A Practical Guide to Winning the Olympics (Dos and Don’ts)

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Summary

When pair skater Yuuri Katsuki’s career comes to a scandalous end, he does not expect the retired pair skating legend Viktor Nikiforov to suggest that they compete together. But taking on a new skating partner is full of trial and error, and the skating world doesn’t know how to react when the Katsuki-Nikiforov duo, against all odds, starts doing well. The last thing either of them should do, as they strive for their last chance at greatness, is to fall in love. Yuuri knows he is damaged goods, and Viktor knows his body is starting to fail him. They have competitions to survive and medals to win. No, falling in love is out of the question; they’re just very good friends. And even if Viktor felt something, he’d never act on it, and even if Yuuri happened to be hopelessly in love, he’d be mortified if Viktor ever found out.

“Well,” Viktor said, “let’s summarise: I’m pushing thirty, have a bad ankle, and haven’t skated competitively in three years. You’re barely out of a doping scandal, coachless, and on the JSF’s blacklist. Hell, Yuuri – we might as well go for it, then. What on earth do we have to lose?”

When Viktor put it like that, it seemed to make an awful lot of sense.
The pair skating! AU no one asked for, but which I’ve wanted FOR SO LONG NOW. I made the age difference between Yuuri and Viktor bigger than in canon because 1) I wanted Viktor to have a prestigious career + years of retirement behind him, 2) I am weak for fic where Viktor is insecure about his age and thinks he is too old for Yuuri. That’s it. That’s my excuse. This is the first of four instalments, and there will be several weeks between each.

Self-beated, please point out typos to me and I’ll fix them. More extensive notes at the end! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

I: Don’t Call It a Comeback

The arena shook with the power of cheers and applause, vibrating off-ice to where they stood in the corridor, waiting. Their team jackets were zipped up, covering the upper halves of their matching outfits. Yuuri had never heard a crowd so wild or loud.

Another burst of noise. How many people were out there? Fifteen thousand? Twenty? How many would be watching them live on TV and the Internet, on their phones and tablets?

Millions.

Viktor was nervous, standing next to him – Yuuri saw the tension in his shoulders. To the side, organisers and journalists kept a polite distance to let them wait for their turn. Determination had set in Viktor’s jaw, even as he flinched at the sound of a standing ovation – a clean skate, clearly.

Viktor never got nervous enough for it to show like this. Yuuri worried on his bottom lip, heart pounding, hands twisting.

They couldn’t do this. God, what had they been thinking, ruffling people’s feathers, causing three scandals and counting in just a single year? Were they mad?! And maybe Viktor belonged at this competition – Viktor absolutely belonged there – but Yuuri next to him, skates on, pretending to be a worthy half of this partnership, was just kidding himself, and –

“Hey,” Viktor said. He startled and met Viktor’s gaze, blue eyes somehow calm. Viktor smiled. It was a smile he’d given Yuuri a thousand times since the first day, a smile of pure trust and confidence. Even now. Even at the end of their road. Viktor even smirked.

And Yuuri nearly stumbled in reaching out to clutch Viktor’s hand as tightly as he could, even as every loud exultation sent a shiver down his spine. Viktor took his hand, warm palm pressing into his, their fingers entwining. Viktor squeezed back firmly, and he didn’t have to say anything – Yuuri got the message.

They could do this.
So he nodded. Okay. God, okay.

“Nearly time,” Viktor said.

Millions of people. Months of training. The underdogs, the past-his-prime and the not-good-enough, the sympathy entry. The two of them on the ice, giving their unexpected, at times unwelcomed, but utterly stubborn, mad and wayward bid for foolish glory.

“When we’re finished here,” Viktor said, “you wanna grab a bite to eat?”

Yuuri almost snorted, but then smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, sounds good.”

“Yeah?” Viktor teased – a front, but he still teased. Viktor tugged on his hand, a persistent, magnetic pull.

“I’ll check my schedule.”

Viktor raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “Schedule? Wow, so that’s how it is. A couple of podium spots and all of a sudden it’s ‘I’ll check my –”

“Mr. Katsuki, Mr. Nikiforov – this way, please.”

If it wasn’t for the hand in his, Yuuri wouldn’t have been able to move. If it wasn’t for Viktor now giving his hand another reassuring squeeze, Yuuri would have packed up and left on the first flight home.

But he took one step, then another, and soon they were at the curtains, which two volunteers parted for them, and the arena came into view: milling officials and photographers in the entryway, beyond them the boards and the battered ice, and then all the thousands of people, the cameras, the lights.

The stadium felt bigger than any Yuuri had ever even seen. The noise was deafening. The pair currently on the ice were coming to the end of their program, and Yuuri forced himself not to look at their superb death spiral or the flawless lasso lift, or the level four – He gulped, looked away. The applause washed over them all when the pair finished, gifts were thrown onto the ice, and the sweepers began collecting the flowers and presents as the gate was opened for them to go warm up.

No matter what happened next, Yuuri knew one thing: he would not let go of Viktor’s hand. They got onto the ice, skate guards and jackets discarded, and all he had to do was to keep holding Viktor’s hand.

Because never again would he stand in the middle of the ice without the firm and calm feel of Viktor’s grip. Never did he want to, and never did he intend to.

The lights were blinding them both. They circled the ice, had a go at some of their choreography. Yuuri tried to breathe. Viktor’s mouth was a thin line. The latest score was announced overhead – high and speaking of perfection, and Viktor always told him to ignore how other people scored, just focus on their goals. But god, he hadn’t expected that kind of a score.

The two of them really were insane.

Viktor circled an arm around his waist, keeping him to his side. Their feet, perfectly synchronised, scraped the ice.

The past ten months had been about this moment – this precise moment. And somewhere
overhead, endlessly far away, the PA shouted, “Next, on the ice, representing –”

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– Japan, pair skaters Yuuri Katsuki and Fumio Sano, have withdrawn from the Four Continents. That had been the first statement released to the press over a year earlier. Two days later, the real news broke – people had been speculating injuries, although their first place finish at the Japanese Nationals had shown them in their prime. So an unexpected injury, perhaps, at an inopportune time.

But then the ISU released the real reason why Katsuki-Sano had withdrawn from 4CC: they had been disqualified. Their gold at the Japanese Nationals was retracted. Katsuki-Sano ceased to exist as a partnership.

After five years of him and Fumio competing together, with some occasional success but without ever receiving too much attention from anyone, they finally made headline news. Yuuri’s phone was ringing constantly, and he sat in his apartment in Detroit, on the couch under half a dozen blankets, watching Netflix movie after Netflix movie, numb and unseeing, while his phone beeped and rang and beeped and rang.

He had no idea where Fumio was, but he clearly wasn’t taking any calls. If he had to guess, Fumio had most likely fled to Kyoto where his girlfriend lived. Celestino had advised him not to talk to anyone in the meanwhile, wait for it all to blow over.

Blow over? Something like this didn’t blow over.

He went to the rink out of habit, at a loss because he didn’t know what else to do, and stumbled straight into the devouring claws of reporters waiting outside. “Can we get a statement?” one of them requested, but Celestino had released one already, confirmed the ISU’s statement, offering an apology, saying it was regrettable and shocking and that they were sorry.

“N-No comment,” he stuttered nervously, and, “I haven’t spoken to him,” and, “I’m sorry, I don’t know.”

At this last comment, a reported shouted, “Don’t feign innocence, Katsuki! Just tell us your side of the story!”

Yuuri, however, didn’t know what his side of things really was. One day, he and Fumio had been training for the Four Continents at their practice rink in Detroit. A few weeks later, after an anonymous tip, Yuuri no longer had a skating partner. Really, he supposed, he no longer was a competitive pairs skater at all.

They had made the front pages in Japan – the first and only time they ever did so.

When Phichit came home from the Four Continents, having placed fifth, he told Yuuri that he couldn’t keep ordering pizzas and sitting on the couch to avoid the real world. Yuuri hadn’t been back to the rink after his one failed attempt and paparazzi ambush.

“You’ve done nothing wrong, remember?” Phichit asked.

Yuuri tugged on the corner of the blanket. “I doubt that’s what people are saying.”

And when Phichit flinched, Yuuri needed no other confirmation of what people were saying behind his back.

His career was over. Maybe it was about time he came to terms with that.
Celestino seemed relieved when Yuuri said he was leaving – Yuuri’s presence alone was enough to bring the rink and Celestino a bad name. Still, Celestino asked if he was coming back, maybe look for a new skating partner. But Yuuri was twenty-three, had once placed twelfth at Worlds, and although they had qualified for the Grand Prix final just months earlier, placed last, which really could only be expected, it was clear that Yuuri’s career had never really taken off.

Skating was over for him. Maybe he should have been angry with Fumio, but he felt too guilty to harvest any real anger. People interpreted this as an admission of shared culpability and shame. A new skating partner? Ha! As if anyone would take Yuuri on now. He was tarnished goods.

Yuuri’s return to Hasetsu was shrouded in shame. At the train station, when he was recognised, people muttered under their breaths. A poster of him and Fumio skating had been graffited on outside the station with *Liars!* He stopped in front of it, staring, numb. Liars. The graffiti wasn’t wrong, he realised, trying to swallow a lump down his throat.

He hid in his childhood bedroom for a month. He helped around the onsen, washed towels, scrubbed floors, and ate whenever he felt miserable (which was often), and only went to the rink when he was sure Yuko and Takashi weren’t there to surprise him.

“Come to the bar,” Minako insisted in late March, “and we can watch the pairs free skate together.”

Afraid of Minako’s fury if he said no, he joined her in watching his former rivals compete for the world title. Sara and Michele were there, Georgi and Anya of course, JJ and Isabella – all the greats.

“You know,” he confided after his third drink, “even if the ISU hadn’t banned Fumio, I doubt JSF really wanted to send us to Worlds. Gold at Nationals was a fluke.” And, after Georgi and Anya were celebrating their gold medal, “Pair skating just isn’t the same after Viktor and Oksana retired. There’s no – no sensuality, no intensity, no – no Viktor and no Oksana.”

Minako looked at him disbelief. “Uhh, did you just not watch what I did? How can you say Georgi and Anya are not intense?”

