuri uses that emotion to carry out Odette's story.

It's his story, after all. His and Viktor's, though Viktor will never know it.

When the song comes to an end, Yuuri has tears in his eyes. In the older versions of the story,
Odette's curse lingered and kept her captive, and Yuuri knows in his heart that his own curse will be the same. He will never go home, he will never see his Viktor again, and all he has now is the broken relationships with his family and friends and an uncertain future. He has Viktor's attention, but it will never be what Yuuri truly wants, and he has no idea what the future holds.

All he can do is keep moving forward. He has to keep grasping for that distant future, even if he can never reach it.

The audience is giving him a standing ovation. Yuuri bows, to cover his emotional exhaustion, making a couple of laps around the rink and collecting a bouquet and a small shrimp plushie. When Yuuri leaves the rink, his eyes catch on Viktor, and what he sees shocks him.

Viktor is crying. When Viktor notices his attention, he smiles and wipes his eyes, then waves, and Yuuri flushes and looks away, horrified that he brought Viktor to tears. He never wanted to hurt Viktor.

Maybe he had put a little too much emotion into his skating.

When Yuuri's score comes out, he is doubly shocked.

"Amazing! Katsuki has shot up to second place! There are still five competitors who have yet to perform, and I think everybody is looking forward to Viktor Nikiforov's upcoming short program. It looks like even Viktor was moved by that performance! That is a new personal best for Katsuki!"

"Wow," Yuuri whispers, and Celestino laughs and pounds his shoulder, sending him stumbling.

"Great job, Yuuri! I knew you had it in you! Now, you have an interview when you exit the rink. I'm going to send JJ off, and then I'll see you afterward, okay?"

Yuuri nods, rising to his feet with a stumble and making his way to the edge of the rink in a daze. The interviewer asks him lots of questions, and Yuuri somehow answers, though he has no idea what he says. He's too busy thinking about the tears in Viktor's eyes, and the emotions he evoked during his short program.

_I have to do better. I have to make the podium. There's one person ahead of me, and Viktor will definitely place above me. JJ might, but he'd have to work really hard to catch up. Chris, too._

After he escapes the reporters, Yuuri makes his way up to the stands where the skaters can sit, sinking into an empty chair beside Phichit. He arrives just in time, too; Viktor is doing a welcome lap around the ice, waving at his adoring audience. Absently, Yuuri wonders what JJ's score was, but soon stops worrying about that, because Viktor has lifted his head and is searching the stands for something.

He seems to find it when his gaze lands on Yuuri. He smiles slowly, and Yuuri feels a hot shiver run through him.

_He's challenging me._

*Pop That Lock* starts to play, and Viktor kicks into his quick step skate, and if possible, this is even more overwhelming than when Yuuri saw it on TV for the GPF. Yuuri sits frozen as Viktor skates with abandon, every movement full of sensuality and beauty, and to Yuuri's horror, heat sweeps through him every time Viktor so much as glances his way.

Yuuri can't look away. His entire body is stiff with the heat curling through Viktor's gaze, his
hands clenched over his knees. He has always been attracted to Viktor, ever since he was a teenager, but now it feels completely different, since he knows what it feels to lose himself to pleasure in Viktor's arms.

He aches for that feeling again.

When the last notes fade out, Viktor stands from his position with a flourish, bowing to the audience which has erupted with applause. Yuuri sits in silence, hunching down in his seat, knowing without looking that he has a hard-on, and hoping desperately that his jacket and the shadows hide it. He closes his eyes as the next skater steps onto the ice, focusing on his breathing, until his body is no longer raging with want.

A few moments later, JJ drops into the chair on his other side, throwing an arm over the back of Yuuri's seat. "Those reporters are vultures," he sighs, and Yuuri shoots him an incredulous look. JJ catches it and grins, winking and nodding up to the score boards, where Viktor's score has just appeared.

Viktor is first. Naturally -- and Yuuri is now fourth, because JJ has taken over third, since his program is technically more difficult. Yuuri narrows his eyes slowly, irritated by the sight of JJ's smug smile, and sets himself to ignoring JJ for the rest of the short programs. The heated thoughts from Viktor's short program are gone; now all Yuuri can think about is skating to the podium and wiping that smug smirk right off JJ's face.

_I'll do it. I'll beat him, and he can go back to Canada with his tail between his legs._

At one point Viktor comes upstairs, pushing his hair back with a contented smile. Yuuri eyes him surreptitiously, absently thinking back to the first time he competed here with Viktor. He hadn't come upstairs to the stands the last time, definitely -- instead he had found an empty bathroom somewhere downstairs and cried his eyes out over his anxiety. Viktor hadn't even looked at him.

Now Viktor can't stop looking at him, because he knows Yuuri can do a quad flip... and apparently because Yurio, of all people, has taken an interest in him. Yuuri wonders if he should be worried about that.

Something to stress over later. When he gets home, Yuuri is going to write down everything that happened this week and go over it with a fine-toothed comb. It will probably drive him a little insane, but Yuuri needs to understand what has changed.

"Sorry you didn't make it to the top three," JJ taunts him, and Yuuri grits his teeth but says nothing in reply. A moment later, a warm arm slides over his shoulder, blocking JJ from his sight. Soft hair brushes his cheek, which makes Yuuri start in surprise. A phone with a gleaming black and gold case appears in front of his face, and Yuuri blinks to recognize Makkachin in its background image before she disappears beneath the Instagram app.

"Smile, Yuuri," Viktor whispers into his ear, and Yuuri just knows that his ears have turned red. He can't help the smile that appears on his lips, a little giddy at having Viktor so close, and on the phone screen, Viktor returns the smile, looking satisfied.

"The short program was a success, wouldn't you say?" Viktor says airily, before letting go of Yuuri and leaning back to catch whatever Chris says behind him. Yuuri doesn't know whether Viktor means his own, or Yuuri's -- but the words still send a shiver through him.

He briefly meets JJ's gaze, then looks forward to watch the rest of the skaters. _I'll win. I'll show everyone what I can do. I have to._
On Thursday, Yuuri manages to avoid Viktor almost completely. He spots him at practice, leaving as Yuuri is arriving, and then manages to escape dinner with him and Chris again by promising to meet Minako-sensei, who has flown from Japan to watch the competition. Minako-sensei accompanies Yuuri and the rest of Celestino's team to dinner, spending most of the meal chatting with Celestino, but frequently turning to Yuuri and congratulating him for his placement.

At one point, JJ tries to point out that Yuuri still fourth, not even in the top three, but Minako-sensei is quick to shut him up with, "there's still the free skate, boy." Yuuri buys her dessert just for that comment alone.

Celestino finally makes a decision about Yuuri's quad flip. Yuuri isn't sure how to feel about it, and he only manages to sleep because Phichit gives him some over-the-counter pills.

Then Friday comes, and with it, the free skate for men. Out of the thirty contestants that year, twenty of them reach the final stage, and they are separated into groups of four.

To Yuuri's dismay, that means he will be skating in the last group, with Viktor and JJ again. He groans a little at the realization, not looking forward to the awkward tension between the three of them. He really, really hopes that JJ does not pick a fight -- but it seems JJ cannot resist poking at Yuuri's temper.

"So, are you going to use it?" JJ asks him, not long before the four of them will be called out. Yuuri reaches up to rub his forehead, sensing an oncoming headache.

"What are you talking about?" he asks JJ tiredly.

"Your quad flip, of course." JJ's gaze sneaks across the room to Viktor, who is watching them with a raised eyebrow. Cao Bin is completely ignoring them, headphones in his ears. "Since you stole it from the current reigning champion."

Yuuri's jaw clenches briefly. Celestino turns away from his conversation with Josef Karpisek and fixes JJ with a warning look, and JJ thankfully subsides. Yuuri stands and walks to the hallway where the air is less oppressive with tension, taking a deep breath and pushing against the wall to stretch again.

"Jealous, like I said," Viktor says quietly, settling against the wall beside him. Yuuri blinks and stands up straight, feeling Viktor's warmth brush his shoulder. It's a little disconcerting to see Viktor clad not in his favored suit, but instead in all black, in a beautiful costume that already has over a million posters printed, reminiscent of a military uniform with accents in silver. Yuuri's own red and purple costume, glittery and dazzling, seems rather soft in comparison.

He considers Viktor's words for a moment. "It's probably because I landed it before he did. He has the lutz, but he hasn't done the flip, yet."

"Like I said," Viktor repeats, a faint smirk curling at his lips. "Whether or not you use it in your skate, you shouldn't let him stress you out. You should skate the way you want to skate, not because anybody else demands it of you."

Yuuri makes a soft noise. "He doesn't bother me. But thank you, anyway." He hesitates, watching Viktor's face for a moment, before finally letting himself say what is roiling through his mind. "Good luck on your free skate, Viktor."

Viktor holds his gaze for a long moment. At the end of the hallway, one of the staff signals the
time, and Viktor's lips curl slightly. "To you as well, Yuuri."

Yuuri skates first. He pours his determination into the program, his desperation to create a future for Viktor that will make him happy, to become a better skater, one that will challenge Viktor and pull him out of the funk that is already threatening to overwhelm him and draw him away from skating. He has met this Viktor, now, and despite his own Viktor's wishes, he does not think he has a future together with this Viktor.

Yuuri can fall in love with him, surely -- and he knows he already has, in a way. Just as his Viktor said, this is Viktor, a version of Viktor that Yuuri never got to know, and one that he can love just as easily. Yet this Viktor is not his Viktor, and Yuuri holds onto his resolution more firmly, now: he will not pursue a relationship with this Viktor. He had Viktor once, and to have him again would be far too selfish. Viktor doesn't deserve to have his fate twisted and shaped by Yuuri's hands any more than he can help.

Better to love Viktor and let him go. Yuuri will give Viktor what he always wanted -- a true rival, so that Viktor can retire from ice skating with a peaceful heart.

Then Yuuri will quietly retire as well. Maybe even as soon as next year. He isn't certain that he will be mentally healthy enough to skate the year he would have been with Viktor in his original future. He will not have Eros, nor Yuuri on Ice, and Viktor will be far away from him, too far for Yuuri to reach.

He can give Viktor this time, though. Enough time to make him happy, before Yuuri lets go.

As the end of the song approaches, Yuuri turns his foot inward and kicks off. The quad flip is just as perfect as the one he landed in front of Viktor that day in practice, but in his mind, Yuuri is thinking of that day in Barcelona, where he skated Yuuri on Ice and won silver. He is thinking of the dream he shared with his Viktor, of Viktor's promise to find him again.

The song comes to an end, and Yuuri slows, lifting his arms up and thinking, Viktor. I'll never stop reaching for you.

He closes his eyes, and a moment later, he hears the applause. He can't bring himself to smile, but he gives a low bow to the judges, then to the audience, before collecting a bouquet of roses and going to greet Celestino at the Kiss and Cry.

He doesn't dare look Viktor's way.

The scores come out. Yuuri has a new personal best -- and he is first, now.

Celestino leaves him to go send JJ off, and Yuuri retreats to the hallway for the media to pounce on him. As he expected, Morooka is there to interview him, firing off question after question about the quadruple flip, Yuuri's intentions for training next year, and whether he feels his goals for this year were met.

"I don't know if I did what I set out to do this year. I won't know until we get the next score," Yuuri admits, rubbing the back of his head.

Morooka opens his mouth, then pauses as the announcer comes over the intercom.

"Jean-Jacques Leroy's scores are in. He has finished at... 302.16, below Yuuri Katsuki at 307.01! This means that Katsuki is still in first place and has secured a spot on the podium! Yuuri Katsuki is definitely the dark horse of this year's competition!"
Yuuri stares at the TV screen on the other side of the room, where JJ is waving at the crowds. A slow smile spreads across his lips, and he turns to face Morooka.

"Let me change my answer, please. Yes, I have done what I set out to do." Morooka is delighted by his confident answer, once more complimenting Yuuri and thanking him for competing for Japan. Yuuri makes his way to the stands, already knowing in his heart how Worlds will go. Viktor will get gold, and Yuuri will manage bronze.

Except in the end, Yuuri is wrong.

Instead of bronze, he wins silver. Christophe, who won silver last time, gets bronze with a final score of 305.80. Viktor wins gold with 317.94.

I won silver, Yuuri thinks blankly, staring up at the results. Phichit is shouting in his ear, and at his other side, JJ is silent with shock. He thinks he can hear Minako-sensei screaming with pride in the crowd.

Across the ice, Viktor meets his gaze, something fierce burning behind his blue eyes, striking through Yuuri like a punch. After a long moment, Yuuri gives him a small nod, the only thing he can do.

Viktor, are you watching me, wherever you are? I did it.
On a windy day in October, Viktor gets a strange call.

His phone rings in the middle of training, and Viktor is tempted not to answer because it is probably Yakov. With a small sigh, he sits up on his stretch mat and picks up the phone, then blinks at the sight of an American number.

A modeling agency, maybe?

"Allo?" Viktor answers, and instead of the professional tone he expects, his caller speaks in an entirely different manner.

"Viktor," someone whispers in English with an accent he cannot place, high with tension. "I don't know where I am. Where are you? Can you come get me?"

The sound of the stranger's fear sends a shiver through him, and Viktor sits up straight, alarmed. He doesn't recognize the voice or the number. It must be a stranger... so why do they know Viktor's name?

"I'm sorry, but I think you have the wrong number. Who is this?" Viktor asks, frowning.

There is a long pause. "This is... Viktor, right?" the stranger asks, disbelief coloring their voice. A prank call? Yet the stranger's emotions reverberates through him, unsettling him. Who is this person? Viktor thinks they might be a man, but he cannot think of who they might be.

"Yes. Who is this? How did you get this number, anyway?" Viktor asks impatiently. If he can help this person, he needs to know who they are. Perhaps they are one of his old lovers, using an alternate number? He blocks everybody he doesn't date anymore.

Another pause. The stranger's breathing trembles, as if the air has been knocked out of them. Shock. Horror. "I... it's me, Viktor."

Viktor closes his eyes briefly. He cannot, for the life of him, place the voice -- and while his memory isn't the greatest, he would be able to recognize someone he knew. He grimaces slightly.

"I'm sorry," Viktor says after a moment, a little apologetic. Whoever this person is, Viktor will not be able to help them. Viktor is in Russia, after all, and this stranger is somewhere in America. "You must have the wrong Viktor. Or if this is some kind of joke, it's a very poor one. I must go. Good luck, whoever you are."

With a small sigh, Viktor hangs up. He debates whether or not he should block the number, then decides not to yet. If they really are in trouble, then he can afford to be available, at least.

Except the person never calls back -- and soon, Viktor forgets about the call entirely.

~*~

Viktor becomes aware of the phenomenon of Yuuri one day in January, when he walks into the rink and finds half the team crowded around Mila and her phone. On the other side of the rink, Yuri Plisetsky is stewing with a scowl on his face, to which Viktor pays no mind; Yuri is young and unfortunately angry about almost everything. Instead he walks over to the small crowd, smiling in greeting when Georgi and Anya look up at the same time.
What is everyone so interested in? Viktor asks curiously, hanging his coat over the barrier. Mila brightens and waves her phone.

"We're watching the short programs from Four Continents. Yuri threw a fit over one of the senior skaters," she adds slyly, glancing over at Yuri, who scowls and turns away.

Yuri throws fits over lots of things. Viktor never bothers to keep up with his irrational moods.
"What upset him?"

Mila turns her phone around, revealing a dark-haired Asian skater in a fluttering blue and white outfit. "This is Yuuri Katsuki from Japan. Yurochka's mad because they share a name," she giggles, and Viktor raises his eyebrows, watching the video for a moment.

He's graceful. Viktor has only vaguely heard of Katsuki Yuuri before, in the same way that most figure skaters know about each other, though he has never competed against him directly. He knows that Yuuri has been in the Grand Prix series a couple of times but that he has never made it past preliminaries, and since Viktor doesn't skate at Four Continents, he wouldn't have competed against him there, either.

"Well, he surely knew that he's not the only Yuri in the world," Viktor quips, tugging off his skate guards and stepping onto the ice. Yakov will wrangle Yuri and the younger skaters soon enough; Viktor needs to practice. He wants to try something new in his short program, a sexy dance move that he saw online last week, and he doesn't have time to waste on foreign skaters.

In the coming weeks, though, Viktor starts hearing about Katsuki Yuuri everywhere. Mostly from Yuri and Mila, but sometimes Yuuri's name pops up in his feed, enough that Viktor starts paying attention.

"He was so close!" Yuri shouts one day after Four Continents, Mila hanging over his shoulder. "Just one more point, and he would have had bronze!"

"Are you still hung up on that?" Mila asks, amazed, as Viktor draws near. "You don't even know Japanese Yuri."

Yuri waves a hand, flicking through his phone. "He has my name, so he should do well. It's an insult otherwise."

"I sincerely doubt he even knows you exist, Yuri," Mila says, her smile slowly widening. She is completely gleeful over the fact that Yuri, resident Angry Teen, apparently has a crush.

"That's not the point!"

The next week, Yuri tries to land a quad salchow and nearly sprains his ankle. Viktor watches with interest as he sips water, a little relieved that Yakov is shouting at someone else for once. He doesn't interact with Yuri much, since the boy is still in juniors, but he has kept an eye on his skill. Yakov has already boasted about how Yuri could reach Viktor's standards in a few years, and right now, the boy is only fourteen.

Viktor isn't worried. Still, he doesn't let Yuri slip off his radar.

"You could have seriously injured yourself!" Yakov shouts, his eye ticking.

Yuri, in his infinite measure of teenage flippancy, shrugs. "That other Yuri can do it. Why can't I? I'm going to be in seniors soon anyway."
"Not for another year! And that Yuri is old enough to handle himself! You're off jumps for the rest of the week," Yakov orders, and unsurprisingly, Yuri throws a fit about that.

Viktor doesn't know what he expected, acting that way. Seeing Yuri moan and complain about Yakov's strict standards reminds Viktor of when he was in juniors, making him nostalgic. He floats through the rest of practice, turning over Yuri's sudden determination with some thought. It seems that there is more to Katsuki Yuuri than just his name, for Yuri to fixate on him so thoroughly. Viktor thinks it's cute that Yuri has a new idol, and perhaps just a little miffed that it is not him.

When he gets home that night, Viktor opens his laptop and types in *katsuki yuuri*. He finds many videos quickly through YouTube results, idly thinking that the man is certainly striking, with his sharp eyes and dark hair.

He starts with Yuuri's most recent short program, which uses a composition from *Swan Lake*. The video isn't good quality, clearly shot from a cell phone, and it takes place at one of the local Japanese competitions back in September. Viktor watches the video in silent contemplation, then once more.

Again, he thinks, *He is graceful. His step sequences are good and his choreography is lovely. He keeps missing his jumps, though. The story Yuuri tells with his body is interesting enough, the story of the cursed Odette, a rarity for a male figure skater. Still, there are parts of his technical components that seem a little stale, jarring in that they only serve to bring attention to Yuuri's flaws, more than his strengths.*

Something about his skating is familiar, and on the third replay, Viktor realizes what it is. Yuuri skates like *him*. A lot of his elements mirror Viktor's past programs, which means Yuuri must be a fan of his. Viktor smiles a little at the thought, wondering what Yuri Plisetsky would think of that. It might be a little petty of him to feel smug about Yuri's idol being *his* fan, but then, Viktor has never claimed to be pure of heart.

The most recent comments catch his attention.

*yuurifan4eva*: *this one isn't as good as nationals. still so pretty!!*

*yuudan99*: 勇利頑張!! 落ち続けていた...

*l8tersk8ter*: *This version doesn't have the quad salchow. Yuuri must have added it when he went back to Detroit. It's like he completely redid his program for Nationals.*

Viktor raises an eyebrow, then searches for the Japan Nationals skate. When he watches it, he realizes what has the commenters in a tizzy.

Yuuri's program is completely different. The small jarring moments from before are fixed with a few rearrangements of his technical components, and unlike in the small town competition, Yuuri consistently lands his jumps, only missing a landing once. His skating carries a certain fire to it now, a determination that wasn't there back in September. Three months of intensive training, and this is the difference.

Viktor finds himself entranced. There is beauty in Katsuki Yuuri's body, in the way he dances for the audience and brings the story of his music to life with only a few movements. The curse feels very real, now; Yuuri is trapped in a world that he does not understand, that he cannot navigate without a light, which he cannot see, and his last pose is reaching for someone who isn't there.

*Beautiful.*
Absently licking his lips, Viktor switches to the prefectural video for Yuuri's free skate. A stark figure in red and violet, Yuuri skates to Dvorak, another classical composition that makes use of his grace and choreography. Just like with his short program, this skate is full of technical errors, little problems that pile on top of each other and leave his final score much less impressive than it could be.

The Nationals free skate is wholly different. Once again, the technical compositions have shifted to a stronger array of jumps and elements, and now Yuuri has added a quad salchow to the middle of his composition, just before his step sequence. The landing is clean, too, the sharp blade of his skate cutting into the ice with a heavy crack that echoes with the music. The step sequence is quick and energetic, and Viktor finds himself rewinding multiple times so that he can watch the beginning of it, the way Yuuri's hips twist as he skates.

The story is just as engaging as Yuuri's short program. Yuuri is still cursed, but he has decided to fight for what he believes in, transforming the pain of the curse into power that he can use to keep going. Believe in me, Yuuri's body seems to say, reaching up to the heavens in a final pose that brings hope to mind, instead of tragedy.

Leagues different than September. What changed in three months, that brought such confidence and allure to Katsuki Yuuri's skating? The emotions in his skating ring true, speaking of a change in experience. Did Yuuri fall in love? What had changed to give him a new outlook on life?

Viktor is endlessly curious about him. He saves the videos to a private playlist, then goes searching for older programs, ones that are similar to the prefecture performance in mistakes, but still utterly enchanting, with the way Yuuri creates music with his body.

He also watches the infamous Four Continents programs, which are just as beautiful as Japan Nationals. Then Viktor lucks out: to his surprise, he also finds a video of Yuuri at the NHK Trophy from this season. He hadn't even remembered that Yuuri had taken part in the Grand Prix, though he clearly hadn't placed high enough to end up in the finale.

Viktor watches the NHK Trophy in curiosity, noticing immediately that Yuuri has already made the changes to his programs, but that his jumps are not consistent. In the moments before Yuuri's skates, he seems very nervous, which likely detracts from his technical points. Still, Yuuri's bronze win is well-deserved; his skating is beautiful.

On a whim, Viktor goes to the ISU website to check the entries for Worlds. The first name for Japan is Katsuki Yuuri.

"I'll suppose I'll see you then," Viktor says to himself with a small smile. He looks forward to Worlds now.

Then, on the night before Viktor travels to Boston, Massachusetts, he has a vivid dream that he cannot explain when he wakes.

~*~

He is standing on the bridge over the Neva, talking with someone. The air is cool and crisp, typical for January, and Viktor hears a familiar bark. He turns with a smile, seeing Makkachin bounding down the sidewalk. He catches her with a happy laugh, but his eyes are soon drawn to a familiar, beloved figure.

Katsuki Yuuri, running toward him, a smile appearing on his face. Viktor raises his arm to wave, joy bringing a smile unbidden to his lips. He just saw Yuuri a few hours ago, sleepy and
determined to cling to his blankets, but in the daylight of Russia, Yuuri is just as beautiful.

"Yuuri!" he calls, and in the next moment, time slows.

A car comes across the bridge too fast. There is a spot of ice on the road; the sunlight glints off it, momentarily blinding Viktor, and as he rubs his eyes, he hears tires screeching. Then he hears a scream, and it echoes across the frozen landscape, all other sounds fading away, followed by a harrowing crack and a splash.

Viktor realizes someone is screaming. He stands in the same place, but he sees himself running to the broken barrier, held back from jumping in after the victim by desperate hands. He sees ambulances, police, emergency crew. After too long a time, someone dives into the water, and they pull out the unmoving body, and all the while, Viktor hears screaming.

The other Viktor is screaming.

Time returns to normal, and the screaming fades away, replaced by silence. The morning light and the other Viktor are gone, and Viktor stands at the edge of the ice, staring at the body of a person he has never met, yet he feels the devastation of Katsuki Yuuri's death as strongly and clearly as he would Makkachin or his own parents.

He walks closer to the body, staring blankly down at Yuuri's serene expression. His lips are blue -- lips that Viktor somehow knows are softer than silk -- and his eyes are closed in peace, his hair and skin wet from the icy water.

Viktor realizes he is crying. "How could this happen?" he whispers, kneeling beside Yuuri and gently taking his hands. There is a gold ring on Yuuri's finger, and somehow, Viktor knows that there is half a snowflake inscribed on the inside. He lifts Yuuri's cold hand and kisses the ring, bowing his head in grief.

"Viktor," he hears, in a strangely familiar voice, and when Viktor looks around, he is alone.

~*~

Viktor wakes with tears on his cheeks and sits up with a gasp. Makkachin lifts her head, blinking sleepily at him, but Viktor finds himself close to hyperventilating, horrified by the nightmare. He had dreamed of Katsuki Yuuri dying in a terrible accident over the Neva. Viktor has never even met Yuuri, and as far as he knows, Yuuri lives in Detroit, in the United States.

Viktor has never been above superstition. He grabs his phone and checks the news frantically for any sign of Yuuri's name, but all he finds are news articles about Yuuri taking part in Worlds. Nothing about any injury or his death, which soothes Viktor only a little. He even goes so far as to hunt through the news channels for Detroit, but none of them mention Yuuri, nor any accidents associated with a river.

Desperate for something to reassure him that Yuuri is alive, Viktor sends a message to Chris, who knows just about everybody in the ice skating world.

To: Chris :)
Chris, do you know anything about Katsuki Yuuri?

Chris is two hours behind him, and it is the middle of the night. Despite this, Chris is quick to reply, which is a relief to Viktor.

From: Chris :(
Yes, I do. Viktor, you realize that it is almost one in the morning for me. We both have flights to catch

To: Chris :)  
I'm sorry but I need to know. Is he okay? Can you contact him?

From: Chris :)  
I have his number... what is this about? Did something happen?

Viktor stands and makes his way to the kitchen, rubbing his arms. He is overreacting, he knows. Chris will understand though, if Viktor explains it right. He takes a deep breath to center himself, then turns on his coffee maker, switching it over to hot water so that he can make a cup of tea. While it heats up, he types out his response, his thoughts barely coherent.

To: Chris :)  
You're going to think this sounds crazy but I had a dream about him. In my dream he died. I couldn't do anything to stop it. I don't even know him and I dreamed he died. It upset me a lot and I just want to know if he's alright, I couldn't find anything in the news, so can you please find out?

From: Chris :)  
I sent him a message. He's in America so he should be awake right now. I didn't know you knew who he was.

To: Chris :)  
My rinkmate is a big fan and I looked him up. I don't understand why I dreamed about him. I've never even met him. In the dream he was someone special to me. Like a lover or a friend. And he died right in front of my eyes. I couldn’t save him.

From: Chris :)  
Hey it's okay. It was just a dream, it wasn’t real.

To: Chris :)  
It felt real!

From: Chris :)  
It's okay. I'm sure he's fine. Yuuri texted me back. He's watching a movie with his roommate. I made him send an awkward selfie, so you can see for yourself.

The picture that loads sends Viktor sinking to the floor, his legs folding close to his chest. Katsuki Yuuri wears glasses, and his messy hair hangs over his eyes, and his shirt is rumpled. Most importantly, he looks alive. Whole, and utterly beautiful. His eyes are dark, sparkling with humor, and his lips are flushed and pursed with a little grin. A hand, likely belonging to his roommate, is pushing a large handful of popcorn into his face, and it looks like Yuuri is about to start laughing.

Viktor spends a long time staring at that picture, burning it into his memory to erase the haunting image of Yuuri's face, still in death. Yuuri is alive and safe in Detroit, and Viktor has photographic evidence that his dream was just a nightmare. Viktor realizes that he is crying and quickly wipes away the tears, exhaling shakily.

From: Chris :)
You okay love?

To: Chris :) 
Yes. I'm okay now. Thanks for contacting him for me

From: Chris :) 
No problem ♡ let me know when you arrive in Boston. We should have dinner

To: Chris :) 
Okay. Good night Chris ♡

Viktor lowers his phone and sighs, looking up at his ceiling. He wants to understand why he dreamt of Katsuki Yuuri in such a tragic way. Somehow, he doubts he will be able to go back to sleep for some time, so Viktor drags himself up and makes his cup of tea, before retiring to the couch and spending the next three hours watching videos of Yuuri's interviews.

~*~

Viktor arrives in Boston at two in the morning, local time. He is exhausted and all but trudges into his hotel room, which he thankfully does not have to share this year. He sleeps deeply without dreaming, and when he wakes hours later, he feels refreshed enough to handle a shower and coffee.

The morning light is sparkling on the buildings across the river, so Viktor snaps a picture and uploads it. He feels energized in a strange way, and some part of him is aware of the reason: he might meet Katsuki Yuuri today.

He still doesn't know why he dreamed about Yuuri. The dream left a visceral effect on him, to the point that Viktor has taken to opening the picture that Chris sent him whenever he starts thinking too much about it. He wonders what kind of person Yuuri is; his interviews show someone who is shy and uncomfortable with attention, but the photo shows someone who knows how to laugh.

A part of him definitely finds Yuuri attractive. The feeling of closeness and familiarity from his dream might be affecting his thoughts, but Viktor doesn't let himself think too deeply about it. Viktor can admit, at least, that Yuuri has caught his attention, and he looks forward to skating against him.

The TD Garden is a large, shining building with lots of shops dedicated to sports and bars nearby. American basketball is huge here, and the arena is multi-purpose, able to be converted into a skating rink for the Worlds competition, and popularly used as a concert hall for music artists. Viktor browses a list of nearby restaurants curiously on the ride over from the hotel, debating which one Chris will drag him to; nearly all of them are sports bars, but some look interesting. There are restaurants around the hotel, too, so any of them seem like a good choice.

He follows Yakov into the hall, settling into a charming smile when someone notices him and waves. The room is reasonably crowded, ISU staff and skaters milling around, looking over schedules and discussing upcoming events. Viktor breathes in a little of the familiar atmosphere, his smile widening.

He is home, here.

An annoyingly loud person is talking nearby, and Viktor hears his name a moment later in response. He turns his head, raising an eyebrow. The voice is melodic and vaguely familiar, though Viktor can't remember where he has heard it before.
"... been harping about Viktor for hours, and I'm sick of it."

The source of the annoying voice, a young skater with a Canadian jacket, scoffs. "Oh, right, you're his fan. He's never going to look at you, you know."

Wow, what an asshole, Viktor thinks, his lips twitching downward. Viktor has always treated his fans with the utmost respect, making time to meet with them and responding to as many messages and letters that he can.

A figure stands up beside the Canadian skater, and Viktor starts a little in surprise. The source of the kind voice is Katsuki Yuuri, of all people, and he is glaring up at the Canadian skater with an expression that makes Viktor's breath catch in his throat.

"First of all, there is no way that you will beat Viktor Nikiforov. That is a fact. He's the best in the entire skating world." Yuuri tilts his head to the side, his eyes narrowing slightly behind his glasses. The expression on his face is challenging, daring. "Second of all, before you worry about beating Viktor, you should worry about me."

A thrill runs through Viktor. Yuuri's words are rather flattering to his ego, and Viktor inches a little closer, stepping around someone and ending up behind Yuuri, which is a shame because he wants to look at Yuuri's face again. He finds himself cheering for Yuuri, amused that the seemingly diminutive Japanese skater is staring down a taller, more imposing man without batting an eyelash.

The Canadian skater laughs mockingly. "You? Why should I worry about someone like you? Twenty-two and you've never even medaled internationally. Someone like you could never hope to reach the podium."

Viktor's smile disappears. He hates people like this man, who talk down to others with arrogance. In front of him, Yuuri snorts as if the Canadian skater's words mean nothing to him. "Then why have you been watching my practices so closely, hm? Worried?"

Ooh, nice, Viktor thinks, watching the Canadian skater's mouth snap shut. Yuuri turns around after a moment, and Viktor feels another thrill when their eyes meet for the first time. Yuuri stares blankly at him for a moment before embarrassment takes over, his face flushing brilliantly to the tips of his ears, and the weight of his horror at finding Viktor there is palpable.

Viktor has to keep himself from smiling. Cute.

He wonders what he should say. Hi, I'm Viktor Nikiforov. I heard that you're my fan.

Hi, I'm Viktor. I've been wanting to meet you for a while now.

Hi, I had a dream that you died, and I'm so happy to see that you're alive, and by the way, you're the most beautiful person I've ever met in my life.

"Viktor Nikiforov!" the Canadian skater says loudly when he notices him, drawing attention from around the room. He throws an arm around Yuuri, and the minute flinch of Yuuri's shoulders does not escape Viktor's notice. "We were just talking about you!"

Steel returns to Yuuri's expression, and Viktor can see the exact moment that Yuuri decides he is not going to deal with this any longer. "Stop," Yuuri orders, before he slips out from under the man's arm and steps away from him, fixing him with a glare. "I'm going to find Celestino."

He turns and leaves without another word, perhaps a little rudely, but after the way his friend behaved (and Viktor is rather hesitant to call them "friends"), Viktor finds he doesn't blame him.
The Canadian is left standing alone, bewildered. Viktor raises a cold eyebrow, summoning his best smile that screams *Living Legend of Russia*, and the Canadian man blinks several times.

"Well," the man huffs, giving Viktor a narrow-eyed stare before walking after Yuuri. Viktor watches them across the room, his gaze following Yuuri as he joins up with Celestino Cialdini and several other skaters. They follow the tall Italian man out of the hall, and just before Yuuri steps outside, he glances over his shoulder.

He meets Viktor's eyes, sending another thrill through him. Then he walks away, and Viktor is left wondering what Katsuki Yuuri thinks of him, to defend him so passionately against a detractor while running away from Viktor as soon as he sees him.

He smiles slowly. Seems like a challenge, this Yuuri.

That is the thought that carries Viktor into Tuesday. He does his rounds with his fans, signing autographs and having lunch with one of his sponsors, before he heads to the rink for practice. As he trails Yakov and Georgi into the practice rink, Viktor's focus is on his short program and how the audience will react to the additional moves he has added.

"Ah! The fires of rivalry have been fanned," Georgi gasps when they near the ice. Viktor rolls his eyes upward, then looks toward the practice rink, wondering which skaters have gotten into an argument this time.

To his surprise, he sees Katsuki Yuuri and Jean-Jacques Leroy, the Canadian skater from yesterday, standing close while exchanging heated words. Most of the rink has cottoned onto the fact that the two are arguing, and Viktor narrows his eyes, wondering if Leroy is still baiting Yuuri. Suddenly, Yuuri brings his hand up and points a finger at Leroy's chest, snapping something at him before skating to the other side of the rink.

Viktor watches, nonplussed. He has no idea what Leroy said to set Yuuri off, and he wonders what Yuuri is up to. It becomes extremely clear in only a few moments, when Yuuri begins skating part of a routine -- but not any routine that Viktor has seen in his videos.

Seconds later, Yuuri throws a challenging glare across the room and propels himself off the ice into a quadruple jump. Not just any jump, either -- the quadruple flip, Viktor's own signature jump.

Viktor counts the rotations as if in slow motion. Yuuri makes every one of them and lands cleanly, turning into a spin and raising his hand over his head in poignant grace. As he slows to a stop, he lifts his hand as if to reach out, but at the last second, his hand turns over and he points at Leroy, glaring.

"Gonna call me a liar now?" Yuuri says, his voice echoing across the ice. Viktor blinks once, realizing that the entire room has stopped to stare, just as shocked as he is.

Katsuki Yuuri just landed his jump. To prove Leroy wrong, apparently, and Viktor distantly wonders what Leroy must have said to push Yuuri into performing the jump.

He is aware of people noticing him and whispering. Viktor says nothing when Yakov turns to look at him with wide eyes, wondering what his own reaction to this event is. His mind is completely blank. All he can think about is the way Yuuri looked when he landed the jump -- as if lost in a beautiful memory.

"Yuuri Katsuki!" Celestino thunders, and Yuuri flinches, his expression crumpling. Viktor watches as Celestino gathers his three skaters to him and drags them off the ice, wondering if Yuuri was
prohibited from jumps today. Yakov does that to him sometimes, when Viktor is a little too impatient.

Yuuri steps off the ice, just a few feet away from Viktor, and when he looks up, that same look of horror from yesterday takes over his expression when his eyes land on Viktor.

The dull rush of emptiness in Viktor's head suddenly comes to a stop when he sees tears appear in Yuuri’s eyes. Yuuri looks away, visibly struggling to reign in his emotions, before he nods to Viktor and passes him, the line of his shoulders slumped with defeat.

Viktor turns halfway. He needs to talk to Yuuri, to find out what he was thinking when he made that jump. "Wait," he calls, but Yuuri has already left by the time he says the word.

"Who is that boy?" Yakov demands, and Viktor rocks back on his heels.

"That's Yuuri," he hears himself replying. "Katsuki Yuuri, from Japan." The man from his dream, who has more emotion inside him than Viktor has ever seen in a person before -- and he desperately wants to find out what else Yuuri feels.

~*~

"He did what," Chris says later in the lobby of the hotel, after Viktor escapes Yakov's attention and has changed into casual clothes. The flabbergasted expression on his face doesn't suit him, but Viktor understands it all too well. After a moment Chris pulls out his phone, sending off a quick text.

"He landed a quad flip in practice. Perfectly, might I add." Viktor makes a noise of frustration. "Apparently that Canadian skater accused him of lying about being able to do a third quad. Yuuri wasn't supposed to do quads during practice, so he got in trouble with his coach because that man baited him into showing off. I'm mad, because I don't want to thank that annoying skater. If he hadn't tricked Yuuri into doing the jump, I wouldn't have found out he could do a quad flip, but I don't like that he upset Yuuri enough to get him in trouble. What was his name, Jimmy Jack?"

"Jean-Jacques," Chris reminds him, his shock fading a little. "Is that dislike I hear? From the famous nice guy of the skating world?"

"Nice," Viktor scoffs, pulling on his sunglasses as they step outside. He switches to French and lowers his voice, not wanting to be overheard. "Nice does not encompass the ire I feel toward that stain on sportsmanship."

"He's not that bad... hmm." Chris eyes him for a long moment, pausing in his typing, and Viktor sighs, giving him a look over his sunglasses.

"What?"

"Nothing," Chris replies, a little too quickly. "Shall we go eat? I'll be happy to listen to you rant about JJ Leroy for a couple of hours. It would bring me great amusement."

"Sure," Viktor sighs, glancing up at the cloudy sky. "Where are we going?"

"A restaurant nearby. I picked it out earlier," Chris says, smiling. Viktor stays quiet, brooding over what happened earlier. As they turn onto the street where the restaurant is, Chris gets a text message from someone. "Ah, good. Viktor, would you mind if a friend or two joined us?" His tone is far too casual for Viktor's taste.
He narrows his eyes a little. He sees right through Chris' innocent smile. "You're going to invite Katsuki Yuuri, aren't you."

Chris laughs and lifts his phone, showing his messages with Yuuri. Viktor can't help but steal a glance at the conversation. "Already done, my friend. He and Phichit Chulanont are making their way here right now. You wanted to talk to him anyway, didn't you?"

Viktor wonders whether he should be annoyed or impressed. "You're maneuvering me," he tells Chris, whose smile widens with amusement.

"I'm giving you a helping hand. Don't whine so much, mon cher. You'll like him."

That's what I'm afraid of, Viktor doesn't say. The invitation has already been sent, and Viktor isn't the type of person to run away from his problems. He might gracefully sidestep them on occasion, but this is one situation that he should face head-on.

Chris puts his phone away after a while, and the silence between them stays a little tense. Chris doesn't appear too bothered by it, leaving Viktor to his thoughts about having a meal with the elusive Katsuki Yuuri. For the first time in many years, a tendril of nervousness creeps into him.

Yuuri is clearly a fan of his. His skating contains more elements and imitations from Viktor's style than Viktor has ever seen in a skater at his level. The fact that he overheard Yuuri arguing against someone in Viktor's favor is a positive point as well. While Viktor couldn't care less what Leroy thinks of him, he almost wishes he had overheard the entire conversation. He wants to know more of Yuuri's opinion of him.

Has he ever been this interested in what a fan thinks of him? Another skater?

I hope he doesn't run away again.

As they wait outside the Atlantic Fish Company, Viktor tapping his foot impatiently, he notices a flash of dark hair out of the corner of his eye. He looks over in time to see Yuuri ducking out of sight, dragging his rinkmate with him. A moment later, Chris gets a text message, which makes him raise his eyebrows.

"Oh dear," Chris says as he reads it, smiling wryly. Viktor doesn't have to think too hard on what happened.

"This is why you don't maneuver people, Chris," he sighs, before heading in the direction that his elusive target escaped. Chris lifts his eyes upwards but doesn't protest, following after Viktor as he taps away at his phone.

As he nears the storefront where Yuuri is hiding, Viktor hears Yuuri's melodic voice, deadened with dread.

"...pack everything up and move to Wisconsin and become a potato farmer," Yuuri is saying, his voice somewhat muffled by the glass window he is using to hide his face. "Potatoes are important, right? More important than my dismal skating career and every crap decision I've made in the past five months. You can make a lot of things with potatoes, you know. Fries. Croquettes. Curry."

The other skater, Phichit, notices him and Chris immediately and claps his hands over his mouth, his eyes going wide. Yuuri doesn't notice as his monologue continues, and Viktor can't help but pity him.

"Vodka," he offers for Yuuri's proposed future, his lips twitching upwards into a grin. Yuuri is just
too cute. He entertains a brief thought of Yuuri flailing and running in the other direction, but Yuuri only nods in agreement.

"Right, vodka, that one's pretty important. See? Potato farmer it is."

A second later, Yuuri jumps three feet in the air and whirls around, his eyes widening with comical shock at seeing Viktor standing there. Viktor has to bite back a wide smile; somehow, every single expression or movement from Yuuri has him completely charmed. They stare at each other for a long moment, and Viktor unconsciously holds his breath, wondering if perhaps this time, he will get to talk to Yuuri before he runs away again.

After a moment, just long enough for a blush to start taking over Yuuri's cheeks, Phichit clears his throat. "Isn't Wisconsin next to Canada? You'd still be neighbors with JJ."

Yuuri's face quickly turns to horror, and Viktor bursts out laughing, the last of his irritation fading away. Delighted, he watches Chris cajole Yuuri into joining them, his gaze briefly dropping to the hand that slides down Yuuri's hip for a quick, welcoming squeeze. If Viktor didn't know the entirety of the saga of Chris and Masumi, he would be more jealous than just a quick glance could stir, but Chris has been in a monogamous relationship for years and uses flirting like other people use manners.

Yuuri's squawk of indignation makes Viktor smile again. He watches him for a long moment, then looks over at Phichit. "Shall we, then?" Viktor offers, which makes Phichit's eyes widen with excitement.

"Hi," Phichit blurts out, beaming. "I'm Phichit Chulanont! I'm such a big fan, Viktor! May I take a selfie with you?"

"Sure!" Phichit takes the picture and posts it with an ease born of a love for social media, which Viktor can respect. He exchanges some small talk with Phichit as they enter the restaurant, finding that the Thai skater is bubbly and effusive while not being overbearing. Phichit is an interesting counterpoint to Yuuri, who is currently trying to evade Chris' sneaking hands with a small frown on his lips.

Lips that are flushed with life, soft, inviting. Viktor briefly sees them as pale and cold, touched with ice, and has to shake his head a little hard to chase the image away.

Katsuki Yuuri is alive, and it was only a dream.

Chris 'maneuvers' Viktor into sitting across from Yuuri, which grants him the opportunity to look at Yuuri all he wants without it seeming odd. One must look at their tablemate to be polite, right? Viktor settles into staring, paying close attention to the way Yuuri's hair falls over his eyes, and the way he skirts away from ever maintaining eye contact.

Yet despite his apparent shyness at actually meeting Viktor, Yuuri is not intimidated by other social exchanges, joking with Phichit and Chris with a small smile that grabs Viktor's attention and does not let go for the rest of the night.

The moment that Yuuri finally meets his eyes sends a shiver straight through Viktor. How can someone's eyes be so expressive? They all but sparkle, and despite the trepidation that overshadows Yuuri's mien, Viktor can't help but soften.

"You're different than what I expected," he says quietly. Yuuri is surprising him at every turn, and Viktor finds it a little enthralling. Watching him in interviews on the internet (and seeing him in his
dreams) paints only a small part of the picture that makes up Katsuki Yuuri.

"Um, okay," Yuuri says, thrown. He seems to struggle with himself for a moment, some battle inside his mind that Viktor cannot hear, before his eyes clear of their indecision and he squares his shoulders. "I didn't think you'd have an opinion of me. We've never met before."

_Much to my dismay. Chris, I'm buying you that bottle of Clive Christian if this works._

"I've heard about you, though. You nearly got bronze at Four Continents, didn't you? Then you won your Nationals back in December." Viktor has seen the video of Yuuri's reaction at the Kiss and Cry. That soft, dazed look on his face at hearing the announcement that he had won gold stayed with Viktor for weeks afterwards.

Yuuri seems to turn a little pink. His eyes have not left Viktor's face. "I suppose. I just didn't think you'd look me up," he all but mumbles. Viktor is briefly reminded of Leroy, taunting Yuuri about not getting to meet Viktor, and he has to hide a scowl.

Of course he would want to meet Yuuri. Not just as a fan, but also as a fellow skater -- especially since Yuuri can land the quad flip, too.

Besides, it seems like Viktor is becoming Yuuri's fan, as well, if the number of videos in his "Yuuri" playlist on YouTube is any indication. Viktor shrugs a little, casual. "My rinkmate, Yuri Plisetsky, started watching your programs after someone linked him because you two share a name. You caught my attention." _And I'm not even lying._

"Yuri Plisetsky," Yuuri repeats a little blankly. "He's in juniors, right?" Viktor raises his eyebrows, bemused that Yuuri even knows who Yuri is. That would send the short teenager straight up the wall.

"Mm," Viktor agrees. "I'm sure you'll meet him sometime. I'll have to thank him for bringing you to my attention, because it's definitely proven worthwhile." He smiles, thinking of how mad Yuri would be to know that Viktor is here chatting up his idol while Yuri is stuck in St. Petersburg.

Viktor is not above being petty.

The server brings them their drinks, and Viktor settles into his Amstel Light with a small sigh. He would love to have something harder, but Yakov would actually murder him if Viktor dared drink during a competition. Yuuri seems to be under the same guidelines, because he only orders a draft beer. (Chris has no such compunction. Damn him.)

Viktor is so caught up in his thoughts that he almost doesn't notice it. When he sets down his beer, licking his lips of the sharp taste, he sees Yuuri's gaze drop to his mouth, then look away quickly as the tips of his ears redden. The vision shocks Viktor, enough that he ends up staring openly.

Katsuki Yuuri is attracted to him.

Many of his fans are. Viktor is no stranger to the public's love for him. He has starred in commercials, posed for fashion shoots, given countless interviews, and received admiring messages from fans all over the world. Viktor knows full well how popular he is. If he wants a date, sometimes all he has to do is flash a smile, and he has suitors falling over each other to take that elusive spot in his bed.

Yet none of it compares, somehow, to the fact that Katsuki Yuuri, the most beautiful man Viktor has ever seen and the source of his quickly growing obsession, is attracted to him. No wonder Yuuri has taken to running away every time he meets Viktor.
Viktor usually ignores his fans' more blatant interest in his body, while respecting their desire to be close to him. It's becoming apparent, though, that Yuuri is more than simply a fan.

The real question is... what is Viktor going to do about it?

Quickly, Viktor searches for something to say, to distract himself from entertaining that thought any further. His mind catches on what happened earlier that afternoon, and his interest sharpens. "You can do the quad flip now."

Yuuri looks rather defeated when Viktor brings it up. Likely, he wished to avoid all mentions of the infamous jump. "Yes. I haven't performed it in competition, though."

"Why not? From what I heard, you landed it perfectly at practice today," Chris interjects. Viktor has to wonder what Chris thinks about Yuuri landing a third quad, when Chris has only managed two in competition. Viktor is of the opinion that the number of quads one has under their belt does not make one a better or worse competitor, though he knows many of his fellow skaters (and rivals, which Chris definitely is) have looked at him jealously for years for being able to perform the more difficult jumps.

Yuuri shrugs a little. "I haven't been sure about the landing," he mumbles, briefly glancing away. "My coach didn't know I had it down. I kind of hid it from him."

Chris is surprised, as is Viktor. "You kept a secret like that from your coach?"

"He didn't tell anybody," pipes in Phichit. "We're all in the same skating club, and none of us knew that Yuuri had a third quad." He gives Yuuri a pout. "Not even me, your roommate! How could you keep this from me, Yuuri?"

Yuuri looks away, his shoulders tensing from all the attention. Viktor almost wants to reach across the table and draw his fingers along Yuuri's arm to relax him. The thought surprises him, because he is rarely this concerned for a fellow skater's welfare. "I'm sorry. I wanted it to be a surprise," Yuuri admits.

"Do you think you'll add it to one of your programs? Your free skate, perhaps?" Chris asks, strangely intent on the answer.

Yuuri drags his gaze away from the decorations on the wall, his gaze skirting Viktor's face briefly. "I haven't thought about it. I'm in trouble with my coach right now, so..."

Ah, that sounds familiar. How many times have I made Yakov mad, now? "Mm, that's disappointing. He should be praising you for landing it," Viktor says. He would want someone to support him if he was having a fight with Yakov over something like his jumps.

Yuuri gives him a wide-eyed look, apparently surprised by Viktor's comment. "Well, that's up to him," he says after a moment, still eyeing Viktor cautiously. He doesn't quite understand why Yuuri is looking at him in such a way, so Viktor gives a smile, somewhat confused.

"Hmm..." Viktor takes a drink of his beer, thinking. He knows that half the skating world has heard the rumor of what happened at the men's practice, but since no one took a video and it was only a practice, many people do not believe the rumors. If Yuuri landed the quad flip in competition...

Viktor can just imagine the furor such an act would create. He almost looks forward to it. For so many years, Viktor has been at the top of the figure skating world. His wins are guaranteed. He has won the GPF for four years in a row, and his fans have come to expect the gold medals that hang on his chest for a few hours before he quietly packs them away. He knows he is getting older, that
skaters like Yuuri and Leroy and Phichit are the future, but still he cannot let himself retire.

Yet if he cannot surprise his audience, then Viktor does not know how he can go on, either. Figure skating has been his life for so long that Viktor has no idea what else he would do. Watching Yuuri roll out surprise after surprise, from his Nationals win to the possibility of using a quad flip in his program, is interesting -- even though Viktor feels it bittersweet at the same time. Yuuri is in the same position Viktor was once in, now.

He wonders what else Yuuri can do. He wonders if Yuuri could get up to his level -- and then, what Viktor could do to rise above him again. He lets himself imagine the constant challenge, and for a moment, he wants.

When a lull in the conversation draws Viktor back to the table, he notices Yuuri staring at him, his dark eyes almost sparkling beneath the lamplight. Viktor wonders briefly what Yuuri is thinking, to look at him in such away.

"How long have you been practicing the flip?" Viktor asks, before Yuuri can get embarrassed and look away again.

"Five months," Yuuri says after a moment, shyly meeting Viktor's gaze. Viktor blinks in surprise, then smiles.

"That's very impressive, Yuuri," Viktor says, leaning his chin on his hand. It is, too -- it took Viktor seven months to land the flip consistently, and at least a year to be confident to use it in competition. He marvels at Yuuri's work ethic to practice the flip so much while training for Nationals, Four Continents, and Worlds at the same time.

"That means a lot coming from you, Viktor," Yuuri says quietly, opening his eyes to look at Viktor again. His eyes are glittering again, warm and bright with unnamed emotion, and Viktor swallows against the sudden dryness in his throat. The realization is sudden, sweeping through and rewriting everything he knows about Katsuki Yuuri.

Yuuri isn't just his fan; he looks up to Viktor. Perhaps as an idol, but the emotion in his eyes and words speaks of something deeper, something Viktor can only hope to touch upon, because somehow he knows that Yuuri will never say the words.

He blinks a few times, touched, and infinitely happy that he has met this person. "I'm glad," he says quietly, watching Yuuri's cheeks flush delicately.

Perhaps sensing that Viktor is just a little distracted, Chris leads the conversation for the rest of the night, steering it away from the upcoming competition and asking Phichit and Yuuri about their time training in America. Phichit is quick to ask Viktor and Chris all sorts of questions about their training, their home countries, and their personal lives, which gives Viktor ample opportunity to talk about Makkachin, his favorite topic.

To his delight and surprise, he finds out that Yuuri also has a dog -- a poodle, no less. Yuuri's phone background is of a darling little chocolate poodle, and Viktor immediately falls in love.

"Is that a poodle puppy?" he asks, fingers twitching toward Yuuri's phone.

Yuuri freezes, looking down at his phone, then up at Viktor. His face floods red again. "He's not a puppy, he's a toy poodle. But... um, yes, that's my dog." He must see the hope in Viktor's expression, because he gives a heavy sigh and opens his phone, pulling up a picture gallery before holding out the phone. Viktor beams and scrolls through the pictures, nearly cooing at how cute
the poodle is.

"He's adorable," Viktor croons. "What's his name? How old is he?"

If possible, Yuuri turns even redder. "He's... twelve years old." He closes his eyes briefly. "His name is Vicchan."

Viktor blinks, looking up from the phone. "Vicchan?"

"Short for Viktor-chan," Yuuri mumbles, before taking a very long drink of beer. Viktor stares for a long moment, his face slowly heating up. If he hadn't been certain of Yuuri being his fan already, then he would be now.

He named his dog after me.

"That's adorable," Viktor says, his smile brightening as he wills away his blush. "He's so beautiful. I love him already. I bet he and Makkachin would love each other," he sighs, pulling out his phone and opening it to his Makkachin folder. He taps on a picture on each phone and admires the two dogs side by side, before turning them around to show Yuuri. "It's like they're siblings! They'd be best friends!"

Something in Yuuri's face trembles a little, and for a moment he looks sad, his eyes wide and vulnerable. "I bet they would," Yuuri murmurs, his eyes going a bit misty. "May I look at your pictures of Makkachin?"

"Of course!"

He loves that Yuuri is also a dog person. He is rather touched that Yuuri apparently got Vicchan because Viktor had Makkachin, and that he even named his poodle after Viktor himself -- which speaks of how long Yuuri has looked up to him.

Viktor wishes he had known of Yuuri earlier. He wonders if he can find Yuuri's old juniors videos. Chris competed against him once upon a time, hadn't he?

After dinner, the four decide to walk back to the hotel together, and Viktor finds himself watching Yuuri once again. He isn't sure his attention ever left Yuuri once during the entire dinner, to be honest. Seeing Yuuri and talking to him has gone a long way to reassure Viktor after his haunting dream.

He is hit with a sudden idea, and Viktor grins, crooking a finger at Yuuri to beckon him to his side. "Come here," he calls. Yuuri gives him one of those adorable wide-eyed looks but obeys, and when he is close enough, Viktor wraps his arm around Yuuri's shoulder. Beneath his touch, Yuuri feels warm, alive. Before Yuuri can protest, Viktor takes a selfie of the two of them, inwardly sighing at how gorgeous Yuuri looks.

"Perfect," Viktor says, adding tags and posting it after he lets Yuuri go.

v-nikiforov: A lovely night with a new friend! #WorldsCompetition #figureskating

He notices Yuuri's phone buzzing and watches him open it to Instagram. Yuuri stares blankly at his phone. "Viktor, you have three hundred thousand followers," Yuuri says in disbelief, before he turns pink.

Viktor wastes no time. If Yuuri has Instagram, then Viktor can follow him. "Oh, you have Instagram, Yuuri? What's your handle?" he asks casually, and after a long moment, Yuuri gives in.
and spells it out for him. Soon Viktor has access to katsudon-y’s feed, which he will definitely review thoroughly later.

"I guess this is really happening," Yuuri mutters to himself, which Viktor overhears. Ahead of them, Chris and Phichit are chatting with friendly smiles, which amuses Viktor. He is glad that Chris seems to have gained a new friend from tonight.

Just like Viktor, hopefully.

"It isn't that bad, is it?" Viktor asks wryly. Yuuri gives him a startled look, which makes him chuckle. "You ran away as soon as you saw me earlier. In fact, you've been running away from me all week, and it's only Tuesday."

Yuuri's blush seems to reach up to his hair. Viktor is almost tempted to run his finger along the edge of Yuuri's pink ear, just to see if it feels as warm as it looks. "Can you blame me? Every time we meet, you witness something embarrassing happening to me."

Viktor almost can't believe what is happening to him. This beautiful, shy, adorable skater likes him and admires him so thoroughly that he would name his own dog after Viktor. Despite what some people might think, Viktor has never turned away a fan, and he would never, ever think badly of Yuuri for his admiration. Despite his clear apprehension, Yuuri still managed to share a meal and hold a normal conversation with Viktor, and Viktor thinks him brave for it.

He suspects he knows who put such doubt into Yuuri's mind. "I didn't think any of it was embarrassing. That Canadian skater... he was rather rude, wasn't he?" Viktor really does not like Jean-Jacques Leroy. One can be confident in their own skills without putting down others -- Viktor manages it just fine. If Leroy aspires to topple Viktor from his rightfully-earned place at the top of the skating world, he should at least be as courteous to his fellow skaters as Viktor is.

Yuuri grimaces, sliding his hands into his hoodie pockets. The hoodie is dark blue with a Wayne State emblem, clearly well-loved, and it dwarfs Yuuri a little. "I don't know why he has it out for me. We're in the same skating club, but..."

"Sounds like he's jealous to me," Viktor says thoughtfully. He can't say he knows the full story, but it seems likely enough -- though Leroy certainly has no business being nasty about it. "You've improved so much in such a short time. He gets to see that firsthand, since he skates in the same rink as you, and it's making him very worried. Still, he shouldn't be so rude."

Yuuri looks up at him for a long moment, his dark eyes deep with unspoken hope that Viktor wants to gather and hold in his hands, to protect it from ever faltering. "Thank you," Yuuri says quietly. "I'll have to try to ignore him for now. I've got to focus on the competition."

"Good idea," Viktor says with a small smile. "I look forward to your short program tomorrow."

The expression that takes over Yuuri's face is one that Viktor cannot read. After a moment, Yuuri's cheeks turn a little more pink, but at the same time, his eyes darken, something otherworldly flaring. Yuuri licks his lips as he considers what to say, and Viktor cannot help but glance at that mouth, reminded of his dream's knowledge that they are soft as silk.

He wonders.

"If you can... I'd love for you to watch me perform," Yuuri says softly. Watch me, and only me, his eyes say, and Viktor swallows, reminded of his unfortunate attraction to this beautiful man.

After a moment, Viktor smiles, and it is a slow, dark thing, with a little bit of challenge, and more
than a little flirtation. "Okay. If you promise me you'll do the same. Watch my short program."

The sight of Yuuri's blush is gratifying beyond measure.

All of the skaters for Worlds are staying at the Marriott Copley Hotel, so the four walk back together. Viktor allows a lull in conversation to fall between him and Yuuri, glancing at him out of the corner of his eye. Yuuri catches his eye a few times and, once, manages a small smile, and to Viktor's surprise, the silence is never uncomfortable.

It isn't just his imagination. There is something wonderfully familiar about Katsuki Yuuri, as if they have been friends for years. He sees a kindred soul in Yuuri, and that comfort from a stranger calls to him.

It's like Yuuri already knows him.

He realizes he does not wish to let go of Yuuri. He wants to believe they could be friends. Viktor has so few real friends -- Christophe, certainly, and his rinkmates. His small collection of contacts in St. Petersburg, though he hardly ever sees them. Stephane, though Viktor rarely speaks to him anymore. He could use another friend.

Yuuri and Phichit are staying on the seventh floor, while Viktor's room is on the tenth. They share the elevator for the ride up, and Viktor draws himself from his thoughts when Yuuri follows his rinkmate off the elevator. Phichit waves excitedly, and Yuuri looks back with a tiny smile.

"Good night," Yuuri says, his eyes staying on Viktor for longer than is strictly necessary. Viktor holds his gaze until the door closes.

He sighs, pushing his hair back out of his face and tilting his head back, marveling over their exchange over the course of the night.

Chris laughs softly beside him. "Aren't you glad I introduced you?"

"You could say that," Viktor says quietly, lost in thought.

Despite staying on a floor above Viktor, Chris follows him off the elevator and to his room, which Viktor doesn't mind. He lets Chris in, tossing the key card and his sunglasses on the bed. Chris sits down, reclining back with a flirtatious grin, and Viktor considers him for a moment.

"How long have you known him?"

"Eight years, give or take. We were rivals back in juniors, and he gave me some fierce competition. He was such a cute little thing," Chris sighs. "Sweet and nervous. Adorable. He's grown up well, I'd say."

Viktor rolls his eyes, sliding off his coat and hanging it up in his closet. "Were you ever together?"

Chris eyes him for a long moment for the question, but Viktor avoids his gaze and walks over to the window, gazing at the city lights. Finally Chris answers, "No, he's had someone else in his heart, for the entire time I've known him."

Viktor doesn't let himself think too hard on that. "I wish I knew why I dreamed about him."

"That is curious. You really hadn't met him before?" Chris asks, pulling out his phone and looking at the screen.
Viktor shakes his head. "Never. I'm sure I've read about him before in articles about Four Continents, that way you hear about everybody in figure skating. But I never interacted with him before this competition. Yuri, my rinkmate, started following him a few months ago, and it caught my attention. So I looked him up... and then I had that dream." He sighs, sinking into the chair by the window, his thoughts returning to the dream.

"Do you think it's something like destiny?" Chris asks after a moment, making Viktor blink and sit up.

"Destiny?"

"Dreaming about him, then meeting him. He looks up to you, you know," Chris offers casually. Viktor gives him a look; as if it isn't obvious.

"I don't know about destiny, but... something about him just feels right," Viktor says slowly. "Like he could be someone important to me. I'd like to know him better."

Chris says nothing to that, his eyes staying on his phone. Viktor doesn't worry about Chris' reticence too much; Chris rarely speaks his own thoughts, choosing instead to dance around others with a charming smile. If Chris had a problem with Viktor knowing Yuuri, he wouldn't have introduced them in the first place.

Viktor does not know what Yuuri will become to him. A friend, a rival, a lover -- the future is beautifully uncertain, and Viktor finds himself looking forward to finding out.

~*~

When he makes it to the stadium on Wednesday, Viktor realizes with delight that he will be skating at the same time as Yuuri, then grimaces with dismay when he notices that Leroy is in the same group. He glances between Yuuri and Leroy, sensing the simmering tension, but their coach is keeping a close enough eye on them that Leroy hasn't started bothering Yuuri.

He seems to have no compunction about taunting Viktor, though, right in the middle of Viktor's stretches. The group before them has already gone, and it will be Yuuri's turn next. Viktor looks forward to seeing his short program in person.

"It must be pretty disappointing, knowing you're not the only person who can do a quad flip anymore," Leroy says to Viktor, his voice pleasant, but Viktor sees through him easily. He puts on his best smile, sharp and dangerous, daring Leroy to go any further.

"I think it's something to be celebrated, actually. Shouldn't we all support each other as skaters?"

"Yes, yes, of course," Leroy agrees, a little too quickly. Then he makes the mistake of looking at Yuuri. "Still, it's a shame when some of us just don't compare to the rest."

Viktor struggles not to seethe. His normally slow temper seems rather short, for once. He feels intensely protective of Yuuri, for some reason. "Hm? I can't imagine there's anybody like that." Viktor's smile is all teeth.

Leroy laughs, but the offending noise is cut off when Yuuri stands and turns to stare up at him flatly. Whatever Leroy sees in his expression makes him look away, while Viktor stares, his heart skipping a beat.

"Yuuri, it's time," Celestino calls. Yuuri unzips his jacket, revealing a gorgeous, form-fitting costume of white, blue, and violet, perfect with his dark hair. Viktor drag his gaze down a bit,
then takes a deep breath and follows Yakov to the arena, his heart beating a bit faster.

*He is going to perform.*

Yuuri is listening to his coach give him encouragement, nodding slightly, his expression staying mute with concentration. Before he skates away, he glances back and meets Viktor's eyes, and Viktor remembers Yuuri's wish from yesterday.

*I'll watch you,* Viktor promises silently, touching his finger to his lips. He exhales softly as Yuuri holds his gaze, dark eyes glittering, before he turns and makes his way to the center of the rink.

When the music from *Swan Lake* begins to play and Yuuri slides forward with a raw, open expression, a creature cursed in a terrifying world, Viktor stops breathing.

*Beautiful.*

Odette's pain from her curse is all too real, brought to life by Yuuri's sleek and concise choreography. His jumps are nearly perfect, and though there are small errors in his technical points, Yuuri carries the emotion of his story too well for the problems to truly detract from his skate, unlike programs in years past. Viktor wonders where Yuuri got the inspiration for the story; most would have woven it into something lighter, something less tragic, but Yuuri has turned the story into something truly amazing.

He doesn't think he breathes again until the last notes fade and Yuuri reaches out into the darkness once more, and all he can think is, *That is so much better than Nationals.* Viktor starts slightly to realize he is crying, when he sees Yuuri glance at him on his way to the Kiss and Cry.

Yuuri's eyes widen slightly, looking briefly horrified, and Viktor wipes his eyes and gives him a smile, lifting his hand in a wave. He ignores the look Yakov gives him and closes his eyes as Leroy steps onto the ice, listening for Yuuri's score.

His smile widens when he hears what it is. *Good, Yuuri.*

He doesn't bother watching Leroy, instead focusing on his upcoming program. Viktor's short program is part of his larger theme of *Rebellion.* Two years ago, Viktor had begun a one-man war against the the ISU, and to a lesser extent, the Figure Skating Federation of Russia, with a fierce campaign to allow same-sex couples in pair skating. Viktor had spread the campaign through his fans, his sponsors, and all of his social media accounts, and the revolution had quickly gained traction amongst skating fans -- until the ISU had come back and issued a punishment against him, including a threat to strip him of his certification if he did not stop involving the public. Yakov had all but dragged him kicking and screaming back to St. Petersburg after a vicious meeting with ISU officials.

He had not lost, though. The ISU had, rather reluctantly, promised to review the arguments Viktor had levied against them, though he hasn't heard a word from them since. This year's theme is a strongly coded condemnation of the ISU's continued silence. That the Russian counterpart had done little to assist Viktor in his quest infuriated him. Hence, "Rebellion," using songs from LGBTQ artists to make his point.

The ISU and Russia want Viktor to bow to their whims and follow at their heels like a good little poster boy, and Viktor will not have it. He knows the power of his face and ability; he is a celebrity, a so-called "living legend" of figure skating, and he will not be silenced.

For his short program, *Pop That Lock* by Adam Lambert does well to tell every official, who
threatened to cut off his sponsors and take him away from figure skating, "fuck you." They cannot silence him, nor his sexuality, nor his beliefs, and Viktor knows full well that his dances will sell faster than any tripe that the ISU tries to sell.

He is not their toy. He does what he wants, and they cannot stop him.

Yakov is talking to him, lecturing him on all the technical points he must ace to get gold. Viktor lets him drone on, instead thinking of the beautiful program he saw from Yuuri, and wondering what Yuuri thinks of his short program. Most of the skaters are familiar with each other's programs by this point. Viktor performed *Pop That Lock* at the GPF and European Championships after all. Yuuri must have seen it already.

Still, Viktor wants to leave a lasting impression on him, just as Yuuri did for him. Yuuri, the ISU, the world -- Viktor wants every one of them to watch him, and to know his truth.

He gives Yakov a confident smile and steps onto the ice, skating around the rink to tumultuous cheers. He glances across the crowd until he finds the competitor section of the audience, and his eyes land on Yuuri, already returned from his post-program interviews. Across ice and darkness and light, Viktor meets Yuuri's gaze, and he smiles slowly.

He does not know what Yuuri will come to mean to him. He has noticed Yuuri's attraction, and Viktor would be lying if he said he hadn't noticed how beautiful Yuuri is. He isn't certain whether he wants to bed Yuuri, or simply wants to know him, but no matter what he thinks of Yuuri, the terrifying images from his dream keep coming back to him.

Does he want Yuuri as a lover? As a friend? As a rival? What sort of relationship would suit the two of them best? Idol and fan define Viktor and Yuuri in one way, but that doesn't begin to explain Viktor's dream, nor the draw he feels toward Yuuri, a stranger until this week. He does not know if he has ever been this enthralled by someone before.

Yuuri has been a continual surprise since Viktor met him. He hopes Yuuri enjoys the program.

The heavy beat starts building, and when Adam Lambert begins to sing, Viktor kicks off the ice and starts a fast-paced step skate backwards, before twisting and heading across the ice, spreading his arms to invite the audience to clap. His first quad is a lutz, and from there on, Viktor never slows. While designing the choreography, Viktor was tempted to use all of his jumps, but ultimately Yakov talked him out of it, insisting that he focus on other components.

So Viktor added hydroblading and a cantilever instead. The look on Yakov's face when Viktor first pulled the moves off had been *amazing*. Every movement is designed to heighten his sexuality, to dare any who watch him to deny that he is top of the figure skating world. Usually Christophe has the most erotic programs, but Viktor believes that his SP is quite a strong challenger.

His last jump is the triple axel, and Viktor drops down into his cantilever, his fingers dragging along the ice behind him as he comes to a stop with the echo of the last note. He is breathing fast, oddly exhilarated, moreso than past performances. A second later, the audience erupts into screaming, and Viktor unfolds himself from his pose with a smirk, holding up a hand to accept their accolades.

At the Kiss and Cry, Yakov vaults into lecturing him immediately, complaining that his quad-double combination was too risky and that Viktor should have known better to go into it so quickly. Viktor tunes him out, his gaze drawn to the scoreboard at the end of the arena. Yuuri is in third place, and Leroy has bumped up to second, which makes Viktor narrow his eyes slightly.
Viktor's score catapults him into first place, but Leroy and the second place skater, Cao Bin, are close behind him. Yuuri trails Leroy by four points.

Viktor goes through his post-program interviews with an easy smile. He talks about his theme of rebellion without mentioning his war against the ISU, since that was part of the agreement he was forced to sign. The press is already aware of it, to some extent, but Viktor has never confirmed nor denied anything about the ISU's sanctions. He knows that the fans would revolt if he did.

"Viktor, what are your thoughts on the rumors that Yuuri Katsuki can perform your signature quad flip? Do you think he might use it in his free skate tomorrow?" one reporter asks him, and the others seem to hold their breath.

Viktor smiles. "I witnessed him land it in practice myself, and I'm amazed that he can do it. I believe skaters should continue to challenge themselves and set new standards for the next generation, and if Yuuri chooses to use it on Friday, then I will be the first person to cheer for him."

He keeps that smile through the rest of the questions, knowing that his answer will cause a large amount of commentary, perhaps even focus the attention even more on Yuuri. Despite that possibility, Viktor wants to be as supportive as possible.

When he reaches the stands, though, Viktor's smile nearly disappears. Down in the front row, Yuuri is hunched down in his seat, while Leroy leans against him, undoubtedly bothering him. One of the remaining seats is behind Yuuri. Viktor does not hesitate to take it, accepting congratulations from the other skaters with a charming smile.

Leroy glances at him briefly, then leans over to Yuuri. "Sorry you didn't make it to the top three," he says, and Viktor's smile widens slightly, sharp and fierce.

Everybody in the skating world is talking about Yuuri and his quad flip. Viktor has already noticed that many of them are doubtful and antagonistic toward Yuuri, particularly his own fans, and Viktor absolutely does not want that.

Viktor shines his smile at Leroy before leaning forward over the back of Yuuri's seat and pressing his cheek to Yuuri's, holding his phone up to take a selfie. "Smile, Yuuri," he murmurs, his breath washing over Yuuri's pink-tipped ear. On the screen, Yuuri's face flushes beautifully, but a second later his lips twitch into a small smile, his eyes sparkling, and Viktor returns that smile, satisfied.

He wants the entire world to know that Viktor Nikiforov, living legend and the first person to land the quadruple flip in competition, gives Yuuri his complete approval for learning the same move. He doesn't want Leroy or any other naysayers to think anything less.

And if he gets to keep a picture of the most beautiful man in the world -- well, Viktor has never pretended to be completely selfless.

v-nikiforov: We popped that lock on Worlds! #WorldsCompetition #figureskating

Yuuri is warm beneath his arm, and Viktor savors the contact. "The short program was a success, wouldn't you say?" he says, his lips brushing Yuuri's ear.

"Quite so, Viktor," comments up Chris from behind him. "You were rather sexy on the ice today. Almost as good as me."

"Why, thank you, Chris," Viktor replies with a smile, leaning back and enjoying the banter, utterly pleased with himself.
Despite Viktor's best efforts, Yuuri eludes him for the entirety of Thursday. Instead, the day is full of interviews, meetings with sponsors, and practice. Viktor finally escapes for dinner by begging Chris to take him out before he gets pulled into a "team dinner" with Yakov, Georgi, and Anya. Chris invites Yuuri to join them again, but unlike before, Yuuri bows out of the meal, citing a family friend arriving for the competition. Viktor broods throughout the cocktail he orders, until Chris tells him in no uncertain terms to relax.

"You're going to skate against him tomorrow, darling," Chris sighs, pulling the straw out of Viktor's mouth and shaking his head. "Quit pouting. You're acting like a teenager with a crush."

Viktor laughs, his heart skipping a beat. "What a thing to say!"

Masumi joins them for dinner, which means Chris is sufficiently distracted enough to stop teasing Viktor about his interest in Yuuri. Viktor watches them sit together with a small smile, amused at how exasperated Masumi acts toward Chris, who never once stops flirting with him. Christophe may flirt with anything that breathes, but Masumi will always hold his complete attention when he is in the vicinity.

He is amazed that Masumi never gets jealous whenever Chris openly admires other men. The two have been dating for two years, and not once have they ever fought about Chris flirting with everyone around him. Masumi merely nods along, basking in the knowledge that Chris will always remain his.

Viktor wonders what it would be like, to have such faith in his partner. Another thought for another day.

When they reach the hotel, Viktor is gifted with the sight of Yuuri standing on the other side of the lobby, speaking with an older Japanese woman and his coach. Viktor lingers for a moment, but Yuuri doesn't notice him, so he retreats upstairs with Chris to find his swimming trunks, appeased by the brief glimpse.

Chris gives him a knowing look, and Viktor ignores him, grateful when Masumi joins them at the pool and becomes the immediate target of Chris' flirtations. While he relaxes in the whirlpool, Viktor watches silently as Chris crowds Masumi against the side of the pool and teases him, unheeding of other patrons who give them second glances. He looks away with Masumi unbends enough to give Chris a kiss.

He has no one like that. Viktor has had his share of lovers, and none have stayed long enough to make a real difference in his life. After a while he simply gave up on finding someone like that, too focused on his training and work. He never needed anyone to complete him.

The dream comes to mind again. He had been so certain in his dream that Yuuri had been dear to him, perhaps enough for Viktor to put that ring on his finger. Viktor has barely even thought of marriage; he is already married to the ice.

How strange, Viktor thinks, drawing his fingers back through his hair and tilting his head back to gaze out the windows. At any other competition, Viktor would be thinking solely about his upcoming programs, yet here he is ruminating over a stranger.

When Viktor gets back to his room, he checks Instagram and finds a new post from Yuuri. The picture is of a decadent cake, drizzled with chocolate and topped with whipped cream, with two forks resting on the plate. Some of the comments point it out as a slice of Boston cream pie.
Viktor doesn't hesitate to pull up a Japanese dictionary website. After a few minutes of sleuthing, he deduces that Yuuri said, "Dessert together with teacher," which makes him wonder about the Japanese woman he had seen with Yuuri. A previous coach, perhaps?

He wonders if Yuuri is already back in his room.

Constantly, without fail, his thoughts circle back to Katsuki Yuuri. Viktor takes a deep breath, then likes the picture and closes out the app, determined not to look at it for the rest of the night.

He utterly fails and ends up going through all of Yuuri's Instagram posts into the early morning, liking every single one of them, then going back and unliking them before Yuuri can notice his attention. His late night means that he wakes up just as late, which means he misses morning practice. Yakov yells at him for it, which isn't unusual, so Viktor merely lounges in his room until he needs to change into his costume, refreshing his timeline constantly.

Yakov glares at him for his apparent laziness when he finally strolls downstairs, but Viktor doesn't bother explaining himself. Dressed and prepared, his hair carefully combed back, and with the suitcase for his skates rolling behind him, Viktor makes his way to the bus that will take all of the competitors over to the rink.

He notices Yuuri board the bus at the same time and brightens, lifting a hand in a wave. Yuuri spots him almost immediately and turns a little pink, waving shyly before he sits down with his coach and rinkmates. Viktor smiles, feeling better about his late night, absently watching the back of Yuuri's head through the bus ride, while Yakov mutters beside him.

"I'll be fantastic today, you know that," Viktor says to Yakov's exasperated sigh, when he dismisses yet another piece of advice.

"I'm just saying, Vitya --" And so on. Yakov loves to lecture him, and Viktor loves to ignore him. They have a healthy relationship where Yakov gets to yell as much as he wants, and Viktor does spectacularly well anyway, despite all the nitpicking and constant haranguing from his coach. Viktor truly wouldn't have it any other way.

Viktor spends his time before his free skate stretching and meditating. He exchanges a few challenging smiles with Chris, before turning his focus inward. Group by group, the number of skaters in the waiting area slowly decreases, until at last, the only ones remaining are him, Yuuri, Leroy, and Cao Bin.

Yuuri has his headphones in, white buds that are likely playing his free skate music. Viktor follows the line of his body with his eyes as Yuuri stretches on the floor, then looks away. He had read somewhere that Yuuri tends to get nervous before competitions, and he can see hints of those nerves in the blank expression Yuuri wears. Yakov shoots him a look for his distraction, but Viktor ignores it.

"So, are you going to use it?" Leroy asks Yuuri, which catches Viktor's attention immediately.

Yuuri gives him a flat stare. "What are you talking about?"

"Your quad flip, of course." Leroy briefly meets Viktor's gaze, a small smirk on his face. "Since you stole it from the current reigning champion."
Fortunately, before Viktor can react, Celestino breaks away from Yakov to give Leroy a warning look, making him subside. Clearly fed up, Yuuri stands and leaves the room, going out to the hallway to continue his stretches, and after a moment, Viktor follows.

He leans back against the wall where Yuuri is stretching, crossing his arms and keeping an eye on the entrance to the room. "Jealous, like I said," Viktor tells Yuuri, keeping his voice down. The cameramen are still inside the waiting room, which is a relief; Viktor does not want anyone listening in on his and Yuuri’s conversation.

"It's probably because I landed it before he did," Yuuri replies after a moment, sighing. "He has the lutz, but he hasn't done the flip, yet."

"Like I said," Viktor repeats, a faint smirk curling at his lips. "Whether or not you use it in your skate, you shouldn't let him stress you out. You should skate the way you want to skate, not because anybody else demands it of you."

Yuuri makes a soft noise. "He doesn't bother me. But thank you, anyway." He hesitates, watching Viktor's face for a moment, and Viktor holds his gaze, seeing that familiar sparkle that continues to thrall him. "Good luck on your free skate, Viktor."

Something soft and warm tugs at Viktor's heart. At the end of the hallway, one of the staff signals the time, and Viktor's lips curl slightly. "To you as well, Yuuri."

At the rink, Yuuri takes off his jacket and hands it to Celestino. His costume is skin tight with sleek black pants and a red and violet shirt, sparkling and form-fitting, the red trailing down the pants in glittering designs. The dark colors only add to his beauty, and Viktor sighs a little, admiring him.

"Vitya, stop staring," Yakov mutters under his breath in Russian. Viktor smiles without looking back at him.

"In this, I cannot do as you ask, Yakov," Viktor replies in his mother tongue. He couldn't look away from Yuuri if he tried.

Yuuri's free skate is gorgeous. He begins from that same position that his short program ended in, his hand reaching out to someone unknown. Then he looks up, as if noticing that his scenery has changed, and skate forward, his movements much more pronounced than the graceful sadness of his short program. The curse on him remains, but now he must find a way out of the darkness and fight for a better future.

His step sequence is quick and precise, and when the music shifts to something slower and more hopeful, Yuuri settles into his natural grace with arching, sweeping movements. He has made peace with his curse, and now he will move forward, seeking light where he can find it.

Viktor waits in silence. Every time Yuuri takes off for a quad, Viktor holds his breath, waiting to see if it will be his quadruple flip. It never is, and as the end of the song approaches, Viktor feels oddly disappointed. He had wanted to see Yuuri perform it...

Then Yuuri does, on the last jump of his free skate. Not even Viktor could hope to land a difficult quad like that at the end of his skate, and it says amazing things about Yuuri's stamina that he pulls it off.

Viktor stares, forgetting where he is. Over the intercom, he can hear the announcers clamoring with excitement, but he hardly pays attention to them. Instead his gaze is fastened to the look on Yuuri's face, of poignant sadness, even though his body language is full of hope.
"And Yuuri Katsuki has landed his rumored quadruple flip! I see no errors in his landing, and there appear to be enough rotations! Until today, the only competitor in men's figure skating to land this jump has been Viktor Nikiforov! Putting this jump at the end of his program is very daring, too! I think we are all excited to see what this talented skater will do in the future!"

"I can't believe that boy did it," Yakov says quietly. He sounds shocked, and Viktor feels the same surprise echoing through him.

"It was beautiful," Viktor hears himself saying, and he touches his gloved hand to his chest, wondering why it feels so full. He is... proud. Proud and excited and happy, because Yuuri landed his jump, and it was amazing.

Leroy goes next, and Viktor watches him with a placid expression. Leroy is a strong skater, to be sure, and he could definitely take Viktor's place sometime in the future. He occasionally stumbles over his jumps, and once or twice he seems to lose his bravado, but he has enough technical components to overcome the deficiencies. The crowd seems to love him, too; likely because he has a large fanbase in nearby Canada.

He doesn't compare to Yuuri, though, and when Leroy's final score is announced, almost five points below Yuuri and three points below Chris, Viktor almost shouts in celebration. He holds himself back only because he has an image to maintain, but he still grins, beyond enthralled.

Yuuri made the podium. Now all Viktor has to do is go out and join him.

~*~

That night, Viktor barely sleeps. After tossing and turning for over an hour, Viktor sits up with a grumble. The competition is over, he has won his gold medal, and yet he cannot rest, his mind racing with thoughts too vague and quick for him to pin down. Sleep is far beyond his grasp.

His phone has a couple dozen messages of congratulations, but Viktor pays them no mind. He pokes around the mini bar inside the fridge for a while, then sighs again and decides to head down to the restaurant, which should be open late. He takes a few minutes to dress, nicely enough to look fine in a photograph if he gets caught, but without too much effort; he is too tired for it.

No reporters greet him, which is a relief; Viktor does not want to deal with them right now. They like to camp around his hotel during competitions, but whatever he said during his interviews earlier must have dissuaded them from bothering him tonight. In fact, not many other skaters are out of their rooms this late, even for a Saturday. Other than the hum of TV noise and voices from the bar, the hotel is mostly silent. The quiet is inviting, and Viktor is almost tempted to go for a walk. He knows better, though.

The kitchen is about to close, but the staff are more than happy to offer Viktor coffee or dessert. After a few moments of thought, Viktor orders a slice of the Boston cream pie, thinking of the photo Yuuri posted a couple days ago. He did win gold, after all, so he might as well spoil himself. Viktor makes sure to leave a large tip, knowing that the staff are likely ready to go home, before he collects his dessert and starts to make his way back to his room.

He likes this hotel. The lobby contains a beautiful crystal chandelier hanging in the center of the open space. Bag of dessert in hand, Viktor pauses by the railing, looking up at the crystalline structure. It reminds him of a cascade of ice, and for a moment, Viktor entertains the thought of a costume that mirrors the effect, crystals trailing down the side of the bodice. He wore something like that in juniors, but in black, didn't he?
He is about to turn away when his eyes catch on the lounge nearby. A familiar figure is curled up on one of the sofas, wrapped in a faded blue hoodie and sweatpants.

Viktor's heart skips a beat. Yuuri.

He doesn't exactly run as he crosses the floor, but Viktor is grateful that nobody is around to see his pace, either. Yuuri is slumped sideways on the sofa, his phone held out in front of his face as he scrolls through what is probably his social media. A nearly empty cup sits on the table in front of him, the straw slightly chewed. He looks lost and tired, and Viktor feels an answering ache inside him.

*Guess I'm not the only person with insomnia tonight.*

"Hello, Yuuri," Viktor says quietly, pausing beside the round table. Yuuri's eyes flick up to him and widen, but he otherwise doesn't startle. Viktor gives him a smile. "May I join you?"

Yuuri nods, then slowly sits up, setting his phone beside his cup. Viktor sets his box down and sits down beside Yuuri, taking in the dark circles under his eyes and the way he shifts, as if nervous, his fingers pinching the cuffs of his hoodie. After a moment, Yuuri speaks up, his voice a little gravelly. "Why are you awake?"

"Restless energy, I suppose," Viktor replies after a moment. If he looks closely, he can see that Yuuri's eyes are a little puffy, the skin reddened. Has he been crying? Viktor doesn't ask, though; he doubts Yuuri would appreciate the intrusion. "Is it the same for you?"

Yuuri makes a low noise, giving up on worrying at his sleeves and pushing his hands into his hoodie pocket. He looks soft as he sits there, oddly vulnerable. "I couldn't sleep. I guess I was too shocked..."

Viktor blinks. "By your silver?"

Yuuri lowers his gaze. "Yeah."

Viktor wonders what he should say. He wonders if Yuuri had hoped to win gold, or if there are other underlying reasons for his distress. He does not know Yuuri well enough to ask, but he also cannot leave Yuuri to his misery. While Yuuri is not crying, he seems sad enough for it to mean the same, and Viktor has never been good with tears.

Then Viktor has an idea. "Wait here," he tells Yuuri, standing up and hurrying back to the restaurant. The bartender gives him a second fork, and Viktor makes his way back up to the lounge, relieved to see Yuuri still on the sofa, blinking at him in confusion. Viktor smiles as he retakes his seat and opens the takeaway box, revealing the decadent slice of Boston cream pie. Yuuri's gaze drops to the dessert, then back up to Viktor, flummoxed.

"Share with me?" Viktor offers, holding out the second fork. A moment passes, and Viktor can actually see the desire to run away warring within Yuuri, before he gives a tiny sigh and reaches out to take it, his fingers brushing Viktor's palm.

"Okay," Yuuri says quietly. "I've had it before. It's pretty good."

"I saw your picture," Viktor replies, pleased. He cuts the soft cake with his fork, taking a bite and relishing the sweet flavor. He doesn't often treat himself to interesting foods outside of his diet, let alone sweets, but the season is officially over now. Viktor can afford the calories.

"Oh," Yuuri says, turning pink. Viktor pauses with his fork brushing the whipped cream, gazing at
Yuuri for a long moment, before he pulls out his phone decisively. For a few minutes, Yuuri takes small bites of the creamy dessert, while Viktor systematically goes through every single photo Yuuri has ever posted, just like he did before. This time, each photo gets a heart and a comment, and Viktor doesn't hold back -- until Yuuri notices his phone screen.

"Is that my Instagram?" Yuuri asks warily.

"Perhaps," Viktor says with a little grin. "You post lots of pictures of tasty-looking food. Вкусно!"

"What? Get out of there!" Yuuri yelps, grabbing for the phone, and Viktor swiftly holds it out of reach.

"I'm just giving them some love, Yuuri!" He laughs when Yuuri reaches for the phone again, catching him by the waist to hold him back, and Yuuri strains against him for a moment, before letting out a low whine and slumping against Viktor's side. For a glorious moment, Yuuri stays pressed against him, his warmth seeping through Viktor's clothes, before he pulls away. Viktor reluctantly lets him go.

"I can't believe you sometimes," Yuuri sighs, stabbing at the cake, then giving Viktor a look. "Aren't you going to eat this? You bought it after all."

"As soon as I finish leaving comments on all your posts," Viktor replies teasingly, just to see the way Yuuri's eyes narrow warningly. He laughs again, utterly charmed, and obligingly sets down his phone. He eats his dessert for a few minutes, enjoying the way Yuuri's eyes flutter sometimes when he takes a bite heavy with chocolate. He could watch Yuuri all night and be perfectly content.

He might spend more time watching Yuuri than actually eating. Viktor doesn't mind; he finds it just as enjoyable to watch Yuuri enjoy the cake as eating it himself.

At last their forks scrape the bottom of the box, and Yuuri leans back with a deep sigh, patting his stomach. Viktor absently gathers their trash into his empty bag, then leans back beside Yuuri, resting his arm across the top of the sofa behind Yuuri's head.

"Thank you for sharing, Viktor," Yuuri says quietly, peering up at him, and Viktor smiles brightly back. The misery has faded from Yuuri's eyes, which is the best Viktor could have hoped for.

"It was my pleasure, Yuuri." He glances at his phone, sighing at the time. "I suppose we should try to sleep now. We had a rather long day today, didn't we?"

"Too long," Yuuri replies, yawning. His eyelids keep falling a little, and Viktor smiles slowly, hoping that Yuuri is able to sleep well when he goes back to his room. "Are you going to watch the pair dancing tomorrow?" he asks Viktor curiously.

"Yes, I am," Viktor replies, though he will feel bitter about it. He wonders if they will ever allow same-sex dancing.

"I am, too." Yuuri follows Viktor to throw away their trash, covering another yawn as they make their way over to the elevators. His hand drops to his side and brushes Viktor's arm, and for a moment, Viktor is almost certain that Yuuri wants to take his hand. He does not.

The silence between them is companionable, familiar. Viktor glances over at Yuuri, who seems lost in thought. The elevator opens, and together they step inside.

When they are finally alone, with no one to spy on their conversation, Viktor says quietly, "Your
programs were beautiful, Yuuri. I think everybody was amazed this week."

Yuuri glances up at him. His expression is unreadable, for once. "It still feels like a dream," Yuuri says softly after a moment, drawing Viktor's thoughts back to the dream he had a week ago. "I never expected to get this far. And I think I have you to thank for that."

Viktor blinks, surprised, and Yuuri finally smiles a little, something in his gaze softening. "You believed in me," Yuuri says quietly. "You chose to watch me and support me, and that made me work harder than I thought I could. Thank you." He bows in the Japanese custom, and Viktor watches him for a long moment, not saying anything until they reach Yuuri's floor and the doors open.

As Yuuri steps out of the elevator, Viktor catches the doors with his hand, stopping them from closing. Yuuri looks back at him in askance, and Viktor meets his gaze. "If you push yourself even harder next year, do you think you could win gold?"

Yuuri's eyes widen with shock. He gapes at Viktor for a moment, then starts to stutter over a reply, and Viktor lets him fumble for words for a brief moment. The elevator starts to beep, and Viktor hesitates.

"Show me next season what you can do. Prove to me that you can win gold." Then he lets go of the doors, but Yuuri reaches out to interrupt them this time, leaning forward, his eyes glittering brightly.

"I'll work hard next season. I'll beat you," Yuuri tells him earnestly, before he turns red and steps back. "Ah, sorry!"

Viktor smiles slowly as the doors begin to close, his gaze never leaving Yuuri's face. "I look forward to it."

~*~

The exhibition gala is a success, though Viktor wishes again that he could have been paired with another man for the pair dancing portion. How lovely would it be if he and Yuuri skated together? Or if the gold and silver medalists from the women's division could skate together? Viktor is reasonably certain that Sara Crispino and Shasta Nguyen flirted through half of the pair dancing yesterday, without Michele Crispino ever noticing.

He dresses slowly for the banquet, entertaining thoughts of following Katsuki Yuuri around the ice, weaving a romantic story for the enraptured audience. When he realizes that he has been dazing out for ten minutes with a goofy smile, Viktor shakes himself and finishes buttoning his jacket, then reaches for a blue silk handkerchief to fold and tuck into his pocket.

They would be a rather striking couple, he has to admit. Perhaps he should start another campaign...

Humming under his breath, Viktor heads downstairs to meet Yakov and the rest of his team. The banquet takes place in a wide, open ballroom, beautifully decorated with roses and crystalline arrangements.

After speeches from the ISU representatives and congratulations, Viktor is left to mingle. At first he spends most of his time charming sponsors into supporting him for another year, never once allowing them to consider the idea of retirement. (He is beginning to hate that question. So what if he is twenty-six years old? He still wins gold.)
Then comes the customary dance with Chris, then Masumi because Chris asks for it. He gets pulled into dance after dance as the night wears on. Viktor doesn't mind; it's all part of his reputation as the Living Legend of the skating world. Men, women, anybody who wishes it -- Viktor dances with them all.

Except one, who lingers at in the background, rarely venturing into Viktor's view. Viktor keeps an eye out for the elusive Yuuri, too, but every time he spots him, Yuuri is either speaking with sponsors, politely dancing with giggling younger skaters, or huddling by the buffet tables. Viktor can't ever seem to catch him, either, because whenever Viktor manages to make it across the hall to Yuuri's location, the other man has disappeared.

If Viktor didn't know any better, he would say Yuuri is avoiding him.

"He's definitely avoiding you," teases Chris, while Masumi gets them both drinks. "You've scared him away for good. The great and terrifying Viktor Nikiforov, traumatizing Japanese skaters everywhere."

"Says the man who made Michele Crispino scream higher than my babushka's cat," replies Viktor lazily. He smiles at Masumi when he returns, taking the glass of champagne and sipping it slowly.

"How could I resist that finely sculpted backside? Besides, his sister dared me," confides Chris with a small grin. Masumi only rolls his eyes.

"If you're that excited, I should just take you upstairs," Masumi mutters, which makes Chris perk up with delight.

"My dear, if you want me to ravish you, you only need to ask. It seems the party is winding down anyway." Chris sighs as he drapes himself against Masumi's side, looking somewhat despondent. "Once again, they wouldn't let me bring in a stripper pole."

Masumi's lips twitch, and Viktor laughs. "What on earth would you need a stripper pole for? You're the only person here who could use it."

Chris' smirk turns sly. "Oh, I wouldn't say that," he replies, and he refuses to say another word on the subject no matter how much Viktor needles him.

"Good night then," laughs Viktor, waving Chris and Masumi off a few minutes later. He glances around the room, noticing that Yakov has already retired, and decides that he might as well leave himself. He doesn't see Yuuri's messy dark hair anywhere, and he has an early flight in the morning.

When Viktor starts toward the doors to the ballroom, though, he notices a lone figure standing in the corner. Viktor doesn't hesitate to change his course, stepping past a large floral display to the somewhat private space, smiling a little to see Yuuri standing there with his eyes closed, swaying slightly to the music.

"Wall flowers shouldn't hide themselves away from the light," Viktor says quietly, and Yuuri starts and opens his eyes, staring up at him in surprise.

"Viktor?" Yuuri blinks a few times, before a pleasant blush covers his face. He is wearing his glasses and a dark blue suit, along with a truly horrendous tie, though Viktor cannot fault him for it. He looks amazing anyway. "Wait... wall flower? I'm not...

The music shifts to something softer, a song that Viktor has heard on the radio before, but which he cannot name. He holds out his hand to Yuuri, tilting his head invitingly. "Why not join me on the
dance floor? For one last dance before the night ends."

Yuuri glances down at his hand, an unnamed emotion passing too quickly over his face. The look he gives Viktor is raw and open, disbelief threatening to overwhelm the naked vulnerability. *Me?* he seems to ask with those beautiful dark eyes, and Viktor nods slightly, his mien softening as he waits.

Then Yuuri reaches out to take his hand, and Viktor draws him closer, sliding an arm around Yuuri's back. Mindful of Yuuri's choice to hide away, Viktor doesn't take him over to the dance floor; instead, he stays in their private little corner, the music from the speakers drifting over slow and sweet.

Yuuri's grip tightens on his hand, before he steps closer to Viktor, enveloping him in the faintest scent of his cologne, something clean and warm. Viktor breathes in, taking the lead for the moment and turning them slowly, silently grateful for how real Yuuri feels in his arms.

*It was just a dream. He's real, he's alive, he's okay.*

"I should have known you'd catch me," Yuuri says quietly. His voice sends a shiver through Viktor with its intimacy. "I didn't want to be a bother..."

"You're never a bother," Viktor replies, glancing past Yuuri at the crowd of dancers on the other side of the room. No one is paying any attention to them. Pleased, he can't help but tease Yuuri a little. "Even if you like to run away whenever I approach."

Yuuri huffs, lifting his head to look at Viktor. "Yet you manage to find me every time."

Viktor smiles at that. "Must you keep running, then? I admit, the chase is intriguing..." He enjoys the resulting blush on Yuuri's cheeks, letting go of Yuuri briefly to spin him around. Yuuri follows the motion with elegant grace, which gratifies Viktor; clearly, Yuuri has had professional training in dancing. Most skaters have, but Yuuri has an innate grace that speaks of intense private lessons.

A moment later, Viktor is surprised when Yuuri shifts their hands and takes the lead, stepping Viktor backwards and turning them so that Viktor's back is to the rest of the room. "Every step I take away from you, you take two steps to catch up to me," Yuuri murmurs, more to himself, and Viktor stares down at him, bemused. Then Yuuri meets his gaze again. "You keep surprising me."

Viktor feels a faint blush touch his cheeks. He can carry a charming smile to anyone in the world without faltering, yet one look from Yuuri leaves him flustered and senseless. "Says you," Viktor murmurs. "Who was it that jumped a quad flip for me and won silver? Mr. Dark Horse."

Yuuri groans softly, his fingers resting lightly on Viktor's back. He leads with infinite grace; Viktor can follow him easily. "I can't believe they're calling me that."

"I like it. The unexpected medalist," Viktor says thoughtfully, and then Yuuri surprises him yet again by dipping him. Viktor stares up at him for a few seconds, breathless, and Yuuri's gaze softens slightly, warming, before he pulls Viktor up and steps away from him, their hands the only connection between them. Viktor mirrors him thoughtlessly, never looking away.

Something is burning in Yuuri's eyes, a message that Viktor cannot read, cannot hear; the only sound that reaches him in this moment is the music flowing around them. *'My only dream is about you and I.'* The thought that the person filling Yuuri's heart could be Viktor captivates him, but he says nothing to Yuuri, letting the music speak for both of them.

They dance, and whoever is leading doesn't seem to matter, because Viktor must be floating on air,
the way he and Yuuri move with each other. Has anyone ever read him so well before? Yuuri seems to anticipate Viktor's every move, yet when Viktor tries to surprise him, Yuuri meets him halfway every time.

At last, Viktor gives in and pulls Yuuri closer again, taking the lead once more and turning them around with a little flare. Yuuri reaches up to rest his hand on Viktor's arm, and Viktor closes his eyes for a long moment, something bright and wonderful touching his heart.