“It’s a show, it’s not innate the way – the way Viktor’s performance was.” He sighed, somewhat dramatically, on his fourth drink. Viktor and Oksana had retired just when Yuuri and Fumio had started getting sort of good – he still remembered seeing their winning free skate in Sofia, his heart bursting at the sheer beauty of it. “I mean, I don’t mind if my career is over, I was nothing special! But Viktor Nikiforov and Oksana Bosava won three world golds, four Grand Prix titles and silver at the Olympics! And they were robbed at the Olympics! Robbed! They should have kept going.”

Minako hummed. “Oksana was getting too old for it, I guess. Even a few years of age difference makes pair skating difficult a lot of the time. It’s a shame – they were one of the greats.”

At least they agreed on something.

Well, Yuuri thought, it was the end of an era, in all accounts. Pair skating was moving on, with or without him, or without the talent of duos like Bosava-Nikiforov.

“But I got you tickets!” Phichit protested over the phone. “What do you mean you’re not coming?”
It was April and cherry blossoms were in full bloom. Yuuri had gotten comfortable where he was: out of sight and out of mind, in quiet Hasetsu. The locals didn’t turn to look at him anymore, and he was able to skate at Ice Castle without people murmuring behind his back. He was becoming invisible, insignificant.

Good.

So no, he didn’t plan on going to Fukuoka to see the ice show Phichit and other skaters were starring in. The shows had started in Sapporo and had travelled southwards, and Yuuri had seen Phichit’s numerous selfies with the cast on Instagram. They looked like they were having a ball: a new town every night, glamorous performances for the sake of artistry, athleticism and entertainment, but no pressure of competition. Normally, Yuuri would have been thrilled to go, but now?

“People will recognise me.”

“And?”

“And they all think I betrayed the sport and am a disgrace and –”

“Fumio was a disgrace, not you!” Phichit gasped.

Yuuri ignored this. “And I’ve gained a lot of weight and look a mess and no, it’ll be embarrassing for me. No. I’ll look like a sad loser!”

“You can’t hide in Yutopia for the rest of your life, you know.” A silence on the line. Then Phichit said, sweetly, “We have special guests for the final few shows, by the way.”

Despite himself, Yuuri was intrigued. “Oh? Who?”

“Flying in today… From Russia, of all places.”

Yuuri paled and clutched the phone tightly. “You better not be kidding me. Are you serious? Phichit, are you serious?”

“Come and see.”

Yuuri was getting worked up now. “Are you lying? I’ll never forgive you if you’re lying.”

Phichit laughed. “I am not lying! They were doing shows in Russia, so they couldn’t join us sooner. Life of superstars, I guess.”

Yuuri moped, cursed himself, and said that he’d be there.

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The show was sold out, as it should be: the cast was full of famous skaters, some retired, some still competing. Yuuri kept on a hat and a mask on his lower face as he hunched near the front of the rink – Phichit had gotten him a good spot. Phichit had promised to take him backstage, but Yuuri was reluctant. He’d shown up late on purpose to avoid seeing anyone before the show.

People clapped and cheered when the opening number began and the skaters came on the ice one by one. Phichit looked glorious in a red and gold military-styled uniform with tassels on his shoulders, and Yuuri clapped his appreciation. Sara and Michele Crispino of Italy were part of the cast – some months earlier, they had been rivals. The two came on to great applause, while Yuuri
was a faceless viewer. Then Christophe Giacometti, the reigning world champion of men’s skating, came on, and the people around Yuuri seemed to absolutely adore him. More skaters followed.

And at the very end, amidst much fanfare, Oksana Bosava and Viktor Nikiforov skated onto the ice, hand in hand, waving and beaming. Yuuri hadn’t seen them since their retirement three years earlier, but it was as if no time had passed. Viktor was just as handsome and Oksana was just as stunning; so effortless, so flawless, such unity and precision! And Yuuri meant no disrespect to Phichit, Sara and Michele, Chris or the others, but for him Oksana and Viktor stole the show. They did two skates: a new, light-hearted skate to a Russian folk song Yuuri had never heard – the music was upbeat and entertaining, the chemistry between Oksana and Viktor was playful and tongue-in-cheek. Later in the show, they did their Olympic silver free skate, *Stammi vicino*, which brought tears to Yuuri’s eyes – it was as gut-wrenching, poignant and romantic as ever.

When at the end all skaters came onto the ice to bow goodnight, Yuuri was up on his feet shouting “Bravo!” – mainly at Oksana, a true goddess, and at Viktor, as masterful as he’d ever been. He’d admired them since his novice days and had dreamed of him and Fumio being able to be as good as Bosava-Nikiforov. If only.

When Phichit found him, he had a sharp pain gnawing at his guts. No, Yuuri didn’t want to go meet anyone. Phichit looked sorry for him, briefly, before putting on a smile. Phichit offered a cup of coffee somewhere near the rink instead, and they met outside and wandered the streets together until they found a café to sit down in. Yuuri asked Phichit about the show, and Phichit hesitated but he insisted.

So Phichit talked about how Viktor had taught them all the final All on Ice portion that day, having choreographed it himself, and how the cast were beside themselves that Oksana and Viktor had joined them. “Viktor’s really sweet, you know! Although intimidating too. It’s insane, the shape he’s in, considering he’s retired. Chris loves having him here – they’re good friends. I didn’t know that, did you? I think Oksana and Chris might have had a thing, actually…”

But even this ran its course. Phichit eyed him from across the table, coffee cup in his hands. Yuuri knew what his former roommate thought: he was depressed, he was lonely, he was upset. It’d been too soon, coming to see other people skate, people whose partners hadn’t been banned from the sport.

“So you haven’t heard from Fumio?” Phichit asked, and Yuuri shook his head. What more was there to say? It’d been a shouting match, in the end. Fumio had stormed out. Yuuri had been in tears. Phichit crinkled his nose. “And he never even apologised to you. What an asshole.”

Yuuri shifted in his seat. “Maybe if I’d been a better skater, Fumio wouldn’t –”

“Hey, no. None of that is on you,” Phichit said. “So are you still skating?”

He shrugged. “Some. Sort of hard without a partner, but Yuko and Takashi have humoured me at Ice Castle. Haven’t spoken to Celestino since I left, though. The onsen isn’t bad, you know, I enjoy helping around. Mari needs the help, too.”

Phichit appeared displeased. “Yuuri, you’re one of the best pair skaters in the world.”

“Debatable.”

“You were at the Grand Prix final!”

“Where we finished last, yeah.”
“You shouldn’t be running an onsen, you should be skating!” Phichit insisted, but Yuuri just shook his head. Phichit gave him a big grin. “Come on, let’s go back to the rink and take a spin, hmm? Oh come on, it’ll be fun! Like old times, let’s just goof around for a bit. Please? Pleeease? Oh, is that a smile? Lo and behold, Katsuki Yuuri smiles!”

“Shut up,” he laughed. Maybe coming to Fukuoka hadn’t been such a bad idea, after all.

The ice had been smoothed over, but the rink was deserted. The place felt quiet and serene, the loud jubilations of the evening only a memory. Yuuri waited by the rinkside while Phichit went to get them skates, returning ten minutes later with apologies that Sara had delayed him. The cast of the show still appeared to be in the dressing rooms, hanging out, with Oksana telling stories of their glory days, the room captivated, and normally Yuuri would have elbowed a child in the face to be there – figuratively. But now he couldn’t face even that.

So he and Phichit put on skates, with Yuuri trying to adjust to boots that weren’t his. The two of them had often skated together in Detroit, Yuuri staying after Fumio had already left, working on his spins and jumps, trying to memorise the choreography. Fumio was more naturally talented; Yuuri needed the extra time to keep up. So it felt natural to have a rink just to the two of them again, laughing off their tumbles and scrutinising their wobbly axes.

“You know what we could do,” Phichit then challenged with a daring eyebrow lift, and Yuuri knew what he meant.

And he should have said no, really, but it was fresh on his mind, as exciting and wonderful as the first day he’d seen it: Stammi vicino. He’d forced Phichit to learn Viktor’s part so that Yuuri could skate Oksana’s part – Fumio had refused to be Viktor, saying it was pointless to copy other people. But Phichit, who didn’t pair skate, had thought the challenge fun.

They had never been anywhere as good as Viktor and Oksana, of course, and Phichit couldn’t do the more demanding lifts and throws, so they’d eased the technical level somewhat. Still, they knew the skate, or their own version of it, nearly flawlessly, and they skated to it without the music. Yuuri even managed to land the throw triple Salchow, he was rather relieved to discover. Phichit cheered enthusiastically when they managed it.

At the end of it, they were both out of breath and panting. “That was good!” Phichit grinned in their final pose on the ice, on their knees and embracing. They broke apart, flushed.

To their utter surprise, someone started clapping. Yuuri flared bright red when he saw Christophe Giacometti at the rink side, beaming at them. “Very good!” Chris, World Gold Champion, enthused. Yuuri wanted to die.

Phichit laughed sheepishly, getting up and skating to Chris with a hello. When Yuuri, still catching his breath, hesitated, Chris called out, “Yuuri Katsuki, I’m not going to bite. C’mere!”

Yuuri skated over, and Chris hugged him over the barrier. Yuuri hadn’t known they were on hugging terms, although they had been somewhat friendly in the past. “Sneaked in, huh? Come, you must join us for drinks. Ah ah! No is not an answer I will accept. You do an uncanny Oksana, has anyone told you? She will be delighted when I show her the video.”

“T-The video?” Yuuri stammered.

Chris casually waved his phone in the air. Had they been filmed?!

“Just one drink, Yuuri,” Chris purred. Phichit looked at him expectantly. Yuuri swallowed, throat
tight. Chris wasn’t treating him like dirt. Chris was being almost kind, but Yuuri couldn’t detect pity in it. He’d been convinced everyone would treat him like a leper, but Chris was being his usual self.

One drink?

Okay. Perhaps one drink wouldn’t hurt.

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Eight drinks in, Yuuri was feeling rather boisterous. They were in a club in Fukuoka, and at first he’d gone out with Chris, Phichit, Sara and Michele – although Michele had only come to make sure no one got too friendly with his sister, he said, glaring at Yuuri as if _he_ had intentions towards Sara.

And Yuuri had been nervous and quiet to begin with, but Chris had bought them all tequila shots, and they’d ended up on the dance floor somehow. The club was small and sweaty, and Yuuri’s shirt wound up hanging off him, half-taken off. Yuuri wound up dancing with a pretty hot guy, who seemed to enjoy grinding up against him, and Yuuri didn’t particularly object. Maybe he needed to fuck his way out of his slump? Maybe? Maybe! He wasn’t sure!

But right then he felt good, and not a failure, and he was having fun, and god, he should drink more often!

Somewhere in the midst of this, Viktor Nikiforov and Oksana Bosava showed up.

Yuuri staggered on the dance floor when he spotted them. They made the most handsome couple: both tall and lean, Slavic cheekbones, one with silver hair and blue eyes, the other with red hair and green eyes. Viktor in black slacks and a burgundy shirt, Oksana in a sexy black dress. Sara and Chris were at the table, talking to them, waving at him and the grinding guy on the dance floor. Yuuri wasn’t sure if what he saw was even real or if he was imagining things.

Yuuri had seen Bosava-Nikiforov in competitions, and he had shared practice ice with them too, but he’d never spoken to his skating idols, and then they’d retired anyway. Chris was showing Oksana and Viktor something on his phone, and Phichit was suddenly on the dance floor again, asking if they should go get more drinks. Yuuri said yes and untangled himself from his handsy dancing partner.

Then suddenly they were at the bar, ordering drinks. Oksana Bosava was also there. Yuuri tried to catch up. Oksana was shouting something to his ear over the music. Yuuri couldn’t hear. “What? What?” he kept repeating. Oksana laughed. Oh wow, she had a wonderful laugh. She was how old now? Thirty-two, thirty-three? She looked so much younger! Yuuri stared. _Oksana Bosava_ was talking to him.

“You’re amazing!” he shouted. “You’re angelic!”

Oksana laughed again. She took his hand and pulled him along.

Yuuri was sat at the table. He was so drunk that sitting straight was difficult. Oksana was sat to his left. She was still there. Amazing! She was real! She knew who he was! Someone spoke on his right. His head swivelled. It was Viktor! Nikiforov! Squished in the booth to his right! He was in a Bosava-Nikiforov sandwich! Yuuri stared in disbelief. His stomach lurched. Viktor was close enough to _touch_. Their thighs were, in fact, touching. Yuuri felt like hyperventilating.

Viktor looked serious. “Are you okay?”
“What are you doing here?” Yuuri asked, dumbfounded. Then Viktor’s hand was on his shoulder, and Yuuri felt close to fainting. Viktor Nikiforov! “You’re real,” he said, and Oksana laughed, said something in Russian, and Viktor kept looking at him sternly.

Sober Yuuri would love/hate this. Sober Yuuri would be over the moon and ask them about their 2011 short program and those side-by-side jumps at the Rostelecom Cup that year, if sober Yuuri could muster the courage to speak, of course. But drunk Yuuri slurred his words and got stuck on Oksana and Viktor! Oksana and Viktor!! He wasn’t worthy, and Viktor looked at him like he was trash, which he was – the others had been friendly, but Viktor was right, he’d ruined their sport, he was a joke, he –

He was outside, trying not to throw up. He was walking. Phichit called him. He knew where he was, yes, yes! It was fine, he – To the train station. Yes, yes. Goodnight, they’d speak soon. No, he was okay! He loved Phichit, very much. Had Oksana been there? He’d thought so. And Viktor too? Viktor. God, Viktor Nikiforov had been right there! He nearly threw up, but managed to hold it in.

He got to the train station. There was no train to Hasetsu until the morning.

He sat on a bench outside the station, heaved, and threw up generously.

In the morning, he only remembered a third of these events, but Viktor’s stern, unimpressed gaze remained.

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A week later, Yuuri was making his way back to Yutopia, having run down to the shop to buy eggs and noodles. A taxi passed him, and Yuuri wondered if a new guest had arrived. By the time he was crossing the courtyard, he was thinking of his mother’s ramen instead.

At the reception, he nearly walked into a tall man. Yuuri apologised profusely, and the man turned around. The man looked like Viktor Nikiforov, was shaped like Viktor Nikiforov, but could not possibly be Viktor Nikiforov.

Except that it was.

Yuuri dropped the egg carton. His jaw, he was sure, was touching the floor. Viktor gave him a friendly smile. “There you are!” Then, “Oh, you dropped your eggs.”

Viktor stood there with two large suitcases, a carry-on, and a laptop case. He was in Yutopia. Yuuri didn’t understand.

Viktor picked up the carton and lamented that two eggs appeared to be broken. It was making a mess of Viktor’s expensive looking coat. Horrified, Yuuri grabbed the carton back and started apologising again, but Viktor was already wiping the stain off with a silky looking handkerchief like it was no problem at all – Viktor had several coats from this spring collection, he explained, and it was already two seasons old, too!

And, somehow, Viktor was still smiling at him. “Well, here I am.”

Yuuri stared. Behind Viktor, Yuuri’s father was beaming at them both. Yuuri stared. There Viktor was? Yuuri had no context for any of this. Yuuri had barely spoken to Viktor – slurred at him once, more like. Why was Viktor there? How did Viktor know where he lived? Where was Oksana? Why was Viktor there? On holiday, perhaps? Had Yuuri invited Viktor to the springs when he’d been drunk?
It sounded like the kind of thing drunk Yuuri had done, sure. But for Viktor actually to show up?

“Aahhh…?” he voiced, uncertainly.

“I think we have a bit of a language barrier here,” Viktor then said, motioning at Yuuri’s dad. “I asked to be shown to my room. Could you lead the way, maybe? And then once I’ve settled in, we could go to that rink you told me about. It’s close by, I assume?”

“…Yes, there… is a rink… close by?”

“Perfect! Help me with my bags?” Viktor asked sweetly. Yuuri’s head was spinning. Viktor seemed to not notice. “Since you know Stammi vicino so well, we could do that for our trial skate. Take out some of the lifts, of course, seeing as we haven’t practised those together before, but we should manage the spins and an easy throw. What do you think?”

The bottom of Yuuri’s stomach dropped, nay, disappeared. Trial skate? For… for Viktor and… and. Him?

“Such an adorable onsen!” Viktor was now enthusing. “Charming! Would you mind if I soaked in the springs first? But I’ll be quick about it, I promise!”

An Olympic silver medallist was at the reception of Yutopia, ready for a trial skate with Yuuri. Yuuri had only spoken to him once, when drunk off his mind. Viktor Nikiforov had not competed in years, and for some insane reason he seemed to be suggesting that he had arrived to see if, perhaps, the two of them should skate together.

How Yuuri didn’t actually faint, he was unsure.

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Viktor Nikiforov had not competed in three years, three weeks, and four days. When he and Oksana had won Olympic silver, followed by a third world gold, they knew it was the highlight of their career. Oksana had been twenty-nine, Viktor had been twenty-six. Oksana had a bad hip, Viktor had a bad ankle. Between them they had strained numerous ligaments and ankles, broken a collarbone, bruised a coccyx, broken two fingers, and Viktor forgot what else. They were bloodied and bruised and exhausted – but victorious.

“Sort of like Tina Turner,” Oksana said of her favourite artist (they had done one Tina Turner short program, and one exhibition skate, back in the day). “We want to retire when we’re at the top, not when we’re on a downhill slope.”

Besides, Oksana wanted to start a family. Viktor understood: the road had been long, and they were tired. They’d done enough. Oksana had skated competitively since she was eight, and Viktor had paired up with her when he himself had been nine.

It was time to bow out.

People had been disappointed by their retirement, of course. They probably could have reigned longer, but they had achieved all they had set out to achieve, and more. Oksana didn’t want to fade away, to let younger generations overtake her. It was a tough call, but Oksana had never regretted it.

Viktor wasn’t sure what he’d expected retirement to be like. He had choreographed for other skaters, was a sort of celebrity and was invited to talk shows with Oksana. Oksana wrote a book about their career, and it sold well and was translated to seven languages. They were invited to ice
shows all around the world, and they toured the US and Canada, China and Japan, Russia and Italy. It was leisurely and comfortable.

But Oksana did not start a family. She married; Viktor was in attendance. She divorced seven months later, after she’d caught her husband in bed with one of their good friends. She remained childless, and Viktor knew her well enough to know she mourned it. Oksana didn’t say anything, however, but put on a brave face and was as cheerful as ever, booked them onto endless ice shows, but Viktor wondered if they’d given up their competitive career too soon for the wrong reasons.

But be that as it may, the years passed them by, and Viktor slowly began to realise that he had an itch. Some skaters stopped following the sport when they retired, skated twice a year, and some even said that they’d spent their teenage years thinking that figure skating was all there was to the world. Ha! How narrow-minded and naïve they had been, and so were the fools still stuck in that mind frame! Quitting the sport set you free!

Viktor was not, however, one of those skaters. He was on the ice every day. When he heard a beautiful piece of music, he instantly began converting it to a program in his head. He wasn’t sheltered – he knew there was more to the world, he had other interests (poodles and food, mainly). And he wondered, sometimes, what life would have been like if they hadn’t retired. Oksana never wanted to skate competitively again. But Viktor wondered.

The itch was made much worse one evening in a Fukuoka bar, when Chris slung an arm around his shoulders and told him to look at this! And what he saw was Phichit Chulanot and Yuuri Katsuki performing one of his favourite programs of their career, *Stammi vicino*. Oksana was delighted, laughed and said it wasn’t half bad. Chulanot was terrible – in the nicest of ways, he butchered Viktor’s moves. But that was to be expected as Phichit wasn’t a pair skater to begin with. Katsuki, on the other hand, was extraordinary. Phichit barely gave Yuuri enough height for the throw, and Yuuri still got enough rotations and a clean landing. Katsuki wasn’t doing an impression of Oksana. Some might have thought so, but Viktor saw beyond that. Katsuki had added movement to the routine. Katsuki added a spin where there hadn’t been one. Katsuki added a difficult exit to the throw triple Salchow that Viktor was astonished had never occurred to them. His edges were deep, his transitions seamless, his musicality and expression breath-taking.

“When was this filmed?” Viktor asked. Back in the last Olympic season, perhaps, when this had been his and Oksana’s free skate?

“A few hours ago,” Chris said dismissively, and Viktor did a double-take. “Not too bad, right? Considering Yuuri was borrowing skates from Phichit, too.”

Viktor was in disbelief. This had happened earlier today? When Yuuri wasn’t even skating in his own boots? He vaguely knew Yuuri Katsuki, the pair skater…. Why was the name ringing bells for him?

Oksana said, “Katsuki is clearly a big fan! It is very flattering. He knows how to move, that’s for sure.” Oksana nodded to the dance floor where Katsuki then was, with some handsome Japanese guy grinding up against him. Yuuri was flushed, his shirt half-undone, revealing pale chest, eyes glassy with alcohol. The man’s leg pushed between Katsuki’s thighs. Katsuki moved against him, hips a sway of seduction.