_This man is amazing._

He doesn't want the song to end. He wants to dance with Yuuri forever like this, hidden away from the world and its obsessions and distractions. Soon, though, the song fades into nothing, and Viktor reluctantly steps back, his fingers gripping Yuuri's hand briefly before he lets go.

He is shocked when he sees tears in Yuuri's eyes. Viktor panics -- he has never been good with tears, and he doesn't know what he could have done to upset Yuuri. After a moment of floundering, Viktor draws Yuuri back to the wall and pulls out the silk handkerchief from his jacket pocket. Yuuri inhales softly over a hiccup, looking away in shame, but then he takes the handkerchief and blots it beneath his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Yuuri whispers. Viktor waits, unsure what else to do. He hates the sight of tears in Yuuri's beautiful, dark eyes. Finally Yuuri seems to bring himself back under control, gripping the handkerchief tightly, before he looks up at Viktor and smiles. "Thank you for everything, Viktor. It's been an honor to meet you. I should... oh, your handkerchief..."

"Keep it," Viktor says without thinking, panicking again. That sounds too much like a good-bye. Like they will never see each other again -- and Viktor does not want that. "You're going back to Detroit tomorrow, aren't you? So we should, um..."

Yuuri smiles slightly, though it doesn't reach his eyes. "I should go to my room. Thank you for the dance, Viktor."

"Wait," Viktor nearly begs, desperate. "Do you have your phone with you?"

Yuuri blinks a few times. "What? Um, no, my coach made me leave it upstairs..."

Viktor glances around quickly, trying to find something to keep Yuuri here, for just a few minutes longer -- and then he sees a book on a table nearby, a piece of memorabilia that all of the skaters signed. He grabs one of the sharpies and a napkin left on the table, writing down his number, then pushing it at Yuuri.

"I have international service. You can contact me anytime. Just to chat, or... or talk about training, or ask for advice. I don't mind at all. Will you call me?" Viktor asks, intent on Yuuri's answer. Yuuri stares at him with wide eyes, automatically reaching up to touch Viktor's hand, though he doesn't take the number.

"I... I couldn't --"

"Please," Viktor says, pushing it into Yuuri's hand. "I'd like to stay in touch with you. You can facetime me. I want you to," he adds, when Yuuri looks close to running away. Slowly Yuuri's face transforms, that vulnerable softness that makes Viktor's heart tremble taking over his features. Viktor doesn't know what he has done to put that look of cautious wonder on Yuuri's face, but he would do anything to bring his smile back.

After an achingly long moment, Yuuri touches his fingers to Viktor's, taking the napkin from his
grasp and smoothing it carefully. For a moment, it looks like he will cry again, but finally he looks up at Viktor and smiles, and this time, the warmth reaches his eyes.

"Okay," Yuuri says softly. "I'll send you a message when I get back to my room. If... if that's okay?"

"That's more than okay," Viktor breathes, elated. He glances back at the crowd, but there is no one he needs to say good night to; he has already taken care of his duties. "May I walk you back to your room?"

Somehow, that is what makes Yuuri blush again. "I really will send you the message! You don't need to..."

Viktor laughs, and finally he waves his arm to the door with a flourish. "After you, Yuuri."

Yuuri covers his face for a moment, so Viktor touches his back to guide him along, beaming when Yuuri follows him without complaint. "I can't believe you," Yuuri says to his hands, muffled, and Viktor laughs again.

"I told you I'd keep chasing you," he teases. Yuuri shakes his head, not looking up at him, but Viktor can see a smile playing at the corner of his lips.

Together they make their way to the elevators. Unlike the last elevator ride they shared, now they stand together in silence, while Viktor floats on the feeling of a job well done. He can keep in touch with Yuuri, can continue talk to him, and then...

Then what?

Viktor blinks, stunned. Then what? What does he want from Yuuri?

Viktor thinks about it as they wait for the elevator. Katsuki Yuuri... Viktor just wants to know him. To learn more of his emotions, to see more of his smiles... to have him in his life. He doesn't know why. He doesn't know how to define the changing relationship between them, but he isn't too worried about it, either. So long as he can hold onto Yuuri.

Shaking his head, Viktor keeps his promise and walks Yuuri to his door, smiling softly as Yuuri fumbles for his room key. Yuuri glances up at him briefly. "Wait here," he says softly, disappearing inside, but he leaves the bolt out so that the door does not shut all the way. Viktor leans against the wall and waits patiently, listening to the faint rustling of a bag inside, before Yuuri steps out into the hallway with his phone, his tie and shoes now missing.

Viktor watches, utterly pleased, as Yuuri holds up the napkin with one hand and types it into his phone with the other. When he pulls out his phone, Viktor finds a message from an unknown number.

From: +1 313-957-****
This is Katsuki Yuuri.

"Just so you don't chase me down in the morning," Yuuri mutters. Viktor grins smugly.

"Thank you, Yuuri." He winks at Yuuri and enjoys the exasperated look Yuuri gives him, before bowing extravagantly. "Have a safe trip tomorrow. I expect updates every minute!"

Yuuri sighs heavily, but he is smiling. "You too, Viktor."
Viktor gazes at him for a long moment, noticing how Yuuri's collar sits open, revealing the long line of his neck. He looks tired, yet the quiet misery that has clung to him for days is all but gone, barring the faint puffiness of his eyes. Quick as lightning, he brings up his phone to take a picture of Yuuri, beaming when Yuuri gapes at him.

"Now me," Viktor says, batting his eyelashes and posing.

Yuuri groans. "You're going to wake my roommate, and then he's going to post it all online, and then I'll never get any peace again," he mutters, before he lifts his phone and takes a picture of Viktor. His cheeks are pink again. "Go away now. I want to sleep."

"As you wish!" At last Viktor leaves Yuuri to return to his room, floating away with a dreamy smile. When he reaches the elevator, Viktor pulls up his phone and quickly adds a new contact, before sending off a message.

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Sweet dreams, sleeping beauty ♡

It takes a long time for Viktor to get a reply. He has already changed, showered, and brushed his teeth by the time his phone lights up again.

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Good night, Viktor.

Viktor falls asleep with a smile, satisfied.

~*~

"Vitya, put away your phone," grumbles Yakov. Viktor ignores him, letting Yakov focus on listening for their boarding call. The airport din hardly registers, as Viktor engages with Yuuri via text message.

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
About to board my flight!
You're lucky, you only have to fly two hours. Mine is over fourteen!
I must say good-bye to you soon. Whatever will you do without my important messages?

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Get some sleep

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Didn't you sleep enough last night?

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
There's never enough sleep...

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Wow! You're amazing, Yuuri~

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Have a safe flight, Viktor

Viktor smiles happily at his phone, before turning it to airplane mode and following Yakov over to boarding. He ends up rereading his messages from Yuuri several times throughout the flight, as
well as looking at the pictures he saved from Yuuri's Instagram. Yakov eyes him a few times but
never brings it up, not that Viktor is really worried about what he thinks.

In St. Petersburg, Yakov gives Viktor two weeks vacation from the rink, telling him to stay the hell
away or else Yakov will personally tie Viktor to his bed for forced rest. Viktor responds to this by
asking if Yakov is into rope play, which earns him a scathing lecture for half the taxi ride home.

"Irritating boy," Yakov mutters, glowering as Viktor steps out of the cab. "Two weeks, Vitya!
There will be hell if I see your face anywhere near the rink!"

"Of course, Yakov," Viktor laughs, blowing a kiss and escaping before Yakov has a stroke, or
worse, finally tries to murder him. After he deposits his luggage in his apartment, Viktor rides
down to the garage to get his Cadillac.

Then he goes to get Makkachin from the pet hotel. The story of their reunion is heartfelt and
beautiful, worthy of a Hollywood movie.

"Makkachin," Viktor sobs, hugging Makkachin close as she happily licks his cheeks. "You're so
beautiful! I'm so sorry I left you all alone for so long! Never again, my darling Makka!"

"I have your bill ready, Mr. Nikiforov," chirps Sofiya, who has been boarding Makkachin for
Viktor for six years now and is happy to retrieve Makkachin for him no matter the time of day.
"Congratulations on your gold medal!"

Viktor manages to tear himself away from Makkachin, but only just. He really missed his poodle.
He doesn't like leaving her for so long these days; Makkachin is getting older, approaching
fourteen, and between training, his modeling and commercial contracts, and travel, Viktor doesn't
get to see her nearly as much as he wants.

"Thank you," he smiles, paying the bill with his card and looking back at Makkachin, who stares
up at him lovingly. Viktor returns the goofy smile and happily escorts Makkachin to the car when
he is done, telling her all about Worlds and his trip.

"And then I met this guy," Viktor sighs, weaving through Russian traffic with an ease born of
many years of reckless driving. "Makkachin, you would love him, he's so beautiful and he's sweet
and charming and I just want to wrap him up in a blanket and protect him for the rest of his life. Is
that weird? Am I weird, Makkachin?"

Makkachin barks happily from her spot beside him. Viktor nods. "You're exactly right. I'm not
weird at all! I'm just a guy who likes a guy," he sings, stopping at a red light. Someone honks at
him, which Viktor ignores. "Oh, and he has a poodle! A cute little toy poodle named Vicchan! You
could be his big sister, Makka, he's so cute and tiny and Yuuri named him after me! Me, of all
people!

"We had dinner, and then we had dessert one night, just the two of us, and then we danced at the
banquet, and his programs were amazing, Makkachin. If only he didn't live so far away," Viktor
sighs. "I'd love to bring him here... you'd like to meet him, wouldn't you, Makkachin? Yuuri and
Vicchan!"

Makkachin barks again, and Viktor beams at her, pulling into his building's garage and parking the
car. Makkachin sticks close to him all the way upstairs, and Viktor is happy to let her, pausing
every so often to rub her soft cheeks.

Once in the apartment, he spends an inordinate amount of time cuddling and playing with
Makkachin on the floor. Sometimes, it feels like Makkachin is his only true friend in the world, the only one who accepts him unconditionally. Everyone else has expectations of him, or they want him to fill a certain role, or they desire him too selfishly to care about what Viktor wants.

Makkachin simply loves him, and Viktor loves her back.

After their long and happy reunion, Viktor lies on his back on the floor and reaches into his pocket for his phone. He turned it on earlier but didn't pay attention to it until now, given the early hour in St. Petersburg. With Makkachin under his arm, Viktor opens his gallery and pulls up the latest picture of Yuuri in his suit with his hair askew and his tie missing, a soft smile on his face. He shows the screen to Makkachin, who is leaning heavily against his side.

"This is Yuuri, Makkachin. Isn't he beautiful? I could stare at him all day," Viktor sighs. "We watched his free skate together before, didn't we? I'll show you his short program, too." A second later, the screen lights up.

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Did you get home okay?

Viktor's eyes widen slightly at the notification. "Makkachin, he sent me a message!" he whispers excitedly. Makkachin rests her head on his arm, whuffing into his face, and Viktor laughs.

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Just got home with Makkachin! She says hi!

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Tell her I say hi
Isn't it very early there?

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Isn't it very late there? ;)

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Benefits of being a night owl...

Viktor hits FaceTime before he can think about it. After two rings, the call picks up, and Yuuri's face fills the screen, a faintly wary expression on his face. Viktor smiles slowly, enjoying the sight of him. Half a day of travel was well worth it, if this is his reward.

"Hi," Viktor says quietly.

"Hello," Yuuri greets, just as quiet. The room is somewhat dark behind him, and the screen lights up all of the best features of his face, his glasses missing. "How are you, Viktor?"

Yuuri always seems to worry about Viktor. Viktor has no idea how to tell him that Yuuri's health and safety are infinitely more important, considering his dream. He doesn't dare tell Yuuri about it, though, afraid that speaking about it aloud to him will make it come true. Viktor is still afraid that the dream is a premonition, though he cannot say how. It doesn't make any sense to him.

"Tired," Viktor admits. "I slept on the plane, but it wasn't very restful. How are you?"

Yuuri's lips twitch slightly. "Tired. I had to go to class today even though I just got back. I have an early class tomorrow, too." Despite saying so, he doesn't look like he wants to hang up. He shifts, the camera momentarily pointing away from him, before he resettles. Viktor realizes that Yuuri is
now lying in bed, his cheek pressed to his pillow.

If Viktor looks closely, he can see a poster on the opposite wall. The figure has familiar platinum hair. His lips twitch. "Sounds like sleeping beauty needs his beauty sleep."

He doesn't miss the minute flinch Yuuri makes, something sad passing over his face. Yuuri seems to hunch into himself, his shirt bunching against his shoulder. "Why do you call me that?" Yuuri asks quietly, oddly intense.

Viktor debates on what to say for a moment. "Do you not want me to call you that?"

If possible, Yuuri seems to grow sadder. "No, it's not that, it's just... it's odd, is all."

"I can stop, if you want."

Yuuri is quick to shake his head. "It's okay, I was just curious." The vulnerable look on his face makes it obvious to Viktor that the last thing he wants is for Viktor to stop using the nickname.

He offers Yuuri a small smile. "It just suits you for some reason. You could be sleeping peacefully, yet here you are, talking to me."

Impossibly, Yuuri softens at that, enough for his smile to return, a faint echo of the smile he gave Viktor after the short program. "You called me. I had to answer."

"You didn't," Viktor tells him gently. "But I'm glad you did."

Makkachin barks then, and Yuuri starts slightly at the unexpected noise. Viktor brightens. "Ooh, want to meet Makkachin?" He turns the phone around to face Makkachin, beaming when Makkachin sits up and tilts her head at the screen. "Makka, this is Yuuri!"

Makkachin barks at the screen, her happy greeting, and wiggles her bum as if she wants to run to Yuuri and leap onto him. Viktor laughs, delighted that Makkachin likes Yuuri so quickly, just like him.

"Hi, Makkachin," Yuuri says, though Viktor cannot see his face. His voice softens considerably while talking to the happy poodle. "You're very pretty. It's so nice to meet you." Viktor hears a quiet hitch of breath when Makkachin barks and leans forward to nose against the phone, and after a moment he turns the phone back around.

Yuuri quickly lowers his hand from his face. Viktor's eyes widen. "Yuuri, did I make you cry? I'm so sorry!"

"No, it's okay," Yuuri whispers, and his smile is honest and bright. "I'm just really happy to see her. Um, you know... because she looks like Vicchan," he adds feebly, and Viktor accepts the excuse, though he worries. He hates how close Yuuri seems to tears all the time. Isn't there something Viktor can do to make him feel better?

As if reading his mind, Yuuri laughs a little self-deprecatingly. "I keep crying whenever I talk to you. I'm sorry..."

Viktor shakes his head, sitting up and scratching behind Makkachin's ear when he jostles her. "You don't have to apologize, Yuuri. I seem to have befriended you at a rather stressful time in your life... but I don't mind."

Yuuri is silent for a long moment, drawing his hand up to scratch his cheek. His gaze flicks up to
the camera, meeting Viktor's eyes. "Do you really mean that?"

"Hm?"

"That we're friends," Yuuri says softly.

Viktor's lips twitch, and he slides his hand back through his bangs, dragging them away from his face. He feels a little vulnerable for being so honest with somebody that he just met, when Viktor is rarely upfront with anybody, even people in his life that he has known for years. Something about Yuuri calls to him, reminds him of home. Viktor doesn't think he could resist him if he tried.

"I do. I'd like it very much if you felt the same," Viktor answers, hesitant but truthful, and slowly, Yuuri's lips curl upwards, a faint blush touching his cheeks.

"Friends, then."

He lets Yuuri go a few minutes later, after securing a promise that Yuuri will try his best to sleep, and he lets Makkachin say good-bye to Yuuri as well before he ends the call. With a long sigh, Viktor slumps against the side of his couch, staring out the large windows at the slowly brightening sky. Just like this spring morning, where St. Petersburg wakes up to soft sunlight and new life, Viktor believes that this is a new beginning as well.

A new beginning with someone amazing.

~*~

Two weeks is a long time for Viktor to avoid the rink. He is tempted a few times to go visit, ideas swimming around in his head for his next season, but he resists. He rarely gets time to be with Makkachin, after all, so instead he focuses on spoiling her within an inch of her life, buying her toys and taking her out to explore their hometown.

They go to the beach and walk alongside the waves. They go to the park and play with sticks until both Viktor and Makkachin are panting with exhaustion. One day, Viktor brings home a bunch of face masks and skin treatments for his own personal spa day, and he treats Makkachin to a bubble bath and has fun shaping her curls into goofy arrangements.

Viktor takes lots of pictures for his Instagram, and he sends many of the more private ones to Yuuri. Unlike Viktor, Yuuri isn't nearly as prolific with his pictures unless Viktor starts pestering him, but slowly, Yuuri unbends enough to send a few selfies.

Yuuri doesn't always reply to his texts immediately, despite Viktor's eagerness, partly due to the time difference, and partly because of his insecurity. He still seems shy to be speaking to Viktor as a friend, but Viktor never pressures him into going over his limits, content to have whatever Yuuri will give him. Viktor will readily admit that he is a selfish person, but it is somehow easier to meet Yuuri at his boundaries, instead of reaching past them and making him uncomfortable.

Still, it is lovely to talk with him so much. Viktor finds out many details that are absent from his interviews and Instagram. Yuuri loves eating, and he gains weight easily, so he has to stay on a strict diet when he is training. He is majoring in Slavic Studies and into his third year of Russian, which is a delight to Viktor, who takes to texting him in Russian every so often to see how much Yuuri understands.

Those texts are much slower than the ones in English, but Viktor perseveres, because he loves it when Yuuri talks to him in Russian.
He learns that Yuuri sometimes goes to football games when the weather is nice, because his father is a fan of a Japanese team, and he sometimes misses the sport. They call it 'soccer' in America, and it's not as big as it is in Japan or Europe, but Yuuri likes it anyway. He also learns that Yuuri fits dance classes into his class schedule as part of his minor concentration, and that he has been taking ballet since he was four.

Best of all, whenever Viktor catches him on video chat, Yuuri becomes more and more comfortable with him, accepting Viktor's teasing with rolled eyes or sarcasm, as well as warm smiles. He still seems sad, moods occasionally overtaking him if Viktor says the wrong thing, but he never blames Viktor for it.

Viktor might be falling in love.

His vacation is lovely and far too short. Viktor is almost tempted to spend another week away, but at the same time, he is ready to get back on the ice and start planning his programs. When he walks into the rink, Yakov gives him a look but doesn't call him over yet, busy with Mila on the other side of the rink.

Eventually Viktor will have a long meeting with Yakov about what kind of programs he has in mind and what Yakov thinks should be done to make those programs perfect. It's a ritual by now that Viktor enjoys; Yakov lets him deal with the musical and presentation side of the choreography while Yakov himself focuses on the technical aspects and all of the possibilities within. They often butt heads over Viktor's opinions about the technical components, but in the end, the programs are always flawless.

He couldn't ask for a better coach.

As Viktor is tying on his skates, he hears furious stomping coming towards him, and looks up with a smile to see Yuri Plisetsky bearing down on him.

"There you are, old man," Yuri says, narrowing his eyes and stopping in front of Viktor. "Now that you're finally decided to show your ugly face, you can explain this horseshit." He thrusts his phone in Viktor's face, and Viktor blinks a few times before he focuses on the screen.

"Someone so short shouldn't use such foul language," Viktor comments absently. The picture on the screen is of him and Yuuri with their faces pressed together after the short program at Worlds. He smiles softly to see Yuuri's blush in the photo.

"Excuse me?" Yuri snarls. "Explain this! What are you doing with Japanese Yuri?"

"Yuuri," Viktor corrects, brushing the phone away and leaning down to finish tying up. Then he stands and sets his phone on the stand where Yakov keeps his CD player, flashing a smirk down at Yuri. "I befriended him at Worlds."

Yuri stare at him open-mouthed. Seeing no response forthcoming, Viktor walks over to the ice and slips off his skate guards, skating around the barrier to set them beside his phone. Yuri suddenly jerks forward to the barrier, grabbing at Viktor's sleeve.

"What's he like?"

Viktor pauses, his gaze cooling a bit as he looks down at Yuri. That's right, he thinks, debating what to say. He likes Yuuri.

He thinks of all the wonderful things Yuuri has told him over the past two weeks. He doesn't particularly want to share those intimate details with the younger skater.
"He's kind," Viktor eventually says. "Very talented, and a joy to speak to. We've had several conversations." He stresses the last words, if only to watch Yuri's mouth drop open with jealousy.

He really should not be picking on a boy twelve years younger than him.

"You'd like him," Viktor adds, just to be spiteful, before he skates away.

He has a program in mind, and if he can begin to shape it into something new and surprising, then he can begin his training properly. No need to stress over the anxieties of a teenager.

~*~

Spring warms into summer, and Viktor practices. He begins to notice that Makkachin moves more slowly than she used to, and he ends up taking her to the vet in frantic worry, only to be told that as she ages, she will lose bone mass and could develop arthritis. He spends a lot of money on vitamins and changes her food to an enriched diet, not caring about the money, because he wants Makkachin to be as comfortable and happy as possible. He wishes that he could spend more time with her.

His various composers send him demos year-round, to which Viktor listens in his spare time for designing programs, but none of them stand out this year except a scant few. Viktor thinks of what might surprise people this year, and the first thing that comes to mind is romance.

He doesn't skate to love songs, usually. Sexy songs, yes. Viktor prefers to challenge stereotypes with his programs, to continue to surprise the audience and surpass their wildest dreams. Romantic songs have never been his first choice for programs, unless he has other intentions for the music. He simply doesn't skate to them.

Then it will be surprising when I do.

Viktor is determined to surprise his audience. Doubt builds in the back of his mind, edged with frustration, because even Yakov and his rink mates are no longer awed by his abilities. They admire him and look up to him, but he fears that his excellence is now expected, and the stories he tells with his skating generic.

He pushes himself harder every day, determined to reach new heights with his skating. Sometimes he thinks of Yuuri, who worked so hard last year to reach him, coming within ten points of Viktor's score. Even Christophe has trouble getting that close when they compete, yet Yuuri managed it after coming from relative obscurity.

Viktor needs to push himself further. If Yuuri can do it, so can he.

His short program is an edited version of Lara Fabian's *Immortelle*, and Viktor spends many hours thinking about the story he wishes to convey. A lover devoted, protective and consuming, chasing after someone who has been taken away from her. She follows her lover to the ends of the earth, moving heaven and earth to keep him safe.

Viktor doesn't choose his free skate music until May, when he receives two versions of the same song, a beautiful aria titled *Stammi vicino, non te ne andare*. The first version has a male soloist singing, and the second version has the same lyrics, but in a duet with a soprano. Viktor loves them both, but ultimately he chooses the solo version. The sadness in the lyrics reminds him of the soft, vulnerable expression he catches on Yuuri's face from time to time.

Heartache turned melancholy and bitter. The man has reunited with his lover, but he has turned cold in his loneliness and seeks to run away from it all. Together, the two lovers flee, but it is a
bittersweet ending.

Viktor thinks the programs will be beautiful.

He wonders what Yuuri will think of them.

Yuuri surfaces in his thoughts often, and they speak almost daily. Viktor ends up video calling Yuuri in the early mornings when he does not have practice, at the same time that Yuuri is about to fall asleep. Viktor tried a few times to call Yuuri when he would be awake in the morning, but the one time Yuuri actually answered, he managed to speak only three distinct words, and one of them was Japanese.

Viktor thinks it's utterly charming that Yuuri is not a morning person. Viktor himself has always risen with the sun and likes to get his day started as early as possible. Yuuri is the exact opposite, in that he stays up too late, pushes his classes and training to later in the morning rather than earlier, and often misses his alarms.

Yuuri's bedhead is adorable, though. Viktor wishes he could get a picture of it.

Yuuri has slowly opened up to Viktor, and in return, Viktor has begun to relax his own defenses. It helps that he is weak to Yuuri's expression when he is about to fall asleep, phone tilting dangerously. When Yuuri is most relaxed, Viktor finds he can talk about himself openly, the secrets he rarely tells anybody else.

Somehow, Viktor knows he can trust Yuuri. He ends up telling Yuuri about his estranged family, rich parents who support him, but who never understood his need to express himself through artistry. He tells Yuuri about his aging babushka who was a prima ballerina in her day, and who introduced Viktor to Lilia Baranovskaya and, by extension, Yakov Feltsman. He even tells Yuuri about his worries for Makkachin, how she is slowly getting older and he fears the day she will be too old to go on walks with him or play with him. He doesn't think about the future beyond that, but he sees sympathy in Yuuri's eyes.

In return, Yuuri tells him about Vicchan, and how he had a dream once that Vicchan died, and it made him realize that he hadn't been paying enough attention to his dog and family. Then Yuuri tells him about Japan and his little seaside hometown, where his family runs a hot springs resort. In Hasetsu, there is only one skating rink that almost went out of business, until Yuuri's win at Nationals brought renewed tourism and interest to the area.

Best of all, Yuuri tells Viktor about himself, with his small smiles and his complaints about his classes and his accented Russian. Those are the most precious of their conversations, and Viktor holds tightly onto each memory of Yuuri murmuring, "Доброй ночи, Виктор."

Yuuri has not told him about his programs for the next season. He tells Viktor he wants it to be a surprise, so Viktor promises to keep his own programs secret as well. While Yuuri refuses to reveal the music he has chosen, he does end up asking Viktor for advice on some of his components, and Viktor is all too happy to critique the training videos that Yuuri sends him.

That Yuuri never once complains about Viktor's criticisms is amazing. Everybody else, even Yuri Plisetsky who constantly seeks Viktor's advice, says that Viktor is too harsh with his critiques. Yuuri only nods, writes down everything Viktor tells him, and thanks him for the help. Viktor isn't completely certain that Yuuri actually uses his advice, but he never tries to make Viktor feel bad for offering it in the first place.

It's almost like coaching, in a way. Viktor and Yakov have similar conversations about Viktor's
training, and Viktor hopes to impart that same wisdom to Yuuri. He even finds himself giving advice for other parts of Yuuri's life, going so far as to gather modeling contacts for Yuuri to do some part-time work. The resulting magazine spreads are gorgeous, and Viktor saves every copy he gets his hands on.

It's utterly satisfying to have such an impact on Yuuri's life -- especially since Yuuri seems to be having trouble with his coach.

Viktor finds that out one day in June, when Yuuri finally calls him after two days of ignoring Viktor's messages and calls. As soon as Viktor sees the name on the phone screen, he nearly topples off his sofa to answer the call, while Makkachin wags her tail from the other side of the sofa.

"Алло, Yuuri," Viktor says with a smile. "I was afraid I would have to fly out to Detroit and chase you down, had you continued to ignore me."

"Ha," mutters Yuuri, and Viktor can't help a little sigh at hearing his voice. "You're not allowed to come to America just because I don't text you back, Viktor."

"Well, there go my plans for the weekend," Viktor quips, grinning at the window. "How may I help you on this fine summer day? You usually wait till the evening to call me."

Yuuri is silent for a few moments, and in the background, Viktor can hear the hum of a restaurant, glasses clinking and voices murmuring. "I had a bad day at practice. If you're busy..."

"No, I'm not busy," Viktor says, closing his book. "I'm just reading. Would you like to talk about it? I'm happy to listen."

Yuuri sighs softly. Viktor imagines him tucked away in an armchair in a busy café, stirring a straw through the foam in his coffee. Yuuri has admitted to an unhealthy love of Starbucks lattes, despite Viktor's strongly worded hints that so much sugar will be bad for him during practice.

"I had an argument with Celestino," Yuuri says quietly. "He won't let me go forward with my music choice for my free skate. It's really frustrating, and I don't know what to do about it."

"Didn't you choose your songs last year?" Viktor asks, moving his leg so that Makkachin can crawl onto his stomach. After a moment, he switches to speakerphone so that Makkachin can listen to Yuuri's voice, which makes her tail wag.

"No," Yuuri admits, sighing again. "Celestino has this policy about music. If he doesn't approve of the music you suggest, then he'll pick something from his own music. He has a lot of songs that anyone can use, but... I wanted to do something special this year. He doesn't like it, but I asked him to consider it before he says no. So I hope that he lets me use it."

Viktor's lips twitch downwards. Yakov hasn't restricted his music since Viktor was in juniors, after Viktor made it clear that he was going to skate to his own choices whether Yakov liked it or not. They had settled on an equilibrium where Yakov focused on the technical side while Viktor dealt with the music compositions, and it worked rather well.

"Why is he so strict about music?"

Yuuri makes a noise as if he is sipping a hot drink, then clears his throat. "Mm, well, he coaches a lot of skaters, mostly teenagers and college students. Three years ago, he had a season where everyone went wild with their music choices, including songs with profanity, and that got him in trouble with the ISU. So he doesn't allow pop music or anything like that now. But mine isn't like
that, it's..." Yuuri exhales in frustration. "It's just different. And I want him to accept it and support me using it, but he doesn't like it. It's the first program that I've really made on my own, and I really want him to let me use it. It's already June, and I really need to work on my free skate."

Yuuri stops speaking for a moment, but Viktor senses he still has more on his mind. Then, Yuuri says, "I guess he just doesn't have as much time to work with everyone individually. Practices are kind of scattered... everyone meets with him once a week to update him on our progress, and of course he tells us what we're doing wrong when we're skating, but... I don't know. I never had a problem with him before this season."

"I'm sorry that you have to go through that, Yuuri." Viktor has never heard anything bad about Celestino as a coach, except that he tends to be strict on occasion. He remembers well when Celestino took Yuuri and Leroy off the ice when Yuuri was caught doing the quad flip. "Yakov is strict as well, but he always lets me control the artistic side of my programs. Surely Celestino wants you to skate the way that makes you happiest."

Yuuri huffs a small laugh. "I don't know about that... I have a habit of mental weakness when it comes to competitions, and I think he thinks he needs to protect me from that, so he tends to be pretty strict with me. He's not a bad coach, don't get me wrong, but I feel like I'm finally coming into my own as a skater, and... it'd be nice if I had some more support from him."

Viktor wishes he could see Yuuri's face. He wonders what kind of coach would best suit Yuuri; each coach has their own way of teaching and training their students. Viktor has always been with Yakov, though he has also trained under Lilia Baranovskaya in his younger days. While both of them have been incredibly strict for his training, they still allowed him to blossom as a skater. He wonders if Yakov's style of coaching would suit Yuuri more.

Briefly, Viktor entertains the thought of coaching Yuuri himself, if he ever chose to retire. He could do it, if it was Yuuri. Belatedly he realizes that his thoughts have gotten away from him, and he refocuses on the conversation. "He should support you more, yes. Hopefully he will let you use the music you have chosen."

"I hope so." Yuuri sips more of his drink, and Viktor can hear him slurping the foam, which makes him smile. Makkachin perks up a little at the odd noise. "Thanks for listening to me, Viktor... I'm sorry to talk about such heavy topics."

"I'm happy to listen, Yuuri. I happen to like listening to you," he teases, and Yuuri laughs softly.

"So you've said." In the background, Viktor hears someone calling Yuuri's name -- it sounds like Phichit. "Oh, my roommate's here. Um... are you going to call me tonight? Tomorrow morning for you, I mean?"

"I'd be happy to," Viktor replies with a soft smile. "Enjoy your overpriced sugary coffee, Yuuri."

"How did you -- no, never mind. Bye, Viktor," Yuuri says, a smile in his voice, before he ends the call. Viktor sighs after the phone screen goes dark, tilting his head back to stare up at the ceiling.

"I have it really bad, don't I, Makkachin?" he asks his poodle, and she wiggles up to lick his face in commiseration.

~*~

On the first Saturday of August, Viktor walks into the Detroit Skating Club with sunglasses on his face and a jaunty smile for the attendant at the counter. "I'm just visiting a friend," he tells her,
then breezes past her down the stairs to the rink entrance, humming under his breath.

The rink is decently sized with many skaters making loops around the ice. Celestino Cialdini is sitting on one of the benches speaking to Satsuki Muramoto. Viktor can see at least four groups of skaters, ranging from young children surrounding two young coaches to the college-age skaters clustered at one end of the rink, giggling over someone's phone.

In the middle of the rink is Yuuri, skating in all black, gloves on his hands. Viktor pauses at the barrier and gazes at him for a long moment, sighing to see his familiar grace. Nobody notices him at first, so Viktor leans back against the wall and watches.

Yuuri doesn't seem to be following any particular music on the speakers, but Viktor recognizes a song in his movements anyway, of aching sadness and lost love. Yuuri touches one hand to his chest, bowing his head as he skates backwards. A moment later, Yuuri pushes himself off the ice in a quadruple toe loop double loop combo.

Viktor beams at the clean landing. "Marvelous, Yuuri!" he can't help but call out, and Yuuri whips his head around, his eyes widening dramatically before he trips and goes down.

The crack on the ice draws everybody's attention. Viktor winces, but Yuuri scrambles up without seeming hurt and races over to the barrier to meet him, waving his hands in a sweetly awkward flail. He catches himself on the barrier in front of Viktor and leans forward, blinking at him as if not believing his eyes.

"V-V-Viktor?!"

"Hi," Viktor says, lifting his hand in a wave. He might have a goofy smile on his face, and Yuuri is gaping at him. "Surprise! I came for a visit!"

"Oh my god, it's Viktor Nikiforov," somebody says, and then half of the rink is skating closer to marvel at Viktor's very presence. Viktor smiles at them all, then leans over to Yuuri with a wink.

"May I steal you? If your coach doesn't mind," he asks quietly, glancing over at Celestino, who is watching them with a raised eyebrow.

"N-no, um, I'm nearly done for the day... Why are you here?" Yuuri asks, his face flushing.

Viktor grins again, delighted by the surprise on Yuuri's face, just as he had pictured it. "Why don't you go finish up, and I'll tell you when you're done?" he offers, making little shooing motions. Yuuri gives him a brief narrow-eyed look, then slowly skates away, utterly bewildered. Viktor notices Phichit grab onto Yuuri's arm, before several skaters crowd around him and begin to talk excitedly.

Viktor signs a few autographs and chats for a while, though soon the skaters are replaced by Phichit Chulanont, who shoos the others back to their coaches with a laugh.

"It's nice to see you, Viktor!" Phichit tells him, leaning against the barrier. "Yuuri had no idea you were coming. He would have cleaned the apartment!"

"I kept it a secret from him," Viktor admits, smiling a little at the smallest skaters on the other side of the rink. "I have a hotel room booked, so you don't need to worry about where I'll stay tonight. I had the opportunity to visit him, so I took advantage of it."

"He's very happy that you're here," Phichit confides, a smile on his lips. "I knew you two were calling each other, but..."
"We text a lot, too."

"Mm... that's really good, though. Yuuri doesn't talk with a lot of people that much. I admit, it was a surprise when he said you two were talking." Phichit glances at Viktor, then away to the ice, watching a few teenagers skate by. "Yuuri is... kind of particular about things like that. He's not good with people."

"Mm." Viktor wonders what point Phichit is trying to approach, when it dawns on him that Phichit might be worried about Viktor's intentions for the visit. Living legend Viktor Nikiforov, visiting shy Yuuri after only a few months of talking online? Viktor would be suspicious, too. "Yuuri is someone very dear to me."

Phichit glances at him again. "That's good. He needs more friends." After a moment, Phichit lowers his voice, his eyes scanning the rink. "There's no good way to say this, and Yuuri wouldn't want me to talk about it, but I want to tell you to be careful with him. He's been hurt before, and because he looks up to you... well..."

Viktor stays silent, Phichit's words dragging his thoughts back to when he first looked at videos of Yuuri and compared his performances at Nationals to his prefectural skating. He had thought, then, that Yuuri must have gone through something momentous, to be able to put such confidence and emotion into his skating. Yet at Worlds, Yuuri had been sad most of the time, near tears often enough that Viktor had worried for him. Sometimes Yuuri still shows that sadness, but as the summer has passed, he has smiled more, laughed more, while talking to Viktor.

Before, though... Yuuri was miserable.

Something occurs to Viktor then, and he wonders how he didn't see it before.

Someone broke Yuuri's heart.

Viktor stares at the ice for a long time, thinking. Phichit doesn't say anything else, a knowing expression touching his face when he looks at Viktor, which makes his stomach sink with the knowledge that he is right. Yuuri must have fallen in love, giving him new meaning to his life, but sometime before Worlds... Yuuri's lover must have left him.

It seems so obvious now. Somebody hurt Yuuri deeply, and he still carries that pain in his heart. No wonder he cried so much at Worlds.

The knowledge doesn't completely change Viktor's understanding of Yuuri, but it leaves him shaken. Viktor thinks of how insensitive he has been of Yuuri's feelings, flirting with him shamelessly for months, and despite the pain in his heart, Yuuri has still allowed Viktor into his life.

He cannot imagine hurting Yuuri. Not like that other person, that unknowingly cruel person who took Yuuri's heart and shattered it.

I would never let something so precious be harmed.

"I will take care of him. Thank you, Phichit," Viktor finally says, giving Phichit a smile before turning away and heading to the lobby to wait for Yuuri. He is glad that Yuuri has someone like Phichit to look out for him.

Twenty minutes later, Viktor lifts his head when Yuuri steps out of a hallway from one side of the counter, wearing a blue jacket made of light material and a backpack on his shoulders, his hair freshly washed. Yuuri's eyes widen a little when he notices Viktor, as if he had thought that seeing
him earlier had been a hallucination.

Viktor stands to greet him, smiling at the cautious look that takes over Yuuri's expression. "Surprised?"

"Just a little," Yuuri says, rubbing the red mark that his faceplant on the ice gave him. Viktor makes a small noise of regret and reaches forward to push up Yuuri's bangs to look at the little mark. Yuuri goes still at the touch, staring at him with wide eyes.

"I didn't mean for you to get injured! Does your head hurt?" Viktor asks, rubbing his thumb against the mark with a small frown. He lets go a moment later but doesn't step away, enjoying the opportunity to be close to Yuuri.

"It's fine," Yuuri breathes, then shakes himself and grips the straps of his backpack. "Um... what are you doing here? I didn't realize you were in the country."

Viktor smiles, helplessly drawn to Yuuri's messy hair, a sign that he didn't bother to brush it properly when he finished his shower. "I had a photo shoot in New York for a magazine this week. They finished early, and since Yakov doesn't expect me back until Tuesday, I thought I'd come down for a visit. I'm so happy to see you, Yuuri."

"I'm happy to see you too," Yuuri replies, blinking several times, before he flushes again. "Sorry, I'm just really shocked, I didn't think... um, well, it's really good to see you. You're here," he says, a little dazedly. Viktor softens a little, relieved that Yuuri isn't mad about Viktor hiding the trip from him.

"I'm here," Viktor agrees. Yuuri is utterly beautiful, and Viktor is so, so glad that he chose to come down here. "Do you live nearby?"

"Sort of... our apartment complex is just down I-75. Phichit and I ride together, though, and he's got the car keys. I think he's going out tonight so I was going to take the bus back."

"That is fine, I rented a car," Viktor explains, his smile widening. "I'm here until Monday, so you have me all weekend. Anything is fine!" He beams, holding his arms out, then has to put them down before he is tempted to hug Yuuri.

"Oh," says Yuuri, tightening his grip on his backpack. "I, um... okay. I can direct you. I need to take my skates home, so we can go to my apartment first."

"Okay!"

Viktor drives with a modicum of caution, distrusting that American roadways are as controlled in their chaos as Russian traffic. He does slow down when he notices Yuuri's white-knuckled grip on the door, taking care to follow his directions without getting lost.

Yuuri still seems to be in shock, so Viktor fills the silence with chatter about his photo shoot. "I've worked with the magazine before for some lovely spreads, and they're always so nice, giving me samples of the cologne and everything. It's not my favorite scent but it makes for easy gifts for acquaintances!" he laughs, and Yuuri snorts.

"What if they don't like the cologne either?"

"Then a pair of socks," Viktor says, grinning as Yuuri relaxes enough to snicker. "Though for my friends and family, I like to buy them many presents for birthdays. They deserve it, since I have the means to take care of them."
"So that's why," Yuuri murmurs, then shakes his head when Viktor makes a questioning sound. "I meant, that makes sense. My family and I send each other presents for birthdays, but with the cost of shipping, sometimes I think it'd be easier just to get them a gift card online. Oh, the exit is coming up, the one after this one."

"That's no good, Yuuri! Presents should be chosen with care and love," Viktor admonishes, shifting over to the next lane. "You should take into account all of the person's likes and dislikes. They deserve the best!"

"I can't always afford the best," Yuuri sighs. "If it wasn't for sponsors, I wouldn't be able to study here and train at the same time... I would have run out of money next year and would have had to let go of Celestino, if I hadn't won at Worlds. The modeling you talked me into helps at least."

"If you win gold this year, then you'll be able to afford it," Viktor says slyly, earning a sharp look. He takes the exit Yuuri indicates, and the next few minutes are quiet as he focuses on driving while Yuuri directs him. Soon they draw up to the tall apartment complex, not far from the highway.

"We're up on the eighth floor," Yuuri explains, leading Viktor into the lobby. He pauses by a long row of mailboxes and unlocks one, pulling out a small stack of ads and letters, then walks over to the elevator to summon it.

Viktor follows happily. He steals a glance at Yuuri's mail, unable to help his nosiness, and Yuuri catches his attention and holds up one of the ads.

"When Phichit moved in with me, we went shopping since it was the first time either of us had lived outside of home or a dorm. We signed up for all these mailing lists, and they constantly send us coupons and ads. It's kind of ridiculous," Yuuri sighs. Viktor likes watching him in this sort of setting; Yuuri seems much more at ease with himself here, compared to the less comfortable setting of the hotel and competition.

At last they stand in front of Yuuri's door, numbered 813. Yuuri glances at him nervously as he unlocks it. "Well... this is home," he says, before opening the door and welcoming Viktor in. Viktor steps inside, his heart beating a little fast in his excitement.

The apartment is tidy, surprising for two young men living together, with a decently sized TV sitting in front of the couch, a game system attached, and a couple of paintings as decoration for the large white space. The kitchen is livelier with a basket of vegetables on the counter and brightly-colored plates stacked in the glass-covered cupboards. The refrigerator has a list of groceries written on it. Viktor sees some mess, but nothing horrible.

Yuuri directs him where to hang his coat and leave his shoes, and as Viktor hangs up his peacoat, he notices a small hallway leads away from the open living area. Viktor starts to peek down it, noticing an open door before Yuuri flails and steers him over to the couch.

"No fair, Yuuri," Viktor pouts as he sits down. "I want to see your room!"

"Absolutely not," Yuuri vows, dropping his backpack on the floor and falling down next to him. "You're not allowed in there."

"Why not?" Viktor asks curiously, widening his eyes guilelessly. "If this is about the fourteen posters you have of me on your walls, then you don't have to be ashamed."

"What?!" Yuuri yelps, twisting to stare at him with wide eyes. "How did you know? Wait, you
counted them?!

Viktor just laughs, while Yuuri slumps and covers his face, now bright red. "You weren't supposed to see those," Yuuri moans, sliding down further on the couch, and Viktor smiles softly, resting his arm across the back of the couch. If he lowers his fingers a few inches, he could touch Yuuri's hair, but he doesn't.

"I don't mind, Yuuri. I have posters of you on my wall now, too," Viktor admits, his smile brightening. The gobsmacked expression Yuuri gives him makes Viktor blush just a little. "I especially like the ones from Japan. So enchanting," he sighs.

"Stop it, that's embarrassing," Yuuri begs, and Viktor laughs again. "Please tell me you're lying."

"I would never," Viktor replies, putting a hand to his chest. "Would you like to see my receipts? I have many!" He starts to pull out his phone, and Yuuri gasps and grabs his hand, pushing the phone back down.

"On second thought, never mind," Yuuri says quickly, while Viktor relishes the feeling of their hands touching. He really has it bad, if simple touches are making his heart beat this fast. To his disappointment, Yuuri lets go a moment later, though he doesn't move away from Viktor.

Somehow, Yuuri settles into Viktor's space easily, not minding his closeness except through his little blushes, and Viktor wonders at how they can be so comfortable with each other despite knowing each other for less than a few months. He observed Yuuri quite a lot at Worlds, and other than Phichit, Yuuri rarely allows people into his personal space, and he touches people even less.

Viktor feels very, very fortunate that Yuuri allows him close like this. Especially knowing what Phichit told him earlier.

"So can I see your room, Yuuri?" Viktor asks after a moment of comfortable quiet. Yuuri's response is to hit him with a pillow.

Yuuri's room sits at the end of the hall, and though Viktor has glimpsed it several times through his video chats with Yuuri, he still marvels at the space. The walls are covered in posters of Viktor, while the bed is neatly made with a blue bedspread, and a laptop sits on a desk against one wall. Like the living area, the room is mostly tidy, and Viktor spins around to admire.

"Now you've seen it," Yuuri says flatly from the doorway, earning Viktor's grin.

"Yuuri! Does this mean you're going to silence me now?" Viktor asks, batting his eyelashes. "So I can never tell another living soul?" He floats over to the closet and peeks in, seeing a few jackets and the simple suit that Yuuri wore to the banquet, as well as a few skating costumes near the back.

Yuuri scoffs and goes to sit on the bed, watching Viktor explore. "I'd be in more trouble if you disappeared than if people found out I have posters of you on all of my walls," he muses, making Viktor chuckle. "Your fans are terrifying."

"Doesn't that mean you're terrifying, too?" Viktor teases, returning to Yuuri and sitting down beside him. Yuuri raises an eyebrow at him, pretending to be stoic for a moment, and Viktor returns the expression with a happy smile. Finally Yuuri's exasperation cracks, and a reluctant smile touches his lips.

"I can't believe you're here." Yuuri lifts a hand, then sets it down again, swallowing briefly. "In my room. In my town."
"For a little while, at least," Viktor replies, his gaze softening. "My flight is Monday morning."

Yuuri tilts his head a little, frowning. "Where is your hotel? Is it near the airport?"

"I picked the one with the nicest reviews. The Townsend? I can look up the directions later."

"Do you want to go out to eat?" Yuuri asks after a moment, and Viktor shrugs. He hasn't even considered what he will do for food, so long as he gets to spend time with Yuuri, who accepts his reply with a thoughtful look.

"I could make something here, or we could go out to a restaurant," Yuuri offers, shifting on the bed. He looks nervous, and Viktor wants to reassure him of whatever worries are plaguing him.

Viktor's eyes widen. He has been to enough restaurants in his lifetime, but the chance to have Katsuki Yuuri's home cooking?

"I'd love it if you cooked," Viktor blurts out. He nearly covers his mouth, but the response seems to be the right one, because Yuuri's eyes light up, almost shy in his pleasure. Viktor beams, pleased.

Yuuri makes a soft noise of acknowledgement, and Viktor enjoys the resulting comfortable silence, as well as Yuuri's warmth beside him. Yuuri is watching him with a quiet sort of disbelief, a small smile on his face.

Viktor says nothing, merely watching him with an answering smile. He isn't certain of Yuuri's feelings for him, but he could easily imagine this trip becoming very romantic very quickly -- and yet...

Viktor is happy just to visit Yuuri. He doesn't expect anything out of this trip except Yuuri's lovely company. If something happens, then that will make him happy; but if nothing happens, then he will still be happy. He isn't certain of Yuuri's feelings for him, but the knowledge that Yuuri has been hurt before tells Viktor that he shouldn't push him too hard. Something in Yuuri still seems fragile, and Viktor wants to make sure to take care of him, instead of causing him any undue stress.

Viktor stands up and goes to inspect the books on the shelf above Yuuri's desk. "How is your training going?" he asks Yuuri, looking over his shoulder. "Your jump earlier was beautiful. Was that part of your free skate?"

"Were you spying?" Yuuri accuses, making Viktor beam. "You have to wait until the preliminaries just like everyone else. I'm not telling you anything, Viktor."

"Oh, that reminds me!" Viktor pulls out his phone and turns to face Yuuri, pulling up the link Chris sent him earlier. "They posted the assignments for the Grand Prix Final this afternoon. Shall we look at them together?"

"Oh... was that today?" Yuuri wonders, then stands and walks over to his side, peering down at Viktor's screen. Viktor scrolls down the page slowly, and suddenly Yuuri reaches up to touch his hand. "Wait, let me see that."

Viktor notices immediately what has his attention. "Oh! We'll be skating so close to each other!"

"That's not supposed to happen this way," Yuuri mutters. Viktor blinks, confused by the statement.

"What?"

Yuuri glances up at him quickly, going a little pink before looking back at the screen. "I mean, um,
I thought they'd put me in NHK and Skate America, not Skate Canada. You're going to be in Skate America, though, right?"

"You could come watch me," Viktor replies, beaming. "That's wonderful! Though I won't get to see your skate in person until the final."

"Mm..." Yuuri stares at the screen, his fingers brushing against Viktor's as he continues to scroll down. Like Yuuri predicted, his other assignment is at the NHK Trophy, while Viktor's second assignment is in the Cup of China. Christophe is in Rostelcom and Trophée de France. "There's no guarantee that I'll even make it to Sochi, you know," Yuuri says quietly a moment later.

Viktor lowers the phone, setting it on the desk before gently tilting Yuuri's head up to meet his gaze with a finger. "You promised me you would beat me, didn't you? Before that, we each have two chances to win and show the world our strength. Two chances for gold... which one of us will win, I wonder?"

Yuuri swallows but doesn't look away from him, his wide gaze tracking between Viktor's eyes and his mouth. Viktor can't help the brief glance at Yuuri's lips, soft and inviting, but he resists that urge. He smiles slowly, letting go of Yuuri a moment later and putting his finger to his lips, in the same pose as one of the larger posters on the wall.

"I'll do it," Yuuri breathes, his hands clenching at his sides. "I'll win gold, Viktor. Then I'll beat you at Sochi."

Viktor's smile widens. "That's what I want to hear."
Cicadas call out to Yuuri as he jogs past the trees, the sun bearing down on his back with relentless heat. His shirt absorbs some of the perspiration that trickles down his back, and Yuuri keeps running, thinking only of the bottle of Pocari Sweat that awaits him when he reaches Ice Castle.

That, and the sweet air conditioning that keeps the entire rink at a beautifully cold temperature. Yuuri really, really looks forward to that.

_I can do it, I can do it_, he chants in his mind, until finally he flies up the stairs and lands, gasping, against the glass doors.

"I did it," Yuuri rasps, pushing the door open with a sigh and stumbling inside. "Hey, Yuu-chan, listen to this! I reached my weight goal!"

Nishigori Yuuko looks up from the counter and brightens at the sight of him. "Yuuri-kun! Good job! I bet you're thirsty, huh?" She grins and pulls out his prize, a gleaming bottle with its crisp blue wrapping.

Yuuri groans and collapses against the counter, twisting the plastic cap with weak fingers. "You're amazing, Yuu-chan," he moans before drinking deeply. An arm lands around his shoulders a moment later, and Nishigori Takeshi leans into his view, leering.

"Had fun out there in the blazing heat?" Nishigori teases, and Yuuri ignores him in favor of replenishing his electrolytes.

"Takeshi-kun, leave him alone," sighs Yuuko with a smile.

"You should join me next time," Yuuri suggests, a grin quirking at the corner of his mouth. "It's a great way to lose -- ack!" He doesn't get to finish his quip as Nishigori begins ruffling his hair, laughing.

Yuuri's semester ended with decent grades, and his summer began with a trip to Japan. He is still living off the money he won at Nationals, and he booked the flight not long after he got home from Tokyo back in December. Two weeks in his hometown with his family and childhood friends, and Yuuri has enjoyed every day so far.

Hasetsu in May is humid and very excited to see him. Locals notice him immediately and come out to greet him, shaking his hand or getting autographs. Yuuri finds out quickly that Ice Castle has classes for the summer, which Yuuko explained is completely due to Yuuri's influence. Apparently many locals renewed their interest in ice skating, and a lot of youths from neighboring towns have come to skate at the same rink that Yuuri trained in for most of his life. Even Minako-sensei has more customers, from people hearing about her coaching and teaching Yuuri for years.

None of this had happened in Yuuri's other timeline. Then again, he hadn't won silver at Worlds after his gold at Nationals.

"Oh, Yuuri-kun?" Yuuri manages to separate himself from Nishigori and looks over, blinking, at the innocent smile on Yuuko's face. "You're staying through the twentieth, right?"

"Yes," Yuuri answers, wondering what she's getting at.

"Great! Then that means you can come teach at Ice Castle for a few days this week, right?"
Yuuri's eyes widen. "Wait, what?"

"It's just a couple of classes," Yuuko says quickly, glancing at Nishigori. "Little kids, some middle school students. One of the coaches is going out of town to visit family, and the other one is busy for a couple of days. Please?" She clasps her hands together and widens her eyes, looking rather sad. "It wouldn't take long! I'll let you come in after hours to make up for any training you want to do!"

"I'm not supposed to be training right now," Yuuri says blankly, his eyes widening. Teach a class?! He doesn't know the first thing about teaching.

"Great!" Yuuko brightens and pulls out her phone, sending off texts rapidly. "I'll let them all know the classes are still on!"

Yuuri might be panicking. "Wait, but I don't know if I--"

"Thanks, Yuuri-kun! I'll text you the details later! We'll pay you, too!" She waves excitedly at him and quickly disappears behind the counter before Yuuri can argue with her, and Yuuri is left staring blankly at the empty space. Nishigori pats his shoulder consolingly.

"Tough luck, that," Nishigori says, and Yuuri groans and covers his face. What the hell is he going to do?

~*~

"Teach?" Viktor says over the phone that night. "That'd be amazing, Yuuri! I'm sure you'll do great!"

"You're not helpful," Yuuri says to his desk. He's debating running away. Something tells him Yuuko would hunt him down pretty quickly. Or send Nishigori after him, which would end in disaster.

"Now, Yuuri," Viktor says, taking on a familiar lecturing tone, and Yuuri's lips twitch at the familiarity. Knowing Viktor a year earlier than in his old timeline is both frustrating and so very rewarding, because he already recognizes many facets of Viktor's personality that most people would never catch. He knows what to expect of him, and yet Viktor keeps surprising him. He knows Viktor like he knows his own heart.

Vaguely, Yuuri wonders if that should be foreboding. He forgets about it a moment later when Viktor continues speaking.

"This is a great opportunity for you as a skater. Think of the possible sponsors who will hear about you teaching classes at your rink! Not to mention, having that bit of experience will help you later in life, if you ever decide to become a coach or work with future skaters," Viktor tells him, then pauses. "Yuuri... do you have any modeling contracts?"

Yuuri blinks and lifts his head. "What? No. I mean, I've been in magazines before, but they were mostly for skating... interviews and pictures."

"That's something you should consider taking up," Viktor says thoughtfully. "Skating isn't very lucrative by itself. I know your family owns a business, but..."

"Mm, I don't ask them to support me like that," Yuuri replies, a little quietly. "I have sponsors and a scholarship and my winnings."
"Well, that's just not enough," Viktor says, blunt as ever. Yuuri can't help but smile. "If you want, I have a few American contacts that would love to help. They would need a portfolio, of course, but that wouldn't take much to put together, and they wouldn't be very intrusive, no personal details or anything, just a few pictures for their spreads. What do you think?"

Yuuri thinks about it for a little while. The money from Nationals and Worlds has been very nice, especially for a poor college student living mostly on rice and salads, but Yuuri knows that eventually he will have some trouble with money. When his contract with Celestino had ended in his old timeline, Yuuri simply hadn't had enough money to sign on for another year, even with his winnings from the preliminary GPF competitions. Yuuri had won bronze and gold at Skate America and NHK respectively, and much of that had been sent back to his family.

"I could take a look at them," Yuuri offers slowly.

"Great! I'll set everything up, you won't have to worry about a thing," Viktor assures him, and Yuuri can tell by his elation that Viktor is smiling that beautiful grin that always melts Yuuri's heart. Yuuri listens to Viktor babble for several minutes, content to hear his voice.

He never, ever thought Viktor would call him like this, before they had become coach and student, then more. Yet Viktor had begged for his number at the end of Worlds, and Yuuri had been unable to resist giving it to him, not with those pleading eyes focused on him.

Now Viktor texts him nearly every day, or ends up calling him late at night when Yuuri is about to fall asleep, or video calls him in the middle of the day to complain about his rink mates or tell him about Makkachin or any number of inane excuses that all amount to the same thing: Viktor likes to talk to him.

Yuuri still can't believe it. Yet without fail, he ends up responding to Viktor's messages, all the while wondering how things could have changed. What did he do that caught Viktor's attention so thoroughly?

Had Viktor been this focused on Yuuri in their last lifetime together? So quickly?

Yuuri doesn't understand it... but it makes him happy, regardless.

Even if it hurts at the same time. Every time they talk, Yuuri hears his Viktor, yet he knows that Viktor doesn't remember a single thing about their year together in the alternate future. Surely Viktor would have confronted him long ago if he had known that they would be together one day; yet he has not, so Yuuri must believe that he does not know anything at all.

He had wondered if Viktor had come back, too. He had hoped, even, and yet the idea had broken his heart at the same time, that Viktor might have died as well. Part of him is intensely relieved that Viktor does not remember him. If Viktor remembered him, then it would mean that Viktor had traveled back in time as well... and considering that Yuuri traveled in time only because of his death, he cannot bear the thought of the same thing happening to Viktor.

Sometimes it gives Yuuri a headache, worrying about all this. He vows to write in his journal later, to get his worries off his chest.

"Isn't it almost bedtime for you, sleeping beauty?" Viktor teases, and the nickname sends a familiar pang through Yuuri's heart. He still does not understand the nickname. Viktor had given it to him last time, too.

He loves it too much to ask Viktor to stop calling him 'sleeping beauty.'
"It's my vacation," Yuuri grumbles, setting the phone down and switching it to speaker phone. Viktor has a point; it is late enough for him to slink into bed. "Shouldn't you be practicing?"

"I'm already finished for the day," Viktor replies, a smile in his voice. "Right now I'm grooming Makkachin. Makka, say hi to Yuuri!"

Yuuri pauses in pulling out his bedclothes when Makkachin barks, his heart melting a bit. "Hi, Makkachin," he replies, unable to help a smile. Hearing and seeing Makkachin, even if just through the phone, soothes his old wounds just as much as Vicchan.

"Ooh, my darling girl, you can't just grab the phone like that," laughs Viktor, as the line rustles. Yuuri listens to him chide Makkachin for a few minutes while he changes, finally crawling into bed and lying heavily on his side, the phone sitting by his ear.

A moment later, his door opens, and Vicchan squeezes in, hopping up on the bed and nosing at Yuuri's face, before licking him.

"Stop that, Vicchan," Yuuri laughs, catching Vicchan and scooping him into his arms. "That tickles!"

Vicchan barks, and the noise on the line suddenly stops. Then Makkachin barks, and Vicchan twists his head around to search for the other dog, while Yuuri unconsciously holds his breath. Vicchan and Makkachin have never met before.

Vicchan squirms out of Yuuri's arms with whine and scoots closer to the phone, nosing at it curiously, and on the speaker, Makkachin barks again, sounding excited. Vicchan finally barks back, and for a few minutes, the call is filled with barking. Yuuri just stares, shocked by Vicchan's happy wiggling.

After a while, Yuuri can hear Viktor laughing as he tries to calm Makkachin down.

"Makka, Makkachin, calm down! It's okay! It's just Vicchan!" Viktor soothes Makkachin until she stops barking, and Yuuri catches Vicchan again, shushing him with an amazed smile. "Wow," says Viktor, after a moment of quiet, "I've never seen her act like that."

"I wonder if they talked about us," Yuuri says quietly, smiling. Viktor laughs.

"Perhaps so. I imagine Makkachin has many questions about you, and Vicchan would want to know about me," Viktor says, but Yuuri replies before he can control his mouth.

"He already knows everything about you." A second later, Yuuri turns bright red as he realizes what he just said, and he rolls onto his stomach to hide his face in his pillow, mortified.

"Yuuri," Viktor says after a long moment of silence. "Do you --"

"Don't say it," Yuuri says to his pillow, desperately.

Viktor barely misses a beat, his voice turning firmer, amused now. "Do you tell Vicchan about --"

"No! Stop saying it!" Yuuri wails, lifting his head. "Viktor, stop, please!"

Viktor is laughing again. "Do you tell Vicchan about me? I'm honored, Yuuri!"

Yuuri slumps against his pillow again, giving in. "Maybe a little," he mumbles, unwilling to say anything more. Viktor doesn't need to know about all the posters, figurines, DVDs, CDs and other
Viktor Nikiforov paraphernalia that Yuuri has stashed in his room, both here and in America.

Viktor chuckles softly. The sound sends a pang through Yuuri; that is the laugh he used to hear whenever Viktor was about to kiss him. Yuuri closes his eyes, unable to stop himself from imagining the sweet smile that would accompany the noise, alongside the motion of Viktor leaning in, and his breath hitches a little.

He wishes Viktor was here.

"Tired already?" Viktor teases, and Yuuri huffs, turning onto his back and setting Vicchan on his chest, absently scratching behind his fluffy ears.

"Not really," Yuuri replies, then surprises himself with a yawn. "Well... maybe a little tired. I ran a lot today, and being with my family, it's... well. I always worry when I'm with them."

Viktor is quiet for a moment. "Do they have health problems?" he asks, and Yuuri realizes he was being too vague.

"Oh, no, it's just... it's like I'm constantly worrying about how they'll see me. I spent a long time away from them, and I didn't really call or anything, and I... I realized what I was doing was hurting them. I was too selfish to see it before. Now I'm trying to be better, and I want to be a good son, but I never seem to know what the right thing to do is."

He isn't sure how else to explain it to Viktor. His Viktor had understood the problem implicitly. Yuuri had taken his family and loved ones for granted for years, until Viktor had taught him to look beyond himself and see the love that infused his relationships. He wants so badly to repay his family for supporting him for so long, that maybe he tries too hard, or ends up not trying at all, because he puts too much pressure on himself.

He has done it before.

He tries to call them once a week, at least. Sometimes it feels more like a chore than an honest wish to talk to them, and Yuuri hates himself for it. It's hard to get out of old habits.

"Do they seem unhappy with you?" Viktor asks quietly, and Yuuri exhales.

"No. That's the thing... they never get mad at me. They never say I did anything wrong. But I feel like it, anyway."

Viktor hums in consideration. "It sounds to me like you simply need to keep trying, but not so much that it upsets you. Your relationship with your family shouldn't be stressful. Simply do what you think is best, and don't worry about the rest."

When Viktor puts it like that, Yuuri can see how foolish he has been acting. Viktor has always been able to reframe Yuuri's worries to something more palatable, and he aches for a moment, wishing he could express his gratitude properly.

"Okay," Yuuri whispers, sighing. "Thank you, Viktor."

"You're welcome, Yuuri." Viktor goes quiet for a few moments, and Yuuri listens to his soft breathing. A tension lays coiled in his chest, slowly growing stronger with the words he wants to say to Viktor -- his gratitude, his apologies, his misery, his love -- but Yuuri bottles it all down, refusing to burden Viktor with his problems. Especially not this Viktor, who barely knows him and hasn't given himself the responsibility of taking care of Yuuri's mental health, as his Viktor did for so long.
Finally, Viktor exhales deeply. "Yuuri, may I see you?"

Yuuri starts slightly. "What? Oh, um, yeah."

A second later, the phone makes a noise for the video call feature, and Yuuri hastily connects, his heart beating a bit faster when Viktor's face appears on the screen, his living room in the background. Viktor smiles upon seeing him, then brightens when he notices Vicchan on Yuuri's chest.

"Ooh, is this Vicchan? He's so cute!" Viktor croons, and Yuuri relaxes a little, holding the phone back so that Viktor can see Vicchan better. Vicchan perks up at the sound of his name and looks at the phone, tilting his head curiously. Yuuri can only watch with a small smile as Viktor spends quite some time cooing at Vicchan and talking to him in a particular voice, the one Yuuri has heard him use only for Makkachin before.

"Toy poodles are too cute. I want him to meet Makkachin so much," Viktor sighs, and Yuuri wonders how it would even be possible. He would love for them to meet, too, but Viktor would have to come to Japan again... and Yuuri does not plan on letting that happen. It's a nice thought, but one that will never happen in reality.

He manages to keep his thoughts out of his expression and voice. "I think they'd like each other," Yuuri says instead, his gaze softening a little.

Viktor meets his eyes and smiles, and the familiar expression sends a shiver through Yuuri, leaving an ache from the force of his yearning. He hides his face in Vicchan's fur, and he hears Viktor chuckle.

"You look like it's your bedtime, sleeping beauty," Viktor says quietly. Even though it's been two months since Viktor began calling him that, it still makes Yuuri's face heat up with happy embarrassment.

"It's always my bedtime," Yuuri mumbles, and the reply might be a little silly, but Viktor makes him say and think things that Yuuri would never normally express. He peeks over Vicchan's fur, meeting Viktor's gaze for a long moment, that urge to spill his secrets building up again, until he locks it away.

"おやすみ、ヴィクトル," Yuuri says softly, and the Japanese makes Viktor light up, his cheeks turning pink as the Kyushu accent rolls easily off Yuuri's tongue.

"Доброй ночи, Юрий," Viktor replies, his vivid gaze glittering. Yuuri doesn't want to be the first person to hang up, and he hesitates with his thumb over the 'end call' button, his gaze roaming over Viktor's face, and then he realizes that Viktor is doing the same.

Yuuri promptly flushes red, which makes Viktor's eyes widen a little, another little blush stealing across his cheeks. Good night never tasted so sweet.

"Night," Yuuri mumbles, and Viktor echoes the sentiment softly, before Yuuri forces himself to push the button. The screen goes dark, and Yuuri stares at it for a long time, wondering at this new feeling building inside him.

In his dream, Viktor had told him to admit everything, about Yuuri traveling back in time and their shared history together. Yuuri cannot do that; but something still calls to him to tell Viktor his secrets, the truths that he hides from everyone else. The need to come clean, to be able to trust Viktor to listen to him, is threatening to burn him up from the inside.
He can't, though. Not now... maybe not ever. Not even when Viktor himself told Yuuri to do so.

He never, ever wants to see that sad expression on Viktor's face again.

~*~

Two weeks in Hasetsu fly by, and before Yuuri knows it, he is back in Detroit in a meeting with Celestino, planning out his training schedule for the summer.

"You still have those dance classes at school, don't you?" Celestino asks while peering at his laptop with a frown. Yuuri knows he prefers the leather book sitting beside it, but he always prints out the schedules for his skaters.

"Tuesdays and Thursdays at 2:30," Yuuri affirms. Two hours of ballet each day, with alternative dance on Thursday if he joins the night class. His knee is jittery, probably from the extra shot he had in his latte this morning. Viktor and Phichit both think that Yuuri drinks too much coffee, but sometimes tea just isn't enough in the mornings.

"Right, then we'll do Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from nine to one," Celestino says, typing. "Workouts in the afternoons, and Sunday will be a rest day. Are you picking up any shifts at that game store you worked at last summer?"

Yuuri frowns as he remembers his old summer job. "No, I won't. I'm starting that modeling thing, remember?" Classes were hard enough, even taking the minimum every semester; he would rather focus completely on training.

"Right, right. Well, let me know whenever you have to travel for that." After a few more minutes of typing, Celestino prints out two copies of the new schedule and hands one to Yuuri.

"I think that takes care of everything except the programs." Celestino observes him for a moment, and abruptly, Yuuri realizes he has no idea what he should do for his programs this season. He could do his old routines from the last time, but...

He does remember his old programs from his other timeline, but the strain of losing at the Grand Prix Final and Nationals, which left him unable to compete at Four Continents, still lingers in his memories. His humiliation haunts him to this day. He had failed at the most important competition of his life, at that point in his career, and he can't help but wonder if those programs were cursed.

Celestino still looks thoughtful. "You know, the arrangement you did on your programs last year worked pretty well. Do you want to try that again?"

"I..." Yuuri is used to Celestino choosing his music for him. He had once tried to get music arranged for him, this same time in his past life, but it hadn't worked out. He should try contacting Ketty again and see if she can put something together. He wonders if she will come up with his Yuuri On Ice program again.

"I'd like to try," Yuuri says, surprising himself. "May I think about it and get back to you?"

"Of course, Yuuri," Celestino replies, opening his ancient leather notebook. "I'll give you two
weeks to submit your music choices. In the meantime, we'll work on your jumps and flexibility. Okay?"

"Okay," Yuuri agrees, his mind whirling. What should he do?

When he gets back to the apartment, Yuuri throws himself into Spotify lists and YouTube and iTunes until he is drowning in music. Nothing seems right, though. He asks Ketty again for an ensemble about his career, but somehow it sounds the same as last time, too dull, not good enough. For days, Yuuri stresses over music and possible component combinations until he starts to lose sleep. He even stops talking to Viktor, because Viktor has already chosen his programs and Yuuri feels embarrassed that he has not done the same.

Then he finds the perfect songs, within an hour of listening to each of them.

The first is a classical piece from an anime show he and Phichit watched together. Usually Yuuri avoids more modern music, but the song had spoken to him with beautiful emotion, to the point that Yuuri found himself humming it in his downtime. *Watashi no Uso* expresses the melancholy that has made its home in Yuuri's chest, the pain of a lifetime with the love of his life, lost forever.

He cannot express his hurt in words, so Yuuri decides he can skate it instead.

He has almost always skated to classical compositions since he moved to America, partly because of his background with Minako-sensei, and partly because Celestino has a ban on pop and rock music unless it is considered easy listening. Yuuri prefers harder sounds for his own music, but for skating, he loves classical music. Mostly because of Viktor, whose most beautiful skates have always been to classical music.

Yuuri had forgotten about the song, until it starts to play on his shuffled playlist the night before his music choices are due. Yuuri had put his entire library on shuffle and buried his head in his arms, exhausted. Then the song begins to play, and...

Yuuri thinks it is *perfect*. What other story but his own could Yuuri skate? No one would truly understand, but... maybe Yuuri could find some peace, if he skates it for the world. For Viktor.

The second song, which he chooses for his free skate, is also chosen for Viktor, but for an entirely different reason.

By chance, not long after Yuuri chooses *Watashi no Uso*, Phichit links him to a Spotify list with the note that "THIS IS AMAZING." Yuuri listens with growing wonder, just as amazed.

Lindsey Stirling's *Ascendance* enthralls him upon the first listen, and even more so on every listen after. Yuuri is still shocked he found it. The story he can tell with it...

It's Viktor's story. His rise to brilliance, his battles with other skaters and the ISU, his desire to surprise and impress, his loneliness... The violin sings a beautiful song that carries Viktor's soul in its notes, and Yuuri starts crying when he first hears it. It's perfect.

The only problem is that Celestino doesn't like it.

"The short program is fine, but the other one, no," Celestino says, handing the two CDs Yuuri burned back to him. "You know my policy on that pop music."

Yuuri doesn't grit his teeth. His voice may show a bit of his tension, though. "It's not pop, Coach Celestino. It's violin with an electronic beat. It doesn't even have lyrics."
Celestino looks doubtful. "Electronic, pop, it's all the same."

*It's really not. Damnit.* "Coach Celestino, please, listen to it again. I really want to use this music."

He bows low and holds out the CD labeled *Katsuki Free Skate.*

After a long moment, where Yuuri debates between apologizing profusely and yelling, Celestino sighs and takes the CD.

"Alright, Yuuri, if you're serious. I'll let you know on Monday."

"Thank you," Yuuri mumbles, bowing again before scuttling away with his approved short program. His heart is beating fast in his chest. He has never stood up to Celestino like that before – and he is furious that he had to. Celestino should trust him by now. He isn't like the teenagers that come in with profanity-laden trash. When has Yuuri ever picked a bad song? Even during the musicapocalypse, as veterans of *that year* call it, Yuuri had picked perfectly normal music.

By the time Yuuri makes it to his favorite coffee shop, he is shaking with nerves. Phichit hasn't gotten out of class yet, so Yuuri stands in line alone, chewing the inside of his cheek. He grips his phone while he waits for his caramel frappuccino, which is definitely not part of his diet, turning the device over with his thumb not quite hovering over Viktor's name on his speed dial.

As soon as he wraps his hand around his drink, he hits 'Call.'

"Allo, Yuuri," Viktor answers almost immediately, sounding slightly winded. Yuuri can hear a smile, though, as flirtatious as Viktor ever is. "I was afraid I would have to fly out to Detroit and chase you down, had you continued to ignore me."

"Ha," Yuuri mutters, shame welling up. He should have responded to Viktor sooner, or at least explained why he was being quiet. "You're not allowed to come to America just because I don't text you back, Viktor." He makes his way through the coffee shop to the small nook where there are armchairs and a fireplace, though it isn't lit right now. He prefers the armchairs over a table.

Yuuri can hear the smile in Viktor's voice. "Well, there go my plans for the weekend," Viktor replies, hopefully joking. Yuuri wouldn't put it past Viktor to appear in the middle of Detroit with no warning. Yuuri has experience with Viktor's whims.

"How may I help you on this fine summer day?" Viktor asks. "You usually wait until the evening to call me."

Oh, right. It's evening for Viktor, and Yuuri thinks immediately that he must be intruding. Then again, Viktor wouldn't have answered if he hadn't wanted to; he rarely bothers with such niceties if he is truly busy.

"I had a bad day at practice," Yuuri finally admits. It's hard to tell Viktor that Yuuri needs him, that he wants to hear Viktor's voice to make himself feel better. "If you're busy..."

Viktor's response is immediate, and it warms Yuuri. "No, I'm not busy. I'm just reading." Yuuri can hear rustling, the soft noise of a hardback book closing. Viktor prefers books over reading on his tablet when he is at home. It seems that no matter what, Viktor is always concerned for Yuuri and wants to help him in any way possible. "Would you like to talk about it? I'm happy to listen."

The soft worry in his voice makes Yuuri sigh. He misses that worry, misses being able to talk to Viktor properly about his problems. Maybe they can never have what Yuuri had with his Viktor, but he knows he can trust this Viktor, no matter what.
"I had an argument with Celestino," Yuuri admits quietly, then sighs deeply. Voicing his frustrations leaves him slumped against the side of the armchair, the tension draining out of him. "He won't let me go forward with my music choice for my free skate. It's really frustrating, and I don't know what to do about it."

He can hear the confusion in Viktor's voice. "Didn't you choose your songs last year?"

"No." He doubts Viktor would know about Celestino's issues with music. "Celestino has this policy about music. If he doesn't approve of the music you suggest, then he'll pick something from his own music. He has a lot of songs that anyone can use, but... I wanted to do something special this year. He doesn't like it, but I asked him to consider it before he said no. So I hope that he lets me use it."

"Why is he so strict about music?" Viktor asks after a moment. Yuuri bites down a sigh; it's easy for Viktor to ask, as if it's never been an issue, when Viktor has been ordering music ensembles for his programs for years. Yuuri doesn't have the same freedom as Viktor does.

For a moment, he sips at his drink, absentmindedly licking away the foam that coats his lip. "Mm, well, he coaches a lot of skaters, mostly teenagers and college students. Three years ago, he had a season where everyone went wild with their music choices, including songs with profanity, and that got him in trouble with some sponsors. So he doesn't allow pop music or anything like that now. But mine isn't like that, it's..."

Yuuri exhales in frustration, all too aware that the song he has chosen is for the man he is speaking to, wishing he could just tell Viktor. He keeps his silence, though. "It's just different. And I want him to accept it and support me using it, but he doesn't like it. It's the first program that I've really made on my own, and I really want him to let me use it. It's already June, and I really need to work on my free skate."

For a moment, Yuuri twists the straw around in his drink, mixing the whipped cream and the caramel swirl, debating on what else to tell Viktor. He doesn't want Viktor to think that Celestino is a bad coach, because he isn't. He has supported Yuuri for years, and he doesn't want to sound ungrateful, but it still bothers him.

Finally he sighs. "I guess he just doesn't have as much time to work with everyone individually. Practices are kind of scattered... everyone meets with him once a week to update him on our progress, and of course he tells us what we're doing wrong when we're skating, but... I don't know. I never had a problem with him before this season."

"I'm sorry that you have to go through that, Yuuri," Viktor says, and he does sound sorry. Viktor, who would be Yuuri's best and worst coach in another future, had always given Yuuri the time and attention he needed and, in many ways, craved. "Yakov is strict as well, but he always lets me control the artistic side of my programs. Surely Celestino wants you to skate the way that makes you happiest."

You'd think so, but not everybody is you, Viktor. Yuuri doesn't let that thought escape, softening enough to laugh. Nobody had given him as much artistic freedom as Viktor had. "I don't know about that... I have a habit of mental weakness when it comes to competitions, and I think he thinks he needs to protect me from that, so he tends to be pretty strict with me. He's not a bad coach, don't get me wrong, but I feel like I'm finally coming into my own as a skater, and... it'd be nice if I had some more support from him."

Such as the kind of support Yuuri had once received from Viktor, in his other life. Though he had been strict with Yuuri's diet and training and clumsy with his anxiety, Viktor had always been there
for Yuuri. Even though Viktor has placed himself at Yuuri's beck and call, it's just not the same, now. Yuuri has no one he can truly rely on when he falls apart.

The thought sends a sharp pang through Yuuri's heart, and he has to distract himself with his drink, for a moment.

"He should support you more, yes," Viktor replies, sounding thoughtful. Yuuri has never been this honest with him; it has always been hard for him to talk about his feelings and innermost thoughts, but Viktor draws them out of Yuuri's heart with gentle ease. He wishes he could show Viktor how grateful he is. "Hopefully he will let you use the music you have chosen."

"I hope so." Yuuri sips more of his drink, enjoying the foam and thinking guiltily that Viktor would not approve of it. "Thanks for listening to me, Viktor... I'm sorry to talk about such heavy topics."

"I'm happy to listen, Yuuri. I happen to like listening to you," Viktor says, that flirtatious note back in his voice, and Yuuri can't help but laugh, love swelling in his heart. He misses Viktor so much; if only he could see him...

"So you've said," Yuuri replies, unable to stop himself from smiling. Talking to Viktor really does make him feel better.

"Yuuri!" he hears, and Yuuri turns his head to see Phichit waving from the door.

"Oh, my roommate's here," Yuuri tells Viktor, hesitating as he waves at Phichit. "Um... are you going to call me tonight? Tomorrow morning for you, I mean?" He can feel his face heat up as he asks, knowing that Phichit will see him blushing, but Yuuri has come to enjoy Viktor calling him most nights. It's nice to fall asleep listening to his voice, even if Yuuri feels guilty for it at the same time.

"I'd be happy to," Viktor says, chuckling. "Enjoy your overpriced sugary coffee, Yuuri."

That pulls Yuuri up short, and he blinks down at his coffee. "How did you," he starts to ask, then shakes his head. Viktor never ceases to amaze him. "No, never mind. Bye, Viktor," Yuuri says, smiling, before he ends the call and gathers his bag. The phone goes into his pocket as Yuuri makes his way to Phichit.

"Who was that?" Phichit asks, following Yuuri out of the building to the car.

Yuuri's blush hasn't really abated. "Viktor."

Phichit's eyes light up, before a frown touches his expression, tinged with worry. Yuuri has told him that Viktor has been talking to him lately, though he doubts Phichit knows the full extent of their contact. "Yuuri... is that wise? Since he's..."

Shrugging a little, Yuuri throws his bag into the backseat and settles into the driver's seat, waiting for Phichit to join him. He doesn't say anything as they pull out of the parking lot and turn onto the road that will take them home, wondering what he could say to defend himself.

Nothing. Yuuri has no defense for his actions, and Phichit seems to sense this. Phichit remains the only person to know about Yuuri's other future, and he has given Yuuri as much support as Yuuri has been able to accept. Still, Phichit will never be able to understand Yuuri's need to be with Viktor, nor the relationship he lost.

Yuuri wishes in some ways that he could give Viktor up, but he refuses to hurt Viktor, and if
Viktor wants to talk to him... then Yuuri will let it happen, even if it hurts him every time he hears Viktor's voice and remembers a time when Viktor loved him.

After a while, Phichit distracts them both with a conversation about the new toys he bought for his hamsters, and Yuuri listens, all the while thinking of the phone in his pocket and how it may already have a message from Viktor.

He doesn't let himself pull it out and look until he gets home.

~*~

To his relief, Celestino finally approves of the free skate choice, and Yuuri sets himself to routine. So starts his summer of training, accompanied by monthly potlucks with the skating club, infrequent trips to the pool, and a constant barrage of messages from Viktor. It isn't just a few texts anymore, but nightly calls when Yuuri's defenses are low enough to allow it, video calls after he gets home from practice, and a stream of conversation via text message. Yuuri has never been more grateful for his international data plan, because otherwise Viktor would drive up his monthly charges to unbearable heights.

Summertime used to be a hodgepodge of trips to the lake and training, but Yuuri doesn't go near the waterfront any longer. The pool is okay; Yuuri tends to avoid the deep end enough that he gets questions about it, but Phichit always manages to steer those conversations away from Yuuri's failures. He ends up taking late nights at the rink to practice, worrying over whether he will be able to pull off these new programs that he has choreographed alone.

He ends up asking Viktor for advice, constantly. He should be going to Celestino, but already Yuuri's mind is wired to entrust his skating questions to Viktor, who nearly glows whenever Yuuri asks him to look at a particular sequence. Viktor's technical knowledge and artistic ability are second to none, and Yuuri takes full advantage, trusting that Viktor will help him.

Not all of the advice ends up being useful, but Yuuri can see the beginnings of Viktor's interest in coaching, just from guiding Yuuri through difficult component combinations. Viktor might not have been the best coach, but Yuuri has long known that Viktor likes to help other people. He believes that with enough time and experience, Viktor would become a fantastic coach, and Yuuri is forever honored that Viktor chose him as his first student.

Talking to Viktor every day, though... it wears on Yuuri. He can't truly be himself with Viktor. He ends up holding in a lot, stopping himself from mentioning anything from their other future. Viktor will ask questions about Yuuri, constantly seeking more information about him and his past, and it hurts because Yuuri has already told him everything, though this Viktor doesn't remember.

Yet Yuuri tells him again anyway, because the last thing he wants to do is push Viktor away. Viktor's wonder and admiration are just as beautiful and enthralling to Yuuri as they were in the other lifetime, and Yuuri can't stop reaching out to him, seeking that familiarity.

Viktor never stops giving it to him. Sometimes it feels like Yuuri never lost him, but then Viktor says something that reminds Yuuri of his death, of the dream he had of Viktor crying after his funeral, of the two years separating them -- and it hurts. All the while, Yuuri keeps telling himself not to fall in love with Viktor again.

An impossibility. He only hopes that Viktor only sees him as a friend. Yuuri can't handle having him and losing him a second time.

He realizes he is getting depressed again, and just like after he lost at Sochi and Nationals in his
other future, Yuuri gets bored of it. He forces himself to go out more, to go skating for fun, to
watch movies with Phichit and try cooking new things. He throws himself into practicing his
routines, tweaking them until Celestino tells him excitedly that he is going to amaze the audience.

He hates feeling depressed, but at least he can pretend he isn't. Ignoring the waterfront is easy
enough. Thoughts about his other future go into his journal. The nightmares are the worst part of it,
but Yuuri soldiers through them, even if sometimes they morph into things other than the Neva.
Dreaming of Hasetsu in the summer with Viktor and of the Grand Prix Final in Barcelona are no
less uncomfortable than dreaming of dying, though -- because when Yuuri wakes up, he still
remembers that those memories can never become real.

Viktor notices, of course, but Yuuri does his best to pretend that everything is fine. If he can just
get through the summer, then school will start back up, and Yuuri will be able to distract himself
with class and practice.

His training is going well, at least. The first time Yuuri finishes his free skate, he calls Viktor, too
jubilant to stop himself.

As the phone rings, Yuuri realizes that he must have missed Viktor's now nightly call, though he
hadn't noticed a notification. He has been skating late at the club to practice, building his programs
with critical attention. He already had his short program planned and roughly completed, but his
free skate was taking longer due to the attention he was paying to the story he wanted to tell.

He finished it, though, and in his excitement, he called Viktor immediately.

"Allo?" Viktor answers after a moment, sounding a little sleep muzzled, and Yuuri flushes a little at
the gravelly sound of his voice.

"Hi, Viktor," Yuuri says, breathless from the skate he just finished. "Oh, did I wake you?"

"Seems so," Viktor mumbles, a yawn catching his voice. "It's fine though. I should have gotten up
an hour ago, but Georgi wanted to go out for drinks last night because Anya is giving him the cold
shoulder, and I drank too much. Is everything okay?"

"Oh! Yes! I just, I wanted," Yuuri fumbles, before blurting out, "I finished my free skate! It's really
good!"

"Oh?" Viktor says slowly, and Yuuri can hear his smile. "Think it's gold worthy?"

And now Viktor has to tease him about the gold medal Yuuri promised him at Worlds. Yuuri rolls
his eyes, unable to help a smile, but it dims a little when he thinks of the five gold medals he
promised his Viktor.

"Definitely," he tells Viktor firmly. "I'm going to beat you."

"I hope you do," Viktor teases. "Now, you should tell me what your program is."

Yuuri laughs in surprise. Viktor can't seriously be asking him that. "What? No, Viktor, I'm not
going to tell you what the song is."

"Yuuri," Viktor sighs, and Yuuri can see his face now, the pout that is undoubtedly resting on
Viktor's lips. "You woke me up so early, after I had such a terrible night! What if I ask very, very
nicely?"

As he covers his face, Yuuri feels a smile spreading across his lips. His beautiful, petty, whiny
Viktor -- Yuuri has missed this side of him. "Then I'll tell you very, very nicely, no."

"Yuuuuri!"

Yuuri does not give in. Programs in hand, Yuuri trains, until he and Celestino are satisfied with his program components. He decides not to tell anyone about his program choices. Not even Viktor, who takes this news in a rather predictable way: by whining and begging for Yuuri incessantly.

"You have to," Viktor insists. It is near the end of June now, and Viktor has not given up. He has been wheedling for Yuuri to cave for almost an hour now on Skype, ranging from downright begging to careful bargaining. Most of his promises are things he would give Yuuri anyway: an hour long call with Makkachin, or an exclusive photo that no one else has seen. Yuuri almost gave in when he was offered a signed first edition Viktor Nikiforov poster from Viktor's junior days, but he has held strong. "I'll tell you mine!"

The shock of that statement takes Yuuri by surprise. Viktor has never revealed his programs to anyone prior to the competitions before. Yuuri already knows what they will be, but the fact that Viktor would offer baffles him. Does Viktor really trust him that much?

"I couldn't ask you to do that!" Yuuri sputters. "What if your fans find out? Then it wouldn't be a surprise!"

"I trust you," Viktor tells him, certain of Yuuri's integrity, and Yuuri wonders wildly how Viktor can believe in him so easily, so thoroughly.

"Viktor," he tries, then sighs deeply. "I'm not telling you." He looks away from Viktor's pout and continues paging through the top Viktor Nikiforov forum in Japan. He has moderated it since he was fourteen, though once he entered college, he turned most of the duties over to Yuuko. She does a good job keeping up with all the rumors and press releases.

The irony of perusing a news website dedicated to his once-fiancé while speaking to the man himself is not lost on Yuuri -- but he bravely pretends it is perfectly normal.

"Yuuuuuuri," Viktor whines from the corner of the screen, where the video window sits. Yuuri ignores him and clicks on a link for a recent ISU release.

Before he starts reading, Yuuri looks up at the camera, his cheeks warming a little. "Maybe I want to surprise you," he says quietly, and Viktor breathes in softly, his pout fading as wonder fills his eyes.

"Yuuri... okay. Fine, then surprise me. But make it a good one," Viktor orders, his eyes glittering. Yuuri can only hold his gaze for another moment, distracting himself with the article. He swears his ears are turning red, but he nods, determined to make his programs perfect.

"I will," Yuuri promises quietly.

Viktor smiles, pleased with his victory, and for a little while they are quiet together while Yuuri reads and Viktor watches him, content.

"How is the modeling going?" Viktor asks after a moment. His eyes are twinkling, and Yuuri knows for a fact that Viktor already has copies of the magazines Yuuri has appeared in. At one point, Viktor posted pictures of them on Instagram, which nearly doubled the sales, and earned Yuuri two more modeling contracts.

"It's going well, thanks to you," Yuuri replies, giving Viktor a small smile. "It helps that they have
a studio in Detroit, though most of the time I drive to Chicago."

He never imagined that he would *model*, of all things. Yuuri is no stranger to appearing in magazines, from the many skating specials that Japan likes to publish to the official ISU releases. Modeling is very different than sitting down for an interview and a few photos. Yuuri has to sit through makeup sessions and change into beautiful clothing, none of which he would ever dream of owning. Most of the shoots are for clothing, though he has also done a few cologne spreads.

The people are nice to work with, at least. The modeling pays decently well, enough that Yuuri doesn't have to take up a summer job. He is putting the majority of it into savings, though he still sends money back to his parents when he can. He needs to buy new skates soon, though, and pick out his outfits for his programs this year.

"Good. Though, you know that modeling isn't all that we could be doing, right?" Viktor looks far too pleased with himself, and Yuuri resists rolling his eyes.

"I don't want to shoot commercials, Viktor. That would be ridiculous."

"No! Not commercials," Viktor insists. "Ice shows. I do ice shows every so often. Sometimes for charity, sometimes for my rinkmates when they need some extra income. You don't do any?"

Yuuri knows about the ice shows; he has them recorded somewhere on his computer. "I sometimes help out at the rink, when they put on a performance and need some adult skaters, but that money goes to the rink. I don't do any solo shows. I did do a charity show with JJ once..."

"Hmm... well, you could do some anyway. Would Celestino let you use your rink?" Viktor asks, wrinkling his nose briefly at the mention of JJ.

"I doubt it... the rink is pretty booked for the next few months," Yuuri muses. In his other future, he had done Onsen On Ice, but that was Viktor's idea in the first place. "My club is having a competition in July, but that's still for the rink."

"I have the suspicion that you do more ice shows than you're telling me," Viktor says, and Yuuri blinks at him in confusion. "Given the number of results I get on YouTube when I search for 'Katsuki Yuuri ice show.' Now I'm going to have to watch all of these."

"What -- Viktor! Stay out of my videos," Yuuri protests. "I wouldn't know the first thing about setting up an ice show. My modeling makes me enough money anyway."

Viktor's pout is admittedly cute, but Yuuri doesn't dare say so. "Hmph. Fine."

After a moment, Viktor begins humming *Stammi Vicino*, and it takes all of Yuuri's willpower not to react. He *knows* that is Viktor's free skate, and Viktor thinks he doesn't know, thus Viktor believes he is teasing Yuuri, perhaps in the hope that Yuuri will ask about the song. Then Viktor will taunt him and say he can't tell Yuuri about it, because they promised that their programs would be a surprise.

Viktor's idea of revenge is petty and juvenile, and Yuuri loves him for it. Unfortunately for Viktor, Yuuri can be just as savage in his pettiness, so he refuses to acknowledge the humming.

Instead, Yuuri reads, and soon he forgets about Viktor's humming, because the article is about Viktor getting disciplined by the ISU.

Yuuri doesn't remember this at all. He checks the dates on the article and realizes that while the article was released this month, the 'incident' had been two years ago, when Viktor had spent
several weeks building up public interest in same-sex ice dancing, which has been banned by the ISU for years despite the growing support for it. Yuuri had followed the news about it up to the point that Viktor had suddenly stopped talking about the issue at all, and the movement had fizzled and faded. There had been some talk that the ISU and the RSF had gotten involved, alongside a few quiet articles about Viktor meeting with ISU officials, but nothing had ever come of it.

Or so Yuuri had thought. He glances up at Viktor's face, then back at the article. Viktor had been disciplined for promoting an act that was against ISU regulations. They had forced him to stop his campaign and had placed his membership on probation for a year under Rule 125 of the ISU constitution.

Yuuri has to pause and look up the exact regulation. Viktor had been disciplined for "improper public comments" when he had disparaged the ISU for not allowing same-sex partners, as well as for not obeying the ISU rules and code of ethics by stating that he believed the rule prohibiting same-sex partners was unfair.

Then they had sealed the records for two years and had forced Viktor keep silent on the matter.

Suddenly, the article gives new meaning to Viktor's theme of rebellion last year.

Yuuri finds himself simmering with angry tension. He wants to go straight to the ISU and make a complaint about how they handled the situation, though he knows he shouldn't, lest they discipline him, too. Viktor is the darling of the skating world, and no doubt the rest of their peers will be just as furious.

"Why the scowl, Yuuri?" Viktor asks, breaking through Yuuri's anger.

Yuuri licks his lips, realizing how dry they are, and debates how to answer. "The ISU statement," he finally says, glancing up at the camera window. "They made a release about you."

Viktor stares blankly at him, then his gaze drops to his screen, and Yuuri watches as he types quickly for a moment. The smile on Viktor's face fades, and he is quiet for a long time. Yuuri does nothing to push him, reading the faint hints of tension, anger, and resignation that no one else in the world would be able to see.

"So they finally published it," Viktor says without any inflection. "It took them long enough. I was under the impression they would never release the records... I suppose that means I will be getting interview requests soon."

"How could they do that to you?" Yuuri breathes. He had never heard about this, not even in his old past. Had the ISU suppressed it that much? Had something changed behind the scenes, for the ISU to come forward now?

Viktor smiles without mirth. "Because my words were too powerful and they knew it. So they silenced me. It's alright, Yuuri."

"It isn't," Yuuri says forcefully, sitting up straight. "You were standing up for what's right. It's not fair that we can't skate with same-sex partners. If, if I ever did ice dancing, I'd want to skate with a man, not a woman, and it'd be just as beautiful and well-coordinated as a straight couple! And it's not fair that they disciplined you like that! I just, I want to say something to them –"

"Don't," Viktor interrupts, a serious expression on his face. "They will sanction you, too. Don't even think about it, Yuuri."

Yuuri shuts his mouth, his face heating up as he realizes that his emotions got away from him.
"Sorry, it's just... I never knew you were fighting them like this. Alone. If, if I could have helped..."

"No, Yuuri," Viktor says, this time more gently. "Then you would have been in the same position, or even worse. They only stopped themselves from banning me because I'm their 'living legend.' I don't want to think about what they would have done to a skater without as much political clout as I have."

"I suppose," Yuuri admits, knowing that he would be unable to handle a disciplinary meeting. The JSF would ban him for daring to get in trouble in the first place. "I just... I wish I could help."

Viktor finally smiles, and the soft expression reaches into his eyes and brings out that familiar gleam that tells Yuuri that he is surprised and pleased. "You don't need to worry about it. With that press release, I am now free to talk about it in public, and I imagine that Yakov is already fielding questions. My attorney notified me that it would be released, though I hadn't realized it would be today. I'll handle it. The right way, this time."

Yuuri is quiet for a long moment, one finger tapping the space above his arrow keys. Viktor is an expert at his own press; Yuuri shouldn't worry about him, but he does, anyway. Yuuri wishes he had the confidence and popularity to make a stand with Viktor; however, if Yuuri joined the protest, the JSF would probably be unhappy with him.

He finally sighs. "Okay... but please keep me updated. I support you completely." Yuuri glances down at the screen, then up at Viktor again. "I've always wanted same-sex ice dancing, too. If that had been an option when I was a teen..."

"Oh," Viktor breathes, his smile widening. "It's never too late, you know. Though... I would prefer to keep you as a rival, rather than let the ice dancing world have you."

Yuuri can't help a pleased noise, and he has to look down before Viktor can see his smile. He has thought about it – performing ice dancing instead of competitive singles, though he hasn't practiced doing major lifts enough to be good at it. When he and Viktor had skated together for the GPF exhibition, Viktor had done most of the lifts, though by no means had he performed all of the traditionally masculine roles in the program. They had switched easily, and Yuuri had loved it, sharing the lead, just as they did in their relationship.

He would love to do ice dancing with Viktor, just as much as he loves to skate against him.

"I suppose you do need a proper rival," Yuuri says instead of sharing his thoughts, glancing up through his bangs. Viktor grins at him, and Yuuri can't help but smile back.

A message buzzes on his phone then, and Yuuri glances at it with a small frown.

From: Christophe Giacometti
I've got quite the programs planned for this year. How are yours going?

"It's from Chris," Yuuri murmurs, confused. Christophe doesn't talk to him often outside of competitions. "He's asking me about my programs." He texts a reply, Going well, before setting the phone down and looking at the image of Viktor again.

"Oh?" says Viktor, as casual as can be, which makes Yuuri raise an eyebrow. "Must be sounding out the competition."

"Competition?" Yuuri repeats, frowning at his phone. "But I haven't..."

Yuuri trails off, hesitating. He had beaten Chris for silver at Worlds. In his other lifetime, Chris
had won silver, but Yuuri had edged out over him with a scant few points. Chris had always been Viktor's main rival, as well as Yuuri's, and yet Yuuri had barely acknowledged the win, only looking at the point gap between him and Viktor with consideration.

He knows the exact program composition of *Immortelle* and *Stammi Vicino*. If Yuuri is successful, then *Watashi no Uso* and *Ascendance* will be even stronger.

Chris, though... Yuuri knows Chris' programs as well, though not by heart like Viktor's. Chris never does as well during the GPF as during Europeans or Worlds, by his own admission: he starts out slowly then gains power as he gets deeper into the season. Yuuri knows well that Chris' attention has always been fixed on Viktor; he would have to be blind not to notice that Chris considers himself to be Viktor's number one rival.

Yuuri wonders if Chris feels threatened by him. He hopes that Chris doesn't hold it against him.

"First JJ, now this," Yuuri sighs, setting the phone aside and going to the art gallery on the Viktor fansite. He knows Viktor is staring at him, touching his lip in curiosity with one finger, but he doesn't ask what Viktor is thinking.

He's pretty sure he knows.

"Is he still bothering you?" Viktor asks after a moment, and Yuuri shakes his head.

"No, he went back to Canada when the season ended. I'm pretty sure he's going to train under his parents from now on." The Leroys are an infamous power couple of ice skating, and their notoriety in Canada will be good for JJ's training and connections, as far as Yuuri knows. He still won't lose to JJ, though.

"Good," Viktor says decisively, and Yuuri does glance up now, seeing a small smirk on Viktor's lips. It disappears quickly, but it makes Yuuri raise an eyebrow. Does Viktor really dislike JJ that much? He remembers Viktor being somewhat cold to JJ during Worlds, but not enough to hate him...

Viktor beams when he has Yuuri's attention. "By the way, Yuuri, I will be going on a business trip next weekend. Texting will be fine, but I won't be in a good location for video calls for a while."

"Oh," Yuuri says, briefly disappointed. He likes being able to see Viktor's face every day. "Well, I'll just be practicing all weekend, but I'll keep my phone on me. Where are you going?"

"A magazine shoot in New York," Viktor says, waving a hand. "I've worked with them before, so it should be a short trip." Then he adopts a flirtatious smile, and Yuuri groans, already anticipating his next words. "So, are you going to tell me your program choices now?"

"No," Yuuri tells him flatly. No matter how cute it is, Viktor's pout does not move him.

~*~

Slowly, Yuuri peers up from his cutting board of green onion and mushrooms. To his dismay, Viktor Nikiforov is still sitting in his apartment, sharing the island bar that separates the living room from the kitchenette with Phichit, while Yuuri busies himself with food preparation. Ostensibly, Yuuri is cooking dinner for himself and Viktor; in reality, he is having a nervous breakdown.