Oksana said, “Do you think it’s true, then? That he really had no idea his partner was doping?”

Ah, that was it: the doping scandal! Everyone had heard of it, of course, but Viktor was bad with names. Something Sano, banned for six years because of doping. It was coming back to him now. Fumio Sano, that was it! Whose partner was Yuuri Katsuki.
He looked at the man on the dance floor again: was it seduction still, what he saw? Or was Katsuki simply trying hard to forget?

If Sano had been doping, Katsuki must have been doing it too, had been the general sentiment. But Katsuki’s samples had been clean. Katsuki had released a statement that he hadn’t known of Sano’s activities, but even Viktor wondered how that could be true. The figure skating world had been in uproar over the incident. He and Oksana had been asked for their views on doping in their sport on a Russian morning show some months earlier, prompted by the Japanese scandal.

The man on the dance floor was hard to connect to the man everyone had been busy accusing of doping and busy theorising how Katsuki had managed to give clean samples. Katsuki must have been some kind of a doping mastermind.

The man on the dance floor was even harder to connect to the man in the video, giving new life to 
Stammi vicino
in a way that sent a shiver down Viktor’s spine. Off-season, non-competitive, out of shape, and in someone else’s boots, Yuuri Katsuki had temporarily calmed the itch that Viktor had carried around for three years, three weeks and four days now.

Viktor didn’t know what to do.

Katsuki joined them at their table a while later, a drunken mess. Katsuki was a fan, clearly: flustered and awed in a way that Viktor found rather adorable. They must have competed together for a while, before the retirement, but Viktor didn’t remember Katsuki or Sano at all. Viktor quizzed Katsuki on 
Stammi vicino
, with little success. But Katsuki had a moment of clarity when he beamed: “Come to Hasetsu, and we’ll do it together, Viktor!”

Katsuki’s eyes shone bright with excitement, and Viktor’s throat felt awfully tight. Katsuki’s breath had been sweet and tequila-heavy.

Katsuki had been all over the place that night: excited, intimidated, seductive, down on himself – mostly just drunk. When Oksana went to get Katsuki a much-needed glass of water, Katsuki had stumbled out of the booth, and Viktor didn’t see him again.

He thought of nothing else all night. It was a mad idea, an utterly mad idea… Besides, Katsuki wasn’t okay, that was clear. Katsuki was upset and vulnerable, in need of fixing.

But Viktor could work with that. These days, he thought, he rather needed fixing too.

* * *

The staff at Ice Castle were endearing. Yuuri explained that Yuko and Takashi had enjoyed a promising juniors career in Japanese pair skating, but when Yuko wound up pregnant with triplets at the age of eighteen, that had been the end of that. Yuko and Takashi asked for selfies and pictures with the triplets. Viktor complied.

Truthfully, he was nervous. He had Oksana’s blessing – do whatever you need to do, she had said when Viktor announced he planned on staying in Japan a little longer. They had known each other for over twenty years: she had read his mind without him having to say anything. But surely the idea of a comeback – he cringed at the word – could only end up in disaster. He was twenty-nine. What was he doing?

But Yuuri Katsuki was visibly more nervous, so Viktor pretended to have no doubts whatsoever. Yuko and Yuuri had spoken to each other in rapid Japanese that Viktor could only guess at when they’d arrived. Together they now got on skates and got onto the ice, which they thankfully had to
themselves. Yuko stayed to observe and play music for them.

*He’ll think I’m too old,* Viktor thought, once again. Yuuri was twenty-three – young in Viktor’s books. He had googled Yuuri and watched roughly all of his skates with Fumio. Viktor considered himself rather the Katsuki expert, really: consistently inconsistent, going for big elements but rarely executing them cleanly. Sano was to blame, too: he didn’t give Yuuri enough height on throws and twists, for instance.

Even so, Yuuri was more talented than Fumio, this was clear. Fumio had solid skating skills, nice clean, deep edges, but he had nothing on Yuuri’s musicality and grace. Yuuri made music with his body. Fumio, on the other hand, was doing sloppy karaoke.

Viktor was full of tension and tried to relax as they warmed up on the ice. At least the shows had kept him in shape; otherwise this entire thing would end up in humiliation on his part. Next to him, Yuuri was bright red – star-struck, embarrassed, a bit of both? – and hadn’t looked Viktor properly in the eye since they got on the ice. This was worrying for Viktor’s plans of them pairing up to skate.

“I don’t really skate the program how you and Oksana did,” Yuuri fumbled as they circled the ice. “That’s fine, we’ll figure it out. Just to see if we can skate together,” Viktor said. He tried to exude confidence. Fake it until you make it – hadn’t that always been Oksana’s policy? Pair skating was a nightmare: finding a person who matched your style, a person you had chemistry with… And Viktor knew he came from the Russian school and had a Russian style to his skating, while Yuuri was both Japanese-American in his style. It might be a disaster. Viktor may have made a grave mistake.

“Let’s go through it without music first, figure out which elements we feel comfortable with,” he said, and Yuuri nodded. He circled behind Yuuri and put his hands on Yuuri’s hips.

Yuuri yelped and then clasped a hand in front of his mouth. “I’m sorry!” Yuuri flared even redder. But Viktor smiled. “If we’re to skate together, you need to let me touch you, don’t you think?” He tightened his grip on Yuuri’s hips and pressed himself to Yuuri’s back. This was pair skating: personal space did not exist.

Yuuri inhaled deep, nodding. His hair smelled nice, Viktor noticed. What was the scent – citrussy shampoo? And then Yuuri himself, a scent of musk and deodorant? Whatever it was, it was nice.

“Okay,” Yuuri swallowed, leaning into him, and brought up a hand to caress Viktor’s cheek: the starting pose for *Stammi vicino*. Their eyes locked; Yuuri’s were a deep brown, dark lashes against pale skin. Viktor’s chest tightened, felt painful, but he focused on the task at hand.

They ran through the program a handful of times and changed a few of the elements as they’d never done the more difficult throws or lifts together. Viktor felt like he was cheating on Oksana, if he was being honest, but Yuuri had a unique spin on the routine and Viktor was happy to adapt it.

Once they had it roughly figured out, they decided to try it with the music. Yuuri seemed less shy now and was intensely focused. The flush on his cheeks was from exertion, not embarrassment. Good.

He pulled Yuuri close to him again, hands on the other’s hips. Yuuri tilted his head, met his gaze, and caressed his cheek. Like lovers, Viktor thought: it was a routine for hopeless lovers. A murmur: *stay close to me, stay close to me...*
They began to skate. Viktor was concerned with the feel of it: could they tell the story and read each other? Could they see where the other one was going, read each other’s thoughts with a mere glance? Yuuri was very technically able – the video had proved that already. But was Viktor’s touch enough to guide Yuuri, and could a slight shift in Yuuri’s glide signal Viktor where they were heading?

They skated across the rink, synchronised, a unified scraping of ice as they matched each other. He pulled Yuuri close, and Yuuri spun in his arms, graceful, hand in Viktor’s as they curved the bend. They nailed their side-by-side triple flips, and Viktor managed to admire Yuuri’s extension and free leg when they landed. They had agreed not to do lifts yet, but he still spun Yuuri in his arms. But then he stopped counting the technical elements, because the way Yuuri skated made him feel the music. They were lovers, asking the other to stay. Viktor got lost in the performance.

He and Oksana had saved a triple twist to the second half, and when they attempted it, he caught Yuuri at an awkward angle. Yuuri nearly slipped from his grip to the ice, but Viktor haphazardly clutched him tight, and with an armful of Yuuri, he let himself fall backwards to break the fall instead of letting Yuuri smack onto the ice. His behind met the surface with a hard bang, and Yuuri’s right knee met a similar fate. They spun a full three hundred and sixty, piled up, probably looking utterly ridiculous, one heap of disastrous skating.

But before Viktor could even be embarrassed by such a mistake, Yuuri was up with a “Come on!” And Viktor got up with the speed of a figure skater who had fallen on their ass mid-routine: a nanosecond and he was up. Yuuri had already caught up to the music, and his hand was reaching out to Viktor, to pull him back to the program and the choreography. Viktor followed, hand finding Yuuri’s.

And that was when Viktor knew, really.

The program ended with a crocodile spin, the two of them holding on to each other as they spun. They pulled out of the spin, and glided, gently, into each other’s arms. Yuuri pressed his head to Viktor’s chest, delicately. The music finished. Yuuri smelled like sweat and was heaving against him, and in the distance Yuko was clapping and cheering. Viktor was sore and out of breath – he’d forgotten how tough a program it was.

Viktor was going to have a nasty bruise on his ass. Yuuri’s knee needed checking out, too. They’d been sloppy and unrefined, utterly unfit for competition.

But Viktor laughed, delirious: he’d been right. He’d been right! It was an informal practice session, a let’s-have-a-go skate, and Yuuri had pulled Viktor into the skate, and Viktor could have closed his eyes and still known where Yuuri was. Yuuri had refused to let the program go unfinished because of a nasty fall, even when they were only testing it out, and that was the kind of guts and determination Viktor was looking for.

And that was how Viktor knew.

Yuuri looked at him like he was unsure what had just happened.

* * *

“I’m not sure,” Yuuri muttered to Yuko as they waited for Viktor at Ice Castle reception. He was back in his hoodie and sweatpants, shower fresh. His left knee was throbbing painfully.

Yuko’s mouth was hanging open. “What do you mean you’re not sure?! You were on the ice for two hours, and it looked like you’d been skating together for years! Years! Of course there’s work
to do, but you looked amazing together!”

He fidgeted. “I don’t know.”

Yuko was exasperated. “What don’t you know?! Yuuri, for goodness sake!”

But then Viktor appeared, dressed in loose grey bottoms and a hoodie, but still looking like a million bucks. His bangs had flopped over his eyes, and he threw his head back to move them, like a casual Hollywood superstar. Yuko nearly squealed.

“So, Yuuri,” Viktor said, “should we go talk things over somewhere?”

He thought about Minako’s bar, mainly because Minako would be all over Viktor and Yuuri could make a quiet exit. But instead he took Viktor back to Yutopia, where they sat in the common room and sipped on green tea. It wasn’t a busy season for them, and they were alone. Yuuri had an ice pack on his knee, and Viktor had an ice pack that he’d slipped into his boxer briefs to keep against the bruise on his butt cheek. Yuuri knew this wasn’t Viktor’s usual underwear of choice, as Viktor had loudly complained that all of his thongs were useless for keeping the ice pack in place, and Yuuri really wished that the mental image – and the knowledge – of Viktor Nikiforov in nothing but a thong wasn’t burned into his brain.

“Well,” Viktor said, “what do you think?” Viktor titled his head to the side, inquisitively, like a puppy.

Yuuri had no words. That it was the best trial run he’d ever had with anyone, even if they were sore for it? That skating Stammi vicino with Viktor had been a dream come true? That none of this felt real?

Instead he said, “You could do better.”

Viktor frowned. “Excuse me?”

“Than me.” He swallowed hard and clutched his tea cup. “You should find someone better than me. You’re a- an Olympic medallist, and I’m a disqualified Japanese pair skater who once came last at the Grand Prix Final. If people knew you wanted to compete again, you could have anyone you wanted as a partner.”

Viktor was still frowning. “That may be true, sure. I want you.”

Yuuri was in pain trying to explain it. “I’m not good enough.”

“I think you are.”

“I don’t deserve it.”

“Says who?”

“Everyone!” He motioned around vaguely. His career had ended in flames and accusations: it wouldn’t be a glorious comeback like it might be for Viktor – for Yuuri it’d be something else entirely. He’d let down their fans, their supporters. People hated him now.


Yuuri was shocked by the bluntness. “N-No!”
“And did you cover up Fumio’s doping?”

“Of course not,” he said, even if he halted briefly. He’d been asked these questions a hundred times, fans and reporters yelling them at him. He’d quit all social media as a result of the abuse. His answers had never changed, but the tone of the questions had always been accusatory and bitter. When Viktor asked, he might as well have been discussing the weather.

Viktor smiled. “Well then.” The two words sounded like ‘that settles it’ and ‘we’ve covered that topic for the rest of time now’. Did Viktor really think it was so simple? Yuuri’s reputation was going to reflect on Viktor, too. “Let’s summarise: I’m nearly thirty, have a bad ankle, and haven’t skated competitively in three years. You’re barely out of a doping scandal, coachless, and on the JSF’s blacklist. Come on, Yuuri – we might as well go for it, then. What on earth do we have to lose?”

When Viktor put it like that, it seemed to make an awful lot of sense.

He sipped his tea to buy some time. Viktor kept smiling at him. Yuuri liked him. Pair skating was a profession like any other, but getting along with your partner was essential. He and Fumio had been best friends, too, but that had changed at some point: Fumio found other friends in Detroit, and Yuuri mostly hung out with Phichit. He and Fumio stopped seeing each other outside the rink. And while that was fine, they didn’t need to be BFFs and you needed time away from your partner, absolutely, Yuuri knew it had negatively impacted their dynamic on the ice. Were they even friends anymore, Yuuri had already wondered a year ago. Communication had become harder and harder.

In the end, Yuuri hadn’t known Fumio at all. He’d been lied to and cheated.

Viktor was beaming at him, full of goodwill and optimism. It was a ‘would I ever lie to you?’ face. Yuuri wasn’t sure if he could trust another skating partner, only to be burned again. But this was Viktor Nikiforov. Viktor wouldn’t go doping behind his back, would he? Yuuri liked him. Yuuri liked him too much, he knew. That could be a problem further down the line.

“Don’t leave me hanging, Yuuri.” Viktor purred, teasing. Yuuri flared bright red, he was sure, for the millionth time that day. God, this was going to be a problem. “I won’t sugar-coat it: we will need a lot of work. I’d say I’ll work you harder than you’ve ever worked before and push you to your limits – but it will be worth it! So what do you say? Can we give it a go, you and me?”

This couldn’t be real, could it?

“Okay,” he said.

Viktor’s eyes were full of childlike excitement and warmth. “Okay.”

They shook hands in the quiet common room, the table between them. Viktor was grinning, but there was determination on his face. Yuuri took in a deep breath, and matched it.

* * *

Yuuri would like to take you on a tour of his new reality, if he may. Old reality: retired, shamed and shunned. Never to skate again, tainted by everyone’s assumption that he’d been doping too. Career over. Name erased.

New reality: Viktor Nikiforov had moved into the onsen. His room was next door to Yuuri’s. His dog, Makkachin, had been shipped in from Russia a few days later. Makkachin adored Yuuri and was already sneaking into Yuuri’s room for cuddles.
Yuuri wasn’t in the room often, however: Viktor had planned a strict regimen for them, where they
got up at six in the morning for a five-mile jog, which was followed by balance training, core
training, strength training, and endless dancing lessons, sometimes with Minako, sometimes alone.
They were practising throws, twists and lifts off ice every day, Viktor picking him up, spinning
him around, throwing him in the air and catching him again. They usually weren’t back at Yutopia
until the evening, when they soaked in the hot springs to ease muscle pain and did stretches in
Viktor’s bedroom. Even the evening stretches were a joint exercise.

Viktor hadn’t lied: it was the most exhausting and gruelling training program Yuuri had ever been
subjected to. Viktor demanded absolute perfection all the time and then some, making them do a
hundred push-ups and then saying they should throw in another ten on top. There was no such
thing as an early night – skaters who wanted early nights didn’t place on podiums, Viktor said
gravely.

Yuuri was still confused. “So who’s our coach?” he asked one evening.

Viktor, with his forehead touching his knee as he stretched, left leg pointed outwards, hummed.
“Well, I mean – me, I suppose. Sort of. We’ll need help further down the line, but I think I’ve got
us covered for now. Unless you don’t think so?”

“No, no, you’re doing great!” he rushed to say – and meant it, too.

Viktor was keeping them off the ice until they were both fitter and leaner. Yuuri needed to lose
weight, first of all, and Viktor needed to tone up as well and get his strength back, although Yuuri
saw Viktor naked in the showers and in the hot springs daily now (did he mention that before?) and
Viktor looked perfect to him, in all accounts.

And the drapes did not match the carpet, by the way. The carpet was darker. God, why did Yuuri
have to know these things? How had Oksana survived Viktor roaming about a locker room in
nothing but a thong?

Yuuri had always hated unwelcomed touching and people being in his space, but Fumio had
always been an exception. Viktor, too, was an exception: Yuuri let himself be picked up, put down,
thrown on Viktor’s shoulder, spun around, all of it. He was working when Viktor was in his space,
and Yuuri needed his partner there, up-close and personal, to do his job.

And so, in this new reality, which was utterly absurd, Viktor Nikiforov had moved to Hasetsu to
train with Yuuri because Viktor wanted to return to competitive figure skating.

With Yuuri.

Katsuki-Nikiforov. Yuuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov, pair skating team.

Yuuri did not know what awesome – in the literal, awe-inducing sense of the word – world he had
slipped into, but this new reality was difficult to process. If Viktor wanted to return to skating, and
Oksana didn’t want to, why had Viktor chosen him? He was nothing! He was no one! The JSF
wanted to pretend he didn’t even exist!

Yet Yuuri knew they had, perhaps, the most essential ingredient of all: they had chemistry. Viktor
laughed at his stupid jokes. Viktor made him smile. Viktor was acting like he’d lived in Hasetsu
for years, and Yuuri was not immune to the other’s charms. Viktor was sort of a dork, Yuuri was
beginning to realise: he spoke with his mouth full, spent an hour every night (!) grooming
Makkachin while constantly cooing at her, had the most adorable Russian accent when he
attempted to speak Japanese, and he also had Yuuri’s entire family eating out the palm of his hand.
Yuuri found Viktor’s inability to duck at the one door of the onsen he was too tall for endearing, and he had somehow learned to accept that being manhandled, lifted, thrown and embraced by Viktor was regular everyday life. He no longer flinched when Viktor touched him, but bent to his touch, thoughtlessly.

Yuuri was enjoying their training sessions, even when they were hard. They matched well. They could read each other. Yuuri was beginning to find himself smiling, when he was alone, for no reason.

Viktor was talking about programs for the new season, what competitions they should enter into, and pondered aloud when would be a good time to contact the FFKK to register Yuuri with them and announce Viktor’s return to the ice. They had both agreed to skate for the Russian Federation, after Yuuri and Fumio had been disqualified. The JSF would have died to have Nikiforov skate for Japan, probably, but Yuuri felt too much bad blood was there, and they needed an enthusiastic association to help them along.

“There is more competition within Russian pairs,” Viktor mused, “and the Junior World gold medallists are turning senior, too, adding more pressure within Russia. But it’s nothing we can’t handle.”

Yuuri was less sure.

“And besides,” Viktor then said, in a somewhat subdued fashion, “doping rumours aren’t, ah. As damaging in Russia as in other places. People will forget.”

Yuuri hoped so. He had dreamt of skating with Viktor Nikiforov since he’d been able to do basic spins, and as they worked together, Yuuri saw daily reminders of Viktor’s unquestionable figure skating genius.

But he still didn’t think he was good enough. And what if, one day, Viktor realised he’d made a mistake?

* * *

Apart from Yuuri’s family, friends, and Oksana and Chris, no one knew that Viktor was returning to competitive skating. He’d spoken to Oksana a few times, when she called him to see how they were getting on. She was supportive, maybe a bit wistful. “You better not break any of our records with him,” she joked. Viktor doubted they would have the time: Viktor would be competitive for, what? Two more years, maybe three if he was lucky?

On some days, he wondered if he was doing Yuuri an injustice. Yuuri was a fantastic skater, and Viktor thought they could do great things together. But if Viktor retired in two, three years, then Yuuri would be robbed of another skating partner when Yuuri could go on skating. Yuuri deserved someone younger, who could compete with Yuuri for longer. God, he hated being nearly thirty.

But he kept this to himself. He was slowly learning who Yuuri was as a person, and he didn’t need a psychology degree to see that Yuuri’s self-confidence was wobbly at best. So Viktor focused on being so confident in their partnership that Yuuri couldn’t help but believe him.

In late May, they started working on their programs, which he was choreographing. They spent endless hours on the ice and in the dance studio working them out. Viktor was stressed, but hid it the best he could. He didn’t want Yuuri to think he was at fault – it was Viktor who was putting pressure on himself. They needed to surprise people: this wasn’t a Bosava/Nikiforov show, or a Katsuki/Sano show. They needed to feel new and different. Memorable.
And so, their short program was going to be sexy and steamy: Eros. It would be a hell of a way to enter the stage, to make a statement. Fumio and Yuuri had never done anything as daring, and Oksana’s overly jealous boyfriend (and then husband, and then ex-husband) had never liked them doing anything too fiery. Viktor may have been pushing thirty but he was still sexy. Right?