He did not expect Viktor to appear in Detroit, despite multiple jokes about this exact scenario. He should have suspected it, at the very least, when Viktor mentioned his magazine shoot in New
York of all places. He should have known that Viktor wouldn't be able to resist the opportunity to surprise Yuuri with his presence.

It's really nice to see him. Viktor is just as beautiful in person as he is in their video chats and pictures, and it seems unreal for him to be sitting in Yuuri's apartment. With a small sigh, Yuuri refocuses his attention on his hands and vegetables.

Phichit is leaving in twenty minutes; he has a group date planned for eight, though he had offered to stay and help Yuuri cope with being in Viktor's company. Yuuri had refused, believing that he can handle Viktor. At least Viktor isn't staying the night; then, Yuuri might have a problem.

With another sigh, Yuuri starts the rice. He might as well busy himself with cooking.

"I guess I should be going," Phichit sighs, tucking his phone away and beaming at Viktor. "It's nice to see you, Viktor! Unexpected, but I'm glad you're here to keep Yuuri company! Otherwise I'd drag him out with me!"

"Hm? Yuuri, did I interrupt plans for tonight?" Viktor asks Yuuri, who shrugs.

"Not particularly. I don't like to go out to these things, because," he starts, then hesitates, glancing between Viktor and his hands. "People usually try to set me up with dates. It's not my thing."

"I see," Viktor says slowly, his smile fixing on his face. Yuuri hides a wince, while Phichit's smile widens.

"That's right! Our Yuuri's so popular with the ladies," Phichit nearly sings, winking at Yuuri. "Not to mention the guys, too. I think Andy was going to try asking you out tonight."

Yuuri groans. He really does not want to talk about his unfortunate ability to attract a high number of people with crushes on him. He has been dealing with weird crushes since middle school, and it has always confused him. Viktor remains silent, and Yuuri doesn't dare look up. "I'm not interested in Andy," Yuuri mumbles, then goes to hide his nerves in the fridge.

Viktor finally speaks, and his voice is far too even. Yuuri recognizes it as a warning of danger, but Phichit seems oblivious, even though he very likely knows fully well what he is doing. "Unfortunately for both him and your friends, I plan to be selfish tonight concerning Yuuri."

Yuuri cannot help his blush. He tries to cool it down in the freezer.

"Too bad, I bet it would have been interesting," Phichit comments with a smile, then stands. "Well, I'm off! You two have fun tonight!"

Yuuri halfheartedly waves goodbye as he returns to the stove, and the sound of the door closing seals Yuuri alone with Viktor. Yuuri stubbornly stays silent, staring down at his simmering pot. He waits only a moment before Viktor turns to look at him, an easy smile on his face.

"I like your roommate," Viktor says. "He was at Worlds, wasn't he?"

"Yes, and at Four Continents," Yuuri affirms, relaxing a little. He hopes Viktor will forget the comment about Andy. Yuuri hadn't even been aware that Andy liked him, and he isn't interested, either. He has always had eyes for only one person.

Viktor hums thoughtfully, content to watch Yuuri as he cooks. Yuuri doesn't really know why, either. Viktor was usually the one who cooked when Yuuri moved in with him, in the other future, and Yuuri isn't the best cook on the planet. Viktor always said that Yuuri looked great in an apron,
though.

He really should have gone with Phichit. A group setting would make it much easier to handle his feelings for Viktor through determined ignorance. Even if it meant he would have had to deal with rink mates with unfortunate crushes.

"Are you sure you don't want to go out with your friends? I can drive you there," Viktor offers, and Yuuri finally looks up, unable to stop himself.

"I'm really not interested in anybody else," Yuuri says quietly. For some reason he dares not evaluate too closely, he needs Viktor to know that. "Not Andy, not anybody from the skating club. All they want to do is drink and dance. I'd rather be here with you."

Viktor's smile is a slow, beautiful thing, and Yuuri's heart aches to see it. Viktor prefers quiet nights with his books and his dog, just as Yuuri does, though he loves to go out to eat. On the car ride home, Yuuri had planned to take Viktor to one of the more interesting restaurants around Detroit, up until the moment that Viktor's eyes lit up in excitement at the opportunity to taste Yuuri's cooking.

He couldn't deny Viktor after that.

The rice cooker clicks, and Yuuri turns off the stove to begin plating. He sets the bowls of rice and tofu vegetable stir-fry on the counter in front of Viktor, joining him on the other side with glasses of water. This deep into the season, Yuuri is careful what he puts into his body, to avoid messing up his training. The food is simple and healthy enough, but Viktor lights up when he takes a bite.

"Amazing!" Viktor cries, taking several more bites. "What sauce is this? It's delicious!"

"It's just soy sauce, honey, and ginger," Yuuri admits, smiling down at his bowl. "It's easy to make. I'm glad you like it."

"Yuuri made it for me, so I love it," Viktor tells him, beaming, and Yuuri hides his smile in his dinner.

His forehead still smarts from when he had fallen flat on his face at seeing Viktor standing in the Detroit Skating Rink. Yuuri isn't entirely sure that this isn't a fantasy dreamed up by his overworked brain; he has not been sleeping well these past few nights, ever since Viktor left on his trip. Having Viktor say goodnight to him every night over video chat has become an addiction, but also one that has helped Yuuri: he sleeps better when he gets to see Viktor before he falls asleep.

"Do you want to do anything in particular in Detroit?" Yuuri asks after a few moments of quiet. "There are some museums, and I think there's a music festival this weekend."

"Hm... I've never been here before. Are there any nice places to walk around?" Viktor asks, and Yuuri hesitates for a long moment, almost too long.

"There's the lakefront," Yuuri says slowly, staring down at his half-empty bowl. The food tastes cold. Like ice. "The Detroit River and Lake Erie are the major bodies of water. It's pretty this time of year."

Viktor stays quiet, and Yuuri forces himself to look up, to see what Viktor is thinking. Viktor is watching him, concern on his face, and Yuuri is abruptly reminded of how keenly Viktor can sense his moods. He shouldn't be surprised that Viktor can tell when Yuuri is upset about something, but he is. They hardly know each other, after all.
But that isn't true now, is it? We've been talking nonstop for four months. It took Viktor two months in person, last time.

"You don't want to go there," Viktor says finally, and Yuuri averts his gaze to his meal, his pulse speeding up. His palms feel damp. How could he possibly explain himself to Viktor?

I died in a river, and it's haunted me ever since. Almost a year has passed, and I still have nightmares about it.

"Not really," Yuuri mutters, picking up a piece of tofu and eating it. The temperature of the food is perfectly fine; it's all in his head. It still tastes like ice. "I..."

I had an accident. The words die on his lips. In this, he cannot lie to Viktor. Anything else, and Yuuri is able to twist his words enough that he can hide his knowledge of the future, but in this, he cannot tell Viktor anything but the truth, and he will never speak the truth. His chopsticks rattle against the side of the bowl, and Yuuri abruptly sets them down, clenching his shaking hands.

A moment later, Viktor's fingers touch his back, pressing a soothing circle into his spine. "It's alright, Yuuri, you don't have to explain," Viktor says softly. The sweetness in his voice lodges a knot into Yuuri's throat, and he swallows against the sudden heat in his eyes, before looking over at Viktor again. Viktor is smiling at him, reassuring and kind, and Yuuri slowly relaxes, realizing that Viktor will never push him.

"We can do something else, then," Viktor says decisively, and then he begins to pester Yuuri about his school and his favorite restaurants. The change in subject is a relief.

For the rest of the meal, Viktor never takes his hand off Yuuri's back, offering him that gentle reassurance. As they talk, the taste of ice fades away, and Yuuri can enjoy his meal again, even leaning back into Viktor's hand.

They end up on the couch together, arguing over Yuuri's Netflix. Viktor spots Amélie and immediately votes for it, but the last time Yuuri watched that was in his other future, and he resists. It's one of Viktor's favorite movies though, and despite the memories it carries, Yuuri agrees to watch it, settling in at Viktor's side after making popcorn.

Before they start the movie, Viktor takes a picture of their socked feet resting on the coffee table with the popcorn bowl between them. Yuuri groans when his phone screen brightens with notifications a moment later, flicking open Instagram to see the damage.

v-nikiforov: Hanging out with #1 in Japan before the season starts! #amélie #movienight

"Your fans are going to kill me one of these days," Yuuri sighs, slumping down a little. He can already see a large number of #netflixandchill comments, which makes his face heat up horribly. That had definitely happened in his other future, though Yuuri refuses to think about it now. Instead, he hits 'start' on the movie.

Viktor just laughs. "They would never! They're your fans, too," Viktor insists, which is a bald-faced lie, but Yuuri lets him get away with it.

Yuuri barely remembers the movie, and though much of it is upbeat and interesting, Yuuri is left with an odd melancholy, the same ache that has plagued him since he woke up in the past. It's Viktor's movie, not Yuuri's, but he pays attention because Viktor expects it, as Amélie makes her way through a world that doesn't quite understand her, but that she's happy to enjoy regardless.

Sitting beside Viktor, who laughs at some of the French jokes that fly over Yuuri's head, relaxes
him. By the time Amélie has begun her extravagant game of hide-and-seek with Nino, Yuuri is
dozing off, his head listing sideways every so often.

After a little while, Yuuri feels a warmth bump into his cheek. The strength and firmness is
familiar, and he sighs, leaning into Viktor's side and breathing in his long-missed scent. The French
washes over him in a lyrical hum of noise, nonsensical and soft, and Yuuri drifts into a comfortable
doze.

*It's almost like the past ten months never happened...*

Yuuri wakes a long time later, when the screen is dark and the apartment is quiet. His world has
skewed sideways, warmth beneath his cheek still, and Yuuri blinks a few times. Long fingers are
stroking through his hair, gently petting him, and his glasses are gone. He vaguely remembers
lying down, but surely he hadn't slept through the whole movie?

Carefully, Yuuri turns his head, and the sight of Viktor sitting so close fills him with a quiet sense
of peace. His head rests in Viktor's lap, and Viktor looks content with the position, his gaze soft as
he watches Yuuri. When their eyes meet, Viktor blinks a few times, a faint blush touching his
cheeks, and Yuuri's heart melts a little.

He has missed this side of Viktor, the one nobody else gets to see.

He wonders how he can accept Viktor so easily, when he is used to pushing people away. When
Yuuri had come back in time, he had decided to keep a barrier between him and Viktor, because he
didn't believe he deserved to be selfish a second time. He should be pushing Viktor away, keeping
things polite and platonic, but Yuuri cannot help his feelings.

Viktor gave him so much during their year together in the other future that it feels natural to let him
this close, even though Yuuri hates being touched by nearly everyone else, including his family.
The few hugs he gives his family, the skinship with Phichit and Nishigori... Until Viktor, that had
been the extent of physical contact Yuuri had with other people.

The year with Viktor never happened. Instead, he and Viktor have been talking for months, and yet
it feels natural to let Viktor this close, to accept him as part of his life. Maybe they will never have
what Yuuri and Viktor had in their other future, and Yuuri is still determined not to take Viktor
from skating again, but...

He thinks he could accept this, but only because it is Viktor.

"Viktor," Yuuri whispers, and Viktor's smile widens.

"You fell asleep," Viktor explains quietly, gently brushing Yuuri's bangs from his eyes. "You
missed the most romantic part of the movie."

"Oh?" Yuuri tries to remember what was truly romantic about that movie, and all he can remember
is the reunion scene between Amélie and Nino. Instead of saying anything, Viktor's hand slides
down a little and touches the corner of Yuuri's mouth, the same spot where Amélie first kissed
Nino.

Yuuri goes still, staring at him with wide eyes.

Viktor's lips twitch. His fingers trace a path to the skin below Yuuri's ear, tracing a kiss there. The
last touch is on the soft skin under his eyebrow, and Yuuri closes his eyes, swallowing against the
sudden heat in his face.
"Sometimes the best kisses aren't on the lips," Viktor says finally, and Yuuri exhales sharply, turning his face away from Viktor's touch. His cheeks are on fire. He doesn't know what Viktor meant by that -- is he trying to be romantic? Is he coming on to Yuuri? If it were his Viktor, Yuuri would have laughed and leaned in for a real kiss, but Yuuri is trying so very hard to keep things platonic between them.

Viktor is making that very difficult.

"I'll have to show it to you properly next time," Viktor says a moment later, and Yuuri breathes out carefully. The movie. He means the movie, surely.

"Sorry for falling asleep," Yuuri apologizes, sitting up and looking around for his glasses. They are sitting beside the empty popcorn bowl, and Yuuri slides them on, hesitantly looking at Viktor, who shakes his head.

"I don't mind, Yuuri," Viktor says, resting his arm on the back of the couch, behind Yuuri's shoulders. "Have you not been sleeping well?"

The dark circles under Yuuri's eyes must speak volumes to Viktor, but Yuuri doesn't mention them. He shrugs and picks up their empty dishes, carrying them to the kitchen to set them in the sink. "Weird dreams, I guess. I'm fine."

"Alright," Viktor says after a moment. "I don't mind listening if you need to talk, though."

"I dream of dying every night." Viktor would tell him to see a therapist. Yuuri can't burden Viktor with his pain and nightmares; Viktor doesn't deserve that. Yet the depression has been destroying Yuuri from the inside, stretching him thin between stress and anxiety, and it would be so nice to talk to someone about it, to unload his burden...

Tears prickle at his eyes. "You don't have to," Yuuri tries to say, but he chokes on the words and ends up coughing. A moment later, Viktor's hand lands on his back, patting him until Yuuri can get himself under control. He glances up at Viktor through blurry vision, seeing the patience, worry, and acceptance in his face, and something in his heart trembles.

He finally unbends, a little.

"I've been having nightmares," Yuuri admits into the quiet, in the shared warmth that separates him and Viktor. He can't meet his eyes now. "I have them a lot. It's not something I can really stop or anything, but they've been bad these past few nights... I'm tired of them. I tried meditation techniques and writing them in a journal and all sorts of things, and they won't go away." He closes his eyes, a frustrated noise escaping him. "I'm sorry. That was..."

"Shh," Viktor murmurs, and the next thing Yuuri knows, Viktor has wrapped him up in his arms, gently guiding Yuuri's head to rest on his shoulder. "It's alright. I'm sorry I didn't know before."

"I didn't want to worry you," Yuuri says feebly, into the soft cloth of Viktor's t-shirt. He doesn't dare let himself hug Viktor back, but he cannot help leaning into his familiar warmth. He hasn't been this close to Viktor since they danced together at the banquet.

"You can tell me anything," Viktor says, holding Yuuri for another long moment before letting go and taking his shoulders in hand, meeting his eyes with a serious expression. "Anything at all, Yuuri. I will listen."

Yuuri can only nod, barely meeting his eyes. His heart is raw with emotion; seeing Viktor is a constant reminder of what he lost, but every moment with Viktor is precious to him. He hates that
he has brought his worries to Viktor like this.

Viktor's mien softens a little, and he lets go of Yuuri, giving him some much needed air. "Would you like me to stay the night? I could..."

Yuuri is horrified by the very thought. All he has is a lumpy couch; Viktor shouldn't have to sleep on that, just to make Yuuri feel better. "No, no! It's fine!" At Viktor's stern look, Yuuri wilts a little, then looks away. "Could you... maybe... video call me later? After you check in at your hotel?"

There is a knowing look in Viktor's eyes, and Yuuri is afraid of that knowledge, of what Viktor has figured out just by watching him. Viktor has always been able to read him far too well. "Of course I will, Yuuri."

Yuuri manages a small smile. He can only hope he has no nightmares tonight, if Viktor is the last thing he sees before he falls asleep. "Okay."

Not long after that, Yuuri escorts Viktor downstairs to his car, leaning against the apartment complex doors as he watches Viktor drive away. For the next hour, Yuuri sorts through his notifications, shaking his head at the ridiculous reactions of their fans at Viktor and Yuuri spending time together, and straightens up the apartment, always hovering near his phone.

He has just changed into his sleep shorts and a t-shirt when Viktor calls him. Yuuri answers quickly, the tension in his chest draining away when he sees Viktor's smile.

"You called," Yuuri says quietly, sitting down on his bed, and Viktor's smile widens. He looks tired, and he is wearing a robe from the hotel, a towel hanging around his neck while his hair hangs damp in his eyes. He looks so much like Yuuri's memory of Viktor in Barcelona that it leaves him breathless, remembering their argument.

Yuuri forces himself not to think about that. This is a different Viktor.

"I couldn't leave my sleeping beauty alone, could I?" Viktor teases, and Yuuri huffs a laugh, shifting to lie against his pillow.

"How is your hotel?"

"Lovely and luxurious, just how I like it," Viktor says with a wink. Yuuri can't help a smile, reminded of how spoiled Viktor is. Then again, Viktor makes enough money to spoil himself as much as he pleases. "Although I had forgotten that I'd booked one of their specials that comes with breakfast for two. Would you like to join me tomorrow morning?"

Yuuri blinks a few times. Breakfast for two at a luxury hotel? He flushes a little, reminded of Viktor's urges to spoil him as well. "Well... I suppose so. Do you want to go anywhere tomorrow? I think there's a lot of shopping in that area, and a park nearby, and..."

Rather predictably, Viktor's eyes light up at the mention of shopping. "Whatever you want to do, Yuuri! I wouldn't mind some window shopping after breakfast, though. And I'd love to go skating with you."

Yuuri blinks at him, confused. "But your skates are in St. Petersburg."

"I can rent, I don't mind. I just want to skate with you," Viktor replies, and the innocence of that statement makes Yuuri roll over and hide his face in his pillow.

"Yuuuuuuuri," Viktor calls, a hint of a whine to his voice, and Yuuri manages to look over at his
"Your fans will really kill me if we skate together," Yuuri tries, but he knows he has lost when Viktor beams. Then Yuuri narrows his eyes. "You aren't going to use this as a chance to spy on my programs, are you?"

Viktor just laughs. Yuuri watches him for a long moment, the happiness on Viktor's face a balm to the pain in his heart. He would do anything for this man.

When he finally falls asleep, his thumb on the 'end call' button, Yuuri doesn't dream at all.

~*~

In the morning, Viktor comes to pick Yuuri up and takes him back to his hotel. They eat breakfast together on the veranda connected to Viktor's room, which faces the park across the street. The food is a pretty display, and Yuuri can't help but take pictures for his Instagram, his one social media weakness.

Viktor is resplendent in a dark blue button-up shirt that brings out his eyes. Even after years of being his fan and a year of living with him, not to mention sharing a bath with him every night, Viktor's beauty still takes Yuuri's breath away. He remains distracted through breakfast, which is just as cozy and romantic as the Townsend website advertised, bemused that he is on a date-like meal with Viktor of all people.

Viktor only sees it as friendly, though. Conversation flows from the weather to a serious discussion of this year's GPF contenders, and Yuuri is still arguing with him two hours later, when they're knee-deep in expensive boutiques that make Viktor light up with glee.

"I'm telling you, Michele Crispino is going to place. He got bronze in the European Championships, didn't he?" Yuuri is holding most of Viktor's bags. He doesn't even want to think about how much money Viktor has spent.

"He will have to beat Christophe first, not to mention you at Skate Canada," Viktor replies, flippant as he looks through a rack of shirts. "In any case, I'm tired of talking about this. Yuuri, what size shirt do you wear?"

Yuuri is not ready to give this up, even if it is annoying Viktor. "But Viktor -- wait, what?" Yuuri stares at him, then at the rack of shirts, which are priced very high and are nothing like what he usually wears. Oh, no. "Th-that's none of your business."

"Th-that's none of your business." Viktor turns with a wide smile, and all Yuuri can see is Viktor's annoyance and petty need for revenge. How on earth did Viktor figure out that Yuuri hates shopping -- and even more so, spending money on himself?

"Viktor, I don't need a new shirt," Yuuri says slowly. He might run, if Viktor makes a grab for him.

"Your shoulders aren't as wide as mine, but your neck is pretty and lithe, and we're close enough in height... medium, then. Oh, if only I could get you to a Parisian tailor," Viktor sighs, picking out a grey shirt and holding it up against Yuuri's shoulders. "That suit you wore for the banquet was terrible, Yuuri. How about a new tie?"

Yuuri groans. Viktor and his undying hatred of Yuuri's ties. "I said no once, and I'm saying no again. Leave my ties alone, Viktor. And don't steal them out of my closet, either!"

Viktor's grip on the shirt loosens a bit, and the ire hiding behind his smile fades as he blinks at phone, knowing his face is flushed.
Yuuri. "When would I be able to take them from your closet? Ooh, does that mean I can come over for dinner again tonight?" He beams, excited by this prospect, but a chill runs down Yuuri's spine.

This isn't his Viktor.

This Viktor never raided Yuuri's closet in a fit of pique before the Grand Prix Final, stole all his ties, and replaced them with much nicer ones. He never bought Yuuri a new suit in Barcelona, just because he could. He has never bought anything for Yuuri before.

"I, um, sure," Yuuri stutters, looking away. His heart is beating fast. He needs to control himself better; he had blurted out such a thing without thinking. At least Viktor didn't pay too much attention to his slip. "B-by the way, the rink should be opening soon, if you still want to go."

"Oh! Then we should head back to my hotel," Viktor says, and to Yuuri's relief, he puts the shirt back and begins gathering the merchandise he has already picked out. "I need to change if we're going to the rink."

Yuuri sighs and follows him. Skating he can handle.

The rink is mostly empty when they arrive. The crowds aren't due until after lunchtime, and not even Yuuri's rink mates are in today, since it's supposed to be an off-day for everybody. Yuuri sits on the bench and laces up his skates carefully, stealing glances at Viktor as he adjusts his rented skates. Since the few people on the rink seem to be amateurs, there is a low chance that Viktor will be recognized.

Viktor does make Yuuri stretch, though. "Practice or not, we should always keep up good habits!" Viktor tells him with a lecturing finger held up, and Yuuri turns away so that he can roll his eyes without Viktor catching him. He is strongly reminded of Coach Viktor.

Viktor stands up, and the sight of him wearing rented skates makes Yuuri twitch a little. Those should be gold blades, not dulled steel. Yuuri sighs and stands as well, stowing his and Viktor's belongings in his locker before heading out to the ice.

"Remember, this isn't practice," Yuuri reminds Viktor, who winks at him mischievously as he sets his skate guards on the railing before stepping onto the ice. Even with rented skates, which are usually in bad condition compared to what Viktor and Yuuri usually wear, he is graceful on the ice.

"I mean it. No short programs or free skates!"

Viktor pouts as they skate closer to the center of the rink, away from the small groups of people that are hugging the wall. "You're no fair, Yuuri. If no programs... then how about a dance?"

As if on cue, the radio that is playing over the intercom switches to Walk the Moon's *Shut Up and Dance*, and Viktor's eyes light up at the perfect timing. He stretches his fingers out to Yuuri, wiggling his eyebrows, and Yuuri has to cover his face.

"You have got to be kidding me," Yuuri says to his hands. Viktor laughs and takes his hand, skating backwards onto the ice.

"Never, with you," Viktor says, oddly fierce, and Yuuri can't help looking at him. Viktor looks happy and excited, and who is Yuuri to deny him?

"Okay," Yuuri whispers, then laughs, as Viktor takes both his hands and draws him to the middle of the rink, where they begin to spin around each other.

After a moment, Yuuri turns his back to Viktor, and Viktor grins, skating them both backwards,
before he spins Yuuri around and lets go. The challenging glint in his eyes enthralls Yuuri, and when Viktor lifts his arms and dances across the ice, Yuuri copies him perfectly.

They might become a spectacle. Yuuri is having too much fun to care. Dancing with Viktor like this reminds him of Barcelona, of long days in Ice Castle in November, when Yuuri and Viktor practiced relentlessly for their duet exhibition skate. There had been laughter and tears, frustration and awe, in how they had come together on the ice, reading each other's bodies in a beautiful song that only they could hear.

Ice dancing with Viktor. Yuuri never would have imagined something like this, had he stayed the same, boring Yuuri he was before. Viktor has given him so much already.

"Yuuri," Viktor says in Yuuri's ear, and Yuuri turns a little to find Viktor behind him again, his eyes alight with excitement. "Want to try a lift?"

"But we just started," Yuuri says, as Viktor's hands come to rest on his waist. The position is familiar, comforting, and Yuuri finds himself relaxing. "Okay. I'm not good at it, though."

Before Viktor, Yuuri had tried doing lifts with Phichit on occasion, along with some of the female skaters in their club, but Viktor had been the first to lift him. He bites his bottom lip, his chest tightening with excitement. His first lift with this Viktor.

"That's okay, I have you," Viktor says, and in the next moment, his hands have slid up Yuuri's side to hook underneath his arms, lifting him off the ice. Yuuri breathes in as he holds himself still, the world spinning above him as the song reaches its peak in the background, and when his feet find the ice again, he spins out of Viktor's hands, laughing in exhilaration.

"We did it!" Yuuri turns to catch Viktor's hands again. He wonders if they could do some of the more difficult lifts. Viktor had been against pushing Yuuri into anything too strenuous, given some of the positions the 'lifted' partner could settle into for official lifts. Yuuri thinks that if he practiced enough, he could do some of them, if Viktor was the one lifting him.

"That was amazing, Yuuri!" Viktor proclaims, catching his hands and spinning him around. "Let's try it again!"

"Eh?"

They end up skating for almost two hours, and at least half of that time is spent trying out ice dancing moves. Yuuri finds himself spurred by the ISU article and his memories of performing *Stammi Vicino* with Viktor, and he lets himself enjoy fooling around on the ice. Neither of them ever stop smiling, and though Viktor keeps up his public persona, Yuuri finds a deep sparkle in Viktor's eyes whenever he looks at him. Viktor is having as much fun as he is.

Viktor's stamina can't hold up to Yuuri's, though, and Yuuri ends the session with odd reluctance. As he and Viktor change into their shoes and begin their cool-down exercises, Yuuri realizes he wants to keep skating with Viktor.

"I haven't had fun like that in a long time," Yuuri says slowly, staring blankly down at his shoes. Viktor glances over at him, making a questioning sound. "It's usually just practice. It feels... like it's been too long since I enjoyed skating like that."

Yuuri stopped enjoying skating for a long time, in his determination to reach the top so that he could skate against Viktor. It was only when Viktor began coaching him that Yuuri could enjoy skating again. Even in the past year since he came back in time, Yuuri hasn't really *enjoyed*
skating, so much as he has been working hard to be a good rival for Viktor.

Viktor is quiet for a long moment, his jacket rustling as he stands. "Then we'll have to do it again sometime," he says finally, and Yuuri blinks up at him, finding Viktor holding out his hand with a smile. "Shall we, Yuuri?"

Yuuri watches him for a long moment, then reaches up to take his hand. "Okay, Viktor."

Viktor is thoughtful during the ride back to his hotel, where he showers and changes, while Yuuri pokes around his phone. Yuuri gives him his space, filling the silence with chatter about classes starting up soon. Only when they are driving back to his apartment does Viktor speak up again, giving voice to his contemplation.

"How would you like to do an ice show with me?"

Yuuri blinks at the window, then turns to look at Viktor. They are currently stopped at a red light, just a few streets from his apartment. Viktor glances at him out of the corner of his eye, an oddly nervous air to him. "An ice show? Like..." Like Onsen On Ice, he doesn't say.

"Like you and me, maybe one or two other people, do some ice dancing for an audience. We could perform one of our exhibition skates, and... perhaps, if you would agree, you and I could do an ice dance. Like we did today."

Yuuri blinks rapidly, utterly confused. Viktor had brought up the topic of ice shows back in June, but he hadn't mentioned it since then except in passing, and Yuuri hadn't thought anything more of it. "Well... classes begin on the 31st, I think, so it'd have to be before that."

Wait. What is he saying? He can't do an ice show with Viktor! Panicking, Yuuri opens his mouth to put a stop to this nonsense, but Viktor speaks before he can say anything.

"So we could have it the weekend before that. Saturday the 27th would be a good day... that gives us three weeks," Viktor says, tapping his fingers against the wheel. The light turns green, and he presses on the gas, while Yuuri tries not to fall apart. "That gives me a week to set things up, and then two weeks for practice. If I send you a video, will you be able to work from that?"

"Viktor, wait, I couldn't possibly do an ice show! That's for..." For skaters like you.

Viktor glances at him again, raising an eyebrow. "We can split the proceeds. I'll have my attorney write up a contract."

"That's not the issue!"

Viktor says nothing to that, driving in silence for a few minutes until he pulls into the visitor's parking lot for the apartment complex. He leaves the car on after parking, turning to look fully at Yuuri, who is still staring at him. "Then what is it? Are you afraid that you won't be popular? I can assure you, Yuuri, you will draw a large number of fans to this, if we advertise it right. Of course, your biggest following is in Japan, but I'm sure some of them will come to the program anyway... Why are you looking at me like that?"

"You've really thought about this," Yuuri says blankly. "Doing an ice show with me. Me, of all people."

Viktor meets his gaze, that strength that Yuuri has come to rely on so much blazing in his eyes. "Who else would I want to skate with? We have real chemistry on the ice. We did a lift without any practice beforehand. I want to skate with you, Yuuri. It's just that simple."
"It's that simple..." Yuuri falls quiet, some of his panic fading as he absorbs Viktor's words. The idea of doing an ice show is daunting, but Viktor is more than capable of handling all of the logistics of it. Venue, time and dates, contracts, ticketing, the program... Yuuri wonders how long Viktor has been planning this. He licks his lips, uncertain.

If he agrees to do this, it might be seen as taking a stance on same-sex ice dancing. Doing the show right after Viktor's ISU statement came out, and then dancing with him in front of a live audience...

Yuuri wants to. Oh, how he wants to.

"All you have to do is say yes," Viktor says quietly, smiling slightly. "I'll take care of everything else. I can even get you a costume if you don't want to use one of the outfits in your closet."

Yuuri narrows his eyes a little. When had Viktor taken the time to look through his closet? He sighs and shakes off that thought, thinking about the costumes he has. None of them would really suit an exhibition skate.

"I might need a costume," Yuuri finally says, giving in. "Fine. I'll do an ice show with you. But nothing wild, okay? We both have to train."

Viktor's smile is beautiful. Yuuri holds his gaze for a moment, before he has to look away, his cheeks heating up. "How about we invite Phichit and Christophe, too? An even split for the four of us. Four exhibition programs and a dance for the two of us, plus the intro and finale. There's a venue in New York we can use. It will be easy."

Yuuri gapes at him. "New York? That's a ten hour drive!"

Viktor waves a hand, smiling. "I'll get the plane tickets. After all, I'm inviting you."

"I probably need to ask Celestino," Yuuri says, a little dazed. "And Phichit, too... oh, and a costume..."

"Well, let's get started!"

To Yuuri's endless shock, Celestino and Phichit both approve enthusiastically. Chris agrees as well, and the four of them end up in a group chat that night, crowded around Yuuri's laptop while he calls Chris over Skype. They spend almost an hour going over possible skates they can do, deciding on a theme based around dancing.

Chris, unsurprisingly, wants to do one of his infamous Lady Gaga skates, while Phichit picks a Cobra Starship song that has been on the radio for years. Viktor decides, also unsurprisingly, on his short program from last season. Everyone knows well of Viktor's love for Adam Lambert.

Yuuri doesn't need to look hard at his playlist for his choice. Whenever Yuuri is skating alone or wants to have fun on the ice, he plays Cascada's *Evacuate the Dance Floor*. The alternative would be *Cruel Angel Thesis*, but an American audience probably wouldn't enjoy it as much as Japan would.

Viktor doesn't know either song, so after their call with Chris, Yuuri and Phichit show him several music videos. Seeing Viktor watching the screen in amazement reminds Yuuri that Viktor rarely lets himself explore the internet and popular media, outside of music.

He vows to change that, if he can. Viktor should be able to enjoy things outside of skating, just as Yuuri does.
"This one would be good, too, though it's not a dance," Viktor says, after they rewatch one video for the third time. He wipes away a tear, overwhelmed for a moment. Yuuri silently offers him a tissue. Phichit has already retired to his room, and Yuuri is alone with Viktor now, counting down the minutes to when Viktor has to leave.

Viktor will go back to Russia in the morning. Yuuri doesn't want him to go.

"This is my favorite exhibition skate. I came up with the program last year, but Celestino wouldn't let me use it for my free skate," Yuuri explains, then falls quiet. They are sitting together on the couch, shoulders lightly pressed together. Viktor glances at his watch, and Yuuri takes that as his cue to shut his laptop and set it on the coffee table, then nervously twists his hands in his lap.

"Do you think we can pull this off?" Yuuri asks, breaking open the comfortable silence. He has his doubts. Just thinking of performing an ice show makes him nervous, but it isn't a competition like Onsen On Ice. It's just like the ice shows he participates in for the Detroit Skating Club. So why does he feel so nervous?

"I think it will be amazing," Viktor says quietly. His arm brushes the back of Yuuri's neck. "I promise I will take care of everything."

Yuuri watches his face a moment longer, then nods. "Okay... please take care of it, Viktor."

Viktor chuckles softly, and the sound is so familiar that Yuuri's heart skips a beat. For a moment, he is sure that Viktor will lean in and kiss him, but then the moment passes, and Viktor is letting go of him and standing with a stretch.

"Walk me down to the car?" Viktor requests, looking back at Yuuri, and Yuuri can only agree wordlessly. He grabs his keys and his shoes and follows Viktor downstairs, the elevator ride silent. Viktor will go back to Russia tomorrow, but before then...

"You're really planning on coming back here? A week before the ice show?" Yuuri asks as he opens the lobby door for Viktor.

"I am, yes. We can practice together then. Celestino doesn't mind as long as we don't interrupt the rest of your schedule and you get plenty of rest." They walk deeper into the darkened parking lot, and Yuuri hesitates by Viktor's rented car, watching him as he unlocks it. Before Viktor opens the door, though, he turns to look at Yuuri, smiling softly at him.

"You don't have to worry, Yuuri. I'll stay at a hotel again."

"You could stay with us," Yuuri blurts out, then turns pink. "I mean... you could take my bed, and I'll take the couch or bunk with Phichit. It'd be expensive to stay in a hotel for a week..."

He knows Viktor can afford it. Instead Yuuri is thinking of waking up to Viktor for a week, cooking for him, being close to him again. He should be pushing Viktor away, and yet every time they talk, they become a bit closer to each other. Hesitantly Yuuri meets Viktor's eyes, to find that Viktor is gazing at him in quiet wonder.

"I'll think about it and let you know," Viktor finally says, then opens his arms. After a short moment, Yuuri steps into the warmth of his body, letting Viktor hug him, and he briefly reaches up to touch Viktor's sides, the closest to a hug that he can return.

"Good night, Viktor," Yuuri whispers, before he lets go.

"Good night, sleeping beauty," Viktor murmurs into his hair, drawing away and smiling that sweet,
charming smile that Yuuri loves. "Off to bed with you, now."

"Like that will happen," Yuuri mutters, shaking his head and stepping away from the car. He lifts a hand in a half-hearted wave as Viktor starts the car and drives away, his heart beating strangely fast in his chest.

I know I'm in love with you. But why are you acting this way toward me?

Yuuri doesn't fall asleep for a long time that night, but at least his dreams are free of the cold.

~*~

"Yuuri! You have to see this! Why didn't you tell me?"

Yuuri wakes up exactly a week later to Phichit waving his phone in his face. Blinking a few times, Yuuri wonders what has Phichit so excited this year, when his gaze focuses on the phone.

On the screen of Phichit's phone is an image of Yuuri skating with Viktor a week ago. The title of the video is "Romantic tryst between Viktor Nikiforov and Katsuki Yuuri?!" The video is several minutes long, and to Yuuri's horror, it has half a million views.

Yuuri blanches and grabs the phone, flicking through the information on the video. A fan had seen them that day and had recorded it. Phichit crowds at his side, and Yuuri silently plays the video, swallowing to see that it covers the dance he and Viktor shared.

"You didn't know about this, did you?" Phichit whispers, and Yuuri shakes his head.

"I didn't think anyone had recognized us. I definitely didn't see anyone recording us... but I was distracted," Yuuri admits. Once again, one of his most private moments was leaked to the internet via video, though it's different than his friends' kids posting the video of his private skate. This was a special moment for him and Viktor, and now it is all over the internet, racking up inappropriate comments about his and Viktor's relationship.

Then again, how many times had his videos and pictures been leaked during his summer with Viktor in the other future? For months, Yuuri's social media accounts had been plagued with fans questioning his relationship with Viktor. 'Are you lovers? Are you dating? Are you fucking?'

It hadn't helped that Viktor's Instagram had been full of cute, romantic photos all summer. Some people had even stalked them around Hasetsu, trying to find evidence of Yuuri and Viktor's secret relationship. Never mind that Viktor had blown the rumors out of the water when he had kissed Yuuri on live television in Beijing. Yuuri had avoided social media for almost a month after that.

This video is still shocking, though. He and Viktor really do look like a couple... but they aren't, now.

Yuuri passes the phone back to Phichit and covers his face.

Phichit rubs his back reassuringly. "Hey, it's okay, Yuuri. I can find out who put the video up. We can probably get it taken down."

"I doubt it," Yuuri sighs, reaching for his phone and glasses, absently flicking on his lamp. He grimaces when he sees all the alerts on his phone, sliding it open and glancing at his texts.

Somehow Viktor has sent the most recent messages, though Minako-sensei and Yuuko are close in volume of texts. Yuuri chooses to look at Viktor's messages first.
From: Viktor
Yuuri, someone leaked a video of us dancing together last week
https://youtu.be/6JCLY0Rlx6Q
I had no idea anyone had a camera on us. I had no idea until it went viral
Are you okay?
Please talk to me
Are you mad because of the comments?
Just ignore the comments. They don't understand us and they don't have any input on our friendship.
Do you want me to have the video taken down? Surely a message from me would convince them to delete it.
It's a very nice video. But I can get it deleted if you want me to.
Please call me when you can. I'll wait.

Yuuri can't help a small chuckle, hitting Viktor's name for the video chat. Two rings later, Viktor answers, looking panicked and harried, his hair in disarray. Yuuri's heart aches at the sight of him. "Hi, Viktor... I just got your messages."

"Yuuri," Viktor breathes, then sighs deeply in relief. "I was afraid you were mad at me."

Yuuri shakes his head. Behind him, Phichit is sneaking out of the room, and he gives Yuuri a thumbs up as he leaves. "You didn't have anything to do with this. It's an invasion of privacy, but... I should have considered it. People take my picture all the time when I'm back in Japan, and I bet you get it even worse in Russia."

"I do, but it's still no excuse," Viktor says, pushing his hair out of his eyes. Yuuri can see that Viktor is in his apartment. It's Sunday, which is a rest day for both of them. "You haven't read the comments, have you?"

"No, but I imagine it's the same thing that was on your Instagram when you posted a picture of our feet for our movie night," Yuuri says, dryly enough that Viktor flushes. "I don't mind, Viktor. It's none of their business anyway. And... we shouldn't have to define it just because your fans are nosy."

For a moment, Viktor just blinks at him, and finally the anxious light leaves his eyes. "Do you want me to get them to delete it?" Viktor asks after a moment, and Yuuri shakes his head, his shoulders slumping.

"It's probably on a hundred mirror sites by now, so there'd be no point. We were just skating. And... it is a nice video," Yuuri adds quietly, rubbing his cheek. He catches himself a yawn and sighs, pushing his hair out of his eyes. "Sorry, I just woke up."

Viktor glances up at his messy hair, a smile twitching on his lips. "Sleeping beauty has awoken, has he?"

"Lay off," Yuuri groans, falling back against his pillow. "I wanted to sleep in today, but Phichit woke me up with the video."

"I'm sorry," Viktor says quietly, and Yuuri shakes his head.

"Don't be," he yawns. "I'm not mad at you, Viktor. I'm not really mad at all. Just tired of people thinking that my personal life is their business."

"I know how that is," Viktor says with a small, bitter laugh, one that Yuuri doesn't think he meant
to express. Both of them have been public figures for some time now, but Viktor more than anyone has never had a private moment in his life. Yuuri should know; he has been following Viktor since he was a boy. "What do you want to do about it? Ignore it? I imagine we'll get lots of questions."

"I'm going to ignore it. It's none of their business," Yuuri says stubbornly. He refuses to cater to public opinion. He hadn't listened to the world back when he did have Viktor, so why would he listen to them now when he doesn't? His and Viktor's relationship will never be any of their business.

At least in this, Yuuri is selfish enough to keep Viktor to himself, lovers or not.

"Alright," Viktor says quietly, then sighs deeply. Yuuri watches him curiously, as Viktor leaves his living room and enters his kitchen. Yuuri can hear quiet clinks, the sound of a tea tin opening. Viktor sets the phone on the counter to run some water, and Yuuri watches Viktor's ceiling for a moment, smiling a little.

"You know," Yuuri says, meeting Viktor's eyes when he picks up the phone again, "this could be considered good advertising for the ice show we're doing."

"Huh," Viktor remarks, blinking at him. Then he walks back into his living room and goes to the desk in the corner, opening his laptop. Viktor sets the phone in a charging station, which holds it upright so that Yuuri can watch him. After a moment of clicking around on the computer, Viktor grins victoriously.

"You're right, Yuuri. The show is sold out now. Last night only half of the tickets were sold."

Yuuri blinks a few times, surprised. "Wow... really? How many people will that be?"

"About sixteen thousand, I think."

Yuuri blinks a few times. Viktor is still typing on his computer, though now he glances at Yuuri, as if realizing how odd his statement was. Surely there won't be that many people at the ice show. "Um... what?"

"We'll be skating at the Prudential Center in New Jersey. It's still New York, really! And just think of the proceeds!" Viktor might be babbling, but Yuuri no longer hears him. That's the size of a normal audience for the Grand Prix Final. For Worlds, even, if not bigger. And their little ice show is sold out?

"Sixteen thousand," Yuuri repeats, utterly blank. He might be feeling a little faint. With a groan, Yuuri sets his phone down and covers his eyes with one hand. He isn't surprised that Viktor has a contract at one of the largest stadiums in the tri-state area of New York City. He isn't even surprised that so many people would want to see Viktor Nikiforov in an exclusive ice show. He is surprised that eight thousand tickets sold in one day, because of one video of Yuuri dancing with Viktor on the ice.

"Yuuri?" Viktor's voice is small. He must be worried about Yuuri's reaction.

"I hope you have our dance arranged," Yuuri says weakly. "We're going to need to practice a lot if we want to pull this off."

He isn't look at the screen, but he can hear Viktor's relieved laughter, and it makes his lips twitch into a smile.
Yuuri practices relentlessly. In consideration for the ice show, Celestino lessens their training to three hours per day, giving Yuuri time to practice his Evacuate the Dance Floor program. Phichit joins him for these extra hours, working on his own exhibition skate, then helps Yuuri in the evenings when he returns to the club to practice his dance with Viktor. He will do another dance in addition to his exhibition skate: a dance with Viktor that will become the finale as Chris and Phichit join in.

The finale is Shut Up and Dance, which Viktor decides on after seeing how popular their skating video is. Yuuri had to turn off his Instagram notifications after the first day the video was posted, because of the volume of comments and follows. Yuuri and Viktor will pair up for the dance, while Phichit will pair up with Chris, and the four will culminate in a grand finale.

Yuuri has to admit that he is excited about it. Viktor sent him a video of what he wants for the dances, and Yuuri has been practicing relentlessly, imagining Viktor beside him.

A week later, Viktor arrives in Detroit, and Chris follows two days later. Despite Yuuri’s offer, both Viktor and Chris stay in a hotel close to the skating club, and the four meet up every day to practice.

Yuuri and Phichit both still have their training with Celestino. During these hours, Viktor and Chris join them on the rink and practice their own programs. Yuuri does his best to focus on his own training, ignoring the familiar movements of Stammi Vicino not far from him, and Viktor gives him the same privacy, since they promised not to reveal their skates to each other. He wonders if Viktor recognizes the elements that Yuuri asked him for advice on, but Viktor never says anything about it.

Because of the video debacle, and because of Viktor's popularity, Celestino and the other coaches issue a rule that prohibits phones and cameras in the rink. When one girl gets caught trying to record Yuuri and Viktor talking together, she gets banned from the rink for the rest of the day. After a couple days, though, the amazement over Viktor's presence dulls to something more bearable, and Yuuri is able to practice in peace. Chris' arrival reanimates the fans to fervent heights, and even a few reporters stop by, interested in finding out more about the ice show.

"Viktor! Is it true that the four of you are practicing together for your show, Viktor and Friends? Can you tell us more about the upcoming show?"

"We are practicing, yes. As for the show, you'll just have to wait and see,” Viktor tells the reporter with one finger resting on his smile. Chris is leaning against his shoulder and smiling flirtatiously at the camera, while Phichit is peeking around them with a grin. Yuuri is doing his best to blend into the background. He twitches at the reporter's next question.

"Will you and Yuuri Katsuki be dancing together, like the rumors suggest?"

"That's part of the surprise, isn't it?" Viktor replies, his smile widening. "You'll see on Saturday!"

In the evenings, they practice their finale, and by Thursday, Viktor looks very pleased. "This will be wonderful!” he tells them, clapping his hands together as they stand in the middle of the ice. The rink is otherwise empty, and Shut Up and Dance has finished playing over the intercom.

"I think it will," Chris agrees, smiling and wiping his forehead. "Shall we celebrate? I could use a glass of wine.” His gaze cuts to Yuuri, who has pulled out his phone and is frowning distractedly at it.
"Yes! Let's go get dinner," Phichit exclaims, spinning around on the ice, and the four make their way back to the stands. Yuuri follows half-heartedly, and Viktor drops back to skate beside him.

"What time is our flight tomorrow, Viktor?" Yuuri asks, looking up from his phone.

"Eight forty in the morning," Viktor replies, his smile softening a bit as he looks at Yuuri. "So you should go to bed early tonight. Christophe and I will pick you up early."

Yuuri sighs deeply. He hates getting up early for flights, but having Viktor there makes it a little easier. "Fine, but I want Starbucks when we get to the airport."

"Now, Yuuri, those drinks have far too much sugar..."

Yuuri tunes out Viktor's lecture, a familiar one. He has a small smile on his face as he takes off his skates, listening to Chris and Phichit's conversation, with Viktor chiming in every so often. Even if Yuuri and Viktor aren't together anymore, he feels... happy, for the first time in a long time. This future might not be one that he ever expected, but it still makes Yuuri happy. Viktor makes Yuuri happy.

Later that night, Chris manages to corner Yuuri after dinner. Somehow, Yuuri has avoided being alone with him, but Viktor is getting the car and Phichit is in the restroom. He isn't sure what to say to Chris, since their relationship seems to have changed a little, and other than the usual flirtatious smiles and thoughtful glances, Chris doesn't seem upset with him. He has been paying more attention to Yuuri than usual, but Yuuri hasn't paid it much mind.

"You've changed a little," Chris tells him quietly, his arm gently bumping Yuuri's shoulder.

Yuuri's heart skips a beat. He glances up at Chris, wondering what the Swiss skater has observed, but he is afraid to ask. "Changed?" Yuuri echoes aloud, and Chris smiles a little.

"You seem more comfortable with yourself. Before this year, I never would have thought you'd be able to stand talking to Viktor, let alone setting this up with him."

Yuuri averts his gaze. There is no way to explain his sudden comfort with talking to Viktor Nikiforov, his longtime crush and idol. It had taken Yuuri almost a year, in his alternate future, to become comfortable enough with Viktor to address him so familiarly. Yuuri could have acted that way again, pretended to be terrified of speaking to Viktor, but... he doesn't see the point in it. Being close to Viktor feels natural to him. In some ways, it feels like his death was just a dream, that the other future was simply a product of his mind.

Still, Yuuri is grateful for the memories. He knows Viktor well enough that they can be friends easily. He doesn't have to wait another two years to have Viktor's regard.

"I guess I got to know myself," Yuuri says finally. "I've looked up to him for so long, yet when we met, it seemed... right. Like I've always known him." It felt that way last time, too... but I was too nervous to understand it then.

Chris is quiet for a moment. Phichit surfaces from the restroom and starts toward them. Chris notices him and slings an arm around Yuuri's shoulders, leaning in closer, a small smile on his lips. "Should I warn you two off each other? Anybody can see the chemistry between you two."

Yuuri flushes a little and shakes his head. "We're just friends... I don't know if I can go further than that," he admits quietly. Yuuri knows he is very selfish, and he would love nothing more than to hoard Viktor and hide him away from the world, but he knows better.
"Ready to go?" asks Viktor from behind them, and Yuuri starts and turns to face him. Viktor's expression is unreadable, and Yuuri wonders how much he heard. Viktor meets his eyes, and the softness there relaxes Yuuri enough that he can escape from under Chris' arm.

"We're ready."

~*~

"I'm not ready for this," Yuuri says on Saturday, twenty minutes before the ice show is due to start. He is standing in the shadow of the hallway that protects them from the stares of sixteen thousand people, gripping the wall tightly as he struggles with his anxiety. The stadium is massive, seats reaching up all the way up to the ceiling, and every one of them completely filled. Even a curtain hiding him from the crowd, Yuuri can feel the eyes of thousands of fans on him, all ready to judge him for dancing with Viktor.

He hadn't even been this nervous when he and Viktor had performed his Stammi Vicino exhibition skate. Not even the Cup of China could compare to the size of this stadium. Logically, Yuuri knows that he has skated for thousands of people in comparable stadiums, not to mention being broadcast live to millions of people around the world, but it seems a little different in a stadium of this capacity.

"Yuuri," calls Viktor from behind him, moments before Yuuri feels a warmth brush his back. Viktor catches him around the waist, pressing reassurance into his side, and Yuuri takes a deep breath. "The venue that Worlds was in last season was even bigger than this. This is nothing. Come now, take a deep breath."

Yuuri obeys, and the cool air does wonders to his lungs, so he takes another breath. He focuses on the warmth of Viktor's hand through the silk of his shirt, realizing that Chris and Phichit are watching them, as well as the staff waiting to start everything.

All four of them are dressed in variants of the same outfit, simple black pants and a long-sleeved white shirt, with variants of formalwear. Yuuri's vest is a deep blue with a loose blue tie, and Phichit has on a gold bowtie and a gold sash around his waist. Chris has unbuttoned most of his shirt with only an open red tie, along with a red flower in his pocket. Viktor is wearing a vest like Yuuri is, but his outfit is toned in a softer, lighter blue, matching his eyes, a blue flower in his pocket.

Admittedly, Yuuri thinks they all look very good. Viktor has done an amazing job with arranging the entire event. He has staff that will take care of the lights and music, and somehow he had found these outfits. Apparently Yakov (who, according to Viktor, is not very pleased that this event is even happening) has several skating costumes in storage, and Viktor was able to wheedle them out of his coach.

Dress rehearsal went very well. Phichit will open with his favorite song by Cobra Starship featuring Sabi, You Make Me Feel. Chris will follow with Just Dance by Lady Gaga, one of his more exhilarating exhibition skates, and Yuuri will go third with Evacuate the Dance Floor.

Viktor will follow Yuuri with Pop That Lock, and after the lights go dim at the end of his show, Yuuri will skate out to join him for their duet. They will kick off Shut Up and Dance, and then Chris and Phichit will join them on the ice for the last song, one final hurrah before the four of them bow to the audience.

"I'm sorry," Yuuri whispers to Viktor, who squeezes his side, then turns them around and pushes Yuuri back toward the waiting area, where Phichit and Chris are standing. Yuuri gives them a
sheepish little smile, and Phichit beams at him, while Chris returns the smile with an easy one of his own.

"You can do this," Viktor whispers to him, before going to speak with one of the staff.

"I can do this," Yuuri repeats to himself, taking a deep breath. This is just like the ice shows he performed with the Detroit Skating Club. He can do this without a problem. There are no judges, even though the audience is comparable to the Grand Prix Final, and Yuuri doesn't have to stress himself out with difficult jumps or program components. He only needs to worry about the story he wants to tell with his body.

Viktor walks back to him, stopping beside Yuuri and glancing down at him. Yuuri peeks up and starts slightly, realizing that when they are both wearing their skates like this, Viktor is taller than him. He is used to looking Viktor in the eye when they are at the rink, since the skates add several inches to his own height, and Viktor often stays on the sidelines when Yuuri is skating.

"Good luck," Yuuri whispers, briefly battling his nerves before reaching up to take Viktor's hand, squeezing it. Viktor's fingers twitch in his grip before Viktor grips him back, with one last reassuring squeeze before he lets go.

"I'll meet you on the ice," Viktor tells him, winking, before moving out into the stadium to welcome the audience to the show. Music builds up to his appearance, and as soon as the spotlight lands on Viktor standing alone on the ice, the crowd begins screaming.

"Hello, everyone!" Viktor announces, spreading his arms wide and basking in the glow of people shouting his name. Then he puts a finger to his lips, and the room goes quiet, making the hair on the back of Yuuri's neck stand up. Viktor truly is the king of the skating world, to demand such power.

"Welcome! Are you excited? Is your heart pounding in anticipation? Are you looking forward to the show?" The crowd screams in response, and Viktor smiles widely. "Then please sit back and enjoy our show, Viktor and Friends: On Ice!"

As the crowd applauds, Viktor vanishes into the darkness and skates back to the side of the rink, taking his skate guards from a staff member and sliding them on. Phichit is waiting to take his place, nearly vibrating with excitement, and Yuuri spares a smile for Phichit when he looks back, giving a quick thumbs up. Phichit grins at him, then steps onto the ice, a spotlight landing on him as he greets the audience.

Viktor steps back behind the curtain and smiles at Yuuri, his eyes fever bright. "Well?"

"That was perfect," Yuuri tells him, as You Make Me Feel starts to play. Most of his attention remains on Phichit, but he gives Viktor a small smile. Viktor leans toward him, and Yuuri unconsciously lifts his head, expecting a kiss.

Then Chris calls Viktor's name, and Viktor pulls away, flashing a smile at Yuuri before crossing the floor to Chris. Yuuri stares at the empty space where Viktor stood, his face flooding with heat at the realization that he meant to kiss Viktor.

It had been second nature. How many kisses had he exchanged with his Viktor at competitions, after he had stepped off the ice? Kisses for good luck, for congratulations, as a surprise, out of love.

Yuuri hasn't kissed Viktor in ten months, and he misses it.
In order to distract himself, Yuuri focuses on Phichit, absently comparing this program to the one Phichit will refine and show off in a year. The technical components aren't as difficult, with much more pizzazz to his step sequences. Phichit is having fun, and it shows, too; the audience is clapping along, energized by his smile and performance.

Yuuri cannot help a smile, too. Phichit loves vibrant songs with lots of energy, and he has a talent for delivering amazing performances. Yuuri had just barely convinced him not to use a song from *The King and the Skater*, knowing that someday Phichit will perform it in competition. Phichit has wanted to perform his favorite movie's songs practically ever since he began skating. With his ban on pop music, Celestino hasn't allowed Phichit to use any music from the movie, or even most of Phichit's preferred songs on his playlists. Absently, Yuuri wonders what will make Celestino change his mind next year.

He is proud of Phichit for his passion, and he looks forward to Phichit's triumph next year. After the song ends, Phichit gets wild applause, and he beams up at the audience, bowing low before waving his hands happily.

After Phichit leaves the rink, four young skaters from one of the local clubs circle the ice, picking up the bouquets and gifts that the fans throw down, as they will do after every song. After the young teens leave, Yuuri hears a voice behind him.

"Looks like it's my turn," Chris says, and Yuuri turns to find Chris standing beside him, one hip cocked. "You'll watch me, won't you, Yuuri?"

Yuuri stares up at Chris for a long moment, a little taken aback by the request. It reminds him too much of his demands to Viktor during *Eros*, once upon a time. "Good luck, Chris," Yuuri finally says with a smile, which Chris returns before he walks out to the ice.

"What did you think, Yuuri?" Phichit exclaims when he reaches the hallway, wiping sweat from his face with a towel.

Yuuri grins. "You were awesome!" He lets Phichit pull him into a selfie, holding up his fingers in an awkward V sign, before letting him go get some water, looking back at the ice.

Chris has taken up his position on the ice, and *Just Dance* begins to play. Sultry and beckoning, Chris' skating enthralls the audience, earning cheers every time he pulls off a complicated or particularly sexy move. Yuuri watches, his expressions minute, wondering what Chris wants him to see.

"You have a serious look on your face," Viktor murmurs in Yuuri's ear, and he jumps, a flush traveling down his neck.

"I'm concentrating," Yuuri returns. His gaze flicks back to Viktor, admiring the stylized fall of his hair. Just as with competitions, Viktor has used product to sweep his hair back from his eyes, outlined with just the tiniest hint of make-up.

Viktor smiles down at him. "On Christophe? Should I be jealous?"

Yuuri looks back at the show, watching Chris drop down into a cantilever, his hips moving with the heavy beat of the song. He isn't sure what to think of that question, until he figures out that Viktor means Chris as competition. "You don't have to worry about that," Yuuri finally says, his voice soft. Not even Chris, his longtime rival and friend, can compare to his desire to skate against Viktor.
Viktor hums softly, his only response, and they watch in silence as Chris' song comes to an end, Chris taking a rather risqué pose that has Yuuri covering his face briefly. Even with Eros, he never managed to out-sexy Chris on the ice.

Viktor's fingers touch his back. "Show them your love, Yuuri," Viktor whispers, then pushes him forward, and Yuuri is so stunned that he lets it happen, throwing a startled look over his shoulder. That sounded too much like his Viktor, and he stares at Viktor for a wild moment, trying to find something that does not exist.

No, it can't be.

"Good luck, Yuuri," Chris whispers to him as Yuuri passes him, and Yuuri spares him a smile, taking a deep breath. When he skates onto the ice, the spotlight surrounds him in soft blues, pinks, and purples, reminding Yuuri of his faraway dance with Viktor, in another lifetime.

Then Evacuate the Dance Floor begins to play, and Yuuri begins to skate.

The song has a heavy club beat, and Yuuri uses that to his advantage, shimmying along with the music. Even before Viktor taught him how to be confident on the ice with Eros, Yuuri has known how to dance in an evocative manner. Admittedly, Yuuri's 'evocative' dancing was mostly innocent compared to skaters like Chris, but he can hold his own on the ice. Especially after Eros and Viktor.

Yuuri drops down low to the ice, rocking his body upwards, and then rises into a spin, skating backwards with his arms held out. He grins, exchanging a come hither look with the audience, listening to the resulting screams with amusement.

His jumps aren't as difficult, but Yuuri adds a quad flip to invigorate the audience, knowing that his fans will be excited for it after last season. The audience might not realize it, but Yuuri means it as a subtle call out for Viktor, to meet Yuuri's standards for his dance.

His Viktor would have risen to the challenge, if only to be petty. Yuuri hopes this Viktor feels the same, that Yuuri can invigorate him just as much.

His step work makes up a large majority of his dance, and here Yuuri lets himself be free with his movements, his hips doing much of the work as he skates. As the song nears its end, Yuuri lands a quadruple toe loop, and soon after, he falls into a Biellmann spin, arching back as he grasps his skate. The last note approaches quickly, and Yuuri drops out of his spin fast, turning sharply and coming to his final pose, arched back with his arms up.

A beat of silence, and the audience erupts into screaming applause, which makes Yuuri flush as he straightens, beaming up at the spotlight. He can hear people chanting his name, and it feels good, to get that kind of response outside of a competition. Yuuri bows low, then picks up a single red rose that someone has thrown onto the ice, kissing it to renewed cheers.

If he somehow, miraculously, got to perform Eros again... well, no one would say that Yuuri's Eros would be completely unprecedented.

Viktor is waiting at the edge of the ice, and he holds out Yuuri's skate guards, his gaze bright in the shadows of the stadium. Yuuri swallows at the heated look in his eyes as he takes the guards, hesitating an instant before offering Viktor the rose he caught.

Viktor inhales softly, taking the rose and pressing it to his lips, before he leans in close. "Amazing, Yuuri. See you soon," is all he whispers, before he takes Yuuri's place on the ice. Yuuri breathes
out as the stadium erupts into even louder cheering, stepping back toward the curtain. Phichit appears with his water bottle, beaming.

"That was amazing, Yuuri!" Phichit bubbles, as Yuuri drains his water. His gaze hasn't left the ice, where Viktor is still skating laps around the rink, waving to his ecstatic fans.

"Thanks," Yuuri says breathlessly, swallowing. He glances over long enough to catch Phichit's knowing look and flushes, quickly drinking more water.

"Excited about your romantic duet?"

"Quit calling it that. It'll be a group dance anyway," Yuuri mutters, wiping his mouth and putting the water bottle aside. Viktor skates backward to the center of the ice and stops. Phichit grins and reaches an arm around Yuuri, quickly taking another selfie with him, and Yuuri can barely manage a smile, his attention already back to Viktor.

After that, Phichit leaves him alone, knowing how touchy Yuuri can be whenever he watches Viktor performing. Yuuri flashes him a brief smile, then lets himself focus as Pop That Lock begins to play.

Like Yuuri's ensemble, Viktor's skate epitomizes his grace and choreography, the difficulty dialed back to give Viktor more maneuverability. More than anything, though, the song emphasizes Viktor's sexuality, the beauty in his body, and just like every other time he has witnessed this program, Yuuri cannot look away. As Viktor spins on the ice and holds his hand out to his invisible lover, Yuuri feels himself growing tense. He has daydreamed to this song more times than he can count, of being with Viktor, of making love with him.

The idea of running away with Viktor appeals to him, but... Yuuri can't take him from the ice again. The world loves Viktor, and Viktor loves pleasing the world, giving back to the fans that have supported him for so long. Yuuri stole him once before, but to do so again...

He can't, no matter how much he wants it.

That bittersweet feeling still holds Yuuri in its grasp when Viktor's dance ends and he bows, to endless cheering. Yuuri waits until the cheering has slowed, then skates out to join him.

They have a dance to perform.

~*~

When Yuuri enters the pool, it is nearly empty. An older couple is lounging in the hot tub, but Yuuri pays them no mind, leaving his shirt and sandals by a chair and stepping into the pool. The cool water sends a shiver through him, though he grows used to the temperature quickly. The pool isn't very large, but he still manages some laps, and when he surfaces, the couple is gone. It is late, after all. Yuuri is somewhat surprised that not many people would use the pool, but then again, this isn't a skating competition, where skaters love to take advantage of the hot tub if the hosting hotel has one. Besides, unlike Yuuri, most other people are reasonably responsible and have probably gone to bed already. They also don't have insomnia like he does.

Or so Yuuri thinks, until Viktor walks into the room.

Viktor doesn't notice him at first, frowning at his phone, but when he looks up, he zeroes in on Yuuri at the other end of the pool and stops, staring. He is only wearing his swim shorts and sandals, and Yuuri is briefly surprised that he manages the shoes. Viktor hates wearing shoes when
his feet are wet.

Yuuri can't help but look a little, his gaze dropping to admire. Then he has to look away, turning abruptly to face the pool wall, his face heating up uncomfortably. He has no right to look.

Viktor says nothing, and Yuuri listens to him walk around the room to one of the tables, setting down his phone with a towel. Yuuri busies himself with ducking under the water, swimming across the pool to the shallow end. He's tempted to get into the hot tub to soothe his sore feet.

When Yuuri surfaces, though, Viktor is standing in front of him, hands on his hips with a small smile.

"Viktor," Yuuri says blankly, and Viktor's smile widens.

"Is there room in there for two?" Viktor asks, one hand on his hip. Yuuri can't find his tongue for a moment. He has seen Viktor's bare chest countless times, not to mention the rest of him, and yet somehow he can't stop looking. He closes his eyes briefly and nods.

"Sure," Yuuri says quietly, much more steadily than he feels.

Viktor steps in and sighs as the cool water hits his skin. "Nothing like a nice swim," he groans, and Yuuri abruptly decides to wait on the hot tub, swimming backwards as he watches Viktor.

He wonders what might be bothering Viktor, for him to seek out a distraction at this time of night. "It's late for you."

Viktor shrugs, pushing himself through the water to move closer to Yuuri. "I was replying to emails. Our show got lots of attention, and we have requests to perform again. I had to tell them that we would not have another show during the rest of the skating season... but perhaps we could do this again, once the off-season starts."

"Oh... really? Well, if it's during off-season, we could do it," Yuuri muses, watching Viktor as he draws closer. "Maybe with more people, too. My rink mates would love to join."

"Mine too," Viktor says, his gaze meeting Yuuri's for a moment. "My youngest teammate would likely try to take over the whole show, though."

Yuuri very carefully does not react. Yurio would definitely try to take over the show, if he could get rid of Viktor and turn it into something with loud music and punk themes. After a moment, Yuuri's lips twitch traitorously, and an answering smile blooms on Viktor's face.

"I think we could handle him if we worked together," Yuuri says, and Viktor laughs.

"I think you and I could do anything together if we tried," Viktor replies, winking, before he ducks underwater and swims past Yuuri. The faint brush of his arm against Yuuri's leg makes him shiver, and Yuuri propels himself away before he can do something dangerous, like follow Viktor.

Yuuri turns in time to see Viktor surfacing, water running down his face and through his hair, and he watches in blank silence as Viktor slicks his hair back out of his eyes. Damn him for being so attractive, and damn himself for wanting Viktor so badly.

This isn't his Viktor, though. Yuuri has no right to even look at him, let alone lust after him. With a shake of his head, Yuuri swims over to the ladder and climbs out of the pool, walking across the tiles to the hot tub. The hot tub shares a curved wall with the side of the pool, allowing Yuuri to run his fingers through the cold water if he wishes.
He bites back a groan as he sinks into the hot water, exhaling, before moving to sit next to the poolside wall. A moment later, Yuuri realizes his mistake when Viktor surfaces from underwater right beside him and splashes cool water on his shoulder. "No fun, Yuuri, you moved to the hot water," Viktor says with a pout, which makes Yuuri roll his eyes.

"My feet hurt and I wanted to sit down. Don't whine at me," Yuuri tells him. Viktor laughs and crosses his arms on the wall which is at the same level as the water, putting him uncomfortably close. Yuuri makes himself look away before he can admire again, but soon his gaze steals back to Viktor, who is watching him with a smile.

"Did you have fun today?" Viktor asks, his voice a little softer.

Yuuri relaxes a little, trying to push his inappropriate thoughts out of his mind. "I did. It was nice not to worry about competition requirements."

"I'd say so," Viktor says, reaching across and testing out the water of the hot tub. The closeness of his arm makes Yuuri feel a little caged in, but he doesn't say anything to make Viktor stop. "I think you do phenomenally better with exhibitions than competitive performances. Without the pressure of judging and program components, the music that you create with your body shines brilliantly. It was wonderful to watch." Viktor sighs deeply, looking a little dreamy, yet Yuuri has gone still, staring at him with wide eyes.

The music that you create with your body. His Viktor had said those same words to him. Not at the same time, nor in the same place, but his Viktor had spoken about the music that Yuuri conveyed with his skating, and that had been half the reason Viktor had flown halfway across the world to coach Yuuri. His Viktor had believed so strongly in Yuuri's artistic ability and choreography, and somehow, this Viktor felt the same... yet Yuuri never skated Stammi Vicino.

A traitorous voice whispers, Are they really so different?

"I'd love to arrange a program for you," Viktor muses, and Yuuri nearly jumps up and runs away. "I could maximize the music you create with a high-difficulty program... Would you let me, Yuuri?" He opens his eyes to look at Yuuri, and Yuuri freezes, caught by the emotion glittering there, the brilliant blue that shines brighter than any other color Yuuri has ever seen. He has always been weak to Viktor's eyes.

"O-okay," Yuuri whispers, unable to deny Viktor, watching as Viktor lights up in surprised pleasure. "But not till after this season."

"Okay!" Viktor replies, and by the glint in his eyes, Yuuri suspects he is already thinking of music and component arrangements. Viktor begins to hum under his breath, and Yuuri sighs a little, watching him, no longer feeling overwhelmed by Viktor's closeness.

If Viktor creates Eros again, Yuuri would skate it. Even Yuuri on Ice had been Viktor's arrangement, and Yuuri had skated them both proudly, determined to show off Viktor's coaching with his body.

Except... Viktor will not be his coach again. Yuuri refuses to take him away from skating again, so those programs will never exist for him. If Yuuri cannot skate those programs, then what will he skate next year?

Yuuri realizes abruptly that he does not want to skate next year, his year with Viktor, if he does not have Viktor as his coach, if he cannot skate the programs that gave him such joy and changed his life for the better. Yet Yuuri refuses to ask Viktor to be his coach again, not if it means taking
Viktor away from skating, the one thing that makes him happy. With a heavy heart, Yuuri closes his eyes.

He will have to retire after this year. What other choice does he have?

Yuuri isn't truly surprised by the decision. For months Yuuri had intended to retire after his year with Viktor in the other future, after all, based on the belief that Viktor was meant to continue skating. He and Viktor had fought about it, too. Though they had resolved it when Viktor had agreed to come back to skating if Yuuri also kept skating, the argument still leaves a bitter feeling in his heart. They had not spoken about it again; there was so much they had not discussed properly, before Yuuri had died.

He wishes he could talk to his Viktor again and ask him if this is the right thing to do. He could, feasibly, skate *Eros* and *Yuuri on Ice* again, since he knows them by heart; however, they were Viktor's creations, not his. Stealing them would never feel right.

Viktor will never arrange them, either. *Yuuri On Ice* had been created over their summer together, and *Eros* had been created after the infamous banquet in Sochi, where Yuuri had lost to alcohol and had humiliated himself -- while sweeping Viktor off his feet. Yuuri cannot do that again, either.

He may never have Viktor again, the way he wants. He hasn't held Viktor's hand in almost a year. He hasn't woken to Viktor's messy hair and complaints about coffee not being ready. He hasn't listened to Viktor humming while he grooms himself in the morning in so long; it was nice, waking up to that soft voice on lazy mornings, to be woken fully by a kiss.

Deep in his contemplation, Yuuri reaches out without thinking to rest his hand on Viktor's head, halting the soft humming. He can’t resist brushing a few locks away from Viktor’s eyes, lost in memories of gazing up at Viktor’s picture and deciding that blue was his favorite color. How many years has he looked up to Viktor? How many years has he been in love?

Yuuri never dated anyone before Viktor. He had a few crushes, but he never shared his life with someone like he did with Viktor. His situation is already incomparable to any other, but Yuuri wonders if this is what it feels like after a breakup, to miss someone so wholly and completely that even seeing their face makes everything a little better.

Yuuri realizes he is close to crying. What a dilemma to have in the middle of the hot tub, while Viktor is inches away. He takes a deep breath and sinks beneath the water's surface, letting the heat envelope him for a few long moments, before standing up in the center of the hot tub. The desolate feeling in his heart ebbs away a little as water trickles off his body, and Yuuri pushes his hair out of his face, opening his eyes to see Viktor staring at him, his mouth fallen open.

Viktor meets his eyes, and to Yuuri's astonishment, a blush spreads across his cheeks. Yuuri stares back, forgetting himself, because *Viktor is attracted to him*.

Yuuri doesn't understand how. He hasn't danced with Viktor at Sochi. He hasn't performed *Eros* over and over. He hasn't done anything other than be himself, nothing to sweep Viktor off his feet like last time, and yet... somehow, Viktor both likes him and is physically attracted to him.

If it was anybody else, Yuuri would remain oblivious, but he has been watching Viktor for years, and he already knows the signs of Viktor's attraction by heart.

A blush even more vivid than Viktor's sweeps across Yuuri's cheeks, and he sinks into the water again, averting his gaze. Viktor being attracted to him... Somehow, Yuuri never even imagined it. He believed he would have to go through the same experiences as in his other future, for Viktor to
feel this way about him again.

Could he be with Viktor again? Viktor had filled his world up with joy... but could Yuuri do that again for him? He could never be honest with Viktor about the other future, and it would be stressful for Yuuri, to hide that part of his life from his partner.

Yet... Yuuri wants, so badly. Except... this is not his Viktor. This is not the Viktor he fell in love with, who fell in love with him... and Yuuri does not know if he can bear betraying his Viktor. Even if his Viktor told him to be with this other self...

How could he? Yuuri just doesn't know what to do.

With a heavy sigh, Yuuri closes his eyes to Viktor's attention, misery wrapping around his thoughts. After a few moments of quiet, he hears Viktor moving through the water, splashes following him as he swims away from the hot tub wall. Yuuri's heart sinks a little, wishing Viktor would have stayed, yet relieved that he doesn't have to worsen Viktor's night with his depression.

Then he hears another splash right next to him, and Yuuri starts a little, looking up to see Viktor stepping into the hot tub. Viktor meets his eyes and smiles, a soft and intimate expression, and Yuuri relaxes a little.

"This is the life," Viktor sighs, settling across the hot tub from Yuuri. "I could spend every night in something like this."

*You could, if I wasn't so selfish.* "My family's onsen is better."

Viktor tilts his head curiously. "*Onsen*? The Japanese baths?"

"Hot springs," Yuuri explains. "Most of them are natural. My town used to be known for them, but tourism has died down a lot lately."

Viktor's eyes are wide and impressed, and Yuuri is reminded of when his Viktor was in Hasetsu. His heart aches a little. "Wow... so you grew up with hot springs in your backyard? How nice! I'm jealous, Yuuri."

Yuuri smiles a little. "I helped out a lot around the inn when I was growing up, though... it wasn't all fun and games."

"Still, sounds nice," Viktor sighs, his eyes falling closed. Yuuri cannot help but admire him for a moment, remembering countless evenings where he and Viktor would sit in the onsen and talk about everything under the sun. At first, mostly just his programs, but as time went on, they spoke of other things, too. Viktor's family, Yuuri's pathetic lack of experience, Vicchan. He had told his Viktor everything about himself, and in turn, Viktor had opened up to him, showing him the Viktor that the media with all their cameras and interviews never glimpsed.

A Viktor just for Yuuri.

So much he has not told this Viktor. Yuuri has opened his heart a little, letting Viktor into his everyday life, but... how can he give himself wholly again? This Viktor isn't his, and Yuuri has no right to push his feelings onto him.

Yet... it seems that the draw between them, the attraction that swept Viktor from Russia to Japan, is resurfacing again, pulling them together once more. Yuuri doesn't know how to feel about that.

With a small sigh, Yuuri mirrors Viktor and closes his eyes. For a few long moments, quiet
surrounds them, uneasy to Yuuri. He has no idea what Viktor is thinking. He doesn't think he could handle asking.

He hears a splash and opens his eyes to see Viktor getting up and leaving the hot tub, going to the wall where a button sits. When Viktor pushes the button, the hot tub bubbles come to life, and Yuuri jumps a little, surprised.

"Bet your onsen doesn't have this, does it?" Viktor teases as he sits back down again, this time beside Yuuri, his arms resting across the tiles. If he moved sideways, he could press his shoulder to Viktor's side.

Yuuri chuckles weakly. "Not so much." His heart is beating erratically, He closes his eyes and leans his head back, only for the back of his head to meet Viktor's arm. Yuuri forces himself not to react, somewhat bemused at himself for being so jumpy around Viktor. Viktor, to whom his sister affectionately referred as an octopus, for how often he clung to Yuuri. There is no one else in the world Yuuri is more comfortable with.

Except his Viktor.

Yuuri's heart hurts, as does his head. He doesn't want to stress about this any longer. He just wants to relax and enjoy a little time with Viktor, before he goes back to Detroit and training and classes. With a heavy sigh, Yuuri closes his eyes again and lets himself use Viktor's arm as a pillow, not seeing the need to pull away when he has already allowed Viktor into his personal space.

The melancholy in his heart is the only reason that Yuuri lets himself do what he does next. Everything that follows happens because he is too weak to say no to his own heart.

Without opening his eyes, Yuuri reaches behind his head to where Viktor's hand is resting on the tiles, gently entwining their fingers. He hears Viktor inhale softly beside him, but after a moment of Yuuri's heart beating fast in his chest, Viktor squeezes his fingers.

"Your flight is early, isn't it?" Yuuri asks after a moment of peaceful quiet. His heart isn't beating as loudly anymore, but he still wonders if Viktor could hear it, if he listened closely enough.

"Yes," Viktor replies, just as quiet. "I have to fly a long way, after all. You'll be alright waiting in the airport for a few extra hours?"

Yuuri nods a little. "I don't mind. Phichit will be there. Chris is leaving at the same time as you, isn't he?"

"Mm, a little after I do. Then we will return to training. I expect daily updates from you, of course."

"Of course," Yuuri echoes, smiling a little. "I'm not telling you what my program is, Viktor. You can find out in October."

"Yuuuuuri," Viktor whines. "You're so cruel to me! I've assisted you so much! You might as well call me your assistant coach!"

Yuuri's heart skips a beat, and he turns his head to look up at Viktor, stunned. Has Viktor been thinking about becoming his coach? Already? A rush of panic fills him. Viktor can't, he can't be Yuuri's coach again, Yuuri can't take him away from skating again. No matter how much Yuuri wants it, Viktor shouldn't have to give up his own dreams just for Yuuri.

"I -- I can't ask you to fill that role!" Yuuri exclaims, stuttering as he tries to reign in his panic before Viktor notices it. Too late, he thinks, when Viktor's eyes narrow slightly. "You've already
helped me so much, and, and you're also training, it must be too much for you..."

Viktor's hand closes around Yuuri's fingers, before he turns to face Yuuri. "Helping you is never too much, Yuuri. I enjoy it. I enjoy it a lot more than I realized," Viktor says with a soft laugh. He turns his gaze away, looking across the pool at the darkened windows with the cityscape beyond, and for a moment, he is far from Yuuri, lost in his own mind. "Retire or continue. Every year they ask me, and every year I say continue, because what else would I do? My body still skates the way I want it. I still enjoy the sport. Skating is my entire life."

Then Viktor looks back at Yuuri, his vivid gaze pinning Yuuri in place. "Then I met you, and I began to wonder if there was more that I could do. Coaching, ice dancing, even simply sponsoring other skaters. Someday I will have to leave the ice, and... now I have a better idea of what I could do with my life in the future."

Yuuri doesn't look away from Viktor. He can't; how could he, when Viktor is speaking thoughts that his Viktor kept from Yuuri for months? For the longest time, Yuuri hadn't understood why Viktor had chosen to coach him, and even with the truth of the Sochi banquet revealed, Yuuri hadn't truly comprehended his Viktor's indecision. His Viktor had kept it all hidden away, not wanting to burden Yuuri with his own problems.

Yet this Viktor is speaking them plainly, without any prompting. Hearing about the pressure Viktor must face as a competitor, as someone who is much older than other skaters yet stands at the top of his career...

It makes Yuuri wonder how much of that factored into his Viktor's decision to coach Yuuri.

All Yuuri wants is for Viktor to keep skating, yet that might not be all that Viktor wants. The realization stuns Yuuri silent.

"You don't need to look so panicked, Yuuri. I'm not going to retire immediately," Viktor says, misreading Yuuri's shock. "When I do, though, I think that I will have more options than I have considered before. You gave me those options. So... thank you." Viktor smiles, a faintly nervous lilt to his voice, and Yuuri breathes out, a tiny noise escaping him.

Yuuri lets go of Viktor's hand and turns toward him, lowering his gaze. "I admit, I don't want you to retire," Yuuri says to the water, watching the bubbles flowing against Viktor's bare chest. Yuuri realizes what he is staring at and looks away, his cheeks flushing. "I want to keep challenging you. It's... it's always been my dream, to skate on the same ice as you. But I know it can't last forever."

"Nothing does," Viktor murmurs, and long fingers catch Yuuri's chin and turn his head back. Yuuri freezes, caught in that blue gaze he has always loved. "Not the exhilaration, nor the joy, nor the pain. Yet we don't want to let go of them, either."

Yuuri can't breathe. Viktor is far too close, too close for Yuuri's comfort, yet he cannot pull himself away. Viktor's gaze is impossibly soft, filled with wonder, and Yuuri's heart seizes in his throat, wanting to build up that wonder into jubilation. "Viktor..."

Viktor's smile is gentle, gentler than any Yuuri has ever seen from him. "I loved skating with you today. You were amazing, Yuuri. Would that we could have skated like that forever..."

Yuuri is sure that his face is on fire. "Viktor, please..."

"Please, what?" Viktor asks, and Yuuri realizes how close he is when his warm breath washes over Yuuri's damp lips, leaving them tingling. "Anything you ask for, I will give it to you."
Oh, Viktor. For a moment that stretches into forever, Yuuri wants, knowing that if he leans just the smallest bit forward, their lips will meet. Viktor's lips, soft and wet and so familiar, and... Yuuri can't. "You can't say that to me," Yuuri whispers, his heart breaking. "I'd ask too much. I can't."

For a long beat, Viktor does nothing, the warmth of his lips close enough for a kiss, before finally he lets go of Yuuri and leans back, giving him much-needed room for air. Yuuri can't look at him, his shoulders hunching as the silence builds between them, guilt wrecking through the rest of his emotions.

Viktor is clearly attracted to him, and Yuuri rejected him. He must have hurt Viktor. He's ruined everything between them --

A finger touches Yuuri's face, poking him in the forehead, and Yuuri startles back, flailing a little as he catches himself. Viktor smiles at him, though his eyes are clouded with something like pain. "It's okay, Yuuri. Relax. I pushed too hard, I'm sorry."

Yuuri can only watch as Viktor backs away from him and starts up the stairs into the hot tub, as if to leave. Without thinking he reaches out to grab Viktor's hand, standing, and Viktor pauses, turning to look at him.

"Please don't let this come between us," Yuuri begs, desperate. He can't lose Viktor over this. "I... I can't. I'm sorry. I do feel attraction to you, but... I'm not ready for a relationship right now. Please don't let anything change between us. You're important to me." It hurts, admitting that, but the wonder that blossoms in Viktor's eyes clears away the guilt.

Slowly, Viktor twists his hand around to take Yuuri's, squeezing gently. "You're important to me, too. I want to stay close to you... if you'll let me?"

"Please," Yuuri whispers. "I can't be more than this, but... I hope you'll accept me, anyway."

"Always, Yuuri." Viktor is quiet for a moment. "Would you like me to stay?"

Yuuri nods, some of his misery fading away as Viktor lowers himself back into the water, facing Yuuri. After a moment, Yuuri cannot resist reaching up and hugging Viktor tightly, closing his eyes as he presses himself close to Viktor. He will do anything, so that Viktor doesn't get hurt. Viktor only takes a moment to embrace him in return, his warm hands resting easily on Yuuri's back. For a little while, they stand together, until Yuuri hitches a shaky sigh and lets go. Then he sits down, and Viktor follows, his gaze never leaving Yuuri, even though Yuuri can barely stand to look up.

Yuuri sighs deeply, leaning back against the wall of the hot tub, drained from the force of his emotions. The quiet between them is less oppressive now, easier to handle, and slowly, the heat relaxes Yuuri enough that he can look at Viktor again, watching his pale hair fall into his closed eyes. Viktor's lips twitch, a sure sign that he knows Yuuri is watching him, but he doesn't open his eyes.

Instead, Viktor begins to hum Stammi Vicino, and Yuuri's heart threatens to break again. He just barely holds himself back from singing the lyrics, because he shouldn't know them, and he can only sit in silence as Viktor hums their song, the music that brought them together in another lifetime.

Finally, Yuuri gives in. "What are you humming?" he asks quietly, and Viktor's lips turn up into a smile.
"You'll find out in two months. Unless you want to tell me your secrets, too...?"

Yuuri can't help a laugh, relieved that they are back to their old banter. "I'm not telling you my programs, Viktor. Stop asking! Was that one of your skates?"

Viktor opens one eye and puts a finger to his lips. "It's a secret, Yuuri."

Yuuri groans, but the familiar teasing fills the space between them with warmth, and somehow he knows that they will be okay. He hasn't ruined their friendship after all.

~*~

Yuuri goes back to Detroit in a daze. As classes start up and Yuuri's days refill with déjà vu and lectures, he ends up spending most of his free time at the rink, skating out his troubled thoughts.

Viktor almost kissed him. Why, why did Yuuri stop him? Why did Yuuri let him get so close?

He still talks to Viktor, mostly via text. By not calling him as much, Viktor is giving him space, and Yuuri appreciates it. The time alone with his thoughts allows Yuuri to focus on training, though always at the end of the day, his mind returns to his dilemma: retire or continue?

Be with Viktor, or don't?

Yuuri still has no idea what to decide. He takes to rereading his worn journal full of his Viktor and his other future, seeking answers in memories that no one else carries. His dreams are quiet for once, neither his Viktor nor the Neva surfacing to haunt him, yet his sleep is troubled, anyway.

Still, he manages. Classes are familiar and, while not easy, a good distraction. His training progresses rapidly, and for the first time in a long time, Yuuri feels ready for his competitions.

After a couple of weeks, Yuuri's interactions with Viktor return to something like normal. They text, they call, they send each other pictures and videos, and they ease back into that comfortable friendship of before. Yet Yuuri looks at each exchange with new knowledge, seeking the signs of attraction, of the love he recognizes from his own Viktor. He finds little sign of it, which means Viktor has backed off and given Yuuri his space.

The hollow disappointment at that realization should fade with time.

Since Yuuri is the number one skater in his country, he doesn't need to participate in prefecturals, but he does need to go back home to announce his theme for the year, just before the Japan Open. He won't participate in the Open since that is reserved for the silver medalist from Nationals, but Yuuri intends to show his support.

First, though, a visit to his family.

"Hi, Vicchan," Yuuri exclaims happily, sweeping his dog into his arms and cuddling him close. His mother watches him with a smile, a hand to her cheek.

"It's too bad you're not staying longer. Vicchan is so happy to see you!"

Vicchan accompanies this announcement with a flurry of puppy kisses, and Yuuri laughs, standing up with Vicchan in his arms. "I wish I could stay," he says ruefully. Vicchan yips at him, and Yuuri's heart sinks, the haunting memory of Vicchan's death coming back to him. He told his mother to have the vet keep an eye on Vicchan's blood tests, but... if Yuuri doesn't do something to stop it, Vicchan will die sometime within the next month.
"Um, have you been taking Vicchan to the vet recently?"

"Every three months or so," his mother answers, blinking. "Why? Is something the matter, Yuuri?"

"I don't know," Yuuri says quietly. "He just seems a little different." Now that he is holding Vicchan, he notices it; Vicchan is lighter. He has calmed now, and he feels warmer than Yuuri is used to. He must be losing weight, which means that he might already have an infection. Yuuri's heart seizes with fear. "Has he been eating okay?"

"Well, now that you mention it, he didn't seem too interested in breakfast this morning," his mother says, frowning. "Mari fed him last night, so I'm not sure about that." She watches Yuuri for a long moment, then reaches out for Vicchan. Yuuri hands Vicchan to her, and Hiroko turns Vicchan onto his back, scratching his belly and peering down at him.

"We could take him to the vet. It's a quiet night, so would you like me to go with you?" Hiroko offers, and Yuuri nearly collapses with relief. They still have a chance.

Three days later, Yuuri is in Tokyo, his heart light with joy. As he sits down on stage, holding his theme card for the year, Yuuri's mind is not on what he will say, but on home and Vicchan. The vet caught the infection and prescribed antibiotics, and Vicchan is already responding well to them. His dog is going to be okay. Vicchan will live, and Yuuri has the memories of another life to thank for saving him. If he hadn't known to watch for the signs...

Morooka Hisashi calls Yuuri's name, smiling encouragingly at him as Yuuri walks up to the microphone. After a beat, Yuuri sets his theme card on the podium for the cameras to see, taking the microphone.

"My theme this year is gratitude," Yuuri says quietly, gazing out at the field of reporters. "Many people have supported me over the years. My family, my friends, my coaches, and my fans. For a long time, I couldn't see past my own limitations, but someone special gave me the courage to be myself. Now I can accept the support and love that my important people have given me, and this year I would like to dedicate my skating to them, and to you. Thank you for supporting me all these years." He lowers the microphone and bows, hearing the flashing of cameras, then straightens and hands the microphone back to Morooka, who is smiling brightly at him.

The last time Yuuri was on this stage, he professed his love for Viktor in front of Japan. This year, Yuuri doesn't need to go that far to prove himself, but he will never forget what his Viktor has done for him. Yuuri does mean what he said; he is grateful to everyone who has supported him.

In many ways, though, Yuuri's skates are also in remembrance, of his Viktor, who is forever lost to him, and the future he still holds dear. His old pain over Vicchan, his trauma from his death, his grief for losing Viktor... His two skates will tell the story Yuuri will never be able to say aloud. With that story, Yuuri hopes to gain the strength to do what he could never do before: to let his Viktor go.

He is ready for this season.

~*~

Yuuri is in St. Petersburg on the Tuchkov Bridge. His clothes are chilled, heavy with ice and snow, but Yuuri has been cold for a year now and doesn't let it stop his contemplation of the Neva. The people who walk by are oblivious to his presence, and Yuuri finds comfort in the solitude. He doesn't belong here; he is a ghost to all he passes. He left this world long ago. This he knows in his heart, and he is at peace with that knowledge.
Soon he looks away from the icy water, staring at the wall where he fell into the river's dark depths. The night is still, the stars shrouded with clouds that threaten snow. The railing has been repaired, and Yuuri can see that the steel walls have been reinforced. He relaxes a bit, gladdened that no one else will fall like he did.

"Yuuri," he hears, and Yuuri turns to see Viktor standing beside him, staring at him with wide eyes. Viktor is dressed in all black, a rarity; even his scarf is a dark grey, as if all the color has been muted out of him. Only his eyes hold any semblance of color, and even the vivid blue Yuuri remembers is dulled, lackluster.

"Viktor," Yuuri whispers, turning to him. "You can... see me?"

"Of course I can see you. How, I don't know, but..." Viktor reaches out to take Yuuri's hands, his gloves warm amidst the chilly air of Russia, and seconds later, Viktor yanks him forward into a tight hug, his entire body shaking with the need to hold him. "Yuuri, I miss you so much!"

"I miss you too," Yuuri says quietly, wrapping his arms around Viktor and closing his eyes against St. Petersburg, against the cold that never seems to leave his body. "I'm so sorry... I left you alone here."

Viktor just holds him tighter. Though the bridge is open to travelers, no one passes them, and Yuuri can melt a little into this world of just the two of them, where Viktor is here with him.

Soon Viktor draws away, pulling off his gloves and reaching up to cup Yuuri's face, tilting his head up. His gaze is warm, loving, and so very sad, but his smile is real. Yuuri can feel the metal of his gold ring against his cheek, and he leans into the touch, tears stinging his eyes. He would stay here forever if he could.

"Don't you worry, Yuuri," Viktor whispers. "I am well. Now... tell me about the past. Have you told me the truth yet?"

Yuuri shakes his head, guilt welling up, but Viktor only smiles at him, forgiving in an instant. "No... I can't. But you... he's still... there. I spend a lot of time talking to him. We even skated together."

"Good," whispers Viktor. He looks beyond Yuuri for a moment, his gaze darkening with a flicker of emotion, then focuses on Yuuri again, gently smiling. "Tell me about it."

So Yuuri tells him everything, the words spilling out at Viktor's bidding. He tells Viktor about the season he skated and how he got silver under the other Viktor's gold. He tells Viktor about a summer of texting and calls and flirting, and how much it hurts to talk to the other Viktor. He tells Viktor how happy it makes him, to see the other Viktor smiling and acting like Viktor as Yuuri knows him. He tells Viktor about Vicchan surviving, about the ice show he performed with Viktor and their friends, and about the heated moments between him and the other Viktor.

"I wish he was you," Yuuri whimpers, staring down at the ring on Viktor's hand, his cold fingers tracing the warm metal. His own ring is cold on his finger. They are sitting together on the ground, and Yuuri thinks Viktor must be cold, but Viktor is smiling, soft wonder in his eyes. "I want him to be you so badly. I can't decide... I can't figure out if I should be with him, or if I should keep skating, or if I should give up and go home and take care of Vicchan. I don't know what to do with my life now."

"Yuuri," Viktor says softly, drawing Yuuri's attention back to his face. "How many times must I say it? I am him. I am him then, and he is me now. These new memories you have created are special to me, even if they belong to a different time. Please... do what you must to be happy. With me and
with skating. Even if you change the past, it won't change how I feel about you, nor how you feel about me."

Yuuri is quiet for a long moment. He no longer feels the cold, only the warmth of Viktor's arms around him. "Sometimes... he says things that sound like you. Like moments you and I had together. It's unnerving, because it sounds like..."

"Like he's me?" Viktor finishes with a wry little smile. "That's because he is, Yuuri."

"Like he's lived your life, too," Yuuri corrects him quietly. Viktor's gaze softens a little, and he lifts Yuuri's hand up to kiss the cold ring on his finger.

"He is still me, Yuuri. Remember that. And... trust that in no matter what life we are together, I will take care of you."

Yuuri closes his eyes, his heart aching with longing. He leans into Viktor's warmth, a few tears trickling out of his eyes. The night will be over soon, and Yuuri will have to go back to a past empty of his Viktor. Even if Viktor says it is him... that Viktor doesn't know him as Viktor does. "I want to come home, Viktor." Yuuri whispers, tears trickling down his cheeks, over his lips. It hurts so much, being far away from Viktor, knowing that Viktor is alone without him. "Can't we just stay like this forever?"

"Oh, Yuuri..." Viktor wraps his arms tightly around Yuuri again, gathering him close. "If only I could join you --"

Yuuri jolts back, his eyes going wide. "No!" The noise echoes through the air like a gunshot, and Yuuri grabs Viktor's arms, shaking him. "No, you can't follow me! If, if you died, I couldn't, I could never --"

"Shh," Viktor soothes, taking Yuuri's hands in his own and drawing him close again, kissing his damp cheeks. "Shh, no, I promise I will not die." He kisses away Yuuri's tears until Yuuri is calm again, then cups his face in his hand, the blue of his eyes more vivid than before. Yuuri stares up at him, mute with sadness, but for the first time since Yuuri appeared in this world of cold and darkness, Viktor looks happy.

"Do what will make you happiest, my love," Viktor whispers, before leaning in to kiss Yuuri's lips, the touch slow and loving and so very precious. "I am at peace, knowing that you are safe with me in the past. As long as you are happy."

Yuuri lowers his gaze, thinking on Viktor's words for a few moments, and Viktor waits patiently. "Even... if I choose him?" Yuuri finally asks, his heart aching at the very idea. How could he betray Viktor like that?

"Especially if you choose him. Because he is me," Viktor promises, kissing Yuuri again, and this time Yuuri kisses back, wondering if he can accept the other Viktor into his heart. His Viktor. Could they be the same?

He can hear the rush of water in his ears, the cold seeping into his limbs, and he deepens the kiss, wanting to hold onto that sweet touch for as long as he can. Viktor mouths something against his lips, forming words that Yuuri cannot hear, and then everything fades away.

~*~

Yuuri wakes suddenly, blinking against wetness as he stares up at his dark ceiling, the windows just beginning to show pre-dawn light through the curtains. He sits up slowly, his body feeling
heavy and sluggish, finally managing to turn on the bedside lamp. His room looks perfectly normal, the waters of the Neva gone, and Yuuri shivers, pulling his blankets tighter around him.

He had dreamed of Viktor... hadn't he? Yuuri remembers now. His Viktor, the man he fell in love with. The man he left alone in another time. Yuuri gasps a little, a sob escaping his throat, and he grips his blankets tightly as he struggles not to scream. He had been there with Viktor -- he could have stayed...

With shaking fingers, Yuuri picks up his phone. On his screen is a picture of Vicchan with an empty bottle of antibiotics, happy and alive. A message from Viktor waits for him.

**From: Viktor Nikiforov**

*Sleep well 💖*

The date is October 24, a full year after Yuuri came back to the past. Yuuri sighs, slumping back into his pillows. Usually his dreams center around the Neva or his memories of Viktor, but just like the dream he had before the GPF, this dream was... different. He had spoken to Viktor, laid down his troubles, and Viktor had been amazing, reassuring him and giving him the love Yuuri remembers.

Yuuri forces back another sob, realizing that he left Viktor again, that instead of comforting Viktor who has been alone in the future without him, Yuuri fell apart in such a selfish manner. How could he? He closes his eyes tightly and tries to reach for that sinking sensation again, the feeling of the Neva, but no matter how hard he focuses, his world does not change.

He cannot reach Viktor, now.

"Viktor," Yuuri moans pitifully, hiding his face in his pillow as his shoulders shake with sobs. He cries until his phone lights up in his hand, and Yuuri has to blink away his tears, his heart skipping a beat when he sees a new message from Viktor.

**From: Viktor Nikiforov**

*My free skate is tonight. Will you watch me today, too?*

Yuuri wipes at his eyes, his gaze softening a little. His Viktor is far away from him, and Yuuri will always hate himself for leaving him alone... but this Viktor is here, now, and if they truly are the same person...

**To: Viktor Nikiforov**

*Yes, I will.*

Seconds later, he gets another text, and the sight of it makes Yuuri laugh, hard enough that a few more tears slip out.

**From: Viktor Nikiforov**

*Why are you awake? Go to sleep, Yuuri!*

**To: Viktor Nikiforov**

*Why are YOU awake? It's even earlier there! You're an hour behind me.*

**From: Viktor Nikiforov**

*You avoided answering my question. Should I call you and sing you a lullaby? I will, Yuuri.*

Yuuri chuckles. His heart is too weak right now to handle seeing Viktor, but he appreciates the
kindness. He starts to type a response, and the phone screen switches to an incoming video call, which makes Yuuri startle. He tries to hang up, but the call connects instead, and Yuuri flushes when Viktor's face appears on the screen, surrounded by the background of his hotel room.

Viktor's eyes widen a little at seeing Yuuri's damp face, and Yuuri hastily wipes his cheeks, hating that Viktor has caught him in such a vulnerable moment. "Yuuri, are you crying? Are you okay?"

Some of the cold that has lingered in Yuuri's heart melts away at the sound of Viktor's voice, the exact same voice he heard in his dream, and Yuuri cannot help a smile, tremulous and fragile, but honest.

"Yes. I'm okay now, Viktor."
open up your heart

Yuuri is light in his arms. For those few moments that he holds Yuuri up, as if he is lifting the world, Viktor enters another realm, where Yuuri and Viktor are the only people who exist. The spotlight shines like a halo behind Yuuri, and his smile when he looks down at Viktor is brighter than the sun.

Then the moment ends, and Shut Up and Dance continues. It never fades from Viktor's mind, though, as they dance their hearts out to the rest of the song, nor after, when he bows alongside his friends to the roaring crowd.

Nor later, when Viktor is alone and aching, his heart full of an emotion he wishes he could not name.

~*~

In between polite emails to sponsors and skating clubs, Viktor's phone screen continually lights up with messages from his peers, rink mates, and few friends. Yakov already sent him a terse "good job," and the rest of them Viktor ignores, except the ones that mention Yuuri.

From: Georgi Popovich
Your skate with Japanese Yuri was beautiful!!! Your message of love was received by everyone in the world!

From: Anya Uspenskaya
Good show tonight. Are you dating that Japanese boy?