“So really,” Viktor explained to Yuuri as they strolled along the Hasetsu shoreline one Sunday morning, Makkachin bouncing in the waves and barking, “it’s a story of you seducing me. I succumb, the passion is consummated, and then at the end you abandon me.”

Yuuri snorted beside him, and Viktor raised a questioning eyebrow. Yuuri pushed his glasses up his nose and then said, “No, I mean, sounds great.”

“Yuuri.” It was his ‘tell me what you really think’ Yuuri. He also had a ‘that was sloppy’ Yuuri, and a ‘Can we please have a break now?’ Yuuri. The man could be a machine.

Yuuri worried on his lower lip. His lips were always chapped and bruised, which Viktor found endlessly distracting. “I just. I just don’t find that very likely. Surely it’d be- be a lot more realistic if you seduced me.”

“Ah, but that’s what people expect!” Viktor grinned victoriously. “The element of surprise, see? But instead you’ll be drawing me in, and I’ll be helplessly at your mercy.”

“Right. And why do I dump you again?”

“Because you don’t want what you’ve already conquered. You’re a heartless man-eater,” he mused.

And again, Yuuri snorted. “Yeah, sure sounds like me.” And before Viktor could say anything, Yuuri added, “It’s a character, I know. I’m working on it. So we can make it... sexy and steamy, was it?”

Viktor beamed. “Exactly!” He scanned the shoreline and found Makkachin, then whistled loudly. Her head shot up from a pile of sand, butt wiggling, and bounced over to them. She jumped up at Yuuri, who laughed and gently pushed her down. Makkachin adored Yuuri, and Viktor smiled widely at the sight of it. “Come on, Makka, you’re getting him covered in sand.”

“I hardly mind,” Yuuri smiled, petting Makkachin before she dashed off again. Yuuri didn’t ooze a greedy Casanova, but Viktor also had not been able to forget the night they’d first met. Yuuri remembered little of it, this was clear, but Viktor still could see Yuuri on the dance floor, arms looped around some man’s neck as Yuuri’s hips had swayed to the music and the man’s hands had travelled up Yuuri’s thighs to his ass. The sexiest thing in the entire club, really. Viktor thought about it sometimes. Too often.

Yuuri could seduce anyone, Viktor was sure of it.

He drew in a deep breath and then said, as casually as he could, “I hope you don’t have a lover somewhere who’ll get upset when we skate to Eros.”

Yuuri paled. “N-No! No lovers, nowhere!”

“A jealous ex, then?”

“Nothing of the sort,” Yuuri rushed out, too quickly, and then looked embarrassed. “I mean, ah. I haven’t really, um, done much dating. I don’t know. I’m not good with that stuff.”
Viktor couldn’t help but say, “There must have been people, though, who were interested, or people you were interested in.”

“I suppose,” Yuuri admitted, lost in thought. Viktor wondered which people Yuuri was thinking of, who these people had been. “But it never seemed to be mutual.” This sounded like a mystery to Yuuri, too.

“One thing less for us to worry about, then, making someone jealous,” Viktor decided, then added, “No jealous lovers at my end either. Not anymore, anyway. Which is great! This year is our debut, we don’t need distractions.” He bumped his shoulder to Yuuri’s. “Come on, let’s race Makkachin down the beach.”

They had the summer to work on their routines. Viktor had no doubt that their Eros would be intense and spell-binding when the time came.

* * *

Minako was indulging Yuuri with private Eros lessons behind Viktor’s back, which was hard to do when Viktor was attached to his hip nearly 24/7. Thankfully Viktor was tremendously addicted to a bad Russian soap opera that Viktor managed to stream online, and Yuuri got the chance to sneak out to Minako’s studio a few times each week.

One night, when he returned from Minako (im)patiently showing him how to be sexier, he dropped by Viktor’s room to say goodnight. Viktor was on the couch, Makkachin asleep by his feet, flipping through a photo album featuring Yuuri’s novice days. Mari apparently had given it to Viktor. Viktor was enthralled. Yuuri was downright humiliated.

“But look at your chubby cheeks!” Viktor enthused, snapping pictures of the photo album with his phone.

“Viktor, please,” he begged.

“And look at this outfit! Is it – Oh my, are you Aladdin? You are! Wait, did you skate to –”

“Prince Ali, yes, and yes, there’s probably a recording of it somewhere in this house. But that’s not for tonight,” he said, snatching the album from Viktor’s hands.

Viktor pouted at him dramatically. “There’s so much I still don’t know about you! Still! We’re partners, we should know everything about each other. Like where were you just now? I know you sneaked out. And what do you think of us doing A Whole New World for an exhibition program? I’d be Jasmine, of course.”

Yuuri shifted from one foot to the other. “We still need boundaries. Some stuff should be private.” Viktor looked at him with faux innocence, as if to say he had never heard anything as unexpected as the word ‘boundary’. Why must Viktor be like this? Yuuri stayed firm. “Now goodnight.”

Viktor sighed, dramatically, and let him go. Yuuri was going to kill Mari for showing Viktor this embarrassing crap! Viktor had been in Hasetsu for weeks and weeks now, and for some miraculous reason had not left yet. Showing Viktor pictures of a chubby seven-year-old Yuuri as Aladdin was not necessarily helpful!

He stuffed the photo album into his desk drawer and changed into pyjamas. He was nearly ready for bed when a knock sounded on his door. It was Viktor, looking both sheepish and victorious, holding his laptop. The light of the screen illuminated him in the dark hallway.
“I know what we need to do!” Viktor announced in a half-whisper, because it was late and they were the only ones still awake. Yuuri stared at him. “So we can finally know each other better! I found this quiz online – see?” Viktor turned the laptop around. “It lists things everyone should know about their partner!”

Yuuri would have groaned, except that he still hadn’t quite gotten over how star-struck he was when he realised Viktor Nikiforov was living in his house and pestering him at midnight with ridiculous online quizzes.

“Can we just do this quiz? Please?” Viktor almost whined, and Yuuri wished he could say no. But instead he nodded and let Viktor in. Delighted, Viktor slid in and settled on the bottom of Yuuri’s bed, back to the wall, laptop on his crossed legs. Viktor padded the bed next to him and Yuuri moved to sit at the top of the bed. Viktor’s face was one of teasing mischief, which Yuuri didn’t particularly like. “So I have fifty-five questions here that –”

“Fifty-five?!”

Viktor gave him a look of utter seriousness. “Yes, Yuuri. Fifty-five essential questions. Don’t worry, we already know answers to some of these. Like, okay – what’s the colour of my eyes?”

Yuuri fought off a smile. “The entire world knows the answer to that.”

“Exactly! So I’ll skip the easy ones.” Viktor studied the screen. “Okay, let’s start then with… Ah, here. What is the one place you desperately want to travel to?”

Yuuri thought the question was utterly random and of little use, but then it occurred to him that he might get some insight into Viktor that wasn’t common knowledge. He settled in, trying to take the quiz seriously. Viktor was in earnest, so Yuuri tried to meet him halfway. “Uhm. Well Africa is the only continent I haven’t visited. I’d like to go to Kenya, maybe. I mean, I wouldn’t say I desperately want to –”

“Don’t overthink it!” Viktor chastised him. “Go with your gut. For me, I’d say French Polynesia, stay in one of those huts above water. Do nothing but drink cocktails and swim in the nude all day.” Viktor gave him an impossibly charming grin, and Yuuri tried not to snort. He’d always thought Viktor was intimidating – he’d been so wrong. “See, we’re learning new things about each other already!”

“I guess,” Yuuri said, even as he moved to hug his knees. Viktor then quizzed him on his voting habits, whether he preferred morning or evening showers, his favourite chocolate and what kind of food he hated. Viktor also gave him his own answers, and as Viktor tried to describe a cabbage stew that was very popular in Russia that Viktor simply couldn’t stand, he was so animated in describing its sliminess that Yuuri found himself laughing and then worried if they were waking up the entire house.

“Okay, next question!” he soon found himself saying, trying to keep his voice from getting too loud.

They ended up discussing Orthodox Christianity, as Yuuri wasn’t sure how that differed from other branches of the faith. Viktor talked of his ultra-conservative grandmother, who had been scandalised by his skin-tight skating outfits and had told him, when he’d only been fourteen, that he was tempting Satan with his long hair and firm behind. Viktor’s grandfather had been a missionary, sent to an island off the Russian east coast that Japan had conquered in the early 20th century, to lead the Orthodox community there. “The island was Russian speaking,” Viktor said, “although it belongs to Japan now. After my mother was born, they moved back to St. Petersburg.”
Viktor was mainly glad that the religious zeal had faded along the generations and that he hadn’t been brought up on a small island in the Pacific Ocean without any ice rinks. Yuuri in turn talked about Shintoism, although Viktor was by then familiar with the shrines and temples around Hasetsu. Viktor tilted his head when listening, a gentle smile on his lips, eyes attentive and curious, and maybe this quiz thing hadn’t been such a bad idea after all. It started to feel less like a quiz, anyway, and more like a conversation.

Every now and then, Viktor prompted them to a new topic. “Is there a nickname you absolutely hate?”

“Debu,” he said, automatically, and then flushed when Viktor raised an enquiring eyebrow. “Fatso,” he translated. “Takashi always teased… Fumio too, sometimes.”

Viktor frowned. “Well that’s a poor attempt at a nickname. My grandmother used to call me Meatball. I kind of objected to that, have to say, but at least it was imaginative.” Although sat at opposite ends of the bed, they were now facing each other, knees nearly bumping. Viktor paused, then asked, “Did Fumio say that a lot?”

“Well no, only when he thought I was putting on too much weight,” he said, realising that such occasions had been numerous. But Fumio had been right, usually – Yuuri had needed to be stricter with his diet, so it hadn’t been unfair to point it out… Fumio needed to be able to lift him up, at the end of the day.

Viktor made a displeased sound, but then said, “Next one’s easy – do you want a cat or a dog?”

They looked at each other and in unison said, “Dog.”

Viktor laughed, and Yuuri began to worry if the warmth on his cheeks was a visible blush or not. Thank god they hadn’t turned on the lights, and only the lamp on his desk and the laptop screen brightened the room.

“What do you think of long-term commitments?” Viktor then asked. “I hope you’re in favour, considering.” Viktor motioned between them.

“I doubt it means skating partnerships.”

“Okay,” Viktor shrugged, “so what do you think of marriage?”

Yuuri, who had been chattering about his childhood and Japan and food and habits for who knew how long, shifted uncomfortably. “I, um. I’m not sure.” He had never particularly considered himself as a very marriable person. “I guess – I guess I’ve always known people who talk about wanting to get married. People say, oh you know, I want to get married one day. But I always wondered how could they possibly know that if they hadn’t met anyone they felt that way about. I don’t know. Marriage seems like a very abstract thing to want, if you don’t actually know a person you want to marry.”

“But surely you can want it just for the idea of it,” Viktor objected. “People are drawn to the promise of companionship.”

“The illusion of a life-long relationship.”

“Yuuri!” Viktor said with a tut of his tongue. “That’s far too cynical coming from someone as sweet as you. I want to get married; I would look marvellous in a white tux and I would make a superb husband.”
Yuuri grinned. “I’ve no doubt.”

“Do you like foreplay?”

Yuuri nearly choked. “Wh-What?!”

Viktor blinked at him, face utterly innocent. “It’s the next question. Do you like foreplay?”

He squirmed. “Doesn’t everyone? Jesus!”

“Not everyone,” Viktor disagreed, “but I too rather enjoy it.” Yuuri did not need to think about Viktor enjoying foreplay. “Ah, which celebrity do you find most attractive? What? Is it embarrassing?” Viktor asked when Yuuri buried his face in his hands. A few months earlier, he easily would have said that his celebrity crush was Viktor Nikiforov. Now Viktor Nikiforov was nudging his knee with his toes, asking who his crush was. Why was the universe so cruel?

“Uh, a guy called Takao from this Japanese pop group,” he lied, giving Viktor Mari’s celebrity crush instead. He then discovered that Viktor harboured a long-suffering crush on a young Leonardo DiCaprio.

“He was such a looker in my formative years,” Viktor said, rather wistfully. Right: blue-eyed, blond, Hollywood handsome. Yuuri wasn’t completely oblivious of Viktor’s dating history – all pair teams had dating rumours, and people had wondered if Viktor and Oksana had dated back in the day, too. Yuuri was aware Oksana had married a long-term boyfriend when they retired, though. Viktor, on the other hand, had dated a French swimmer for a few years: blue-eyed, blond, devastatingly handsome. A swimmer’s physique. This had been years ago, but Yuuri remembered it still.

Viktor was peering at the screen, muttering, “Well I know what you studied in college… Ah. Favourite sex position! Don’t gawk at me, Yuuri, it’s the quiz! It’s the essential fifty-five questions! I’m going to be a bit boring: missionary. It’s intimate, it’s easy to vary the speed and depth, and you can kiss and have eye contact. What about you?”

What about him was that he was burning up, and Viktor liked missionary, because it was intimate, and Viktor could kiss and have eye contact, and Yuuri was not allowed to think about the speed or depth at which Viktor gave or took, absolutely not. What perv had written this quiz?!

When he didn’t respond, Viktor said, “Okay, we’ll skip –”

“I like being on all fours and getting taken from behind, missionary is nice too, but the best sex I’ve had has been that, and we are never discussing this again.”

Viktor’s mouth was hanging open. Finally, Viktor looked flustered, heat colouring his cheeks. The quiz was stupid. This whole thing was stupid. But then he thought of Viktor’s ex-swimmer boyfriend – who Viktor had never even as much as mentioned, to be fair – and Yuuri could play this game. He wasn’t sexless; he’d gone to college! He’d been to parties! He’d had enough scraps of sex to know what he liked, at least.

Viktor stammered, “R-Right, I see, uhm. Yes, er. Ah, the next question is about sex too, uhm, maybe we’ll? We’ll just skip those? Not strictly… relevant.” Viktor was pulling on the loose collar of his sleep shirt, doing nothing but exposing collar bone for days. “The, uhhh, ah okay, favourite season! Winter, definitely. Autumn close second. Thoughts?”

“I like spring.”
“Spring! Great season! You know, uh, maybe we don’t need to finish this quiz. I think it’s been quite a learning curve as it is. Who wrote this, I really –”

Viktor was now nervously scrolling down the page, but Yuuri rarely accepted defeat, and it wasn’t often he got to see Viktor squirm. “I’ll ask next,” he demanded and took the laptop from Viktor, spinning the laptop around as it came to rest on his knees. “Okay, what’s the one thing that – that gets you off every time? Uh.”

“I did warn you,” Viktor said earnestly, but then sat up straighter. “Okay, fair question! A bit of dirty talk goes a long way with me, actually. Oh nothing too filthy, just a- you know, an appreciative comment on how good it is, my partner telling what they like and how it feels, riles me up pretty well, usually. Oh, and watching my partner come, of course. What about you, Yuuri?” Viktor asked sweetly. “What gets you off?”

“You’re the worst.”

“Am I?”

“Ungh!” he protested, glaring. What did he like? “I sort of like having my hair pulled when I’m – when, er. I am about to. Finish.”

Viktor’s eyes gleamed with interest. “Really? I never would have guessed! Well, we might skate together beautifully, but we’re not sexually compatible. I like sweet nothings in missionary, you like hair-pulling in doggy style. Very different tastes. You look so innocent, truly.”

“Shut up,” he objected, ignoring Viktor’s wide grin and going back to the screen. “What’s your dream job?”

“Dog groomer,” Viktor supplied without hesitation. “I’ve gotten rather good, with Makkachin’s fur in constant need of trimming. You?”

“A ninja,” he said, and when Viktor laughed, he said, “Hasetsu Castle was right there when I was a kid! I wanted to be a ninja.”

“I think it’s asking for your dream job now.”

“Still is,” he claimed stubbornly, and read, “Okay, do you like celebrating your birthday?”

Viktor wrinkled his nose. “No? Not really. We were usually at Nationals, competing. Oksana would always get me some kind of a present, but mostly that was it. I doubt many skaters like their birthdays: with every year, you become more irrelevant to the sport. Your joints creak, your body breaks, and the latest world champion is aged sixteen. No, I don’t like my birthdays at all.”

Yuuri knew the feeling well. “And who is currently your closest friend?”

“Ma –”

“Is a dog,” he interrupted, but kindly. “It’s Oksana, I’d imagine.”

“Ah, but she is unaware of my missionary fetish and secret desire to be a dog groomer,” Viktor smiled. Silver strands of hair swept across Viktor’s face. “So, after this amazing quiz, maybe my closest friend is you.”

Yuuri bit on his bottom lip. “Yeah. Maybe for me, too.”
They sat for a few moments in a companionable silence which Viktor then broke with, “Not just partners, then, but good friends. Maybe we can even become best friends, with time. I’d like that, anyway. Would you?”

Yuuri had a feeling that he didn’t fall, exactly: more like stumbled down headfirst into something where Viktor had, somehow, snuck even closer to the core of him than before. “I’d like that too,” he admitted.

Viktor’s eyes were full of warmth. “Great. What’s the next question?”

Yuuri pushed the lid down. “That was the last one.”

* * *

Viktor eventually decided that it was time to break his social media silence. Well, a sort of “silence” – he’d been posting pictures of Makkachin regularly, and of the amazing meals Yuuri’s mother cooked for him, and of himself at the gym or the dance studio, looking rather toned and a little beefed up, which was a great look for him, even if he said so himself. People knew he was in Japan, but no one knew where or why. He made sure the backgrounds were generic and couldn’t be placed – he knew what tricks fans used.

It had been difficult, however, not to put Ice Castle, Hasetsu, Minako, Yuuri, Yuuri’s family, and all of it on social media. In a mere two months, these now formed Viktor’s world. Viktor’s phone was full of training videos that he and Yuuri scrutinised together, hundreds of pictures of them mid-pose, doing lifts and step sequences, of Yuuri in the dance studio, going through the routines in purple leggings and pink leg warmers. Viktor’s phone was a shrine of material. He should have been given medals for self-restraint.

Once Viktor had even found Yuuri snoozing in the Ice Castle locker room, head pressed to one of the lockers, fast asleep two in the afternoon. Viktor knew he took longer in the showers, but surely falling asleep waiting for him was excessive. Yuuri’s glasses were askew, he was faintly snoring, and Viktor wanted to post it on his Instagram very badly, but managed not to.

He knew it would be a media circus that he didn’t want to waste time on. Yuuri had stayed away from social media since the doping scandal and still didn’t want to return to it.

But, Viktor liked boasting. A bad habit of his, he knew. And so, one evening, he cracked. He posted a clip of him and Yuuri doing side-by-side triple axels with a caption of How’s our synchronisation? ;) #katsukinikiforov #comingsoon

It wasn’t just an announcement, it was a gauntlet being slammed down. How many pairs teams were doing s-b-s triple axels? Maybe two, or three, in the entire world. Fumio hadn’t been able to land them; Oksana neither. But Viktor and Yuuri could. They weren’t going to be just any team: they were going straight to the top of their sport. Wait and see.

Viktor was positively giddy.

It was a Saturday night, and he’d talked Yuuri into watching a movie with him and Makkachin. Right after he’d posted the video, Yuuri knocked on his bedroom door before sliding it open. Viktor put his phone away, straightening up on the sofa. His laptop was on the coffee table, ready to play a Japanese movie Yuuri had picked out for them. They were indulging themselves with some popcorn, too.

Yuuri had changed into pyjama bottoms and a loose shirt, and looked all-around soft. Viktor knew
this to be false: Yuuri was toned and muscular everywhere, now. Viktor nearly missed the softness of Yuuri’s belly when he’d first arrived.

Yuuri got cosy, sitting cross-legged, as he explained why the film had been a defining moment of Yuuri’s childhood. Between them, Makkachin snoozed on the couch. Yuuri began to pet her fondly as Viktor reached over to press play, and the opening credits rolled.

“I might fall asleep, though,” Yuuri warned as Viktor offered him some popcorn.

“I won’t wake you, then,” he said.

“No, you must! I –”

Viktor’s phone started ringing. He reached for his phone and realised it was Yakov Feltsman, of all people. His former coach didn’t call him much anymore… They were cordial, of course: Yakov was the father he had never asked for, but why was –

Oh. Oh, already?