From: Yuri Plisetsky
Too bad you didn't fall on your face, old man

The last message has no mention of Yuuri, but it likely refers to the times when Viktor lifted Yuuri during their dance. Viktor suspects that Yuri watched every minute of his skate with Yuuri very closely. That he hasn't even mentioned Yuuri in any of his messages, after relentlessly begging Viktor for details for weeks, is telling.

I hope that doesn't become a problem later.

He isn't threatened by the jealousies of a teenager, but it grates nonetheless. As much as Viktor loved showing Yuuri off to the world tonight, he also wishes he could selfishly hoard those moments when they danced together. He could have stayed lost in Yuuri's eyes for eternity.

Viktor sighs. He really has it bad.

Finally he finishes the emails and puts his laptop away, stretching his arms and wincing at the small aches in his body. Lifting Yuuri hadn't been difficult for him, but it still pulled at muscles that Viktor isn't used to using. Despite how tired he is, the lure of the hotel's pool facilities call to him.

Viktor takes his phone and his room key, sliding his feet into plush sandals to ease the ache a little. In the elevator, he gets another message from Yuri, griping about how he could have pulled off both programs better than Viktor. He rolls his eyes as he enters the pool room, glancing up when he notices movement.
Instead of a stranger, he sees Yuuri.

Their eyes meet across the room. Yuuri looks just as surprised to see him as Viktor feels. Viktor swallows as he absorbs the fact that he will now be alone with Katsuki Yuuri, shirtless and beautiful and, unfairly, missing the glasses that hide those striking eyes. The world must be laughing at him.

Interestingly, Yuuri turns pink at the sight of him and looks away. Viktor blinks, then softens a little, realizing that he might not be the only person unsettled by this situation. Smiling to himself, Viktor deposits his phone and shoes on a table, then walks over to the pool, waiting until Yuuri looks up at him.

"Viktor," Yuuri says, blinking up at him as if he thought he had imagined Viktor's presence. Viktor cannot help a smile. He wonders why Yuuri is up this late after a long day of travel, practice, and skating; likely something that Viktor cannot predict. Is something bothering Yuuri? Viktor hopes he can help.

"Is there room in there for two?" Viktor asks, his heart beating a little faster at the way Yuuri's eyes drop down to admire his body. He knows he has a nice body, and the slow drag of Yuuri's gaze on his skin makes him shiver a little. He hopes Yuuri doesn't notice.

Yuuri seems to turn pinker and looks away. "Sure," Yuuri replies.

Viktor supposes that Yuuri is nervous, though how he could be more nervous than Viktor, he isn't sure. Viktor's heart might beat out of his chest if he isn't careful. Shaking off the thought, Viktor steps into the water with a sigh, the cool sensation a relief. "Nothing like a nice swim," he groans, thinking fondly of Russian winters and going swimming in frozen lakes after a long steam in the banya.

"It's late for you," Yuuri comments, glancing over at him.

Viktor shrugs, thinking of the many emails that have been clogging his mailbox. He could easily take care of the matter after getting back to Russia, but he doesn't want to worry about any of it while he is traveling tomorrow. "I was replying to emails," he explains, noticing Yuuri straighten as he swims closer. "Our show got lots of attention, and we have requests to perform again. I had to tell them that we would not have another show during the rest of the skating season... but perhaps we could do this again, once the off-season starts."

"Oh... really? Well, if it's during off-season, we could do it," Yuuri says, his gaze never leaving Viktor. Viktor resists the urge to reach out to him. "Maybe with more people, too. My rink mates would love to join."

Viktor's lips quirk of the idea of their rink mates joining. Yuri Plisetsky would lose his mind if he got to skate with Yuuri. "Mine too," Viktor says, his gaze meeting Yuuri's for a moment. "My youngest teammate would likely try to take over the whole show, though."

Something flickers in Yuuri's gaze, an odd sort of humor that Viktor doesn't catch. He can read Yuuri very well, but some of Yuuri's thoughts are buried deep in his psyche, too far for Viktor to reach. Yuuri's lips twitch after a moment, and Viktor cannot help another smile, softening. He wonders what is going through Yuuri's head, to put such a look on his face.

"I think we could handle him if we worked together," Yuuri quips, his dark eyes twinkling.

Viktor laughs, delighted. "I think you and I could do anything together if we tried," Viktor replies,
winking, before he ducks underwater and swims past Yuuri, his arm brushing Yuuri's leg. When he surfaces, he has to push his hair back out of his eyes. Usually he doesn't like anyone to see him with his hair pushed back, revealing more of his receding hairline, but Yuuri has fast become an exception to most of his rules.

Out of the corner of his eye, Viktor notices Yuuri getting out of the water, and his heart sinks. The mood had been so good, so why...

Abruptly Viktor realizes that Yuuri is just moving to the hot tub, and he exhales, scolding himself for a moment. Viktor doesn't say anything, his gaze following Yuuri as he walks around the pool, flushing a little as his gaze drifts lower. Yuuri is lithe and fit, and while Viktor has known this from watching him skate, seeing him partially nude is entirely different.

He swallows and looks away before he makes Yuuri uncomfortable. He has sworn to himself that he will not make any advances beyond what Yuuri is comfortable with, and none that are romantic or sexual. The last thing Viktor wants is to hurt Yuuri.

The pool is right next to the hot tub with a curved wall separating them, and Viktor's lips twitch as he realizes the opportunities this presents. He ducks underwater and swims toward the side of the pool with the hot tub, surfacing right next to the wall. To his delight, Yuuri has chosen to sit beside the wall, and Viktor teasingly splashes him, putting on a pout.

"No fun, Yuuri, you moved to the hot water," Viktor whines.

Yuuri just rolls his eyes. "My feet hurt and I wanted to sit down. Don't whine at me," Yuuri replies dryly, and Viktor laughs. He crosses his arms on the wall between them, content to look at Yuuri and admire. He loves being in Yuuri's presence, soaking up his attention -- and Yuuri pays very close attention to him.

Even if, right now, Yuuri keeps looking away from him, his cheeks tinged with soft, pink embarrassment. Viktor is aware that Yuuri is attracted to him on a physical level, but watching him respond to his presence like this is a wonder, because normally Yuuri tries to hide that attraction. Viktor doesn't know if it is because Yuuri doesn't want to do anything to mess up the relationship between them, or if Yuuri is still aching over the person who hurt him. Either way, Viktor doesn't want to push him.

Even if, right now, Yuuri is absolutely gorgeous, and Viktor wants.

"Did you have fun today?" Viktor asks, his voice a little softer.

Yuuri seems to relax at the innocuous question. "I did. It was nice not to worry about competition requirements."

"I'd say so," Viktor says, reaching across and testing out the water of the hot tub, ignoring how his arm ends up inches from Yuuri's chest. His mind goes back to Yuuri's performance tonight, a shiver running through him at the amazing skating Yuuri showed him. "I think you do phenomenally better with exhibitions than competitive performances. Without the pressure of judging and program components, the music that you create with your body shines brilliantly. It was wonderful to watch."

Viktor sighs dreamily, wondering what else he could make Yuuri's body do on the ice. Yuuri has better stamina than him and has three jumps under his belt, not to mention his years of ballet and dance. Many of Viktor's programs could be more complicated, but in recent years, Yakov has resisted adding higher levels of difficulty to the programs, because Viktor doesn't have as much
flexibility as he used to.

Yuuri is younger than him and could easily pull them off. Viktor would love to see Yuuri skate some of the programs he has envisioned, but which Yakov has rejected for fear of hurting Viktor's body.

He thinks Yuuri could do it. Somehow, he knows it.

Maybe Viktor is getting too old for the sport. His body aches after performances in ways that it never did when he was younger, particularly his knees. For years Viktor has resisted retiring, not wanting to leave the world he has always known, but perhaps he could stay... and give back to the skaters who have supported him all this time, like Yuuri, who has been his fan since he was a child.

Yuri Plisetsky, too -- Viktor is reasonably certain that he has promised Yuri a routine of some sort, though he can't remember the details. Even though Viktor is also certain that Yuri wouldn't piss on him if he was on fire, the younger skater still respects him and looks up to him.

Yuri has nothing on Yuuri, though.

"I'd love to arrange a program for you," Viktor muses, flicking his gaze up to Yuuri, who is staring at him with wide eyes. "I could maximize the music you create with a high-difficulty program... Would you let me, Yuuri?"

Viktor realizes after a second how tense Yuuri is, how uncomfortable he has become. Is it his physical proximity? Is it the idea of famed Viktor Nikiforov designing a program for him? Or... it is something else?

How have I upset you, Yuuri?

After a moment, Yuuri's throat bobs as he swallows, meeting Viktor's gaze. "O-okay," Yuuri whispers, not speaking any other thoughts on his mind, and the relief and joy that sweeps through Viktor makes him feel light-headed. "But not till after this season."

"Okay!" Viktor says, his smile bright with excitement. What songs could he arrange for Yuuri? Yuuri's programs tend to fall along the same favored tones as Viktor's best skates, which is unsurprising given Yuuri is his fan. Classical songs with graceful themes, perfect for emotive programs. Some romance, but Yuuri is more inclined toward songs that tell a story.

Abruptly Viktor remembers Yuuri's heated gaze on the ice this evening as he skated to a heavy techno song. Erotic... that is one genre that Yuuri never touches, and Viktor rarely touches himself. Now that Viktor knows how sensual Yuuri's skating can be, he can imagine many other songs and types of skates that Yuuri would otherwise never use.

Viktor hums under his breath, pieces of songs he has considered in the past but opted not to use. Beside him, Yuuri is quiet, lost in his own thoughts, and Viktor doesn't intrude, content to sit with Yuuri while he finds his way back to Viktor. He is startled out of his thoughts of song styles by fingers sliding back through his hair, blinking and looking up to see Yuuri watching him, a faraway look in his eyes. Viktor swallows as Yuuri strokes his hair back away from his eyes, feeling oddly vulnerable under Yuuri's gaze, heavy as it is.

Something echoes with sadness in Yuuri's gaze, but he never speaks his thoughts, and all Viktor can do is give him his silent support. This isn't the first time that Yuuri has fallen into darker thoughts in Viktor's presence. Though Yuuri rarely speaks his mind when it happens, Viktor always notices, and he always worries. He hates seeing Yuuri saddened in any way.
Would that Viktor could take away that sadness and give Yuuri true happiness...

When did Yuuri become so important to him? Viktor breathes out a little as Yuuri’s thumb brushes against his temple, his gaze roving over Yuuri’s features. He follows one of the droplets of water clinging to Yuuri’s hair as it slides down to his ear, wondering if anybody has ever affected him like Yuuri. Was it their dance? Was it the night they ate and watched a movie together, all but a date? Was it the summer of texting and calls and friendship -- a deep connection that Viktor has never formed with anybody else?

As hard as Viktor is falling... does Yuuri even feel the same depth of emotion for him?

Would that Viktor could drive that other person from Yuuri’s soul, to heal the heartbreak that keeps darkening Yuuri’s gaze.

Yuuri’s gaze wavers briefly, before he focuses on Viktor and abruptly lets go, his eyes widening a bit at the realization of how intimate they are. Viktor blinks as Yuuri dunks himself under the water, somewhat bemused, until Yuuri surfaces in front of him, slicking his hair back with a small sigh.

Viktor forgets his earlier thoughts and stares. Yuuri is unfair, with his gorgeous body and innate beauty, and the way he looks at Viktor sometimes... If Viktor was not so hesitant to hurt Yuuri, he would have seduced him long ago. Viktor realizes he is blushing when Yuuri looks down at him, but he cannot look away from Yuuri to save his life.

Viktor is irrevocably, desperately in love with Katsuki Yuuri, and he can never tell him.

Yuuri meets his gaze, blinking slowly, before he seems to realize the way Viktor is staring at him. A beautiful blush sweeps across Yuuri’s cheeks before he looks away, and Viktor’s mouth falls open, overwhelmed with the need to kiss that shyness away.

Quickly Viktor looks away as well. No, he must not act on his desires, not until Yuuri gives him a sign that his feelings are accepted and wanted. Closing his eyes, Viktor sinks into the water and pushes into the water, wondering if a few laps would clear his mind. When he surfaces, his gaze catches on Yuuri again. His breath catches in his throat.

Yuuri looks like he is close to tears, his mien darkened with sadness. Viktor cannot let him sit alone with that darkness any longer.

Crossing the room to the hot tub takes little time, and when Viktor sinks into the blissfully hot water, he bites back a groan. Yuuri breaks out of the contemplation that keeps his eyes closed, blinking up at him, and Viktor smiles softly back, warm and reassuring. I am here, Yuuri. You are not alone.

Some of the darkness lingering in Yuuri’s gaze fades away, chased from the room by Viktor’s smile. Viktor breathes out a little, relieved.

"This is the life," he says aloud, settling across the hot tub from Yuuri, more to deny his own urge to sit as close to Yuuri as possible. He doubts Yuuri would appreciate it right now. "I could spend every night in something like this."

Yuuri raises his eyebrows. "My family's onsen is better."

The Japanese word befuddles Viktor for a moment. He knows that Japanese culture has something similar to banya, though he can't quite recall what it is. "Onsen? The Japanese baths?"
"Hot springs," Yuuri corrects, his lips twitching. More of that darkness has seeped away, as he warms to the conversation, and Viktor is relieved for it. "Most of them are natural. My town used to be known for them, but tourism has died down a lot lately."

Vaguely, Viktor remembers some blurb he read in a magazine about Yuuri's family and hometown. The details escape him, but Yuuri telling him about it makes up for his poor memory. Abruptly, Viktor wishes he could meet the Katsuki family and visit their inn -- he would love to see the place where Yuuri grew up. "Wow... so you grew up with hot springs in your backyard? How nice! I'm jealous, Yuuri."

Yuuri smiles a little. "I helped out a lot around the inn when I was growing up, though... it wasn't all fun and games."

"Still, sounds nice," Viktor sighs, closing his eyes as he imagines it. Little Yuuri running around an inn, carrying towels and bottles of shampoo... Viktor thinks it is a crime that photos of Yuuri as a child are few and far between. He has seen exactly two pictures of young Yuuri, and both of them were from Yuuri's junior days. Viktor would pay a lot of money to get his hands on Yuuri's baby pictures.

Quiet falls between them again, and Viktor can hear the unspoken thoughts creeping back in, the sadness that caused Yuuri's insomnia tonight and keeps taking him far from Viktor. He wonders what else he could do; short of seduction, there is little that Viktor can imagine would distract Yuuri from whatever haunts him. His lips twitch downward; he feels strangely protective of Yuuri. He is better than this. He can help Yuuri.

Perhaps some physical closeness would distract Yuuri, who always becomes a little overwhelmed whenever Viktor sits too close to him. Partly attraction, but also because Yuuri is his fan. Despite enjoying Yuuri's reactions, especially his cute blushes, Viktor has already promised himself not to do anything untoward.

Silently, Viktor stands and walks to the small sign hanging over a button on the wall, pressing it and smiling at the sound of the bubbles starting up in the hot tub. He returns to join Yuuri in the bubbling heat, smiling at the look Yuuri gives him, his dark eyes wide with confusion.

"Bet your onsen doesn't have this, does it?" Viktor teases as he sits back down again, this time beside Yuuri, his arms resting across the tiles behind Yuuri. An open position, to give Yuuri the choice to move closer or further away, on the edge of Yuuri's personal space.

Yuuri chuckles under his breath, glancing up at him. To Viktor's relief, he does not move away. "Not so much." After a moment Yuuri leans back and rests his head against Viktor's arm, his damp hair warm, and Viktor softens a little, glad that their relationship can be this simple.

That thought vanishes a few moments later, when Yuuri reaches up to take his hand. Viktor cannot help but breathe in, surprised that Yuuri would reach out to him in such a way. Viktor has opened himself up for it, but... he was content with waiting.

Maybe Viktor need not wait that long for Yuuri to open his heart to him. Viktor smiles to himself and squeezes Yuuri's hand, gently encouraging him.

"Your flight is early, isn't it?" Yuuri asks after a moment of peace, easy between them, the soft bubbling water hiding the sound of Viktor's frantically beating heart. He wonders why Yuuri seems so calm, then has the thought that Yuuri likely isn't as calm as he appears.
"Yes," Viktor replies, just as quiet. "I have to fly a long way, after all. You'll be alright waiting in
the airport for a few extra hours?" He doesn't particularly want to leave Yuuri to travel by himself,
though he trusts that Yuuri can manage it. Mostly he does not look forward to fourteen hours of
travel with little chance to talk to Yuuri.

Yuuri nods a little, glancing up at him. "I don't mind. Phichit will be there. Chris is leaving at the
same time as you, isn't he?"

Viktor has already arranged for the hotel's shuttle to take them all to the airport, since they will
leave at the same time. He has the suspicion that Yuuri will use the time waiting for his flight to
buy another one of those horrible coffee drinks. "Mm, a little after I do," Viktor replies, thinking.
"Then we will return to training. I expect daily updates from you, of course."

"Of course," Yuuri echoes, smiling a little. Viktor glances at him, his lips twitching, and Yuuri
meets his gaze evenly. "I'm not telling you what my program is, Viktor. You can find out in
October."

Unfair. Viktor cannot help a pout; Yuuri has been tormenting him for weeks with the secret of his
program. It had been torture skating on the same rink as him, during that week of practicing for the
ice show, knowing that Yuuri was skating his routines and unable to figure out what they were.
"Yuuuuuri," Viktor whines, batting his eyelashes. "You're so cruel to me! I've assisted you so
much! You might as well call me your assistant coach!"

Instead of going along with the teasing tone, Yuuri turns toward him sharply, his eyes going a little
wide. "I -- I can't ask you to fill that role!" Yuuri exclaims, stuttering, and Viktor abruptly realizes
that Yuuri is close to panicking. His eyes narrow a little, trying to think of what he said that set
Yuuri off. "You've already helped me so much, and, and you're also training, it must be too much
for you..."

Yuuri trails off, worrying his bottom lip, a habit that Viktor wishes he would break. He can think
of a few ways to stop it, but that would require a different relationship between them. Viktor cannot
help but take Yuuri's hand again, squeezing his fingers as he turns to face Yuuri. He wipes his mien
of his teasing smile, meeting Yuuri's gaze and holding his attention, entirely serious.

"Helping you is never too much, Yuuri. I enjoy it. I enjoy it a lot more than I realized," Viktor says
with a soft laugh. He turns his gaze away, looking across the pool at the darkened windows with
the cityscape beyond, and for a moment, he is far from Yuuri, lost in his own mind.

For years he has been alone on the ice, until Yuuri stepped in and lit up his entire world. Viktor
knows he must retire soon. This year or the next -- someday, his body will fail him, and Viktor
hates the thought of it, of giving up when he wants to keep skating forever. Now he has been given
a taste of skating with Yuuri, which is utterly enthralling and amazing. Viktor is loath to give it up,
just as much as he hates the thought of relinquishing the ice for younger, brighter stars to take his
place at the top.

Yet over the past few months, as he has watched Yuuri work on his programs, Viktor has come to
enjoy giving Yuuri the advice he constantly seeks. Whether Yuuri asks him out of admiration or
because he does not trust his own coach is irrelevant; Viktor genuinely enjoys it. He could become
a coach. He could even become an ice dancer, which might be easier on his body at his age. If he
could convince Yuuri to join him, it would be even more amazing.

Yuuri is staring at him with wide eyes, and Viktor can't help a sad smile. He would not tell this to
anybody else, not even Yakov, his own coach. "Retire or continue. Every year they ask me, and
every year I say continue, because what else would I do? My body still skates the way I want it. I
still enjoy the sport. Skating is my entire life."

Finally Viktor looks back at Yuuri, his gaze pinning Yuuri in place, willing him to understand how much Viktor appreciates him, how much Yuuri has changed his life. "Then I met you, and I began to wonder if there was more that I could do. Coaching, ice dancing, even simply sponsoring other skaters. Someday I will have to leave the ice, and... now I have a better idea of what I could do with my life in the future."

*Thanks to you, my darling. If only I could give the same reassurance to you.*

Yuuri says nothing, his gaze wide, and some of that panic creeps back into his dark gaze. Viktor wonders what he is thinking, before he realizes how it must sound, for him to talk of retirement so frankly, after years of avoiding the subject. Viktor lets some of the seriousness in his mien soften to warmth, smiling.

"You don't need to look so panicked, Yuuri. I'm not going to retire immediately," Viktor says quietly. "When I do, though, I think that I will have more options than I have considered before. You gave me those options. So... thank you." The words don't quite convey all that Viktor feels, but for now, it is enough.

At last Yuuri relaxes a little, a tiny noise escaping him, one that punches straight through Viktor. Yuuri lets go of Viktor's hand and turns toward him, lowering his gaze. "I admit, I don't want you to retire," Yuuri says to the water, his cheeks turning a soft pink. "I want to keep challenging you. It's... it's always been my dream, to skate on the same ice as you. But I know it can't last forever."

*Oh, Yuuri.* If only Viktor had noticed him sooner... he wants to make all of those beautiful dreams come true. He wants to give Yuuri everything. "Nothing does," Viktor murmurs, catching Yuuri's chin and turning his head back. Yuuri looks up at him and freezes, the blush sweeping up to his ears, and Viktor resists his urges. "Not the exhilaration, nor the joy, nor the pain. Yet we don't want to let go of them, either."

Yuuri does not pull away; for once, he allows Viktor to be close enough for a kiss. If Yuuri gives him the slightest hint... "Viktor," Yuuri whispers, and Viktor cannot help a smile.

"I loved skating with you today. You were amazing, Yuuri. Would that we could have skated like that forever," Viktor murmurs. Yuuri's lips look as soft as Viktor suspects they are, that small bit of knowledge from his dreams that he has never quite understood.

Yuuri's eyes have dilated slightly, and still he does not look away. Still he lets Viktor keep him this close. "Viktor, please..."

"Please, what?" Viktor asks, his breath catching in his throat. This is it -- this is the moment he has been waiting for. "Anything you ask for, I will give it to you."

For the longest moment, Viktor waits for Yuuri to close the distance between them, to meet him where Viktor is. Then the moment passes, and Yuuri's breath hitches, his voice wretched.

"You can't say that to me," Yuuri whispers, and the pain in his voice breaks Viktor's heart. "I'd ask too much. I can't."

*Rejection.* Viktor closes his eyes, every nerve in his body crumpling under the desolation. He pushed Yuuri too hard, pressed where he shouldn't have; he knew he should have resisted his urges. Yuuri's words are a slight balm to his pain, but Viktor knows in his heart that he has fallen too deep, and that Yuuri cannot return the feelings that Viktor has been all but screaming for
Viktor resists the urge to lean forward and take that kiss anyway, forcing himself to give Yuuri the space he needs. Viktor lets Yuuri go and steps back, glancing down at him one last time before he leaves.

Yuuri looks close to tears, and self-hatred sweeps through Viktor, for hurting Yuuri this way, for asking for what he did not deserve to have. Viktor reaches up before he can stop himself, brushing Yuuri's damp hair from his eyes, and Yuuri flinches back, his eyes snapping up to look at Viktor. Viktor's heart breaks again at the flinch, his hand dropping to his side, his thoughts numb.

*I've ruined everything.*

"It's okay, Yuuri. Relax. I pushed too hard, I'm sorry," Viktor says quietly, giving an empty smile. The least he can do is reassure Yuuri before he leaves. They should be able to salvage their professional relationship, if nothing else.

First, though, he should leave Yuuri alone. The last thing Yuuri wants right now is for Viktor to intrude on his space any further. His mind blank, Viktor turns away, and he has barely started up the stairs when a hand latches onto his wrist and pulls him back.

Heart beating fast, Viktor turns to look at Yuuri once more.

Yuuri's eyes are wide with desperation and fear -- fear of losing Viktor. "Please don't let this come between us," Yuuri begs. "I... I can't, I'm sorry. I do feel attraction to you, but... I'm not ready for a relationship right now. Please don't let anything change between us. You're important to me."

Something in Viktor's chest trembles from the force of Yuuri's words. A balm to the jagged edges of his heart, slowly mending them back together. Viktor stares down at Yuuri, barely breathing from the ache in his chest, the need to wrap Yuuri up in his arms and protect him from this pain. Another urge, deeper and stronger, to turn tail and run before Yuuri breaks him apart completely, leaving Viktor with no chance of ever finding himself again.

Viktor is in love with Katsuki Yuuri, and Yuuri clearly cares for him too. Yet... Yuuri cannot let himself return those feelings, because his heart is still broken from that other person. Viktor wishes he could find that person and shake them, yell at them, for daring to hurt Yuuri, for standing between him and Yuuri still, even months after it happened. Whatever the details of their breakup, Viktor wishes that Yuuri would think only of *him*, look only at *him* -- and not let that other person hurt him any longer.

Slowly, Viktor twists his hand around to take Yuuri's, squeezing gently. He cannot deny Yuuri this, at least, even if it hurts. "You're important to me, too. I want to stay close to you... if you'll let me?"

"Please," Yuuri whispers, never looking away from him. "I can't be more than this, but... I hope you'll accept me, anyway."

"Always, Yuuri." Viktor is quiet for a moment. He already messed up once tonight -- he refuses to step over Yuuri's boundaries again. "Would you like me to stay?"

Yuuri's nod is all Viktor needs to step back into the water. When he faces Yuuri, though, he gets quite the surprise -- when Yuuri leans forward and hugs him tightly. The warm embrace knocks the breath out of Viktor, and for a wild moment, he wonders if Yuuri has ever hugged him. Viktor has hugged Yuuri before, but they have been small things that Yuuri has never really returned.

He doesn't resist hugging Yuuri back, knowing in his heart that he will bear this pain, so long as he
can take it from Yuuri. Beneath his hands, Yuuri's skin is warm, and Viktor closes his eyes for a long moment, relishing the feeling of Yuuri in his arms. Every moment between them feels natural and familiar, and even this feels the same, like Yuuri has always belonged here.

Viktor holds onto the embrace as long as Yuuri does; as soon as Yuuri lets go, Viktor releases him, hesitating only briefly before sitting down in the water beside Yuuri. The force of Yuuri's sigh chases away some of the melancholic ache in Viktor's heart. Finally he closes his eyes, letting himself relax again as the silence between them becomes something easier to handle.

Some time later, Viktor feels eyes on him, and his lips twitch. He always seems to know when Yuuri is watching him; it has become a sixth sense, to know that Yuuri's attention is on him. Viktor wonders what he could say, but nothing comes to mind. He does not want to break this moment between them, this easy quiet after an emotional trial.

*Stammi Vicino* comes to his lips unbidden. Viktor keeps the lyrics to himself, per his promise with Yuuri, but he cannot resist humming the tune. Everything he feels for Yuuri is in that song. His worries over his future, his desperate love, the ever-deepening bond between them... Viktor can't wait to skate it for Yuuri. He almost wishes that his first performance of the program would not be at Skate America, but at the GPF, where he will skate against Yuuri. This Viktor knows in his heart, that he will face Yuuri then.

He wants Yuuri to know his heart. If only he didn't have to show it to the rest of the world, too. For a moment, Viktor has the strong desire to hide himself away. Everything he has given to the world has been on the ice -- his sense of self, his past and future, his very soul. Surely... being a little selfish, for once in his life, wouldn't be such a bad thing?

Yet Viktor cannot stop himself from skating, as much as he wants to let it go.

"What are you humming?" Yuuri asks quietly, finally ending the quiet between them.

Viktor smiles slowly, holding out the last few notes, before finally ending the song. "You'll find out in two months. Unless you want to tell me your secrets, too...?"

Yuuri laughs in surprise, and the sound is music to Viktor's ears, another balm to the pain in his heart. "I'm not telling you my programs, Viktor. Stop asking! Was that one of your skates?"

Viktor opens one eye and puts a finger to his lips. "It's a secret, Yuuri."

Yuuri groans, and Viktor knows then that they will be okay. Yuuri has accepted his feelings, though he cannot return them now, and that is enough for Viktor.

So he tells himself. If Viktor goes back to his room later and drinks every bottle of alcohol in his little fridge, provided by the concierge, then nobody knows but the housekeeper who bills him.

~*~

After the ice show, Viktor returns to Russia in a daze. While his accountant and lawyer deal with all the profits and necessary steps to pay everyone involved with the show, Viktor focuses on training and on not thinking at all.

He fails on the latter, because Yuuri almost kissed him.

Viktor dwells on that fact too much. He knows it is too much, because Yakov yells at him to get his head out of the clouds. When Georgi starts eyeing him with interest, as if sensing a fellow love-obsessed soul, Viktor quickly refocuses on practice.
His exchanges with Yuuri remain a little awkward as August turns into September, but Viktor forces himself to move past the pain of Yuuri rejecting him. He makes himself remember the entire night, not just the moment when they nearly kissed. He thinks of the way Yuuri looked at him, panicking at the very thought of losing Viktor, and his heart melts every time. How could he deny Yuuri? If what Yuuri wants from Viktor is his friendship and regard, then Viktor will give it to him. Even if he aches sometimes with the desire to be with Yuuri.

He can tell that it still bothers Yuuri, what happened, so Viktor does his best to pretend that everything is alright. He doesn't call Yuuri as often as he usually does, understanding that Yuuri needs the emotional space, but he still sends him messages and pictures, not wanting Yuuri to think that Viktor is ignoring him.

The distance makes it easier to train, at least. Yakov has him practicing five days a week now, and he has already yelled at Viktor for not having variations of his skating programs in case he messes up a component. Viktor has always been good about his timing, though, and he has never worried about it before, so he doesn't bother this time, either. Viktor dislikes the extra practice, but it gives him a valid excuse not to think about his attraction to Yuuri for a while. Time makes the pain a little easier to bear, and Viktor gets used to the persistent ache.

Soon enough, the Grand Prix is upon both of them.

Viktor's first event is Skate America in October, and he intends to start the season off with style. The competition takes place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, only a short distance from where Yuuri is training, and Viktor has to stop himself from changing his ticket so that he can visit Detroit. He resists, because Yuuri just came back from Japan not long ago, and Viktor shouldn't distract him from practice.

Yakov eyes him as they disembark the plane, while Viktor already has his phone out, texting Yuuri that he has arrived. "Are you hungry?" Yakov asks, instead of commenting on Viktor's inability to go one day without talking to Yuuri.

"Famished," Viktor replies breezily. Milwaukee's airport is tiny, and the only food stand that is open seems to be a sandwich deli. Viktor stands in line and fights back a yawn, ordering the first thing he sees. He and Yakov eat their food at a small table, and by the third time Viktor nearly nods off into his drink, he realizes there is a response from Yuuri.

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡

Glad you arrived safely. Sleep well okay?

"Easy for you to say," Viktor murmurs with a smile.

Yakov looks up from inspecting the remnants of his meal. "What was that?"

Viktor waves a hand. "Yuuri. Katsuki, not Plisetsky. He's making fun of me and..." Viktor trails off at the unimpressed look on Yakov's face.

"At least the boy knows how to handle you," Yakov says dryly. "Go throw the trash away. There should be a taxi downstairs somewhere."

"Yakov! How could you say that?"

They make it to the hotel eventually, and somehow Viktor sinks into his soft, warm bed without losing any of his belongings or getting lost. His sleep is not peaceful, though, his dreams distant and full of details that escape him as soon as he opens his eyes.
The next day is focused on official practice, with the short program on Friday night. Viktor pulls out the program they gave him when he signed his accreditation earlier as he drains his espresso, ignoring Yakov's mutters about how he shouldn't be drinking such rot.

The schedule leaves Viktor sorely tempted to sleep for two days. He doesn't want to practice or deal with the media. Yakov meets his stubborn gaze with a scowl.

"Vitya, I have a meeting to attend this morning, as do you. After the men's panel, you will go to the practice rink. There are directions in the packet they gave you. They also have a bus pass."

"So, the normal rules," Viktor sighs, not looking forward to any of it. He didn't sleep well, thanks to odd dreams that Viktor barely remembers, but which unsettled him just the same.

"I expect you to do both programs completely," Yakov instructs, his eyes narrowing as he stands. He doesn't trust Viktor to behave, which is fair -- Viktor doesn't want to behave.

Viktor waves him off, turning his gaze out the window beside them. Usually for the first Grand Prix preliminary event, Viktor is more excited, only for his patience to wear down by the time he reaches the final event and Nationals. Yet the usual excitement of returning to the ice is absent this year.

He knows why. He wants to skate against Yuuri, and Yuuri is not here. They will not skate together again until December.

Deeper, too, is another reason, but Viktor chooses not to think about it.

His phone vibrates with a new message.

**From: Yuuri 🌹🌹🌹**

*My professor cancelled class for the week because of the weather. This means I can stay home and watch Skate America all day*

Viktor softens, imagining Yuuri tucked into bed with a pile of blankets, a skating stream on his laptop. Tomorrow night, Yuuri will watch him skate *Immortelle*, and Viktor is determined to impress him.

Viktor sends a heart emoji in reply, then stands from the table, filled with determination, his earlier mulishness all but forgotten. He needs to get to practice.

Of the twelve contenders at this year's Skate America, Viktor has competed against only four of them directly. He vaguely recalls Otabek Altin from one of Yakov's junior classes, and Cao Bin is a familiar face. To Viktor's dismay, Leroy is also one of the contenders. He finds this out as he is leaving the practice rink, when he nearly walks into Leroy and his parents.

"Viktor Nikiforov!" Leroy grins, looking just as full of himself as ever. Viktor pastes on a smile. He is going to destroy this man. "Are you excited for this season? I've got a few surprises for you."

"Oh?" Viktor debates taking a page out of Yuuri's book and running away. Nobody would hold it against him, except probably Canada.

" Haven't you been following my Instagram? I've added the quad lutz to my programs this year! I landed it in all of my regional competitions," Leroy tells him. Viktor's smile widens.

*Bragging isn't very polite. "I don't follow social media much, sorry. Congratulations are in order."*
Leroy doesn't seem to notice that Viktor doesn't actually congratulate him. "Why, thank you! I hope you still think that way when I have my gold medal on Sunday!"

"We shall see," Viktor replies, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. "Now, you must excuse me, I have a meeting with my coach."

"Of course, of course!" Leroy claps him on the shoulder, his smile turning a little sharp. "Just so you know it's not only you and Yuuri Katsuki who can do three jumps now."

"Five," Viktor corrects absently. "For me, at least, though I have faith in Yuuri's skills. Have a good practice... Jean-Jacques, right?" He nods to Leroy, carefully files away the gobsmacked expression on his face, and walks away, suddenly cheered.

The interviews go well. Nobody asks about retirement, which is always a good thing in Viktor's book, though the topic lingers in his mind. His fans want him to continue skating forever, but his peers are tired of him. Older than all of the other skaters, Viktor has the most experience and accolades of all the people in the entire competition. The attention rings hollow, though, as if Viktor can hear the silent words: *When will you let other people shine?*

_I don't know._

Some of the reporters ask about his ISU sanction, and Viktor gives the answer that his attorney prepared for him: "At this time, the ISU and I have reached an agreement. I will not head any campaign or petition for same-sex ice dancing and pairs skating. However, my personal beliefs will always support equal rights, until the world we live in reflects the world we want for our loved ones."

He knows that the ISU is under fire for sanctioning him. His fans have already mutinied. Some people are, in a way, pleased by the idea that not even golden child Viktor Nikiforov can avoid punishment. Still more are talking about it, looking at his ice show with considering eyes, of how two men could safely pull off the moves necessary for pair skating and ice dancing. Viktor can only hope that ISU will accept his desired changes someday. Until then, he will continue to stand tall beside his beliefs.

To the reporters, Viktor plays up the surprise elements behind his programs, smiling charmingly for the cameras and wondering if Yuuri is watching right now. The thought delights him, and Viktor's interview smile widens into something real, winking at the camera and, hopefully, at Yuuri.

He can almost hear the world sighing.

When Viktor checks his phone afterwards, he finds another message from Yuuri, with a picture of ice outside his apartment.

**From: Yuuri ❤️❤️❤️**

*I'm wearing 3 sweaters and I'm still cold\nIt's not even November!\nI hate winter*

Viktor types out a reply, curtailing his first impulse of flirting, absently wondering at an ice skater hating the cold. Thinking back, he recalls that Yuuri usually wears sweatshirts and such, even in the summer. It makes him think of frozen lips, damp from the Neva, and he shivers despite the warmth of the hotel.
No... none of that. Today will be a good day, and Yuuri is fine. Viktor brightens when a new message appears.

From: Yuuri ♡ ♡ ♡  
I saw that wink

To: Yuuri ♡ ♡ ♡  
(*´♡`*)

From: Yuuri ♡ ♡ ♡  
I should never have told you about emoticons...

To: Yuuri ♡ ♡ ♡  
I'm glad you were watching (*´♡`*) I hope you'll return the favor next weekend

From: Yuuri ♡ ♡ ♡  
I'm not winking on international television!

Viktor laughs softly and pockets his phone, deciding to order dinner from his room. The idea of staying in all night and talking to Yuuri, instead of going out with the other skaters, is far too appealing to resist.

The first day of Skate America's competitions dawns icy and bright. The storm threatening Detroit is too far away to affect Milwaukee, but the cold has seeped in anyway, invigorating Viktor when he steps out of the hotel to board the bus to the stadium. It will be a good day.

He practices all morning. The other skaters look determined, eyeing Viktor when they think he's not looking, and even Leroy is quiet in the practice rink, talking to his parents in low, serious tones. Viktor takes it all in stride, accepting Yakov's criticisms without complaint. He thinks again of going back to his hotel room, but ultimately he thinks of Yuuri, shut up in his room watching the streams, and makes a point of appearing in front of the cameras.

On some level, Viktor knows it is a little pathetic that most of his decisions center around Katsuki Yuuri. He should be performing for himself, not for Yuuri, and yet... Viktor cannot find the energy to deal with it this year. He wonders if his lack of interest means that he should retire after all. If he doesn't enjoy what he is doing... then what is the point?

He muses on how the world might react if he chose to retire this year. He wonders how Yuuri would react, remembering the expression of shock Yuuri gave him when he suggested it in New York. With a sigh, Viktor shakes his mind of those dark thoughts. The least he can do is put on a smile for his fans.

For once, Viktor attends all of the events instead of sleeping his jet lag away. He pays close attention to the pairs and ice dancers, studying the moves they use and wondering if he could pull them off with a male partner. Of all the skaters he knows, Yuuri is lithe and flexible enough for the lifted partner's poses and movements.

Viktor ends up daydreaming about a romantic ice dance he might perform with Yuuri someday. His Stammi Vicino program has an alternate version with a soprano accompanying the tenor. They could share the lead. While Viktor has more upper body strength, Yuuri could likely lift him, and he has enough experience in dance that he could support Viktor in other components... it would be beautiful.

If only.
Finally the ladies' singles end, and Viktor heads downstairs to change. Thankfully, Viktor is in the same group as Otabek Altin and Luis Hernández. Like usual, they assigned him to the last group of skaters, and Viktor is relieved to avoid Leroy. Altin is silent as he stretches, while Hernández listens to headphones. Yakov tends to leave him alone until they reach the ice, so Viktor uses the time to text Yuuri.

To: Yuuri 🌹🌹🌹
Are you ready to watch me?

From: Yuuri 🌹🌹🌹
I'm very ready.

Viktor admires the photo he receives, of Yuuri sitting on his couch in a thick sweater, Phichit peeking over his shoulder with a grin. Yuuri looks so comfortable and soft that Viktor immediately wants to join him.

To: Yuuri 🌹🌹🌹
You look so cozy! I want to cuddle with Yuuri!

From: Yuuri 🌹🌹🌹
Aren't you supposed to be concentrating?

"Vitya, stop texting Japanese Yuri and give me the phone," Yakov grumbles, holding out his hand. Viktor grins sheepishly and quickly types out wish me luck! before passing the phone to Yakov.

"You could just call him Yuuri," Viktor says, raising his eyebrows.

Yakov snorts and stows the phone in his pocket. "No, we already have a Yuri. I suppose Katsuki will do."

"Hmm, I suppose it could get confusing..."

As the time draws closer, Viktor turns his attention to the television on the wall. This year's contenders are good, definitely. Cao Bin and Leroy are already at the top of the short programs. Viktor compares them all to Yuuri's ice show and finds them lacking, for all of their talent on the ice.

He might be biased, though.

Finally, Viktor's group is called out. Viktor steps into the rink first and hands his skate guards to Yakov, breathing in the scent of the ice slowly. The crowd chants his name as the announcer introduces him, and Viktor turns to greet them with a smile.

This is his world. This world is his... yet it merely feels cold, empty of the brilliance he felt while he danced with Yuuri two months ago. The cheering rings false, lip service paid to his popularity.

Somewhere, a beautiful man with dark, sparkling eyes is watching him, waiting for Viktor to skate. Those eyes have been watching him since Viktor's junior years, and all this time he never felt their adoring gaze, never once realized that Yuuri was waiting for him, supporting him.

When the entire world is cheering his name, why does only one voice call out to him?

Viktor closes his eyes as he reaches the center of the ice, turning his head toward one of the cameras and waiting. His short program outfit consists of black pants and a sparkling white shirt, pulled tight around his waist to accent his broad shoulders, creating an ethereal look as Viktor
stands tall and silent in the darkness.

Then the piano begins to play, and Lara Fabian begins to sing *Immortelle*. Viktor begins to skate.

*A lover devoted, protective and consuming.*

Sadness guides his hands up, then close to his body, as if holding something small and fragile. Viktor lifts his precious burden, the heart of his lover, carrying himself across the ice in dazzling turns, one hand always held palm upward. He glides easily into a quad lutz, and as he lands, the fairytale romance breaks apart, his lover gone.

*He chases after someone who has been taken away from him.*

The grand, sweeping pace of the song allows for measured movements, poignant and dramatic. Viktor skates through desperation and love, bitter and intense. He has lost his lover, and he is determined to save them, to protect them from the darkness closing around them.

The thought of Yuuri dawns in his mind, standing alone with that aching misery wrapped around him like a cloak. Viktor would do anything to take that sadness from him, to chase away the darkness that haunts Yuuri's beautiful eyes. If Yuuri were in danger, what would Viktor do to protect him?

Anything. He would do *anything* to save him.

Twenty years of dedication to the ice, and instead of focusing on the story he wishes to tell with his skating, Viktor is thinking of Katsuki Yuuri. It fits, though, that the man Viktor is in love with inspires his skating. His love is the same desperate love of his short program's character, and the ache Viktor feels inside his own heart from Yuuri's sadness pours into his skating.

Wouldn't that surprise the world, if they knew that Viktor was in love?

*He follows his lover to the ends of the earth, moving heaven and earth to keep them safe.*

Yuuri rejected him, but not because of Viktor. Something else haunts Yuuri, keeping him from opening his heart to Viktor, and yet somehow Viktor can reach the cracks that have appeared and widened as their relationship grows. If he can fill those cracks with his love, then maybe he can heal the pain that unknown person left inside Yuuri to fester.

Whether Yuuri returns his feelings or not, Viktor has dedicated himself to loving him, and he will not abandon Yuuri to his heartache. His own desires are meaningless if Yuuri cannot be happy, because how could Viktor be happy if Yuuri is miserable?

He has to try.

Viktor finishes his final spin, sweeping low across the ice and kneeling down as he coasts to a stop, trailing his fingers along the ice. The last beats of the song fade out, and Viktor closes his eyes as the shock of finishing washes over him. He had slowed a little in the middle, thinking of Yuuri, but Yakov's training paid off, and Viktor had been able to adjust his next jump to make up the pace. All in all, a success.

He wonders what Yuuri thought of it.

The crowd erupts in cheers, and Viktor rises from his place on the ice, bowing low to the audience and the judges, before making his way to the Kiss and Cry. He pauses to sweep a bouquet of roses off the ice, smiling breathlessly at Yakov as he reaches the side of the rink. Yakov doesn't roll his
eyes, but Viktor suspects that he wants to.

As soon as Viktor sits down, Yakov lays into him about his speed. Viktor tunes him out, listening instead for the announcement of his score.

His lips curl when he hears it, and he looks up at the crowd, smiling. He is in first place, now.

After the interviews and another long lecture, Yakov relinquishes custody of Viktor's phone and sends him back to the hotel with a firm command to order something healthy from the restaurant. Viktor turns on his phone the moment he is alone on the bus, his heart beating fast as he opens Yuuri's messages.

From: Yuuri ❤️ ❤️ ❤️
Viktor, that was beautiful
That was even better than I
Than last year's SP.
Was that song French? What does it mean?

To: Yuuri ❤️ ❤️ ❤️
"What use would it be for me to find destiny if it doesn’t lead to you?"

Yuuri doesn't reply immediately. Other skaters are boarding the bus now, most of their coaches missing, likely going out for drinks with Yakov. Altin nods to him before sitting down a few rows away, and Leroy gives him a look before sinking into the seat in front of him.

From: Yuuri ❤️ ❤️ ❤️
It's a love song, isn't it?

From: Yuuri ❤️ ❤️ ❤️
The best kind of song ❤️

They chat all the while Viktor rides the bus, disembarks, and heads up to his room. After a long shower and an order to the hotel restaurant, Viktor wraps himself in a fluffy robe and calls Yuuri.

"Viktor," Yuuri answers after two rings. "Are you done now?"

"Waiting for dinner now," Viktor replies, sitting down on the bed. "I'm glad you liked my short program."

"I loved it. I want to find that song now." Something rustles, and Yuuri makes a noise, followed by a few tapping noises. "Immortelle?"

"That's the one."

"It was amazing," Yuuri says, his voice softer now. "I hope someone uploads the video soon..."

Warmth blossoms in Viktor's chest. Yuuri has become more comfortable with expressing his admiration of Viktor, and Viktor thrives on it. He can never say so, for fear of embarrassing Yuuri, but he loves it when Yuuri compliments his skating or any products with his face or name on it. Yuuri is utterly adorable when he gets excited about something of Viktor's, like a new poster or a magazine.

"Tell me what you liked about it," Viktor requests after a moment, and for the rest of the evening, he basks in Yuuri's praise.
Yet when Viktor falls asleep, his dreams are troubled.

~*~

Viktor is standing on the side of a stadium-sized rink. He recognizes it vaguely, one he has competed in before, but Viktor is not skating for once. Instead he is dressed in a suit and overcoat, two lanyards around his neck. He is watching a graceful figure on the ice, wrapped in blue silk, dark eyes sparkling every time they glance his way.

Yuuri's eyes are still red from crying, yet he has never looked more relaxed as he skates. He makes mistakes, one after another, yet Viktor cannot look away, even as he catalogues every error to review with Yuuri later. After the tension of the day and their fight, Viktor worries that Yuuri will injure himself again, like he did at his prefecturals.

Ah, but Yuuri is beautiful like this. His long years in ballet shine through his motions, in the Ina Bauer he performs, in his step sequence. His triple lutz-triple toe combination is perfect.

Viktor can feel Yuuri's determination, now. Instead of diminishing down to nothing, the fire in Yuuri's heart only grows, and Viktor's heart swells as Yuuri pours himself into his skating, into the love that they share on the ice.

Then Yuuri turns into his last jump, a quadruple toe loop -- but no. No, that is not what it is.

A quadruple flip.

Viktor counts the rotations as if in slow motion. Yuuri makes every one of them, though he slips on the landing, getting up quickly and moving into his last spin. He raises his arm over his head in poignant grace. As he slows to a stop, he lifts his hand to reach out to Viktor.

The crowd is screaming, and suddenly, it is too much for Viktor. He covers his face, his gloves blocking out the sight of Yuuri reaching for him, the soft leather cool to his flushed skin. What can he say? What can he do? Yuuri has gone beyond his wildest expectations. He has surprised Viktor in a way that Viktor could never do himself.

How can he possibly respond to Yuuri's declaration?

After a moment, Viktor lowers his hands and begins to run. The applause of the crowd beats in his ears alongside his blood, and though it hurts to run this fast, to reach the Kiss and Cry before Yuuri, Viktor pushes himself. At last he reaches the side of the rink, bending over to catch his breath, and when he looks up, Yuuri is skating toward him, arms spread with an excited smile.

"Viktor! That was good, right?" Yuuri calls to him, breathless, seeking Viktor's approval.

Viktor smiles softly. He can give Yuuri more than that.

He moves. Yuuri catches him without thinking, and as Viktor wraps his arms around Yuuri, gently cupping the back of his head to protect him, he can see Yuuri's shock just as their lips meet. The kiss is perfect, the first ever between them, and he pours his love into the sweet connection, his surprise and amazement.

As they land on the ice, Viktor has to hide his face in Yuuri's shoulder. Yuuri's hands are heavy on his back, and his body is hot beneath him, pressed between Viktor and the ice. The stadium is hushed, as shocked by his actions as Yuuri is. After a moment of taking solace in Yuuri's arms, Viktor pulls himself up, smiling happily down at his most beloved person. Yuuri blinks up at him, his face flushed pink, matching the warmth on Viktor's cheeks.
"This was the only thing I could think of to surprise you more than you've surprised me."

As the crowd begins to cheer again, Yuuri melts, smiling up at him softly, and Viktor knows that they will be okay.

Then the warmth and life from Yuuri's eyes fade, and Viktor jerks back when he realizes that Yuuri is soaked with icy water, the stadium and crowds gone, replaced by the cold of the Neva. No, no, not again -- he can't lose Yuuri again, not to death.

"Viktor," Yuuri whispers, before he closes his eyes. Viktor opens his mouth to call him back --

~*~

Viktor's eyes fly open, gasping in deeply as he abruptly wakes. He sits up immediately, reaching out without thinking for the warmth he left behind in his dream, staring into the darkened, unfamiliar room in bewilderment.

"Yuuri," Viktor says, then realizes he is alone. His head is pounding strangely. Viktor grimaces, climbing slowly out of bed and stumbling to the small kitchenette, where he left a few waters in the fridge. He opens one and drains half of it until the ache begins to recede and he can think clearly again. With trembling fingers, Viktor flips on one of the lights, lifting his eyes to stare at the mirror on the opposite wall.

He barely notices the wrecked look on his face, already thinking back to his dream. It had been a dream, right? He hadn't been in a stadium somewhere in Beijing, watching Katsuki Yuuri perform a free skate while Viktor stood on the sidelines, wearing business clothes instead of his own skating outfit... as if he was Yuuri's coach.

He hadn't jumped into Yuuri's arms and kissed him like there was no tomorrow.

He hadn't lost Yuuri to the Neva.

The dream had been just as vivid and eerily realistic as the first dream Viktor had of Yuuri dying in the Neva. With a small shock, Viktor realizes that it has been half a year since he dreamed such a horror. Has he really only known Yuuri for such a short time? It feels like Viktor has known him all of his life.

With a sigh, Viktor returns to bed, dropping the water on his bedside table and picking up his phone. He wants to talk to Yuuri, to reassure himself that Yuuri is alright. Even if the dream hadn't been bad -- and truly, most of it had been very good, featuring a kiss that Viktor has been daydreaming about for months -- Viktor wants to see Yuuri for himself.

He settles for sending Yuuri a message, knowing full well that Yuuri will not see it for several more hours.

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
My free skate is tonight. Will you watch me today, too?

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Yes, I will.

To Viktor's surprise, the reply is almost immediate, which means that Yuuri is avoiding sleep again. Yuuri never wakes up this early if he can help it. His heart gives a small jolt; it seems too much of a coincidence that Yuuri is awake, at the same time that Viktor had a strange dream about him. He shakes off the odd sensation and turns on his light, leaning forward over his lap as he
texts.

To: Yuuri  ♡  ♡  ♡
Why are you awake?! Go to sleep, Yuuri!

From: Yuuri  ♡  ♡  ♡
Why are YOU awake? It's even earlier there! You're an hour behind me

To: Yuuri  ♡  ♡  ♡
You avoided answering my question. Should I call you and sing you a lullaby? I will, Yuuri.

Without even waiting for a response, Viktor decides to call Yuuri. He wants to see Yuuri's face, to
know that he is alright and that nothing is wrong. Swiftly Viktor switches to video call mode,
waiting as the phone rings.

When Yuuri answers, Viktor's heart drops to his stomach, because Yuuri is crying. His cheeks and
eyes are wet with tears, and he looks sad enough that Viktor wants to get up and fly to Detroit, free
skate be damned.

"Yuuri, are you crying? Are you okay?"

Yuuri wipes at his face, breathing in sharply, but when he lowers his hand, he is smiling. Not a
fake smile to appease Viktor's worry, but something real and honest, warm with some sort of
happiness that doesn't match the tears in his eyes. "Yes. I'm okay now, Viktor."

Viktor hesitates, not knowing what to say. He has never been good with crying, and his ineptitude
is even worse whenever he is confronted with Yuuri's tears. Still, it seems that Yuuri is a little
better now, and Viktor slowly relaxes, wishing he could reach through the phone and comfort him.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Viktor asks quietly, pushing his hair out of his eyes.

Yuuri is quiet for a long moment, his smile turning a little melancholy, but no less real. "I had a
dream about another time. It was... a good dream and a bad dream. I can't really explain it."

That sounds too much like what Viktor just experienced. He licks his lips, both afraid and excited
to ask what Yuuri means. "I'm happy to listen, if you wish to tell me."

"Mm... it's hard to explain in words," Yuuri says softly. Then his gaze focuses on Viktor, and he
blinks a few times. "Viktor? You don't look so good... are you okay?"

Ah. Damn his own inability to pretend in front of Yuuri. Viktor wonders what to say, his lips
twisting slightly. "I suppose I had the same experience. An odd dream. Most of it was very good. I
was watching your free skate, and it was beautiful, but the end was... strange. It became something
like a nightmare, and it woke me up."

"I'm sorry," Yuuri whispers, his eyes widening. Yuuri's room is dark, but Viktor thinks he can see a
small blush on Yuuri's cheeks. "I... um, I didn't mean to give you a nightmare."

That cracks Viktor's dark mood, and he smiles a little, softening. "You didn't do anything to me,
Yuuri. It was just a dream. Just like yours."

Yuuri nods slowly, quiet, before he sits up and reaches over to turn on his lamp. Viktor does the
same, and the discomfort from his dream fades a little as light floods the room, letting him see
Yuuri better.
"My dream wasn't quite like that. It was sad at the end, though. It was..." Yuuri struggles with his words for a moment, and Viktor waits patiently. "It was about someone I used to know."

Viktor's heart beats a little faster. *The person who broke his heart.* Will Yuuri finally tell him what happened? Did that person appear in Yuuri's dreams? "Someone you used to know?"

Yuuri laughs suddenly, a little choked with tears. "Yeah. I'm sorry. It's been hard for me, opening up to someone like this... but I think I need to. It's better to talk about it."

Viktor can understand the sentiment. He rarely tells people his real feelings, choosing instead to wear a mask. Somehow, Yuuri keeps breaking through his defenses. "Mm... that is true, but you shouldn't push yourself if you're uncomfortable, Yuuri."

"I'm never uncomfortable with you." While Viktor basks in the glow of that statement, Yuuri draws in a deep breath, something in his gaze saddening. "I was in love with somebody, and I lost him. We weren't really together for very long... not long enough. He gave me so much, though, and now... it's like there's a hole in my heart where he was. I can't reach him anymore."

Viktor is silent, remembering his own suspicions about Yuuri's past and Phichit's insinuations. His heart sinks with the thought that he was right. How dare that person haunt Yuuri even now, giving him bad dreams that make him cry? Viktor wishes he could erase those memories of that person.

He hides his grimace. He needs to stop being so jealous of a person he has never met, just because they hold so much of Yuuri's heart.

"I haven't been completely honest with you," Yuuri says quietly, his gaze dropping. The light of the screen sharpens the circles under his eyes and his long lashes, and Viktor aches at the sight of him, so vulnerable and sad. "There's a lot I haven't told you. I haven't been able to be myself around you, because so much of myself is wrapped up in him. I don't think that's fair to you."

Viktor's heart skips a beat. "Yuuri..."

"I want to be more honest with you." Yuuri lifts his gaze, pinning Viktor in place with his dark eyes, sparkling with something like determination. "There are parts of me I might never be able to share, but I want to try, anyway. I want us to be able to talk. He and I... we never talked properly, we never told each other what we were really thinking, and now it's too late. But... it's not too late for you and me."

Viktor swallows against his dry throat. That sounds too much like a confession, and despite everything that has happened between him and Yuuri these past few months, Viktor finds he isn't ready to hear it. Yet... he cannot deny Yuuri, when he is this honest. Viktor owes it to him, to accept these feelings with open arms. "You can tell me anything."

"That goes for you too," Yuuri says firmly. Viktor finds he can't break his gaze. "I want you to talk to me, too. About... about your thoughts of retirement, and how you feel about skating, and everything. About what worries you, and all the things you really want. I want to be able to help you, too."

Viktor's eyes grow wet, and he has to lower the phone quickly while he wipes at his face. Yuuri calls his name, but Viktor doesn't move for a moment, overcome with emotion. After the dream he had, after Yuuri being so honest with him... it's a little too much, for a moment. Has there ever been anybody who cared about him like this? He can't remember if anybody has ever concerned themselves with his real feelings. Yet Yuuri sees through his masks, his false smiles and his avoidance, giving him the option to open up about what really bothers him.
No one has ever cared enough to try, yet Yuuri meets Viktor where he is every time.

"Viktor?" Yuuri says again, sounding worried now, and Viktor sighs shakily, lifting up the phone.

"I'm sorry, solnyshko. I just..." Viktor swallows back the first empty platitude that comes to his lips. He should be honest. "Nobody has ever said that to me before. It was a little overwhelming. But I'm happy, Yuuri. If it's you, I think I can tell you those things."

"Oh," Yuuri says, staring at him with wide eyes. "I, um... okay. That's... that's good. But, wait... did you just call me..."

Viktor blinks languidly, not understanding what Yuuri means. "Hm?"

"Solnyshko," Yuuri squeaks. "Isn't that a pet name? For people who are dating, or, or..."

"Oh," Viktor says, realizing that he must have said it, and his face heats up. The nickname had slipped out, much like how Viktor tends to call Yuuri sleeping beauty when he is being cute just before bed or waking up. "Is that a problem? It suits you."

"It's... it's okay," Yuuri mumbles, and for a little while, Viktor simply admires him. Yuuri knows enough Russian to understand what it means, hence the vivid blush that appears on his cheeks. Viktor smiles slowly, happy that Yuuri is so affected by the sweet word. He vows to use it as often as possible.

After a while, Viktor dares to ask what has been bothering him for months, ever since he realized the truth about Yuuri's sadness. "Where is he now? Your old lover."

Yuuri takes a deep breath, calmer now. "He's gone," Yuuri says quietly. "It's hard for me to say more than that, but... I'll never see him again. I've been coming to peace with that fact, and it's taken me a long time... I'm sorry."

It sounds like he died. Oh, Yuuri... Viktor shakes his head, wishing he could reach out and hold Yuuri. "You don't have to be sorry, solnyshko. Thank you for sharing this part of yourself with me."

The nickname makes Yuuri turn pink again. "Thank you for being there for me, Viktor," Yuuri says quietly after a moment. "You're always supporting me whenever I need it, and... I want to do the same for you. You mean so much to me," he whispers, repeating the words that kept Viktor from running away the night he nearly kissed Yuuri.

Viktor doesn't think his heart could get any bigger, yet Yuuri keeps filling it with more love. "Yuuri," Viktor tries, then finds himself unable to speak, overwhelmed again.

Yuuri smiles at him, then yawns, and Viktor catches the motion as well, covering his own exhaustion with his hand. That they managed to talk about the emotions between them amazes him. Viktor doesn't know if he can handle any more of it, though. He rarely engages in such honest conversation, and he is tired from his dream. He sighs softly, thinking of the fact that they both had strange dreams, yet he is no longer bothered by the oddness of it. The cold of the Neva is far away, now.

He still doesn't have any answers as to why Yuuri had such a dream at the same time that Viktor had his own, but he doesn't want to break the peace between them by following that line of questioning. "Do you think you can sleep now?" Viktor asks instead.

Yuuri nods a little, giving him a small smile. "I think so. Will you sleep, too? Your free skate isn't until this evening."
"I will," Viktor promises quietly. "I'll talk to you later, solnyshko." He grins a little when Yuuri becomes visibly flustered at the nickname, pleased.

"You're never going to stop calling me that, are you?" Yuuri groans, and Viktor laughs.

"Never," he promises. "Go to sleep, Yuuri."

Despite his embarrassment, Yuuri smiles at him, real and warm. "Good night, Viktor."

They smile at each other, before Viktor reluctantly ends the call, gazing down at the darkened screen for a long moment. Then he turns out the light and lies down to rest, holding the memory of Yuuri blushing at solnyshko close to his heart.

~*~

Viktor skates _Stammi Vicino_ with only one flaw, a slightly flubbed landing from his quad toe loop. The gold medal has barely made its home on his chest before Yakov tears into him, demanding to know why Viktor missed his landing. Viktor makes light of the mistake, saying it was just a small error, but inwardly he wonders. His knees haven't been the same this year, but they have never bothered him during a competition.

He hopes it won't become an issue.

Yakov isn't so easily swayed, though. He corners Viktor after the interviews are done, insisting that he knows something is wrong. Viktor is hesitant to tell him the real reason, that his knee has been aching sharply on certain turns, but he thinks of Yuuri's honesty and forces himself to tell Yakov the truth.

"Your knee," Yakov repeats, staring at him blankly. They are alone, the reporters and other skaters gone, which is a relief. Viktor doesn't want this getting out to the media. "How long has it been hurting?"

"Not hurting," Viktor is quick to say, then quells when Yakov glares at him. "It just... twinges sometimes. It's the same knee I sprained four years ago. I guess I'm getting old."

Viktor had landed on his knee badly during practice four years ago, creating a sprain. Thankfully, the accident had happened during the off-season, but rumors had flown for months, that the injury would force him to retire. Viktor had worked tirelessly on his physical therapy, until his doctor pronounced him capable of continuing, just in time for the new season.

Now, it twinges occasionally, though Viktor has so far managed to ignore it. He has exercises that he does every week for his knee, but as he has gotten older, they have become less effective, but never enough to affect his skating. This is the first time it has bothered him during a competition, though. He wonders if it is another sign he should retire.

"Hm." Yakov stares at him a bit longer, then shakes his head. "We'll set up a doctor appointment when we get back to Russia. If you need physical therapy again, you'll do it without complaining, Vitya."

"Yes, Yakov," Viktor agrees, deciding to play meek for now. Yakov has always known best when it comes to Viktor's body and its limitations.

The first week back in Russia is spent half at home and half in a doctor's office. Yakov comes with him to glare at the doctor's x-rays, spending almost an hour in conference with Viktor's physical therapist until they decide on a satisfactory balance between training and therapy. Viktor is given
painkillers for the swelling and told to stay off his knee for a full week, which grates at his nerves. Yakov has promised that Viktor can return to the ice quickly, as long as he continues his physical therapy.

Thankfully, the media has not learned of his problem.

The time spent on the ice and physical therapy means that Viktor has less time to play with Makkachin, who tends to stay with Lilia Baranovskaya when Viktor is too busy while he is at home. Still, he makes a point to visit Lilia's manor at least once a day to catch up with his darling dog.

Viktor makes time to watch Skate Canada, too. After practice, he turns down Mila's invitation to watch with her friends and the junior skaters, choosing to fetch Makkachin and return home to watch on his laptop. He makes it to the stream just in time to watch the interviews, which is a relief.

Yuuri will be skating against Christophe, Georgi, and Michele Crispino, among others. In his interviews, Yuuri is polite and calm; Yuuri once told him that he practices with Phichit and Celestino for whenever reporters corner him. Viktor sends him silly emoticon faces whenever he spots Yuuri in the background on the streams. One time, he gets to see Yuuri pull out his phone and smile, shaking his head in amusement.

From: Yuuri ♡ ♡ ♡
You're distracting me, you know.

To: Yuuri ♡ ♡ ♡
I'm not giving up until you wink at the cameras!!!

From: Yuuri ♡ ♡ ♡
NO.

At last, the men's singles short programs start. Yuuri is in the first group, to his displeasure -- he had once told Viktor that he always draws first whenever he skates, and Viktor is starting to believe in the curse. Viktor smiles as he watches Yuuri face Celestino, listening calmly to whatever his coach is saying, only a hint of his usual nerves in his expression.

Yuuri's outfit is beautiful, consisting of black pants and a blue, glittering tunic, with shining material cut at an angle over his chest, creating the image of ice shards. A sheer black jacket, hanging to mid-back and open over his chest, completes the outfit. Yuuri's hair is swept back out of his eyes, and his glasses are missing. The soft fall of his hair and the delicate cut of his costume give him an otherworldly look, like a fae creature visiting the mortal plane. Viktor sighs a little, wishing he could see the outfit in person.

Soon. I'll see him in Sochi.

Yuuri nods and steps away from Celestino, skating to the center of the rink with a wave to the audience. After the cheers die down and the stadium goes silent, Yuuri lifts a hand to the light above, his head slightly bowed. A soothing piano song begins to play, and Yuuri begins to skate.

Viktor is struck silent by the music in Yuuri's body, matched to the sweet tones of piano notes. His grace and poise are unparalleled, his jumps and step sequences carefully executed. Some of Yuuri's nerves manifest in over-rotation on one of his jumps, but overall, the entire program is beautiful and nearly perfect in technical points.
In his presentation points... Yuuri is amazing. The profound story he tells with his body is one of loss and pain, yet also of hope and peace. Viktor realizes very quickly what Yuuri is skating, his mind going back to the conversation he had with Yuuri a week ago.

"I was in love with somebody, and I lost him. ... I'll never see him again. I've been coming to peace with that fact."

This is goodbye to the person who broke Yuuri's heart and left him alone. Viktor feels it in his heart, in his bones, that Yuuri is letting go of that person; so why have tears sprung, unbidden, to Viktor's eyes? He should be glad for it, that Yuuri is moving past his painful memories, but... it hurts, for some reason he cannot explain.

The song ends with a final spin, and Yuuri's last pose is reaching up to the heavens, his other hand pressed close to his chest. Something glitters in his eyes, before Yuuri moves out of the pose and the light no longer shines on him.

Viktor doesn't look away from Yuuri's face, though, watching him as he collects one of the stuffed toys from the ice and bows. The hint of tears is gone, replaced with serenity. Viktor takes a moment to wipe his eyes as Yuuri waits at the Kiss and Cry, unconsciously holding his breath as he waits for the score.

"Katsuki's score is... 110.78, a new personal best! That is the second highest short program score in figure skating history, surpassed only by Viktor Nikiforov!"

"Perfect, Yuuri!" Viktor exclaims, ecstatic that Yuuri scored so high. He knew Yuuri could do it! He grabs his phone, pride swelling in his chest, and sends Yuuri a message, while he watches Yuuri stare up at the scoreboard in shock.

**To: Yuuri ♡♡♡**

*That was beautiful, солнышко*

*I'm sure that person heard your message. I know I did. I'm glad that you have made peace with what happened to you. Now, you can move forward. I'll be with you every step of the way*

Viktor almost doesn't watch the rest of the short programs, but he decides to wait it out, because Yuuri manages to get hold of his phone to text him back, thanking him tremulously. Occasionally the announcer will mention Yuuri being in first place, making Viktor smug that Yuuri did so well. In between skates, he and Yuuri text each other, giving commentary on the different skaters' approaches. Yuuri insists again that Michele Crispino and Seung-gil Lee will do well, though their short programs both end up under a hundred points. Georgi does about the same, and at the end of the night, even Christophe hasn't managed to beat Yuuri.

First place in the short programs, which means Yuuri will go last tomorrow. Viktor can't wait to watch his program.

Yuuri begs off a video call that night, choosing to turn in early for once. Viktor approves; he commends every effort for Yuuri to get more sleep. Yet the next day, the sleep seems to have done Yuuri little good; he misses his jumps in morning practice, he can't even look at the cameras, and he drops a whole bottle of water on the floor. By the time the free skate starts, it is obvious even to the viewers that Yuuri is falling apart.

Viktor resorts to drastic measures -- he calls Yuuri.

"Hello?" Yuuri answers, his voice quiet. The first group of skaters is still performing, which means
Yuuri is somewhere downstairs, waiting for his turn.

"Allo, solnyshko," Viktor greets, smiling.

"Viktor," Yuuri says blankly. "Um, I'm not supposed to be on the phone right now..."

Viktor mutes his laptop for a moment, studying Yuuri's voice. A little flat, empty of emotion, with a faint tremble. Yuuri is very agitated right now. "Yet you answered my call anyway."

"Well, it's you." Yuuri takes a deep breath, and the sounds in the background hush a little; Yuuri must have moved away from everybody. "I'm sorry, Viktor, I'm just... I'm nervous. I don't feel ready for this."

"I suspected that was the case," Viktor says quietly, closing his eyes. He has rarely felt nervous before a competition, but Yuuri always seems to be anxious about performing. He doesn't quite understand it, but he wants to be supportive, anyway. "Simply skate the way you love, Yuuri. Don't think about anything else. Show me the story you want to tell. Gratitude, isn't it? That's your theme?"

"Gratitude, among other things," Yuuri replies, his voice distant. He sighs deeply, the noise loud in Viktor's ear, but he doesn't mind. "My free skate... it's meant for someone important to me. Someone who has inspired me and made me a better person. I don't want to let that person down."

"You won't, Yuuri," Viktor promises, his voice soft, even as his heart beats a little faster. Likely, Yuuri means someone else, but... Viktor can hope, even just a little bit, that Yuuri means him. "Show that person how important they are to you. They are watching right now, aren't they?"

"I hope so," Yuuri says, and then his voice warms, some of his emotion returning. "As long as you have your laptop open, they should be. Tell Makkachin I say hi, okay? I have to go, Viktor."

Viktor's heart skips a beat. "Wait, Yuuri," Viktor protests, but the line has gone quiet. He stares down at his phone, then over at his laptop displaying the stream. He realizes he is blushing, and he groans, sinking down on the couch. "Makkachin, Yuuri is really unfair... he shouldn't tease me like that!"

Makkachin tilts her head at him, as if to say, isn't it fair, since you always tease him?

Viktor sighs, then turns the sound back on, pulling the laptop onto his lap. He can't wait for Yuuri to skate, now.

At last, Yuuri steps onto the ice. His costume for his free skate is a deep blue suit-tunic over black pants, the blue bordering on turquoise, with a black collar and gold accents. The fabric in the front is bunched together and tied to a deep blue gem, dipping low enough on his chest for it to be risqué -- for Yuuri, at least. It looks like something Viktor might wear.

It also looks nothing like the free skate outfit Viktor saw in his dream, which relieves him a little.

Viktor watches, unable to take his eyes away, as the music begins to play. Instead of piano, which is Yuuri's favorite classical accompaniment, the song features a violin soloist with a heady electronic beat supporting the instrument's beautiful voice. This is the song that Celestino didn't want to use, which Yuuri fought tooth and nail to get approved.

The song starts out slow, Yuuri building momentum as he skates, and it quickly turns into a fast-paced song that, nevertheless, allows Yuuri to express his grace. The jumps are fast, and Yuuri fumbles only one of them, the quad salchow. Midway through the performance, he lands his quad
flip without issue, though he over-rotates on the quad toe loop not long later. Small issues with his technical components, and yet...

For this particular skate, it seems that Yuuri isn't using the most difficult version of his program, but Viktor can see the possibilities. With the right combination of jumps and spins, the program has some of the highest difficulty Viktor has ever seen. Even Yakov would be hesitant to let Viktor pull off one or two of Yuuri's components.

All this Viktor notices, yet Yuuri's skate enthralls him anyway. Despite his errors, Yuuri pushes himself through his performance, never giving quarter to the nerves that held onto him for the whole day, up until Viktor spoke to him earlier. Somehow, Viktor had relaxed Yuuri enough that he could deliver this amazing program.

A program for Viktor. He sees the story Yuuri means to tell; he knows it intimately, because the person who has inspired Yuuri the most in his skating is not any of his coaches, nor his lost lover, nor his loved ones... but Viktor.

Yuuri is skating Viktor's story. His talent, his rise to fame, his various battles over the years with would-be rivals and the ISU... and his loneliness, the pain of living at the top of the world alone. Every secret thought that Viktor has in his head, of what if my life had been different is expressed in Yuuri's skating.

Yuuri's answer, every time, is then I wouldn't have this. Viktor gave Yuuri skating -- hadn't Yuuri told him? He skates competitively because he is Viktor's fan, and because he wants to skate on the same ice as Viktor. This is Yuuri's gratitude to Viktor, for giving him a reason to continue skating, and to tell Viktor, please don't give up.

Please stay with me.

"Yuuri," Viktor whispers, covering his mouth. Nobody has ever honored him in such a way. He has been given many gifts by fans over the years... but none of them compare to a free skate designed and produced by Katsuki Yuuri, for and about Viktor himself.

The song ends to brilliant applause, but Viktor is silent, his eyes on Yuuri's still figure, locked in his final pose with one hand reaching toward the camera, palm up. He picks up his phone and sends a text, knowing that Yuuri will not look at it immediately, but he cannot say anything else. He wants to speak to Yuuri.

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Please call me when you can

At the Kiss and Cry, Yuuri is smiling, his cheeks flushed from his skate. He looks hopeful as he gazes into the camera, as if he is looking right at Viktor. Makkachin sits up at the sight of Yuuri's smile, wriggling closer to look at him.

Then they announce Yuuri's score. Another personal best... and high enough to give Yuuri the gold medal. Yuuri stares up at the scoreboard in shock, while Celestino wraps his arm around his shoulders and celebrates. Suddenly, Yuuri smiles and looks at the camera, holding up his hands in a heart and winking.

Viktor has to cover his face after that, his heart threatening to burst out of his chest and run to Lethbridge, Alberta. This man will be the end of him.

Not long after the award ceremony ends, along with the stream on his laptop, Viktor finally gets
his call. He stares down at Yuuri's name, then swallows and answers with a soft, rough, "Allo?"

"Viktor," Yuuri says quietly. He sounds nervous; Viktor has given him little idea of his response to the program. "Did you... did you watch?"

"I did," Viktor says. The memory of Yuuri's skate still brings tears to his eyes. "Yuuri... it was amazing. I cannot express how much it meant to me. Thank you."

"You liked it?" Yuuri whispers, and Viktor smiles, wiping at his eyes.

"I loved it, Yuuri. You were brilliant. I hope you wear that gold medal for the rest of the weekend. The year, even."

Yuuri laughs softly, breathing out a sigh of relief. "Oh, I'm so glad... I had no idea what you were thinking. Your text just said to call..."

"I couldn't put it into words," Viktor explains quietly. He closes his eyes for a moment, his smile widening. "You had me on the edge of my seat after you teased me, and then you gave me that beautiful song. My song. Where did you even find that music? It was exquisite."

"My roommate linked it to me. I just... I wanted to give back to you. You've given me so much," Yuuri says, his voice hushed. Viktor wonders if he is blushing; he sounds nervous still, swept up in the same emotion that has grasped Viktor's heart.

"Yuuri, I..." Viktor bites back his first words, which are I love you, and tries other words, easier words for Yuuri to accept. "I saw that wink. You are a tease, Katsuki Yuuri."

Yuuri laughs weakly, and now Viktor is certain that he is blushing. "That was so embarrassing, but it seemed like the right thing to do..."

Viktor laughs as well, exhilaration coursing through him. He is so in love with this man. "It was perfect. Ah, I can't wait to see you at Sochi. Now, we each have a gold medal... and I'll win another one in a week. Will you watch me then?"

"I will," Yuuri promises. "I'll win gold at the NHK Trophy, too... and then, I'll meet you at Sochi."

Viktor smiles, opening his eyes, wishing he could see Yuuri's face right now. Never has he felt more excited for a skating competition. His happiness is so great, he could fly right now. "I'll be waiting for you, solnyshko."

~*~

Just as he promised, Viktor wins gold at Cup of China, and three weeks later in November, Yuuri wins gold at NHK Trophy, defeating Cao Bin with the sheer difficulty of his program. After two long, agonizing weeks of waiting, the Grand Prix Final arrives. Viktor and the other five competitors travel to Sochi.

The finalists are Viktor, Yuuri, Christophe, Michele Crispino, Cao Bin, and Jean-Jacques Leroy. As he checks into his room, Viktor wonders at Yuuri's ability to predict the future, smiling to himself. He can't wait to see him. Yuuri's flight won't get in until Tuesday evening; Viktor has instructed Yuuri to text him as soon as his plane lands.

Unfortunately for Viktor, he is accompanied by several of his rink mates, including Mila Babicheva, who is competing in ladies' singles, and Yuri Plisetsky, who is competing in juniors men's singles. Thankfully, Viktor doesn't have to room with either of them; Mila is nice enough, if
young, but Yuri has been getting on his nerves ever since he placed high enough to qualify for the GPF, bragging about the "guaranteed" gold medal.

The three of them end up on the same floor, with Yakov staying two floors down. Viktor doesn't miss Yakov's sigh of relief at this, but he lets it go, heading up to unpack and hang up his costumes. Not half an hour after Viktor settles on his bed with the intention to nap, his phone set to 'do not disturb' unless it is Yuuri, someone knocks at his door.

Viktor sighs, staring up at the ceiling, and debates pretending to be asleep.

"I know you're awake, old man. Open up."

No such luck. Viktor reluctantly stands and goes to let Yuri in, resisting the urge to roll his eyes when Yuri immediately begins snooping in his closet and drawers. "Surely you have friends you can bother, Yuri," he drawls, laying himself on his bed again.

"As if I have any of those," Yuri snorts, unzipping one of the travel bags to peek at his free skate costume. "You have shitty taste in costumes. Do you even get rid of these when you're done with them?"

"I'm scared of what my fans will do to them if I do," Viktor replies, his lips twitching. "Most of them are in storage. I do reuse costumes, you know."

Yuri shoots him a look. "You're always buying new ones, though. You should let me borrow some. I need something amazing for my senior debut."

_I was wondering when he would bring that up._ "You need to win the juniors division before Yakov will let you move up to my level."

"Your level, huh?" Yuri stares at him narrowly for a moment, and Viktor ignores him, closing his eyes and settling in to wait. He has a few hours until Yuuri's plane lands, and he intends to take him out for dinner. He can deal with Yuri Plisetsky's brusqueness for a little while.

Except five hours later, after Yuuri has landed and checked into his room, Yuri has not left Viktor alone. Even when Viktor rose to shower and change, Yuri stayed, as if he has been camping near Viktor to catch sight of the elusive Katsuki Yuuri. There was a brief window of opportunity for Viktor to escape, but Yuri was only gone for five minutes, and he was back before Viktor realized he had left.

"Had to get my wallet," Yuri says, when Viktor pauses in the doorway to his bathroom to stare down at him, unamused.

"Your wallet," Viktor repeats. This boy can't be serious.

"Unless you want to pay for my dinner," Yuri says, smirking up at him. Viktor valiantly resists the urge to smother him with a wet towel. It's like having the kid brother he never wanted.

"You're not coming," Viktor tells him flatly, returning to fixing his hair in the mirror. "I'm having dinner with Yuuri."

"It's not like you're dating him," Yuri replies, smug in the knowledge that this is true. Viktor doesn't let his irritation show, though he suspects that Yuri knows that bothers him, anyway. "You look ridiculous, by the way."

"A boy who wears animal print hoodies has no say on whether I can pull off Armani," Viktor
replies blithely, his lips twitching when Yuri bristles at the reminder of his age. Wool trousers and a gray-toned cardigan; perfect for a casual date—that isn't a date. Viktor dabs a touch of cologne on and goes to pick up his wallet and coat, absently wrapping a scarf around his neck. Predictably, Yuri follows him out of the room and to the elevator.

Viktor sighs. As soon as the door closes, he pins Yuri with a look. "If you bother him, I retain the right to set Mila and Georgi on you."

Yuri doesn't look impressed. "Georgi isn't even competing this weekend."

"No, but his girlfriend is, and Georgi follows her everywhere. How did you not know that?" Viktor shakes his head, relieved when the elevator door opens at the eleventh floor, where Yuuri is staying. He glances at his phone to double check the room number, then takes off walking, hoping that Yuri chooses not to follow.

Yuri does follow, despite Viktor's wish to the contrary. Viktor wonders how to introduce him to Yuuri, who will surely be confused by his presence. With another sigh, Viktor stops in front of Yuuri's door and lifts his hand to knock.

"Just a minute," he hears, before the door opens, revealing Yuuri in an attractive brown sweater and jeans. Yuuri smiles up at Viktor, then visibly pauses when his gaze lands on Yuri standing not far behind Viktor, blinking several times. "Yuri... Plisetsky, right? Um, hello."

"Hey," Yuri says, and Viktor has to look away before he starts laughing at how casual Yuri sounds. "So this is the famous Yuri of Japan."

"That's me, though I wouldn't call myself famous," Yuuri says, a smile touching his lips. He steps outside his room, pulling on his coat and buttoning it up. Viktor's fingers twitch with the urge to help him with his scarf and hat. "Are you joining us for dinner?"

"Unfortunately," Viktor mutters, catching Yuuri's gaze and trying to look pathetic. For a moment, Yuuri's eyes twinkle in amusement, and inexplicably, Viktor relaxes. As much as he wanted to have Yuuri to himself for the night, he is glad that Yuuri is not offended by Yuri's presence.

"Somebody has to keep this old man from jumping you," Yuri says, rude as ever, and Viktor closes his eyes. Maybe he should invite Mila to control Yuri; she is good at teasing him. The first hint of his apparent crush on Yuuri would shut him up...

Instead of getting offended, Yuuri laughs. "I don't think that will be a problem, but you're welcome to join us. You're in juniors, right?"

Viktor watches them as they converse, a little bemused that the two Yuris seem to get along so well. Yuri is beyond pleased that Yuuri is talking to him, shooting smug looks at Viktor constantly. After a while, it becomes less annoying and more entertaining, because of the way Yuuri responds to Yuri's personality.

Rather, he doesn't respond, except to treat Yuri with politeness and respect. Yuuri doesn't even bat an eyelash at the rude language and lackadaisical attitude that has gotten on the entire team's nerves for the past two years. After a while, Yuri drops a lot of the bravado which had been hiding his nerves at meeting his idol, speaking to Yuuri plainly, even excitedly.

How the hell had Katsuki Yuuri, champion of avoiding of social interaction through sheer force of will, managed a miracle like this?

Viktor surreptitiously takes a picture and sends it to the rest of their rink mates. Mila is enthralled,
while Georgi goes on some tangent about personal heroes that Viktor ends up ignoring. He lets himself relax, because Yuuri looks happy and Yuri isn't being bothersome.

Halfway through dinner, Viktor gets another shock, one that also takes Yuri completely by surprise.

"So my grandpa met me at the rink and brought me a whole bag of pirozhki! Yakov was so mad!"

"Wow! That's amazing, Yurio," Yuuri says, laughing. "Your grandpa sounds like a nice person."

Silence descends on the table. Yuri's eyes are wide, and Viktor is just as bewildered, by the strange diminutive that Yuuri just called Yuri. A moment passes, and Yuuri realizes what he said and turns bright red.

"U-um, I mean --"

"What did you call me," Yuri says, a little blank. Viktor is vaguely shocked that he hasn't started yelling.

Yuuri backpedals, stuttering as he waves his hands. "I'm -- I'm sorry! It's just, since we share the same name, it got confusing when I mentioned you to my family, and my sister came up with Yurio as a nickname, since the 'o' is for **otoko**, which means 'man' in my language, and a lot of guys have it in their name..."

A beat of silence passes as Yuri and Viktor both unpack that loaded statement. Viktor hadn't even known that Yuuri knew about Yuri outside of Viktor mentioning him once or twice. Then again, some of Yuuri's rink mates in Detroit are still in juniors, so he must have heard about Yuri that way, or perhaps by watching the juniors preliminaries.

Yuri is still silent. Viktor cringes as he anticipates the large explosion that is soon to erupt. Quickly he starts looking for their server, in hopes of getting the check early.

"I guess that's alright," Yuri says in an odd voice, looking away. Viktor stops short, staring. Is Yuri Plisetsky blushing?

"Oh, good. I was worried you would hate me," Yuuri sighs, picking up his water to drink.

Yuri scoffs. "You're not that important."

"Ahaha..."

Viktor smiles slowly, relieved that the meltdown he had feared is not going to happen. "Isn't that nice, Yurio? Your own nickname!"

"Shut up, old man," Yuri hisses, his ire returning in a flash. "You don't get to call me that."

Viktor puts on a dramatic expression, gasping. "What? That's so cruel!"

Yuuri laughs, smiling as he watches them bicker, something soft in his gaze. Viktor wonders what he is thinking but doesn't ask. He is still a little sore that his private time with Yuuri was interrupted; however, seeing Yuuri this calm and relaxed, especially before one of the biggest competitions of the season, is wonderful.

He and Yuuri will have time later.

~*~
Viktor has been watching Katsuki Yuuri all night. Somehow Celestino Cialdini had convinced Yuuri, top sixth skater in the world and last place holder in the GPF, to come to a banquet celebrating the end of the competition. Yuuri had lost miserably with over a hundred point difference between him and Viktor, unlike his wins at the NHK Trophy and Skate America.

Yuuri rejected Viktor’s offer of a commemorative photo, too, after the programs were done for the evening and everyone was set to return to the hotel. He simply turned away, pain shuttering his dark gaze. Viktor was left standing alone in the lobby, confused by the reaction. Even before they skated against each other, Viktor knew Yuuri was his fan, after watching a few videos of Yuuri’s previous programs, all containing elements of Viktor's personal style. He saw it in the blushing glances Yuuri cast his way, in the hours of practice, interviews, and moments glimpsed in the hotel hallways. Viktor noticed, of course, because something about Yuuri called to him. It wasn't only that Yuuri was attractive, but something more.

Even his short program had been good, yet Yuuri had somehow completely bombed his free skate. Some people were whispering about a mental breakdown, not uncommon in high profile athletes, but... Viktor thinks it could be something more.

That look of pain has stayed with Viktor all day. He wants to know what Yuuri is thinking.

As it seems, not much. Instead of engaging with anybody, not even his fellow skaters or sponsors, Yuuri has been drinking glass after glass of champagne. Later in the evening, Viktor edges closer and counts sixteen glasses, and by that point it is too late.

"Viktor," he hears while he is looking through his phone, and Viktor turns to see Yuuri stumbling toward him, carrying an actual bottle of champagne. "Viktor! You won! You won, and I lost," Yuuri slurs, laughing as he falls into Viktor.

Yuuri is drunk off his feet.

Viktor quickly reaches up to steady him. "Oh, my. Are you okay?"

"You won on the ice, but I bet I could beat you on the dance floor," Yuuri hums, smiling slyly up at him. Abruptly Viktor realizes that Yuuri is beautiful even like this. "And if I win..."

Yuuri turns suddenly and points at Yuri Plisetsky of all people. "You! You second-rate Yuuri! You think I’m going to retire? Ha! I could beat you too!"

"What was that, pig?"

Thus starts the most amazing night of Viktor’s life. Despite his failure on the ice, even with more alcohol than water in his blood, Katsuki Yuuri is an amazing dancer, and Viktor is on fire, enthralled by this beauty who can break dance, tango, waltz, salsa -- not to mention the sheer number of en pointe ballet pirouettes. How the hell had anybody missed the fact that Yuuri is this talented?

After Yuuri’s win against Christophe -- at pole dancing, of all things, half-naked with little regard for Viktor's rabid lust -- Viktor finds himself caught up in Yuuri’s arms, while Yuuri gyrates against him. Viktor’s rationality has fled him, chased away by Yuuri’s heated embrace.

Yuuri is babbling, half in English and half in Japanese, with a few odd Russian words thrown in. Viktor didn't even know that Yuuri spoke Russian. "Viktor! After this season ends, my family runs a hot springs resort, so please come!" Then he beams up at Viktor, his eyes hazy with the bliss of alcohol. "If I win this dance battle... you’ll become my coach, right? Be my coach, Viktooooor!"
Viktor stares down at him, overwhelmed. Has anybody ever affected him like this?

Then they dance, and dance, and dance, until Viktor's feet are hurting from dancing -- and his cheeks are hurting from smiling. Yuuri sweeps him off his feet, his dark eyes bright with worship, admiration, drunken glee, and Viktor finds himself falling in love.

"I won," Yuuri tells him breathlessly as the last song fades. Then the light slowly disappears from his eyes, and his clothes flood with cold, icy water. Viktor gasps in shock and reaches for him, but Yuuri is falling, plummeting to the Neva, and Viktor can't reach him.

~*~

Viktor wakes suddenly on Thursday morning, his entire body trembling from the force of his dream self's fear. He sits up slowly, reaching up to cover his heart. Tears drip down his cheeks, landing on his skin, but Viktor doesn't feel them.

Why, why does he keep dreaming of Yuuri dying? He has such beautiful dreams of Yuuri, another Yuuri that has lived a different life than Viktor knows, and yet each time, the dream ends in darkness and icy death.

This must be a sign. Something is going to happen to Yuuri, and the universe itself is reaching out to Viktor, across time and space, in hope that he can stop it.

Maybe Viktor should talk to Yuuri about it, but -- no. This, Viktor must keep to himself. Until he understands these dreams and what they mean, Viktor will keep silent -- and he will do his absolute best to protect Yuuri.

He dresses for his short program with absent-minded hands, barely noticing that he has not styled his hair until Yakov sends him back to his room. He is too distracted even to wish his rink mates luck. He is thinking about his dreams instead.

When Viktor sees Yuuri standing in the waiting room with the other skaters in the first group, Viktor doesn't resist crossing the space and wrapping Yuuri up in his arms. Yuuri is warm and dry and real, and he is beautifully confused by Viktor's sudden clinginess.

"V-Viktor?" Yuuri reaches up hesitantly to rest his hands on Viktor's back. Someone is whispering about them, but Viktor doesn't care. After a long moment, he pulls away, smiling at Yuuri.

"Good luck on your skate today, solnyshko. Remember, skate the way you love. I'll follow you soon." He presses a hand to Yuuri's cheek, then lets go of him and returns to Yakov, not waiting for Yuuri to puzzle through his actions.

Yakov is staring blankly at him. "Did you just call Japanese Yuri --"

"Yes, I did," Viktor says, his tone cutting off any invitation to continue the topic.

Yakov narrows his eyes, then drops it and turns away. "Follow me. You need to do your warm-ups."

Later, Viktor pauses his stretches to watch Yuuri skate his short program. None of Yuuri's nerves manifest badly in this skate, and tears return to Viktor's eyes as he watches Yuuri skating for the man who left him alone. At the end of the song, Yuuri looks peaceful, smiling up at the heavens where his lover waits.

Yuuri's score is brilliant -- another personal best, even higher than his Skate Canada short program.
Viktor doubts anybody but he and maybe Christophe will be able to reach him, perhaps Leroy if he pushes himself -- but Christophe isn't trying as hard at this point in the season, and Leroy doesn't even come close.

Viktor can't stop thinking about his dreams. As the short programs wear on, Viktor's thoughts grow feverish. He grabs his phone out of Yakov's pocket and begins to jot down as many details as he can remember. The outfits Yuuri wore, every word he said, from the very first dream to this one. He saves it all in a file just in time for his group to start moving out to the rink.

"I don't know what's going on in your head, Vitya, but you need to focus. You have to do this perfectly!" Yakov tells him, looking stern and grumpy and wonderful, and for a moment, Viktor is grateful for his coach.

He can't focus, though. Not with the haunting dreams of Yuuri dying.

Still, Viktor takes his place on the ice as is required, his head bowed. When *Immortelle* starts, Viktor skates his program with perfect technical detail, but his heart isn't in his skating. His heart is in a dream, where he didn't know Yuuri and fell in love with him after he and Yuuri danced the night away. He needs to understand, to find out the truth... he needs to know what it all means.

He needs to know if Yuuri will be safe -- if Viktor can protect him.

Instead of the story he wants to tell, Viktor's thoughts are on the Neva, on the fear that grows stronger with every eerie dream of a death he cannot stop.

When Viktor finishes, it is to roaring applause, as is typical -- but he can barely manage a smile. His score, when it appears, is higher than Yuuri's -- and Viktor is abruptly furious.

He puts aside the matter of his dreams for now. That score is not fair. Viktor's choreography had been hollow, devoid of emotion because Viktor's mind and heart had not been focused on the story he wanted to tell. He had skated on autopilot, his body knowing how to move, but... Viktor hadn't cared.

And still they had awarded him a higher score than Yuuri, who *had*.

"Good!" Yakov exclaims, slapping his knee.

Viktor pastes on a wide smile. "That is not good, Yakov. I didn't even put emotion into that. The judging is skewed in my favor. It sickens me," he spits, under his breath so that the microphones don't pick up his irritation.

Yakov stops short and looks at him, then narrows his eyes. "You did seem distracted. What are you worried about? Your technical score was perfect."

"Yuuri's was better," Viktor says, then refuses to say any more. He charms his way through his interviews and smiles all the way back to his hotel room, ignoring Yakov whenever he tries to bring up the topic again. He glimpses Yuuri briefly when he leaves, but Yuuri doesn't get a chance to talk to him, already caught by his coach.

Just as well. Viktor doesn't know how to explain himself.

As soon as Viktor's door closes, the smile drops. He doesn't often lose his temper, having learned from years of controlling himself in front of the media, but right now, Viktor cannot help his fury. Yuuri had been better, and still they had awarded Viktor a higher score. He could challenge it -- but that would create a lot of tension with the ISU that both he and Yuuri do not need right now. Yakov
would be furious, and there is no telling how Yuuri would react.

Viktor forces himself to take a deep breath to cool off a little. He needs to change, and a shower would help clear his head. If nothing else, Yuuri has taught him that a little patience goes a long way, and Viktor needs to be certain before he decides anything.

Hours later, Viktor is listlessly flipping through his gallery. He has several pictures from Yuuri, but so few with them together. He did get a few during their dinner the other night, at least. The cutest was uploaded to Instagram promptly, of Yuuri laughing so hard that his cheeks have turned red, while Viktor stares at him with a smile. Yuri Plisetsky also uploaded a picture of him and Yuuri, tagging it "The Two Best Yuris," which had gotten immediate responses from his thriving fans.

Viktor is still surprised that dinner with Yuuri and Yuri went so well. Despite his own irritation and Yuri’s lack of manners, the evening had passed peacefully, even pleasantly. Yuri had gotten to have dinner with his secret idol, and somehow, Viktor had not been jealous of the attention Yuuri had bestowed on Yuri, because Yuuri had spent just as much time, if not more, watching Viktor.

He wants to have dinner with Yuuri alone. Last night they had gone out with Christophe, Mila, Michele Crispino, and his sister Sara Crispino, who had spent half of dinner eyeing up Yuuri with great interest, much to Viktor's displeasure. Yuuri had been a little quiet during dinner, but he had been happy to talk to Viktor whenever nudged.

Ahh... he wants to see Yuuri. He doesn't want to share him with anybody else.

A message pops down from the top of his screen, catching Viktor's attention.

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
Are you busy?

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
No, do you want to meet up?

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
I'd like to come up to your room
Is that okay?

Viktor quickly agrees, his heart beating a little faster. Usually at competitions, he and Yuuri meet up at restaurants or at the arena, but... coming up to his room is a first. Viktor wonders what Yuuri might have planned. He is certain that their relationship hasn't progressed far enough for anything sexual or even remotely romantic, but...

*Then again, everything I do with Yuuri is romantic to me.* Viktor closes his eyes with a helpless smile. He really, really has it bad.

Soon, Yuuri knocks on his door, and Viktor goes to let him in. He finds Yuuri standing in his hallways in sweats and a hoodie, holding a plastic bag, and Viktor blinks a few times.

"I brought dessert," Yuuri mumbles, stepping past Viktor into the room and pulling off his face mask. "My coach took me out to eat, and there was a patisserie next to the restaurant, and... well, I went overboard. You have to help me eat it all. I think we'll be okay since tomorrow is a practice day..."

After a moment, Viktor closes the door, a smile touching his lips. "That sounds lovely, Yuuri. Let me clear off that table."
Yuuri’s bag contains three small desserts on gossamer paper, delicately decorated. Viktor spots crème brûlée, a citrus tart, and a lovely little chocolate cake. Yakov might kill him for this, but Yuuri brought him dessert. Viktor would never, ever turn this down.

"The last time we had dessert together was rather different, wasn't it?" Viktor says quietly. Yuuri had been quietly miserable at Worlds, and Viktor had run to his side, desperate to bring a smile back to his face.

"Is it really?" Yuuri asks, his gaze flicking up to Viktor's face. "I thought..." He clears his throat, reaching up to scratch his cheek nervously. "I thought you were feeling bad, and I wanted to cheer you up. Like you did for me."

Viktor stares, touched to the point that his throat starts to tighten with the urge to cry. Yuuri was worried for him. Viktor looks away quickly, wondering wildly how Yuuri could tell, if he was so transparent. He starts when Yuuri's hand covers his own, briefly squeezing, before retreating. He wonders what he should say; he doesn't want to talk about the dreams, but...

"I don't think they judged you fairly today," Viktor blurts out, then closes his eyes. There is no going back, now. "You should be first. My program was horrible. I didn't do it right at all, and..."

"But your program was amazing," Yuuri says, and Viktor whips around to stare at him, eyes wide. Yuuri looks beautifully confused, his gaze darting over Viktor's face, as if trying to read his thoughts. "It was... it was amazing, Viktor. You deserve first place. Didn't you see how everyone was crying when you finished?"

Viktor can't believe what he's hearing. "What? No, nobody was crying, it was..."

Yuuri flushes a little. "Everyone was. Even me. Um, if you're talking about how it was different than the preliminaries, well... yes, I think it was, but I don't think it was bad. There was more... um, desperation? The audience could feel your loss and fear, it was like... like you really had lost somebody. That's the story you wanted to tell, right?"

"I... well, yes, but..." Viktor fumbles for some semblance of understanding. He cannot comprehend what Yuuri is saying. He wasn't focused on his story during that skate; he was focused on Yuuri and the fact that he has been dreaming about Yuuri dying. How on earth had that translated to a soulful skate about loss and desperation?

"You really didn't think so?" Yuuri asks, watching him worriedly. "Viktor... is everything okay? This morning you seemed upset, and then..."

Viktor lowers his gaze to their hands, shocked that Yuuri realized that he was upset. He doesn't want to reveal the source of his distress, not yet ready to talk about the dreams, but he doesn't want to lie to Yuuri, either. "Not really, but I'm not quite able to talk about it at this time. I'm sorry, solnyshko."

"Okay. When you feel ready to talk about it, I'll be here to listen," Yuuri says quietly, reaching over to take his hand again.

Viktor says nothing, his throat growing hot for a moment with tears. Instead he fishes out his phone and searches the internet, his mind seizing on Yuuri's earlier words. Unsurprisingly, someone has already uploaded the short programs, and Viktor selects his own to watch.

To his shock, Yuuri is right. There is an edge of desperation to Viktor's skating, which he hadn't realized he conveyed at the time. He had been so focused and worried about his dreams... and yet
that fear had infused his skating with new life. Still, Viktor can see his errors, the differences in the choreography that he hadn't meant to convey, and which he did not mean to share.

"I still think you did better," Viktor finally says, a little childishly. If he hadn't been so wrapped up in his own head, then perhaps he wouldn't have spent half the day stewing in anger. He had been prepared to fight the ISU on the scoring!

Yuuri relaxes, a small laugh escaping him. "Well, I think you did better, so I guess we'll have to agree to disagree."

After that, Viktor lets his temper fade away so that he can enjoy Yuuri's company, finally loosening up enough to laugh and smile again. He takes a few pictures of the desserts, then of Yuuri lounging on his couch, giggling over Viktor's dramatics. His dreams, at the end of the day, are only dreams; Yuuri is real and alive here, and there will be time later to understand what his mind is trying to tell him.

For now, Viktor just wants to be at Yuuri's side.

The night wears on too fast. Dessert is delicious, and Yuuri is beautiful, laughing at Viktor's stories and sharing his own complaints about Russia's cold weather. Soon, though, Viktor reluctantly decides they should sleep instead of stay up all night talking. They both have to skate the next day after all, if just for practice.

Dessert is gone, and Viktor is sitting next to Yuuri on the small couch, their legs pressing together lightly. The cozy mood holds an allure to turn their relationship deeper, but Viktor has gone down that path before and faced rejection. Tonight, he decides to be strong. His eyes closed, Viktor turns his head toward Yuuri to say something teasing, when suddenly, something warm and soft touches his cheek, brushing the corner of his lips.

Yuuri just kissed him.

Viktor's eyes snap open, and Yuuri jerks back, flailing and turning bright red. "U-um, I meant! That was, I meant, I was trying to kiss your cheek! Not, not that, um, I'm sorry, I --"

Yuuri stops talking abruptly when Viktor touches his chin with a finger, holding him still as he leans in. Viktor kisses Yuuri's cheek, a breath away from his lips, and smiles as he leans back, admiring the wide-eyed stare Yuuri gives him.

"Like that?" Viktor murmurs. Yuuri lets out a moan and covers his face; he looks red enough that Viktor can feel the heat of his embarrassment, his hand trailing down Yuuri's wrist for a brief touch as he lets go of him.

"Viktor, you're too much..."

Viktor chuckles and stands from the couch, beginning to gather their empty boxes. "I should be saying that to you." His own face is rather warm; he can't believe he just did that. He can't believe Yuuri just did that.

After a moment, Yuuri stands up to help him, then collects his shoes and keycard. His face is still beautifully flushed, and Viktor can't help but take pictures until Yuuri notices and starts flailing again.

"Viktor, no! Don't post that online!" Yuuri begs, reaching up for his hand, and Viktor lifts his hand up over his head, reminded of the last time they had dessert together.
"I won't, I won't! It's for me!"

"That's even worse!" Yuuri pulls his arm down to confiscate the phone, and Viktor lets him, laughing in exhilaration. Yuuri flicks through the phone, then tosses it on the bed nearby, satisfied that Viktor has not uploaded any strange pictures. Then he leans forward into Viktor's body, resting his forehead against Viktor's shoulder, and Viktor freezes. "You're not fair..."

"So you say," Viktor says weakly. Yuuri is touching him so familiarly, and Viktor valiantly resists the urge to kiss him, a proper kiss. He does reach up to rest his hand across Yuuri's back, enjoying the brief warmth of their bodies pressing together in such a lovely way.

Yuuri's fingers twitch on his wrist, before he draws away, not quite meeting Viktor's eyes. His face is red again, and Viktor melts, twisting his hand to take Yuuri's and lift it upwards. Yuuri looks up at him just as Viktor presses a kiss to Yuuri's hand, his lips brushing his palm.

"Good luck on your free skate, Yuuri," Viktor murmurs, his lips curling at the wide-eyed look Yuuri gives him. "I'm not going to relinquish gold to you easily."

For a moment, Yuuri only gapes at him, his face bright red from Viktor's bold action. Then fire lights up Yuuri's eyes, and an answering thrill sends a shiver up Viktor's spine. "I'm not going to let you win," Yuuri tells him.

"Good, Viktor thinks, satisfied. If Yuuri is filled with fire, then Viktor doesn't have to worry about ice and darkness taking him away.

~*~

Viktor dresses slowly, his fingers mindless as he buttons up his dress shirt. The silver medal glints at him from his pillow, oddly bright compared to the gold Viktor is used to. It is the first silver medal he has won in years.

It is the first medal that isn't gold that Viktor has been happy to receive. He knows he doesn't deserve gold, not after the way Yuuri skated this weekend. Even earlier, when Yuuri had skated Evacuate the Dance Floor as his exhibition skate, Viktor had understood implicitly.

Yuuri is a better skater than him. Someday, Yuuri might even beat his records. The thought does grate at his professional pride, but the part of him that has watched Yuuri grow and change as a skater is filled with bliss. Yuuri really is amazing, and Viktor wants to see how far he can go.

Yuuri hasn't spoken to him much since he won, swept up in interviews and congratulations. Despite giving Yuuri a hug in front of fifteen thousand people after the results were announced, Viktor has kept his distance, the shock at Yuuri winning gold holding him back from approaching. Viktor wonders how he should react. Publicly he has been all smiles, but inside...

One part of him is still shocked. Viktor has been on top of the skating world for so long; he has shared a podium with certain skaters for years, but... few have ever truly challenged him.

Until Yuuri.

Another part of him is in awe, happy even. For twenty years, Viktor has focused entirely on figure skating, ignoring his family, his schooling, his friends -- his life and love. Somehow, Yuuri has cast light on those parts of him which Viktor had frozen beneath the ice, brightening his world and melting his heart.

*Solnyshko.*
Ah, how can Viktor ever give back the joy that Yuuri has brought him? All because Yuuri wanted to skate with him. Now Viktor is at the end of his career, on the eve of retirement, and... so much time he could have shared with Yuuri on the ice, gone.

At least Viktor had this year with Yuuri. Maybe longer, if his body holds up. Viktor's dream has always been to continue skating and surprise the world. Yet year after year after year, the surprises are not longer surprising, and Viktor's body is nearing its limits. Someday he will have to leave the ice... and then what?

How else could he skate with Yuuri? He wants to make Yuuri's dreams come true.

He wants a new dream. And... he thinks he has it. The dreams Viktor has been having, of another life with Yuuri... of a life as Yuuri's coach, supporting him, guiding him, standing at his side. Loving him, and protecting him from all who would doubt him.

The foreboding dreams of Yuuri's death... Viktor will work hard to understand them. If something bad is going to happen to Yuuri, then Viktor will save him.

That is Viktor's dream. Somehow... he needs to make it reality.

Viktor pauses when he picks up his box of cufflinks. Gold, as is his wont, though he wears them because of his gold medals. He wonders if it would be tacky to wear them for his first silver medal in five years, then sighs and pulls out a platinum pair he packed just in case.

As he folds a handkerchief into his front pocket, Viktor laughs suddenly. Yuuri would call him ridiculous for worrying over such a detail. With a smile, Viktor picks up his phone to send a text, then goes to grab his wallet and key card.

To: Yuuri

I claim first and last dance with the GPF gold medalist!

From: Yuuri

Are you in your room?

Viktor notices the message a few moments later when he steps into the hallway. He blinks down at his phone, sighing at having missed the notification.

"Viktor," he hears, and he turns to see Yuuri standing a few feet away. All the breath in Viktor's lungs rushes out at the sight of him fidgeting against the wall, his lithe fingers pinching the cuffs of his shirt. His tie is atrocious, his hair is falling in his eyes, and he looks utterly beautiful.

At the same time, a chill runs down Viktor's spine. Yuuri is wearing the same suit and tie from his dream. He looks nothing like the listless version of himself that drank his weight in champagne, though. This Yuuri, his Yuuri, is all but glowing, radiant with his happiness at winning.

He is not at all prepared to see Yuuri in a suit -- especially this suit. "Are you my room service?" Viktor murmurs, unable to help himself and basking in the blush that his flirtatious words cause. He takes a moment to steel himself and lock away his worries.

"No! I, um, I just wanted to walk down with you, if you were ready," Yuuri says, fumbling with his words. He peeks up at Viktor through his bangs. "If you wanted to."

Viktor breathes in slowly, returning much-needed oxygen to his Yuuri-struck brain. "I would love to. I did claim first dance, after all."
Yuuri visibly relaxes. "You know they have to give a speech first. And dinner, too. And all the sponsors, and the judges..."

"That doesn't mean I'll stray far. If anyone tries to make off with you when the dancing starts up, I'll fight them," Viktor says with a smile. He might be thinking of Yuri Plisetsky and Jean-Jacques Leroy, not to mention Sara Crispino. All three skaters have shown an unhealthy interest in Yuuri, and Viktor isn't about to let anyone get between the two of them.

Yuuri rolls his eyes and moves to Viktor's side, as they start toward the elevator. "You mean other than you?" he asks dryly, making Viktor laugh.

"Just so, solnyshko."

Yuuri turns a fetching pink. "If you call me that in public, people are going to say things again."

"It's none of their business," Viktor replies firmly, then gives in a little. "If you don't want me to use it in front of others, though, I won't."

Yuuri is quiet for a long moment, long enough that they reach the elevator and call for it. As the numbers draw closer to their floor, he sighs a little, glancing up at Viktor. "I don't really care about what the public thinks of me, but I don't want them to spread nasty rumors about you. Half of the world thinks we're a couple already, anyway."

The thought sends a little thrill through Viktor, alongside faint disappointment. Someday. He can wait. "It doesn't matter what they think," Viktor says quietly, holding Yuuri's gaze. "Just what exists between us. We don't need to define it."

Yuuri stares at him for a long moment, before finally smiling, slow and warm. "You're right. We don't need to. It's enough for us."

Viktor smiles softly, resisting the urge to wrap Yuuri up in his arms. He can wait until their dance.

The banquet might have dragged on at any other time, but Viktor honestly remembers little about the speeches and dinner. He catches looks sometimes, of wariness at his reaction, but truly Viktor isn't bothered by his loss. He will win more gold medals at Nationals and the upcoming international events, though Worlds will be a challenge if Yuuri strengthens his program. Truly, Viktor is happy to see Yuuri all but glowing in his own amazement at winning, the blush on his cheeks brightening each time someone congratulates him.

Viktor might spend the entire banquet staring at Katsuki Yuuri like a lovestruck fool.

He also might drink a little too much champagne.

Most of the champagne comes from toasts. Then, later when the mingling has started, Viktor snags champagne from the banquet table with regularity, smiling just a little too wide whenever he catches a whispered conversation with his name, or when a sponsor starts hinting at retirement. His public smile never falters, but it only becomes real when he looks at Yuuri.

When the music begins to play, Viktor has a pleasant buzz, which allows him to ignore the looks he gets when he walks up to Yuuri, surrounded by admirers.

"May I have this dance, solnyshko?" Viktor asks, enjoying the way Yuuri turns pink at the public use of the pet name. Yuuri doesn't hesitate to take his hand though, allowing Viktor to lead him to the center of the dance floor.
"I told you I would claim first dance," Viktor says, sweeping Yuuri into a grand twirl.

Yuuri laughs as he turns back into Viktor's arms, his smile wide, and Viktor sighs, shuttering away his urge to do something terribly romantic, like dip Yuuri and kiss him for everyone to see.

"Have I told you tonight that you look amazing?" Viktor asks instead. His hand slides a bit lower on Yuuri's back, a gesture of the small amount of possessiveness that Viktor allows himself to show. Everyone is looking at them, even as other couples join the dance floor, and Viktor wants to make a statement.

"No, but... thank you," Yuuri says softly, his cheeks wonderfully flushed. "You look... you look amazing, too."

Viktor can't help smiling, warmth spilling into his voice. "Thank you, Yuuri."

He dances with Yuuri for as long as he can, until someone steals him away to talk with a sponsor. In Yuuri's absence, Viktor picks up another glass of champagne and makes small talk with some of the pair dancers, tempted to inquire about the training they do, but deciding to leave it alone, lest he cause more rumors. When Yuuri is finally free of his coach, he gets snatched up by one of the ladies, as does Viktor.

He has to ignore the temptation to return to Yuuri's arms, instead fulfilling his duties to his fans. He spends a good hour dancing and talking with his various fans and fellow skaters, and nearly all of them express their shock over his silver medal. Many, to Viktor's surprise, are supportive of him, insisting that he will win again at the next ISU competition. Some even disparage Yuuri, though Viktor is quick to correct them.

Yuuri deserves the gold medal. Of this, Viktor is certain.

He gets drunker as the evening goes on. The thought makes him smile at times, remembering his dream of another Yuuri at another banquet, getting drunk in his misery. Viktor probably feels miserable, but he is becoming too drunk to care.

Whenever Viktor gets the chance, he steals Yuuri for a dance. Yuuri always melts into his arms, seeking solace in the quiet of Viktor's embrace. He seems rattled at times, likely from all the attention, and Viktor is happy to give him a few moments of peace from his new adoring fans.

At long last, the DJ announces the last dance, and Viktor takes Yuuri's hand again. The room is spinning a little, but Viktor has been drinking since he was sixteen and can handle it.

If he gets a little handsy, Yuuri doesn't tell him off for it. He does notice that Viktor is drunk, though.

When Viktor draws Yuuri closer, Yuuri starts a little. "You smell like champagne," Yuuri says, and the aforementioned drink makes Viktor's face flush, pleased that Yuuri is close enough to smell him. He hopes he smells good for Yuuri.

"It flows freely tonight, and this is a party, is it not?" Viktor asks blithely. He might be drunk, but he can fake a carefree attitude like a champion.

"As long as you're alright," Yuuri replies, his voice a little quieter. That hits a little too close to home, and Viktork wonders at Yuuri's ability to see through his masks. The flush of alcohol has loosened his lips, so when Viktor answers, he speaks more honestly than he usually would.

"I'm alright, I think. I'm frustrated and sad and happy, but it's alright. I'm very proud of you,"
Viktor says, the admission hurting a little. Yuuri managed to pull the truth out of him, with gentle acceptance, and the understanding in his gaze makes Viktor want to rebuild his masks and hide away his vulnerability, here where anyone could see. He only wants Yuuri to see this part of him.

Yuuri must sense his reluctance, because he takes the lead over and turns them around in time to the music. Viktor presses a little closer to him, the soft lull of the music and his drunken haze leaving him pliant in Yuuri's arms.

"Have I told you that you look beautiful tonight?" Viktor asks, wanting to hear Yuuri's voice again.

"Yes, and you told me that you hate my tie," Yuuri answers, chuckling softly. "Twice, even. I like this tie, you know."

"It's horrible," Viktor tells him for the third time this evening. "I'll get you a new one. Twelve new ones! I still owe you a birthday present!"

"What? No, Viktor, I don't need --"

"Twenty ties!" Viktor points upward with the declaration, not caring how loud he gets. "All the ties, for my Yuuri!"

"Viktor!" Yuuri is laughing, tugging his hand down, trying to keep him dancing. "I think you drank too much. Do you need some water?"

Viktor tries to count the number of champagne glasses he has gone through. Dream Yuuri had downed at least sixteen; Viktor wonders if he got that far. "Maybe," Viktor admits, not resisting when Yuuri guides him over to one of the dining tables and pushes him down to sit. Viktor watches blearily as Yuuri crosses the room to a banquet table, returning a few minutes later with two cups of water.

The cool drink quenches his thirst a little, and Viktor sighs, leaning against his hand as he rests his elbow on the table. Yuuri sits down beside him, watching him with concern. Viktor manages a smile.

"I didn't mean to ruin our dance," Viktor says quietly.

Yuuri shakes his head. "You didn't, Viktor. We danced a lot tonight, and it was really fun. Are you okay?"

Viktor nods slowly. He isn't so drunk that he has lost control, which would have resulted in losing clothes very quickly, but his mind is hazy. He has been worried all week about his dreams, about his future, and here is Yuuri, shining brightly every time Viktor looks at him.

Viktor wants to be good enough to stay as Yuuri's idol. He doesn't feel like he deserves the title right now.

"I want to keep skating with you," Viktor tells Yuuri, who blinks at him, nonplussed.

"Eh?"

"This. Skating against you, it was wonderful. But I couldn't enjoy it enough. I've been worried..."

Yuuri is silent for a long moment. He glances past Viktor at the room, which is quickly emptying of skaters and ISU officials, as the banquet has officially ended. No one is near them, and Yuuri has sat them in chairs that face away from the crowd, giving them some privacy. Viktor doesn't
particularly care if anyone overhears, though. "Because they keep talking about retirement," Yuuri finishes for him, his lips twitching downward. "They shouldn't talk about that sort of thing. It isn't fair to you."

"It's true, though," Viktor whispers, closing his eyes. "I know I should. It's the end of my time. I don't want to, though. I want to skate with you... I want to show you the world that I love, I want to give you what you have given me. But... I think, this year, I will have to end it."

Instead of saying anything, Yuuri bites down on his lip, drawing Viktor's attention. He reaches up to touch Yuuri's lips. "None of that, Yuuri."

"Ah..." Yuuri pulls down Viktor's hand, lowering his gaze. "I'm sorry. It's just, it makes me mad... I want to skate with you, too. I don't want you to retire at all. I'm sorry! If I hadn't won, then..."

"No, Yuuri, don't even say that. They've been whispering it behind my back for years. And you won fairly. Didn't I tell you when you won? This is the first time I've ever been happy that I lost."

"But you can't just leave," Yuuri whispers, and Viktor smiles softly, turning Yuuri's hand over and tracing his palm. His fingertips are cool from touching the ice water.

"I have other options now. I'm not going to retire immediately, solnyshko. Yakov would tie me up and have me committed," Viktor says, cheerful at the thought. To his relief, the joke startles a laugh out of Yuuri.

"That's terrible, Viktor." For a few minutes, they are both quiet. Viktor sips his water at Yuuri's pointed look, watching as emotions play across Yuuri's face: hesitance, worry, determination, distress. He hates that he brought this upsetting topic up, but Yuuri had told him, hadn't he? 'I want you to talk to me, too.'

"I've been thinking about retiring, too," Yuuri says quietly.

Viktor feels his heart stop, and his head snaps up to stare at Yuuri. He did not just hear that. "What?"

Yuuri glances at him briefly, then drops his gaze to their hands. Viktor's fingers have fallen limp in shock. "There are a lot of reasons, but... I guess the biggest is that I don't feel like I can compete next season. A part of me is very tired, and I miss home, and I miss my dog... I think I need a break."

No, no, no. Yuuri wants to retire? He just won gold! His programs are amazing! How could he give that up? After he finally reached Viktor's level and beat him, he wants to retire? And... leave him?

No. Viktor will not allow it. On some level, Viktor knows that Yuuri must have valid reasons, but right now, he can only see Yuuri's selfishness. Viktor is happy to accept that part of Yuuri up to a certain point -- this point. He can't let Yuuri retire.

Yuuri takes a deep, shaky breath, his voice dropping a little. "This season isn't even half over, and it's already been exhausting, between classes and training and everything else. Thankfully I'm graduating next week, but it's just... I don't know what to do after that. Celestino is great, but... he and I don't really suit each other anymore, and my contract with him is going to end soon. I don't want to look for a new coach. Then there's the JSF, they've already started pressuring me to take part in the next Winter Olympics, and that's in two years, and... it's just, it's too much. So it's really logical that..."
"I'll be your coach," Viktor blurts out. Yuuri stiffens and turns toward him sharply, his eyes going wide.

"What?" Yuuri whispers. He seems unable to say anything else, and Viktor takes advantage, filling the silence with his rushed begging, the alcohol all but destroying his inhibitions. He grabs both of Yuuri's hands, holding onto him tightly, and Yuuri doesn't fight him, too stunned to react.

"You can't retire. If you need a coach, I'll do it. If you need a place to train, you can come to Russia. You can even stay with me. If I retire, then I can be your coach, and you can keep skating, and we can still be together! Please let me be your coach, Yuuri!"

Yuuri still says nothing, so Viktor throws his arms around Yuuri's shoulders, hiding his face in his neck. "Please," he whimpers into the warm cloth of Yuuri's suit. "Don't retire. Let me be your coach. I want to see how far you can go. Together, we can, we can..."

Slowly, warm hands come up to rest on his back. "You can't mean that," Yuuri whispers, his voice tight with distress. Tears? Viktor jerks back, horrified to see Yuuri crying. "You can't give everything up for me again! I've been working so hard, so that you wouldn't have to, and now... you can't just offer me that, when I'd already decided not to! ヴィクトルのばか!"

Yuuri's anger confuses Viktor. Maybe it's the alcohol, but nothing Yuuri says makes sense, least of all when Yuuri slips into his own language. More importantly, Yuuri is crying, and Viktor has always been terrible at handling Yuuri's tears. Viktor starts panicking, reaching up to wipe the tears from Yuuri's cheeks. "No, no, solnyshko, don't cry. I don't know what you mean, but please, don't cry, it's okay."

"Of course you don't," Yuuri huffs, sniffling and pushing feebly at Viktor's hands. "Stop that." He accepts Viktor's handkerchief, and Viktor hovers worriedly as Yuuri wipes at his eyes.

Finally Yuuri looks at him, his eyes glittering oddly. "Do you really want to coach me?"

Viktor swallows but nods. He has been thinking about it for months, ever since he began giving Yuuri advice on his programs. Even more so than creating a program for Yuuri, he wants to coach him, to bring him to the same grand place on top of the world where Viktor has stood for so long. He opens his mouth to say more, but Yuuri covers his lips with a finger, his gaze still focused, stern. Viktor shuts his mouth, his chest tightening with anticipation.

"I'll think about it," Yuuri says slowly, then presses his finger harder against Viktor's lips to shush him when Viktor immediately tries to protest. "I'm not saying no, but this is a serious decision, and we both need to consider what this means for our futures. If you retire... it'll change everything. You need to talk to Yakov, and I need to talk to Celestino. We still have the rest of the season to get through, too. Let's talk about this again after Worlds. Okay?"

Viktor thinks about it for a moment, then nods. That gives him four months to build a cohesive argument and convince Yuuri, Yakov, and the rest of the world that this is a good idea. Yuuri sighs deeply, lowering his hand.

"I can't believe you," Yuuri moans, covering his eyes with the handkerchief, the blue silk stained with tears. "After everything I'd decided..."

Viktor doesn't know what to say to him, because he doesn't understand what Yuuri means. The realization that Yuuri will not retire immediately affects him profoundly, and he sags a little in his chair, closing his eyes against dizzying relief. "Just as long as you stay with me," Viktor whispers, clutching Yuuri's hand tightly. "I can give up the ice if I can keep you."
Yuuri startles beside him, but he doesn't look up, his hand slowly closing around Viktor's fingers. "ヴィクトルのばか," Yuuri says, more softly this time.

Viktor smiles a little. "Is that a new nickname for me?"

"Might as well be," Yuuri mutters, then sighs deeply. "We should go. They probably want to clean up."

Viktor lets Yuuri pull him up, swaying a little and leaning into Yuuri's side. Yuuri puts a careful arm around him, escorting Viktor from the banquet room to the elevator. The hall has a few people talking in clusters, but no one comes over to join them. Once it opens, Viktor steps into the elevator and sinks against the glass wall, covering his flushed face with his arm.

"You better remember all of this tomorrow," Yuuri says after a moment. He hasn't let go of Viktor's hand, and despite the reddened skin under his eyes and the tremble in his voice, his back is straight.

Viktor can't help but admire him for a moment, chuckling. "I'm not so drunk that I'd forget this, Yuuri. I didn't even reach sixteen..."

"Eh?"

Viktor shakes his head. No reason to explain the dreams now. The elevator dings on his floor, but Viktor finds himself reluctant to leave, and Yuuri looks just as reluctant to let him go. After a moment, Yuuri tightens his grip on Viktor's hand and steps off the elevator with him, to Viktor's confusion.

"I don't want to hold the elevator up," Yuuri explains when he notices Viktor's expression. "We haven't really finished talking, so... I just want to say this." He takes a deep breath, and Viktor waits, his heart beating a bit faster.

Yuuri glances up at him, then down at their hands, visibly swallowing. "Your offer means the world to me. I've looked up to you for so long, it's like a dream... but I'm afraid of what it might mean for both of us. Our careers... and us. But I'm going to think seriously about it. I know that's not much, but..."

"No, that's more than enough, Yuuri," Viktor says quietly, lifting Yuuri's hand and holding it against his chest. "I know it sounds like a whim, but I really... really want this. I've thought about it quite a bit, and I am very serious about this, and you."

Yuuri's face flushes slowly as Viktor's words overwhelm him. "Viktor..."

A smile touches Viktor's lips, before he leans forward to press a kiss to Yuuri's forehead, cupping the side of his face and breathing in his scent deeply. He spends a long moment simply absorbing Yuuri's warmth, wondering if he has ever loved anybody so dearly before. For all of Viktor's faults, Yuuri accepts him with open arms, all of his whims and selfishness and pettiness, and Viktor still doesn't know how he managed to be so lucky.

With a small sigh, Viktor reaches for the elevator button without looking, then wraps his arms around Yuuri and merely holds him while they wait. Yuuri's hands come up to touch his waist, as if afraid that Viktor will pull away if he holds on too hard, before he hugs Viktor back, a tremble running through him.

The elevator dings and opens, and Viktor opens his eyes halfway. He drops his arms from around Yuuri's shoulders, taking his hands again and squeezing. "Good night, sleeping beauty. Have a safe
flight tomorrow."

"Good night, Viktor," Yuuri whispers, leaning into him briefly. Letting go of Yuuri is the hardest act in Viktor's life, but somehow, he succeeds.

~*~

Hardly two weeks later, Viktor walks out of Russian Nationals with a gold medal. His fans are overjoyed, sending him messages that he'll "definitely beat Katsuki!" -- which Viktor ignores, not wanting to listen to any aspersion cast against Yuuri. Instead he focuses on training for Europeans, which take place a month after Nationals.

When Viktor is not training or worrying about his decision to retire, he is deep in websites and books about lucid dreaming and dream symbolism. He writes down each of his dreams to exact detail in a journal that he hides on his lowest shelf, after deleting the note in his phone. He prints out articles and checks out books, all the while trying to make sense of what he is dreaming.

The search consumes him. Somewhere, there must be an answer. Reincarnation? Alternate universes? Prophetic dreams? To Viktor, anything is possible. He even looks up information about psychics, half-convinced that he has gained some sort of special ability. Some of the information seems to match his situation, but there is nothing concrete, and it frustrates him.

He just wants to understand.

On the other side of the world, Yuuri is also deep in training. Shortly after the GPF, Viktor watched the stream of Yuuri's graduation from university, beaming with pride as Yuuri was handed his diploma. He was euphoric for days -- up until Yuuri casually mentioned that he was moving back to Hasetsu, Japan.

"My visa ran out," is Yuuri's excuse, which makes Viktor want to throw things. What about Phichit? "Phichit is going to room with Andy for the semester." What about the Detroit Skate Club? "My contract with Celestino was dependent on my visa. He's still going to meet me for Four Continents and Worlds, but it's done now." So Yuuri was going to be alone?!

"And don't even think of flying to Hasetsu, Viktor," Yuuri tells him firmly over the phone. Viktor grudgingly exits out of the airplane ticket website he had been browsing. Yuuri needs to stop reading his mind. "I can practice just fine on my own. I can send videos to Celestino if I need to. Right now I want to be with my family and my dog."

"You need a coach," Viktor says mulishly. Yuuri sighs. Viktor has brought up the subject as often as possible despite their promise to discuss it when the season ends, with the hope that constantly wearing Yuuri down will get him to agree. So far, Yuuri hasn't budged.

"After Worlds," is all he says in reply. Viktor pouts through the rest of the call, until Yuuri promises to send him pictures of Vicchan when he gets to Japan.

The shift in location changes how they talk to each other. Yuuri is now six hours ahead of Viktor instead of eight hours behind, which means Viktor gets to call Yuuri at dinnertime, instead of when he is eating breakfast. Yuuri sends him lots of pictures of Hasetsu, which looks beautiful, surrounded by ocean and hot springs. Viktor is tempted, several times, to buy a ticket and go visit, but Yuuri must have also developed psychic powers, because he tells Viktor to stop every time he so much as thinks about it.

Yuuri wins gold at his Nationals, just as Viktor expected. Yuuri seems a little dazed by the win,
and afterwards, a plethora of posters and paraphernalia appears on Japanese fansites. Viktor orders as many as he can and puts them up in his living room, taking pictures and gloating on Instagram about how Japan can't compare to Yuuri's true biggest fan.

Yuuri doesn't speak to him for three days after the first big cache of posters. Viktor has to send a video of himself begging in order to get Yuuri to pay attention to him again.

His own fans can't figure out if he and Yuuri are lovers or rivals. They want desperately to hate Yuuri for beating him, but Viktor refuses to let it happen, constantly going on about how lovely and perfect Yuuri is in his posts. In the weeks leading up to Four Continents, Viktor urges all of his followers to support Yuuri and cheer for him in Taiwan.

Yuuri almost stops speaking to him over that, too, but Viktor sends him several pictures of Makkachin to soften him. He even puts Makkachin and Vicchan into the same picture using an art program and posts it with "friends for life!" on his Instagram. The number of hearts that picture gets is nothing short of amazing.

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
I'm only letting you get away with this because I love Makkachin the most.

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
The most?! Fine, then I love Vicchan the most!

From: Yuuri ♡♡♡
I'm telling Makkachin

To: Yuuri ♡♡♡
You're so cruel!

At last, Viktor heads to Bratislava, Slovakia, to compete in Europeans. Christophe is there, alongside Emil Nikola and the Crispino twins. Viktor spots Chris as soon as he enters the hotel, flirting heavily with his boyfriend, though Chris is quick to greet Viktor.

"Hello, darling," Chris says, sliding his hand down over Viktor's backside. Viktor laughs, slipping his arm around Chris and squeezing him.

"Chris, it's good to see you. Masumi," Viktor says, nodding to Masumi as he approaches. Masumi gives him a small smile.

"I hope you're ready for me," Chris tells him with a little smile. Viktor raises an eyebrow, his own smile widening a little. "I'll finish ahead of you this year."

"You'll have to work hard this weekend, Chris. Try not to come too early, hm?" Viktor teases, before disengaging himself and heading to the concierge to check in. He feels Chris watching him as he walks away but doesn't turn back.

Losing to Yuuri gave Viktor new strength. If he is to take on the mantle of coach next season, then Viktor wants his last season to be as brilliant as his fans deserve. He still intends to retire, though he has yet to tell anyone other than Yuuri. After everything that Viktor has gone through, his years and years of standing at the top of the world, he is ready for the next step. He is ready for an easier life where he can focus on Makkachin and Yuuri, and he hopes the world will forgive him for it, someday.

Despite Chris' promise, Viktor wins gold, though Chris wins silver with a closer score than Viktor
expected, which surprises him. Christophe has long been focused on Viktor as a rival, but he rarely pushes himself hard enough to meet Viktor's level. Viktor wonders if he should talk to Chris about it, then decides he would be better off not bringing it up. If Christophe wants to say something to him, he will.

After Europeans, Viktor goes back to training and texting Yuuri, all the while thinking about his dreams. He hasn't found any answers for why he is dreaming of Yuuri's death. He wants something definitive, more than the fanciful articles that his spirituality websites suggest. Something is happening to him; he knows it in his bones.

Halfway through February, just before Four Continents starts, Viktor gets another clue to his puzzle.

~*~

Viktor and Yuuri are sitting on the beach, gazing out at the Sea of Japan as seagulls cry in the distance. Between them sits Makkachin, content to press close to Viktor's side, and Viktor runs his fingers through her soft curled fur. It is peaceful here; perfect for a talk with Yuuri, one long overdue.

"Ever since I came to this city, hearing the seagulls in the mornings reminds me of St. Petersburg. I never thought I'd leave that city, so I never used to notice the seagulls' cries. Did you ever have anything like that?"

Yuuri, legs pulled close to his chest, doesn't reply for a moment. "In Detroit, there was a girl who was really pushy and kept talking to me. One time, a rink mate got into an accident. I was really worried... I ended up sitting in the hospital waiting room with that girl. When she hugged me to comfort me, I shoved her away without thinking about it."

Viktor doesn't look over at Yuuri, his gaze remaining on the distant, cloudy horizon. Knowing how prickly Yuuri is, he can believe it, but he still finds the story a little surprising. "Wow. Why?"

"I didn't want her to think I was unsettled. I felt like she was intruding on my feelings, the ones I kept inside my heart, and I really hated it. That's when I realized that Minako-sensei, Nishigori, Yuuko-chan, and my family have never treated me like a weak person, even though I am weak. They all had faith that I'd keep growing as a person, and they never intruded on my feelings."

Viktor smiles slowly. Hearing Yuuri talk about himself like this explains a lot about why he keeps avoiding Viktor. "Yuuri, you're not weak. Everybody knows it, too."

Yuuri is silent, but the moment is peaceful, as he absorbs Viktor's conviction. Viktor broaches the topic he has been thinking about for two months of frustrated interactions, ever since he came to Hasetsu to become Yuuri's coach. "Yuuri, what do you want me to be to you? A father figure?"

"No," Yuuri murmurs. Viktor is relieved by that, at least.

"A brother? A friend?" Yuuri makes a low noise, not quite agreeing with either of those, and Viktor swallows, his heart beating faster. "Then your lover... I'll do my best --"

Yuuri reacts immediately to that, flailing and waving his hands at Viktor. "No, no, no, no!" He stands up and faces Viktor, his eyes all but sparkling, even beyond the faint blush on his cheeks. That look in his eyes soothes the jolt of pain that swept through Viktor. "I want you to stay who you are, Viktor!"

Viktor looks up at him, wondering what he means, and Yuuri looks down, his cheeks flushing more.
"I've always looked up to you. I ignored you because I didn't want you to see my shortcomings. I'll make it up to you with my skating!"

Viktor stands, his smile returning slowly, and he holds out his hand. "Okay. I won't let you off easy, then. That's my way of showing my love."

Yuuri takes his hand and pulls him up, and Viktor clasps his hand warmly, as the sun breaks through the clouds. If Yuuri can be this honest with him about his worries, then Viktor can do the same, to meet Yuuri where he is.

Finally Yuuri smiles, a small, soft thing that Viktor relishes. In the distance he hears a crack, and he turns to look at the sea in confusion -- but it is no longer the sea. Now it is the Neva, cold and unforgiving, and Viktor's heart jolts in fear. No, not again --

When he turns to look for Yuuri, he sees him falling backwards into the icy water.

~*~

When Viktor wakes, the sickening fear of his dream sends him to the toilet, heaving. After he rises and cleans his mouth, Viktor sits down on the edge of his tub, staring down at his shaking hands. Another dream of Yuuri's death -- and another memory of another time. He and Yuuri have never gone to the sea together, and Yuuri has never met Makkachin.

What does it mean?

Rising quickly, Viktor takes long strides across his apartment to his bookshelf, ignoring the faint nausea that resurfaces, and grabs his journal. He writes down the dream with exact detail, noting the time and date, then sits back and stares at the words for a while, thinking hard. Three memories, plus the very first dream where Yuuri died in an accident. If they are all from the same source... then the dreams are trying to tell him something.

Is his mind trying to stop him from becoming Yuuri's coach? Viktor spends a long time thinking about that possibility. He finally comes to the conclusion that the terrible ending to each dream is a warning, not against a relationship with Yuuri, but against Yuuri dying.

Every one of his dreams has to do with coaching Yuuri and being with him, but given they are both professional skaters, that may simply be the strongest connection between them. First, the free skate program where Viktor was watching as Yuuri's coach and Yuuri surprised him, causing Viktor to kiss him. Then, the banquet at the Sochi GPF, where Yuuri begged Viktor to become his coach, and Viktor fell in love. Now this, a moment where Yuuri opened up to him and allowed Viktor into his heart.

Quickly, Viktor turns to a new page and jots down a few notes. If the memories aren't in order of when he dreams them... then perhaps they fit into a different order. The banquet dream might be first. Then probably the beach dream, as he and Yuuri are not yet together... and last, the free skate dream, where he and Yuuri kissed. They seem to fit into a timeline together, which means... are they all related?

Do they come from the same source? The same... life? Memories of another life with Yuuri?

A chill strikes through him. Months ago, he had been talking to Yuuri while visiting Detroit, and Yuuri had frozen up at the mention of going walking by the lake. It had startled Viktor, given his nightmare before meeting Yuuri, but he hadn't thought more of it then.
'There's the lakefront. The Detroit River and Lake Erie are the major bodies of water. It's pretty this time of year.' Yuuri says it so blankly that Viktor feels a chill go down his spine. 

*He tries, very hard, not to think of Yuuri drowning, dying. Viktor abruptly realizes that Yuuri is trembling, and his heart jolts in worry. "You don't want to go there."

Yuuri doesn't want to answer him. He won't even look at Viktor now, lost in his own thoughts. "Not really. I..."

Yuuri hadn't said another word about it, and Viktor had never brought up the lakefront again, though he had thought about it for some time. With no answers, he had put it in the back of his mind to consider later, not wanting to bring up anything that created such anxiety within Yuuri. Now, though...

*He won't go near the river. He hates the cold. He has nightmares. He won't talk about it.*

The dream of sitting by the sea seems impossible now, because Yuuri refuses to go near the waterfront -- for any body of water, Viktor realizes. He had been tense at Worlds, too, hadn't he? The stadium had been next to a river. Also, Yuuri hadn't drawn attention to it while he was in Japan, but Hasetsu is beside the sea. All of the pictures of the sea that Yuuri had sent him had been taken from far away, like atop hills -- nowhere near the water itself.

Surely... not. Surely Yuuri's dreams have nothing to do with drowning, like Viktor's do. That would mean...

Viktor doesn't know, but he intends to find out.

Viktor flips the page again and writes down his suspicions. He will go to the library this weekend and continue researching. He will definitely understand everything.

~*~

Two days later, Viktor watches Four Continents, Makkachin snoozing on his legs while the stream on the laptop loads. The short programs for men's singles are about to start, and Viktor has been waiting for weeks for Yuuri to perform. He brightens when he spots Yuuri on the screen.

To his shock, Yuuri looks terrible. He has dark bags under his eyes, and he refuses to look at the camera, nodding as Celestino and a vaguely familiar Japanese woman speak to him. Viktor's heart sinks.

He glances through his texts with Yuuri, but he sees little to indicate Yuuri's stress. He suspects that Yuuri has been bottling up his anxiety, so as not to worry anybody, particularly Viktor. If he'd had any idea of Yuuri's mental state, Viktor would have flown to Hasetsu immediately, even if Yuuri objected.

Viktor tries to call Yuuri to reassure him, remembering the last time Yuuri was having an emotional breakdown during a competition. Yuuri never answers, though, and Viktor can only watch and worry as Yuuri takes his place on the ice.

Yuuri's skating is lackluster compared to the GPF. He misses two jumps and slows during his combination spin, which gives him a much lower score than his other performances. The music in his skating is just as soulful, though, bordering on heartbreak, so he makes up the loss of technical points with his choreography.

Just like he used to in years past.
Viktor tries calling again, and again. He doesn't give up until, at last, Yuuri answers late that night, when Viktor has retired to bed.

"Hello, Viktor," Yuuri says quietly when the line connects. "Um... sorry for not answering you earlier."

Viktor closes his eyes briefly at the dull tone of Yuuri's voice. He wishes he was there. "I don't mind, Yuuri."

Yuuri is silent for a long moment. When he finally speaks, his voice is trembling. "Viktor... I messed up. I let it get to my head. Winning the GPF, Nationals... then everyone saying I had to keep winning, I had to beat you... The pressure was just too much."

Oh, Yuuri. Viktor wonders what he should say. Yuuri is the only person who has Viktor choosing his words carefully, because he wants to be as supportive as possible. Anyone else and Viktor wouldn't even care.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" Yuuri draws in a breath. Viktor pushes forward. "Do you like your skating right now? Be honest with me, Yuuri. Is the skating you did today the skating that you love?"

"You know it's not," Yuuri replies, his voice shaking from the force of his emotion. "I hate skating like that. I can do better. I know I can, but I'm..."

Weak, Yuuri doesn't say, but Viktor hears it anyway.

"Show me, then. I know you can do it." He thinks of the words his dream self said to Yuuri, deciding them to be apt here, too. "Yuuri, you're not weak. Everybody knows it, too."

There is a sharp intake of breath. "What did you say?" Yuuri whispers, suddenly keen, and Viktor's heart skips a beat.

"I said you're not weak," Viktor says softly. "Your friends and your family and I all know it. The world knows it. You can't help that you get nervous about performing. That is perfectly normal. It doesn't make you a weak person, Yuuri."

"I..." Yuuri swallows audibly, a faint noise escaping him. "How do you know what I need to hear?" he whispers, and he sounds wretched.

Viktor closes his eyes, wishing he was in Taiwan right now. He wishes that he could see Yuuri more often than a few times a year. If he becomes Yuuri's coach, then he will make certain that wherever they decide to train, he will live close to Yuuri. "How could I not? I know you, darling. I am always here for you." Yuuri lets out another choked noise, and Viktor smiles softly, his heart aching. "Ah, I wish I could come see you..."

"Don't you dare," Yuuri says with a wet laugh. Viktor starts at the realization that Yuuri is crying, then clenches his hand into a fist, hating that he made Yuuri cry. "I still need to do my free skate, and I'll be a mess if you show up in the middle of Taipei."

"Perhaps Hasetsu, then," Viktor suggests, only half-joking.

"Absolutely not!"

Makkachin perks up at Yuuri's raised voice, sitting up from her spot at Viktor's feet and wagging her tail. Viktor beams at her. "Do you hear Yuuri, Makkachin? Do you want to talk to him?"
Makkachin barks her agreement, so Viktor switches to speakerphone. Makkachin noses at the phone, huffing her anticipation at hearing Yuuri.

"Hi, Makkachin," Yuuri says quietly. Viktor can hear the smile in his voice, now. "You have to keep Viktor in Russia, okay? Don't let him fly to Japan on a whim."

"It's hardly a whim when I've been plotting it for months," Viktor says brightly, making Yuuri groan.

"That's even worse, Viktor."

Viktor smiles, closing his eyes as Yuuri settles into a familiar lecture on wasteful spending and surprising one's loved ones with whimsical visits. Makkachin joins in every now and then as if to punctuate Yuuri's points, but Viktor hardly hears any of it, too happy that he was able to cheer up Yuuri. He believes in Yuuri's skating, and he knows Yuuri will be amazing tomorrow.

The silver medal Yuuri wins the next day proves it, too.

~*~

Yakov's office faces the south, which gives him a lovely view of the Neva and, coincidentally, Viktor's apartment if one squints. When he was younger, he always wondered if Yakov had a way to spy on him, with the way he seemed to read Viktor's mind. Now he knows that Yakov doesn't care enough to try. Yakov wants as little to do with his skaters' daily lives as possible, not interested in the drama of young adults and teenagers. Viktor can't really blame him.

He hopes this meeting goes well. After weeks of pointed hints from Yuuri, Viktor finally agreed to schedule the meeting with Yakov to discuss his retirement. Truthfully, he is all for packing his bags and flying to Hasetsu as soon as Worlds ends, but Yuuri has sworn that he won't speak to Viktor ever again if he does that.

So, here he is. Waiting for his doom.

"Alright, Vitya, I'm here." Yakov strides into the room and pulls off his puffy red coat, sitting down at the desk. The look he gives Viktor is wary, and Viktor can only imagine how Yakov will react to his declaration. He is scared of finding out; he has been imagining Yakov's reaction for days now, ranging from anger to outright abandoning him... Viktor doesn't think he could bear it if Yakov cut him out of his life.

Viktor checks to make sure the door is closed, then takes a deep breath. "Yakov, I want you to promise me that you will listen to everything I have to say today."

Yakov narrows his eyes a little. "What's this about? Are you sick?"

Viktor chuckles. "No, nothing like that. Unless you count lovesick. "The matter I want to discuss with you is serious, though, and I know you will not be happy, but I beg of you, please..."

"Just get on with it, Vitya," Yakov sighs, leaning back in his chair. He never did have much patience.

"Alright." Viktor turns to meet Yakov's eyes squarely. "I want to retire after Worlds."

Yakov's jaw drops, his eyes bulging with shock. He can't seem to find a response, his mouth opening and closing, and Viktor quickly presses the advantage, holding up his hands.
"Wait! Before you yell at me, just listen, please? I have reasons. I made a list!" Viktor pulls out a piece of paper where he has carefully detailed all of his reasons, clearing his throat nervously. "First, while of course I am in the prime of my life and can do absolutely anything, for the past year or so, my body has been changing. Just a little! Just enough. My knee and my back, and maybe my ankles too but it's hardly noticeable, really. It's just, everything is starting to hurt more after competitions. Which should be a sign, right? Not to mention that the physical therapy isn't really helping my knee anymore... well, you get the picture."

Yakov says nothing, though he has closed his mouth by now, his eyes narrowing. Viktor hurries on. "Second, Makkachin is getting older, and I am worried that she is... that she needs me right now. I don't get to spend nearly enough time with her between training and all of my trips for work. I need to focus on her."

He glances up at Yakov, trying to read his reaction, but Yakov remains mostly impassive. "Go on," Yakov says after a moment.

Viktor swallows. This shouldn't be so difficult... but Yakov has practically raised him, and Viktor owes it to him. He promised Yuuri he would be more honest. "Third, I... don't feel that I am surprising my fans any longer. Every year feels the same. I feel like..."

"Like it doesn't matter anymore?" Yakov finish for him, and Viktor gusts out a sigh, sagging back in the chair.

"Exactly," Viktor confirms, closing his eyes. "I still love figure skating. I will always love figure skating. But... I am tired. I want to try something new, something... well, something you probably won't agree with, but --"

"You want to try coaching Katsuki, don't you?" Yakov interrupts, then sighs and stands up, heading over to his cabinet which Viktor was never allowed to touch. Viktor shuts his mouth and stares, not believing that Yakov even realized the primary reason behind his decision. Yakov ignores his shock and picks out two glass shooters, pouring vodka into both of them, then sets one down in front of Viktor. He leaves the bottle on the desk.

"Drink," Yakov grunts, nodding to the glass, then knocks it back with a loud sigh.

Viktor picks up the glass cautiously, glancing up at Yakov, then taking his drink as well. He grimaces at the burn, then reaches forward to pick up the bottle and study the brand. The label looks as old and cantankerous as Yakov himself. "How did you know?" Viktor asks after a moment, setting the bottle down.

"Give me some credit, Vitya. You've been chasing after that boy for a year now, and I know all about that 'advice' you gave him over the summer for his programs," Yakov says, sighing. He studies his glass for a moment, then pours another shot of vodka for both of them. "Give me that paper."

Viktor hands it over wordlessly, then lifts his glass of vodka, staring at it while Yakov goes over his nicely printed reasoning. He should have known -- Yakov has always been able to read him easily, ever since he was a boy. After a moment, Viktor drinks his vodka, then sets the glass down and leans forward, eyes glittering. "What would you say if I decided to do ice dancing?"

"No," Yakov says, which has been his answer every time Viktor suggested it for the past seven years. Viktor throws his head back and laughs, relieved -- then nearly swallows his tongue at Yakov's next words. "Not unless you convince Katsuki to join you. His programs this year were good, but he messed up too much at Continents. He needs guidance, and you're too young, you
can't give him that."

Viktor sits up straight, his stomach dropping. "But Yakov --"

Yakov holds up a hand, forestalling Viktor's protest. "Like I said, his programs were good, and I know it's because of your influence. If you want to coach him, you need to do it right. So you can retire, and you can bring him here to coach him -- and I will coach him as well. You can do his choreography, but I'm going to make sure that he shines. You still need guidance, too, especially if you want to become a gold medalist coach like me."

Yakov tosses the paper on the desk, scowling at Viktor, but Viktor can hardly believe his ears. Yakov has accepted. Yakov has approved, and instead of abandoning Viktor like he feared, he will support Viktor and mentor him as a coach. Viktor stands up, his heart swelling with joy, and quickly steps around the desk. Yakov's eyes snap up to him.

"Vitya, don't --"

"Yakov!" Viktor cries, throwing his arms around Yakov, who gives a heavy sigh and pats his back. "Yakov, I love you! You're the best coach ever!"

"Get off me, you brat."

Viktor returns home in a happy daze, buoyed by his conversation with Yakov. They spent some time going over the details of his retirement, which will be announced via press conference, likely at Worlds. Viktor finds himself looking forward to retirement, to the time he can spend spoiling Makkachin and reading and relaxing. Now, all he has to do is convince Yuuri to let him be his coach.

He has barely stepped into the apartment when he pulls up Yuuri on his speed dial, choosing the video call option.

Yuuri answers a moment later. In the background, Viktor can see the ceiling of the rink where Yuuri trains now. "Hi, Viktor," Yuuri says, then yawns, covering his mouth with a gloved hand.

"Are you still at practice?" Viktor raises his eyebrows, putting on a stern face as he nudges off his shoes. "You should be resting, Yuuri! Worlds is in two weeks!"

"I wasn't practicing for Worlds," Yuuri says, looking shifty. "So, um, what were you calling about? You usually call later in the day." Viktor doesn't miss how Yuuri neatly avoids continuing that topic, but he lets it go, because he is too excited to worry about it right now.

"Yuuri! Guess what! I spoke to Yakov about retiring and coaching you, and he agreed!" Viktor beams, and Yuuri blinks at him, his eyes widening a little.

"He did? He wasn't... he wasn't mad?"

"Only a little!" Viktor twirls around in his living room, balancing himself on his toes and holding the phone aloft. Oh, he could dance, he is so happy! "He even suggested that I stay at his rink and work under him! He will be my mentor! As long as he gets to coach you, too!"

"Wait, what?" Yuuri sputters, his eyes going wide. "Yakov Feltsman -- coach me? How on earth did you get him to agree to that?"

"He suggested it!" Viktor replies blithely. "We'll co-coach you! If you agree, that is!"
"Viktor..." Yuuri is biting his lip, chewing it into a bruised state. Viktor focuses on that little detail too quickly, and abruptly drops from his pose, pulling the phone close to his face.

"Yuuri, please let me coach you. I know," Viktor says when Yuuri opens his mouth to protest, "that you want to wait until Worlds to talk about it. That's fine. But I want to try to convince you! I've been waiting in agony ever since the GPF! Please, I have all my reasons now, I can give them all to you, I even made a list --"

"Viktor," Yuuri repeats, his voice softer now, warmer. Viktor closes his mouth and puts on his most pathetic face, which makes Yuuri smile.

"Please, Yuuri? Darling? My sleeping beauty? Solnyshko? Give me a chance," Viktor begs. He has never begged anybody else in his life, not like this -- but Viktor would give anything. He needs to be Yuuri's coach. Not only because of his dreams, but... he feels it in his heart, that Yuuri needs him in this way. He won't let anybody else be Yuuri's coach, and he can't imagine any other life now.

Yuuri is laughing, his cheeks turned pink. "Viktor, I said we'll wait till Worlds to talk about it, and that hasn't changed. However... since Worlds will be in Tokyo, I was thinking... maybe you could change your flight back to a different time, and... come home with me. Then we can talk."

Viktor inhales softly, his eyes widening. Come home with Yuuri? "You'll let me come to Hasetsu?"

"Yes," Yuuri replies, his gaze soft, sparkling with some fervent inner light. Determination, maybe. Viktor yearns to reach out to him, to understand what Yuuri is thinking. "After Worlds, come back to Hasetsu with me. I have something to show you."
Two days before the Grand Prix Final starts, Yuuri dreams of Viktor again, and of the world he left in the future. His past, now.

*St. Petersburg is cold and gray. Perhaps it does not feel so to the people living there, dressed in shorts and sandals, but Yuuri only feels the cold of the Neva. He will never feel anything but that bitter, aching cold.*

Yuuri turns to gaze upon the empty Tuchkov Bridge, his eyes closing slightly. A bouquet of twelve lilies, surrounded by marigolds and forget-me-nots, rests in front of the span of railing where Yuuri lost his life. Yuuri admires the flowers for a moment, then realizes abruptly that Viktor must have left them. Months must have passed by now... and yet Viktor still leaves him flowers.

*His heart aches with the knowledge that Viktor is still in pain over his death. How long has it been?*

*Yuuri wants to see Viktor. Even as he thinks it, St. Petersburg blurs, until Yuuri is standing at the edge of a familiar ice rink. A solitary figure spins in the middle of the ice, hair gleaming as the late afternoon sun filters through the expansive windows. Yuuri stares, reaching up to cover his mouth with cold fingers.*

*Deep inside, Viktor is crying. In his skating, there are tears; there is grief and anger, though Viktor's face is placid, deep in concentration, without a hint of his feelings. Yuuri steps forward, wanting to go to him, but he must be invisible to even Viktor, because Viktor does not notice him. No one does; in this world, he is a ghost.*

*He watches, as Viktor skates through the day's hours and into the evening, long after the rink has cleared of people. The water in his clothes dries and the ice melts away while Yuuri watches, as Viktor ignores his rinkmates, even Yurio and Yakov, who give him deeply troubled looks before they, too, leave. At last, Viktor is left alone on the ice, coming to stand still in the center of the scuffed surface and staring into the distance.*

*Yuuri aches, watching him. If Viktor saw him now... would it hurt him? He left Viktor alone. Viktor, who knew loneliness for so long until Yuuri came to him and lit up his world...*  

*He hates himself so much for leaving Viktor to this pain. How can he ever make it up to him?*

*Finally, Viktor sighs and leaves the ice, going to gather his belongings. Yuuri wonders if Viktor will notice him, holding his breath as Viktor passes the spot where he is standing, but he must be hidden too well for Viktor's senses, because Viktor never sees him. Yuuri is left alone to stare at the ice, turning over the feelings encaptured in the skating he saw.*

*He needs to go to Viktor.*
The world blurs again, and Yuuri finds himself standing in Viktor's apartment. The living room is darkened, but the kitchen light is on, casting an eerie gray glow across the floor. Viktor is rummaging in the pantry, and a moment later he emerges with a cup of dog food. Yuuri watches as Viktor walks to the wall where they keep Makkachin's bowls, pouring the dry food into the metal bowl.

Yet Makkachin doesn't come, and Yuuri is left wondering where she is.

"Right... still at Lilia's, huh," Viktor murmurs, staring down at the full bowl, then sighs deeply. He leaves the bowl as it is and turns off the kitchen light, trudging to the bedroom. Yuuri glances at the dog bowls, then follows, relieved that Makkachin is alright, and worried that Viktor has forgotten about her.

He hesitates at the doorway, watching as Viktor strips methodically and climbs into bed, not bothering with any of his nightly rituals, instead opening a heavy book to read. Just like in the rink, Viktor never notices him, drawn too deeply into himself. The circles under his eyes and the listless way he moves... it speaks of depression so terrible that Yuuri feels the ache of his pain as deeply as the cold of the Neva.

At last Viktor sleeps, and Yuuri lets himself approach. He doesn't seem to affect the real world like he would as a living person, as the bed barely dips under his weight when Yuuri sits down at Viktor's side. He wonders if this is the last time he will be able to visit this world; his only ties are the Neva and Viktor, and Viktor cannot see him any longer.

"Viktor," Yuuri whispers, reaching up to brush limp hair from Viktor's face. Viktor sighs softly in his sleep, perhaps bothered by the cold of Yuuri's fingers, but he does not wake. Tears sting Yuuri's eyes, and he reaches out to cover Viktor's hand. Viktor sighs softly, turning toward him, his eyelashes fluttering.

"Yuuri," Viktor murmurs, a tear falling down his cheek. He opens his eyes halfway.

Yuuri wipes it away, waiting until Viktor lifts his gaze a little to look at him, but his gaze remains unfocused. Maybe Viktor sees him, maybe he doesn't -- but Yuuri needs him to listen. He needs Viktor to understand.

"Viktor... please. You promised me, didn't you? You said you would be okay, if I was with you in the past. I am with you, Viktor. I'm falling in love with you all over again, and I'm okay... I'm safe with you. Please... please, you have to be okay here."

Yuuri breathes in shakily, closing his eyes tightly. The last time he left Viktor so selfishly... how long has it been? What is Viktor doing with his life?

A hand seizes his wrist, and seconds later, Viktor sits up and stares at him, eyes going wide.

"Yuuri," Viktor whispers, then yanks Yuuri forward into an embrace. His hands tremble as he clutches Yuuri's clothes. "You came back to me."

Yuuri hugs him back just as tightly. "It's like before," he whispers into Viktor's bare shoulder. "It's just a glimpse. I can't stay... I'm sorry."

"It's okay, Yuuri. I'm just... I'm so happy to see you," Viktor says, before tugging Yuuri into bed next to him. He relaxes slowly, his arms tightening around Viktor, who continues to press kisses to his hair and cheeks.

Then Viktor kisses him on the lips, hard, and Yuuri gasps, the last of his heart breaking. He has
missed this so, so much. Yuuri kisses Viktor back just as deeply, losing himself in Viktor's warmth, his sweet taste, the familiarity of his lips. Yuuri feels himself shaking when Viktor begins to pull his clothes off, noticing how damp they still are when he is wrapped up in warm arms. He realizes what Viktor wants.

"You can't be serious," Yuuri says in shock, pushing Viktor away. Viktor grins at him, his hair falling in his eyes roguishly, a spark of life.

"I have you in my bed again. I don't care if you're a dream or a ghost. You're my Yuuri, and I've missed you so," Viktor says fiercely, bringing tears to Yuuri's eyes.

"Okay," Yuuri whispers, touching Viktor's lips with his fingers. Viktor kisses them softly, turning his face into Yuuri's palm. "I've missed you, too."

Their reunion chases away the last of the Neva's cold.

Afterwards, they lie together, Yuuri drawing his fingers over the marks he left in Viktor's back. He wonders if they will remain after he has left, or if this is simply a dream to Viktor. Either way, Viktor looks entirely too satisfied, the gray tinge of his skin blossoming into a soft, pink flush, the blue of his eyes shining as he watches Yuuri.

"My Yuuri... how I long for you. Yet this must be a dream, just like the others."

Yuuri shakes his head a little. "It might be a dream, but this feels real to me, Viktor. We're still connected... we always will be, I think."

Viktor is silent for a long moment, his hands stilling on Yuuri's back. "I wonder why you keep coming back to me."

Yuuri closes his eyes, breathing in the scents of their union, of Viktor. "I don't know. Nothing about this makes sense... I mean, we shouldn't be able to have sex. I'm... I'm not alive anymore."

Viktor strokes his hand over Yuuri's head, pressing him a little closer, and Yuuri sighs softly. Viktor hums contemplatively. "Maybe I had hoped that being with you like this would anchor you here. Yet... I suspect it doesn't work like that."

Yuuri leans back a little to look at him, raising an eyebrow, and Viktor flashes a harmless smile. "I can't pretend to understand that," Yuuri says doubtfully, and Viktor laughs, leaning up to kiss him.

"Will you come back again?" Viktor asks softly as they separate.

Yuuri is silent for a moment. "I don't know. This time... this time was a little different. No one saw me, not even you, but... I could move. I came here from the bridge... I saw you at the rink, skating. Viktor... your skating..."

Viktor lets out a low noise, the kind he makes when he is thinking deeply. "The place where you died, and the places where I remember you. Hmm..."

Yuuri refuses to be deterred. "Viktor, please... listen to me." He waits until Viktor focuses on him, taking a deep breath. "I saw your skating. I saw what you haven't told me. Please, I can't... I can't go back, knowing that you're miserable like this. You deserve to be happy."

Viktor stares at him for another long moment, then lifts his hand to cup Yuuri's cheek, a ghost of a smile touching his lips. "I'll be happy when you are safe, Yuuri."
Yuuri reaches up to take his hand. "I am safe. I'm alive now. And... I'm with you in the past. Maybe it isn't your past anymore. Maybe he's another Viktor. But... he's you, and I... I'm going to try to live again. I need you to try to live, too. Please, Viktor?"

For a long moment, Viktor watches him, emotions passing through his gaze too quickly for Yuuri to understand. Then he smiles, and the sadness in his expression makes Yuuri want to cry. "Yuuri... it's difficult for me. You gave me so much, and now... I'm alone again. I don't want to live without you."

Yuuri shakes his head a little. He hates the thought of leaving Viktor here alone. "I'm gone now, though. I can't be here with you, Viktor... I'm not here anymore. You have to promise you'll be okay. I can't go back there knowing that you're living like this... that you aren't okay. You have to be happy. Please, Viktor!"

"Shh, darling," Viktor whispers, brushing his thumb over Yuuri's cheek. "Even though you're the one in peril, you worry too much for me. Worry not, my love. Everything will be okay."

Yuuri closes his eyes briefly, as Viktor wipes away his tears. "Promise me you'll be happy," Yuuri begs. "Promise me you'll take care of yourself."

"I promise," Viktor says softly. Yuuri melts with the relief of having Viktor's promise. If Viktor promises he will be okay, then Yuuri believes him. "In the past... Yuuri, do you love me? Have you told me the truth yet?"

Yuuri shakes his head a little. "It's hard to talk about it," he whispers. "But... I'm trying. You... you're opening up to me, and we're learning to trust each other all over again. But I've always loved you," Yuuri answers, the only honest answer, his heart aching at the way Viktor smiles. "He is you. I love you both, because you are the same."

"Good," Viktor says, his smile widening. He leans up as Yuuri lowers his head, sealing their promise with a kiss.

Yuuri holds onto that feeling, the wondrous, amazing feeling of being loved, and of loving Viktor so much it hurts. He wonders if this is really another future now, or if he can change things. Maybe his Viktor will remember something of their new past together. Everything has changed already, yet Viktor is still alone... Yuuri is still dead, here and now. Does that mean that Yuuri is still fated to die?

"Viktor, do you... do you remember when you called me before my free skate? At Skate Canada?" he asks tentatively.

"Hmm... is that a memory you made with me?" Viktor asks softly, and Yuuri's heart breaks. He nods silently, and Viktor leans up to kiss the soft skin under his eye, kissing away his tears. "Then it is a precious memory, and you should treasure it."

"You don't have those memories," Yuuri says dully. Viktor shakes his head.

"I don't think it works like that. But it's okay, Yuuri. Just promise me that you will stay with me, the other me who loves you just as I do."

Yuuri meets Viktor's gaze, biting down on his lip to keep from crying. He nods once, then pulls Viktor back into a tight hug, unwilling to let him go again. All too soon Yuuri feels the Neva calling to him, and he cries, knowing that he will never see Viktor like this again. He understands now; this will be the last time he can come here.
"Viktor... I have to go."

Viktor's arms tighten around him. "I hate to let you go. You're right... this time is different. I can feel it, too, Yuuri," he says suddenly, sitting them both up and grabbing Yuuri's hands. "Promise me you will stay with me. Promise me you will live." Viktor looks desperate, enough that his fear for Yuuri's life is palpable.

Yuuri nods, holding Viktor's hands tightly. "I'll live for you, so please live for me too," Yuuri whispers, before everything fades away.

~*~

Sochi glistens under city-lit clouds, the sidewalks covered with light snow. Yuuri stands at his window, gazing out at the Russian landscape, tense as he waits for Viktor.

He has not been back to Russia in over a year. The last time he was here, he died.

Different city, different waterfront, different time, yet Yuuri feels the cold of the Neva regardless. Even more, he feels the painful draw of the last time he was in Sochi, the humiliation of failing. To that end, Yuuri has done everything differently that he could possibly do. He has different programs and outfits. He took a different flight, and even has a different hotel room. The only thing that is remotely the same is Yuuri himself and, to his dismay, the suit that he has always worn for formal occasions. Since the suit wasn't the issue in the first place, Yuuri has left it be.

Everything else, though... no. This will not be the same Sochi that Yuuri experienced before. He refuses to lose again.

Being in Russia in the winter... it reminds Yuuri of those two months of domestic bliss while he lived with Viktor. They had been happy and engaged, and Viktor had been amazing, dedicated, romantic. Even between Nationals, Europeans, and his own training, Viktor had kept his focus on Yuuri, accompanying him to practice and spoiling him whenever they were home together. It had strained Viktor to stretch himself so much, but Yuuri hadn't realized... he hadn't noticed, until the very end.

His life with Viktor had been cut short too quickly. Slowly, Yuuri has been healing ever since he died, the gaping hole where Viktor had lived inside him slowly filled in with these new experiences with Viktor -- another Viktor, who has the same heart as his Viktor, though not the same memories.

Yuuri loves this Viktor just as much as his Viktor. He knows that this Viktor cares for him, might even be falling in love with him -- yet for some reason, Yuuri cannot take that step forward into Viktor's arms. He still can't betray his memories of Viktor.

Even though Viktor himself told him to let go.

This season, Yuuri must let go. His short program, especially... it is a message to himself, to accept the hand fate has dealt him and move on with his life. What that life will entail, whether he will welcome Viktor into his heart again, or whether he will die in a year again... Yuuri has no idea.

But he has to try. He promised Viktor, after all.

A knock at the door interrupts Yuuri's thoughts. "Just a minute," he calls, grabbing his coat before heading to the door to let in Viktor. He hasn't seen Viktor in person in months, and after the dream he had before he flew here... Yuuri just wants to be with Viktor again, to know that he is alright, at least in this life. Tonight will be nice; Yuuri is looking forward to a relaxing dinner alone with him.
No other skaters, no coaches, just Viktor -- or so he thinks.

Yuuri stops short as he opens the door to reveal not one figure, but two, blinking several times down at Yurio of all people.

_**Yurio! It's Yurio! I want to hug him! No, he'll kick me in the face, I can't. I miss him though!**_

Quickly Yuuri schools his expression into politeness, smiling at Yurio. "Yuri... Plisetsky, right? Um, hello."

For once in his life, Yurio is not glaring at Yuuri. He looks almost nervous, and much younger than Yuuri remembers, dressed in a leopard print hoodie and a rock band shirt. Yuuri softens a little, realizing that this is the first time Yurio is meeting him properly, and without witnessing the absolute mess Yuuri made of himself at the last Sochi GPF. He has a chance to impress Yurio!

"Hey," Yurio says, entirely too casual, and Yuuri almost gives in and hugs him right there. "So this is the famous Yuri of Japan."

Oh, he has missed Yurio. It's almost strange how Yurio isn't yelling at him, but Yuuri is happy to see him regardless. "That's me, though I wouldn't call myself famous. It's nice to meet you, Yuri," Yuuri says, a smile touching his lips. He steps outside his room, pulling on his coat and buttoning it up, glancing up at Viktor and letting himself admire him, some of his turmoil soothed by the smile Viktor gives him. "Are you joining us for dinner?"

"Unfortunately," Viktor mutters, and the look he gives Yuuri is nothing short of pathetic. Yuuri suppresses a laugh, sensing that Viktor doesn't want to bring Yurio with them, but Yuuri honestly wants to see Yurio and get to know him in this life. Viktor can pout about it all he wants.

"Somebody has to keep this old man from jumping you," Yurio says, throwing a look at Viktor. Yuuri softens more, laughing happily -- there is the Yurio he knows and likes.

"I don't think that will be a problem, but you're welcome to join us. You're in juniors, right?" Yuuri asks, content to engage Yurio in conversation. Maybe they could even be friends this time.

"Yeah, but I'm joining seniors next year. Then I'll be your rival," Yurio tells him, making Yuuri's smile widen.

"Yuuri versus Yuri... that would be interesting, wouldn't it?" Yuuri glances up at Viktor, who raises an eyebrow at him, curiosity on his face. Viktor doesn't seem so tense now, which is a relief.

"I'll win, of course," Yurio brags forcefully.

"Oh? You might be able to, your preliminaries have been very good so far," Yuuri replies. He made sure to watch the junior competitions, so that he could watch Yurio's skates.

"Y-you watched? I mean, yeah, they've been alright," Yuuri says, clearing his throat over the stutter.

Yuuri smiles softly as he watches his young friend, who doesn't realize yet that Yuuri is his friend. He has some awareness of the way Yurio looks up to him, since Yurio had made it a point to notice him and seek him out at the other Sochi GPF. He still remembers every moment of Yurio's last free skate in his other future, the plea for Yuuri to keep skating.

Now Yuuri wonders, though, why Yurio has sought him out this early. Yuuri hadn't met him until after the GPF was over in the other future. Viktor once said that Yurio likes watching his videos,
but... Yuuri doesn't understand what changed. Was it something Viktor had said to Yurio? Or has Yurio always looked up to him?

He may never know. The least Yuuri can do is get to know Yurio again, properly this time.

Dinner is full of lively conversation. Yuuri orders in Russian, which impresses Yurio to the point that he asks Yuuri lots of questions in Russian, until Viktor gently nudges them back to English when Yuuri gets overwhelmed. Yurio's nerves all but disappear, and much of his bravado follows, which gives Yuuri the chance to ask him about his skating and his personal life. Yurio acts a little younger than Yuuri remembers, which is to be expected, and he is acerbic and rude to Viktor, but he answers Yuuri's questions seriously.

"Well, I used to live with my grandpa and mom in Moscow, but then I moved to St. Petersburg to train with Yakov. It's alright," Yurio says, shrugging. "I miss him though. He comes to visit sometimes, and he brings pirozhki."

"Oh, I've always wanted to try those," Yuuri says, thinking wistfully of the katsudon pirozhki that Yurio shared with him, once upon a time. "They interfere with my diet though..."

Yurio peers at Yuuri's figure. "You don't look like you need a diet."

"Oh, I'm very good at dieting. I mean, as in my nutrition requirements for skating. I'm very careful during the skating season." Yuuri explains, poking at his currently flat stomach. In about five months, it will be soft and flabby again, his off-season belly. Viktor had once told him that he liked Yuuri's soft belly, just not during the skating season.

"So you're secretly a fatso?" Yurio says bluntly, and Yuuri gapes at him. How did he come to that conclusion so quickly?!

"Eh?"

"Yuri!" Viktor says, aghast. "Don't talk like that to Yuuri!"

Yurio shrugs, leaning over his plate and spearing one of his potatoes. Unlike Yuuri, he has the metabolism of a teenager and can eat almost anything. Yuuri is mildly jealous. "He just said he's good at dieting, so that means he has weight issues, right? It's not a big deal."

Please don't keep calling me fatso. Not that it bothers me, Yuuri thinks, then sighs deeply. "It's not like he doesn't have a point..."

Viktor scowls a little but lets it go, to Yuuri's relief. He doesn't want to cause an argument between two of his favorite people. Viktor gets his revenge by teasing Yurio, while Yuuri looks on in resignation. For some reason, Viktor and Yurio have never gotten along, no matter what timeline Yuuri is in.

Yuuri nearly causes a catastrophic mistake when he uses the wrong name for Yurio, though. He has been calling Yurio by his proper name, since Yurio never seemed to like the nickname, even though Yuuri still thinks of him as 'Yurio.' Halfway through dinner though, Yuuri's defenses are low, and he says the wrong thing.

Yurio is talking about his grandpa again, which makes Yuuri smile. "So my grandpa met me at the rink and brought me a whole bag of pirozhki! Yakov was so mad!"

"Wow! That's amazing, Yurio," Yuuri says, laughing. "Your grandpa sounds like a nice person."

Silence descends on the table. Yurio's eyes go wide, and Viktor even pauses, blinking at them in
confusion. A beat passes, and Yuuri realizes what he said and turns bright red.

"U-um, I mean --"

"What did you call me," Yurio says blankly. Yuuri debates getting up and running away. He is faster than Yurio, surely.

He backpedals immediately, stuttering as he waves his hands. How can he possibly explain that nickname? Quickly he sends a mental apology to his sister. "I'm -- I'm sorry! It's just, since we share the same name, it got confusing when I mentioned you to my family, and my sister came up with Yurio as a nickname, because the 'o' is for *otoko*, which means 'man' in my language, and..."

The spiel of garbage that falls out of Yuuri's mouth makes no sense, and yet, miraculously, it seems to work. Yurio closes his mouth, staring at him for another moment; then to Yuuri's amazement, he blushes.

"I guess that's alright," Yurio says in an odd voice, looking away.

Yuuri's heart leaps with joy. He has permission to call him 'Yurio' now! And Yurio isn't even mad about it! "Oh, good. I was worried you would hate me," Yuuri sighs, picking up his water to drink.

Yurio scoffs. "You're not that important."

"Ahaha..."

Viktor smiles, looking briefly relieved that Yurio hasn't lost his temper. He has been watching Yuuri and Yurio throughout dinner, more circumspect than his usual behavior with Yuuri. Even with Yurio, Viktor doesn't let down his guard all the way. "Isn't that nice, Yurio? Your own nickname!"

"Shut up, old man," Yurio hisses, his ire returning in a flash. "You don't get to call me that."

Viktor puts on a dramatic expression, gasping. "What? That's so cruel!"

Yuuri laughs softly, his heart warming as he watches them. Maybe they aren't the same as in his memories, but they are still his dear friends, and Yuuri wants more than anything to keep them safe and happy like this. Russia may terrify him on many levels, but... his important people are here, and for them, Yuuri will brave the cold that still haunts him.

~*~

Wednesday is full of practice and rest. Yuuri is tempted to forego the latter, but Viktor figures him out quickly and distracts him with movies and takeout. After practice, they spend the whole day in Yuuri's hotel room watching television. Yuuri ends up relaxing a lot more with Viktor at his side, and he even lets Viktor drag him out to dinner with their fellow skaters. Then he bids Viktor good night and falls into a heavy sleep.

On Thursday, the short programs start. Yuuri is part of the first group, which of course means he will go first. He meets Celestino early and heads to the stadium, which is hauntingly familiar. Other than his other future's Sochi GPF, Yuuri has skated in this stadium once before as part of the 2014 Winter Olympics. Those memories seem far away now, yet Yuuri remembers the pride he had felt. Yuuri had done rather well as part of the team skating, despite his nerves about performing in the biggest sports competition of that year.

He can't imagine performing in another Olympics. The next one is in two years, and already Yuuri
has noticed a few articles suggesting that Yuuri would do well in them. Yuuri doesn't even intend to skate in 2018, let alone compete in the Olympics... He hopes that the JSF doesn't get it into their heads that Yuuri should keep skating.

He absolutely does not want the JSF putting pressure on him.

Celestino has him in the practice rink all day. JJ works nearby, but so far, he has not bothered Yuuri, choosing to stay close to his parents. Yuuri doesn't know if JJ still feels antagonistic toward him or not, and he doesn't want to find out.

At last, Yuuri changes into his costume and heads to the waiting room. Celestino looks around the room with a nod, his hands on his hips. "Yuuri, you have your headphones, right?"

"I have them," Yuuri affirms, holding up one of the cords, then sticking the bud in his ear. Celestino nods and leaves him be, tilting his head to exchange a word with Chris' coach.

Yuuri breathes in deeply and closes his eyes to focus. He can do this. He has a different program, a different outfit, different memories -- and Vicchan is alive. He can absolutely do this.

Oh, what if he can't do this?

Yuuri grits his teeth and turns away from the room, frustrated with his own self-doubt. He won both of his preliminaries! He won gold twice, with one of his best programs ever, and still he doubts himself. Still the memories of losing at Sochi, in front of Viktor, haunt him.

"Isn't Viktor in the second group?" Chris comments next to him, breaking Yuuri out of his dark thoughts.

"Eh?" Yuuri turns to see what had caught Chris' attention. Viktor is striding across the room, wearing his red and white Olympic team tracksuit, heading straight for Yuuri. Immediately upon reaching him, Viktor pulls Yuuri into a tight hug, burying his face in Yuuri's shoulder.

Viktor is shaking slightly, which alarms Yuuri. Viktor loves hugging him, but this seems different. It feels more like the time when his Viktor once told him to hug Yakov if he was in trouble, when he made Viktor return to Makkachin. Is Viktor in trouble? Did something happen?

"V-Viktor?" Yuuri reaches up hesitantly to rest his hands on Viktor's back. He doesn't care that people are staring. He needs to make sure Viktor is alright.

Viktor doesn't say anything for a moment, then draws back slowly, putting a smile on his face. It looks fragile. "Good luck on your skate today, solnyshko. Remember, skate the way you love. I'll follow you soon." He presses a hand to Yuuri's cheek, then lets go of him and returns to his coach, leaving Yuuri staring after him, flushed and worried.

"What was that about?" Chris asks, a puzzled look on his face.

Yuuri just shakes his head, unable to explain it. He is tempted to go after Viktor, but he is set to go out on the ice very soon. "I don't know... I'll talk to him later." He has to settle for asking Viktor afterwards. He just needs to make it through his short program.

"Yuuri," Chris says after a moment, sidling over to him. "Is everything alright between you and Viktor?"

Yuuri barely gives him a glance, turning over Viktor's behavior in his mind. Chris may be his and Viktor's friend, but until Yuuri knows exactly what is going on, he doesn't want to betray Viktor's
confidence. "Everything's fine. Viktor was just wishing me good luck."

"Hmm..." Chris eyes him for a moment, then smiles. "Rather romantic of him. Still just friends?"

Yuuri flushes and looks away briefly, then gives Chris a flat stare. Chris holds up his hands, accepting that Yuuri does not want to talk about it. Yuuri exhales and looks away, continuing to stretch. He suspects Chris will bring it up again later, but for now, he wants to concentrate on the upcoming skate.

Soon, Celestino returns to take his phone and headphones. Yuuri follows him out to the ice, sliding off his Team Japan jacket and handing it to his coach.

"You've got this, Yuuri," Celestino says, clasping his shoulder. Yuuri nods a little, then steps into the ice and takes a deep breath. He can do this -- for his Viktor, whom he left behind, and for this Viktor, who seems to need him just as much.

Watashi no Uso begins to play, and Yuuri follows the music with his body, remembering the dreams he has shared with his Viktor, alone in the future. He hates the thought of leaving Viktor alone so much, but no matter how hard he reaches for the future, he cannot stay there. This is his life now.

He cannot go back to a time where he is dead. His Viktor will be alone... but another Viktor is here, watching him, loving him -- and Yuuri has the chance to be with him, to love him as he does the Viktor who promised to marry him. Maybe they aren't at that level in their relationship yet, but Yuuri wants to believe that they can reach that place together.

He just has to let his Viktor go. He has to give up on the idea of returning to his own time. Yuuri doesn't have that power. He has no idea what sent him to the past, nor what still connects him to the future through his dreams, but Yuuri has no way to get home.

Except to live. Isn't that what Viktor wants?

Knowing that Viktor is alone in the future will always break his heart. Yet if Yuuri tries to go back to his own time and, somehow, succeeds... would he simply be a ghost in Viktor's life? Haunting him, unable to be with him except in their dreams... what kind of existence would that be? Viktor would never find peace. He loves Yuuri too much to let them both suffer like that, and Yuuri loves him too much to put him through that agony.

What about this Viktor, who cares so deeply for him? If Yuuri could go home... would he leave this Viktor alone?

Aren't they the same person?

Yuuri left Viktor alone once already. He cannot do it again. All he can do is continue to live, to try to avoid his death and hope that he can make Viktor happy. He owes it to his Viktor, to stay with this Viktor and give him everything, to understand him and support him. Their year together had been full of strange misunderstandings, from the banquet in Sochi to the fight they had about retirement. Yuuri is determined not to let that miscommunication happen again. He wants to be honest with Viktor, as much as he can be.

Whether he tells Viktor the truth about the future... Yuuri just doesn't know. He is going to try, though.

Viktor, I love you. I'm sorry I can't be with you... but I will stay with the you that remains here, and I will make you happy. I swear it.
Yuuri spins into a stop and lifts his arms upwards in his final pose, smiling as he thinks of his Viktor with that soft, sweet expression on his face. He hopes that his Viktor finds peace, that he moves on with his life and finds happiness again. Yuuri will try his best to do the same... even if it will always hurt, to leave Viktor alone.

His score is even better than his Skate Canada short program, which makes Celestino cheer loudly. Yuuri breathes out a little, glancing down at the stuffed poodle that he picked up from the ice, quietly proud of himself for coming this far. Viktor brought him to this point -- his Viktor, who gave him the confidence Yuuri needed to shine, and this Viktor, who has trusted in his abilities without fail.

"I'm taking you out to dinner tonight for that score, Yuuri!" Celestino says cheerfully, slapping his back, and Yuuri laughs a little, standing to clear the Kiss and Cry.

"Thank you, Celestino," Yuuri says quietly, his gaze going to the opposite side of the rink, where a curtain is hiding the second group. He wonders if Viktor watched. He wishes he knew what upset Viktor, but he will have little opportunity to talk to him until after the short programs are over.

Yuuri leaves Celestino to go upstairs to the skaters' section, sitting down at the end of the front row. He glances at his phone often, but Viktor never messages him, likely either deep in concentration, or because Yakov took his phone again. All through the rest of the short programs, Yuuri worries, barely even noticing when other skaters join him in the stands, the Crispino twins taking the seats beside him.

At last Viktor takes the ice, his figure resplendent in his glittering white tunic and black pants. Yuuri swallows, clutching his phone more rightly. Viktor has on his public mask, no longer looking harried as he did earlier, but Viktor rarely allows himself to look unkempt for his fans. Not even Yuuri can read his thoughts right now.

Lara Fabian's *Immortelle* starts, at the same time that Viktor raises his hands and draws them close to his chest. A shiver runs through Yuuri, reminding him of the first time he saw this program in this life.

At Skate America, Viktor skated it differently than in Yuuri's first life. The song was the same, yet the story he told was different, somehow. Yuuri still can't put his finger on what changed between his first life and this one. The program components are stronger, perhaps in response to the challenge Yuuri set for them both last season. The story feels all the more visceral this time, painful and real.

It could be, simply, that Yuuri is seeing himself in the story, fighting for Viktor and his lost future. Somehow he doesn't think that is entirely the case. Something shifted inside Viktor, something that Yuuri cannot understand because Viktor has yet to share it with him. Yuuri can only hope that, someday, Viktor trusts him enough to tell him... though he wonders if Viktor could even explain the difference.

As the song breaks into its dramatic chorus, another shiver runs through Yuuri, but for another reason. In today's skate, Viktor's skating has changed even more. This is not the same program Viktor skated back at Skate America and Cup of China. Every jump is just a bit more powerful, with an edge of desperation that has replaced the melancholy determination that infused the program previously. Viktor's expression is distant, focused on something only he can see.

Yuuri wonders vaguely what Viktor is fighting for. He covers his mouth, barely breathing as he watches Viktor skate with perfect detail. Viktor really does look amazing on the ice... like he belongs there. Yuuri could watch him skate all day if he could get away with it, and yet...
He knows that Viktor is growing tired of the ice, that he no longer finds meaning in his own skating. Even though Yuuri tried to give Viktor something to strive against, a rival worthy of the skating world's living legend, Viktor is still torn between his desire to continue skating and the limitations of his body and career.

Yuuri will never forget the way Viktor looked when he told Yuuri about his thoughts of retiring.

Yuuri *doesn't want that*, but he is coming to accept that what he wants and what Viktor wants may be very different. All he can do now is support whatever Viktor ultimately decides. He wants Viktor to be happy, and... maybe staying on the ice won't make Viktor happiest, after all. No matter how beautiful his skating is, Viktor may have different dreams. He may want something else entirely.

If only Yuuri could find what that dream is. If it isn't skating... what could it be?

*What will make you happy, Viktor?*

'I am at peace, knowing that you are safe with me in the past. As long as you are happy.'

Yuuri wishes more than anything that he could go back and talk to his Viktor, to ask him his thoughts. Yet Viktor is here now, too, and Yuuri can ask *him*. Viktor will talk to him. Somehow, Viktor has become more open than he was in Yuuri's other future. Maybe because of Yuuri... maybe because of other reasons.

Yet right now... Viktor is closed off from him, lost in his own agony. The pain and despair in his skating feels *real*, and Yuuri wants so badly to reach out to him, to take Viktor in his arms and protect him from everything that weighs him down.

On the ice, Viktor sweeps into his final spin, coming to kneel on the ice, his head bowed in his final pose. Yuuri feels something drip off his face and gasps a little, realizing he is crying. The pain from Viktor's skate has seeped into his thoughts, reminding him of Viktor in the future. Yuuri wonders, briefly, if he ever imagined this sort of connection between the two Viktors before.

He wishes he could go to Viktor right now.

"Are you okay?" asks someone beside him, and Yuuri jerks, turning to see Sara Crispino peering at him in worry, her dark eyes shining a little.

He is still crying. Quickly Yuuri wipes his face with the sleeve of his jacket, nodding. "I'm fine, thanks," Yuuri says quietly, barely managing a polite smile before he stands and hurries to the stairs. Chris is sitting at the end of the row, and he catches Yuuri's jacket briefly, frowning up at him in concern. Yuuri only shakes his head, unable to explain without his voice breaking, and escapes. On his way downstairs, he hears Viktor's score -- higher than his own -- and sighs a little, wondering if he will ever pull ahead of Viktor.

Well, it isn't as if Viktor doesn't deserve it.

Viktor is in interviews when Yuuri finally makes his way downstairs. The smile on his face is chilling -- *fake, fake, fake* -- and Yuuri doesn't manage to catch up to him before he disappears with Yakov down a hallway. Celestino corners him just as Yuuri convinces himself he should follow.

"Didn't I tell you? We're going out to dinner to celebrate your new personal best!" Celestino beams when Yuuri tries to protest.

"That really isn't..."
"Nonsense, Yuuri! You were amazing tonight. What do you want to eat? Seafood?"

Yuuri looks down the hallway and doesn't see any glimpse of Viktor. He sighs and nods. "Okay, Celestino. That sounds fine."

To: Viktor Nikiforov

Did you go back to the hotel?

Viktor doesn't respond immediately. Taking advantage of Yuuri's distraction, Celestino strong-arms him back to his room and into a change of clothes before Yuuri can try to run away. He puts on a pair of jeans, his favorite sweatshirt, and his coat, taking care to bundle up to ward off the Russian winter. By the time Yuuri is ready, he has a response from Viktor.

From: Viktor Nikiforov

Yes, I'm going to rest for a while.

Yuuri bites his lip, torn. Finally he texts Viktor back with a small heart emoji, gets one in return, and goes to find Celestino, his heart aching all the while.

Viktor is upset about something. That much is clear, but he doesn't want to talk about it. Yuuri's anxiety could easily twist it into imagining that Viktor does not trust him, but he knows that is not the truth. Likely, Viktor does not want to unload his own burdens onto Yuuri, either to protect Yuuri from his own mental weakness, or because Viktor is unused to being honest about his feelings.

Yuuri understands. He has trouble being honest, too.

He sends Viktor another heart emoji, but Viktor doesn't reply this time, and so Yuuri goes to dinner.

Celestino's boisterous voice fills the restaurant. Before his coach orders too much beer, as he is likely to do, Yuuri distracts him with a question about next year.

"Celestino," Yuuri begins, playing with the paper from his straw, "since I'm graduating next week, my visa is going to end, and I'd have to renew it to stay. Plus my lease is going to expire, so... um, what would you say if I went back home to Japan to train on my own? For the rest of the season?"

Celestino pauses with his glass halfway to his mouth, raising his eyebrows. "Well, the contract technically depends on your visa, but... what will you do for a coach? I can't come to Japan right now."

"I know." Yuuri swallows, then meets Celestino's curious gaze. "It's just that I haven't been back to see my family in a long time, other than short visits. There's a rink in my hometown where I can train. I know my programs now, and if I have questions, I could send you videos... We could set up a fee for it."

Celestino considers it for a moment, then shrugs. "We can't help it if your visa is going to run out. And I don't need to accept a fee for a few videos, Yuuri, since you paid for the year already. I trust you to take care of yourself. Hey, isn't that ballet instructor of yours still there? Ms. Okugawa? See if she could step in as your coach. I'll still meet you at your competitions."

Yuuri raises his eyebrows, surprised. When he had run away from his responsibilities last time, he never imagined Celestino would be so kind. "You don't have to do that..."

Celestino gives him a grin. "We've been through four seasons together already. I won't let you
finish this one alone, Yuuri. We'll keep in touch by phone and email, alright? I'll reach out to Ms. Okugawa, too, so she can keep an eye on you."

"Thank you, Celestino. It means a lot to me." Yuuri finally smiles, relaxing enough to let himself enjoy dinner. He did score a personal best, after all, and he wouldn't have made it this far without Celestino's support.

On and off all night, Yuuri checks his phone -- but still no messages from Viktor. He does get a few from Chris, expressing his worry over Yuuri's show of emotion earlier, but Yuuri doesn't really explain anything, only telling Chris that he was dealing with some personal issues.

From: Christophe Giacometti
I'm available for a distraction if you need one ;)

From: Christophe Giacometti
Thanks... I think.

From: Christophe Giacometti
In all seriousness, mon ami, I am available if you wish to talk. About your personal issues, or Viktor, or anything else.

Yuuri didn't expect that, but Chris' words warm him anyway. Sometimes he forgets about his other friends, and he really should do better by them. Christophe has looked out for him from the beginning, as often as they clash on the ice. He sends a thank you with a smiling emoji, which earns him half a screen of hearts from Chris.

Smiling, Yuuri shakes his head and goes back to dinner. Later, as they leave the restaurant, Yuuri happens to glance next door, where he sees a window full of pretty, glistening desserts. His eyes widen.

Six months ago, Viktor came to him with a box of cake and a shoulder to lean on, and Yuuri had fallen in love again.

"Um, Celestino, I'm going to walk around for a little bit, if that's okay," Yuuri says. Celestino waves him off merrily, ambling in the direction of the hotel, having had one too many beers already. Yuuri shakes his head, then steps into the patisserie, squaring his shoulders.

Just as his luck demands, Yuuri ends up buying too many desserts. He bemoans his fate all the way back to the hotel, thinking of the pretty little sweets in his bag and wondering if Viktor is going to laugh at him. He meant to buy only one, but then thought that he could get two, one for each of them, so he and Viktor could share them... but then the crème brûlée looked so good...

Nobody must ever know. They would make fun of Yuuri till the end of time.

On his way back to the hotel, Yuuri pulls out his phone to text Viktor.

To: Viktor Nikiforov
Are you busy?

From: Viktor Nikiforov
No, do you want to meet up?

To: Viktor Nikiforov
I'd like to come up to your room
Is that okay?

Viktor takes a longer moment to reply to the last message, finally telling him okay, and Yuuri exhales through his mask, hoping he isn't intruding on Viktor's solitude. He checks his phone frequently all the way up to Viktor's room, but Viktor doesn't send him any other messages.

Finally, Yuuri knocks on Viktor's door. The Viktor who opens it looks tired, his hair messy over his eyes, and Yuuri's heart aches. He looks almost as bad as when he met Yuuri at the Fukuoka airport in their other future.

"I brought dessert," Yuuri mumbles as he steps past Viktor into the room. He tugs off his face mask and stuffs it in his pocket, looking back at Viktor helplessly. "My coach took me out to eat, and there was a patisserie next to the restaurant, and... well, I went overboard. You have to help me eat it all. I think we'll be okay since tomorrow is a practice day..."

Viktor blinks a few times, clearly surprised. Whatever he expected from Yuuri's visit, this was not it. The smile that touches Viktor's lips is warm and honest, though, and Yuuri relaxes a little. "That sounds lovely, Yuuri. Let me clear off that table."

Yuuri sits down on the couch and busies himself with taking out the box of desserts, arranging them neatly on three small golden platters made of cardboard, alongside two sets of plastic silverware and two waters he had grabbed from the lobby. Viktor sinks onto the couch beside him, leaning over to look at the display. His shoulder presses lightly against Yuuri's, and Yuuri swallows a little, allowing himself to lean into Viktor a bit.

"The last time we had dessert together was rather different, wasn't it?" Viktor says quietly.

Yuuri remembers. That night, he had been unable to sleep and had slipped downstairs to avoid keeping Phichit awake, and Viktor had appeared in front of him as if from a dream, bearing a warm smile and a piece of cake. He had comforted Yuuri when he had been miserable over missing his Viktor.

That same night, Viktor had first called him sleeping beauty. The joy and pain those words had brought Yuuri...

He has only cried that hard one other time.

"Is it really?" Yuuri asks, his gaze flicking up to Viktor's face. "I thought..." He clears his throat, reaching up to scratch his cheek nervously. "I thought you were feeling bad, and I wanted to cheer you up. Like you did for me."

Viktor's eyes go wide, as if he did not expect Yuuri to read him so well. To his horror, Viktor's eyes glisten with unshed tears as his gaze drops. Yuuri's heart throbs with worry. He reaches down to touch Viktor's hand, his lips tightening, before he squeezes Viktor's fingers. Then he lets go, giving Viktor a bit of space while he pulls the plastic knives and forks from their little bags.

Yuuri drops his fork in surprise a moment later when Viktor says, unprompted, "I don't think they judged you fairly today. You should be first. My program was horrible. I didn't do it right at all, and..."

Where did this come from?

"But your program was amazing," Yuuri interjects, and Viktor whips around to stare at him, eyes wide. Yuuri stares back at him, bewildered by the very idea that Viktor didn't skate properly today. He briefly considers the idea of being underscored, which has happened to him before, but in this
case, he doesn't think it is true. "It was... it was amazing, Viktor. You deserve first place. Didn't you see how everyone was crying when you finished?"

Viktor shakes his head briefly, his eyes still wide. Yuuri thinks back to the expression on his face when he finished his short program, wondering how he could have missed it. Viktor always pays attention to the audience's responses to his skates. "What? No, nobody was crying, it was..."

Yuuri flushes a little. "Everyone was. Even me." He had been crying so badly that Sara Crispino had noticed, which still leaves him with a hot, humiliated feeling. "Um, if you're talking about how it was different than the preliminaries, well... yes, I think it was, but I don't think it was bad. There was more... um, desperation? The audience could feel your loss and fear, it was like... like you really had lost somebody. That's the story you wanted to tell, right?"

He watches Viktor worriedly as he processes those words, fumbling through an agreement but still disbelieving everything Yuuri is saying. He wonders how deeply Viktor had drawn into himself during his skate. Yuuri has done that before, too -- but he never imagined Viktor would do the same, since Viktor has always been so focused on his performances.

"You don't think so?" Yuuri asks, but Viktor doesn't say anything. "Viktor... is everything okay? This morning you seemed upset, and then..."

Viktor takes a deep breath, a little shaky one that sounds too close to tears, and meets Yuuri's eyes at last. He still looks upset, but something seems a little more at ease within him. "Not really, but I'm not quite able to talk about it at this time. I'm sorry, solnyshko," Viktor says, but Yuuri only shakes his head.

"Okay. When you feel ready to talk about it, I'll be here to listen," Yuuri says quietly, reaching over to take Viktor's hand. Viktor squeezes his fingers back, then picks up his phone and begins to go through it. Yuuri leans over to watch the screen when he realizes that Viktor is pulling up videos of the short programs, already uploaded.

Together, they watch Viktor's short program in silence. His skating is just as beautiful as Yuuri remembers, and he appreciates the close-ups the cameras got of Viktor, even though he doesn't like the expressions Viktor makes through the skates. Still, the program is beautiful, and more than worthy of the score Viktor receives.

Viktor doesn't look like he wants to agree, but finally he gives a short sigh. "I still think you did better," he says churlishly, tossing the phone on the cushion beside him and leaning back into the couch with a huff. His gaze returns to Yuuri quickly, warming as Yuuri laughs a little.

Yuuri is just relieved that Viktor isn't mad about it anymore. Though... he still wonders what upset Viktor this morning. He may never know. "Well, I think you did better, so I guess we'll have to agree to disagree."

"I suppose," Viktor sighs, then sits up and looks at their forgotten desserts. "Now, tell me about what you have brought me, solnyshko. We must be thorough with our treats if we hope to avoid our coaches catching us."

Yuuri cannot help snorting. Skater Viktor is very different from Coach Viktor. Yuuri remembers well the days of suffering under Coach Viktor's strict diet standards, and he has no doubt that Yakov imposes the same threats that his Viktor did. "I won't tell if you won't."

Viktor winks at him, looking much more relaxed now, a smile on his lips. Yuuri has to stop himself from reaching out and brushing the messy hair from his eyes. Instead he turns to their
desserts to explain them.

"That's crème brûlée, and that's a yuzu-ginger tart, I had to get it, and this is..." Yuuri sighs a little, staring down at the chocolate cake, which is made of three layers of different chocolate sponges, each lighter in color than the one beneath it, with a chocolate glaze drizzled across the top, beneath crushed nuts. "A triple chocolate hazelnut cake," Yuuri finishes reluctantly, feeling ashamed of himself. He is so weak to food. If Viktor was coaching him right now, he would have already lectured Yuuri within an inch of his life.

As Yuuri explains, Viktor picks up his phone again and takes several pictures from different angles, making Yuuri roll his eyes. "Sounds delicious," Viktor says, chuckling. He leaves the phone on the table, then reaches for one of the forks. "What shall we try first?"

"You pick," Yuuri says, his gaze lingering on the yuzu-ginger tart. Viktor notices immediately and reaches for that one first, sliding the plastic knife through the center. It cuts like a dream. Yuuri might whimper a little.

"These are small enough we could eat them with our fingers," Viktor muses, then forgoes his fork and picks up his half of the tart. Yuuri's eyes go wide when Viktor's lips wrap around the creamy yellow dessert, and he does whimper when Viktor licks his lips.

This was a very bad idea.

"Oh, it's very tangy," Viktor says, blinking.

"That would be the yuzu," Yuuri says weakly, picking up his own half of the little tart and gently scooping up the tiny bit that oozes out. He licks it off his finger and sighs at the heavenly taste. Delicately sour yet sweet at the same time, the ginger gentles the bite of yuzu. Yuuri hasn't tasted something this good in a long time.

Viktor is staring at him. Yuuri shoots him a defensive look. "I like yuzu, okay? My dad would make tuna tataki for New Years every year, and he always made his own ponzu sauce with fresh yuzu fruit, and it was amazing, okay? Don't judge me."

"I'm not," Viktor says, his eyes sparkling with laughter. "I've never had yuzu before. I'd love to try your dad's cooking."

"You'd probably like it," Yuuri mumbles in between bites, thinking of the long evenings where his father would cook all sorts of traditional Japanese foods for Viktor to try, all while Yuuri looked on longingly as he tried to ignore his own "healthy" dinner. He hopes never to eat another bowl of broccoli and brussel sprouts ever again.

His parents had really loved Viktor. Yuuri hopes to introduce him to them again someday -- properly, this time.

"Oh, you missed a crumb," Viktor teases, picking up a bit of crust from Yuuri's sweatshirt and popping it into his mouth. Yuuri narrows his eyes a little, and Viktor winks at him.

"Let's try the crème brûlée next," Yuuri says after a moment, rolling his eyes. Viktor beams at him and cleans off the plastic knife, before cracking the end of it on top of the crisp topping of the dessert, smiling as it breaks apart. This time they use spoons to scoop up the creamy treat.

"Perfect. You know how they make the top crunchy, don't you?" Viktor asks after he swallows, a small noise escaping him.
Yuuri shakes his head. "A blow torch, right? They melt the sugar?"

"Sometimes, yes. They also make caramel separately and pour it on top, then either broil it or use a torch on that. If they do it just right, it tastes heavenly." Viktor picks up a piece of the caramelized sugar, biting into it and licking the cream off his fingers. Yuuri averts his gaze before he can let himself stare, stubbornly not thinking of how talented that tongue is at other things. "For the very large ramekins, they use a flamethrower."

"They do not," Yuuri says, shaking his head in disbelief. Viktor can't actually expect him to believe that.

Viktor gives him a solemn stare. "They do. I once saw a confectioner wield a flamethrower half his size for a crème brûlée meant for a party of forty people."

His eyes are twinkling. He has to be lying. Yuuri can't help but imagine it though, and he has to cover his mouth when he starts laughing. "Viktor, that's definitely not true!"

"It is," Viktor insists, then spends the next several minutes trying to convince Yuuri that there are monasteries in the French mountains that instruct young confectioners on how to use flamethrowers, blow torches, and other fire-wielding tools to craft the finest desserts. Yuuri doesn't believe a word of it; he knows Viktor is just trying to reassure him that he is alright, and yet he can't stop giggling at the faces Viktor makes and the grand details he makes up for his story.

"I wish I had a flamethrower here," Yuuri shortles, wiping at his eyes. Viktor offers him a water, and Yuuri drinks from the plastic bottle gladly, wiping his mouth with his sleeve afterwards. He leans forward to set it on the table. "It's too cold here. Here and Detroit, it's always so cold."

"Should I get you a sweater for your birthday?" Viktor suggests, brightening, and Yuuri flushes a little. "Or a scarf, perhaps?"

"You don't need to get me anything," Yuuri says quickly, for perhaps the tenth time in the past two weeks. He cannot trust Viktor with a credit card. Who knows what he would buy for Yuuri if given the chance? "I just want warmer weather. I miss Hasetsu."

"Japan gets snow too, though," Viktor says, smiling at him. Yuuri is content to sit close to Viktor like this, pressed against his side and soaking in his warmth. The tension is gone from Viktor's shoulders, his eyes bright with happiness as he watches Yuuri.

"It's still closer to the equator than Detroit and Russia," Yuuri tells him flatly. Viktor only chuckles, pressing his leg against Yuuri's affectionately, and after a moment, Yuuri presses back, his heart beating a bit faster. After August, when Yuuri had rejected Viktor, he had thought he had lost this closeness. It feels good to sit with Viktor like this.

"Then I will keep you warm, my sleeping beauty. Shall we try our last dessert? Chocolate hazelnut, you said?"

Yuuri fights off a blush. "Right, um... yes. That's right." He leans forward to slice the cake in half, pushing one half onto one of the empty cardboard pieces, then hands the other to Viktor. Viktor smiles at him as he investigates the cake, turning it to look at the layers inside.

"Lovely! This is quite the decadent treat. If I was your coach, I would have you doing laps around the block for the rest of the night just to work this off."

"It's December!" Yuuri protests, shocked. Viktor had done exactly that, in another future. He valiantly ignores the thought of Viktor coaching him again. "I'd freeze, Viktor! You wouldn't send
"Discipline is important, Yuuri," Viktor says solemnly, then spoils it by winking at him. "We'll just have to practice extra hard tomorrow."

"Of course," Yuuri says, a small smile finding its way to his lips, despite his best attempt to frown.

The last cake is enjoyed thoroughly, and Yuuri feels himself growing flushed whenever Viktor licks his lips of chocolate. Being this close to Viktor is slowly reigniting his long-buried sexual drive, which was only ever active for Viktor in the first place. Yet Yuuri can't -- because he and Viktor are not together, no matter how much Yuuri wants it. He doesn't think either of them are ready to be together, let alone that sort of intimacy.

Instead, he keeps his desires to himself. A warm, comfortable feeling settles between him and Viktor, hours passing until they have talked themselves hoarse and are simply enjoying each other's company.

Viktor is resting his head against the couch, his eyes closed, a small smile on his lips. Yuuri watches that little smile, his heart full of emotions which he can name too easily. Love for Viktor, who is utterly beautiful in this peaceful mood between them. Worry about falling for him again. Anxiety about the future and what it might bring, if Yuuri crosses the space between them, to meet Viktor where he is again.

Hope, that Viktor will accept him and love him as he did in their other future.

This last emotion gives him a spark of bravery. Yuuri isn't ready to be romantic yet, but... he misses this closeness, and he misses Viktor. Thoughts of his dream again spur him on, reminding him of his promise to Viktor, of his own desire to be intimate with him again. It would be okay to open up their relationship a little more.

Yuuri leans in before Viktor can open his eyes, to kiss him on his cheek. To his surprise, Viktor moves at the same time to look at him, and instead of his cheek, Yuuri's lips brush Viktor's, which sends him flailing back in shocked embarrassment. Viktor's eyes fly open to stare at him, just as surprised.

"U-um, I meant!" Yuuri hastens to explain, stumbling over his words. Viktor hasn't said anything, and Yuuri's face is on fire. "That was, I meant, I was trying to k-k-kiss your cheek! Not, not that, um, I'm sorry, I --"

A finger touches his chin, and Yuuri shuts his mouth, staring at Viktor with wide eyes as his surprise melts away into a smile -- a very familiar smile, slow and seductive. He dares not move as Viktor leans in to kiss his cheek in return, close enough to his mouth for Yuuri's lips to brush Viktor's skin. A heady tingle rushes through him, leaving him flushed and wanting.

Viktor pulls away, his smile widening. "Like that?" he asks, and Yuuri cannot handle him anymore. He groans and covers his hot cheeks, slumping to the side of the couch.

"Viktor, you're too much..." He can hear Viktor laugh under his breath, and a warm hand runs down his back before Viktor stands up.

"I should be saying that to you," Viktor murmurs, and only then does Yuuri dare to peek between his fingers, noticing that Viktor also looks flushed. His heart leaps, realizing that Viktor is just as affected by their flirting as he is, and that thought inexplicably calms him down.

With a small sigh, Yuuri sits up and sets himself to helping Viktor clean up. Once the table is clean
of crumbs and napkins, Yuuri goes to collect his belongings. He sits down on the floor to tie his shoes, his knee brushing against his warm cheek.

*I can't believe him sometimes...*

He glances up in time to see Viktor pointing his phone at Yuuri, clearly taking a picture of his embarrassment, and Yuuri gasps. "Viktor, no! Don't post that online!" He jumps up and grabs for the phone, but Viktor plays dirty and holds it above his head, laughing as Yuuri struggles against him.

"I won't, I won't! It's for me!"

"That's even worse!"

They grapple for a few minutes until Yuuri successfully steals the phone. The damage isn't too bad; a couple dozen pictures of their night together, and none of them have made it to Instagram. Good. Yuuri nods in satisfaction and tosses the phone onto the bed, out of Viktor's reach, then sighs deeply and rests his head against Viktor's shoulder.

This close, Yuuri catches Viktor's scent, familiar and inviting. It would be so easy to give in... but Yuuri can't. Not yet.

"You're not fair," Yuuri whispers, closing his eyes for a moment. It isn't fair that he cannot let himself be with Viktor. More than anything... Yuuri wants, and he is afraid of how strong that want is, to be with Viktor.

"So you say," Viktor says quietly, and the faintest tremble to his voice tells Yuuri that he is just as affected.

Somewhere in another future, Viktor is all alone... but here, he is alive, warm, and just as amazing as Yuuri has always known. Here, he cares so much for Yuuri, and yet...

If Yuuri retires, he will have to give this up. If Viktor retires, and Yuuri doesn't ask him to be his coach... what else would keep them together?

His heart aching, Yuuri allows himself one more moment of Viktor's warmth. Viktor's hand slides up to rest on his back, pulling him closer for a moment, and Yuuri bites down on his lip, struggling not to lean up and kiss Viktor properly. He misses him so much, and being close to Viktor like this... it is far too tempting.

Yuuri sighs a little and pulls away; then Viktor surprises him once more, by lifting his hand and kissing his palm, in an undoubtedly romantic gesture. Yuuri can only stare, his face heating up again.

"Good luck on your free skate, Yuuri," Viktor murmurs, his lips curling upwards. Yuuri's skin is still tingling where those tempting lips had left a kiss. "I'm not going to relinquish gold to you easily."

Yuuri inhales softly, yanked back to reality by Viktor's words. They are in a competition against each other. As much close as he is to Viktor now, as much as they flirt and dance around each other... he is more determined than ever to win. He will change his future, no matter what he has to do.

*I'm not going to lose again!"
"I'm not going to let you win," Yuuri tells him. He isn't going to let Sochi be the same. He is going to change his future, for the better. For himself, and for Viktor.

"I look forward to it," Viktor says, lowering their hands. Yuuri hesitates, then squeezes Viktor's fingers, reaching for the door. He doesn't want to leave, but he knows they both need to sleep.

"Good night, Viktor," Yuuri finally says. He isn't brave enough to try another kiss, but he gives Viktor a smile, watching those beautiful blue eyes brighten with warmth, before he lets Viktor go and opens the door.

"Good night, sleeping beauty," Viktor says, returning his smile with a soft gaze. He looks leagues better than when Yuuri came to him hours ago. Yuuri hopes that this feeling stays with Viktor for the rest of the competition, and that whatever bothered him this morning doesn't return to haunt him.

Yuuri's smile widens, before he finally leaves Viktor alone and heads back to his own room. All the while he thinks of Viktor's smile, of the things he could not say, and of the kisses Viktor gave him.

Viktor kissed him.

Yuuri kissed Viktor.

Yuuri's face heats up just thinking about it. He reaches his door quickly and hurries inside, then tiredly sheds his winter clothes and his shoes, before falling face first onto the bed. Yuuri kissed Viktor. It wasn't a real kiss, but... Yuuri has rarely done such a thing to anybody, not even his own Viktor, who was often the instigator for kisses. Maybe in time he would have become more open with that kind of intimacy, but...

Yuuri squirms a little, his heart racing as he thinks of Viktor kissing him. So slowly, seductively, with Yuuri watching his every move... it still sends heat shuddering through him. All Yuuri had to do was turn his head and kiss Viktor back... he could have kissed Viktor, could have pressed against him and...

Yuuri groans and turns onto his back, staring up at the ceiling and not seeing it at all.

Shit, he's getting turned on. All over a tiny little kiss! On the cheek, no less!

Plus when Viktor kissed his hand...

Yuuri bites down on his lip, remembering Viktor leaning in, the softness of his lips against his cheek. He licks his bottom lip, then presses his tongue to the corner of his lips, where Viktor had touched him. It isn't the same, but he can imagine Viktor's taste now, that addictive sweetness which drove Yuuri crazy in another life.

He shudders. He really shouldn't be thinking about this. It was just a kiss.

It means everything to Yuuri.

Yuuri misses being with him. He misses that intimacy, long nights at Viktor's side, exploring his body and learning each of the things that made Viktor gasp and moan. Viktor had not been short of kisses, either, happy to drop a kiss on his hair, or to kiss him in the mornings, or to whisper nonsense to him between sweet, hot kisses that burned through Yuuri. He had loved to press Yuuri to any available surface and ravage his mouth until Yuuri was desperate for more... and Yuuri misses it.
He had really dreamed of being with Viktor again, too. His Viktor, the Viktor he left behind -- Yuuri had been with him again, and it had been wondrous, falling into Viktor's arms and making love with him. The marks had been gone when he woke, but Yuuri will always remember that feeling of joy from being with him.

"Viktor," Yuuri whispers, then covers his mouth with a groan. Viktor isn't even his anymore! Yet... Yuuri still dreams of him, still thinks of him whenever he thinks about sex. Truth be told, he rarely thinks about sex these days, but when he does... it's always about Viktor.

Viktor making love with him.

"Fuck me," Yuuri sighs, then reaches down to undo the button on his jeans. He might as well get it out of his system. He lifts his hips to wriggle his pants and sweatshirt off, leaving them on the floor, then unbuttons his boxers and slips his hand inside to stroke himself. The same hand that Viktor's lips touched just a little while ago.

His mind returns to Viktor earlier, leaning in to return his simple kiss on the cheek -- only now Yuuri imagines Viktor tilting his chin up for a real kiss. Yuuri would welcome the kiss, opening up for Viktor in need, and Viktor would tug Yuuri into his arms, sliding his hands down Yuuri's backside.

Yuuri shudders and moves his hand faster. He thinks back to when he and Viktor shared a hot tub, and the scene in his head changes to the two of them in the same position in the hot tub, kissing Viktor desperately. Having Viktor's heated skin under his hands, while Viktor happily touches him as he wishes... Yuuri wants.

"Viktor, please," he whimpers, tightening his grip. It feels illicit saying Viktor's name out loud, but Viktor is four floors down and will never hear him. In his fantasy, Viktor wouldn't be thorough, taking Yuuri apart piece by piece with his hands and lips. Instead, in the heat of the moment, he would be desperate, because Yuuri would be insistent.

Yuuri is impatient when it comes to anything sexual. He doesn't like taking his time; he would rather get it over with, but Viktor taught him about patience, about taking things slowly, drawing out the pleasure until both of them are shuddering. Yuuri could trick him sometimes, though, into going fast and hard, with needy words. He would beg. He would plead. Most of the time, Viktor would give him what he wanted, but after quite a while of buildup -- and sometimes, Viktor would respond immediately.

Yuuri imagines it now. Viktor dragging off his swim trunks and reaching down to touch him... it would feel amazing. Viktor's strength, holding him in place, while Yuuri tries to distract him, to pleasure him...

He suddenly remembers Viktor from his dream the other night, leaning over him with a beautiful smirk.

His orgasm takes him by surprise. Yuuri gasps and covers his mouth over his moan, lifting his hips as he trembles, feeling heat splash on his stomach. As the waves of pleasure ebb away, Yuuri opens his eyes and looks down, blushing bright red to see that he has left a mess all over his shirt and boxer briefs.

Gingerly he sits up and hurries to the bathroom to sort himself out, his face burning with shame.

All because of Viktor.
Friday is spent in the practice rink and in meetings. Viktor is busy with sponsors for much of the day, and so Yuuri goes to practice alone, running through his program until Celestino thinks they are perfect. Celestino even lets him do quads; likely to his amazement, Yuuri has not collapsed in an anxious mess like he has done many times in years past.

Occasionally, Yuuri will take out his phone to look at Vicchan, alive and well. Mari sent him several pictures the other day of Vicchan playing with her new phone charm, and Yuuri immediately set one as his background. Having that reminder that Vicchan is safe, and that this Sochi is different, keeps Yuuri grounded.

He is surprised, though, when he is cornered by two different people during the day. The first, of all people, is JJ, looking unusually serious as he approaches Yuuri near the end of practice.

Yuuri straightens from his stretch, turning around to face JJ with a small frown. JJ has not spoken to him in half a year, ever since he went back to Toronto to train with his parents. Yuuri well remembers the antagonism between them, and he hopes that it will not repeat today.

"Yuuri Katsuki," JJ says, scraping to a stop. Yuuri rolls his eyes a bit as some ice sprays across his legs, reaching down to pat it off. "Ah, sorry."

Yuuri pauses, giving JJ another look, trying to see into his intentions. JJ usually doesn't bother apologizing if he is intent on bothering someone. "Hello, JJ."

"I admit, I was surprised when you made it this far," JJ tells him, putting a hand on his hip. "You were always a mess during practice in Detroit. But here I am, wrong. Your skating is quite beautiful."

Yuuri isn't sure what to make of his words, much less the compliment buried beneath an insult. Is JJ trying to start a fight? Yuuri watches him for a moment, noticing how JJ shifts under the scrutiny, before finally thinking of a reply. "Considering the trouble you got me into at Worlds because of my third quad, I find it a little hard to believe that you think that."

"Well, I might have had a change of heart," JJ says, and amazingly, something in his expression softens as he glances over his shoulder.

Yuuri follows the motion to where the Leroys are standing, talking with a young woman. He doesn't recognize her for a moment, then realizes abruptly that she is Isabella Yang, JJ's current girlfriend and future fiancée. He doesn't know a lot about her, only what JJ posts on social media, but he does know that in his other future, JJ became a lot less abrasive after he started dating someone. For the most part, anyway.

"Growing up will do that to you," JJ says, and amazingly, something in his expression softens as he glances over his shoulder.

JJ's broad smile fades a little. "Perhaps my younger self was not the most polite, but I was well meaning! In any case, I've learned a great deal since I started college. Not least of which is my quad lutz!"

Yuuri wants to roll his eyes. The entire skating world knows about JJ's third quad; he doesn't need to brag about it. "So you say," Yuuri replies, watching Isabella look past the Leroys at JJ, then meeting JJ's gaze. "Well, good luck to you on your free skate, JJ."

"And to you, Yuuri Katsuki." Yet JJ does not leave, and Yuuri wonders if he should skate away first. He needs to go clean up and talk with Celestino, but he waits JJ out, sensing that he has
So JJ does. "About Viktor Nikiforov," JJ says after a moment, making Yuuri stiffen and frown at him, which JJ ignores. "Should you really be so close to the enemy? Not all of your fans like it, for either of you."

"Enemy," Yuuri repeats, then covers his mouth as a laugh escapes. JJ looks completely flummoxed, which only increases Yuuri's amusement. "This isn't a war or anything, JJ, we're just competing against each other. Anyway, Viktor is important to me, and I'm not going to stop anything just because people don't approve of us. It's not up to them."

After a long moment of blinking at him, JJ clears his throat. "Well said, well said!" JJ says, a grin appearing as he claps Yuuri on the back. "Don't let the world get you down! Well, no matter what's going on between you two, we will have a good competition tomorrow, won't we?"

"Indeed," Yuuri replies, putting on a small smile. "Everything will be decided on the ice."

"Tomorrow, then. Look forward to my skate, Yuuri Katsuki!" Finally JJ skates away and leaves Yuuri alone, staring blankly after him.

Yuuri sighs and shakes his head, heading over to meet Celestino. JJ has never made much sense to him. He appreciates the fact that JJ is no longer antagonizing him, but he wonders how long it will last.

The second person to approach him is, perhaps unsurprisingly, Christophe, when Yuuri is about to leave the stadium and return to the hotel.

"Yuuri," he hears, seconds before a hand slides over his backside, making him yelp. "You haven't talked to me in so long. I've been so lonely," Chris murmurs into his ear.

"I had dinner with you on Wednesday," Yuuri protests, trying to get away from Chris' wandering hand. Christophe chuckles and lets him go, patting his shoulder.

"So you did, but with others, too. Perhaps today, I can steal you for lunch?" Chris asks with a friendly smile, and Yuuri can't help but think of Viktor's texts, apologizing for being unable to meet him, as he is having lunch with another sponsor.

"I was just thinking of getting something from the hotel restaurant," Yuuri says half-heartedly. Chris' smile widens.

"That sounds perfect."

"Alright," Yuuri sighs, then glances at his phone out of habit and panics. "Oh, no, the bus is about to leave! Come on, Chris!"

Chris follows him, laughing. They barely make the bus, the attendant rolling his eyes as Yuuri slides over his suitcase full of skating equipment. Chris waltzes on after him, taking over the seat beside him and giving Yuuri a smile.

"You're a hard man to get ahold of at competitions, these days," Chris comments, almost too evenly, and Yuuri gives him a sharp look.

"Why do you say that?" Yuuri asks after a moment.

"Well, you keep disappearing ever since Viktor ensnared you... or did you ensnare him?" Chris
raises an eyebrow, a smirk touching his lips.

Yuuri stares at him for another moment, thinking suddenly that Christophe really is fixated on Viktor. Had he really not thought about it, in his other future? Chris had said, more than once, that his motivation was Viktor. Yuuri wonders if he ever really paid attention to Christophe's attachment to Viktor, then guiltily thinks he hadn't.

He never found out how Chris reacted to Yuuri taking silver from him at Worlds last season. Chris didn't seem upset with him when he visited in August, but... Chris can hide his thoughts even better than Yuuri can.

Abruptly, Yuuri realizes he hasn't responded. "I don't think it's a matter of ensnaring," he says quietly, his cheeks warming a little. He still doesn't quite know why Viktor sought him out in this life; yet he is grateful for it anyway.

Chris lets the moment pass, turning their conversation to other topics, which relieves Yuuri. They make it to the hotel in peace, and Yuuri heads up to his room to drop off his skates and change, promising to meet Chris downstairs.

He finds a message from Viktor waiting for him on his phone.

From: Viktor Nikiforov
This meeting is so boring! They want to do another fragrance release. I don't even like their fragrances!

To: Viktor Nikiforov
Then tell them so

From: Viktor Nikiforov
But then they wouldn't buy me lunch ;P and I'm so hungry.
We're eating at a lovely four star restaurant

To: Viktor Nikiforov
You sound like me, talking about food...

From: Viktor Nikiforov
Guess you're rubbing off on me!

"I wish," Yuuri mutters, his face heating up as he remembers the night before. Surely Viktor has no idea. Surely he is only teasing. Yuuri had slept like a log afterwards, but he had woken up feeling guilty and horrified at himself for getting aroused in the first place. Thankfully he hasn't faced Viktor at all today, instead only exchanging messages with him.

Yuuri isn't sure he can look Viktor in the face for a while.

To: Viktor Nikiforov
I'm going to have lunch with Chris. I'm sure it won't be as good as your four star meal though

From: Viktor Nikiforov
I'll have to bring you here next time ♡

Yuuri shakes his head with a faint blush, thinking a date with Viktor would be very nice. As much as he likes to protest, he always did enjoy it when his Viktor spoiled him. No matter how far back in time Yuuri goes, Viktor is still as giving and sweet as Yuuri remembers him.
After tucking his phone in his pocket, Yuuri grabs his wallet and heads downstairs to meet Chris. He gets distracted on the elevator ride by the selfie Viktor sends him, the heart in his smile wide and sweet, making Yuuri remember the fact that Viktor kissed him last night—and Yuuri kissed Viktor as well.

He needs to stop thinking about that. Chris has a habit of picking out his thoughts, as if Yuuri wears his heart on his sleeve, and Yuuri doesn't want to give him any ammunition. To his surprise, the restaurant is already half-full of people who want to avoid the cafeteria at the stadium, and Yuuri gratefully slides into the booth Chris is saving, exhaling.

"You're blushing," Chris says, his smile appearing as Yuuri sits down. Yuuri reaches up to his warm cheek, then sighs.

"Am not," he mutters, picking up his menu to look through it. His face does feel a bit warm.
"Where's Masumi?"

"Napping upstairs. He had a late night, poor dear," Chris says with a faint smirk, and Yuuri can't help but roll his eyes. Any response he has is cut off by the server appearing, and Yuuri gratefully gives his order.

They sit quietly for a moment after their drinks are set on the table. Chris doesn't look away from him, his chin set on the palm of his hand. "You've changed, you know."

"You've said that to me before," Yuuri says quietly. Chris had caught Yuuri unaware in Detroit, and he feels unsure now, wondering what Chris has seen. He forgets, most of the time, how observant Chris really is.

"It's true, though. It's not a bad thing. Viktor has changed a little, too," Chris adds, almost too casually, and Yuuri smiles a little at the thought. "I wonder if it was really a good idea to introduce you two. It's strange seeing him turn to a person instead of the ice."

Yuuri looks at Chris a little sharply for that. He has no idea what to say for a moment. He wonders how Chris has the gall to assume that he had anything to do with Yuuri's encounters with Viktor. A second later, shame sweeps through him, as he remembers the dinner where Chris conned him and Phichit into eating with Viktor.

He has no idea what lies between me and Viktor. He doesn't know.

Yuuri breathes out a little, relaxing. Chris will never understand why it was inevitable for Yuuri to meet Viktor, to know him and befriend him and fall in love with him all over again. He has no idea that Yuuri lived the future, nor any of what happened between him and Viktor there. Yuuri will never tell him, either; the only person who deserves to know any of that is Viktor himself.

Chris is still watching him. Yuuri meets his eyes evenly, a small whirl of anxiety twisting his stomach, but he holds himself steady. "Viktor and I would have ended up in each other's orbit no matter what, Chris. Although I'm happy that you did help us meet, even if the way you did it was ridiculous." He smiles a little, and after a moment Chris returns the smile, some small worry in his gaze fading. "Does it bother you?"

The words catch Chris off-guard. "Bother?" he repeats, staring at Yuuri. "No, of course not. I just..." His smile widens a little, turning melancholy, which surprises Yuuri. "I suppose I'm a bit jealous. The two of you have always been my top rivals. You when we were younger, and now Viktor too... and suddenly, it's as if you only see each other. It makes me feel a little lonely."
Yuuri doesn't know what to say for a moment. "I'm sorry, Chris. It's just... Viktor has been my goal for years, even before I knew you. I don't want to let him go."

"Hm... so has it gotten that serious, then?" Chris asks, stirring the ice in his glass with his straw. He doesn't respond to Yuuri's other comment, but Yuuri didn't expect him to.

Yuuri determinedly does not think of soft lips against his cheek. "I'm always serious about Viktor."

"I should have figured. You know, I never thought you two would hit it off so well," Chris muses, picking his glass to sip the fizzy drink. Yuuri almost flinches, then sighs, knowing that he and Viktor are quite unlikely as a couple, or even as coach and skater. Chris hadn't believed it in the future, either.

"We have, though. And I'm not changing it for anyone," Yuuri says, meeting Chris' gaze boldly. He refuses to back down from this; he has always been selfish concerning Viktor, and his desire to keep Viktor to himself is even worse now that he has lost him once. He will not lose Viktor again.

Chris blinks a few times, then smiles slowly, more softly. "You don't have to, mon cher. I might be sticking my nose where it doesn't belong. I'm sorry, Yuuri."

Yuuri shakes his head a little, finally unbending. "It's okay. I know people what people are saying about us. But I'm happy with what I have with him, even if nobody understands."

"I understand," Chris says quietly, and Yuuri nods, accepting the kindness. He suspects Christophe does understand, far more than anybody else, even if he will never completely comprehend everything between Yuuri and Viktor. It's nice to have the support of his longtime friend at least.

One thing does bother him, though. After a moment, Yuuri leans forward, meeting Chris' gaze again. "Chris, you should know that I have always taken you seriously. I look forward to your skate tomorrow."

For a moment Chris is silent, staring at him in surprise, before a smile blossoms on his face, much more honest than the ones he was wearing before. Chris reaches across the table to clasp Yuuri's hand, his eyes sparkling with a pleased sort of humor. "I'll be happy to show you, my dear. By the way, are you prepared for Sunday? I was thinking of asking one of my sponsors to bring a pole for the banquet --"

Yuuri tries not to blush. He doesn't think he succeeds very well. "No! Absolutely not! You said you wouldn't tell anyone about that, Chris!"

"No?" Chris laughs, picking up his phone and sending off a text. "Pity, because I'm certain Viktor would love to see the results of that particular training." He grins, and Yuuri shakes his head with a sigh. Chris never changes, and Yuuri doesn't want him to.

"No stripper poles," Yuuri insists. He still doesn't know what all he did on the stripper pole with Chris at the banquet in his other future, and he has no intention of recreating the event. Even if Viktor would enjoy it.

~*~

On the morning of the free skate, Yuuri wakes early. His dreams were typical for the night before a performance, which is a relief; he hasn't felt comfortable with his dreams ever since his vision of Viktor the other night. Every time he lays his head down to sleep, his mind flashes back to Viktor, alone in a cold world. It often takes him a long time to fall asleep.
With a small sigh, Yuuri slides on his glasses and picks up his phone, checking for messages. He sees a few from his family and Phichit, wishing him luck, and one from Viktor, from ten minutes ago, with a picture of the horizon, brightening with dawn.

From: Viktor Nikiforov  
_In case you miss it, my sleeping beauty: another beautiful Russian morning!_  

Yuuri smiles a little and slips out of bed, rubbing at his arms as he crosses to the window. When he pulls the curtain aside, he is granted the lovely vision of the sky turning a deep, warm golden color. It feels his heart with purpose.

_**I'll have that in my hands tonight.**_

He snaps a picture and sends it to Viktor, then posts it on Instagram as well, closing his hands in determination as he lowers his phone. Maybe not everything hinges on this competition, but to Yuuri, it means the world. The GPF stands for all of his failures as well as his desires. If he can change the outcome of this competition, then he can change his future.

He has to win. Standing on the same ice as Viktor, defeating the cold memories of Russia and the humiliation he suffered... Yuuri has no choice but to keep going forward. Whatever brought him back in time has given him this chance to redeem himself. If he can do this, he can do anything.

Yuuri gazes out the window at the golden horizon, then turns away, squaring his shoulders. He can do this.

~*~

Most of the day is spent at Celestino's side, engaged in flexibility training, or busying himself with texting Viktor, who has been corralled by Yakov for once. Viktor's whining amuses Yuuri, but he doesn't let the messages distract him too much.

At one point during a break, Yuuri goes to a remote corner of the training room and calls his family in Japan, using the video call feature with his headphones in. Minako-**sensei** is with them, and she laments loudly in the background about failing to get tickets, while his mother smiles at him.

"We will stay up and watch, Yuuri. We're cheering for you," his mother says, beaming. "Minako-**senpai** is with us, and Vicchan will cheer you on, too!" She lifts Vicchan into the camera's view, who barks happily at the phone screen. Yuuri melts a little.

"Thank you, mom," Yuuri says quietly, loving the sight of Vicchan wriggling to get closer to his image. He is so, so lucky that they were able to save Vicchan. He can't wait to see his dog again.

"Vicchan, be good for mom and dad, okay? I'll see you soon!"

"Oh? Are you coming home, Yuuri?" Hiroko asks, brightening, and Yuuri glances across the room at Celestino, who is deep in conversation with another coach.

"I talked it over with my coach, and he's agreed to let me come back to Japan to train. After I graduate, I'll move home," Yuuri says, watching his mother light up with joy.

"That's wonderful, Yuuri! Toshiya! Did you hear? Yuuri's coming home!" Hiroko squeals, turning away from the camera. Yuuri hears his dad's voice in the background calling, "Good, good!" and laughs a little. His mother looks back at him with a wide smile. "I'll make you your favorite _katsudon_ when you get here!"
"Not until I win," Yuuri admonishes, laughing. "And I will win, mom. I promise."

He ends the call a few minutes later, leaning back against the wall where he is crouched, sighing. From mending his relationships with his family to saving Vicchan, Yuuri cannot believe his good luck sometimes. Everything that was wrong before, he has tried to fix, and to his amazement, his efforts are actually working.

Coming back in time has given him so much, as much as he has lost. Losing Viktor... and still, he has gotten Viktor back, in a different way. He has Vicchan, and he has his family and friends. In that regard, Yuuri is very lucky.

He refuses to let this chance slip through his fingers.

Humming, Yuuri turns his music back on, closing his eyes as he listens to his free skate song. A few minutes later, something jostles his shoulder, and he startles and turns to find Viktor sitting next to him with a grin.

"Caught you," Viktor says in a low voice that sends a shiver through Yuuri. He laughs softly and pulls out one headphone, smiling at Viktor.

"Did Yakov lose you?" Yuuri asks, amused, and Viktor sighs dramatically.

"I had to get away! He was tormenting me, Yuuri! Lecturing me and putting me through insane exercises. You understand, right? Right, Yuuri?" Viktor leans into his side, looking pleadingly at him, and Yuuri bites down on his laughter.

*Sounds familiar,* he thinks wryly, remembering the occasionally torturous training Coach Viktor put him through. "I won't tell him you're here," Yuuri says solemnly, nearly caving when Viktor gasps in relief and throws his arms around Yuuri's shoulders.

"You're amazing, Yuuri! My savior," Viktor sighs, and Yuuri breaks. He starts laughing, drawing attention from around the room, but he never notices, because Viktor is laughing, too. Yuuri is glad to see it, after Viktor's upset mood the other day.

He loves seeing Viktor like this, free of the mask that he wears for the public. Yuuri is one of the few people who gets to see this side of Viktor; and really... he doubts anyone else has gotten to see it, at this point in time. In the future, Viktor had opened up more to his friends after getting to know Yuuri and coming to accept this part of himself, but now... Yuuri must be the only person Viktor trusts like this.

It warms Yuuri, to know that Viktor trusts him so much.

"Are you ready for tonight?" Yuuri asks, pulling his legs up and wrapping his arms around them.

Viktor's laughter fades to a smile, keeping his eyes on Yuuri. He leans back against the wall, spinning a water bottle on the floor between his legs. "I am. Are you, Yuuri? I can't wait to see your skate in person."

"I can't wait to show you, Viktor," Yuuri murmurs with a small blush. "I want you to watch me... watch my skate, I mean."

Viktor smiles slowly, a hint of his usual flirtatiousness in the expression. "I'll watch you. I won't take my eyes off you, Yuuri."

Yuuri is distracted from responding by a familiar disgruntled call from across the room. "Vitya!"
"Oh no, he found me," Viktor whispers, winking before climbing to his feet. "Yakov! What a surprise to see you here!" Viktor saunters over to Yakov, who gives a heavy sigh before beginning to admonish him. Yuuri hides a laugh in his knee, watching Viktor disappear to the other side of the expansive training room.

After a moment Yuuri stands and stretches, ready to continue. He notices then that one of the cameramen is stationed nearby, casually filming him, which makes him flush in wonder. Did they film him and Viktor together?

Yuuri takes a deep breath, gives a little wave to the camera, then goes to find Celestino. Whether or not the world is watching doesn't matter. He and Viktor don't need to hide anything, even if he suspects they will be judged regardless.

Social media is already in a frenzy over their friendship and possible relationship. Ever since Worlds, their fans have been engaged in intense speculation over whether or not Yuuri and Viktor are actually dating. Yuuri has mostly ignored it, even when Phichit sends him interesting updates, as he became used to the rumors in his other future when he and Viktor actually were in a relationship. He knows his stance of not responding has puzzled some of his fans, who are used to him being a complete mess with the media.

Yuuri just doesn't care anymore. He will stay with Viktor no matter what his fans want, and truly, the ones who care about him will continue to support him and accept that Viktor is part of his life. He knows that from experience; on the other hand, Viktor's fans will be and have always been a possible danger. If Viktor quits skating, they will turn their anger on Yuuri.

Thankfully, he has never been physically targeted, but he received plenty of angry messages and posts in his other future, after Viktor had chosen to become Yuuri's coach. Yuuri hadn't responded to them, on Viktor's advice, but he hadn't liked that so many people had disagreed with Viktor's decisions and put the blame on Yuuri.

He hates that Viktor's public image suffered because of him -- but he will never regret their relationship, professional or personal. Viktor means more to him than the world. Yuuri doesn't care what they think, at the end of the day, so long as they don't hurt Viktor.

As long as Viktor doesn't make any impulsive decisions regarding his future... everything should be okay.

~*~

At last Yuuri is ready for the free skate.

In the waiting room, the company is familiar; Viktor is standing on the other side of the room, stretching on the floor, while JJ stands in front of the television, watching the free skate of Michele Crispino. Yuuri has his headphones in, listening to Ascendance on repeat. Cao Bin and Christophe have already gone, with Christophe in the lead.

At the call of the staff, Yuuri straightens from his stretch against the wall and turns, finding Viktor immediately and holding his gaze briefly. Viktor smiles at him, glancing briefly at the cameras before blowing a kiss to Yuuri, who sighs deeply. Then he lifts a hand and 'catches' the blown kiss, putting it the pocket of his Team Japan jacket, which makes Viktor's eyes widen.

Viktor opens his mouth, likely to call out his name, when he is nudged forward by Yakov, who has no regard for the ongoing flirtation between Yuuri and his charge. Yuuri covers a smile, then follows Celestino out to the rink, anticipation tightening his chest as he sees the crowds cheering
for them.

The last time Yuuri was here, he lost miserably. Not this time.

Yuuri stays back from the rink, half-hidden by a cloth wall that protects the skaters from the crowd, as JJ steps onto the ice and waves to his fans. His music pounding in his ears, Yuuri waits silently, drawing inward. His thoughts center around one person -- the reason for his skate, and the center of his world.

Viktor.

At long last he hears Celestino at his shoulder, and he slides his jacket off, handing everything over to his coach. Stepping onto the ice feels a little like breathing in clean air after being inside all day. It ripples through his lungs and sets his shoulders straighter. For once, Yuuri feels absolutely calm. The odd sensation reminds him of the feeling of serenity that overcame him for his free skate in Barcelona.

"You've got this, Yuuri," Celestino says, grinning at him. Yuuri nods and turns away to skate to the center of the rink, waving to the cheers.

As Yuuri takes his position, his gaze finds Viktor across the ice, and for a moment, Yuuri imagines that this is his Viktor, meeting him across time itself to support him. Yuuri smiles softly at Viktor, his heart lifting with love. Not just the Viktor who coached him and promised to marry him; but also Viktor, who texts him every day and calls him little sun and has the softest kisses Yuuri has ever felt.

Ascendance begins to play. Yuuri weaves his hands through the air, as if searching for something, before he finds what he was looking for: a glass heart, delicate and beautiful. He cups his hands close to his chest, then lifts them for all to see, wanting to show off the brilliance he has found.

Yuuri wants to show the world the brilliance that has always enthralled him, from the very first time he laid eyes on Viktor Nikiforov.

Your talent, your beauty, your genius. It's the way you belong on the ice, Viktor. It's why I followed you for so long -- why you still inspire me, even today.

Let me show you.

His skate honors some of Viktor's earliest programs, particularly the skate that ignited Yuuri's obsession with him. Many of his elements have always mimicked or complimented Viktor's skating, but Yuuri takes it a step further with this choreography. He knows many of Viktor's programs by heart, and infusing his favorite parts into this skate had been all too easy.

Yet Yuuri's choreography is as much his own, as well. This isn't just a skate about Viktor, but also about Yuuri's feelings for Viktor, the admiration for his skating that Yuuri has long felt, and the gratitude he feels toward Viktor, for bringing him to this point. In their pasts, the two Viktors he knows are the same person whose face has adorned Yuuri's walls. Viktor, whose name made him run to the television to turn up the volume. Viktor, who pushed himself harder than anyone Yuuri knew, just to awe and appease the audience.

How could Yuuri do anything but the same?

Yuuri skates backward for his first jump, a quad toe loop, and remembers. When he was younger, Yuuri had worked himself to the bone to become better, practicing more than any other person, because part of him had always understood that he did not have Viktor's innate flair for skating. In
order to skate on the same ice as Viktor, to become a challenge to him, to become his equal, Yuuri has worked tirelessly to this day.

He has it, now. He has Viktor's regard, his respect, his trust... even his love. He had it in the future, for sure, but even so... even now, Yuuri can feel Viktor watching him, and he hopes that his skate enthralls Viktor just as much as Yuuri has always felt while watching Viktor.

He knows how much skating means to Viktor. Yet it also hurts him, because in order to become the best, Viktor has ignored virtually every other important part of his life, from his family to romance. Some people can survive without it, but Viktor... Viktor needs love. He deserves devotion, not the fickle admiration of a fan, but the honest trust of a lover.

Yuuri lands the quad toe loop perfectly, smiling. His skating turns faster now, as much a part of the music as his desire to show the world his feelings for Viktor. This song is as true for him as *Yuuri On Ice* -- Viktor is the reason he skates. Viktor is the reason Yuuri still stands on the ice today, even if he wants so badly to give up, sometimes. He is tired; he has given so much of himself to the ice, just as Viktor has done... and still, Yuuri cannot let go.

He cannot give up this feeling.

Viktor deserves it. Yuuri will skate for the rest of his life if Viktor wants it. The five gold medals Viktor asked for -- Yuuri will do it for him.

In their other life, Viktor was so lonely before Yuuri finally let himself reach out to him. Yet Viktor never once backed down, seizing Yuuri's hand and pulling him forward into the light, into a world filled with love and brilliance -- their world, which they created together. Viktor gave him so much; he made Yuuri's world so much more than it had ever been.

Yuuri brought light to Viktor's world, too. He can admit that to himself, as he sets up the jump that Viktor gave him, the quad flip. He knows it in his bones, the way he knows that Viktor loves him. Viktor had given up everything -- his future, his career, his friends, his world -- just so he could be with Yuuri. He had flown halfway across the planet because he saw a video on the internet of Yuuri reaching out for him. He had come, and he had taken Yuuri's hands, never once looking back.

Yuuri lands the quad flip perfectly. *For you, Viktor.*

Viktor is here now, watching him. He is the same lonely, sweet, amazing person that Yuuri fell in love with. This Viktor, who has already changed because of Yuuri's presence, deserves love just as much as he does in the future.

As Yuuri turns into a spin, he knows then. He understands in his heart what he has to do.

He cannot leave Viktor again. Just as he cannot go to Viktor in the future, Yuuri cannot leave Viktor alone in this time -- the only time he has, now.

*もう一度、離れずにそばにいるよ.*

Whatever Viktor decides for his future, Yuuri will be there for him. Whether Viktor leaves skating, becomes an ice dancer, tours the world, or by some sort of miracle, decides to coach Yuuri again -- Yuuri will stay by his side. He will support Viktor, as Viktor has long supported him. He can't leave Viktor alone again.

That feeling carries Yuuri through the rest of his jumps and spins, all the way to the end of the song, where he comes to a stop on the ice and reaches out for that glass heart once more, palm up.
The stadium is left silent for a few seconds, as Yuuri finds himself breathing softly, tears beginning to fall from his eyes. Then a roar fills his ears, as fifteen thousand people jolt to their feet, screaming and clapping.

Yuuri gasps, straightening from his pose and pressing his hands over his mouth. His skate had been perfect. He doesn't think he has ever skated this program so cleanly before. He can hardly believe it -- and it's all because of Viktor.

As Yuuri approaches Celestino, he notices Viktor staring at him, one hand covering his mouth. A second later, Viktor lowers his hand and reaches forward, holding his hand out to Yuuri, who doesn't hesitate to change directions and skate to him. He catches Viktor's hand with his palm, letting Viktor pull him to the wall. Viktor's fingers close around him immediately, his keen gaze fastened to Yuuri's face.

Viktor swallows, as aware as Yuuri is of the cameras swinging to focus on them, of Yakov staring and Celestino approaching. "You were amazing," Viktor tells him, low and intimate, squeezing Yuuri's hand before letting him go. "I'll join you on the other side."

"Good luck, Viktor," Yuuri says, breathless with the joy in his heart, giving Viktor a bright smile before heading to the Kiss and Cry with Celestino, mindlessly scooping up a bundle of roses from the floor.

As they wait, Celestino giving him glowing praise for his skate, Yuuri wonders where all of his anxiety went. He should be nervous, even more nervous than after his free skate in Barcelona, but Yuuri only feels peace. His decision holds firm in his heart, and he knows that this skate was nothing like the last time he was in Sochi. Whatever score he gets, Yuuri knows that he did the best he possibly could.

The stadium goes quiet in its cheering for Viktor as Yuuri's scores are announced. "Yuuri Katsuki's free skate score is... 220.56, a personal best for Katsuki, and only one whole point shy of Viktor Nikiforov's world record for the free skate! That brings his total to 337.24, which guarantees him a spot on the podium! Amazingly, this is now the highest score for men's singles ever recorded, making Katsuki the first to beat Viktor Nikiforov's world record for best total score!"

Yuuri stares, unable to believe his eyes. He beat Viktor's score? He didn't beat either the free skate nor the short program records... but his total record beat Viktor's? He barely notices Celestino jumping up and yelling in delight, too shocked.

His score is over one hundred points higher than the first time he skated this competition. Yuuri could win gold.

"I did it," Yuuri whispers, then laughs as Celestino drags him up into a hug. "I did it!"

"You sure did!" Celestino grasps Yuuri's shoulder and beams with pride. "Fantastic job, Yuuri! You made the world record! Here's hoping it doesn't get beaten by your rival," Celestino adds, glancing over his shoulder at the ice, where Viktor is standing, waiting for Stammi Vicino to start. While Celestino begins making his way down the hall, Yuuri lingers, wanting to see the beginning of Viktor's skate.

Yuuri missed it the last time. After his dismal free skate, Yuuri had retreated to a bathroom to hide in shame, and he ended up not seeing any of Viktor's program. The results had never surprised him, but Yuuri has always regretted running away and not letting himself see Viktor's skate firsthand. This skate... it connects him to Viktor in a way he can never explain to anybody. They skated this program together. This program brought Viktor to him.
He owes it to Viktor, to watch.

Celestino comes to stand beside him a moment later. "No interviews yet, they're going to wait on the scores," he mutters to Yuuri, who nods and clutches his roses a bit more tightly. His heart skips a beat with excitement; he can watch Viktor's entire skate! Celestino winks at him before he steps back, a show of support, which Yuuri appreciates. He hopes he can repay Celestino for everything he has done for him someday.

Viktor glances across the ice at him, smiling a little, before his chin drops to his chest and he closes his eyes. *Stammi Vicino* begins to play, those familiar chords holding Yuuri still for a few seconds.

Ahh, Yuuri loves watching Viktor skate...

The movements of *Stammi Vicino* comfort him deeply. He could listen -- and has listened -- to this song on repeat for hours. He did once before, when he was studying Viktor's videos to learn the routine. Watching Viktor in person like this... the videos can't even compare.

He watches, and his heart threatens to burst out of his chest with pride for Viktor. How can anybody watch Viktor like this and not be overwhelmed?

Near the end of the song, when the climax of the music resounds triumphantly, Viktor finishes his triple flip and skates directly toward Yuuri. Amazed, Yuuri breathes in softly, realizing that this part of *Stammi Vicino* is coming up... and Viktor is dedicating it to *him*. He covers his mouth, the scent of the roses in his arms surrounding him as Viktor reaches out to him, one arm over the other, before smiling at him and skating backwards, opening himself up and spinning around.

Yuuri gasps, his eyes filling with tears. Viktor couldn't possibly know what this song means to him, and yet...

As Viktor goes into his last quad, Yuuri can't bring himself to look away, knowing he is crying and that thousands of people are watching, but he doesn't care. Only one person in the stadium matters to him right now.

Viktor finishes his perfect skate to roaring applause. Yuuri claps around his bouquet of roses as Viktor drops his arms and smiles at the audience. He catches another look from Viktor and cannot help a tremulous smile, reaching up and trying to wipe at his eyes surreptitiously with his sleeve.

All too soon, Viktor is sitting in the Kiss and Cry with Yakov. Yuuri begins to play with the ribbon around his roses nervously, waiting.

He cannot remember exactly what Viktor's score was, last time; from what Yuuri had observed so far, most of the scores have remained almost the same, give or take a few small differences. Only Yuuri's score has changed drastically. Knowing Viktor, he doubts that the score will change that much, since Viktor is too skilled to let anxiety affect him. Not only that, but Yuuri has done little to change Viktor's actual skating. He only focused on himself in that regard.

They finally announce Viktor's score -- and to Yuuri's utter shock, as well as the rest of the world's, it doesn't win him gold.

"With a final score of 335.76, Viktor has moved to second place, below Yuuri Katsuki! This means that Katsuki is our gold medal champion of the Grand Prix Final! I cannot believe it, and the crowd cannot either!"

The roses fall to his feet. Yuuri stares up at the scoreboard, stunned to silence. He won gold. He
beat Viktor.

Shaking, Yuuri turns his head to look at Viktor, breathing in sharply to see Viktor striding across
the floor to him. When Viktor reaches him, he pulls Yuuri into his arms, embracing him in front of
fifteen thousand people, as well as the rest of the world. Yuuri gasps a little and reaches up to hold
onto him tightly, relishing Viktor's warmth, his hands gripping the sheer fabric of Viktor's costume.

"Viktor, I...

"I can't believe I'm saying this," Viktor whispers, his arms tightening around Yuuri, "but this is the
first time I've ever been happy that I lost. Congratulations, Yuuri. You deserve it."

Yuuri bites down on his lip, then forces himself to take a deep breath and pull away, smiling
widely up at Viktor, who returns it with a soft one of his own. "Thank you, Viktor. You were
amazing," he gushes, unable to help his feelings, and Viktor laughs softly.

"Not as amazing as you were. Mr. Dark Horse," Viktor teases, bringing up the old moniker they
used to describe Yuuri at Worlds and making him laugh. He presses his hand against Viktor's
chest, admiring how Viktor's eyes twinkle beneath the stadium lights.

"Viktor, don't start that again," Yuuri laughs.

Viktor catches his hand in his grip, smiling, before he glances past Yuuri. "They're going to set up
for the ceremony. Christophe won bronze," he adds, and Yuuri breathes out a little, finally letting
go of Viktor and stepping back. He can barely believe it -- he won gold, against Viktor himself.

He changed everything.

~*~

The awards ceremony, the interviews, and the press conference all pass in a blur. Yuuri hardly
knows what he says, only aware that he is sitting at the center of the winner table for the first time.
Afterwards, Celestino escorts him back to the hotel, and Yuuri goes to shower in a daze, leaving the
gold medal resting on his pillow.

Yuuri cannot stop looking at it, even as he dresses for the banquet. That medal should belong to
Viktor, yet... Yuuri rightfully won it with his skating. He knows that, yet having the gold medal
feels a little illicit.

He smiles to himself, giddy. He has finally redeemed himself. Viktor would be proud -- is proud,
Yuuri is certain.

He hasn't spoken to Viktor since that moment after Viktor's free skate, swept up in interviews and
congratulations from his fans and sponsors. Morooka had almost broken down in tears, he was so
happy for Yuuri, and Minako-sensei had called him, actually crying as she raved about Yuuri's
score. Yuuri had also spoken briefly to his mother right after the competition, though this time he
hadn't been hiding in the bathroom and cornered by Yurio.

Finally, he gets a message from Viktor.

From: Viktor Nikiforov
I claim first and last dance with the GPF gold medalist!

Yuuri flushes at the message, smiling softly at the thought of dancing with Viktor again. Not in a
corner, like at Worlds, nor while drunk off his feet, like in his other future -- but properly, face to
face in the middle of the room, without a care for who watches.

Yuuri wants to see Viktor again. He remembers well how Viktor reacted to losing two of his records in the same competition, in Barcelona. He wants to be certain that Viktor is okay. With that thought in mind, Yuuri finishes straightening his tie, staring at himself in the mirror before nodding in determination.

**To: Viktor Nikiforov**

*Are you in your room?*

Viktor doesn't reply immediately, but Yuuri decides it doesn't matter; he knows where Viktor's room is. He wastes no time in heading downstairs, moving to lean against the wall across from Viktor's room as he waits for a response to his message. He looks up from his phone when he hears the door open, swallowing to see Viktor stepping out, wearing a sleek dark grey suit and a deep blue tie.

"Viktor," Yuuri calls softly, feeling nervous as Viktor looks up. The way Viktor's gaze sweeps over him, from his tie -- which he is certain Viktor will comment on at some point -- to the tips of his feet, sets Yuuri's skin aflame. He loves it when Viktor watches him like this.

"Are you my room service?" Viktor murmurs after a moment, and Yuuri cannot help a blush at his flirtatious tone.

"No! I, um," Yuuri stutters, pushing himself off the wall. "I just wanted to walk down with you, if you were ready," Yuuri says, stopping in front of Viktor and peering up at him. "If you wanted to."

Viktor smiles slowly. "I would love to. I did claim first dance, after all."

Yuuri relaxes. Viktor doesn't look upset, like Yuuri worried. Instead he looks happy, which is everything Yuuri wants. Yet Yuuri wonders if Viktor is hiding some of his emotions, as he is wont to do on occasion. "You know they have to give a speech first. And dinner, too. And all the sponsors, and the judges..."

Viktor chuckles, smiling. "That doesn't mean I'll stray far. If anyone tries to make off with you when the dancing starts up, I'll fight them."

Yuuri rolls his eyes and moves to Viktor's side, as they start toward the elevator. He can't imagine many people would want to dance with him. It amuses him to imagine Viktor squaring off against his would-be suitors, though. "You mean other than you?" he asks dryly, making Viktor laugh.

"Just so, solnyshko," Viktor murmurs, his gaze soft.

Yuuri flushes at the nickname, which never fails to make him feel warm and cherished. "If you call me that in public, people are going to say things again." He knows what the media is saying about them -- especially after everything that happened during and after their skates. He might as well have announced to the world that he belongs to Viktor Nikiforov.

He does, but they aren't actually together, which makes it somewhat needless.

"It's none of their business," Viktor replies firmly, then pauses, looking at Yuuri with hesitation. "If you don't want me to use it in front of others, though, I won't."

Yuuri thinks about it for a moment. Even with the messages Phichit had sent, demanding to know what was going on between him and Viktor, Yuuri hasn't really felt bothered by their fans' perceptions of them. He has always been more worried about how they treat Viktor. "I don't really
care about what the public thinks of me, but I don't want them to spread nasty rumors about you. Half of the world thinks we're a couple already, anyway."

"It doesn't matter what they think," Viktor says quietly, holding Yuuri's gaze. "Just what exists between us. We don't need to define it."

Yuuri stares at him for a long moment, before finally smiling, slow and warm. Maybe they are in a relationship... as close as one can be without defining it. Their relationship had developed like this last time, too, in a completely natural way. Yuuri can finally accept that it is happening again -- and he welcomes it. He wants it... and it feels like Viktor wants it, too. "You're right. We don't need to. It's enough for us."

The blush that sweeps across Viktor's face gratifies him. They head downstairs with that soft mood between them, exchanging little smiles every so often. He ends up at a table with Viktor, Christophe, and the women's medalists, sharing a place of honor. Yuuri cannot help his pleased smile when he sees his name written in gold on a card resting on the table.

Yuuri cannot stop smiling. He won, and it feels better than the gold medals he won at Skate Canada and the NHK Trophy. This is something Yuuri fought desperately for. Winning this GPF means more than just a trophy, or even the joy of skating against Viktor and winning. More than anything, it means that Yuuri has changed his future, that he has the ability to save his own life.

He has to, for Viktor. He promised.

Viktor watches Yuuri throughout the banquet, often sending him secretive little smiles. He claps loudly when Yuuri blows out candles and cuts a massive cake alongside Sophia Kraus, the women's gold medalist. He sets up toasts whenever someone so much as mentions the medalists, acting more and more like Coach Viktor in his pride over Yuuri's win.

Most of Yuuri's attention is stolen by other people, to his dismay. His coach, his sponsors, the other skaters, the staff and judges -- they all want to congratulate Yuuri and admire him. The attention goes to Yuuri's head, a little; he usually hates being at the center of attention like this, but it feels good to be acknowledged, after everything he has gone through.

When the dancing begins, Viktor makes good on his promise and walks up to Yuuri, turning a suave smile on him as he extends his hand. "May I have this dance, solnyshko?" Viktor asks, his eyes twinkling when Yuuri's face turns pink. Yuuri doesn't hesitate to take his hand though, allowing Viktor to lead him to the center of the dance floor.

"I told you I would claim first dance," Viktor says, sweeping Yuuri into a grand twirl.

Yuuri laughs as he turns back into Viktor's arms, his smile wide. This close, he can catch hints of Viktor's cologne. Viktor's cheeks are pinkened as well, perhaps from the champagne he had with dinner and toasts, but his grip on Yuuri is firm, and his movements are steady. He looks happy, which is enough for Yuuri.

"Have I told you tonight that you look amazing?" Viktor asks after a moment of dancing, his hand sliding to the small of Yuuri's back.

Yuuri shakes his head, the heat in his face worsening at the compliment, and at the way they press close to one another. Everyone must be watching, but Yuuri hardly notices, with Viktor in his arms like this. "No, but... thank you," Yuuri says softly, his cheeks wonderfully flushed. "You look... you look amazing, too."
Viktor's smile is clear and beautiful. "Thank you, Yuuri."

All too quickly, their first dance ends, and Yuuri is beckoned by Celestino over to a group of men and women in sleek dresses and suits. Yuuri takes strength from Viktor's easy smile and squares his shoulders to go speak to his sponsors, aware of how important it is to thank them for their patronage.

Soon Yuuri goes back to dancing, but not to Viktor's arms. He dances with all of the women's medalists, including Mila Babicheva, who grins at him and takes over the lead while Yuuri is trying to look over her shoulder for Viktor. Sara Crispino steals a dance, too, effusively praising his free skate. Yuuri smiles at her as the dance ends, aware of Michele Crispino glaring a hole into the side of his head, and turns away.

Only for Viktor to catch his hands and pull him close with a wink, glancing briefly over Yuuri's shoulder at Sara before leading him off into a dance.

"Caught you," Viktor murmurs, making Yuuri laugh.

"You're going to have to work harder if you want to dance with me more," he tells Viktor playfully, pleased when Viktor's eyes light up. He spins Viktor around, his hands sliding down Viktor's waist and squeezing a little. Yuuri thinks briefly of the other banquet, and of his words to Viktor, somewhere in a dream.

'What should I do, dance with him at the banquet again?'

Yes, I should.

"Want to try something different, Viktor?" Yuuri asks softly, leaning in a little to speak to Viktor over his shoulder. Viktor starts in his arms, turning his head to look at Yuuri. This close, Yuuri can see the blush that warms Viktor's cheeks.

"Lead the way," Viktor says after a moment, accepting Yuuri's challenge.

Yuuri grins and does exactly that. He lets his joy infuse their dance, not afraid to show off his extensive knowledge of dancing, even without alcohol. Alongside ballet, ballroom, and his secret pole dancing, Yuuri is proud of his three years of street Latin dance lessons. He puts that training to practice, and Viktor picks up the moves quickly, his eyes lighting up in a familiar way as they dance.

Other people join in, buoyed by their energy. Even Yurio, determined as he is to prove himself, jumps in to show off some of his moves. Unlike the last time, Yuuri doesn't feel humiliated by the dancing, his attention on the way Viktor smiles with joy.

Yuuri wonders if this is what made Viktor fall in love with him, when they danced together in the other future. He wants to give Viktor that feeling again, of being free of responsibility, of not worrying about what people are thinking.

So he dances with Viktor, as much as he can, in between his own obligations and responsibility. Always, always, Yuuri returns to Viktor, in turns taking haven in Viktor's arms from the attention of the world, as well as giving Viktor what moments of happiness he can show him.

Christophe corners him for a dance at one point. "This isn't a pole, but it will do," Chris sighs, making Yuuri roll his eyes. A few feet to their side, Viktor is dancing with one of the pairs skating gold medalists.
"Don't bring that up," Yuuri hisses, and Chris laughs.

"Congratulations on the gold, mon ami. Don't let him take it back," Chris admonishes, glancing over at Viktor with a smile.

"I'll do my best." He knows well how good Viktor is. He still can't believe he won -- but he is happy that Christophe is not mad at him for the loss.

Yurio corners him too, jabbing a finger into Yuuri's chest. "Next year, you better watch out. I'm going to break your record and the old man's." Despite his daring words, Yurio looks excited; he has been smiling more ever since Yuuri cajoled him into a dance earlier. "Your skate was awesome today."

Yuuri smiles, Yurio's praise warming him. "So was yours, Yurio. If you can make it in seniors, then you're welcome to try and beat us. Come on, dance with us!" He drags Yurio into another group dance, catching Viktor's grin as Yurio stumbles after him.

Instead of fleeing the banquet early, as Yuuri has done many times in the past, Yuuri stays till the very end, as Viktor never shown signs of wanting to retire. Between dances and talking and frequent drink breaks, Yuuri holds on for him, until the very last dance is announced and Viktor finds him again.

"There you are," Yuuri says breathlessly, taking Viktor's hand and letting Viktor lead. Viktor sets his hand low on Yuuri's hip, perhaps lower than is proprietary, but Yuuri doesn't mind, having had a few glasses of champagne himself. He does notice how strongly Viktor's breath smells of alcohol, though, when Viktor pulls him close.

"You smell like champagne," Yuuri says, watching Viktor's face worriedly. How many glasses has Viktor drunk? Yuuri hadn't been paying close attention, too distracted by the party. Though Viktor has been smiling all night, Yuuri wonders if he has really been alright.

"It flows freely tonight, and this is a party, is it not?" Viktor asks blithely, a little too fake for Yuuri's nerves.

"As long as you're alright," Yuuri replies, his voice a little quieter. He meets Viktor's gaze and holds it for a moment, realization dawning.

Viktor is upset.

He hadn't realized how much alcohol Viktor must have drunk. It started off small, with one glass of champagne through the buffet dinner, but one glass became many more, and Yuuri didn't notice. When he thinks about it, it makes too much sense.

Viktor's behavior reminds him of Beijing, when Viktor drank to the point of stripping naked in a restaurant, after Yakov had dismissed him and ridiculed him for his decisions in public. Yuuri had been so blind then -- he should have known that Viktor had been upset. Here... he must be upset, now. Yuuri can only hypothesize about Viktor's feelings. Whether Viktor is sad that he lost for the first time in four years, or that whatever bothered him the other day is still bothering him... Yuuri doesn't know.

He can't believe he didn't notice sooner. Yuuri curses himself, worried about the sadness hidden deep in Viktor's gaze. Viktor is upset, that much Yuuri can tell, and he accepts it. He has his suspicions on why.

After a moment, Viktor sighs. "I'm alright, I think. I'm frustrated and sad and happy, but it's alright."
I'm very proud of you," Viktor says quietly. His voice wavers slightly, but when he meets Yuuri's gaze, his eyes are clear.

Yuuri relaxes a little, happy that Viktor can be honest with him like this. He doubts Viktor wants to talk about it here, where anybody could hear. Instead of pressing him, Yuuri gently takes over the lead, not minding when Viktor stays quiet. He lets his arms be a refuge for Viktor, content to hold him close like this, while the music sings of feeling unsteady. Yuuri understands the feeling all too well.

"Have I told you that you look beautiful tonight?" Viktor asks softly after a moment.

"Yes, and you told me that you hate my tie," Yuuri answers, chuckling softly. He has never understood Viktor's disdain for this particular tie, but he finds it amusing. "Twice, even. I like this tie, you know."

Viktor sniffs in offense. "It's horrible. I'll get you a new one. Twelve new ones! I still owe you a birthday present!" he says brightly, and Yuuri's eyes widen.

"What? No, Viktor, I don't need --"

"Twenty ties!" Viktor announces loudly, letting go of Yuuri's shoulder to emphasize the point with an expressive gesture. "All the ties, for my Yuuri!"

"Viktor!" Yuuri cries, laughing at Viktor's silliness. He tries to pull Viktor's hand back down, and Viktor barely resists, moving both hands to Yuuri's waist and slipping them beneath his jacket. Yuuri inhales softly. "I think you drank too much. Do you need some water?"

Viktor slows, tilting his head downward in consideration. "Maybe," Viktor admits, swaying a little, to Yuuri's alarm. He leads Viktor over to a table and gently pushes him into a chair, then hurries to one of the buffet tables, where a few glasses of ice water still sit. He grabs two of them and returns to Viktor's side, setting one down in front of Viktor and sinking into a chair, watching him anxiously.

To his relief, Viktor drains nearly half of the glass, before leaning against his hand with a sigh, as he rests his elbow on the table. Viktor's gaze finds Yuuri again, a tired smile making its way to his face. "I didn't mean to ruin our dance," Viktor says quietly.

Yuuri shakes his head. "You didn't, Viktor. We danced a lot tonight, and it was really fun. Are you okay?"

Viktor nods slowly, a contemplative look taking over his face. Yuuri waits, but what Viktor says bewilders him. "I want to keep skating with you," Viktor tells Yuuri, who blinks at him in confusion.

"Eh?"

"This." Viktor waves his hand to encompass the room, looking past Yuuri for a moment at the lingering skaters and officials. "Skating against you, it was wonderful. But I couldn't enjoy it enough. I've been worried..."

Yuuri is silent for a long moment, following Viktor's gaze to their peers, his lips twitching downward. He isn't completely oblivious to what people have been saying about Viktor. Even though they tried not to bring it up to Yuuri's face, he was well aware of people whispering about Viktor's loss as a sign of failure. Yuuri had done his best to defend Viktor, but nobody had really listened, brushing it off as joking. Yuuri would have argued more, but that would be admitting his
knowledge of Viktor's feelings about retirement, and Yuuri doesn't think anyone deserves to hear that until Viktor himself talks about it in public.

He frowns. "Because they keep talking about retirement," Yuuri says slowly, irritated. "They shouldn't talk about that sort of thing. It isn't fair to you."

"It's true, though," Viktor whispers, closing his eyes. "I know I should. It's the end of my time. I don't want to, though. I want to skate with you... I want to show you the world that I love, I want to give you what you have given me. But... I think, this year, I will have to end it."

Yuuri bites down hard on his lip, holding back his first response of no, don't. Viktor notices -- of course he does -- and reaches out to touch Yuuri's lip, easing the harshness. "None of that, Yuuri."

"Ah..." Yuuri pulls down Viktor's hand, lowering his gaze. "I'm sorry. It's just, it makes me mad... I want to skate with you, too. I don't want you to retire at all." He looks up at Viktor, his heart aching at the way Viktor stares at him. "I'm sorry! If I hadn't won, then..."

"No, Yuuri, don't even say that," Viktor admonishes. "They've been whispering it behind my back for years. And you won fairly. Didn't I tell you when you won? This is the first time I've ever been happy that I lost."

"But you can't just leave," Yuuri whispers. Viktor reaches out to take his hand, turning it over to trace his fingers over Yuuri's palm, a soft smile touching his face.

"I have other options now. I'm not going to retire immediately, solnyshko. Yakov would tie me up and have me committed," Viktor says, looking oddly cheerful, and Yuuri cannot help laughing, thinking of Viktor flying to Hasetsu without telling anyone his plans. He wonders what would have happened if Yakov had followed Viktor to Hasetsu to stop him.

"That's terrible, Viktor." Yuuri shakes his head, drinking some of his water, giving Viktor a pointed look when Viktor merely circles the edge of the glass with his fingertips. Viktor picks up his water obediently, watching Yuuri as he drinks.

Yuuri thinks about it, his heart aching. Retirement for Viktor... Yuuri has long hated the thought of it, even when he gained Viktor as his coach. Viktor had returned to skating after Yuuri had won silver at the GPF in Barcelona, but... had he really wanted to?

Maybe Viktor should retire. If he does... then Yuuri could retire, too, and stay with him.

He is tired. As much as he loves skating... Yuuri is tired. He is tired of worrying about his death, of being afraid of the future, of the pressure and stress from the world. He changed his life with Sochi, but after this... Yuuri could retire, and it might even be okay. He did amazingly here. He could retire and focus on Viktor, on making him happy.

"I've been thinking about retiring, too," Yuuri admits quietly.

Viktor inhales sharply, his head snapping up to stare at Yuuri. "What?"

Yuuri glances at him nervously, then drops his gaze to their hands. Viktor's fingers have fallen limp in shock, but Yuuri holds onto his hand, biting down on his lip again. "There are a lot of reasons, but... I guess the biggest is that I don't feel like I can compete next season. A part of me is very tired, and I miss home, and I miss my dog... I think I need a break."

Viktor says nothing, still staring at him with wide eyes. Yuuri had stunned him in Barcelona, too; but Yuuri doesn't want to make this into a fight. He wants to be honest with Viktor. After that
argument, which still hurts him to think about, Yuuri only wants to make Viktor understand, without upsetting him.

Yuuri takes a deep, shaky breath, his voice dropping a little. "This season isn't even half over, and it's already been exhausting, between classes and training and everything else. Thankfully I'm graduating next week, but it's just... I don't know what to do after that."

He squeezes Viktor's hand a little, afraid to look at his expression again. "Celestino is great, but... he and I don't really suit each other anymore, and my contract with him is going to end soon. I don't want to look for a new coach. Then there's the JSF, they've already started pressuring me to take part in the next Winter Olympics, and that's in two years, and... it's just, it's too much. So it's really logical that..."

"I'll be your coach," Viktor interrupts. Yuuri goes still, not believing his ears.

I did not just hear that.

He looks up at Viktor and stares. "What?" Yuuri whispers, opening his mouth to say more, but unable to find the words.

Viktor holds Yuuri's gaze firmly, grabbing both of Yuuri's hands and holding onto him tightly, and Yuuri doesn't fight him, too stunned to react.

"You can't retire," Viktor tells him. Each of his words feels like a spike of ice to Yuuri's chest. The pleading expression doesn't make sense to him. "If you need a coach, I'll do it. If you need a place to train, you can come to Russia. You can even stay with me. If I retire, then I can be your coach, and you can keep skating, and we can still be together! Please let me be your coach, Yuuri!"

Viktor... wants to be his coach? Yuuri doesn't understand. Everything he has done, everything has been for Viktor to keep skating. Maybe Viktor wants to retire, and that would be okay -- but not to coach Yuuri. Yuuri cannot put him through that again, of losing his friends and fans over such an impulsive decision. The past year, Yuuri's training, everything -- every single decision has been dedicated to the goal of saving Viktor from suffering. He knows it hurt Viktor, to lose everything like that, and... Yuuri cannot be that selfish again.

Viktor grows visibly upset at Yuuri's silence. He throws his arms around Yuuri's shoulders and tugs him close, his voice dropping into a whisper. "Please," Viktor begs, his voice muffled by the warm cloth of Yuuri's suit. "Don't retire. Let me be your coach. I want to see how far you can go. Together, we can, we can..."

Slowly, Yuuri reaches up to hold Viktor. Something warm hits his cheek, and Yuuri realizes he is crying. "You can't mean that," Yuuri whispers, his voice tight with distress. He can't help the words that tumble out, his frustration and fears bubbling over. The joy from earlier in the night is gone. "You can't give everything up for me again! I've been working so hard, so that you wouldn't have to, and now... you can't just offer me that, when I'd already decided not to! シチitoのばか!"

Viktor rears back, panicking at the sight of Yuuri's tears. He reaches up to wipe the tears from Yuuri's face with his sleeves, his cufflinks brushing against Yuuri's cheeks. "No, no, solnyshko, don't cry. I don't know what you mean, but please, don't cry, it's okay."

Belatedly Yuuri realizes what he said, but he is too upset to worry about whether Viktor understood his references to his time travel. "Of course you don't," Yuuri sniffs, pushing feebly at Viktor's hands. "Stop that." Viktor reluctantly lets him go, pulling a blue handkerchief from his pocket and
offering it. Yuuri takes it and wipes at his face, swallowing over the hot ache in his throat.

He spends too long staring at the finely sewn edge of the handkerchief, reluctant to face Viktor after crying. When Yuuri first made his decisions after coming back in time, he had been thinking of Viktor's unhappiness with his career then, but... now, Yuuri knows more about Viktor's feelings. Yuuri had thought then that skating would make Viktor happiest, but... maybe that isn't true.

Maybe Yuuri makes Viktor happiest.

Finally, Yuuri drags his eyes up, meeting Viktor's gaze. If Viktor really wants to coach him... if that would make him happy, then Yuuri will allow it. He heeds down on the hope blossoming in his chest, not willing to admit how much he wants Viktor to be his coach again. Living with Viktor again, loving him... Yuuri wants it, so much.

Maybe... Yuuri can be selfish. "Do you really want to coach me?" Yuuri asks quietly.

Viktor visibly swallows, then nods. After a moment, Viktor opens his mouth to say more, but Yuuri covers his lips with a finger. Viktor shuts his mouth, his eyes widening a little.

"I'll think about it," Yuuri says slowly, then presses his finger harder against Viktor's lips to shush him when Viktor immediately tries to protest. He isn't going to let Viktor jump into this blindly again. "I'm not saying no, but this is a serious decision, and we both need to consider what this means for our futures. If you retire... it'll change everything. You need to talk to Yakov, and I need to talk to Celestino. We still have the rest of the season to get through, too. Let's talk about this again after Worlds. Okay?"

After a moment, Viktor nods, and Yuuri sighs, lowering his hand. "I can't believe you," Yuuri moans, covering his eyes with the handkerchief, the blue silk stained with tears. "After everything I'd decided..."

Viktor breathes out, his grip tightening on Yuuri's hand. "Just as long as you stay with me," Viktor whispers. "I can give up the ice if I can keep you."

Yuuri startles at the words, tears filling his eyes again, but he hides them with the handkerchief. Oh, Viktor... He breathes out shakily, his hand slowly closing around Viktor's fingers. "ヴィクトルのばか," Yuuri says, more softly this time, finally lowering the handkerchief to look at Viktor.

Viktor smiles softly when their eyes meet. "Is that a new nickname for me?"

"Might as well be," Yuuri mutters, then sighs deeply. "We should go. They probably want to clean up." He can feel the attention of the staff, as they are nearly the last people in the room by now. Aware of how Viktor swayed before, Yuuri carefully helps him up and escorts Viktor from the banquet room to the elevator, ignoring the lingering party-goers.

On the elevator, he lets Viktor lean against the wall, but he doesn't release Viktor's hand. His mind turns over their conversation and his knowledge, trying to find a solution in the great mess. What can he do? After everything they went through together in their other future... what can Yuuri do, to make sure Viktor doesn't suffer like he did? How can he make Viktor happy?

"You better remember all of this tomorrow," Yuuri says after a moment.

Viktor chuckles softly. "I'm not so drunk that I'd forget this, Yuuri. I didn't even reach sixteen..."

Yuuri blinks and looks over at him in confusion. Sixteen what? Sixteen glasses of champagne? "Eh?"
Viktor shakes his head, and Yuuri wonders what is going through Viktor's mind. When the elevator opens onto Viktor's floor, Yuuri hesitates only a moment before following Viktor into the hallway.

"I don't want to hold the elevator up," Yuuri explains when he notices Viktor's expression. "We haven't really finished talking, so... I just want to say this." He takes a deep breath to steady himself, glancing up at Viktor, then down at their hands, swallowing over the ache in his throat. He still wants to cry, but Viktor hates it when he cries, so Yuuri tries to hold it in.

"Your offer means the world to me," Yuuri says softly. "I've looked up to you for so long, it's like a dream... but I'm afraid of what it might mean for both of us. Our careers... and us. But I'm going to think seriously about it. I know that's not much, but..."

"No, that's more than enough, Yuuri," Viktor says quietly, lifting Yuuri's hand and holding it against his chest. Yuuri hesitantly raises his eyes to watch him, seeing how clear Viktor's gaze is, even addled with alcohol. "I know it sounds like a whim, but I really... really want this. I've thought about it quite a bit, and I am very serious about this, and you."

Yuuri's face flushes slowly as Viktor's words overwhelm him. If he had any doubt of Viktor's feelings before, it is long gone. "Viktor..."

A smile touches Viktor's lips, before he leans forward to press a kiss to Yuuri's forehead, cupping the side of his face and breathing in deeply. Yuuri nearly cries at the sweetness of it, leaning into Viktor, aching to make sense of everything that happened tonight. Viktor's plea has turned him inside-out, leaving him senseless with confusion. What should he do?

With a small sigh, Viktor reaches for the elevator button without looking, then wraps his arms around Yuuri and merely holds him while they wait. Yuuri's hands come up to touch his waist, scared of holding on too tightly, before he hugs Viktor back, a tremble running through him. He doesn't want to let go.

The elevator dings and opens, and Viktor opens his eyes halfway. He drops his arms from around Yuuri's shoulders, taking his hands again and squeezing. "Good night, sleeping beauty. Have a safe flight tomorrow."

"Good night, Viktor," Yuuri whispers, leaning into him briefly. He hates to let go of Viktor, but he eventually gives in, stepping back into the elevator and holding Viktor's gaze as the doors close.

When Viktor is out of sight, Yuuri sinks to the floor, his knees giving out. He folds into himself, hiding his face in his arms as his shoulders wrack with sobs, overwhelmed by his feelings.

_Viktor... what should I do?_

He starts when the elevator suddenly begins to move, realizing he never pushed the button for his floor. Yuuri quickly stands and wipes at his face, pushing the button and hanging back to wait. The elevator runs down to the first floor, a few people crowding on, and Yuuri keeps his gaze down, silently relieved that they are too drunk to pay attention to him.

Finally Yuuri reaches his floor, and he hurries to his room, wanting to escape the world for a while. He leans back against the door after it closes, feeling tears trickling down his cheeks again.

Viktor wants to coach him again. Yuuri can be with him again. Yuuri turns his face upward as he closes his eyes, unable to stop the smile that touches his lips, even as he cries.

Part of him hates that his decisions of the past year, meant to protect Viktor, have come to nothing. Yet Yuuri feels joy and hope more than he fears the future, because he can be with Viktor again.
Viktor wants to be with him, wants to coach him. Maybe Yuuri will skate Eros and Yuuri on Ice again. Maybe he will skate new programs entirely. Yuuri doesn't know, but he looks forward to it, to living with Viktor again and falling in love with him.

After everything he went through... after losing Viktor, is this really okay?

Isn't this what Viktor wants? His Viktor... the Viktor he left alone, isn't this what he wants?

"Is it really okay?" Yuuri whispers, opening his eyes and gazing up at the ceiling. Viktor cannot answer him, but he remembers his promise to Viktor. To stay with him, and to stay alive.

Yuuri will -- for Viktor, and for himself.

~*~

Yuuri goes back to Detroit in a daze.

His exams are done. Some of them had fallen on the week of the GPF, but Yuuri had been able to convince his professors to let him take the exams before his trip. All that is left for him is to pack up, graduate, and go home.

Yuuri finalizes everything with Celestino and fills out his paperwork for going back to Japan. He gets his cap and gown, receives his exam results, begins to pack... and still, it doesn't feel final. It doesn't feel like he will be going home next week. This apartment has been his home for two years now; yet Yuuri is ready for a change. He can't wait to be with Vicchan again.

He doesn't know how he accumulated so much junk over two years, since he always knew he would be going back to Japan. Most of it he gives to Phichit, to the other skaters in their club, or to neighbors. Yuuri sells most of his school books, and he manages to get a decent sum on some of his furniture. The rest of the furniture will be donated to charity. The things that matter to him, though -- the pictures of Viktor, his clothes, his skating equipment -- that all has to go home.

His parents can't come to his graduation, but they watch a video feed that Phichit sets up, which Viktor also watches. Viktor has been all but glowing with pride over Yuuri graduating, much to Yuuri's amusement.

Phichit is beside himself with joy over Yuuri's gold medal. He takes a hundred pictures of the medal, of Yuuri holding the medal, and of Yuuri wearing the medal, all the while proclaiming to everyone he sees on the street that my best friend won a gold medal! Even though it embarrasses Yuuri, to the point that he ducks away whenever Phichit starts, it still makes him happy.

"I can't believe you're moving back to Japan," Phichit laments while Yuuri peruses the used game section of the local game store, a few days after graduation. Some games he cannot get in Japan, and he wants to bring a few back with him so that he has something to do between helping out at the inn and training.

"I'll call you all the time. And we can do video calls." Yuuri still regrets not keeping in touch with Phichit properly, the last time he ran away. He won't fail his friend again.

"We will Skype until the end of time," Phichit promises, then looks over at Yuuri curiously. "Have you told Viktor?"

Yuuri has not told Viktor. Yuuri is afraid that if he tells Viktor he will be moving back to Hasetsu without a coach, that Viktor will drop a bunch of money on a plane ticket and run away to Hasetsu, throwing all of Yuuri's plans into chaos. Viktor has done it before; Yuuri cannot trust him to
behave responsibly.

"I'll talk to him later," Yuuri hedges, then changes the subject quickly to the games in his hands. Phichit eyes him knowingly but lets him get away with it, content to offer his suggestions, and Yuuri sighs in relief.

Viktor finds out that evening, of course. Yuuri has installed one of his new games and is testing out the mechanics when the phone rings, and he answers without thinking, turning it on speakerphone so he can talk and play at the same time.

"Allo, Yuuri," Viktor greets warmly. "What are you up to on this lovely evening, free of academic responsibility?"

Yuuri rolls his eyes, smiling. "Hi, Viktor. I'm installing a few games on my laptop so that I'll have something to do on my flight home," Yuuri answers, then freezes when he realizes what he said. Shit.

"Your flight home?" Viktor echoes. "Are you going to visit your family?"

Yuuri chews on his bottom lip for a moment. He should be honest, right? Maybe he can keep Viktor from overreacting.

"Well, sort of. I'm moving back to Japan," Yuuri says, then hurries on before Viktor can protest. "I'm flying out in four days. Tomorrow I have to drop off my packages at the post office to ship home, and so tonight I'm trying to install everything that I can. You should see these games, Viktor --"

"Wait," Viktor interrupts. "Yuuri, you're moving back to Japan? Explain this to me."

Yuuri bites down on the inside of his cheek. Viktor sounds too much like Coach Viktor right now, strict and stern. "Well... my visa ran out, and I decided not to renew it. My home town has a rink where I can train."

Viktor does not sound pleased, just like Yuuri anticipated. "Yuuri, you can't leave in the middle of the season. What are you going to do about a coach? What about your roommate?"

"Phichit is going to room with Andy for the semester," Yuuri says, shrugging. "Well... what about the Detroit Skate Club? And your coach? You need a coach, Yuuri."

Yuuri probably does, but he can't ask Celestino to come with him. He did it alone last time, and he truly cannot stay, not now. He has already passed the deadline to reapply for his visa extension. "My contract with Celestino was dependent on my visa. He's still going to meet me for Four Continents and Worlds, but it's done now."

Viktor is silent for a long moment. "I don't approve. Yuuri, you need a coach. Your Nationals are coming up soon, aren't they? Are you taking off the rest of the season?"

"No, I'm going to go to my competitions. It's okay, Viktor," Yuuri says, his voice soft and soothing. "I'll be fine. Celestino will keep in contact, and my ballet instructor from Japan still lives in Hasetsu. She has agreed to take over my training."

"It's not the same," Viktor argues. "You need a real coach. What about --"
"No," Yuuri says before Viktor can even suggest it.

"Yuuri! I can come to --"

"Absolutely not. I have a coach already, and I have a trainer, and I will be fine. And don't even think of flying to Hasetsu, Viktor," Yuuri tells him firmly. He can just imagine Viktor right now, ready to click on a plane ticket. He won't let it happen again. "I can practice just fine on my own. I can send videos to Celestino if I need to. Right now I want to be with my family and my dog."

"You need a coach," Viktor says mulishly. Yuuri sighs. This isn't the first time Viktor has brought up the subject since the GPF, but Yuuri has mostly ignored it. He is still making his plans, and he needs Viktor to wait.

"After Worlds," Yuuri says, exasperated. Viktor sighs, but Yuuri has the sense that he has won this round. He tries to cheer Viktor up with promises of pictures of Vicchan, and for a time, he doesn't hear anything about coming to Hasetsu or coaching.

~*~

The first thing Yuuri does when he gets home is sweep Vicchan into his arms and pepper his fluffy face with kisses. Vicchan greets him in the same way he did when Yuuri returned home last summer, barking happily and licking Yuuri all over his face and hands. Yuuri doesn't let go of him for hours afterward, content to dote on his beloved dog.

The second thing Yuuri does is eat the biggest bowl of katsudon he has had in five years.

"Eat up, eat up," his mother says, all but glowing as she watches Yuuri eat his winning meal. The gold medal hangs in a display out front that Yuuri's parents have filled with medals and certificates as the years have passed, next one of Yuuri's famed posters. Yuuri had shuffled past several of them in Hasetsu's train station, shyly greeting people who recognized him.

Minako-sensei escorted him home, glowing just as happily as Hiroko. She sits across from him now, smiling as Yuuri eats his homemade katsudon with tears in his eyes, a glass of beer at her elbow.

"Just this once," Minako-sensei chides, looking pleased. "I'm going to keep a close eye on your diet, Yuuri. Since I'm going to be coaching you again!" She grins, making Yuuri wonder if he should regret asking her to train him. She had been all too enthusiastic about taking over his dance lessons and exercise regime. Yuuri has no doubt that she is in contact with Celestino.

Yuuri laughs weakly, surreptitiously offering a bit of pork to Vicchan. "I'll be good, Minako-sensei. Thank you for agreeing to look after me."

"Who else would? It's good that you're home, but don't think I'll let you slack off!"

Minako-sensei doesn't, either. She sets him to dancing in her studio daily, though Yuuri ends up training at the rink mostly alone, since Minako-sensei still teaches classes and has her bar to run. Yuuko welcomes him back with open arms, happily giving him permission to use the rink at any time he wants, as well as roping him into teaching a small skating class every Saturday afternoon. Yuuri allows it, since his modeling contracts in America are essentially over, and he could use the extra money.

All the while he trains, Yuuri plots.

Viktor wants to coach him again -- and Yuuri is willing to let him, provided Viktor doesn't give
everything up again suddenly and abandon his friends and team in Russia. Yuuri has already lectured Viktor on the importance of talking to Yakov about the future of his career. Viktor did not like that particular conversation, but Yuuri made it clear that he will not accept Viktor as his coach unless Viktor discusses it with Yakov.

Viktor still hasn't talked to Yakov, and Yuuri hasn't pressed him about it -- yet.

If Viktor gets Yakov's approval, then hopefully he won't destroy their relationship. Yuuri knows how important Yakov is to Viktor, and he doesn't want Viktor to lose his mentor and coach over this, nor does he want Viktor's fans to turn against them. From watching the media blow up over Viktor's decision to fly to Hasetsu in their other future, Yuuri suspects that part of their fans' anger was from Viktor's lackadaisical attitude toward his own career.

That, and the fans were simply too obsessed. Yuuri doubts everybody will be happy with Viktor's decision this time around, but he isn't going to let Viktor destroy his own reputation just so he can run away from everything. Maybe it had felt good to ignore their fans the first time, after the world had criticized them, but... everybody, from their fans to their coaches, had doubted Viktor and Yuuri.

Yuuri doesn't want any doubt to exist when he competes next year with Viktor as his coach. He wants everybody to respect Viktor for his decisions, for his brilliance, and for his skill. Maybe Viktor will not be the best coach, but Yuuri knows him like the back of his hand. He knows Viktor can make him shine, and he wants to prove to the world that Viktor is capable of being a good coach.

His hope is that, if Viktor announces his retirement and decision to coach Yuuri properly, early enough that people will get used to it, that the fan base will not turn against them. The Russian fans in particular had hated Yuuri for 'stealing' Viktor, while Japanese fans had doubted Viktor could do it. Even their fellow skaters had doubted them.

Not this time. Yuuri won't let it happen. He will do his absolute best to protect Viktor.

Much of it rides on Viktor's decisions. Yuuri has done his best to convince Viktor to think it through seriously, to speak to Yakov, and to make a press announcement about his decision. So far, Viktor has only promised to consider those actions, but he hasn't jumped onto a plane to Hasetsu, either.

Yuuri is hopeful he can make this work.

So he trains under the keen eye of Minako-sensei, despite Viktor's grumbling over Yuuri not having a proper coach. In response, Yuuri sets up a few video chat sessions so that Viktor can watch him practice, on the basis that Viktor can give him advice. Viktor jumps on this opportunity, glad to try to prove his desire to coach Yuuri, but... something is missing.

Yuuri wants Viktor to be here. It isn't the same, training in Hasetsu without Viktor. He doesn't dare tell Viktor this, though, in fear of Viktor flying out to meet him.

Thankfully, Viktor never shows up, so Yuuri turns his focus on training for Nationals. Minako-sensei personally escorts him to Nationals in Tokyo late in December, where Celestino will meet them. When Celestino arrives, he takes Yuuri to one of the public rinks where they book private time on the ice, so that Yuuri can run through his programs with both his coach and his interim coach watching.

After finishing *Ascendance*, Yuuri skates over to where Celestino and Minako-sensei are standing
Celestino rubs his chin thoughtfully. "I think you've slowed a little compared to the GPF. And you fumbled that combo near the end. Ms. Okugawa tells me you've done that before, three times now."

"It's just the one jump," Yuuri says defensively. "I can land it fine nine times out of ten."

Celestino exchanges a glance with Minako-sensei. "Run through it again. No music this time."

Yuuri frowns and returns to the center of the rink. He skates his program again, but despite Yuuri feeling good about it, Celestino and Minako-sensei both disapprove. They insist that Yuuri was faster and had more solid jumps at the GPF, and Celestino sets him to running triple jumps for the rest of the afternoon.

It bothers Yuuri to think that he is doing worse. He has kept up with his exercise and training, unlike last time -- but somehow, he doesn't hold up to the standards his coaches have set. He gets nervous as the competition grows closer, but instead of buckling, Yuuri pushes forward, determined to prove himself.

Yuuri's worries over his skating aren't the only thing that gives him anxiety in Tokyo. In addition, his fans begin to stalk him.

While he is in Tokyo, Yuuri causes a small media sensation. He has been mostly left alone in Hasetsu, barring the occasional request for an autograph or an interview from the local news -- but in Tokyo, fans take to following him between the hotel, the rink, the arena, and any other place Yuuri tries to visit with his coaches. They take constant pictures of him, and even try to find out his room number. It gets so bad that Yuuri has to wear a breathing mask, sunglasses, and heavy clothes to avoid detection.

Despite Yuuri's worries, Nationals go well. Though he doesn't set any personal bests, Yuuri wins gold, while Minami Kenjirou sweeps in and grabs silver. Watching Minami perform his homage to Yuuri's dark past without knowing any better -- especially his Lohengrin skate, which Yuuri desperately wishes he could forget -- is more than embarrassing. Still, Yuuri suffers through it, just as he suffers through interview after interview gushing over his performances.

Afterwards, Yuuri notices Minami as he is walking down a hall, and he cannot help calling out to him. "Minami-kun!"

Minami turns halfway, and his entire face lights up with joy and surprise at Yuuri standing there. "Y-Y-Yuuri-kun!" Minami gasps, immediately abandoning his coach and rushing to meet Yuuri.

Yuuri smiles a little. He didn't understand Minami at first, but he can admire him for his tenacity, as well as his determination to skate against Yuuri. In some ways, Minami's admiration is a lot like Yuuri's admiration for Viktor -- though he certainly hopes Minami doesn't have other feelings for him.

Still, Minami deserves to be acknowledged. "Congratulations on your silver medal. Your skating is amazing. Keep up the good work."

Minami gapes at him, then all but shines with joy at the praise. "I will, Yuuri-kun! Thank you very much for supporting me!" Minami flies into a deep bow, which makes Yuuri flush in embarrassment. He holds up his hands.

"Minami-kun, that's not really necessary..."
"It is! I've admired you for a long time!" Minami exclaims, bowing even more deeply, before straightening with a wide grin. "I'll be rooting for you at Four Continents and Worlds! You'll be amazing! You'll definitely beat Viktor again!"

Yuuri's smile freezes a little, but he merely nods, watching as Minami thanks him again before fleeing back to his coach in excitement -- only return with a small sign board and a pen, begging for a signature.

Yuuri relents and signs the board, before finally letting Minami go and turning to follow Celestino and Minako-sensei.

Minami isn't the only person who thinks Yuuri will win at his competitions. Every single person who speaks to him seems to have one thing to say: You have to beat Viktor at Worlds.

"You can do it, Yuuri! You beat him at the GPF, so you can beat him at Worlds!"

"We're counting on you! You have to win at Four Continents! Then you have to beat Viktor!"

"If you win Worlds, it will be the first win for Japan in six years! You have to!"

Yuuri struggles to avoid the pressure, but it builds up regardless. Winning gold against Viktor felt like a dream come true, but now Yuuri worries that he will not hold up to everybody's expectations. It isn't just the media and the JSF, either -- even Yuuri's family and friends believe that Yuuri will beat Viktor again.

Yuuri doesn't know if he can. Viktor isn't one to give up, and no one has ever beaten him like this before. Maybe other skaters would bow to depression over losing, but not Viktor -- no, instead Viktor set a new free skate record at his own Nationals, just a week after Yuuri's competition. It was only one point over his previous record, but it was enough. Not only that, but he won gold at Europeans, despite Christophe and Michele Crispino putting on a strong show.

In another future, Yuuri broke that record. He wonders if he can do it again. His fans certainly want it, as does the JSF. As December turns into January, Yuuri's training gets frequently interrupted by meetings with sponsors, JSF officials, and countless interviews, to the point that Yuuri has to stop accepting them in order to concentrate on practicing.

Yuuri tries not to think of the pressure. He feels it weighing him down, though -- the expectations, the constant attention, the desire for a win for Japan. He is Japan's Ace, but Yuuri doesn't believe he lives up to that name, now. His jumps are getting worse, and just as Celestino pointed out, his skating is slower. His practices are full of mistakes now, and Yuuri can't help but worry that he will fail again, with the entire country watching him.

He can't let them down. He has to win. He has to keep going.

Every day is busy, and Yuuri grows exhausted. He doesn't talk to Viktor or his friends as much as he would like; he barely has time to think, let alone relax. Sitting in the onsen at the end of the day is one of his few moments of private time, along with the walks he takes with Vicchan. Some nights, when Yuuri cannot sleep, he ends up playing video games until the early hours of the morning, purposefully ignoring Viktor's texts in order to pretend he is already asleep.

Viktor doesn't know how bad it gets for Yuuri, because Yuuri refuses to let him see. Yuuri tries his best to pretend everything is fine, but it hurts. He wishes he could go to Viktor and hide himself away in Viktor's arms. He doesn't have that luxury.

Sometimes, when Viktor jokes about flying out to Hasetsu, Yuuri is tempted to let him.
Near the end of January, Yuuri convinces Yuuko to give him a key to Ice Castle, so that he can go practice late at night. She doesn't approve, sometimes sending Nishigori to stay with him if she isn't available to watch over him. Nishigori, thankfully, doesn't comment on Yuuri's long hours or the dark circles that are forming under Yuuri's eyes. Instead he makes fun of Yuuri whenever he gets a call from Viktor while Nishigori is around, making kissy faces mockingly.

Yuuri can ignore that. What he cannot ignore is the pressure on him, demanding that he wins gold again. It doesn't help that Viktor keeps telling his own fans to cheer for Yuuri at Four Continents, making ridiculous posts about how he, Viktor Nikiforov, is the biggest Yuuri fan ever. Yuuri tries ignoring him, only to give in when Viktor sends him cute pictures of Makkachin while begging for forgiveness. He understands that Viktor is just trying to be supportive.

It doesn't help, though.

When Yuuri travels to Taiwan, the first person he meets is Phichit, who has come with Celestino to compete. Phichit beams at the sight of him when Yuuri trudges into the hotel lobby, but his smile drops when he gets a closer look at Yuuri's face.

"Yuuri, you look terrible!" Phichit exclaims, making Yuuri sigh.

"Hi, Phichit-kun," Yuuri says dully, giving half a smile before going to check in at the front desk. Phichit stares after him worriedly. He follows Yuuri up to his room, sitting on the bed as Yuuri unzips his suitcase to take out his costume and clothes.

"Yuuri, what's wrong? You look like you've been sick! Have you been sick? You shouldn't fly when you're sick," Phichit says worriedly.

Yuuri shrugs a little, pulling the first garment bag out and going to hang it in the closet. "I'm fine. Just haven't been sleeping that well," he says, hoping Phichit will take fine as an answer.

"Yuuri..."

"I'm fine," Yuuri repeats, his voice trembling a little over the words. If he breaks apart now, then there is no way he will medal at Four Continents. He has to win.

Phichit accepts this reluctantly. Instead of pushing it further, he distracts Yuuri by taking him out to dinner, having already found the best restaurants in the area. Yuuri lets Phichit lead him around for a little while, realizing that he really missed Phichit after living with him for so long. He hopes he can get Phichit to visit Hasetsu soon, or maybe he will visit Bangkok after Phichit returns to Thailand.

In the end, the good mood is only temporary. Yuuri bombs his short program, resulting in a twelve point difference compared to his GPF standings. After the scores are announced, Yuuri hides himself away in a remote bathroom and tries not to fall apart. Losing like this hurts. He knows he can do better, and yet...

Once again, Yuuri has disappointed everyone who trusted in him.

Especially Viktor, who has been calling and texting him all day. Yuuri hasn't dared respond, not trusting himself not to break down in tears as soon as he hears Viktor's voice. Yuuri escapes his interviews with only a few words to the media, choosing to hide away in his room for the rest of the evening, only letting Phichit in for a little while. He refuses to go out to dinner, though.

He barely sleeps, and eventually he gives up trying. In the middle of the night, Yuuri ends up sitting on the floor between his bed and the floor-to-ceiling window, watching the city with his
knees pulled to his chest, turning his phone over in his hand.

Viktor is calling again. Viktor has been calling all evening, since he is several hours behind Yuuri and has had the whole day to worry about him. Yuuri stares down at Viktor's name on his caller ID, then slides his thumb against the screen, lifting the phone to his ear.

"Hello, Viktor," Yuuri says quietly. "Um... sorry for not answering you earlier."

He can hear Viktor breath in softly. "I don't mind, Yuuri." He sounds worried, but he doesn't press Yuuri, and Yuuri is grateful for it.

His eyes water again. Yuuri doesn't deserve this kindness from Viktor. After he failed, after he fell apart under the pressure... Yuuri wishes someone would get upset at him, as upset as Yuuri feels toward himself. Yet he knows Viktor will not do that. "Viktor... I messed up. I let it get to my head. Winning the GPF, Nationals... then everyone saying I had to keep winning, I had to beat you... The pressure was just too much."

Viktor says nothing for a moment, then exhales. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

The question startles Yuuri, and he inhales softly, shocked.

Viktor doesn't wait for a reply. "Do you like your skating right now? Be honest with me, Yuuri. Is the skating you did today the skating that you love?"

Yuuri bites down hard on his lip. "You know it's not," Yuuri replies, his voice shaking from the force of his emotion. "I hate skating like that. I can do better. I know I can, but I'm..."

"I'm weak. I'm useless. I'm worthless. I can't do it, I can't be like you, I can't --"

"Show me, then. I know you can do it." Viktor pauses, then continues in a slow, deliberate tone, "Yuuri, you're not weak. Everybody knows it, too."

Yuuri sucks in a breath, shocked anew. He recognizes those words. Viktor said them to him once before in another future, on a beach in Hasetsu. "What did you say?" Yuuri whispers, desperate for Viktor to say it again. It seems impossible, but Viktor has said things like this before, in the same way he did in their other future. Sometimes it makes him wonder if Viktor knows more than he has said, but... no. It can't be. It's just Viktor being Viktor.

"I said you're not weak," Viktor says softly. "Your friends and your family and I all know it. The world knows it. You can't help that you get nervous about performing. That is perfectly normal. It doesn't make you a weak person, Yuuri."

"I..." Yuuri swallows against the hot feeling in his throat, a faint noise escaping him. "How do you know what I need to hear?" he whispers, knowing how miserable he sounds. How is Viktor so good to him? Yuuri doesn't deserve it. He has been stretched too thin, unable to think past all the stress he has been under. Yet Viktor never blames him for his failure, instead telling Yuuri firmly that he is not weak, somehow echoing the very words that convinced Yuuri to trust him, long ago.

Viktor's voice gentles. "How could I not? I know you, darling. I am always here for you."

"Don't you dare," Yuuri says with a wet laugh. He knows Viktor would, and while a large part of him would love to see Viktor, he knows it isn't feasible. "I still need to do my free skate, and I'll be a mess if you show up in the middle of Taipei."
"Perhaps Hasetsu, then," Viktor suggests, only half-joking.

"Absolutely not!" Yuuri exclaims. He starts to say more when suddenly he hears barking, echoed by Viktor's laughter.

"Do you hear Yuuri, Makkachin? Do you want to talk to him?" Viktor says cheerfully, and a moment later, Yuuri can hear Makkachin's barks clearly. Viktor must have switched the call to speaker phone.

"Hi, Makkachin," Yuuri says quietly, smiling softly as Makkachin whines at the sound of his voice. "You have to keep Viktor in Russia, okay? Don't let him fly to Japan on a whim."

"It's hardly a whim when I've been plotting it for months," Viktor says brightly, making Yuuri groan.

"That's even worse, Viktor. You can't just spend that much money on a whim, and you can't surprise people with appearing in their home countries without planning! You did it to me before, didn't you? You showed up in Detroit, and I had no warning, and I won't let it happen again."

Viktor is laughing, which warms Yuuri's heart, chasing away the disappointment he feels in himself. Viktor is right -- Yuuri should skate the way he wants, not because of what the world expects of him. He wants to skate against Viktor at Worlds again, and he wants to be a challenge for him. If Viktor is planning on retiring, then he owes it to Viktor to do the best he can.

After Viktor says goodbye, Yuuri sleeps easily, until Phichit and Celestino come knocking at his door late in the morning. It is the first decent sleep he has gotten in weeks.

He holds Viktor's words deep in his heart throughout the next day, letting them calm him when he begins to worry too much. He skates his soul out in his free skate, determined to show the world that he isn't a complete failure, despite his anxieties -- and it wins him silver, under JJ's gold. Phichit wins bronze beneath him, and Yuuri happily congratulates his friend, relieved, because it means Phichit will be invited to the GPF.

All the while, he plans.

~*~

After Four Continents, Yuuri finally feels like he can breathe again. After a long talk with Celestino and Minako-sensei about the stress Yuuri has been facing, his two mentors decide that Yuuri will spend two weeks of March resting, in order to prepare for Worlds. Viktor wholeheartedly agrees with this idea, after he spends a very long call lecturing Yuuri about keeping his feelings to himself and not telling his coaches (and Viktor) when he is suffering.

Yuuri accepts it without complaint. For those blissful two weeks, Yuuri drastically scales back his daily training, and he doesn't read anything in the media. He still takes Vicchan on walks, and he still teaches the class of school kids on Saturdays. Now, though, he only has three days of dance a week with Minako-sensei, and he is forbidden from skating without someone watching him. They allow him to continue practicing his programs, but with restrictions.

"If I'm not available, then you have to ask Yuuko-chan or Takeshi-kun," Minako-sensei orders. She still hasn't forgiven Yuuri for not telling her how stressed he was. A large portion of his meeting with her and Celestino was her asking question after question about Yuuri's mental state. She has long known about his anxiety, but Yuuri had hidden his stress from everybody. "Mari-chan, if they can't. And no quads!"
"Yes, Minako-sensei."

Every day, Yuuri talks to Viktor, making sure to tell Viktor all about the rest he is getting. He tells Viktor about the walks he takes with Vicchan and the places they go. He sends Viktor pictures of Hasetsu in the spring, of blossoming *sakura* and blazing sunsets. He tells Viktor about the games he plays in his downtime, the TV shows he has been watching, and the conversations he has with Phichit and Yuuko about skating.

What he doesn't tell Viktor is how much Vicchan is helping Yuuri's fears in regard to being close to the water.

When he first visited home last summer, Yuuri could barely walk across the bridge to Ice Castle alone. Every trip to the rink was a nightmare; the waters always reminded him of the Neva. Yuuri couldn't go near the beach, either, and he avoided the waterway as best as he could. Then, one day, Mari shoved Vicchan into Yuuri's arms and told him to take his dog with him, since there was a guest with a bigger dog that had intimidated Vicchan, so off Yuuri went.

To his surprise, Vicchan helped his anxiety. Yuuri could walk the bridge without breaking into a sweat for once. Seeing Vicchan happily sniffing everything and yipping at Yuuri was enough to relax him for the whole walk.

After that, Yuuri began taking Vicchan everywhere. No one complained, least of all the Nishigori family, who love Vicchan just as much as Yuuri does. When Yuuri moved home, he continued the outings, letting Vicchan hang out at the front desk of Ice Castle while he skated. Minako-sensei even allowed Vicchan into her studio, as long as he behaved himself.

Yuuri also doesn't tell Viktor about the skating he *is* doing.

While forbidden from quads and excessive practice, Yuuri decides to work on one routine in particular during his forced vacation. It isn't either of his programs, so technically Yuuri isn't breaking the guidelines Celestino and Minako-sensei set down for him. Yuuko, after hearing Yuuri's reasoning, agrees not to tell anyone, going so far as to bar her children from watching Yuuri during his practices.

In secret, Yuuri is practicing *Stammi Vicino* every day.

He has been thinking about it for months, ever since the GPF. Watching *Stammi Vicino* in person had inspired him again, reminding him of the way he skated it for Yuuko in his other future, in order to stave off his depression. *Stammi Vicino* makes Yuuri happy, and he misses the routine, both the solo skate and the pair version.

He wants to skate it with Viktor again. If Yuuri can master it once more... maybe he can show Viktor, as a declaration of his feelings. Whatever Viktor decides, Yuuri will accept -- and it seems more and more, every day, that Viktor has decided to retire for good and coach Yuuri.

Viktor finally speaks to Yakov, for one thing. To Yuuri's utter amazement, Yakov agrees to Viktor's decision -- on the premise that Yuuri moves to Russia and works under both of them. Yakov Feltsman, coach him? Though Yuuri spent a day at Yakov's side at the Rostelcom Cup in his other future, he never imagined Yakov would want to coach him.

Yuuri is uncertain, though. It would mean returning to St. Petersburg, though -- where the Neva is. Where Yuuri died.

Thinking about the Neva still terrifies him. Yuuri doesn't want to leave Vicchan behind again,
either. He wonders if Viktor will let him bring Vicchan, if he moves to Russia -- then decides that yes, Viktor absolutely would let him bring Vicchan. The idea of Makkachin and Vicchan meeting and becoming friends delights Yuuri.

If Yuuri can handle the sea with Vicchan... then maybe he can handle the Neva, too. As long as he avoids the Neva on that day in January, then... hopefully, Yuuri can avoid his death. He has to try.

While part of Yuuri worries that the future will not change, that the public will reject Viktor once more and that they will have to fight for recognition and respect, Yuuri doesn't want any other future now. He wants to be with Viktor. He wants to return to Viktor's arms and stay there; he wants to wake up in the mornings and see Viktor's smile every day. He will take on the Neva, St. Petersburg, and the world, in order to have Viktor again.

To that end, Yuuri makes sure that his plans come to fruition. Three days after Worlds, and two weeks after Viktor finally speaks to Yakov, Yuuri brings Viktor home.

~*~

"Yuuri, take another picture with me and this poster of you!"

"Not right now, Viktor," Yuuri replies without looking, as he waits on the ticket machine to print their tickets. Despite Viktor's insistence, Yuuri only got standard fare instead of first class.

"There," Yuuri sighs, turning to look at his wayward charge. Viktor beams at him, utterly excited for his trip to Hasetsu, and all but glowing in his happiness to be reunited with Yuuri again. Yuuri cannot help a small smile, crossing the hallway back to Viktor and taking hold of his suitcase.

"Do you want to get anything to eat on the train before we go? It's going to be five hours before our transfer."

"Hmm... what do you want, Yuuri?" Viktor asks, sliding on his sunglasses with an easy smile. His good mood is infectious, and Viktor deserves it, after winning gold the other day in Worlds.

Yuuri hadn't made it easy for him, though. For once, his short program had a higher score than Viktor's, but Viktor had eked ahead of him in the free skate, finishing one point ahead of Yuuri for the gold. Christophe had taken bronze over JJ, while Phichit had made it to sixth place. Yuuri is happy with his silver, despite not getting the gold his country wanted.

Yuuri is glad that Viktor won, since it will likely be his last competition. Viktor hasn't announced it to the media yet, but he has already plotted out the press release with Yakov. This Yuuri knows, even though Viktor has tried to keep it a secret. Then again, Yuuri is keeping his own secrets. Yuuri hasn't actually told Viktor that he plans to accept him as his coach, yet.

He wants to show him, instead.

Just as they discussed on the phone, Viktor will return with Yuuri to Hasetsu and stay with him for a week. The old banquet room next to Yuuri's bedroom has been cleaned out and decorated for Viktor's stay, at his mother's insistence. Both Mari and Yuuri worked hard to get the room ready in time for Viktor's arrival, and every moment cleaning it had been bittersweet, reminding Yuuri of the months of Viktor living there in their other future.

Now Viktor is coming home with him.

They spent two days exploring Tokyo together after Worlds finished, though it took a bit of creative wandering, since Yuuri is still easily recognizable by his fans, and Viktor's face is too
famous. Still, they managed, and the time spent together had been more than enjoyable, between shopping and eating out at interesting restaurants.

Viktor loves Japan. Yuuri can see that much, and he hopes that Viktor loves Hasetsu just as much this time around. He can't wait to show Hasetsu to Viktor, and to talk with him properly about their decision. He can't wait to show Viktor Stammi Vicino. He can't wait for Viktor to meet Vicchan and his family. He wishes Viktor could have brought Makkachin, but she is currently staying with Lilia Baranovskaya in St. Petersburg.

With a small sigh, Yuuri clears his mind and focuses on Viktor, who is admiring the long hallway of shops and restaurants inside Tokyo Station. He considers Viktor's question for a moment, then pulls him across the hall to the obento shop. "These are pretty good, and we can get some snacks, too," Yuuri says, smiling as Viktor leans in to look at the menu.

"Yuuri, I want this one!" Viktor exclaims, pointing at the biggest of the lunch boxes.

"Alright, stay with the luggage while I buy them," Yuuri says, handing his suitcases over to Viktor and walking past him to the fridge display. He grabs boxes for both of them and picks out drinks and a few other snacks, paying for everything with his card, before heading back to Viktor.

"Want me to hold that?" Viktor offers, but Yuuri shakes his head.

"I'm fine. Let's just get to the train, okay?"

"Okay!"

On the train, Viktor steals the suitcases so that he can put them up in the luggage rack. Relieved to get a moment to relax, Yuuri sinks into his seat with a sigh of relief, setting their food on the floor in front of him. Yuuri leans back in his chair to watch Viktor, marveling at how easy it is to be with him like this.

Viktor catches him staring and winks, setting the last suitcase on the shelf above them and sliding into his seat. "So," he says, leaning over and holding Yuuri's stare for a long moment, glancing pointedly down at their food, until Yuuri breaks into a smile.

"Stop that," Yuuri laughs. "We can't eat yet, it isn't even noon."

"Yuuri, you are being cruel." Viktor puts on an impressive pout, but Yuuri ignores him, pulling out his phone to silence it. He has his headphones in case he wants to listen to music, but he expects that most of his attention will be on Viktor for the trip.

"So," Viktor says again, pointedly, "tell me more about the room I'll be staying in. Is it big?"

Yuuri smiles as he checks his messages, before tucking his phone away. "It's bigger than my room, at least. It's Japan, Viktor. Everything here is going to be smaller than Russia or America."

Viktor chuckles, reaching between them to take Yuuri's hand and entwining their fingers. Yuuri ignores the hint of heat in his cheeks, relaxing. "I'm sure I'll love it. I just hope your family likes me." Yuuri senses the nervous energy beneath Viktor's smile, and he softens, squeezing Viktor's hand back.

"They'll love you. I promise."
Yuuri's family adores Viktor, as he expected. They have long known about Yuuri's friendship with Viktor, ever since the first picture of them together in Boston was posted at last year's Worlds. Upon seeing it, Minako-sensei had run to tell Hiroko immediately, and by the end of the day, half of Hasetsu had known that Yuuri had gone out to dinner with his longtime idol.

Yuuri has opened up about it to them in phone calls, too. He has told both of his parents that Viktor is important to him, all but saying that he is in love with him -- which they have known for years, anyway. Yuuri's father has teased him for liking "that handsome foreigner" since Yuuri was a teenager. His mother merely smiled, telling Yuuri to have "Vicchan" visit soon.

Katsuki Hiroko loves Viktor. She welcomes him into the inn personally, with a wide, warm smile that stuns Viktor. She speaks enough English to talk his ear off as she leads him through the inn on a tour, while Yuuri trails behind them, translating when needed and smiling at the sight of Viktor standing next to his tiny mother. As Viktor follows Hiroko through the inn, Yuuri notices Mari standing in a hallway and pauses to talk to her.

"Where's Vicchan?"

"Hm? Sleeping upstairs, I think," Mari answers, glancing past Yuuri at Viktor, who is listening to their mother's chatter with wide eyes. A smirk steals across her mouth. "That your boyfriend?"

"Mari-neechan!" Yuuri hisses, grateful that Viktor does not understand Japanese. "Don't say that where he can hear." He points at Mari warningly, which only makes her smirk widen.

"I think someone's got a crush," she sings under her breath, and Yuuri has to roll his eyes.

"It's much more than a crush." Yuuri is gratified to see Mari's eyes widen at that, and he ducks out of sight to rejoin Viktor, catching Viktor's curious look and putting on a smile. "Sorry, my sister was saying something to me."

"Vicchan! Yuuri! Come here, let's show Vicchan the onsen while it's empty," his mother calls from down the hall. Viktor and Yuuri turn to follow, when suddenly they hear barking behind them. Viktor sucks in a breath, as Yuuri turns with a smile.

"Vicchan!"

Vicchan runs up, wiggling happily at Yuuri, and he reaches down to scoop his dog into his arms. Vicchan is always overjoyed when Yuuri comes home after competitions now, and Yuuri wishes he could take Vicchan with him everywhere. He turns to face Viktor with Vicchan in his arms, smiling nervously.

"This is Vicchan, my dog. Vicchan, this is Viktor."

Viktor covers his mouth, his eyes going wide. "He's so cute," Viktor whispers, then holds out his hand to Vicchan to sniff. At the sound of his voice, Vicchan starts wiggling, and to Yuuri's surprise, he propels himself off Yuuri's chest into Viktor's arms, who quickly reaches up to catch him.

Yuuri watches, breathless, as Vicchan and Viktor meet for the first time. Vicchan happily licks Viktor's face, and Viktor starts laughing in joy, rubbing his fingers through Vicchan's curls.

"He recognizes my voice! Yuuri, he knows me!" Viktor says happily, cuddling Vicchan close. "Oh, Vicchan, you are the most beautiful toy poodle I have ever seen! Ooh, he's giving me kisses!"

Yuuri feels something on his cheek and abruptly realizes he is crying. He hides his face with his
arm, wiping furiously at his eyes before looking back at Viktor and Vicchan with a happy smile. "I'm so glad he likes you," Yuuri says quietly, loving the way Viktor looks with Vicchan in his arms.

This has been a dream of his since he was a boy, for Viktor to meet Vicchan and accept him. Vicchan doesn't leave them for the rest of the tour. When he finally wriggles out of Viktor's arms, he follows them around the inn, curiously poking his nose through Viktor's bags when they head upstairs to show Viktor the banquet room. Yuuri wishes it looked the same as when Viktor stayed with him in the other future, but that would require Viktor bringing his furniture again -- and it won't happen this time. Not if Yuuri intends to go back to Russia with Viktor.

Not that he tells Viktor that.

After his mother has gone downstairs, Yuuri makes his request. They still have a few hours until dinner, and Yuuri doesn't think he can wait any longer. "Viktor, would you like to see my home rink? There's something I want to show you."

He wants to skate for Viktor.

"I'd love to, Yuuri." Viktor stands, Vicchan tucked into his arms like he belongs there, and Yuuri smiles thoughtlessly at the sight. "Let me get my skates."

When they reach Ice Castle, Nishigori glances between Yuuri and Viktor before calmly flipping the sign to closed. "There's no one on the ice right now," he explains with a shrug. "We cleared them out when we got your text. I hope this works."

"Thanks, Nishigori," Yuuri murmurs, leading Viktor over to the locker area to change into their skates. "We have the rink to ourselves, Viktor."

"Oh? Is something special going to happen?" Viktor asks teasingly. Yuuri only flashes a smile over his shoulder, leaving Viktor to pester him as they pull on their skates. Yuuri disappears briefly to change into a plain outfit of black skating pants and a simple black shirt, gloves on his hands, then reappears to join Viktor.

At last, Yuuri stands on the ice alone, while Viktor leans against the barrier that rests between them. In another life, Yuuko stood in Viktor's place, but she is hiding in the sound room with Nishigori at the moment. Yuuri wonders if the triplets are also with them, then hopes not; he doesn't want this ending up on YouTube again.

Viktor watches him silently, curious, patiently waiting for Yuuri to explain.

"Um... so." Yuuri swallows nervously, then squares his shoulders and meets Viktor's gaze. He looks beautiful standing there, like he belongs here in Yuuri's world, and Yuuri relaxes. "When I was a kid, I would practice your skates... my friend and I, we would skate them together, and it made me feel closer to you. It made me love skating."

Yuuri slides off his glasses and closes them, then puts them in Viktor's waiting hands. "At the Grand Prix Final, you asked to be my coach. I wasn't ready to answer then, but... I've thought about it, like you wanted. I have my answer now."

He meets Viktor's eyes again. "Please watch me," Yuuri says softly. Viktor nods slowly, closing his fingers around Yuuri's glasses.

Yuuri breathes out and pushes off the wall, skating to the center of the rink. He tucks one foot
behind the other and drops his chin to his chest, closing his eyes and waiting.

*Stammi Vicino* begins to play softly. Yuuri hears Viktor gasp softly, before he lets the music take over, lifting his head and moving by heart.

He skates, and he yearns, for Viktor to stay with him. He wants Viktor to coach him again. If Yuuri has Viktor, then he can handle the pressure from their fans, from their countries -- he can handle anything. Viktor makes everything easier. His love, his support, his affection, his devotion... he makes Yuuri want to keep going.

With Viktor at his side, Yuuri believes he can do anything.

The world may never understand them. They will never know Yuuri's secret about the other future, nor will they understand why he has worked so hard to change his life. They will pressure him and Viktor; they will protest, and they will balk at losing Viktor to coaching. Yet Viktor wants a change; he wants something new and exciting.

He wants *Yuuri*, and Yuuri wants him back. He wants Viktor to stay at his side, always. His future -- their future... Yuuri is ready to take hold of it with Viktor at his side and never look back.

'Let's leave together. I'm ready now.'

*For you, I will live again.*

At the climax of the music, after Yuuri lands the triple flip, he turns and skates toward Viktor, mirroring this same moment at the Grand Prix Final. He sees Viktor's face for the first time since he started, and he smiles thoughtlessly to see Viktor holding a hand over his mouth, eyes wide and glittering with tears. Yuuri reaches out to Viktor, one arm over the other, smiling at him and skating backwards, opening himself up before spinning around for the last jump.

He lands the combo, and as the music comes to an end, Yuuri falls into the final pose, his arms crossed as he stares up at the ceiling.

A moment later, Yuuri hears a clatter from the wall, and he whirs around to see Viktor hurrying to the entrance of the rink. He watches, breathless, as Viktor rips off his skate guards and steps onto the ice, pushing himself to Yuuri, his expression narrowed with determination. Yuuri holds his breath, and when Viktor reaches him, they collide on the ice, as Viktor throws his arms around Yuuri and holds him close.

"Yuuri," Viktor says fiercely, tears in his voice, and Yuuri melts into his arms, hugging Viktor back tightly.

"Please, be my coach," Yuuri whispers into Viktor's shoulder, Viktor's tears making him cry as well. "Please stay with me. I'll go anywhere with you, I'll do anything, just --"

"I'll do it. I'll be your coach. You can trust in me, Yuuri." Viktor tightens his arms around Yuuri, one hand sliding back through Yuuri's messy hair, his voice soothing. "Shh, don't cry, solnyshko. This is a happy moment."

"You're crying, too," Yuuri protests feebly, making Viktor laugh. They hold each other for several moments, their tears running dry as elation fills them both. Yuuri smiles helplessly, closing his eyes as he breathes in Viktor's scent.

He has Viktor back.
Viktor sighs shakily against his ear. "I've already planned everything. Yakov has the contract ready. You can stay with me, and your home rink will be my rink, and it will be amazing. I can't wait to show you around St. Petersburg!"

That city name sends a shiver through Yuuri, and Viktor pauses, as if remembering something. He pulls back, keeping Yuuri in the circle of his arms. "Oh, but are you sure you want to train in Russia?" Viktor asks, strangely keen. "We can train here. This rink is perfect, and it's much more private. I don't mind living in Japan to coach you."

Yuuri frowns a little, confused. Given Yakov's change of heart, he didn't think Viktor would be willing to leave his home rink. "What about Coach Yakov? If we're here, we can't train with him..."

"I know," Viktor agrees, looking briefly torn. "It's just that... you know the Neva River is in St. Petersburg, right? I walk by it every day. I don't want to make you uncomfortable by..."

For a moment, all Yuuri can hear is the rush of water. He shivers deeply, shocked by the mention of the Neva, his fingers gripping Viktor's shirt. He has to pause to collect himself, horrified that he showed such a reaction. Vaguely, Yuuri wonders why Viktor even mentioned that horrible river.

He has to struggle to find words. Finally, Yuuri asks carefully, "Why do you think I would be uncomfortable with the Neva?" He curses himself for stuttering on the word, glancing up at Viktor.

The look on Viktor's face stops him cold. Somehow Viktor looks guilty and worried at the same time, and Yuuri cannot make sense of those emotions. His heart begins to beat faster. Does Viktor... know, somehow?

No. No, it can't be.

Viktor licks his lips, as if nervous. "Yuuri, I have noticed that you are uncomfortable with large bodies of water. It's fine!" he adds quickly, noticing Yuuri's expression change. "I can't say I understand why..."

Something in Viktor's gaze flickers as he says the last words, and Yuuri blinks. "You're lying," he says faintly. How he knew that, he doesn't know, but... Viktor is lying to him. Why would he be lying?

The guilt in Viktor's mien deepens briefly, before it clears. "Alright, maybe a little. I don't know for sure, but... I have an idea why."

Yuuri can feel himself trembling. He doesn't understand what is happening, or what Viktor means. Panic begins to crowd his thoughts, anxiety making his vision go a little gray. "You... what? I don't..."

"I've been having these dreams," Viktor says quietly. "Of you... drowning. They began a year ago. I've had other dreams... strange dreams, wonderful dreams, but they always end with you drowning in the Neva. I don't know why. I hadn't even met you when I began having them. I've been trying to understand what they mean, but nothing I've read explains them. Then I noticed that you don't like rivers or lakes or anything similar, and... I wondered."

Yuuri stares at him, unable to move.

Viktor takes a deep breath. "I wondered if you once had an accident, but I couldn't find anything online about it. Then I wondered if it was something else... but I don't know. It doesn't make any
sense to me, and I don't know what it all means, or why it bothers you. I will never push you though."

Viktor takes both of Yuuri's hands and lifts them, his blue gaze clear. "You don't have to explain it if you don't want to. But please understand, Yuuri. I care very deeply for you, and I want to protect you. If you don't want to go to St. Petersburg, we will stay here. Whatever my dreams mean, that is what I promise -- to take care of you."

"He is still me, Yuuri. Remember that. And... trust that in no matter what life we are together, I will take care of you."

Yuuri's legs give out beneath him. The ice is cold against his knees, and he realizes he is shivering, his breath coming in short, erratic bursts. He can't move. He can't see anything. He can't --

"-- breathe, Yuuri! It's okay, you are safe, you are with me, please, calm down!" The voice sounds frantic, and Yuuri abruptly recognizes it. The fear in Viktor's voice jolts through Yuuri, bringing him back from the edge of insanity.

Yuuri gasps, becoming aware of pressure on his hand and shoulder. Viktor is gripping him tightly enough to bruise. Almost immediately the touch gentles, fingers sliding to his back and rubbing warmth into his spine. Yuuri focuses on getting air, holding each breath for five seconds until his heart is no longer pounding in his ears, letting him concentrate on Viktor's low, comforting voice, still tinged with that terrible fear. He gives Viktor's hand a faint squeeze.

"Better?" Viktor asks softly. Yuuri nods slowly and doesn't resist when Viktor stands and guides him up, letting Viktor pull them across the ice to the barrier. Soon Viktor has him settled on a bench in the lobby, kneeling in front of him and rubbing little circles into his knees. He looks so earnest and worried that Yuuri almost starts crying.

Yuuko bustles over. "Yuuri-kun! What happened? Is he okay?"

"He just had a fall. I'm going to check him out. Can you get something for him to drink?" Viktor asks Yuuko, who nods and goes to grab water from the machine. Yuuri hunches over, wrapping his arms around his stomach. He feels like he might throw up.

"Okay?" Viktor asks, watching him closely.

Yuuri doesn't know. Viktor is having dreams of his death. What the hell does that mean? How? How could something like this even happen? He suddenly needs to know everything about Viktor's dreams. When did they start? What exactly happens in them? Why is Viktor dreaming of him dying in the Neva?! Only Yuuri came back, and despite his own dreams of Viktor in the future, nothing else came back with him... right? Viktor had promised. He had promised that he wouldn't try to follow Yuuri into death, into the past.

Viktor, what have you done?

Viktor isn't looking at him anymore. He has taken off Yuuri's skates and is running his hands over the contours of each ankle, checking for any obvious contusions. He glances briefly up at Yuuri, meeting his glassy stare, before smiling slightly and looking back at Yuuri's feet.

Yuuko brings a bottle of water over, and Yuuri takes it, sipping slowly as he stares at Viktor. "Is he okay?" Yuuko asks again.

Viktor nods, standing up. "He isn't hurt, but I'm taking him home." He goes to take out the bag, spending a few minutes putting Yuuri's skates away, before kneeling in front of Yuuri to help put
Yuuko frowns up at Yuuri as they gather their belongings to leave. "You take care of yourself, okay? You shouldn't have been skating so soon after Worlds!"

"Thank you, Yuu-chan," Yuuri murmurs, his eyes on Viktor standing a few feet away. "See you later."

Yuuri finds himself lost in his thoughts as they walk back to Yuutopia. He can't bring himself to ask Viktor what he meant. Thinking about his death, about Viktor knowing about his death, terrifies him. Viktor holds his hand the entire way, glancing at him frequently, but Yuuri doesn't know what to say. He doesn't understand how Viktor could possibly have dreamt of his death. It makes no sense to him.

He remains quiet through dinner, watching his family as they feed Viktor and get to know him. Viktor keeps an eye on him, worry in his gaze, but Yuuri can only manage a small smile, not knowing what to tell him. He had a panic attack on the ice because of the Neva. Because Viktor is dreaming about his death, and Yuuri doesn't know what it means.

Finally his mother sends them off to bed, and Yuuri leads Viktor upstairs, pausing in front of Viktor's room. Viktor watches him keenly, visibly uncertain, and Yuuri sighs softly, reaching out to take his hand.

"I haven't changed my mind, you know. You don't need to look so worried."

"Are you certain?" Viktor asks quietly, lifting a hand to cup Yuuri's cheek. "You collapsed earlier. It scared me, Yuuri. I just... I need to know you're alright."

Yuuri nods slightly, hating that he scared Viktor like that. Viktor shouldn't have to deal with his mental weakness. "I'm okay. I just... I need some time, Viktor. I'm sorry for scaring you."

Viktor watches him a moment longer, then leans in and presses a kiss to his forehead. "Do you need me to sleep with you?"

Yuuri blinks, staring up at him, then turns pink. "No! I'm, um, that's okay! I'll be fine, you just... you sleep in there." After a moment, Viktor chuckles, smiling down at Yuuri, who manages a small smile back.

"Good night, Viktor."

"Good night, Yuuri."

Yuuri lets him go, reluctant to let Viktor out of his sight after tonight. Yet he forces himself to turn away and disappear into his room, preparing for bed with bland motions. Every nerve in his body is screaming at him to go back to Viktor. Yet Yuuri resists -- for a little while, at least.

After turning over in bed a dozen times, Yuuri gives up and climbs out from under his covers, leaving his room on silent feet and heading down the hall. The inn is quiet, but he has little doubt that Viktor is still awake. Sure enough, the light is still on in Viktor's room. Yuuri touches the door, then slides it open.

Viktor, sitting on a futon with a notebook in his lap, turns to look at him, achingly beautiful and familiar in his inn clothes. They gaze at each other for a moment, before Viktor shifts to the side and pats the futon. Yuuri closes the door and goes to him unquestioningly.
As soon as he sits down, Viktor wraps an arm around his shoulder, gently tucking Yuuri against his side, and it's all that Yuuri ever wanted, and all he needs. He sighs deeply, melting a little against Viktor's warmth, and Viktor leans against him as well, resting his cheek against Yuuri's hair.

Yuuri swallows, afraid of telling him. Yet Viktor had told him to trust in him... and Yuuri promised. He doesn't think he can admit the full truth -- even just the thought of talking about time travel makes him break out into a cold sweat -- but... he owes it to Viktor, to be honest.

"I've been keeping a secret from you. It's... it's bigger than you or me. I want to tell you so badly. I'm afraid to, though," Yuuri whispers. Admitting that he is scared feels oddly freeing. "I can't... I'm... mm."

He can't say it.

Viktor's voice is impossibly gentle. "Yuuri, if you're not ready talk about it..."

Yuuri struggles for a moment, then sags against Viktor, admitting defeat. As soon as he realizes he doesn't have to explain it now, he feels a great weight disappear from his chest. "You're right, I'm not ready to talk about it, but you deserve to know... and I want to know about your dreams, too, but..."

Viktor's arm tightens around him. "I'll tell you everything you wish to know. You don't have tell me now, or ever if you don't want to. I can wait. I'm happy to support you."

Yuuri shakes his head, bringing his hand up to grip the back of Viktor's robe. "But Viktor, that's not... it's not fair, to keep asking you to wait, to keep holding you at arm's length. You keep meeting me, reaching for me, and I'm so afraid... of, of dragging you down with me."

"Yuuri," Viktor murmurs, his name sending a shiver through Yuuri. "I reach out because I want to lift you. When two skaters work together, they can lift each other, support each other... they can show the world amazing things together. Our love is the same. You don't need to shoulder this burden alone."

"Love..." Yuuri is silent for a moment, certain that his cheeks are flaming. The little waver in Viktor's voice tells him that Viktor is similarly affected. Yet Viktor speaks the truth, and despite the time that separates him from the Viktor who first loved him, Yuuri cannot help the rush of love he feels for this Viktor, who loves him just the same.

His face heats up more, before Yuuri sits up, determined. Viktor turns to face him as Yuuri leans in to kiss him. As their lips meet, softly and surely, Viktor goes stiff against him, before slowly relaxing and returning the kiss.

Oh, how I've missed you.

Yuuri draws away slowly, glancing up as Viktor blinks several times, a delicate flush taking over his face. Their eyes meet, and Viktor's smile breaks through his confusion, joy radiating through him and echoing the happy ache in Yuuri's chest.

"Yuuri, that was..."

"Yeah," Yuuri agrees softly, blushing. "You really don't mind waiting?"

"Yuuri, my dear, I will wait forever for you. Though... you have surprised me, once more." Viktor lifts a hand to draw his thumb over Yuuri's lips, his gaze soft. After a moment, he asks, hushed, "Is this really okay?"
Yuuri smiles, almost shyly. "Yes... this, everything between us, it's okay. So long as it's okay with you. I want to be with you, Viktor. I... really, really want it --"

Viktor cuts him off with another kiss, unable to hold himself back, and Yuuri melts into him, sighing in relief.

They're okay. Together, they can try to understand what is happening to them. So long as Yuuri has Viktor. They will talk eventually -- Yuuri is not letting Viktor go back to Russia without finding out exactly what his dreams entail -- but for now, he can wait.

Soon Yuuri pulls away, far enough to murmur against Viktor's lips, "Can I stay with you tonight? Just to sleep. I want to lay beside you."

Viktor breathes in sharply, then wraps his arms around Yuuri's shoulders and pulls him close, his silken hair falling against Yuuri's cheek. "Yes. Yes, Yuuri."

Yuuri doesn't hesitate to kiss him again.
your trembling heart and his

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much for waiting patiently. A massive thank you to Meri for betaing! ❤

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Viktor will see Yuuri soon.

The thought resounds with clarity, echoing through his brain every time he lingers over which shirt to bring, which tie to pack, which cologne to wear, easily dragging him into fantasy. Viktor packs without noticing half of what he puts into his suitcase, until the baggage is nearly bulging with clothes that he will never use.

He imagines Yuuri laughing at him and quickly empties the whole suitcase, determined to pack properly. He doesn't need ten pairs of socks; both the hotel and Yuuri's home will have laundry facilities.

Viktor will see Yuuri soon, and he will stay at Yuuri's home.

He nearly packs another five pairs of socks, then abruptly realizes he is being ridiculous and forces himself to work on his toiletries instead.

An hour later, Viktor finally has all of his bags neatly packed and set by the door. He collapses on his couch and sighs, reaching for Makkachin for a cuddle, then abruptly remembers that his dog isn't home right now. Makkachin has already been dropped off at the kennel. Viktor doesn't like sleeping without her, but he will not have time in the morning to drop her off, so he took her a day early. He sighs again, deeply enough to blow his hair off his face, and tilts his head back to stare at the ceiling.

Viktor will see Yuuri soon, he will stay at Yuuri's home... and after this week, he will never compete again.

The thought seems unreal to him. Even after finalizing everything with Yakov, he still cannot believe that he will be retiring. Skating has been his life since he was a child, since he first set blade to ice and realized he could fly. Competitions, traveling, ice shows -- he cannot imagine giving his work up. Yet he looks forward to the days after Worlds, when his only responsibility will be taking care of Makkachin and Yuuri, if Yuuri allows it.

He will still do ice shows at least, as well as continue many of his contracts for modeling, brand promotions, and commercials. He has a farewell tour planned for the summer after he makes his announcement, and he plans to host another ice show with his friends. That will keep him busy during the off season, while Yuuri rests and prepares ideas for the next season.

So long as Yuuri agrees to let Viktor be his coach.

He wants to believe Yuuri will accept him. He suspects it, with the way Yuuri has been smiling every time Viktor mentions coaching. The invitation to Hasetsu is very telling, but Yuuri has kept silent on the topic, letting Viktor plead and whine without even hinting at his response. Viktor can
read between the lines, but until Yuuri actually says yes, he is left in limbo, suffering at the mercy of the man he loves.

Yet Yuuri still invited him to Hasetsu, and he wouldn't do that if he planned to reject Viktor's proposition, right? He even invited Viktor to stay at his home -- to meet his family. Viktor has never been introduced to any of his lovers' families. He can't imagine what he will say to Yuuri's parents or his sister -- do they even speak English?

Frowning, Viktor sends off a text to Yuuri with that very question, then sighs and slumps a little more. His Japanese is terrible, but he will make do if necessary.

Thinking of Yuuri brings his dreams to mind. Viktor hasn't experienced one of the strange visions in almost two months. A few nightmares of Yuuri dying, but nothing like the memory dreams, as Viktor has come to think of them. He still has yet to tell Yuuri about them; he has been waiting for the right time, and yet...

After a moment of thought, Viktor stands and walks to his bookcase, kneeling to pick out the notebook he keeps there. Several books and a few academic journals have been added to the pile, but Viktor leaves those, instead carrying the notebook over to the couch and sitting down, opening it to the first page.

'I first dreamed of Katsuki Yuuri's death on Sunday, March 29, 2015. In my dream, he...'

Viktor drags his finger over the words, remembering that bitter cold from his dream, unwillingly calling up the image of Yuuri lying still in death, lips blue and eyes closed. After a moment, he unlocks his phone and pulls up his very first picture of Yuuri, laughing with Phichit Chulanont the weekend before Worlds. He looks at the warm, sparkling eyes of the man he loves, long enough to banish the nightmarish image in his head, and sighs.

Four dreams, and Viktor still does not know what they mean. He has filled his notebook with exact descriptions of his dreams, followed by pages and pages of theories, research, and his own fears. He is terrified of Yuuri dying like in his dreams. Yuuri has come to mean so much to him, and to lose him... it would break Viktor.

Viktor can bear the pain of his dreams, as long as he can keep Yuuri safe in real life. Nothing else matters -- not his career, not the world, not even skating, so long as Yuuri remains safe.

He believes the dreams are a warning, but he has yet to figure out the puzzle of them. Perhaps if he shared them with Yuuri... maybe Yuuri could help him understand.

Yuuri's fear of water, his depression, and the way he looks at Viktor sometimes -- as if he can't believe Viktor is real... everything must be related. If only Viktor could understand, then he could start working on keeping Yuuri safe from the terrible visions.

For a long while, Viktor reads through pages of notes, absently finding a pen and adding a few thoughts here and there. When he finishes the notebook, he closes it carefully and exhales. Then he stands and walks to his carry-on bag, sliding the notebook into a pocket inside.

He will talk to Yuuri, the first chance he gets.

~*~

When Viktor lands in Tokyo, he finds out that Yuuri has already checked into his hotel. All of the skaters have been clustered in either one of two hotels, and Viktor is dismayed to find out that he and Yuuri have different hotels for this competition. He pouts about it all the way through baggage
Viktor settles for texting Yuuri to appease his sulk.

**To: Yuuri ♡♡♡**
This will make it so much harder to sneak into your room!

**From: Yuuri ♡♡♡**
You're not sneaking into my room during Worlds. The press will lose their minds

**To: Yuuri ♡♡♡**
I don't care! I want to be with Yuuri ॲ• (>.<) •ॲ

**From: Yuuri ♡♡♡**
You are ridiculous. We'll have plenty of time to be with each other after Worlds ends I mean see each other!

**To: Yuuri ♡♡♡**
Oh? You want to be with me that badly, Yuuri? (*´

**From: Yuuri ♡♡♡**
oh my god
I'm not talking to you anymore

Viktor laughs to himself, pleased that Yuuri responds in such a way to him now. His messages used to be very polite and distant, but as their relationship has deepened, Viktor has learned so many new things about Yuuri and his emotions.

He really is in love with him. Somedays, he cannot believe that, either.

Check-in takes little time, as does accreditation, Viktor receiving his badge, meal vouchers, and information packet in short order. For a little while, Viktor gets caught up in an interview and several happy fans, content to appease his loving audience, then escapes as soon as an opportunity arises. He happily ignores Yakov rolling his eyes as he ducks out of the hotel in a hat and sunglasses and makes his way down the street.

When Yuuri opens his hotel door, Viktor steps in close to hug him immediately. The feeling of Yuuri in his arms after months of not seeing him makes Viktor want to cry. He resists the urge, though.

"Viktor," Yuuri says in surprise, but he does not hesitate to hug Viktor back for a long moment, before taking him by the wrist and tugging him into the room before any paparazzi or fans can see them. Viktor catches Yuuri's face in his hands and studies him.

Yuuri looks a little tired. After his stress surrounding Four Continents, Viktor is not surprised, but he is pleased to see that Yuuri no longer has such dark circles under his eyes, as Viktor had seen in his videos. He resists the urge to kiss the soft skin beneath Yuuri's lashes and smiles brightly at him.

"Hello, Yuuri," Viktor says, letting him go stepping back a little to look at him. Yuuri is wearing jeans and a black zip-up jacket, his hair a little damp. Viktor lets himself breathe in Yuuri's clean scent and sighs.
"Hi, Viktor," Yuuri replies, a small smile on his face. He looks happy to see Viktor, which makes Viktor happy. "You didn't have to come all the way over here, you know... we could have met at a restaurant."

"And miss seeing you as soon as possible?" Viktor asks, putting a hand to his chest in affront. "I would never miss the opportunity to spend time with my Yuuri! I cannot believe they put us in different hotels."

Yuuri laughs, his eyes twinkling even as a tiny blush touches his cheeks. Viktor realizes how possessive he sounds and chides himself, sighing deeply.

"I'm happy to see you too, Viktor," Yuuri says, a little quiet. Yuuri's hand touches his after a moment, making Viktor's heart speed up a little. He carefully entwines their fingers, and when Yuuri doesn't pull away, Viktor cannot help a happy smile.

The world will be sad to see Viktor go, but Viktor has this new, wonderful feeling in his hands, filling up his heart with warmth. He thinks he can give it all up, if it means he can keep Yuuri.

He just hopes that Yuuri accepts him.

~*~

The week passes as if in a dream.

Viktor goes through each event with something building in his mind. The words are on the tip of his tongue -- I'm retiring -- but he holds them back, carefully navigating his fans' expectations and hopes. During each interview, the reporters focus on Viktor's current season, but they often ask him about his plans for the future. Each time, Viktor puts on a mysterious smile and says I'll tell you after this season. He does it to his fellow skaters and the fans he meets as well.

He will surprise the world one last time. He can't wait to see their reactions.

His sponsors already know, since their money is tied to his image, but they have kept the secret, as has Yakov. The only other person to know is Yuuri, who avoids reporters like the plague and ends up spending most of his time practicing or hiding in his hotel room. Viktor has to coax him out for meals, which are usually taken in the hotels' restaurants with their vouchers. The one time they tried to go out on the town with their fellow skaters, they were mobbed -- for Yuuri's presence.

Being Japan’s Ace at the World’s competition in Tokyo meant that everybody wanted to talk to Yuuri. Yuuri nearly had an anxiety attack in their attempts to get away. After that, Viktor kept Yuuri at the hotel, wanting to protect him from his rabid fans.

Worlds this year does not feel like a competition. Viktor finds himself exasperated and impatient with the event coordinators. Should they really wait so long between events? Can't they see he wants to be done with it?

The thought catches Viktor by surprise. He has never wanted a competition to end so quickly. He tries to slow himself down, making a point to watch the pair skates and ice dancing events. Yuuri sits beside him for both, making quiet noises of awe every time the pairs do a fantastic lift or throw. Viktor wonders if he and Yuuri could pull it off; he keeps thinking of Yakov's words at their meeting two weeks ago.

He and Yuuri could skate together like that. What would the world say...

When Viktor does finally compete for his short program, he hardly remembers what he does. First
place, of course, but Viktor spends more energy watching Yuuri's skate, barely paying attention to the other skaters as they try to reach his standards. Yuuri and Christophe come the closest, neck and neck for second place, but Viktor only has eyes for Yuuri.

Christophe notices, of course. He has always paid close attention to Viktor's moods and activities. Viktor once thought Christophe was in love with him, but when Christophe got a boyfriend, he put that thought aside.

Still, Christophe wastes little time in cornering Viktor, catching him alone the night before the free skate. Yuuri has already retired for the night, but Viktor has chosen to stay out a little late, lounging by the hotel pool. The room is otherwise empty, yet Christophe manages to surprise Viktor when he walks up to the pool, a martini glass in one hand.

"Thought you might be here," Christophe says. Unsurprisingly, he has sunglasses on, despite the time and location.

Viktor gives him a lazy smile. "Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"Shouldn't you?" Christophe returns, raising an eyebrow and pushing his sunglasses up. He is wearing a bathrobe and likely intended to swim naked if Viktor wasn't around. Viktor has never been one to stop Christophe when he chooses to strip.

"Merely enjoying the lovely evening. Tomorrow will be a grand day," Viktor says, returning his gaze to the glass walls that look over the city. The pool is near the top floor of the hotel, which grants them a beautiful view of Tokyo.

"If you mean the day I finally defeat you, then yes, it will." Christophe sips his martini and slips off his bathrobe, revealing a small pair of swimming briefs. Viktor raises an eyebrow, amused.

"You say that every year, Chris, and yet I still manage to beat you."

"I make you work for it," Christophe returns easily. Despite their rivalry on the ice, there has never been any negativity between them. He sets his drink on a little table with his phone, then steps into the pool, sinking into the water with a sigh. "I would have thought you'd be with your lover."

Viktor's heart speeds up a little. He keeps his voice even. "If you mean Yuuri, he went to bed already. He isn't my lover."

Yet, Viktor doesn't say, but Christophe seems to hear it anyway.

"Not for lack of trying," Christophe replies with a knowing look. "I never imagined it before, you and him. I am happy for you two, though."

"I told you, it's not like that," Viktor says, a little more softly. He is grateful for Christophe's support, even if Christophe doesn't know all that lies between him and Yuuri. He wonders if Christophe would be so supportive if he knew Viktor has decided to retire to coach Yuuri.

He will not say so. Telling Christophe such a thing before tomorrow might throw off his skate, which would be unfair.

"I want invitations to the wedding," Christophe says lazily, swimming closer to Viktor and turning onto his back. "Front row. I deserve it after I hooked you two up."

A shiver runs up Viktor's spine, as he recalls a flash of a gold ring from a dream. The ring has a snowflake engraved inside it. Viktor has never touched that ring before, yet he is certain that he slid it onto Yuuri's finger, once upon a dream. He sighs a little, wondering how he could ever convince Yuuri to marry him, then realizes abruptly what he is thinking about.
"Marriage," Viktor laughs, a little too loudly. "Whatever are you imagining, Chris?"

He makes the mistake of looking at his friend. Christophe is staring at him with interest and a bit of worry, the only hint of emotion he will show other than his usual, graceful cheer. Viktor feels his cheeks warm, then dunks his head under the water to cool off.

He swims for a while, and Christophe keeps his distance. Eventually Viktor moves to drift on his back in the water. He hears a splash and turns his head; Christophe has swum closer, his gaze on Viktor's face.

"Something is different about you," Christophe says quietly. "You would never have acted like this before over a boy. You've been acting different this whole week, but I don't understand why."

Viktor stays silent for a long moment. "I've never met anyone like him, Chris."

"Do you remember that night you called me?" Christophe asks, off-hand, and Viktor goes tense. Christophe doesn't seem to notice, turning his gaze to the glistening lights outside the pool room. "You were so panicked over this boy you had never met... a boy who idolized you, whom you never even noticed before. You told me that you were close to him in that dream, and that you saw him die."

"I remember," Viktor says after a long moment, tilting backwards to float in the water. He hears a soft splash as Christophe moves nearby.

"I've never seen you want to protect someone so much," Christophe continues, then lets out a low laugh. "It made me a little jealous. Sweet little Yuuri, who loved you to the moon and back... and you were dreaming of him. I wondered..."

Viktor stays silent, listening, waiting. He stares up at the ceiling, his heart beating strangely fast as he waits for Christophe to continue.

"I wondered if I should introduce you, to see if you'd act the same in real life," Christophe finishes with another small laugh. "And you have. To everyone's surprise, you have. Do you really intend to retire, Viktor?"

Viktor turns so fast that his head spins. "What did you say?"

Christophe stares back at him evenly for a moment. Then something in his expression falls. "So it's true."

"Where did you hear that?" Viktor demands. He doesn't want anything leaked before he goes to Hasetsu.

"We share a sponsor," Christophe replies, putting a hand over his face. "One of their representatives let it slip to my coach, who told me. I believe he also spoke to your coach, who was not happy about it. They went to talk to the sponsor to put a stop-gag on the rumors, I think."

Viktor doesn't know what to say to that. He turns away, pushing his hair back, then doing nothing when it falls in his eyes again. "They weren't supposed to tell. I'm going to announce it in two weeks."

"Two weeks?" Christophe says sharply, his hand dropping. "What happens in two weeks?"

Viktor stays silent. After a long moment, he swims to the ladder and climbs out of the water, offering a hand to Christophe, who pulls himself up and out. They stand at arm's length for a
moment, and Viktor realizes that Christophe's fingers are trembling in his hand.

"Why are you retiring, Viktor?" Christophe whispers.

"Because I found someone I want to protect," Viktor replies quietly. He gives Christophe a little half-smile, letting go of him and reaching for a towel, dropping it over Christophe's curly hair. "It isn't marriage, but I am going to ask him to stay beside me. Next season will be a surprise for everybody, I think."

Christophe says nothing, reaching up to grip the towel, his gaze darkening and his cheer gone. Then he takes a deep breath and puts on a smile. It hurts Viktor to see that mask on his face, but he doesn't intend to lie to Christophe to make him feel better. He hates that Christophe knows the truth now and can only hope it doesn't affect his skating tomorrow.

"I won't tell anyone," Christophe promises quietly. "I believe I'm too tired for swimming. Good night, Viktor."

"Good night, Chris."

Christophe leaves as quietly as he came, taking his martini and robe with him. Viktor wonders what Christophe is thinking; they have long been rivals, ever since Christophe joined seniors and began competing against him directly. Christophe has said more than once that Viktor is his motivation for skating; truly, Viktor has not had a better rival in years... until Yuuri, anyway.

Viktor isn't going to change his mind, no matter how Christophe feels about it. He can only hope that Christophe will continue to be his friend after he finds out the truth.

Viktor has decided on his future. No one can change his mind, now.

~*~

At last, Viktor comes to stand on the ice for the final time.

_Stammi Vicino_ begins, the solemn notes ringing across the ice. Viktor lifts his head and reaches out for the lover he seeks. Yet he reaches for more than that; this song was never just about love lost, but also about the inspiration Viktor couldn't attain this past year. He found that inspiration in Yuuri, creating joy that has infused his life with new meaning.

Even before Viktor knew Yuuri, he was reaching for something he could not have through only skating. _Stammi Vicino_ has always symbolized that longing for something more -- the life and love he ignored for twenty years.

Skating has been his life for so long. He has dedicated his entire soul to the ice, to the applause of the audience and the feeling of skates on his feet. His life has been _work, work, work_ for years, with a heavier cost than Viktor realized: his life and love, the two things that Viktor should have never neglected... Yet, when Yuuri stepped into his world, Viktor realized he could not go on like this.

He wants to rest. He wants the new, exciting emotions that Yuuri has created in him. He has someone he wants to protect now, not just himself. Christophe and the world, they may judge him all they want -- but Yuuri has become precious to him, and Viktor will do everything in his power to safeguard Yuuri's happiness.

No matter what his dreams mean. No matter what anybody says. No matter if he loses everything else. He will always, always fight to remain at Yuuri's side.
Each moment of skating to *Stammi Vicino* stands out as crisp and clear, his body and hands moving through each motion with grace. The lyrics are all the more meaningful to him now. He pours himself into each jump, each turn, wanting to give the audience everything. They have supported him all this time, and he would not be here today without his fans, without his coach and peers and sponsors giving him courage to continue forward. They deserve to have the best skate of Viktor's life; he can only hope it is enough that the world will forgive him later, after he steps away.

*Let's leave together, I'm ready now.*

He finishes with his arms crossed over his chest, gazing up at the lights of the arena, breathing harshly. He is more winded than he would have been normally, but the burn in his chest and legs feels *good*, satisfying in a way that no other feeling can compare. He drops his arms with a faint groan, then looks up to the audience, tears coming unbidden to his eyes. The arena is silent, caught by the emotion of his skate, and Viktor wonders what they are thinking. Did he surprise them? When he puts his hand to his chest and bows to them, the audience erupts with applause and screams, calling his name in a way that makes his heart ache.

"Thank you," Viktor whispers to the ice, then straightens to receive his accolades, unable to stop himself from smiling.

It is over.

~*~

The gold medal has barely landed in Viktor's hands before he makes his escape to Yuuri's side.

Throughout the weekend at Worlds in Tokyo, Viktor has focused on being the best version of himself possible, knowing in his heart that this would be the last time he would compete in men's singles. He skated *Immortelle* and *Stammi Vicino* with no faults, earning his highest ever free skate score and winning gold.

Yuuri didn't let him win easily, though, skating just as hard as Viktor, but Viktor managed to edge out over him. The true surprise of the competition was Otabek Altin, another dark horse of the skating world, stealing third place from Christophe while nobody was looking.

Viktor wonders how Christophe reacted to that. Christophe had smiled when the results were announced, charming to a fault, but Viktor knows Christophe better than most of his other competitors. He doubts Christophe will take his retirement well; he hopes that his friend doesn't give up skating, though.

All too quickly, thoughts of other skaters vanish from his mind, as Viktor focuses on Yuuri.

"Congratulations, Viktor," Yuuri says, breathless as he watches Viktor. His own silver looks good on his chest, but Viktor wants to see gold there instead. Knowing that several dozen cameras and thousands of pairs of eyes are fixed on them at this moment, Viktor puts one hand to his chest and bows to Yuuri, a smile touching his lips. When he glances up through his bangs, he sees Yuuri's eyes gleam with determination, acknowledging Viktor's challenge.

Next year, there will be a new king.

Then Yuuri pulls him out of his bow, laughing with an embarrassed flush, and Viktor beams, presenting him with a rose from his bouquet. Yuuri's blush only gets worse, but Viktor is happy to catch him in a one-armed hug after Yuuri takes the rose, unable to resist pressing a kiss to Yuuri's dark hair.
"Viktor!" Yuuri protests, laughing, and Viktor smiles to himself.

Yuuri, who is a mild celebrity in his own country and has to sneak around in a heavy coat and sunglasses as big as his face, is filled with effusive congratulations. "You were amazing, Viktor," Yuuri says earnestly as Viktor pulls him close for a pose, smiling at the cameras flashing in their faces.

"As were you, solnyshko," Viktor replies, loud enough that the cameras pick it up. He doesn't care about hiding his love any longer.

After the ceremony, Viktor settles into interviews, in which he plays cat and mouse with the constant question of "What are you doing next season?" He toys with the interviewers, refusing to give an answer either way, only saying that soon he will have an announcement for everybody. He has decided to wait until after his vacation with Yuuri to make his statement of retirement. Yakov wasn't too happy but has agreed to return to Russia, as long as Viktor comes home in a timely manner.

First, though, Viktor and Yuuri must get to Hasetsu.

Viktor arranges to move into Yuuri's hotel for two more nights, lucking out with a room on Yuuri's floor. This enables both of them to sneak around easily, as Yuuri wants to avoid his fans and Viktor wants to spend as much time with Yuuri as possible.

Still, they manage to have a fun time. Yuuri takes him to tiny restaurants with amazing food, shopping centers that stretch up to the sky, and neighborhoods with streetside markets full of interesting wares. They go to a park, where cherry blossoms are just beginning to bud on the trees, and walk close together, hands brushing each other as they talk. Viktor would call them dates, but he respects how Yuuri does not wish to define what is between them, not quite yet.

What will happen in Hasetsu remains unspoken, yet the promise lingers between them, hiding beneath every exchange. Viktor can only hope that Yuuri's smiles and soft looks mean that he will be rewarded for his patience.

After a pleasant two days of sightseeing and not-dates, Viktor follows Yuuri home to Hasetsu. He worries the entire way about whether Yuuri's family will like him. Yuuri insists that they will love him, but Viktor has not been close to anybody's family in years, other than Yakov and Lilia. He barely talks to his own parents; he just hopes that Yuuri's parents and sister accept him.

Yuutopia is a beautiful traditional Japanese inn with a warm, welcoming lobby that smells heavenly, the scent of delicious food wafting from the kitchen mixing pleasantly with the scent of the hot springs. Yuuri looks just like his mother, who stands in the middle of the lobby and smiles warmly at Viktor when he steps into the inn and toes off his shoes.

"My mother Hiroko, my father Toshiya, and my sister Mari," Yuuri murmurs, nodding to each of his family members as he sets their suitcases aside. He turns nervously to his family and introduces Viktor to them, and Viktor bows.

"Hello, I am Viktor Nikiforov," Viktor says in halting Japanese. Toshiya smiles serenely, amicable and kind, while Hiroko steps forward, beaming at him. She has a round face and soft brown eyes, the same eyes that Yuuri has.

"Vicchan, welcome to our home," Hiroko says in English, her accent charmingly thick, bowing before taking Viktor's hands and drawing him up the step. Viktor follows her in confusion, feeling rather tall next to her diminutive, round figure, thrown by the nickname and her warmth. He
glances back at Yuuri, only to find Yuuri smiling widely at them, his eyes misty.

"Come in, come in! We have been waiting for you, Vicchan! Yuuri always talks about you," Hiroko tells him, patting Viktor's arm several times as she leads him deeper into the inn.

"Okaasan!" Yuuri whines behind them. Hiroko tuts and ignores him. After that, Yuuri sighs and leaves them to it, letting Hiroko guide Viktor on a tour of the inn, only stepping in to translate when Hiroko's English falters.

Viktor is torn between keeping an eye on Yuuri, excited to see him in his natural habitat, and reveling in the attention Hiroko bestows on him. She tells him all sorts of interesting details about the inn, from when it was founded to how many times Yuuri has tripped on the bottom step of the stairs that lead up to the family rooms. Her smiles and soft touches warm his heart; he can scarcely believe how much she seems to like him.

Hiroko is nothing like Viktor's mother, who was always cool and distant when he was younger. She is the embodiment of warmth and kindness, always aware of when Viktor starts to get flustered, while remaining ever vigilant of the locations of her two children and husband. She treats him like he always imagined a mother should, and for a brief moment, Viktor almost wants to cry. He could easily love this woman.

Toshiya disappears into the kitchen at one point, while Mari returns to her work, but not before teasing her brother. Viktor doesn't catch what they say, only that Yuuri doesn't let his sister fluster him too much. While Hiroko walks ahead, Viktor pauses beside Yuuri, giving him a curious look.

"Sorry, my sister was saying something to me," Yuuri explains, only blushing a little. Viktor glances past him at Mari, who watches them with a faintly curious look on her face, and flashes a small smile. After a moment, Mari returns the smile with a smirk of her own and disappears down the hall.

"Vicchan! Yuuri! Come here, let's show Vicchan the onsen while it's empty," Hiroko calls. Viktor and Yuuri turn to follow, when suddenly they hear barking behind them. Viktor sucks in a breath, as Yuuri turns with a smile.

"Vicchan!" Viktor turns on his heel to see a small, furry body launch itself into Yuuri's arms. He stares, breathless with awe at the tiny dog that resembles a puppy version of Makkachin so much, his fur darker in color. Yuuri laughs and greets his dog happily, before standing and turning to Viktor, glancing up at him nervously.

"This is Vicchan, my dog. Vicchan, this is Viktor."

Viktor covers his mouth to hold in the loud exclamation he wants to make. "He's so cute," Viktor whispers, then holds out his hand to Vicchan to sniff. At the sound of his voice, Vicchan starts wiggling, and to Yuuri's surprise, he propels himself off Yuuri's chest into Viktor's arms.

"He recognizes my voice! Yuuri, he knows me!" Viktor says happily, cuddling Vicchan close. "Oh, Vicchan, you are the most beautiful toy poodle I have ever seen! Ooh, he's giving me kisses!" Viktor tears his gaze away from Vicchan long enough to see Yuuri wipe at his face, worrying
briefly that Yuuri is crying, but Yuuri is smiling instead.

"I'm so glad he likes you," Yuuri says quietly, his gaze soft with happiness.

Viktor smiles back at him, thinking of the fact that Yuuri asked for a poodle puppy because of him, to the point of naming that puppy after him. He feels honored that Vicchan likes him, so much that the small dog stays in his arms for quite some time as they continue the tour of the house.

The last room Hiroko shows them is an old banquet room, cleared out and cleaned for Viktor to sleep in, and conveniently right next to Yuuri's room. Viktor eyes Yuuri's door longingly, wanting to see the childhood room of the man he adores, but he holds himself back for now. Hiroko pats him on the arm one last time, then leaves them alone, while Vicchan sniffs at Viktor's luggage. Viktor can't help but kneel down and scoop Vicchan into his arms again, petting the happy dog gladly.

Viktor glances at Yuuri, who is gazing intently at his phone. Upon noticing his attention, Yuuri puts the phone away and takes a deep breath.

"Viktor, would you like to see my home rink? There's something I want to show you."

A shiver runs through Viktor at the way Yuuri looks at him. "I'd love to, Yuuri. Let me get my skates." He stands and gently deposits Vicchan in Yuuri's arms, then walks over to his suitcases to pull out his skates and a change of clothes more suited to the ice. Yuuri leaves briefly, then returns with a backpack slung over his shoulders and secured across his chest.

Viktor smiles, tucks his skates into his own bag, and stands to follow him. Together they leave the inn and walk down the hill toward a long bridge that crosses the small river that leads up to the nearby bay.

Seeing Yuuri so close to the water makes Viktor break out in a sweat, his nightmares flashing before his eyes. When Yuuri shows no signs of avoiding the bridge, Viktor swallows back his fear and makes certain to stand between Yuuri and the rail. When Yuuri visibly tenses at the sound of a particularly large wave hitting the foundation, Viktor tries to distract him with excited chatter about Yuutopia. Yuuri remains quiet for the most part, but he relaxes a little, leaning into Viktor's side.

Soon they leave the river behind, to Viktor's relief, and he puts his protective worry aside for now. Their destination is Ice Castle, a small skating rink that Yuuri explains has been his local rink as long as he has been skating. A young couple is working the counter, greeting Yuuri in Japanese and giving Viktor wide-eyed stares of recognition.

Yuuri speaks with the man for a few minutes, who then walks over to the door to hang a sign on it. Yuuri watches him, then looks up at Viktor. "We have the rink to ourselves, Viktor."

"Oh? Is something special going to happen?" Viktor asks teasingly. Yuuri only smiles, which makes Viktor pester him for details, excitement lighting up his nerves with hope.

He wonders if this has to do with whatever Yuuri has been hiding from him for the past few weeks. Practicing late at the rink... yet not practicing his own skates. Yuuri has been good about keeping it a secret, but Viktor has noticed he is up to something interesting. He looks forward to finding out what it is.

After changing into his black skating clothes, Yuuri leads him to the rink, which is empty of visitors, leaving Viktor alone with Yuuri. He notices the couple in the sound room -- Nishigori
Takeshi and Yuuko, old rink mates of Yuuri's -- but pays them no mind, his attention on Yuuri, who has asked him to remain at the barrier while he steps onto the ice.

Yuuri's gaze flicks up to Viktor's eyes nervously when he approaches, stopping at the barrier in front of Viktor.

"Um... so." Yuuri swallows nervously, then squares his shoulders and meets Viktor's gaze. He looks beautiful standing there on the ice, like everything Viktor has always dreamed of, and some of the tension in his chest eases. Whatever Yuuri wants to show him, Viktor trusts in him. "When I was a kid, I would practice your skates... my friend and I, we would skate them together, and it made me feel closer to you. It made me love skating."

Yuuri slides off his glasses and folds them carefully, and Viktor holds out his hand for Yuuri hand them over. Yuuri gives him a brief smile in gratitude.

"At the Grand Prix Final, you asked to be my coach. I wasn't ready to answer then, but... I've thought about it, like you wanted. I have my answer now."

Viktor scarcely dares to breathe as Yuuri meets his eyes again.

"Please watch me," Yuuri says softly. Viktor nods slowly, closing his fingers around Yuuri's glasses.

Yuuri breathes out and pushes off the wall, skating to the center of the rink. He tucks one foot behind the other and drops his chin to his chest, closing his eyes and waiting. A shiver of surprise runs through Viktor's body. He knows that pose intimately.

*Stammi Vicino* begins to play over the speakers, and Viktor gasps softly. He covers his mouth as Yuuri lifts his head and arms, beginning to skate the same intricate dance that Viktor skated to gold just days ago.

The emotions that Viktor poured into *Stammi Vicino*... Yuuri heard every one of them, and now he returns those feelings. Yuuri is just as ready for a new life as Viktor is; he skates like he is dreaming of something wonderful, each movement all but singing of longing and hope. No longer is Yuuri afraid of the future, because he has Viktor.

He wants Viktor. To be with him... to be his coach. Viktor has never been more certain of anything else in his life.

At the climax of the music, after Yuuri lands the triple flip, he turns and skates toward Viktor, mirroring Viktor's actions at the Grand Prix Final. *Let's leave together. I'm ready now.* Yuuri tells him, beckoning him with love in his gaze. Viktor cannot help the tears in his eyes as Yuuri reaches out to Viktor, one arm over the other, before smiling at him and skating backwards, opening himself up before spinning around for the last jump.

Yuuri lands the combo perfectly. The music fades, and Yuuri stands alone on the ice, arms crossed as he stares up at the ceiling. Viktor reacts without thinking, leaving Yuuri's glasses on the barrier before ripping off his skate guards and taking off across the ice. Yuuri turns to face him, apprehension clouding his gaze, but Viktor wastes no time in throwing his arms around Yuuri to chase that worry away.

Yuuri gasps a little and melts into him, and Viktor closes his eyes tightly as Yuuri's chest expands beneath his hands, his heart racing against Viktor's ear. He is sweaty and panting and beautiful, and Viktor has never loved him more.
"Yuuri," he says fiercely, unable to help his tears. Yuuri lets out a tiny noise, burrowing himself deeper into Viktor's arms.

"Please, be my coach," Yuuri whispers into Viktor's shoulder, his voice choked. Viktor almost sobs in surprise and happiness, suddenly feeling light-headed at Yuuri's plea. "Please stay with me. I'll go anywhere with you, I'll do anything, just --"

"I'll do it. I'll be your coach. You can trust in me, Yuuri." Viktor tightens his arms around Yuuri, one hand sliding back through Yuuri's messy hair when he notices that Yuuri is crying as well. "Shh, don't cry, solnyshko. This is a happy moment."

"You're crying, too," Yuuri mumbles into his shoulder, making Viktor laugh.

They hold each other for several moments, their tears running dry as elation fills them both. Viktor runs his hand down Yuuri's back, relishing his warmth, the way Yuuri fits against him so perfectly, then lets out a shaky sigh.

"I've already planned everything. Yakov has the contract ready. You can stay with me, and your home rink will be my rink, and it will be amazing. I can't wait to show you around St. Petersburg!"

The second Viktor says St. Petersburg, something changes. Yuuri shivers, going a little tense, and a sense of foreboding fills Viktor. He thinks of his dreams, then quickly changes tactics. If going to St. Petersburg upsets Yuuri, then Viktor can easily stay here in Japan.

"Oh, but are you sure you want to train in Russia?" Viktor asks, glancing down at Yuuri anxiously. "We can train here. This rink is perfect, and it's much more private. I don't mind living in Japan to coach you."

Yuuri hesitates a long moment, frowning in confusion. "What about Coach Yakov? If we're here, we can't train with him..."

"I know," Viktor agrees, hating the thought of letting go of Yakov's deal... but he will, if he can protect Yuuri. He hesitates over his next words, then decides to be honest. He promised himself that much before he came to Japan. "It's just that... you know the Neva River is in St. Petersburg, right? I walk by it every day. I don't want to make you uncomfortable by..."

Something in Yuuri's expression changes, dread flashing across his face. He opens his mouth to speak, but nothing comes out, his grip tightening on Viktor.

After a long moment, Yuuri lifts his gaze to look at Viktor. "Why do you think I would be uncomfortable with the N-Neva?" he asks, as calm as he can, but his eyes widen when he meets Viktor's gaze. Viktor wonders vaguely how transparent his own emotions are.

Viktor licks his lips nervously. He promised to be honest and to talk to Yuuri properly about his dreams and suspicions. He refuses to back down now, though he wants to be careful, since the topic clearly bothers Yuuri.

"Yuuri, I have noticed that you are uncomfortable with large bodies of water."

At those words, Yuuri's gaze goes wide and dark with something old and horrible, and Viktor's heart beats faster. "It's fine!" Viktor adds quickly. "I can't say I understand why..."

Though I think I do.

Yuuri blinks once. "You're lying," he says faintly. Viktor winces as Yuuri calls him out on his tiny
lie, briefly battling with himself. He wants to be honest, but Yuuri is already upset... but Viktor wants to know. He wants to help Yuuri, to protect him from everything that upsets him. This conversation was never going to be easy... but with Yuuri staring at him like this, seeing into him, Viktor cannot help but be honest with him.

"Alright, maybe a little. I don't know for sure, but... I have an idea why," Viktor says quietly, watching Yuuri's expression closely.

Yuuri looks briefly horrified, then afraid, his eyes going a little glassy. Viktor has no idea what to make of his expression, and he wonders if he should stop now. Yet... Yuuri wants to know, and Viktor wants to understand. "You... what? I don't..."

"I've been having these dreams," Viktor says quietly, the secret of the past year spilling from his lips. His chest feels lighter for finally saying it. "Of you... drowning. They began a year ago. I've had other dreams... strange dreams, wonderful dreams, but they always end with you drowning in the Neva. I don't know why. I hadn't even met you when I began having them. I've been trying to understand what they mean, but nothing I've read explains them. Then I noticed that you don't like rivers or lakes or anything similar, and... I wondered."

Yuuri is still staring at him, a faint tremble running through him. Viktor takes another deep breath to center himself, rubbing Yuuri's arms gently to reassure him of his presence, unsure how Yuuri will react to any of this, but he cannot go back now.

"I wondered if you once had an accident, but I couldn't find anything online about it. Then I wondered if it was something else... but I don't know. It doesn't make any sense to me, and I don't know what it all means, or why it bothers you. I will never push you though."

Viktor takes both of Yuuri's hands and lifts them, his blue gaze clear. "You don't have to explain it if you don't want to. But please understand, Yuuri. I care very deeply for you, and I want to protect you. If you don't want to go to St. Petersburg, we will stay here. Whatever my dreams mean, that is what I promise -- to take care of you."

Something flashes across Yuuri's expression, and in front of Viktor's eyes, he collapses onto the ice. Viktor can hear a high-pitched wheezing sound, realizing that Yuuri is hyperventilating, his eyes wide and unfocused.

He panics and drops to his knees beside Yuuri, grabbing his shoulder and hand. "Yuuri? Yuuri! I'm sorry, solnyshko, I didn't mean to upset you! Oh, Yuuri, please -- please breathe! Breathe, Yuuri! It's okay, you are safe, you are with me, please, calm down!"

Suddenly Yuuri takes a breath, filling his lungs with much-needed air, and Viktor sags in relief. He realizes how tightly he is gripping Yuuri and relaxes his hold, moving his hand to Yuuri's back and gently rubbing as Yuuri catches his breath and calms down. When Yuuri gives Viktor's hand a faint squeeze, Viktor lets himself relax.

"Better?" Viktor murmurs, and Yuuri nods slightly. His gaze is distant now, unfocused with something strange and old and terrible. Viktor has no idea how to reach past the thoughts clouding his mind, so he focuses on what he can do: take care of Yuuri.

Getting Yuuri out of the ice rink is easy enough. Yuuri goes along with everything he does, willing to let Viktor pull off his skates and massage his feet, then staying at his side as Viktor walks him home. He barely speaks to his friends as they leave, nor to his family at dinner, and Viktor spends the whole meal watching him worriedly. As if sensing that something has happened, Yuuri's family does not press Yuuri too much, instead asking Viktor about his life and interests. Viktor is glad for
the distraction, but he never takes his attention off Yuuri.

The warmth from Stammi Vicino and Yuuri's decision to accept Viktor's offer is gone, replaced by something otherworldly, creating a distance between him and Yuuri that Viktor worries he cannot cross. He wants to talk to Yuuri, but he is afraid of causing another panic attack. That moment on the ice terrified Viktor. He never wants to see Yuuri in such agony ever again.

Viktor decides to forego the onsen that night. He is too worried about Yuuri, and Yuuri must sense his anxiety, because he turns to Viktor as they reach their floor, taking his hand.

"I haven't changed my mind, you know. You don't need to look so worried," Yuuri says quietly, glancing up at Viktor.

"Are you certain?" Viktor asks after a moment, lifting a hand to cup Yuuri's cheek. "You collapsed earlier. It scared me, Yuuri. I just... I need to know you're alright."

Yuuri nods slightly. "I'm okay. I just... I need some time, Viktor. I'm sorry for scaring you."

Viktor watches him a moment longer, then leans in and presses a kiss to his forehead. "Do you need me to sleep with you?"

Yuuri blinks, staring up at him, then turns pink. "No! I'm, um, that's okay! I'll be fine, you just... you sleep in there." He looks so beautiful standing there that Viktor feels the urge to kiss him properly, but he resists, not wanting to spook Yuuri any further than he already has. After a moment, Viktor chuckles, smiling down at Yuuri, who manages a small smile back.

"Good night, Viktor."

"Good night, Yuuri."

Viktor reluctantly releases him, watching Yuuri step into his room and close the door, before sighing deeply and retiring to his own room. A futon has been laid out on the floor, a set of dark green clothes folded on the pillow, and Viktor slowly changes into them, not interested in sleeping. He fishes his dream notebook out of his bag and sits down on the futon, turning the pages without really reading what he wrote inside.

He told Yuuri about his dreams, and Yuuri had a panic attack.

What does it mean? What traumatized Yuuri so much that he collapsed upon hearing Viktor's suspicions? What happened to him? Viktor has more questions than he did before he came to Japan, and he is afraid of asking again, afraid of the distance between them. How can he reach Yuuri? How can he protect him?

He isn't certain of anything anymore.

So deep in his thoughts that Viktor almost doesn't notice the door opening. He turns to find Yuuri standing in the doorway, achingly beautiful and uncertain, wearing a simple t-shirt and shorts. They gaze at each other for a moment, before Viktor shifts to the side and pats the futon. Yuuri closes the door and goes to him unquestioningly.

As soon as he sits down, Viktor wraps an arm around his shoulder, gently tucking Yuuri against his side. Yuuri melts against him with a deep sigh, easing the ache in Viktor's heart as he rests his cheek against Yuuri's hair. If Yuuri has come to him, then maybe they can make this work after all.

After a long moment, Yuuri finally speaks, his voice barely more than a whisper.
"I've been keeping a secret from you. It's... it's bigger than you or me. I want to tell you so badly. I'm afraid to, though. I can't... I'm... mm."

Viktor wonders at this secret that Yuuri has not told him, his heart beating faster in anticipation. Yuuri sounds heartbroken and terrified, and Viktor hates that he has put Yuuri in this position. He wants Yuuri to feel comfortable talking about this with him, but he wants to protect Yuuri's mental state as well.

"Yuuri, if you're not ready talk about it," Viktor says gently, trailing off as he waits for Yuuri to respond.

Yuuri seems to battle with himself, then gives in and sags against Viktor. "You're right, I'm not ready to talk about it, but you deserve to know... and I want to know about your dreams, too, but..."

Viktor closes his eyes for a moment. He could curse himself for the rest of his life, for hurting Yuuri this way. "I'll tell you everything you wish to know. You don't have tell me now, or ever if you don't want to. I can wait. I'm happy to support you."

Yuuri shakes his head, bringing his hand up to grip the back of Viktor's robe. "But Viktor, that's not... it's not fair, to keep asking you to wait, to keep holding you at arm's length. You keep meeting me, reaching for me, and I'm so afraid... of, of dragging you down with me."

Viktor thinks of Yuuri drowning, disappearing into the dark depths of the Neva. He vows never to let that happen, nor to let Yuuri believe such a fate.

No, my love.

"Yuuri, I reach out because I want to lift you," Viktor murmurs, tightening his arm around Yuuri. His cheeks heat up as he speaks, aware of how intimate the words are, yet they are his truth. "When two skaters work together, they can lift each other, support each other... they can show the world amazing things together. Our love is the same. You don't need to shoulder this burden alone."

Yuuri is silent for a long moment. "Love..."

When he turns in Viktor's arms, sitting up to face him with a determined expression, Viktor does not expect the kiss. He goes stiff as Yuuri presses against him, his lips as soft and sweet as Viktor always dreamed, before he slowly relaxes and kisses Yuuri back, just as fervently. When Yuuri pulls back, flushed pink and beautiful with uncertain hope, Viktor cannot help a smile, joy filling his heart.

"Yuuri, that was..."

"Yeah," Yuuri agrees softly, blushing. "You really don't mind waiting?"

"Yuuri, my dear, I will wait forever for you. Though... you have surprised me, once more." Viktor lifts a hand to draw his thumb over Yuuri's flushed lips, his gaze misty. After a moment, he asks softly, "Is this really okay?"

Yuuri smiles, almost shyly. "Yes... this, everything between us, it's okay. So long as it's okay with you. I want to be with you, Viktor. I... really, really want it --"

Viktor cuts him off with another kiss, unable to hold himself back, and Yuuri melts into him. Viktor lets himself taste Yuuri properly, not pushing him too much, but willing to take what Yuuri has so freely offered. He loves how right it feels to kiss Yuuri, to be with him like this.
Always, Yuuri reaches him where he is, and Viktor can only hold onto him.

"Can I stay with you tonight? Just to sleep. I want to lay beside you," Yuuri murmurs when he pulls away, making Viktor breathe in sharply. He can imagine doing so much with Yuuri, but after the day they had, he would love nothing more than to fall asleep with Yuuri in his arms. He wraps his arms around Yuuri's shoulders and pulls him close, his silken hair falling against Yuuri's cheek.

"Yes. Yes, Yuuri."

Yuuri leans in to kiss him again, and for a while, Viktor loses himself in Yuuri's soft kisses, in the way their bodies press together, fitting against one another like pieces to a puzzle. He thinks of the notebook sitting at his hip, then deftly reaches back without looking to slide it under his pillow, before gently pulling back.

"You've had a long day, solnyshko. Let us rest now."

"We've had a long day," Yuuri corrects him gently, smiling. "Okay, Viktor."

Viktor leaves him on the futon while he changes out of his inn clothes and into a pair of pajama pants, guessing that Yuuri would probably not be okay with Viktor wearing his usual sleep clothes -- which is only his underwear. He glances over to see Yuuri watching him, looking a little dazed at Viktor stripping right in front of him. Viktor's lips twitch into a smile, flattered by Yuuri's obvious attraction, which makes Yuuri turn red for a moment.

"Come on," Yuuri mutters, lying down under the futon covers. Viktor chuckles and moves to join him.

The way Yuuri settles against him eases the rest of the worry in Viktor's heart. He fits into Viktor's arms perfectly, resting his cheek against Viktor's bare chest with a low sigh, and Viktor cannot resist running his fingers up and down Yuuri's back, breathing in his scent.

They stay like that for a long time. Though Viktor doesn't think he could sleep after what happened, Yuuri's warmth lulls him to slumber, and for a while, he does not dream. When he does, they are nothing like his nightmares or memory dreams, yet they trouble him all the same.

~*~

Viktor wakes slowly, and as his dreams fade, he remembers the warmth in his arms and has to smile. When he opens his eyes, he finds Yuuri resting close against him, one arm wrapped around Viktor's waist. This close, Viktor can smell him, the faint scents of his shampoo and soap.

"Viktor," Yuuri says quietly, lifting his head. Viktor blinks, somewhat surprised that Yuuri is awake before him.

"Hm?"

Yuuri's gaze is strangely intent in the early morning light. The sun has begun to cast light through the windows, brightening the room and highlighting the worry in Yuuri's expression.

"Can we talk?" Yuuri whispers. Viktor softens a little, reaching up to brush Yuuri's hair from his face. Seems that his sleeping beauty had a hard time slumbering, just as Viktor did.

"Of course."

Yuuri leaves him for a little while to get dressed, while Viktor cleans himself up and changes into
a set of running clothes. As he grabs his running shoes to bring downstairs, he wonders what Yuuri will tell him. After last night, Viktor suspected that Yuuri would avoid the topic for a while, but it seems as if Yuuri wants to discuss everything now. If so, Viktor will be honest with him.

Yuuri slips into his room several minutes later, carrying his backpack. Viktor gives it a puzzled look, and Yuuri shrugs self-consciously.

"Not my skates. Um, it's something else," he mumbles, and after a moment, Viktor pulls his notebook from under his pillow and stands.

"May I put this in your bag as well?"

"Sure." Yuuri watches Viktor curiously as he steps behind him and unzips his bag, tucking the notebook in next to what looks like a journal, a blanket, and a couple bottles of water. Viktor asks no questions, though, instead sliding his hand into Yuuri's and squeezing.

Yuuri gives Viktor a tiny smile and squeezes his hand back. Together they head down to breakfast.

By silent agreement afterwards, they set off running together, Vicchan joining them. Yuuri leads the way, and Viktor runs beside him, pleased to see more of Hasetsu in the daylight. When they veer off the main road and onto a side road, Viktor realizes they are moving toward the sea, which makes him worry. To his dismay, Yuuri takes him out to a long beach where clouds have gathered on the horizon. The beach is empty of anybody, the spring air a bit too chilly for leisure, but the occasional fishing boat can be seen out on the waterfront. In the distance, islands dot the horizon, surrounding the edge of the bay.

Abruptly Viktor stops when he reaches the sand, his heart dropping to his stomach. He recognizes this beach. The seagulls, the horizon, even the boats on the water, he recognizes all of it.

He saw it once in a dream.

When he turns his head, he finds Yuuri staring at him closely, his eyes wide and dark, filled with hope and grief at the same time. Yuuri glances briefly at the deep blue waters, then turns away, closing his mouth tightly. Alarmed, Viktor reaches out to take his hand, stepping close to him, and Yuuri lets out a short, shuddering breath.

"Yuuri, if this place upsets you..."

"It's fine," Yuuri says forcefully, then gentles his voice. "Sorry, it's... it's fine. Vicchan's here, and he's been helping me... you know, deal with it. I didn't think it was possible, but... he's helped me a lot, since I moved back here. Besides, we're just here to talk." After a moment, Viktor accepts this, hiding a grimace as he thinks of his dream. As long as he keeps Yuuri away from the water, it will be fine.

After unhooking the leash from Vicchan, who bounds off with a happy bark, Yuuri pulls off his backpack and takes out the blanket. He spreads it open and lays it on the sand, then sits down on top, leaving his shoes on the corners. After a moment, Viktor copies him, glancing nervously at his notebook as Yuuri sets it down with the journal. He accepts a bottle of water and drinks slowly, unsure who should lead this conversation.

"I'm not sure how to start," Yuuri says quietly, reaching out to catch Vicchan as he wanders back and plops down at Yuuri's feet. "There's so much I want to tell you, but... I can't make sense of any of it. I thought I understood everything, but after what you told me last night... I... I just don't know."
Viktor picks up his notebook and sets it in his lap, gripping the worn pages tightly. He watches Yuuri for a moment, then feels himself relax. Whatever it is, they can face this together.

"How about I try to guess?" Viktor offers, smiling a little when Yuuri stares blankly at him. "I'm not completely oblivious to everything, solnyshko. Let me share my knowledge, and you can confirm or deny it."

Yuuri worries his bottom lip with his teeth, then nods silently. Viktor strokes a finger down the pages of his journal and gathers his thoughts.

"I told you last night that I have been having dreams of another life. A life with you... where you died. At first I thought they were simply dreams, but I keep having them, and they all end the same way. They feel different to any other dream I have ever had. I spent a long time struggling to understand it." He opens his notebook to the fourth page and pulls out an often-read article on multiple realities. Yuuri takes the sheets of paper and stares at them, his face white as he scans the document.

"There are scientific theories out there for this sort of thing, though I have not found quite the right one that suits my beliefs and experiences. Whether it is science or magic, I have yet to decide. The important theory is that there are multiple realities of our world. Other worlds where you and I never met, or where we met later, including one where, I believe, I was your coach. But... you died there. I do not understand how, but I believe the dreams are warnings, spilling over from that other reality, so that I can protect you from that fate."

Viktor exhales hard as he finishes his theory, watching Yuuri's expression worriedly. Yuuri reads through the article silently, lips pursed tightly, before he hands it back to Viktor with a shaking hand. Then he remains silent, staring out at the sea watching the clouds roll in.

Viktor waits, giving Yuuri his space to formulate his thoughts. He wonders if Yuuri thinks him insane for his theory, but Yuuri has yet to get up and run away screaming, so Viktor can only hope. He distracts himself with Vicchan, who rolls onto his back and lets Viktor pet his fluffy belly.

"They're not dreams."

Viktor's head jerks up, startled. "What?"

Yuuri doesn't take his eyes off the horizon. "The dreams you're having. They're probably not just dreams... well... I don't know what they are, but the alternate reality theory probably isn't that far off. Maybe it's more an alternate timeline, but I'm still not sure how it works." He takes a deep breath.

"I was there. In that other reality where you and I were together. You were my coach, and we went to the GPF together. We lived together in St. Petersburg. Then... I was out running one day in January. I was going to meet you for practice. Before I could meet you, I got hit by a car on the bridge over the Neva. I came back in time somehow. Two years of my life, of our life together... gone, because I died. I drowned, and I died."

Viktor's thoughts race as he considers the implications. Yuuri... came from the future? Another future, maybe. It makes sense in a way. No wonder Yuuri is terrified of the water, if he truly drowned in another life. If he remembers it...

Dying. Yuuri died.

Viktor's heart has surely stopped. The dreams are real? No -- how could the universe put Yuuri
through that pain? How could it take someone so precious away? His dreams suddenly make sense. That first nightmare, that first time he saw Yuuri fall into the Neva -- all of it truly happened.

Yuuri was his. His beloved, his other half, the person closest to him -- and Viktor lost him in another life. He tries to put aside the wonder that Yuuri, who is beauty and light and perfection, fell in love with him, swallowing back his awe. Yuuri loved him in another life... and he came back and loved Viktor again.

Yuuri looks so small and cold, sitting there on the blanket, which makes Viktor ache. He reaches out to pull Yuuri into his arms, hugging him tightly. Yuuri goes stiff, then slumps into his embrace, reaching up to grip the back of Viktor's jacket tightly.

"I'm so sorry, Yuuri," Viktor whispers, closing his eyes. "You must have been so scared... I can't imagine what you went through, but I am here for you, my love."

Yuuri lets out a low, pained noise. "You believe me?"

"Of course I do," Viktor tells him, unable to comprehend his disbelief. Between his dreams and everything he knows of Yuuri, this feels truer than anything else in Viktor's entire life.

Yuuri sags against Viktor, curling into himself. "I can't believe it... I've wanted to tell you for so long, but I was afraid..." He glances past Viktor at the sea, which makes Viktor tense.

Viktor suddenly wants to pick Yuuri up and take him far away, the conversation be damned. He forces himself to remain calm, though. Viktor holds Yuuri for a long time, until he feels he can continue without frantically dragging him home. Yuuri leans against his side, gripping his hands tightly in his lap.

"Tell me about it," Viktor whispers.

Yuuri closes his eyes. "I remember the cold... it was so cold. Then I woke up in bed in Detroit, like I'd never lived any of it, except I remembered everything. I traveled back in time somehow, and I had to relive everything."

Viktor wishes he had been there for Yuuri. He hasn't always been the most empathetic of people, but he finds it unfair that Yuuri has been alone with this secret for so long, while Viktor has lived in oblivion. His dreams aside, Viktor should have supported Yuuri. He supposes it couldn't happen any other way, though; since Yuuri has never dared to tell him, and Viktor could scarcely bring himself to talk of his dreams.

He is glad they are talking now.

Yuuri squeezes his hands, absently digging his thumb into his knuckle. He doesn't dare look at Viktor, who hasn't said a word -- can't say anything. "I didn't know where I was at first, and I... I tried to call you. You weren't in my phone, and it scared me, so I tried calling your number, and... you... you didn't recognize me. You didn't know me, and then I noticed the date, and..."

"You called me?" Viktor interrupts, going tense. "When was this? What did I say?"

Yuuri flinches slightly. "Um... a year and a half ago. It was October when I came back. I doubt you remember it but --"

"No, I do." An old memory, of getting a strange call in the middle of practice, from a foreign number. The voice had been afraid... and it had been Yuuri's voice. Viktor hadn't known. Yuuri had needed him, and Viktor had abandoned him. "I... was cruel to you, wasn't I? I hung up on you. You..."
called me for comfort, and I hung up."

Yuuri's eyes widen, and he shakes his head quickly. "No, Viktor, I don't blame you. You didn't
know me then, so why would you have comforted a stranger? It's okay."

Viktor fights back a scowl, wishing he could go back in time and change his reaction that day. He
reaches for his phone, trying to find his call history, but the call was so long ago that it must be
gone now. He shoves the phone in his pocket and takes a deep breath. "No, it is not okay. You
were afraid, you had just gone through something horrible, and I was not there for you."

"Viktor..."

With a small sigh, Viktor takes Yuuri's hands, gently unclasping them from their tight grip. "I'm
sorry, Yuuri. For what it is worth now, I'm sorry." Yuuri meets his eyes briefly, then looks down as
he bites his lip. Viktor reaches up to smooth the bite, smiling slightly as he takes Yuuri's hand
again. "Tell me more, solnyshko. Tell me everything."

After a long moment, Yuuri takes a deep breath and grips Viktor's hands back. "Okay. I came
back... and I don't know how I did it. But I remember everything that happened. Two years... gone,
and no one else knew about it. Though, um, Phichit knows. He was my roommate then, you know,
so when I woke up, I panicked... I had an anxiety attack. Phichit talked me through everything... he
helped me get better."

"I am glad you had someone to support you," Viktor says softly.

Yuuri lets out a low noise. "Phichit has been great. He's been cheering me on this whole time. He
helped me with the decision I made." Yuuri grips the fabric of his pants, his mouth twisting a little.
"I... well. I knew you, and I knew how you were unhappy with your career. I was too afraid to try
and be with you again... I thought that everything had changed, and I wouldn't be able to have the
same relationship with you, if I tried again. So I decided to be something else for you... a good
rival. Maybe that way, you wouldn't lose everything by deciding to coach me."

"Lose everything?" Viktor repeats, stunned. "Yuuri... last night, when you asked me to coach you,
it was the happiest I have ever felt. I have been waiting for this day for months. How could you
think of it as my loss?"

"I mean," Yuuri flounders, ducking his head, "it's just, when you decided to become my coach, you
kind of... dropped everything else. You put your entire career on hold, and you suffered for it... you
lost your friends, and your coach, and your reputation. All because of me."

"Impossible," Viktor decides. "Coaching you would not have such repercussions."

"No, I mean you dropped everything. Viktor, you flew out to Hasetsu two weeks after Worlds and
didn't go back until December. Coach Feltsman stopped speaking to you."

"Oh." Viktor considers it for a moment. He tries to imagine Yakov's reaction to that sort of
behavior and winces. "Ah... perhaps I might be that hasty."

"Just a little," Yuuri agrees, a small smile quirking his lips before fading. "I didn't want to see you
go through that again. So... I tried something else. I tried to be a better skater, and... then it just kept
going, I started winning, and then we skated against each other... it didn't happen like that, the first
time. I mean, when you befriended me... I couldn't even believe it. It changed everything.
Everything was different from the beginning, but it's already changed so much, even my
relationship with you... it's different, and I still don't really understand it."
Viktor hates that Yuuri suffered so much. Thinking about it, when Viktor had met Yuuri, he had been so sad... so lost in turmoil. Viktor had thought it was because of losing his lover, but...

A shiver runs through him as Yuuri speaks of their relationship so frankly. If they had been together in that other future, then Yuuri had come back to find that his lover -- Viktor -- had forgotten him. He had lost his life, his love, his career, his family... and he had been alone.

He inhales sharply with realization. "You lost everything."

Yuuri lifts his gaze, blinking. "Mm?"

"That is why you were so sad. You lost it all. You lost everything... your life, your career, your family..."

"You," Yuuri whispers. "I lost you, Viktor. Then you started talking to me, and... I couldn't believe it. We came together so easily and naturally, like we were never apart, and... I've been trying so hard not to want you, but I failed. I love you too much to stay away from you, and I'm worried... that I made you fall in love with me, when maybe it wasn't supposed to be this way."

Viktor can hardly believe his ears. He can feel his face starting to warm at the blatant words of love, but he manages to keep his focus on what Yuuri is saying. "Yuuri... how can you think that? You made my life better. You gave me love and sunlight and laughter and warmth when I had nothing before. It must be fate that I fell for you again without knowing anything about our other life together. Besides, I was interested in you long before I began having those dreams, long before we ever spoke. I fell for you because you are Yuuri."

Yuuri turns to stare at him, beautiful and fragile in his hope. Viktor smiles softly, lifting Yuuri's hand to kiss his palm. "If we were not meant to be, then we would have simply passed each other, like ships in the night."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I'm just... it was rough," Yuuri whispers. His cheeks have blossomed with pink, surely matching the color on Viktor's face. He leans into Viktor's hand. "It didn't help that I dreamed of you. Like... I guess like the dreams you described."

"Mm... dreams of you. I dreamed of going back, but... I was dead, so I was a ghost there. I talked to you. You were so sad... you were empty and lonely and sad, and I left you there all alone." Yuuri's voice breaks on the last word, and he breaks apart, letting go of Viktor and covering his face. "I left you alone! I couldn't reach you, I couldn't see you again, and here I was in the past and you didn't know me. You were gone, and I was alone, and I've been trying to keep going all this time, but then we met again and now you're here, telling me you're dreaming of me dying, and... it's too much, it's..."

Viktor realizes that Yuuri's breathing has quickened with panic. He grasps Yuuri by the arms and pulls him into the circle of his legs, holding him tightly and tucking Yuuri's head under his chin. "Shh, Yuuri, it's okay. Whatever is happening, we can understand it together. Take deep breaths, okay?"

Yuuri gasps softly, then burrows his way deeper into Viktor's chest, trembling against him. Vicchan wriggles between them and tucks himself into Yuuri's arms, whining softly in worry. Yuuri hides his face in Vicchan's soft fur as he slowly calms.

Viktor thinks about what Yuuri told him, his mind whirling with the new information. Suddenly,
his dreams make more sense than ever before, along with all of the curious little behaviors he has caught from Yuuri. The way Yuuri looked at him in the beginning, like he didn't believe Viktor was really there. His sadness at Worlds last year, and the sudden improvement of his skating... if Yuuri came from two years in the future, he would have gained that skill and knowledge.

"You are amazing, Yuuri," Viktor says quietly, rubbing his hand down Yuuri's side as he stiffens. "Coming back alone and reliving it all... you must have been frightened. I'm so sorry I left you alone."

Yuuri shakes his head sharply. "No, I left you alone. It's my fault you're so sad --"

"There is no way in the world that I would ever blame you for it," Viktor tells him, pulling away enough to lift Yuuri's chin to meet his gaze. "I will carry a thousand years of sadness if it means you will be safe. I am not alone there. I'm here with you. I wish I could remember that life with you. Everything you have told me, Yuuri, all of it is okay. Neither of us may understand it, but I am here for you in every way that I can be, solnyshko. Trust in me."

Yuuri stares at him with wide eyes, dark with sadness and awe, and Viktor smiles softly, entwining their hands together. "Perhaps the dreams are memories, then. How, I do not know. But if I am dreaming the same things you lived, then surely my dreams are from your other life. They must be a warning of some kind."

Yuuri is quiet for a long moment. "Is that why you pushed so hard to become my coach?"

"Perhaps," Viktor allows, returning his arm to Yuuri's waist. Yuuri takes a deep breath, then settles more comfortably against him, less tense now that he is no longer panicking. "Part of it, yes. I dreamed of coaching you and being with you, loving you... and I wanted it. I wanted to be that person for you, that man in the suit at your competitions cheering you on."

Yuuri starts a little, turning to look at him. "Your dreams... will you tell me about them? I just don't understand how you could dream about us..."

Viktor nods, a little thrill of nerves tightening in his chest, before he reaches for the notebook at his side and opens it against his leg, so that both he and Yuuri may look at it. "I wrote them down," he says with a faint hitch of his breath. "Every dream, I wrote it down because it seemed so strange. The first one... it was just before Worlds last year. That was when I dreamed of your death."

For a moment, Viktor lets himself breathe in Yuuri's scent, centering himself with the assurance that Yuuri is safe here in his arms. Yuuri is nowhere near the Neva, and even the sea several yards from them cannot hurt him. He hides a grimace as he thinks of taking Yuuri back to St. Petersburg... back to the place where he died. He would rather keep Yuuri as far away from the Neva as possible.

Yakov will understand —and even if he doesn't, Viktor doesn't care.

He lets Yuuri read the pages, his heart aching as he rereads the words he wrote a year ago. Yuuri stays silent, as Vicchan wriggles out of his grip and curls up on the blanket beside them.

"That's... yes," Yuuri whispers, pushing his fingers against the lines that say, he went into the water, and they didn't pull him out in time. "I drowned. I didn't see the car coming, but I felt the cold..."

A deep shiver runs through Yuuri, and Viktor tightens his arms around him. "It will not happen," Viktor says lowly, fiercely. "I will not let that happen to you again."
"You might not be able to stop it," Yuuri says, a little frantically. "What if -- what if I'm meant to..."

"No!"

Viktor's shout wakes Vicchan, who sits up halfway to blink at them. Yuuri twists to stare at him, shocked, and Viktor takes a deep breath to calm himself, reaching up to cup Yuuri's cheek.

"No, Yuuri. You are not meant to die. Otherwise you would not be here with me, you would not have come back to this time. I am meant to save you -- I know it. That is why I keep having these dreams. You are meant to live, and I am meant to make sure of that. I will never accept you dying. I will stop it. What else are these dreams good for, if not to save you? I will not let it happen."

"But what if you can't?" Yuuri asks desperately. Viktor shakes his head.

"Then we will not go to St. Petersburg. We will stay here, and then you will be safe from that awful river."

"Viktor! You made a deal with Coach Feltsman, you can't back out of it now!" Yuuri says in shock, sitting upright.

"He will understand. I will coach you from here, and --"

"No, no -- I... Viktor, you can't give that up again. Last time, everyone treated you terribly because you decided to stay here and coach me, and I can't let you go through that again!" Yuuri pushes his hair back in frustration. "Coach Feltsman stopped talking to you, and no one respected you, and... it infuriated me. I know how much it hurt you! Will hurt you! You can't give that up again, not for me."

Suddenly Yuuri's words from the banquet make sense.

"You can't give everything up for me again! I've been working so hard, so that you wouldn't have to, and now... you can't just offer me that, when I'd already decided not to!"

"Oh, Yuuri," Viktor says softly, his mien melting into a smile from his stiff, cold expression. "I care about you more. If it is a matter of my career versus your safety, I will choose your safety every time."

Yuuri lets out a low noise, not backing down. "No. I want to go to St. Petersburg."

Viktor's smile fades abruptly. "St. Petersburg killed you. The Neva killed you. No."

"Anything can kill me!" Yuuri says, shrill, then looking horrified at himself. "I mean..."

Viktor takes a deep breath to center himself, then gently catches Yuuri's face in his hands, meeting his eyes. "Yuuri. I will not let you die. Let me protect you, please."

Yuuri breathes in sharply over a sob, reaching up to grip Viktor's wrists, but he doesn't pull away. A shuddering breath escapes him, before he turns his face into Viktor's palm. "I don't want you to suffer for me. It's... that time is so far away. If it happens, it will be in January. We can still go to St. Petersburg for training if we leave in January... right? It's important to me, that you stay with Coach Feltsman. The facilities there are better, and you're more at home there, and..."

"It is not worth your safety," Viktor says quietly, discomfited that Yuuri seems to value himself so little. Yuuri's argument does make sense, but... Viktor does not want to take any risks. "Why
should we chance it? The Neva is situated between my apartment and the rink. I cross that bridge every day, and you will have to as well. I do not trust that river."

"Viktor, please," Yuuri whispers, and for a moment, Viktor aches at the sight of him like that, tears clouding his dark eyes.

"Don't look at me that way, solnyshko. I cannot simply let you go back to that place." He cannot imagine watching Yuuri break down again like he did on the rink. His trauma from dying is far too great to ignore in favor of Yakov's skating club. Viktor thinks of all the times Yuuri tensed up near water. How much worse would it be if he was faced with his killer? "You were unhappy in Detroit, and Boston, and even here. It will be worse in St. Petersburg. Your peace of mind is more important to me."

Yuuri stays silent for a long moment. His eyes fall closed, his dark lashes creating soft crescents against his skin. "Can we talk about this later? I... I don't know what to think anymore. I'm so confused..."

"Shh, of course, Yuuri," Viktor says, softening and drawing Yuuri into his arms again. "I am sorry for upsetting you. I simply... mm. Surely you must know how much I adore you. The lengths I would go to protect you."

Yuuri swallows, heat coming to his cheeks for the first time in a long while. "I'm starting... to understand. I'm sorry. It's just... it's been so hard, keeping all this in. I had no idea you were dreaming of this, and... I wish I had said something earlier."

Viktor shakes his head. "I am sorry you had to go through it all alone, Yuuri. I am here now, at least. You can tell me everything now. We can figure this out together."

"Okay," Yuuri whispers, then leans in and rests his forehead against Viktor's cheek, unaware of his racing thoughts.

Viktor will do anything for Yuuri. He considers moving to St. Petersburg like Yuuri wants for a moment, thinking of all the plans he had made... of Yuuri living with him, training with him. He had not realized how treacherous the Neva was, and now he cannot bear the idea of letting Yuuri anywhere near that dreadful river. If he agrees -- which would take a lot to convince him at this point -- Viktor would do everything in his power to protect Yuuri from that river.

Perhaps if he got an apartment closer to the rink... perhaps if he began campaigning with the city to put better rail guards on the bridge. Perhaps he should do those things and remain in Hasetsu anyway.

Perhaps they should move somewhere else entirely, far away from rivers and cars and anything that could harm Yuuri.

"Um... your other dreams," Yuuri says after a moment, shifting against Viktor. "What else did you dream?"

"I dreamed of this place, here," Viktor says quietly, putting thoughts of the Neva aside for now. "I dreamed that you and I sat on the beach together after we had a fight. We talked about what it felt like to belong. I told you that you weren't weak, and you told me you wanted me to be just Viktor. It was like... you were meeting me where I was."

Yuuri starts in his arms, lifting his head. "But... that happened. We did come here. I snapped at you during practice, and then I brushed you off, and then I was too ashamed to face you... so you came
and dragged me out of bed and brought me here. That was... it was the first time I felt like we
could make it work, you coaching me."

"Wow," Viktor whispers, his eyes widening at the implications. If the dreams are truly memories
of his other life with Yuuri, then somehow information is being transferred. He wonders at the
source of the memories, likely his other self in some way... Viktor wouldn't put it past himself to
attempt time travel to save Yuuri. "Yes. It was easier after that... wasn't it?"

Yuuri turns to face him, keen as he grips Viktor's arms. "Viktor, how much do you remember? If
these aren't dreams, then..."

Viktor shakes his head slowly. "Not everything. I remember the dreams, but the life I spent with
you... I do not remember it. I am sorry." When Yuuri's face falls, Viktor's heart clenches. "The
dreams must be memories, at least. How... I do not know."

"I don't understand," Yuuri whispers. "When I talked to you -- in my dreams, I visited you in the
future, and I talked to you -- you said you wouldn't try to follow me. You promised. But you're...
gaining your memories? Are you alright, the other you? What if you're -- what if he's hurt?"

"Shh," Viktor soothes, running his hands up and down Yuuri's arms. "Yuuri, I am fine. I am here
with you now, see? I may not remember everything, but I am here."

Yuuri refuses to relax, desperate in his emotions. That pain is for Viktor, and Viktor cannot stand to
see him so miserable. "But you're alone in the other future, and the way I know you now, he
doesn't remember this! So he must be alone, separate --"

"No, Yuuri. You must not think of me like that. How can I be there when I am here? This is me.
That was me, too, but now I am with you, I am happy," Viktor says, suddenly fierce, his conviction
in his words solidifying as he grips Yuuri's arms. "That other me cannot be completely separate
from who I am, because I am dreaming about you, am I not? I am here, loving you, being with
you, am I not? He is me, and I am him -- and I have not lived that life, not yet. But I can remember
some of it, and I am here with you."

Yuuri just looks at him, miserable, and Viktor gentles his voice. The thought comes unbidden to
him that he must have tried to convince Yuuri to take care of himself in that other future, as soon as
he could communicate with him. He knows exactly what he would say. "What did I tell you in your
dreams, Yuuri?"

Yuuri chews on his bottom lip, then reaches up to wipe at his eyes with his sleeve. "You kept
telling me to believe in you and tell you everything. That you're the same person, even if you don't
have the same memories. You told me... to make new memories."

Viktor reaches up to cup Yuuri's cheek, leaning in to press their foreheads together. "You have
done that, haven't you? You reached out to me at Worlds. You worked hard to become my rival...
you let me be your friend, your lover, even though it must have hurt you to talk to me every day.
You fought so hard even though you were alone... and you let yourself love me again, even though
I hurt you."

"You didn't hurt me," Yuuri protests, and Viktor can't help but smile.

"I did," Viktor murmurs, lifting his head to kiss underneath Yuuri's eyes, catching the tears
gathered there. "I hurt you when you called me and I hung up on you. I hurt you by leaving you
alone in this new life. I didn't protect you, and I am sorry, my love."
This time, when Yuuri starts to cry, Viktor doesn't hesitate to pull him back into the protective circle of his arms, hugging him tightly. He presses a kiss to Yuuri's forehead, rocking Yuuri slowly as he cries. He has never been good with tears, but with Yuuri, slowly, he has come to understand what he needs.

He will never leave Yuuri alone again. Not after knowing what Yuuri went through all this time. Coming back to the past alone... he must have been terrified, and Viktor never knew.

He knows now.

"Better?" Viktor asks softly when Yuuri's sobs have faded away. Yuuri nods a little and pulls back, taking off his glasses and wiping at his face. Yuuri glances around while gingerly touching his running nose, and Viktor takes off his jacket and offers it, grinning a little at the look Yuuri gives him.

"I'll wash it when we get home," Yuuri mumbles, then uses the edge of the sleeve to blow his nose. "Mm... tell me more about your dreams. I want to know everything you remember."

"Okay," Viktor replies quietly. "Everything is written in that notebook, if you want to read it later." Yuuri glances at the book and nods, but his attention returns to Viktor, so Viktor takes a deep breath. "One of the dreams was about you skating in a competition. I do not know which one, but it was a free skate. You were dressed in blue and you skated a beautifully poignant program. You were a vision," he sighs, smiling a little when Yuuri goes pink.

"Yuuri On Ice," Yuuri mutters.

"Hm?"

"My free skate. Yuuri On Ice. You made me produce it, since you had already choreographed my short program with a song you ordered," Yuuri explains, shifting a bit nervously. Viktor blinks, then smiles in delight.

"I did? Wow! Your skills are amazing, Yuuri!"

Yuuri smiles a little at that. Viktor wonders which music he chose for Yuuri's short program, suddenly thinking of all the amazing ideas he had when Yuuri first agreed to let him choreograph for him. He has sketched countless ideas and programs, but he draws a blank at the knowledge of what he would have chosen in another life. Something beautiful to reflect Yuuri, surely, but...

"I wonder which competition it was. You were at my free skate for most of my qualification rounds for the GPF, and my prefectural skate..." Yuuri trails off, frowning a little.

Viktor makes a considering noise. "I am unsure. You were upset about something, I know that much. You had been crying, and we had fought. But your skating was filled with peace, and at the end, you surprised me with a quad flip... then I kissed you on the ice," he says with a smile. Yuuri's eyes widen as he stares at Viktor.

"That was Beijing," Yuuri says in a small voice. "I... well, I had an anxiety attack before the free skate. You tried to help, but you ended up making it worse, and we argued. You didn't know what to say. I told you that you didn't have to say anything, as long as you..."

"Stay by your side," Viktor murmurs with him, his head aching oddly for a moment. He doesn't recall that detail from his dream, yet it feels like the truth. For an instant, his vision doubles. He can see Yuuri crying, but he is wearing a Team Japan jacket, and they are in a parking lot. He frowns to himself, struggling to draw more details from the odd vision, but it fades quickly. He
puts a hand to his head in confusion.

"Viktor?"

Viktor glances up to find Yuuri staring at him again. He gives a small smile, putting the strange sensation out of his mind for now; he can write down the experience later. He does not want to worry Yuuri. "You surprised me then. Just as you surprised me at Worlds, here... with your quad flip. I must have taught you that."

Yuuri nods slowly. "You taught it to me. You taught me everything."

"Good. Though I will have to test you," Viktor says, winking. "I would not mind seeing the skates we made together, either."

"You want to see them?" Yuuri smiles, slow and delighted, which relieves Viktor to see. "I want to show you. They mean so much to me... the skates you made for me."

"We will go later, then. Though I still have yet to see the other skate in my dreams," Viktor says thoughtfully.

"How many of these dreams have you had?" Yuuri asks after a moment, quiet.

"Four distinct ones. The first, your free skate, and talking to you on the beach... and last, a banquet. In that memory," Viktor says, trying out the word instead of dream, "we danced all night, and you made me fall in love with you. You asked me to coach you."

For a moment, Yuuri stays frozen in his arms, before he suddenly lets out a loud groan. "You dreamed of the banquet? How? That isn't fair!" He slumps sideways in Viktor's arms, despondent, and Viktor pulls him back up with a quizzical smile, bemused at how Yuuri is acting. Usually he is the dramatic one.

"What do you mean?"

"I can't remember it," Yuuri whines. He slides down to the blanket beside Viktor and reaches out to ruffle Vicchan's ears as he snoozes. "I got so drunk that night because I bombed the GPF, and I don't remember dancing with you, or begging you to be my coach, or anything! It was such a mess too, you thought I remembered the whole time you were coaching me, and it caused a lot of problems..."

Viktor thinks of sixteen champagne glasses and the thrill of dancing with a beautiful man, remembering how fascinated he was, how Yuuri invigorated him and enthralled him. He starts to smile, reaching down and drawing his hands through Yuuri's messy hair, away from his face. Yuuri glances up at him, eyes still reddened from crying.

"We made a new memory though, didn't we?" Viktor offers, smiling. "Surely you remember the way we danced that night this time. The way you swept me off my feet, and the way I begged you to let me coach you."

Yuuri swallows, not looking away from him. "I remember," he whispers. "You shocked me that night. I had no idea you wanted to coach me. And all this time, you've been dreaming of us... together?"

"Together," Viktor affirms, shifting to lay on his side. When he settles his hand on Yuuri's stomach, they both let out a little sigh. Touching him like this, being so close to him, free to kiss him and touch him and love him... Viktor cannot believe how lucky he is. For all that Yuuri
suffered, for all that his dreams have haunted him, Yuuri has never given up, and Viktor loves him more with every passing moment.

His light. His miracle.

They will have their trials in the future, Viktor is certain. Yuuri has lived with Viktor as his coach before, but Viktor does not remember that life, and his inexperience will frustrate them both. They will argue, but they will also grow even closer, and Viktor cannot wait for those new experiences. He knows Yuuri will surprise him again and again, and he looks forward to every new memory they will create together.

He wonders at himself in another future, risking everything to protect Yuuri. However Viktor came by the memories... it matters little in the end, because what matters is protecting Yuuri.

He will do anything to protect Yuuri.

After a little while, Viktor notices a shiver run through Yuuri. The day is still early, and the sea breeze is cool against his skin. "Are you cold?"

"No," Yuuri whispers after a moment, reaching up to wrap his arms around Viktor's neck and pulling him down. Viktor finds himself lying prone against Yuuri, creating warmth between them and warding off the chill. Yuuri smiles at him. "Not since you're here."

Viktor does not resist his invitation, leaning down to kiss him softly. The nearby sea, the cries of the seagulls, and even Vicchan, curled up on the blanket beside them, are all forgotten for a time. All Viktor remembers of these moments is Yuuri's warmth and the joy of loving him.

~*~

Three days of uneasy sleep and blissful time together pass. In quiet agreement, Viktor and Yuuri do not press each other on their dreams and memories again, letting the knowledge rest for a while in the back of their minds. Viktor needs to absorb what he learned, to fully understand what he can do now.

He ends up sitting in the onsen for a long time every evening, watching the stars and thinking. Yuuri joins him every time, lacking the shyness Viktor expected of sharing a space naked with him, but still keeping distance between them. Viktor tries to keep his interest polite to respect Yuuri's privacy, but he cannot help thinking about what Yuuri told him -- that they were lovers in another life. He peeks a few times despite his best efforts, but if Yuuri notices, he does not chide Viktor for it.

Some other version of him has held Yuuri before him. Viktor can admit to a bit of jealousy, but mostly he just feels awe, that someone as beautiful as Yuuri chose him.

Viktor did consider exchanging his notebook for Yuuri's journal, though he held back at the last minute. He feels vulnerable knowing that his precious notebook, filled with his dreams and theories and worries, could end up in Yuuri's hands. Yuuri has not offered to share his journal, either, though Viktor is endlessly curious about it.

Despite Viktor's worries, Yuuri shows no sign of anxiety for these few days, so either he is hiding his emotions well, or the meltdown he had the other day has cleared away his anxiety for now. Viktor knows Yuuri too well; he doubts Yuuri has perfected his mask so quickly.

Viktor goes back to sleeping alone. He leaves his door open in invitation every night, but Yuuri merely bids him good night after their dinners and baths, likely lost in his own thoughts.
Half of the week goes by in a quiet daze. Viktor wakes later than he usually does every morning, and his inattention leaves him feeling strange. He wonders if this is to be his new normal, if his relationship with Yuuri will ever go back to familiarity and happiness. Perhaps this tension is what Yuuri has felt all this time -- and if it is, then Viktor needs to feel it as well, to bear the pain his lover has been hiding.

Just as Viktor starts accept this new, uneasy feeling between him and Yuuri, he has another dream.

~*~

Yuuri has to win. He has to -- he has to --

Because Viktor cannot go back to that old life. He cannot fit into that shell any longer, that cracked mask that has hidden his longing, his loneliness. He wore it for four months, and he refuses to wear it again, because it hurts him every time he puts it on. Yakov and even his fans -- they cannot understand how much it tears at Viktor to keep going for them. He has a chance with Yuuri, to be something more than just a skater, to take someone else to the heights he has seen. He wants it so badly. He doesn't want Yuri Plisetsky to beat Yuuri in this contest.

Yuuri's turn is next, yet Yuuri is hiding in the shadows, his hands covering his face. Viktor hides his worry and steps closer to him, calling Yuuri's name. Yuuri's attention snaps to him, and a blush blossoms across his cheeks at the yelp he makes. Viktor watches, enchanted.

"I'm going to become a super tasty katsudon, so please keep your eyes on me," Yuuri tells him fervently. "It's a promise!"

"Of course," Viktor murmurs, his ears ringing with the words Yuuri does not say: **watch me and only me.** "I love katsudon."

When Yuuri steps onto the ice, Viktor's heart lodges in his throat. The familiar music begins, and... the way Yuuri moves...

Every sensual shift of his hips takes Viktor back to the banquet. That night, he was light in Yuuri's arms, and now Yuuri is the sun to his endless sky, shining brightly for Viktor to hold, to admire, to love. His breath catches in his throat, and he has to cover his mouth, his smile. Love. What a silly emotion; something Viktor only skates about, but rarely has he encountered such a simple feeling.

This man... this beautiful, anxious, frustrating, brilliant, daunting, amazing man. If Viktor can come to know him, and if Yuuri can accept him... perhaps that silly emotion will become truth for both of them. Seeing Yuuri skating like this, like the dreams that Viktor had for months since the banquet, makes Viktor hope for the future. Yuuri has the talent, and Viktor has the vision: together they can create beauty.

Ah, but watching Yuuri... he truly encompasses Eros, even if he never realizes it. Pleasure upon pleasure... and oh, how Viktor wants him. If Yuuri wasn't so skittish, Viktor would have seduced him already. Perhaps that is only right, because Yuuri deserves a slow romance, the kind Viktor has never dared to have.

Perhaps together, they can have the perfect love.

The music crests. Yuuri lands his jumps and spins to a stop, his face shining with exertion, determination, exhaustion. He looks up as if in a daze, and Viktor can no longer hide his smile, opening his arms for Yuuri to come to him.
“Yuuri!”

Yuuri’s face lights up with joy. He begins to skate toward Viktor, and the ice beneath him shifts strangely -- then suddenly, the ice is the water of the Neva, and Yuuri is falling, drowning, and Viktor cannot reach him --

~*~

Viktor sits up with a gasp, throwing the blanket off him in terror. He stares unblinkingly into the darkness, only hearing his heart pounding, the splash of water, water so cold that it took his beloved from him. He blinks, and he recognizes where he is.

Yuutopia. Yuuri is next door. Yuuri is --

Viktor throws the blankets off him and scrambles to his feet, not caring about how little he is wearing or what the time is. He races for the door and all but runs down the hall to Yuuri's room, pushing Yuuri's door open and nearly tripping in his haste to get inside.

"Viktor?" Yuuri says sleepily, pushing himself up in bed. His hair is a mess and his glasses are missing. He squints at Viktor and rubs his eyes. "Is everything okay?"

Viktor lets out a breath that he didn't realize he was holding. Without waiting for Yuuri to give his permission, he strides forward and pulls Yuuri into his arms, holding him tightly, bracing one knee against the bed in his desperation to feel Yuuri's warmth, his life. He buries his face in Yuuri's shoulder, inhaling shakily against the soft cotton of his shirt. He smells real, alive, like everything Viktor has always wanted, nothing like the cold or the stench of the Neva.

Yuuri lets out a shocked little noise, his hands landing on Viktor's back. "V-V-Viktor?"

"You're okay," Viktor whispers harshly, focusing on the beat of Yuuri's heart against his chest. "You're okay."

"I'm okay," Yuuri whispers, one hand coming up to rub Viktor's bare back. "It's okay, Viktor."

Viktor doesn't know if it really is okay. The images from his dream echo in his mind, and he shudders, wanting to crawl into Yuuri's arms and never let him go. It was just a dream. Yuuri is alive, safe. After a long moment, in which Yuuri stays silent in his confusion, Viktor reluctantly lets go of him, reaching up to wipe at his eyes. He doesn't look at Yuuri's face.

"I am sorry, Yuuri. I... had another dream. The dream itself was lovely, but the end... the ends are always horrible, and I overreacted. I should go back to bed." Viktor starts to pull away, but Yuuri shakes his head, pulling on Viktor's arm.

"No, it's okay. Um... here." Yuuri lets go of Viktor, only to scoot back on the bed and lift his blanket in invitation. Viktor finally dares a glance at his face, his heart twisting to see Yuuri looking soft and rumpled and worried. Yuuri's gaze drops briefly, before his face warms and he looks away, and finally Viktor allows a small smile.

"Perhaps I should put pants on first."

"It's okay," Yuuri repeats. He lies down against his pillow, still holding the blanket up, and looks up at Viktor.

Viktor cannot resist such an expression. Carefully, he climbs into the narrow bed and slides down to rest beside Yuuri, glancing at him briefly before wrapping his arms around Yuuri and pulling
him close, cupping the back of his head with one hand. He breathes out when he feels Yuuri's warmth pressed against him, turning his damp eyes into Yuuri's hair. Slowly but surely, Yuuri relaxes against him, his arm curling around Viktor's waist.

Yuuri is alive. It was only a dream. A beautiful, sorrowful dream of impossible things -- of another future where Yuuri suffered.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Yuuri whispers. His breath tickles Viktor's collarbone, and he sighs to himself.

"Another memory dream. They... always end in your death. No matter what the dream is, at the end, you are always taken by that damn river. I hate it," Viktor whispers, his embrace tightening when Yuuri tenses against him. "I would do anything to protect you from that."

"Viktor..."

Viktor nearly begs for Yuuri to stay with him, never to go to St. Petersburg, but he does not want to bring up that argument again. Instead he forces himself to focus on the rest of the dream, the beautiful program Yuuri skated for him. With a start, he realizes that he recognizes the music as a piece that he ordered a couple months ago.

"On Love: Eros."

Yuuri starts against him. "Eh?"

"Your short program. You skated it for me... perhaps for the first time. You were wondrous," Viktor whispers. Yuuri shifts slightly, then pulls back to look at his face, his eyes wide.

"You... saw me? Skating Eros?"

Viktor nods. Yuuri stares at him, absently chewing on his lip, drawing Viktor's attention to his mouth. In his dream, Yuuri's mouth had been soft, flirtatious -- blowing secrets and smirks across the ice to catch in Viktor's heart.

"Prove it."

Viktor blinks and looks up. "Hmm?"

"Prove it," Yuuri repeats quietly. "Give me... something else. Something tangible, to show that you really had this dream, that these dreams are happening. It just seems so unreal to me. It's so weird for you to dream of Eros right after we talked about it..."

Viktor thinks that is fair. He knows his story is fantastic, just as fantastic as Yuuri saying that he died in another life. Somehow, though, he understands that Yuuri is not asking to convince him of the truth. Yuuri already believes him, but he is afraid of that belief, of the truth of the dreams. He is afraid of what it means for Viktor to be dreaming of a life Yuuri left behind. He needs reassurance, and Viktor will give it to him gladly.

In response, Viktor begins to hum the song to Eros. He makes it about twelve notes into the refrain before Yuuri covers his mouth, his eyes wide. Viktor stops humming, reaching up to stroke Yuuri's cheek comfortably.

"That's it," Yuuri says weakly. Something hard settles in his gaze, bright with so many emotions, that it almost hurts Viktor to look at him. "I want to show you in the morning. I'll skate it for you."
"Okay," Viktor whispers, the words a kiss against Yuuri's fingers. He wonders if Yuuri will skate the programs again for this year. He wants it suddenly, fiercely; he wants the fragile hope on Yuuri's face when he skates it for the first time in front of a crowd. He wants Yuuri to race toward him with joy after finishing a skate. He wants to kiss Yuuri for the first time on the ice.

But he already has, hasn't he? He has had two first kisses with Yuuri. One in his dreams, and one in real life. Both of them count, somehow, yet mean something completely different to him.

He is starting to understand why this double reality seems so strange to Yuuri.

"You were amazing," Viktor says quietly. He resists the call of rest, as he doubts whether he will fall asleep after his nightmare. He can still see Yuuri's fearful face in his mind's eye, the Neva rising up around him.

He suppresses a shudder and nuzzles Yuuri's hand, comforted when Yuuri's arm tightens around him. He usually stays up to write out his dreams, or cuddle with Makkachin, or busy himself with research, but having Yuuri in his arms like this makes him feel safe enough to relax. The Neva is far away, and Yuuri is alive in his arms.

He can write the dream down in the morning. It isn't something he can ever forget.

"I wanted you to stay," Yuuri whispers. "I needed you to stay with me. I didn't want to lose to Yurio and lose you too."

"Yurio?" Viktor frowns. He does remember Yuri Plisetsky, vaguely, but the focus of his dream had been on Yuuri. He wonders what Yuri skated.

"When you came to Japan, he followed you. He wanted you to be his coach, and you organized Onsen on Ice, and it was... ridiculous. If I lost, you would go back to Russia to coach him."

"No wonder I was nervous," Viktor says without thinking, and Yuuri pulls back a little to stare at him in question. Viktor smiles slightly. "Watching you on the ice was nervewracking. I needed you to win. You were my chance to be something else... someone new."

"To be you," Yuuri whispers, and Viktor starts at the words.

'I want you to stay who you are, Viktor!'

Something inside Viktor trembles from the memory of Yuuri saying those words, the words which made Viktor hope that Yuuri could love him, too.

"To be me," Viktor says softly in wonder. "I didn't have to be the Living Legend anymore. I didn't have to be a skater, or Yakov's protege, or world famous. You never wanted any of those masks. I had been wearing them for so long, and when you looked at me and asked me to be someone new, someone important to just to you... it inspired me. That is why I followed you, why I decided to coach you."

"I always wanted it," Yuuri whispers, his voice caught on a ragged emotion. Viktor tightens his arms around Yuuri, tilting his head up to kiss Yuuri's forehead. He feels Yuuri's soft sob against his neck, the way he trembles against Viktor. "It was my secret desire for so long. Then I blurted it out to you at the banquet, and... you accepted. You came to me, and you stayed. I was so afraid you would leave with Yurio."

Viktor closes his eyes as he listens to Yuuri, his lips pressed warmly to his forehead. When he turns his head, he leaves kisses along Yuuri's cheek, his soft hair. "I would have found a way to stay with
you. Either by manipulating things so that you came with me to St. Petersburg, or making both of you my students, or simply ignoring the results. I don't think I could have left you for anything in the world."

Yuuri's fingers dig into his back for a moment, as if seeking something to grip, before twisting to hold onto the blanket.

"I want to skate them again," Yuuri says suddenly. "Eros and Yuuri on Ice. This season, I want to skate them again and give them my all. They're our programs, the ones you and I made. If you're going to be my coach again, I want to show the world that you chose right."

"I know I did," Viktor whispers, his heart lighter with Yuuri's devotion. The last of his dream's fear fades away as he begins to plot, his mind whirling with ideas and plans. He is determined to be the coach he saw in his dreams, always at Yuuri's side, supportive and brilliant and strong. The world will hate him for quitting, but if Viktor's plans are successful, then they will love Yuuri in his place.

He will make sure of it.

~*~

Even though Viktor tries to put it off, he must return to St. Petersburg at the end of the week. Yakov would have his head if Viktor avoided his retirement announcement, despite every cell in Viktor's body demanding to stay with Yuuri.

He spends the rest of their week together at the tiny rink where Yuuri first skated for him, watching Yuuri perform *Eros* and *Yuuri on Ice* with a critical gaze. The programs are good -- he can tell that he produced *Eros* and heavily influenced *Yuuri on Ice*. He can see his own emotions and desires in *Eros*, matching the feelings inspired by Yuuri's actions at the banquet in their other life.

He wants to see them performed at the GPF. Yuuri has said the same; the fire in his eyes matches the determination Viktor feels.

The programs were not without their mistakes, and Viktor wants to adjust the flow in a few places, but he can see that Yuuri has them well in hand. While having his programs established early before the season will be beneficial, Viktor has no intention of allowing Yuuri to slack off in his training. He wants to see how far Yuuri can go, and he suspects it will be nearly impossible to keep Yuuri from the ice.

No matter that Yuuri once said he wanted to retire. Viktor has not forgotten, but he has no idea how to handle that issue. Yuuri has not brought it up again. Though he once professed to be tired of skating... Viktor can see the excitement and love that shines through him whenever Yuuri steps onto the ice.

He hopes to use this season to convince Yuuri to keep skating. He knows Yuuri is hurting, but every day that Viktor stays with him, Yuuri seems better. If his presence can help heal Yuuri's heart, toward skating and toward his other life, then Viktor will stay with him forever.

He won't leave Yuuri alone again.

They spend their last day together walking through Hasetsu, Viktor admiring the town as Yuuri points out different restaurants, buildings, and spots. Some of them give him odd headaches, as if he has seen these places before he cannot remember, but he tries not to think too hard on it,
suspecting the phenomenon has something to do with his dreams.

He should tell Yuuri, but he doesn't. He needs to study his mind more and write down the feelings and knowledge. Once he understands it, then he can talk to Yuuri.

They end up at the beach once more, a few hours before dinner. Viktor has to get up very early in the morning to take the train out to Fukuoka Airport, but Yuuri has promised to go with him and see him off. Viktor doesn't want to leave. Partly, he can admit, because he wants to avoid the media circus that will erupt when he announces his retirement and decision to coach. Mostly because he is afraid to let Yuuri out of his sight.

Yet Yuuri has been safe for months in Hasetsu. Viktor is just overthinking things.

His plan is to return to Hasetsu to begin coaching Yuuri as soon as the first of his ice shows are done. He will fly back to Russia as needed throughout the summer to finish the rest of the shows, but he wants to focus on Yuuri. Moving into Yuutopia will not be a problem; Yuuri had implied that Viktor had stayed in the same room as he slept in this time. Once he retrieves Makkachin, everything will be set.

He just has to leave Yuuri first, and he does not want that.

"Are you really going to announce that you're coaching me in your interview?" Yuuri asks quietly. They are sharing a blanket on the sand once more, the cool sea breeze ruffling their coats and hair. Vicchan is curled into a little ball between them, snoozing from playing fetch with Viktor earlier. Yuuri's hand is clasped with Viktor's, his grip tight despite his mild tone. Viktor squeezes his hand, his gaze drawn to Yuuri's knuckles, pinkened with the breeze. He smiles a little, admiring how strong Yuuri tries to be, even when he feels vulnerable.

"I am. Have you told anyone? Your former coach, perhaps?"

"I should call him," Yuuri mumbles, pulling his legs up to his chest and pressing his chin between his knees. "And Minako-sensei... she'll be surprised."

"You can do that during my flight. Since I won't be able to text you," Viktor sighs. He glances up at Yuuri's face in time to see him hide a smile.

"You can text me when you land," Yuuri says lightly, then shifts to the side a little, leaning his weight against Viktor. He glances up at Viktor, his dark eyes bright with worry. "You're coming back after the first ice show?"

"I am," Viktor says, smiling softly as he watches Yuuri's face. He loves looking at Yuuri. "You'll have to forgive me for going back to do the other two shows. But I will return quickly to you."

"I want to see one. It's your last show, after all."

Viktor only shakes his head. He has made his decision -- he will not risk Yuuri's life by taking him to St. Petersburg, even for a moment. Yuuri fought him long and hard, but eventually stopped arguing with him, though his face remained set in a mulish glare for a long while afterward. Viktor is glad that Yuuri caved, because he hates fighting with Yuuri almost as much as he hates the idea of Yuuri being anywhere near that river.

Yuuri gazes up at him for another moment, then sighs under his breath, looking away with a faint frown. He softens the expression by resting his head against Viktor's neck, and Viktor cannot help a smile, drawing his thumb along the bone of Yuuri's wrist. He cannot wait to get back to Hasetsu in two weeks, so that he can have this all the time.
He searches for something to shift their conversation, not wanting to dwell on the unhappy decision. "Will you watch my press conference?" he asks instead. Yuuri nods, his hair brushing against Viktor's skin, and Viktor sighs in relief.

"I'll watch it. And then I'll turn my phone off, because everyone is going to be trying to ask me questions." Yuuri sounds petulant over his likely future of being stalked by the media, but Viktor trusts that Yuuri can handle the press long enough for him to return and extend his own protection.

"I'll do my best to keep them busy," Viktor teases, earning a small smile. The dark mood doesn't seem to lift from Yuuri, though, and Viktor wonders what else he can say. He refuses to give in on St. Petersburg, but he doesn't want Yuuri to remain upset at him while he is gone.

Yuuri seems to make the decision for him.

"Viktor," Yuuri murmurs, turning and deftly climbing into Viktor's lap, gently nudging Vicchan to rest against the jacket he leaves on the blanket. He looks cold like that, so Viktor winds his arms around Yuuri's waist, shivering a little as Yuuri fixes dark eyes on him. He has seen that look before, but only in his dreams. Yuuri seems too shy otherwise.

He isn't shy now.

"How lewd of you, Yuuri." Viktor's voice does not reveal his nerves, which are churning at the sensuality Yuuri is offering him. "Aren't we in a public place?"

"There isn't anyone around," Yuuri says, his lips twitching upward, as if he can read Viktor's excitement. "We're not going to do anything lewd. Just... a kiss."

A telltale flush touches Yuuri's cheeks. Viktor softens a little, seeing that Yuuri is nearing embarrassment; unsurprising for Yuuri, who gets flushed at the most ridiculous things sometimes. Viktor leans forward into Yuuri's space, reaching up to push Yuuri's glasses up, before sliding his fingers back through Yuuri's hair to cup the back of his head.

"Just a kiss," Viktor murmurs, his lips brushing Yuuri's. "Just a kiss might be too much for any innocent passerby... with the way you make me feel."

"Nothing lewd," Yuuri breathes, then closes the remaining distance between them and kisses Viktor in a way that makes his toes curl. Viktor gives back as good as he gets, until Yuuri is trembling in his arms, holding onto him tightly.

He has imagined this kind of intimacy with Yuuri for ages, but never has Viktor acted upon his desires before. Viktor has barely let himself think much on it, between learning all of Yuuri's past this week and getting used to the feeling of being in a relationship with him. Not that it feels much different than their usual friendship, but for the knowledge that he loves me keeps lighting him up every time he looks at Yuuri.

The hints are there, though. That Viktor is Yuuri's beloved in another life means that Viktor has loved Yuuri before and will love him again. In another lifetime, he held Yuuri in his arms like this. He kissed Yuuri like this. He made Yuuri weak in the knees -- perhaps even made love with him.

Yuuri knows his touch, but Viktor has yet to learn the feeling of Yuuri against him. Part of him wanted to wait, to get used to the changes in their lives, but... another part of him is jealous of the other lifetime he has yet to remember, because he wants everything with Yuuri.

Perhaps not on the beach in Hasetsu, public enough that anybody could walk by and stare. Viktor doesn't want to share this side of Yuuri with anybody.
Yet when Yuuri kisses him, needy and determined, Viktor cannot deny him. His fingers entangle in Yuuri's hair, tilting his head the way he wants, so that he can sweep Yuuri's mouth with his tongue and taste him properly. Yuuri opens for him easily, letting out a little whimper that sends fire racing through Viktor's veins.

Viktor draws him closer, needing more of Yuuri's mouth, his lips, his tongue, his moans. He needs to hear Yuuri's voice making more of those noises, sweet and succulent like his lips, begging for Viktor to ravish him. How can he possibly leave this man to return to Russia? He wants the next two weeks to fly by, so he can return to Yuuri's arms as soon as he can.

He ends up lying on his back, the cold sand and blanket cushioning his head as Yuuri straddles his hips and kisses him senseless. Yuuri's thighs are hot beneath Viktor's hands, and he cannot help but squeeze, enjoying the way Yuuri shivers against him. He would love nothing more than to roll Yuuri over and drink his fill of his sweet sighs and moans, but not out here.

When they pull apart to breathe, panting softly against each other's skin, Viktor carefully rolls them both onto their sides, sliding his hand up Yuuri's back as he gasps and buries his face in Viktor's neck. Viktor kisses his hair soothingly.

"Sorry," Yuuri whispers, his fingers clenching in Viktor's shirt. "I just... I wanted..."

"You can do that to me anytime, solnyshko," Viktor murmurs with a smile. His heart feels light to know how affected Yuuri is by their kisses. "I want it, too."

Yuuri takes a shuddering breath. Viktor can feel his heart beating under his hand, under layers of cloth, and his chest goes tight with love. "You have to pack... We should go back."

"We should," Viktor agrees, making no move to get up. Yuuri just pulls him closer, hiding his face against his chest, his ear pressed to Viktor's heart.

~*~

Yuuri escorts Viktor to the airport, taking him via train to Fukuoka, staying quiet all the while. Viktor doesn't push him, as they both have a great deal on their minds, and everything important has already been said.

Just before Viktor passes through the checkpoint, Yuuri pushes something into his hands. Yuuri glances up at him, then down at the object, his gaze blank, with a frown that seems to carry more than Viktor can read. Viktor blinks, staring down at the object in surprise.

It's Yuuri's journal. Viktor considers Yuuri's expression, his lips tightening at the thought of Yuuri feeling so anxious.

"Are you sure?"

Yuuri nods. "Yeah. I think... I need you to read it. Maybe it'll help. If we can understand it..."

Viktor considers Yuuri's request, his heart aching. Despite wanting to read it, Viktor hadn't asked to see Yuuri's journal once during the week; he couldn't bring himself to dare. Something about the journal seems sacred, like Viktor shouldn't trespass, but if Yuuri is giving it to him... then how can Viktor deny him?

It only seems fair to share his own secrets.

"Alright, solnyshko." Viktor reaches into his carry-on bag and pulls out his notebook, handing it to
Yuuri silently before carefully sliding the journal into its place. Yuuri takes the notebook and holds it tightly to his chest, his gaze unfocused for a moment, before he puts it in his bag and looks at Viktor.

"Thank you, Viktor. Have a safe trip," Yuuri says quietly.

Viktor smiles, reaching out to wrap his arms around Yuuri to hold him tightly. Yuuri all but melts into his arms, fitting against him perfectly, as if he has always belonged there. "I'll see you soon," Viktor murmurs into Yuuri's hair.

"Sooner than you think," Yuuri promises, drawing back after a moment, his cheeks flushed faintly. Viktor admires him, tempted to lean in for a kiss, but Yuuri seems to read his intentions and steps back. "Bye, Viktor. Text me?"

"Always, my dear." Viktor throws a wink, catching Yuuri's smile before turning away and striding toward security. When he reaches the line, he glances over his shoulder. Yuuri lifts a hand in a wave, and for the first time in days, his eyes are clear, his smile real. He stays until Viktor disappears behind security.

The loss of his presence leaves Viktor cold and worried for the entire trip, and he spends every moment he can texting Yuuri to reassure himself. Yuuri seems just as anxious, because he texts Viktor more often than usual, even during his normal sleeping hours. Viktor suspects both of them will be wrecks for a while.

Viktor returns to St. Petersburg without any delays. Yakov meets him at the airport. Something in him seems tired, as though a great weight has settled on his shoulders. Viktor, who has never felt lighter since he decided to retire, spares a few thoughts for how Yakov will react to his decision to return to Hasetsu. Yakov will be unhappy, certainly, but Viktor has already decided. He does not wish to lose his mentor for his new career, but Yuuri's life is more important.

Better to tell him later.

"How did it go?" Yakov asks, after settling into the passenger seat of Viktor's Cadillac. He drove it to the airport so that Viktor could take it home.

"It went very well. You're looking at Yuuri Katsuki's new coach," Viktor says with a smile. Yakov says nothing, but the heavy aura around him seems to lighten a little. Viktor stays silent for a moment, thinking again of how Yakov will react, and how Yuuri seemed to believe that Yakov would start ignoring him.

The thought hurts a little. Yakov has looked after him since he was a boy. To lose his support and respect... but what else can Viktor do? He refuses to bring Yuuri to St. Petersburg. Even if the accident is meant to happen next year, Viktor does not want to risk anything. What if Yuuri gets hurt in a different way? Surely it would be better to stay in Hasetsu, where it is safe. Even if he loses Yakov, he will still have Yuuri -- and someday he can regain Yakov's respect.

Yet Yuuri does not want Viktor to lose his reputation. As if that is more important than Yuuri's own life.

Viktor shakes his head of the dark thoughts and turns on the car, setting off toward home. Yakov starts grilling him after a few minutes on his plans for Yuuri, and Viktor focuses on answering about the training he intends to put Yuuri through, ignoring the other questions about where Yuuri will stay.
At one point, he has to drive over the Tuchkov Bridge. The Neva gleams beneath the late afternoon sun, a lurid orange that sets off Viktor's nerves. He glares at the water as they pass over.

You cannot have him. I will never, ever let you take him.

Yakov gives him a strange look. Viktor tries to ignore the feeling that he may have said that out loud.

He doesn't bother explaining, instead driving Yakov home, before he crosses the city to his pet setter. Makkachin is overjoyed to see him, and some part of Viktor relaxes, knowing that he will get to spend a lot of time with Makkachin now. She settles on the passenger seat in Yakov's place, panting happily at him and earning several pats and scratches as Viktor weaves his way through St. Petersburg.

Finally, home.

The apartment he thought of sharing with Yuuri seems dark and empty now. Viktor ignores the odd feeling and unpacks after getting Makkachin settled, until his bag is empty, but for one thing.

Yuuri's journal.

Viktor picks up the journal to stare at it. The binding is a dark blue, the edges a little worn, the pages occasionally crumpled. After a moment, he runs a finger down the blank cover, his lips tightening in a small frown.

It feels strange to have Yuuri's journal instead of his notebook. At the airport, it unnerved him to leave such information somewhere where anybody could steal it and read. Yet the only person who has any right to it is Yuuri, so Viktor left it all with him, so that Yuuri could try and make sense of Viktor's dreams while he is busy with his retirement. Perhaps reading the dreams will help Yuuri accept Viktor's decisions more easily.

Perhaps it will make him stop loving Viktor. Or, perhaps Viktor is merely overreacting with that thought. It wouldn't be the first time.

Baring his secrets, his dreams... He has never felt so vulnerable in front of a single person before, yet never has Yuuri made Viktor feel any discomfort. Grimly, Viktor sets the journal down and goes to finish getting ready for bed.

He doesn't settle in bed, though, instead taking up space on the couch next to Makkachin, who happily lays against his side and goes to sleep. Viktor sets down a steaming cup of tea and touches the cover again, his heart beating a little faster. Then he opens the journal.

January 17, 2015. On this day in two years, I will die.

My name is Katsuki Yuuri, and I'm from the future. I've tried to understand it and I still don't know why it happened. All I know is that I lived to January 17, 2017, and on that day, I was hit by a car, thrown into the Neva River, and killed. I woke up in the past on October 24, 2014.

I lost everything. I lost Viktor, Makkachin, Vicchan, my family. I lost two years and woke up in the past, knowing no one and nothing, except that I died.

I don't want to forget any of them. I'm the only person who has these memories, and I want to write them down here, so I never lose them. The Viktor who loved me is still in my heart. Maybe I won't get to be with him again. The future has already changed, but
Viktor reads on, the tea forgotten. He reads about Yuuri skating under Celestino, losing his dog, and coming in last at the GPF. He reads about Yuuri dropping out of his competitions, then waking up one day to find Viktor in his family's inn, proposing to be his coach. He reads about the beach, about a short program to seduce the world, a free skate for himself. He reads about competitions and trips and moments between two people who didn't understand each other and yet somehow made it work.

He reads about the Neva and the nightmares that haunted Yuuri. He reads about Yuuri's fear, his terror that he felt in that dark, cold place. He reads about the dreams that still haunt him, the steps Yuuri takes to try and overcome his trauma, the determination he pours into his skating and schoolwork so that he can keep going.

He reads about Yuuri's love for him.

The worst part is, I left Viktor. I left him alone in the future. We were going to get married -- married! Me, marrying Viktor Nikiforov. He promised we would marry after I won five gold medals to match him. Viktor, my inspiration... my love, my life, my fiancé. I miss him so much. Viktor doesn't know me now; we haven't met yet, and he'll never know me. He'll never love me like he does in the future, because how can I live all that again? I've already changed things. It can't happen the same way. I'll never have him again.

But I have to try. I love him, and I want him to be happy. The Viktor I remember and love is gone, but there is another Viktor whom I love just as much. I'm going to protect him from that pain, if I can.

There is one good thing that has happened so far. I got to see my dog, Vicchan. He died in my last life before I could come home. I hadn't seen him since I was eighteen. This time, I came home for Nationals and got to be with him and my family. I want to save him if I can. Vicchan died from a bladder infection last time, but if we keep an eye on him, maybe we can prevent it. If I can convince my family to take him to the vet, maybe I can save him... I have to try. I know he is getting older, but... I got to see him again, and that's more than I ever got before.

Maybe... the future can be changed, and I can be saved, too. I don't know. I don't want to die again. What if I die, and I come back again? What if I get caught in a constant cycle of death and rebirth? I want to live on. I want to grow old with Viktor. But even if I can't be with him, I just want to know him, to make sure he's happy and safe. I don't want him to hurt and suffer like before.

I love him. Seeing him on television, even hearing his voice the night I called him... it isn't enough. I have to be stronger so I can see him again and skate against him. I want to become someone he can respect. I can't have the other future with him, but I can give him something else, something just as special.

I have to try.

Viktor doesn't sleep a wink that night. He never finishes his tea, either. He only sets down the journal when dawn creeps into his living room, pale and cold, his phone lighting up with a good morning, Viktor from Yuuri.

He blinks at the sight of the sun, feeling as if he has woken from a long dream.
Viktor manages a few hours of sleep, then wakes late with nothing to do. A little bemused, he calls Yuuri while cooking himself lunch, hoping that the circles under his eyes aren't obvious. He simply wants to see Yuuri, after

When Yuuri answers the video call, Viktor sets the phone on the counter, propped against a canister of pasta. Yuuri smiles at him, looking a little tired but pleased to see him, and Viktor gives him a smile, wishing he could reach through the phone and hold Yuuri. He distracts himself with fixing a cup of tea.

"Hello, Yuuri."

"Hi, Viktor," Yuuri replies softly. His eyes are a little red, perhaps from not enough sleep, but Viktor wonders if Yuuri read his notebook. A little frisson of tension runs up his spine at the thought. "You look like you just woke up."

"Perhaps I did," Viktor says loftily, setting a few ingredients on the counter and beginning to crack eggs into a bowl to whisk. A simple omelette with plenty of greens. Viktor pauses, remembers that he does not need to stick to his strict diet any longer, and adds a few sausages to his breakfast, setting them to fry. "Am I not allowed to sleep in?"

"Of course you are. What are you making?"

"An omelette and sausages. I can hear your stomach growling from here." Viktor grins a little when Yuuri blushes, scratching his cheek with a gloved hand. He notices then that Yuuri is not at home, as he first thought, but in Ice Castle wearing practice clothing, and his eyes narrow.

"My dear Yuuri," Viktor says with a sharp smile, "It appears that you are at the rink again, even though you should be resting."

Yuuri averts his eyes. "Er..."

Viktor's smile widens. "You are simply having a day of fun at the rink, aren't you, Yuuri?"

"I'm not practicing," Yuuri says quickly, though Viktor notices him rolling his eyes. "I just wanted to do some figure eights. I... well, I read your notebook, and... I just needed to think about some things."

Viktor softens a little, glancing over at the notebook on his table. He pours his scrambled eggs into the pan, carefully stirring the eggs as they cook, his eyes drawn again and again to Yuuri. The ceiling behind him is moving, as Yuuri skates slowly around the rink. They enjoy the quiet for a few moments while Viktor cooks.

"I wondered," Viktor finally says. "You seem a little tired this morning, too."

"It was really... um. It affected me a lot more than I thought," Yuuri says, his voice a little distant. His eyes have gone dark and sad, echoing the hollow feeling inside Viktor. "I have a lot of questions, but I can't even think of them right now. I just... I'm glad I can see your face."

Viktor manages a small smile. "I like seeing your face, too."

"Viktor," Yuuri sighs, the darkness in his eyes fading a little. "I am glad you called, though. I wanted to talk to you about St. Petersburg."
Viktor's humor fades abruptly. He does not reply, instead focusing on finishing his meal, setting
the omelette on a plate beside the cooked sausages. He moves everything to the table, then carries
the phone over and props it up against the bowl of fruit he keeps as a centerpiece to the table,
letting Yuuri watch him as he eats. He sets the meal on the table beside the journal and sits down,
picking up his tea to steady himself.

"There is nothing to talk about."

"You haven't even listened to my side of it," Yuuri says sharply, then groans. "I'm sorry. I don't
want to fight about this. But I want to come to St. Petersburg. You haven't bought your ticket to
Hasetsu yet, right? I can buy my ticket today --"

"I already bought it," Viktor interrupts, sipping his tea slowly as Yuuri shuts his mouth. The
statement is true; he bought the ticket before he left the airport the previous day. He tries to ignore
the hurt on Yuuri's face. "You do not need to buy a ticket to St. Petersburg, as you will not be
traveling to St. Petersburg. That is final."

"It's not final! Viktor, will you please just listen?"

"No. I have no intention of changing my mind, Yuuri." Viktor focuses on his breakfast, waiting to
see if Yuuri will continue to argue with him, though the food has little flavor in the face of their
fight.

Yuuri stays silent for a long moment, biting down hard on his lip, and Viktor aches to see the anger
and frustration in his expression. He cannot understand why Yuuri is so willing to risk his life just
for Viktor's sake. He grimaces a little, thinking of the journal he read last night, and exhales.

"I understand that you are worried for my reputation and career, but everything will be fine. I will
explain everything to Yakov, and he will understand." Viktor notices Yuuri's look of alarm and
thinks better of what he said. "Do not worry, I will not tell him about the dreams. I will find a
sufficient excuse. Until then, please... just wait for me. I will take care of everything, your training,
your dietary needs, all of it. I'm not incapable."

"I'm not saying you are," Yuuri mumbles. He wipes at his eyes, and Viktor panics a little, realizing
he made Yuuri cry. "I know how good you are at being my coach. I'm just..." He sighs deeply,
staring off to the side before looking back at Viktor. "Fine. Whatever you say."

"Thank you," Viktor says, relieved that Yuuri has given in. The silence that settles between them is
a little uncomfortable, and Viktor strains for something to say. He glances at the ceiling beyond
Yuuri's head, watching how it spins as Yuuri skates.

He clears his throat. "Will you spend a lot of time at the rink? I would prefer it if you rested."

Yuuri sighs, a little harder than Viktor expected. "No... I won't push myself. I'll make sure to rest. I
have a few games I need to finish..."

"Oh? Will you tell me about them?" Viktor asks hesitantly, and Yuuri gives in, telling Viktor all
about the latest Assassin's Creed game, which Viktor barely understands. He never played games
like Yuuri did, but perhaps now that they will be living together, Yuuri could show him some
games during their downtime.

Yet Yuuri seems distracted, and Viktor is no less preoccupied. Soon he lets Yuuri go back to his
figure eights, standing with a sigh and going to empty his plate into the trash. He lost his appetite
before he even started eating.
Instead of returning to the table, Viktor takes the journal and his tea to the couch. Makkachin joins him, laying over his stomach while Viktor reclines across the cushions. He strokes a finger over the journal, then sighs and rests it against his chest, picking up his phone to browse his social media.

He sees a link from Christophe, a video with a Japanese title, and clicks on it -- and as soon as the video loads, his head begins to hurt.

His vision goes oddly gray. On his screen is a video of a very familiar figure -- Yuuri, skating *Stammi Vicino* in a blue shirt and black pants. He is chubbier than Viktor knows he should be, but he skates just as beautifully as he did for Viktor in Ice Castle. He turns toward the camera and smiles, and a shiver runs through Viktor.

The vision fades, and Viktor realizes his heart is thundering, sweat beading on his forehead, while Makkachin lifts her head and whines worriedly. The video on the screen is still *Stammi Vicino*, but Yuuri is thinner, wearing a black shirt instead of blue. The video is nearly over.

At the very end of the video, Viktor sees himself race across the ice and wrap Yuuri in his arms. To his relief, the video shows nothing that happens after that -- not Yuuri's collapse, nor their conversation.

Who filmed them?

He calls Yuuri back immediately, not bothering with video call.

"Hi again, Viktor," Yuuri says, sounding a little tired.

"There is a video of you skating *Stammi Vicino* online," Viktor says flatly.

"What?!

"Christophe sent me the link," Viktor explains. He doesn't mention the way he feels as if he has just run a marathon, nor the strange vision he saw. "Apparently, someone was filming us. The end of the video shows us embracing, but it does not have our conversation. I do not know how much they saw after you finished skating, nor how much they heard."

"I bet it was the girls again," Yuuri whispers. "Yuuko-chan's children. They did the same thing last time, too. If they heard our conversation, or saw me fall... Hold on, Viktor."

Viktor listens to the silence as Yuuri makes his way across the rink, a door opening and closing, before Yuuri speaks up again in Japanese, and a woman in the background answers.

Viktor listens closely as Yuuri speaks with a woman -- Nishigori Yuuko from Ice Castle, if he remembers correctly -- converse, but he makes little sense of the conversation. Finally Yuuri returns to English, sounding both relieved and worried. "It's okay. Yuuko says she caught them just as I finished my skate and pulled them away. None of them heard anything. It's just... now the video's online. They'll know that you were with me."

"That is fine," Viktor reassures him, exhaling. "It does not spoil the press conference. It just means that more of our privacy was violated, but I can deal with that."

"I'm sorry," Yuuri says, sounding wretched. "I should have thought of this. They did the same thing last time, too. It was the reason you came to Hasetsu. You saw the video, and I guess you remembered the banquet and me asking you to coach me, and..."
Viktor stays silent, thinking of the vision he saw moments ago, his head aching strangely again. He wishes he had his notebook, but Yuuri still has it. He will have to get a new notebook and write everything down.

"I said it's fine, Yuuri," Viktor says, a little more gently. His head hurts a little less, now. "How old are Yuuko's children?"

"Five. They're triplets."

"Just kids being kids. I take it they are fans?"

"Huge fans," Yuuri sighs. "It's because Yuuko is a fan, and they always watch competitions with her. They know my stats better than me."

Viktor chuckles, ignoring the ache in his head. "How resourceful. If any reporters bother you about the video, just ignore them and tell them you have no comment at this time. I really should get you a publicist..."


"As your coach, I have every intention of being thorough in my management of you. A publicist is only the beginning. You also need a nutritionist, a personal trainer, a location to work out and practice your dance, not to mention a physician experienced with athletes..."

Everything Yuuri could get in St. Petersburg, if Viktor would only allow it. He puts the thought out of his mind, tensing as he waits for Yuuri to bring up their argument again.

"That's ridiculous, Viktor," Yuuri sighs, and Viktor relaxes as he realizes that Yuuri did not take the bait. "I don't need all that. You handled everything yourself, with some help from Minako-sensei."

"Well, I am talented, after all."

"I'm aware." Yuuri's voice warms as he says the words, and Viktor cannot help a small smile. He feels as if everything will be alright, when Yuuri speaks to him like this, soft and intimate. Perhaps their argument is not over, but Viktor has made his decision. He can only hope that everything works out.

"Speaking of coaches, I should call Yakov about the video. Will you be alright?"

"Yeah. I'm going to go home and turn off my phone. Love you," Yuuri says, then makes an odd noise, like a squeak.

Viktor blinks, then realizes his own face is hot. He smiles at their mutual embarrassment. "I love you too, solnyshko. Be safe and text me when you get home, alright?"

"Okay," Yuuri says weakly, then quickly ends the call before Viktor can embarrass him further. Viktor chuckles as he sets down the phone, musing over Yuuri’s slip of the tongue, wondering at how easy it was to say the words.

Soon though, his humor fades. He stares down at the phone, thinking of the odd double vision he experienced a few minutes ago. He experienced something like this before, with Yuuri at the beach. Other moments, too... more like knowledge, but...
Viktor shakes his head. He cannot think about this right now. Instead, he calls Yakov and explains the video. Yakov is not pleased, but it changes nothing about their announcement.

With that out of the way, Viktor goes to find an empty notebook and a pen. He has some new experiences to write down. Carefully, Viktor details every part of both visions, detailing the pain he felt, the fact that he was awake both times, and the circumstances leading up to the visions. He also jots down a few other pieces of information that have come to him over the past few months, which weren't featured in his dreams.

Such as the fact that he knows that the ring he gave Yuuri has a half a snowflake etched inside it. Such a detail could not have come from his dream, because Viktor did not see the inside of the ring. No... this information came from another source, and Viktor intends to find out what.

The two visions must have come from the same source. Yuuri had mentioned the video in his journal, though not with that level of detail. No, that was a vision -- a memory, perhaps, of Viktor's other life, the one that he shared with Yuuri in the other reality. Symptoms of what is happening between him and Yuuri... somehow.

If only Viktor could understand.

After writing furiously for half the afternoon, Viktor stops and shakes out his cramping hand, reading over what he wrote. He feels better knowing that the details are written down, but he still wishes he had his notebook, to see if there were any other details that he remembered outside of his dreams.

He sighs and realizes that his head is hurting badly, a combination of staying up all night and having the strange vision. With a grimace, Viktor stands and goes to fetch some painkillers, frowning to himself. As he returns from his room, he pauses beside the second bedroom, which he has used primarily as a storage room since he moved into the apartment.

Carefully, Viktor opens the door. He had planned for Yuuri to stay here... but the room is still filled with junk -- medals from his youth, boxes of costumes and clothes, even old pairs of skates. Yuuri shouldn't have to sleep in here.

Viktor closes the door slowly, thinking of his argument with Yuuri. He turns away and returns to the living room, picking up the journal and spending the rest of the day rereading everything.

~*~

The next day, Viktor starts clearing out the second bedroom of his apartment.

He tells himself that the reason is because he needs to pack everything to send to Hasetsu. Yet he has no excuse for buying a bedframe and mattress set, nor for the blue damask sheets he puts on the new bed. As he smoothes down the comforter he bought to match -- dark blue with soft gray stripes -- he sighs at himself. He knows why he is doing this.

The plan is easy. Train, practice, and win enough competitions to skate against Viktor at the GPF and Worlds. Even if, by some miracle, we meet again and come to know each other, I won't ask him to be my coach.

Tearing Viktor away from professional skating destroyed his reputation. The world said he wasn't good enough for me. They said he was too young, he was too impulsive, he couldn't do it. Yakov Feltsman stopped talking to him. Everyone told him to leave me and come back to skating. It wore on him. He drank more, and he lost a lot of his
contacts, even his work. He spent so much time focusing on me that he forgot everything else, and it hurt him. I ruined his career.

They said I wasn't good enough for him. I already knew that, but I hated how it made him feel. I wanted to be good enough -- I wanted to show the world that only I could inspire Viktor. That out of everyone in the world, he chose me, and I wanted to keep him for myself. I wanted to prove them all wrong, and maybe I did, in the end. But it wasn't enough.

I still wanted him to keep skating. I thought he wanted to return to skating too, with the way his eyes sparkled as he watched other skaters. I thought it would be great if we could skate against each other, now that I was good enough to beat his records. But... thinking back on it, I wonder if Viktor really wanted to return. I know he was tired, and that coaching me was something new, something that excited him more than anything else he had experienced recently. Ultimately, he decided to return to skating, but... it was because I had tried to retire, and he didn't want that.

It was our worst fight. We still didn't resolve everything. We put it aside to focus on Nationals and moving to St. Petersburg, but the thought of it always lingered. I wish I could talk to him again and find out what he was thinking. If he was really happy coming back to skating, or if I should have kept my mouth shut and let him retire.

Sometimes, watching him in this life, I see it. That tiredness, that frustration. Maybe I'm the only person who can, because I know Viktor better than anyone else. It terrifies me that he could become that sad again. Out of everyone in the world, Viktor deserves to be happy.

By some miracle... maybe we'll meet again. Maybe we'll skate together. Maybe he'll still want to be my coach. But if that happens, I won't let him throw everything away for me. I'll sign with Yakov Feltsman if it means keeping him in St. Petersburg. Even if it means going back. Even if it means facing the Neva again.

Please, let me protect him. I'll do anything so that he can be happy.

Viktor still doesn't agree with it. He doesn't think his own professional pride is worth risking Yuuri's life. Yet... Yuuri's determination is clear, and Viktor cannot help but respect how much Yuuri cares for him. He can concede, a little, that the future is unknown, and that anything can happen. Yuuri isn't truly safe anywhere, except at Viktor's side. He is only planning for all possibilities.

In between fretting over the state of his apartment, Viktor has several meetings with Yakov, and he doesn't mention a word about going to Hasetsu in any of them. Yakov seems excited -- for Yakov, anyway -- to take Viktor under his wing as an assistant coach. Viktor doesn't have the heart to ruin his good mood. His own dream of coaching at Yakov's side has already been destroyed.

So Viktor sorts through contracts and schedules and training regimens, all the while wondering if Yakov will truly stop speaking to him if he leaves. He struggles to come up with a proper excuse for running away to Hasetsu that doesn't involve his dreams or Yuuri's death. What would make Yakov understand?

Viktor just doesn't know.

~*~
Then comes the day of the press announcement.

"You'll tell them only what we decided on, Vitya. It's all in your notes," Yakov tells him roughly, focused on straightening Viktor's tie. Viktor could do it himself, but he is still trying to be nice to Yakov, with the knowledge that in less than a week, he will abandon everything Yakov has arranged for him.

"I know, Yakov."

"Be polite. None of your usual flirting. You want to appear professional! Don't let them walk over you."

"Okay, Yakov."

"And no winking!"

"I make no promises," Viktor says with a smile, laughing when Yakov glowers at him. Yakov shakes his head and pats the tie on Viktor's chest, then steps back and observes him critically. Viktor glances down at himself, pleased with the dark blue suit and grey tie -- his subtle homage to Yuuri, who will be watching the announcement live.

"I suppose you'll do," Yakov grumbles, and Viktor laughs.

"Don't worry, Yakov! You know I'm excellent at handling the press." He winks, much to Yakov's annoyance, enjoying the resulting eye roll. He will miss these interactions when he goes to Hasetsu.

The thought makes his heart ache a little, but he ignores the feeling. Best to focus on the press conference for now.

The cameras train on him as soon as he walks into the room, Yakov following like a great protective wall. The podium stands in the center at the front, and Viktor takes his place behind the microphone, smiling at the reporters who have come to listen to him. The room is crowded, filled with reporters and cameramen from both Russian and international stations. Tiny red lights blink at him, reminding him that on the other side of the world, Yuuri is watching.

His smile widens.

"Thank you for coming here today," Viktor says, touching the microphone to adjust its position, before resting his hands over his notes. He doesn't bother to read them. "I am sure that many of you are curious about my announcement, after the way I have teased you over the past few weeks. I have a few things to address today, and I ask that you hold your questions until after I have said my piece."

He waits for a moment, thinking of the thousands of people on the other side of those cameras, of the people who have cheered his name for years, of Yakov standing behind him. He thinks of Yuuri lying on the beach beside him, eyes soft with an emotion he hasn't been able to name until this past year.

"As of this past season, I will retire from figure skating."

The reaction is immediate. The reporters begin to talk over each other, standing up from their seats and shouting questions at him, a clamor of shock, indignation, and amazement. Viktor says nothing, instead holding up a hand until the room goes silent, the reporters slowly sitting down again, hands poised over their recorders, phones, and notebooks.
He lowers his hand, absently gripping the side of the podium. "I am certain that this is a shock to you. Why would I retire after winning gold at Worlds, the best of my career? Yet I have worried over this decision for months, and I ask for your patience in explaining my reasoning."

Viktor's smile softens. "I am not in the best shape anymore, physically. My right knee suffers from patellar tendonitis, which has flared up from time to time despite physical therapy. I have worked through this pain before, but my physician has advised me that my knee will deteriorate if I continue to train as I have before.

"In addition to my knee problems, I have a few other reasons for retiring. I am at a point in my career where I wish to advance to the next level. For me, that is not another competition, but a new job completely. It is my intention to step down as a skater and become an assistant coach under Yakov Feltman's tutelage at the Sports Champions Club. In addition to assisting Yakov with his students, I will take one student to coach for the 2016-2017 season. That person has already agreed to sign with me.

"The most important reason for my retirement is something far more personal. In the past year, I have discovered something new and amazing, and I wish to share that with the world. That something... that person has changed me for the better, and I want to support him. I would like to focus my attention on that person and my dog Makkachin, who is growing older and needs me at her side."

Viktor falls silent for a moment, thinking of his darling dog, who has faithfully stayed with him all this time. He hopes she likes Hasetsu, and Yuuri and Vicchan. He cannot wait for them to meet.

He lifts his head and smiles at the cameras and the silent reporters. "My first and only student for the upcoming season will be Yuuri Katsuki of Japan. I hope that you will support my decision to retire and become a coach for Yuuri, who I believe will show you great things on the ice.

"Lastly, I want to extend my gratitude to every single one of my fans, sponsors, fellow skaters, and most of all, my coach Yakov. I would not have made it this far without any of you. Meeting my fans and hearing how I have inspired them has always given me great joy. All of you, from the tiny skaters who look up to me to my friends on the ice, are my reason for skating. Thank you all."

Viktor glances over at Yakov, who has a few tears in his eyes despite his frown. He winks, and something in Yakov's expression softens into a smile. Viktor turns back to the reporters. "I will have a farewell ice show in honor of my retirement, called Love on Ice, to take place this summer, and I hope that many of you will attend! Do not worry! I will continue to have ice shows and appear in television and modeling work, in between my work as a coach.

"I know this announcement will be hard for everyone, and not all of you will agree or approve. I want to assure you that I am happy with my decision. This will be a good change for me. I look forward to coaching Yuuri and learning all I can from Yakov. I hope you accept my decision. Thank you all, for your support for all of my career."

Viktor bows his head and takes a deep breath. The room is silent, and he cannot bring himself to look at the faces of the people watching him, for fear of seeing the thousands behind the cameras. He doesn't want to see their disappointment or anger, their shock at his decision.

Yet he is startled when someone begins to clap. The noise is quickly echoed until the room is full of applause, the reporters and cameramen both standing, abandoning their devices and cheering for him. Viktor stares at the crowd, then looks over at Yakov in confusion. Yakov merely smiles and motions to the microphone.
Viktor turns back to the world with a smile, waiting for the applause to die down. "Thank you, everyone. Now, first question."

~*~

"I can't believe that reporter had the nerve to ask if we're dating."

"We are dating, Yuuri," Viktor says calmly, smiling as he wipes his face dry after washing up. Tonight was his first performance show of *Love on Ice*, and the show itself was quite exhilarating. While the program was not nearly as intense as most of his competitive skates, Viktor still worked hard for his fans.

The response to his retirement from the skating world has been overwhelmingly positive, though many of his fans have sent him messages with their disappointment and desire for him to come back to skating. Still, the vast majority have expressed their love and gratitude, many of them sending him presents at the rink, while more have posted video compilations of his skates. Still more have been analyzing Yuuri, who has received a great deal of attention since Viktor's announcement.

Viktor has been evasive on the subject of Yuuri, whenever reporters or fans have asked, only reiterating his decision to coach Yuuri. A few of his fellow skaters have asked if they are dating, but so far, the media has not cottoned onto that fact -- until tonight, anyway.

Yuuri makes a small noise. He called Viktor half an hour ago without their normal video chat, having stayed quiet for most of the day while Viktor focused on his ice show. Viktor has been happily talking his ear off about the show, as well as the reporter that cornered him after his ice show to ask about his retirement. Yuuri was not pleased about the invasive questions from the reporter.

"That's beside the point. It's none of their business."

"I know, love. Still on your walk?" Viktor asks. He needs to sleep soon, but he wants to stay on the phone with Yuuri for a bit longer.

"Yeah," Yuuri says, sounding a little breathless. Viktor hears a small chime in the background of the call. "Um, I might cut out for a minute."

"That is okay, Yuuri," Viktor replies. Yuuri must be walking through an area of low reception. "Do not worry about the reporters. We are not obligated to tell them anything about our relationship. They should be focusing on your career, not our personal lives."

"I suppose," Yuuri says doubtfully. "I mean, I'm used to it, but it's still annoying that they don't change."

Viktor chuckles. Now that he knows Yuuri's secret, their conversations have been a lot easier in many ways, and more difficult in others. Yet when Yuuri drops little hints of his other life like this, Viktor cannot help but feel exhilarated.

"Reporters never change, my dear. Now, as much as I wish to keep talking to you, I must sleep soon. I still need to finish packing a few things before my flight tomorrow."

"About that..."

The doorbell rings, and Viktor frowns, leaning away from the mirror. "I wonder who that could be. I didn't order anything."
"Why don't you answer it?" Yuuri says. Viktor sighs and stands up, tossing the towel into the laundry and picking up the phone, turning the speakerphone off to keep his call private. He walks through the apartment, wondering who it could be at this time of night, and pauses in front of the door to unlock it. Makkachin follows him, her tail wagging with interest.

"Hold on, Yuuri, I'm answering the door."

Yuuri makes a noise in acknowledgement, and Viktor hears an identical soft hum on the other side of the door. His nerves prickle when his hand nears the doorknob. He knows that voice.

"Yuuri," Viktor says slowly. Yuuri has been awfully quiet on the topic of St. Petersburg lately. He was also very quiet today, not sending Viktor any messages until an hour ago, which was ten o'clock. Thinking back, Viktor thinks the last message before that must have been at about six this morning.

About fourteen hours. Long enough for a trip by airplane between St. Petersburg and Fukuoka, Japan.

He didn't...

"Open the door, Viktor."

Viktor grips the doorknob tightly, then pulls the door open, staring blankly at the man standing in his doorway. Yuuri lifts his head, smiling a little as he meets Viktor's eyes. He has a large suitcase behind him, and a small cloth carrier on the floor by his feet. As Viktor stares, Yuuri lowers the phone from his ear and ends the call between them, sliding the phone into his pocket. Viktor does not move, even as the phone by his ear goes silent.

"Hello, Viktor."

"You cannot be here," Viktor breathes. "You're supposed to be in Japan."

Yuuri's smile fades, but he does not look away from Viktor. "I know. Can I come in? I'd like to have this conversation inside, and I need to check on Vicchan."

Vicchan. Viktor's eyes dart down to the pet carrier, noticing little brown paws beyond the mesh. He takes a deep breath, holding in his first reaction of anger, and steps aside, only to watch as Makkachin rushes forward, bowling Yuuri over and landing on his chest with a happy bark. Yuuri goes down with a shout, and from the carrier, Viktor can hear Vicchan's tiny yips of confusion at his master's yelp.

Viktor covers his face for a minute, then takes a deep breath to fortify himself. Then he reaches down to grab Makkachin's collar, gently hauling her off Yuuri. She whines and strains against his grip for a second, trying to lick Yuuri's face more, but Viktor pushes her into the apartment and offers Yuuri a hand.

Yuuri's face is glowing with a smile as he reaches up to take Viktor's hand. The expression fades a bit when he looks up at Viktor, but he seems too happy, his gaze moving to Makkachin quickly and softening. Viktor steps aside so that Yuuri can walk inside, his carrier in hand, then grabs the suitcase and pulls it in after them.

He does not mean to slam the door. Well, perhaps he does. He is angry. He is angrier than he has ever felt in his life, and he has no outlet for that anger. His fury is unknown; Viktor's temper is long and slow, and rarely has he ever lost it.
Yet Yuuri has pushed him to his limit, and fast. Viktor isn't sure how he feels about that.

He puts it aside to focus on Yuuri, who has knelt down to open Vicchan's carrier, while Makkachin sniffs around him. As Viktor watches Yuuri coax Vicchan out to meet Makkachin, who is all but dancing in excitement, something cold fills his chest. He acknowledges the warmth of the scene in front of him, of Makkachin and Vicchan cautiously sniffing each other, but he cannot draw happiness from it.

Yuuri is in St. Petersburg. Yuuri lied to him. He put himself in danger, and for what? To prove something? To show Viktor up? To protect Viktor's career? Nothing is worth Yuuri's life. The arguments build inside him, ready to lash out at Yuuri, his fury reaching a height Viktor has never seen before.

Yuuri must have driven over the Neva to reach the apartment. Viktor's gaze sharpens. Yuuri has one hand hanging at his side while he watches Vicchan and Makkachin, and when Viktor looks closely, he can see Yuuri's fingers trembling. Yuuri's face is a little pale, his gaze darker than normal.

The fury inside Viktor abruptly drains, leaving him exhausted.

They can fight about this later. He needs to take care of Yuuri.

Silently, Viktor crosses the room and kneels down beside Yuuri, pulling him into a tight embrace. Yuuri goes stiff in his arms, and this close, Viktor can feel him shaking. His heart aches, wondering how Yuuri must have felt to cross that river, to build up the courage to come to this haunting place despite every one of his fears telling him to stay in Japan.

"I have you," Viktor murmurs, and Yuuri lets out a little sob. His hands come up to grip Viktor's shirt, and Viktor sighs softly, reaching up to cup the back of Yuuri's head and stroking his hair.

Half an hour later, the dogs are fed and settled. In silent agreement, they leave Vicchan and Makkachin to sleep in the living room, while Viktor escorts Yuuri past the boxes in the hallway to his bedroom. Yuuri sits down on the end of the bed, his gaze on his hands, while Viktor stands by the window, his arms crossed.

"I know you're mad."

"I am," Viktor agrees quietly. His fury upon seeing Yuuri left him scorched, and he still does not feel calm. He wonders if he will ever feel calm again, knowing that Yuuri is so close to the Neva. "Mostly I am in shock. I did not expect you here at all."

"I didn't want to tell you," Yuuri tells his lap. "I planned it out ages ago. I know... I should have talked it over with you --"

"Yes, you should have." Viktor is surprised at his own voice, at how flat it sounds.

Yuuri flinches, then squares his shoulders. "I'm sorry for deceiving you."

"It is no matter, Yuuri. What is done is done. I will buy your ticket back to Hasetsu tomorrow --"

"I'm not going back," Yuuri interrupts, finally lifting his head. His eyes are bright with determination and an echo of fear. "I'm staying here with you. This is important to me, Viktor. Being here with you, training here with you, it's very important to me. It's not fair that you decided we should stay in Hasetsu without listening to my side. Please, can't we talk about it? I'll, I'll pay for your flight cancellation tomorrow, we can figure it out together -- just please don't send me
Viktor stays silent for a long moment, before crossing the room and kneeling down in front of Yuuri. He leans forward with a heavy sigh, resting his forehead on Yuuri's thighs, the tension draining out of him. They sit together like that for a few moments, before Yuuri rests a hand on Viktor's head, petting his hair gently.

"Having you here is like every one of my nightmares coming true," Viktor murmurs, hearing Yuuri suck in a breath of shock. "All I can see is you falling into the water. What if I cannot protect you? I will not be able to live with myself if you get hurt."

"I'm sorry," Yuuri whispers, a tremble to his voice. "I just... I wanted you to listen to me. I wanted us to talk this over and figure out a good solution. But you wouldn't even listen to me. I guess it made me mad..."

Viktor exhales softly, turning those words over. He had not listened to Yuuri. He had barely entertained the possibility of coaching Yuuri in St. Petersburg upon learning the truth. Yet part of him knew that it was a possibility -- or else he would not have cleared out his second room and turned it into a bedroom. He would not have looked up driving laws in the city. He would not have held off on telling Yakov about his decision.

He knew this might happen, and that is what he hates most of all. He lifts his head after a moment, looking up and aching at the sight of Yuuri's misery.

"Why not Hasetsu?" Viktor asks, meeting Yuuri's eyes.

"Because this is the home we were going to make together," Yuuri whispers. His eyes are wet, and the pain in his voice makes Viktor want to hold him again. "Because I really like it here. I like it in Hasetsu, too... but Hasetsu is only home because you are my home. And I want to have that with you here. I don't... I don't want to be afraid any longer."

Viktor closes his eyes briefly, thinking of Yuuri's journal, of the pages and pages of fears and dreams and hopes. His expression hardens, and he hears a soft inhalation of breath, as if Yuuri is fortifying himself against whatever Viktor has to say. Viktor opens his eyes and pushes himself up, closing the space between them with a kiss.

Yuuri gasps a little, hands flying to grip Viktor's shoulders. Viktor continues to move, pushing Yuuri back against the bed, one leg between Yuuri's as he pushes him upwards a little. Yuuri arches into him, the air between them turning hot as Viktor slides his tongue into Yuuri's mouth, tasting him. The kiss is not out of passion, nor lust, but a need that Viktor cannot express, something deep within him that he cannot put into words.

He does not want Yuuri to be afraid any longer, either. He does not agree that St. Petersburg will be safe, even if the accident is months away, but... he cannot deny Yuuri, even if having Yuuri here makes him unhappy. Yet he would do anything to keep Yuuri safe, to make him happy.

If that means giving up Hasetsu, then so be it. As long as Viktor can keep Yuuri away from the Neva, he can protect him.

Viktor draws away slowly, opening his eyes halfway to admire the beautiful flush on Yuuri's face, the way his glasses have fogged up. He gently picks the glasses off Yuuri's face, smiling a little at the way Yuuri's eyes fasten onto him. Yuuri's lips are pink and flushed, a rare sight indeed, one that Viktor cannot help but admire.
"If home is where I am, then you will not mind if we move, will you?" Viktor murmurs.

Yuuri stares up at him, before his face lights up. "You mean...?"

Viktor sits up, exhaling hard. "I am not happy about you being here. But I understand that the future is not set in stone, and that this is important to you. I read your journal, and... it helped me understand your feelings."

"Viktor..."

"I am sorry for having made the decision without listening to you," Viktor says quietly. "I want us to be equal in everything we do together, including our decisions. I will... try to listen. But I ask that, if you are to stay here, that you make a few concessions as well."

"Okay," Yuuri agrees, a little breathlessly. "What kinds of concessions?"

"First, I want to drive you everywhere," Viktor says with certainty. Yuuri nods, much to his relief. "I have a car, and as your coach, I am happy to take you anywhere you need to go."

"Right, the Cadillac," Yuuri mumbles, which makes Viktor smile.

"Ah, you know of it? It is the best car, truly." At Yuuri's doubtful look, Viktor lets out a short laugh, before his amusement fades. "The second concession is that, if at any point you change your mind, or you feel uncomfortable, I want you to tell me. If I feel like this place is hurting you, I wish to take you back to Hasetsu. We can train there. I do not care if it ruins everything with Yakov and the world. You are more important to me. Please... if your nightmares get worse, or if you suffer in any other way, tell me."

Yuuri takes a long moment to digest that, then slowly nods. "I'll tell you if things get worse. But I still want to try. Can we at least talk things out before you take me back?"

Viktor nods once. "Fine, we can talk about things if it comes to that. Thank you. Lastly, I want to limit your exposure to the waterfront. Since I have to travel over the Tuchkov Bridge every day to reach the skating club, I think it would be better if we moved across the river, closer to the rink. Are you very attached to this apartment?"

Yuuri glances past Viktor, looking around the room with a small smile. "Well... it is where we lived together. But I meant what I said. About... you being my home," he says, his cheeks darkening. Viktor smiles softly.

"Good. Those three are the most important. Anything else, I will discuss with you when it comes up." Viktor sighs to himself, realizing that if he is to stay in St. Petersburg, then Yuuri will get to work with Yakov and the full training staff of the rink. He had meant to arrange things when he got to Japan, but if they will stay here... well. He supposes that makes it easier, at least.

He has no intention of letting the matter rest, though. Something needs to be done about the Neva.

"I agree to all of that. Thanks... for listening to me, Viktor. Um... can you let me up?" Yuuri asks with a blush. Viktor blinks, then smiles slowly.

"Hmm... should I?"

"Viktor!" Yuuri whines, which makes Viktor laugh. He steps back and helps Yuuri sit up, then strokes his fingers over Yuuri's cheek affectionately, leaning down to kiss his forehead.
"I will not lie... I am still very, very upset with you. But I am happy to see you, my Yuuri. You are incredibly brave for traveling all this way alone. Please... from now on, let me be at your side, always."

"That sounds like a proposal," Yuuri says weakly, leaning into Viktor's hand.

Viktor smiles and says nothing. He remembers the ring that was on Yuuri's finger in his dream.

'We were going to get married -- married! Me, marrying Viktor Nikiforov. He promised we would marry after I won five gold medals to match him. Viktor, my inspiration... my love, my life, my fiancé.'

It might as well be, at this point.

"Come here," Viktor says quietly, drawing Yuuri to his feet. He opens the door silently and steps down the hallway to the other bedroom, bracing himself before pushing open the door. Inside is the bed he bought over a week ago, along with a matching wardrobe and a few relaxing abstract art pieces in soft grays -- no rivers or oceans in sight. Viktor steps aside for Yuuri to look at the room, oddly nervous.

For a few moments, Yuuri only stares, his eyes wide. Viktor waits for his reaction.

"You put a bed in here," Yuuri says faintly. "But... you were going to come to Hasetsu..."

"I think part of me wanted to prepare for all eventualities. I wanted you to have a safe space, if by some chance you did end up in St. Petersburg, or if we survived this mess and you came to stay here later. But... yes. As long as you stay with me, this will be yours. Well, at least until we move, but I'll make sure to get an apartment with two bedro--"

Viktor is cut off when Yuuri's arms wrap around him, soft lips pressing against his mouth for a moment before Yuuri pulls away, smiling at him sheepishly. Viktor softens, wrapping his arms around Yuuri's waist and leaning in to kiss him again, taking it more slowly, loving the feeling of having Yuuri in his arms. He ached for Yuuri these past two weeks, and having him here is a wonder. Even though this is not what he planned, Viktor is still happy to see Yuuri, to be able to love him openly.

Having Yuuri in St. Petersburg is terrifying. Having Yuuri in his arms gives him hope for the future.

"Thank you," Yuuri whispers, rubbing his nose against Viktor's as he pulls away, just a little bit. Viktor gazes at his long eyelashes, his heart light despite the anxiety churning in his gut. He can believe, just a little, that they will be okay. That Yuuri will be okay.

He cannot let it be anything but okay. He will do whatever it takes.

"Whatever happens, Yuuri, I will protect you," Viktor promises. The vow is something he has said before, something he thinks many times a day, but it rings with something more this time. Yuuri shivers in his arms, falling silent for a moment. Viktor thinks of how Yuuri trembled even after he reached Viktor's apartment, reached home, how the Neva haunts him from here -- how it will always haunt him.

"I'm afraid," Yuuri whispers. Viktor closes his eyes, his resolve hardening. "I'm so tired of being afraid. Of fearing this, of fearing a future where you and I can be together. I want it so badly."

"I'm sorry," Viktor murmurs, his grip tightening on Yuuri. "When it comes to you, I cannot stop
myself anymore. If you must be afraid, then know that I am afraid, too. I am frightened of the intensity of my feelings for you."

Yuuri lifts his head, meeting Viktor's eyes, scarcely a breath away. "I've never been afraid of my feelings for you. Everything I've done, I've done for you. I love you."

"I love you, too, Yuuri," Viktor murmurs, closing the distance between them once more.

*Whatever it takes.*

~*~

Viktor awakens when the door opens, though he does not realize what is happening until a cold hand slips into his grip, holding onto him tightly.

"Viktor," Yuuri whispers. The strain in his voice makes Viktor push himself up, opening his eyes to see Yuuri standing beside his bed in a t-shirt and shorts, pale and trembling. Wordlessly, Viktor opens his arms.

Yuuri lets out a faint noise and moves forward, crawling into Viktor's arms and pressing in close, not caring or even noticing that Viktor is shirtless, only seeking warmth and comfort. Viktor hugs him close, tucking Yuuri's head against his neck and murmuring soothingly, before gently laying them both down and pulling the covers up over Yuuri's shoulders.

Yuuri is crying softly against his neck, the tears dampening his skin. Viktor gazes past his head at the window, silently hating that cursed river. He rubs Yuuri's back until the trembling fades and the tears stop. The silence between them lasts long enough that Viktor thinks Yuuri must have fallen asleep, until Yuuri speaks.

"I d-dreamed of standing next to it. I couldn't move, and the w-water was getting closer..."

"It was just a dream," Viktor whispers. "You were traumatized by what happened, and your mind is creating images to help you sort through those fears. Coming here... ah, I wish you had told me you were coming, so I could have met you at the airport. I would have driven you here myself."

"You would have put me back on the plane," Yuuri says with a faint, wet laugh. Viktor cannot deny the words. "It's... it's okay. I know it was just a dream... I'm just... I'm afraid of it taking me again. I mean, I still don't know how I came back... if it was because of the river, or..."

"We may never understand what brought you back. Yet here you are... and here you will stay, with me. I will not let you die again, Yuuri." Yuuri flinches against him, and Viktor exhales softly, turning his head to kiss Yuuri's hair. Yuuri no longer feels cold. "Just say the word, and we will go back to Hasetsu."

"Not yet," Yuuri whispers, and Viktor lets it rest. He wonders briefly if Yuuri should return to his own room... yet he cannot bring himself to suggest it. He does not want to let Yuuri out of his sight, nor the safety of his arms. Just for now... just for tonight, it would be alright if they stay together.

"Rest, solnyshko," Viktor whispers. "I am here. I will always be here."

Yuuri does not reply, but soon his body relaxes, as he eases into slumber. Viktor does not sleep for a long time afterward, gazing out the window, wondering if this is truly the right decision, to stay in St. Petersburg.
What else can he do to protect Yuuri?

~*~

With great reluctance, Viktor cancels all of the flights he booked to Hasetsu. Yuuri winces at the cancellation fees, but Viktor assures him that the price is no trouble, refusing to let Yuuri pay him back. He throws all of his energy into getting Yuuri and Vicchan settled, arranging for groceries to be sent to the apartment, and finding a new place for them to live together.

Yuuri does not have any more nightmares; at least, none that he tells Viktor about. If he sneaks into Viktor's bed more often than not during the week, Viktor says nothing about it, merely pulling him close every time. It feels strange, sleeping beside someone who is not Makkachin, but somehow Yuuri feels like home when no one else ever has.

To his joy, Makkachin loves Yuuri and Vicchan. She spends most of her time sitting happily at Yuuri's feet, snoozing on his bed, or urging Vicchan to play. Vicchan, who has to take medication every day, tires much more easily than Makkachin, but she is perfectly content to lay on the floor with him in the sun, while Viktor and Yuuri work on packing together. Viktor notices Yuuri watching the dogs sometimes, a melancholy smile on his face.

He knows why. Vicchan never knew Makkachin or Viktor, in Yuuri's other future.

Hunting for an apartment takes much less time than Viktor expected, partly because of his name, and partly because one of his rinkmates found out he was looking and told him about a place. Their new apartment is on the other side of the Neva and close enough to the skating club that he and Yuuri can jog to practice if they want, with a nicely sized grocery store nearby.

The apartment is still too close to the waterfront for Viktor's peace of mind, but then again, all of St. Petersburg is too close, because several rivers wind through the city to the sea. Viktor pays the deposit immediately, then sets up an appointment with a company to move everything.

Yuuri's family forwards a few boxes of Yuuri's belongings, which Viktor directs to their new apartment. In the week after Yuuri's arrival, the two of them spend most of their time moving, packing, and unpacking, until at last, Viktor and Yuuri stand alone in their new living room.

Their new home.

The apartment is one of the new high rises with a park just down the street. Viktor lucked out on one of the corner apartments on an upper floor, which afforded them a lovely balcony. The hardwood floors gleam, while the large windows reveal the late afternoon sun. Makkachin is been nosing around the kitchen, where Viktor left her and Vicchan's water bowls, and boxes sit stacked against the wall, some emptied of their contents while others remain full. Vicchan is snoozing on the couch, tired after the long day.

The couch does not look quite right in this warm, brightly lit space, compared to the cold, narrow walls of Viktor's old home. The table only looks marginally more familiar, with two half empty cups of tea resting on top.

Yuuri's hand slips into his, clasping his fingers. "Does it feel as weird to you as it does to me?" Yuuri asks softly.

Viktor exhales. The apartment is different, to be certain. More spacious, with a bigger living room and an office space for them to share. They still have much to do, more unpacking and decorating, grocery shopping, among other things. Viktor needs to change his address with his bank and his
various business contacts. Yet all of that will fall into place. What matters is that he and Yuuri have a new home together.

Perhaps too fast a step in their relationship, yet... Viktor feels like this moment has been a long time in coming. Between their dreams and his feelings, he cannot imagine living with Yuuri any other way. Even the idea of living in Yuutopia with Yuuri's family, as kind as they are, does not compare to the reality of having their own space, together.

"I think it will be just right. Do you like the view from your room?"

"It's nice. I think I'll be able to see the sunset most days," Yuuri says, his hand tightening on Viktor's. "It's different than the other place... but that's okay. I like it."

"Shall we go put the linens on your bed?" Viktor offers after a moment.

"I was thinking of staying with you tonight," Yuuri says in a rush. Viktor looks over at him to see Yuuri's cheeks turn pink. "Not to do anything. Just... it's our first night in our new place..."

Viktor smiles slowly, squeezing Yuuri's hand reassuringly. "I would like that very much, Yuuri. Shall we go put the linens on my bed, then?" he offers teasingly, and Yuuri gives him a look, opening his mouth to scold him.

Viktor leans in for a kiss before Yuuri can try. The setting sun is warm on his face, Yuuri's lips taste like his favorite blend of tea, and the world seems a little safer in this place, this space just for them.

~*~

"Sign here, and here," Yakov says, pointing at the papers on the desk. Yuuri signs carefully, while Viktor watches in silence. After the ink has dried, Yakov makes several copies and hands them over in manilla folders to Viktor and Yuuri, a smile on his face.

"Welcome to my skating rink, Yuuri Katsuki. You don't mind if I call you Katsuki from time to time, right? We have another Yuri on the team, so it might get confusing."

"I don't mind, Coach Feltsman," Yuuri says with a small smile, standing to shake Yakov's hand. Viktor stands beside him, beaming with pride. His first student!

"Yakov is fine. I will call you Yuuri when it is just us and Vitya. Many of us speak English here, but if you need help learning Russian, we get a discount at one of the local colleges for classes."

"I speak some," Yuuri tells him in Russian, his pronunciation careful, his cheeks turning a little pink. "I studied it in college."

Yakov's eyes widen, and he looks very pleased. Viktor winks at Yakov, who immediately loses his smile and frowns at him, which leads Viktor to believe they should relocate to the rink.

"How about I show you around, Yuuri? We can introduce you to your rinkmates, too. If you are done, Yakov...?"

"Go on, take him," Yakov sighs, sitting down again and waving a hand. "I need to go over the training schedule you submitted. I want you back in here after lunch, Vitya. We have a lot of work to do."

"Yes, Yakov," Viktor all but sings, pushing Yuuri out the door quickly. He keeps his hands to
himself while they walk through the Sports Champions Club, despite wanting to take Yuuri's hand. He prefers to hold himself to a professional standard when they are in the club, though, to keep everything proper. Yakov had already lectured him about being too affectionate as a coach, though Viktor had mostly tuned him out.

He leads Yuuri around, pointing out his new office, the different training rooms, the cafeteria and the nutritionist's office, and the dance studios. Yuuri follows contentedly without looking lost, and as they move closer to the rink, Viktor realizes that Yuuri trained here for a little while in his other future.

"I apologize, I forgot that..."

"It's fine, Viktor," Yuuri says, giving him a smile. "It's mostly the same, but it's nice to get a refresher. Please don't hold back on telling me everything."

"Alright. Well, the last place to show you is the rink, of course. Today is everyone's first day back from vacation, so they will all be excited to meet you. Sadly, we share the rink with the local hockey team, but they tend to practice in the evenings and on weekends, because many of them are in school..."

Viktor tries to keep his disdain out of his voice. He has never approved of the hockey team, nor do they approve of him. The years of mutual dislike have left their mark, with many members of the skating club openly jeering the hockey team, while others completely ignore them. Shaking his head at Yuuri's smile, Viktor walks ahead of Yuuri and pushes the door leading to the rink, holding it open for Yuuri.

"Viktor!" someone calls, and Viktor turns to see Mila Babicheva and one of her friends skating toward them, their eyes lighting up when they see Yuuri. Beyond them, Georgi Popovich and Yuri Plisetsky turn and stare. Yuri's expression instantly darkens, but Viktor pays him no mind.

"Come over! Let me introduce you," Viktor says with a smile. "My new student, Yuuri Katsuki."

While Yuuri introduces himself, Georgi and Mila both taking up the space at the rink wall while other members of the club crowd behind them, Viktor watches in satisfaction. He does not notice until too late that Yuri has snuck up behind him, until a small hand grabs his elbow and yanks him backwards. Viktor turns to see Yuri glaring at him, and he obligingly steps away from the small crowd around Yuuri, to give them some privacy.

"What the hell, Viktor?" Yuri hisses in Russian. Viktor observes his fury for a moment, wondering where this anger came from. He thought Yuri liked Yuuri. "Why did you bring him here?"

"You knew I was going to coach him," Viktor says evenly. As if someone like Yuri had missed the announcement.

"You knew I was going to coach him," Viktor says evenly. As if someone like Yuri had missed the announcement.

"I know, but --!" Yuri makes an angry gesture, then pushes his hair out of his face. "It's not fair! I should be your student, not him!"

Viktor raises an eyebrow slowly, watching as Yuri flushes and covers his mouth after shouting. He hopes that Yuuri is not listening. "I never made such an agreement with you, Yuri. You have never once expressed a desire to become my student. As it is, Yakov is your coach, not me. I'll certainly assist you during practice, but --"

"No. Drop him and be my coach. Send him back to Japan."

Viktor's gaze goes cold, and he is gratified to see Yuri flinch. "No. He's here to stay. What is this
about, Yuri? I thought you looked up to him."

"Shut up!"

Viktor waits patiently for an explanation, while Yuri stews in his anger. He is rewarded when the boy glances past Viktor and crosses his arms again.

"You promised me, and you forgot," Yuri bites out grudgingly. Viktor raises an eyebrow in question, and Yuri exhales explosively. "A program. You promised me a program for when I entered seniors. You're good at them. I thought, if you were ever going to retire, I'd ask you to be my coach. But then he snatched you up --"

"First of all, there was no snatching. I asked him first," Viktor says evenly, sighing when Yuri just gawks at him. "Second of all, I don't remember having promised you a skate, but if I did, I'll certainly take care of it. Now, you need to be polite to Yuuri. He will sense this needless antagonism, and it will not be good for the team if you act like he should not be here."

"He shouldn't," Yuri mutters. "You stole him -- I mean, he came here to steal you --"

Ah... it makes sense now.

He had forgotten about Yuri's little crush. After all, Yuri had been the person to make Viktor notice Yuuri, so he supposes he does owe Yuri for that, at least. He does, vaguely, recall speaking to Yuuri after a juniors competition, where he promised something or other... but that had been ages ago, and he had been preoccupied with his dreams and plans to retire.

He sighs, wondering what sort of program he could give to Yuri that would appease him enough to leave Yuuri alone. If he remembers correctly, *On Love: Eros* had a companion piece.

He fixes Yuri with a look and lowers his voice. "I will take care of your program. In the meantime, do not treat Yuuri badly for my choices. You can hate me all you want for bringing him here, but I have my own reasons for it. Yuuri is someone I want to protect, and I will not let anyone stand in my way. Even you, Yuri Plisetsky."

Yuri stares up at him, his hands slowly closing into fists, his expression darkening with some sort of rage. Viktor holds his stare evenly, wondering at this boy who gets so wound up over Yuuri, yet hardly knows him. As long as Yuri keeps his foul opinions to himself, then Viktor will have no reason to argue with him. Yuuri's mental health is far more important than Yuri Plisetsky's pride.

"Viktor?"

Viktor turns with a smile to see Yuuri making his way over, ignoring the way Yuri tenses. "Ah, *solnyshko*, I was just speaking with Yuri about training. Did you meet everyone?"

"I think so," Yuuri says, looking a little frazzled. His expression lights up at seeing Yuri. "Hello, Yurio! It's nice to see you again. I look forward to training beside you."

Viktor gives Yuri a sharp glance, but thankfully, Yuri behaves, hiding away his anger and giving Yuuri a stiff nod. "You too. I'm going back to practice." Yuri turns abruptly and hurries away to the rink, all but ripping off his skate guards and throwing himself onto the ice. Viktor watches him go with a small frown, then hears a sigh from Yuuri and glances over.

"I was afraid of that," Yuuri says quietly.

"Hm?"
Yuuri turns away from the rink, shrugging and crossing his arms to ward off the cold. "Yurio wasn't happy that you were my coach last time. He even came to Hasetsu to argue about it."

"Right. That short program challenge. Onsen on Ice, correct?" Viktor remembers the competition in his dream clearly. The desire for Yuuri to win, to defeat Yuri Plisetsky and become his student, to skate for him. Yuuri nods slightly, and Viktor puts one hand on his shoulder and leads him away from the rink, into a warmer part of the building.

They walk in silence for a moment, Viktor leading the way to his office, before letting Yuuri in and closing the door. The office was a gift from Yakov after his retirement announcement, and Viktor finally decorated the space this past week. The window looks over the same courtyard that Yakov's office does, being right next door, and while it might be a bit smaller, Viktor can't help the swell of pride at this space being his.

He would have given it up in an instant for Yuuri. At least here, they have a small space where they can speak privately, particularly about any problems Yuuri might have that Yakov will not understand or be able to handle.

"I can always arrange another challenge between you," Viktor says, half-joking, but the look of consideration on Yuuri's face surprises him.

"That might not be a bad idea. Yurio is... someone who only accepts facts through wins and losses. I don't think he'll respect me or my place here unless I give him something absolute."

Viktor smiles a little, amused at Yuuri's insight to a boy who regularly irritates everyone in the rink, while missing the most obvious part of Yuri's psyche. "You might be right about that. I think his lack of respect has more to do with the fact that you are here in part as my boyfriend, and he hates me for it."

Yuuri blinks once, then lifts his head and stares blankly. "What?"

Viktor raises an eyebrow, then winces slightly at revealing Yuri's secret without even thinking about it. He sighs deeply. "Yuuri... Yuri Plisetsky's crush on you is an open secret, here. He is likely overjoyed that you are skating at his rink, but because I am involved, he is jealous. He never did respect me," Viktor muses, then shakes his head.

"In any case, I can speak with Yakov about a possible competition between the members of the club. Perhaps the winner can star in the next ice show."

"That sounds great," Yuuri says weakly, then rubs his hand over his mouth. "Yurio... likes me? Really? I never realized... I mean, he's always been so antagonistic..."

Viktor chuckles and walks around the desk, leaning his hip against it and patting Yuuri's hair, absently stroking his fingers through the messy black locks. "He has always looked up to you. He enjoyed watching your videos and complaining about the scores the judges gave you. Then he would try to imitate your step sequences and jumps. That is how you caught my attention, by the way. I looked you up and quickly became even more enamoured than young Yuri is."

Yuuri lifts his head, staring at him with wide eyes. "That's... how you noticed me?"

"Mm. You didn't realize, did you?" Viktor asks softly. Yuuri shakes his head mutely, and Viktor chuckles, sliding his hand down to Yuuri's chin and tilting his face up. "My dear, you can be oblivious to other people, sometimes."

Yuuri flushes a little, then stands and wraps his arms around Viktor, hiding his face in his shoulder.
Viktor smiles and pulls him close, Yuuri standing between the vee of his legs, rubbing his back slowly. Yuuri breathes out and nuzzles into his arms, fitting against him like he has always belonged.

"Are you alright? Simply say the word, and I will book us tickets to Hasetsu."

"I'm fine," Yuuri murmurs. He turns his head and kisses Viktor's cheek lightly. "We don't need to go back to Hasetsu yet."

"Yet," Viktor repeats, then sighs softly, sliding his hand up Yuuri's back. He opens his eyes partway. "I am still mad at you, by the way. However, I will let you try and earn my forgiveness."

"I know," Yuuri whispers. Viktor wonders if he is smiling. Yuuri pulls back briefly and glances up at Viktor, making him realize just how long Yuuri's eyelashes are. To his amusement, Yuuri is quick to hide his small smile, instead putting on a solemn expression. "So... how much forgiveness is a kiss worth?"

Viktor pretends to consider it, touching one finger to his chin, while Yuuri gazes at him. He waits until Yuuri has started to frown, his lips twitching, then leans in to brush their noses together. "Just enough to be substantial, I think," he murmurs, their lips just barely touching.

The kiss Yuuri gives him is more than enough.

Chapter End Notes

#draintheneva

Let me know what you think! (° Winn°)

End Notes

New and returning readers, please check out this Spotify list with the music featured in this story!

I'm happy to share with you an AMV that was partly inspired by this story, by @saoril! I am absolutely amazed by its beauty. Kudos to @saoril for this absolutely lovely AMV, that captures the feelings between Viktor and Yuuri brilliantly! Watch it here! (Also check out the other fics that inspired it!)

Also, I'm honored to share this AMV by KeksFannxXx, inspired by this story. T_T It's amazing! Thank you so much!! Please go watch it!

Please let me know what you think! (° Winn°) I'm also available on tumblr for chatting and things!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!