Viktor felt like a fourteen-year-old Junior all over again, caught practising quad loops when he’d been told not to – it was a useless skill for a pair skater. He didn’t pick up, just put his phone away and told Yuuri he’d get it later. Yuuri shrugged. The movie had started. Viktor’s phone started ringing again.

This time it was Georgi, his old rink mate. Right, okay. Yuuri’s phone then started ringing, too, and Yuuri looked confused as he looked at the lit-up screen. “It’s Celestino…”

Yuuri and Fumio’s ex-coach. Yuuri hadn’t spoken to him in months, as Viktor well knew. Yuuri looked confused.

“Okay, how about we – we put our phones away,” Viktor said, gently.

Yuuri complied, but now looked wide awake. “What did you do?” Their phones started beeping with notifications.

“Silent modes?” Viktor suggested, sweetly.

Yuuri gave him the same look he had given Makkachin when she’d tried to eat food out of the trash. “Viktor, what did you do?”

Turned out, they had gone viral in a matter of minutes. Figure skating news outlets, blogs and feeds had shared their video, accompanied by shocked emojis and !!!!!s. Viktor had sort of known what he was about to launch, of course – he’d been famous for long enough – but even he was taken back by the sheer scale of it.

His phone wouldn’t stop ringing and was flooded with messages, and Yuuri’s phone wasn’t faring much better. People were shocked that he was coming back, without Oksana, and with Yuuri Katsuki out of all people. Mila messaged him with I didn’t even know you knew each other?, which a lot of people seemed to be asking themselves and each other. Yuuri turned off his phone and hid it behind the pillows of Viktor’s bed in a panic, and in Viktor’s estimation Yuuri was freaking out a bit.

They didn’t watch the movie. Yuuri paced around the bedroom, having a meltdown, as Viktor and Makkachin remained on the couch. “Fumio probably knows by now,” Yuuri was saying. “I never even told him! I should have called him, or emailed him…” Viktor let Yuuri have his freak out.
“Oh, god! Oh god, oh god!” But eventually Yuuri said, “We’ll let it blow over. Right? It’ll blow over.”

“Of course it will,” Viktor promised, even as he, too, was forced to turn off his phone.

* * *

When the reporters surrounded Yutopia the next day, it was clear that it wasn’t blowing over. Not only were these the Japanese press, but also the Russian press had legged it to Hasetsu overnight. Yuuri’s parents were politely going around the courtyard, offering green tea to the reporters waiting in the warm June morning. Yuuri refused to leave his bed, but Viktor said he couldn’t go out alone: they were a team now. The two of them against the world!

Emotional blackmail!

So Yuuri got out of bed, anxious. He’d tried texting Fumio with a Hope you’re well! You might have heard I’ve found a new skating partner. But then he wasn’t sure what to say next: I’m sorry? So he hadn’t said anything, and it only made him feel worse.

Before facing the reporters, however, they had some admin to do. They sat on the bed of Yuuri’s bedroom while Viktor called the FFKK.

“I’m on hold,” Viktor said with a roll of his eyes, “he didn’t believe I was who I said I was.”

But someone believed Viktor soon enough, and Yuuri kept pulling on the loose thread of his pyjama pants as Viktor had a half hour conversation in Russian, pausing a few times to ask Yuuri his height and weight, place of birth, blood type and so on. “Ice Castle,” Viktor said, at one point, and Yuuri hurried to write down the address for Viktor.

And so Yuuri found himself, unexpectedly, as a member of the Russian Figure Skating Federation – and even more shockingly, he was registered as Viktor Nikiforov’s skating partner, just as Viktor was registered as his. It was official.

Viktor finished the call, and they looked at each other, taking this in. “So, how’s it feel to be a Katsuki-Nikiforov?” Viktor asked.

“You could carry me over the threshold, at least,” Yuuri said, and Viktor smirked.

They still had a hoard of journalists outside, so Viktor wrote a statement to give them, which Yuuri read: ‘We are happy to announce our intention to compete in the upcoming figure skating season as a pairs team, as representatives of the Russian Figure Skating Federation.’

Yuuri blinked. “This is it?”

“Sure,” Viktor said. “They’ll ask us follow-up questions, naturally.”

Yuuri put on a suit that Viktor objected to, and in the end Viktor dressed them both, in shirts that a disgruntled Mari ironed for them, while Viktor debated between black and grey trousers. Yuuri let himself be manhandled and dressed. They looked like they were heading into a semi-casual business meeting when they finally headed outside.

Cameras flashed and microphones were extended as the press surrounded them. Yuuri stepped closer to Viktor instinctively, trying to remain calm. Fumio had been their press guy as Yuuri had hated it. Thankfully, Viktor was also more equipped to deal with the press.
Viktor was smiling, but it was a smile Yuuri didn’t recognize—Oh, but he did. He’d seen the smile a million times in interviews, in the kiss & cry, on the ice. It wasn’t a real smile, but Yuuri had never been able to tell the difference until then.

Viktor read out the statement: in English, then in Russian, and then Yuuri repeated it in Japanese. A dozen hands shot up in the air. The questions were as expected: what are your programs? Who choreographed them? Who is coaching you? Where will you be competing? How did the partnership come about? Why didn’t Viktor want to skate with Oksana? Why had Viktor chosen Yuuri to skate with (everyone realized, at least, that Viktor had done the choosing)?

“Will we see you at the Olympics?” someone asked, referring to the upcoming winter games, but Viktor said that they didn’t qualify as Yuuri didn’t have Russian citizenship. They didn’t have existing rankings either so they were starting from scratch: B-class competitions, heading into Russian Nationals. Neither did they qualify for the Grand Prix circuit, so they would have to get ranking points elsewhere.

A reporter asked Yuuri, in Japanese, “Is Nikiforov-kun aware of the doping allegations made against you earlier this year?”

The question was moot: there was no way Viktor could be unaware. The goal was probably to humiliate him, and it succeeded. Yuuri, who had been doing sort of okay, felt himself shrink. “Hai,” he said with a nod, eyes nailed to the ground.

“Do you think it is fair to tarnish Nikiforov-kun’s esteemed name with such a scandal?” the man added, and it was nothing Yuuri hadn’t asked himself a million times over. No, it wasn’t fair, Yuuri was being selfish, thoughtless, he–

Viktor said something in fast Russian, and one Russian reporter replied.

“Ah, I see,” Viktor said, in English. Viktor was a tall man, but suddenly stood even taller. “Let me make one thing clear: neither one of us has ever given a positive doping sample. Yuuri is a superb skater and a natural talent, and I am both honoured and humbled that he has chosen to skate with me in the upcoming season and beyond. We believe in clean sports and will undergo all tests the ISU sees fit, as do all athletes in our sport. But let me make one thing very clear: I will not stand for false accusations to be made against myself or my partner, do you understand? Never. This concludes today’s conference, thank you.”

Viktor placed an arm on Yuuri’s shoulder and led them back inside in long strides. The hubbub of the press faded when the doors closed behind them, and Yuuri took a few seconds to realize that Viktor was shaking—with anger. “Well, that’s us done with that,” Viktor said when they were safely in the reception. “You okay? You sure?” Viktor pressed when he simply nodded. He was shaken, but tried to hide it. “Did you know that reporter?”

“Yes, he–”

“Won’t be interviewing us ever again, if I have my way.” Viktor was gloomy in a way Yuuri had hardly ever seen him. “I’m pretty worn out after all this. Do you mind if I go soak in the springs—alone?”

“Yes, that’s fine.”

Viktor gave him a smile—that fake press smile. “Thank you.”

Yuuri nodded, bewildered: he was overwhelmed and upset and also shocked that Viktor had called
him a superb skater. Viktor withdrew for the evening, and Yuuri went to help Mari put away some towels, hiding away until his mother came to confirm that even the last of reporters had finally left.

When he went back to his room, he found a text from Fumio: Seems like you’ve hit the jackpot. Bet you’re happy now.

He hung his head and he replied with, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. Everything happened so fast.

He wondered if Fumio was still in Kyoto with his girlfriend, if Fumio was studying, or perhaps working. In one single day, their years together had been destroyed – they would never be friends again, not after what Yuuri had done.

Have you told him? Fumio texted back, and Yuuri paled. No. No, he hadn’t told Viktor. Viktor had never probed about the past, focusing on the future instead. Yeah I thought so, Fumio added after Yuuri didn’t respond. Good luck then. He’s gonna need it.

And a final text: It’s not going to last.

Yuuri was trembling, and he deleted the messages and switched his phone off. He crawled into bed, a heap of misery, and didn’t get up until the following day.

* * *

Viktor realised that it was time for them to move to Russia. Not only was this the country they were competing for, but Viktor had looked at their schedule for the autumn months and decided that if they were competing in Italy, Finland, Estonia and so forth, St. Petersburg was a much handier base than Hasetsu. He had other reasons for the change of scenery too, but kept these to himself when he broached the topic with Yuuri.

The talk was a reminder to Viktor that, even if they had decided to be good friends, he still didn’t know Yuuri fully: he had expected Yuuri to be reluctant and doubtful. Viktor himself felt bad for suggesting it, because it was clear to him Yuuri was enjoying his time back in Hasetsu after so many years in Detroit. Now Viktor demanded to be followed across the world, selfishly.

But Yuuri said, “I’ve been thinking that, too, for some weeks now.”

Viktor was surprised. “Really?”

“The training we need we can’t get in Hasetsu. We need to be in an environment that helps us improve, with people who can guide us. St. Petersburg has seemed to me to be the best place for that.” Yuuri said this with steely determination, and Viktor wondered if there really was such a thing as knowing Yuuri Katsuki well enough never to be surprised.

But with Yuuri’s blessing, Viktor started making plans. He finally called Yakov back, who yelled at him down the line that Viktor never should have retired in the first place, and how did Viktor even think he could be competitive after such a long break – hadn’t Yakov said he’d come to regret everything! Hadn’t he! – and why hadn’t Viktor chosen another Russian to skate with, at least, Yakov had suitable partners by the dozen! And yes, Yakov expected Viktor and Yuuri at his rink by Monday next week, eight o’clock sharp. Sharp! Always such a stubborn child!

Viktor was cheerful after such a warm reception. He and Yuuri started packing.

But a day after that, they were approached by the JSF to ask if they were interested in representing Japan instead. No one had even seen them skate yet, although now that Viktor had lifted his self-
imposed social media ban, he had begun to share glimpses of their practices. Viktor was as vaguely patriotic as the next guy, but he didn’t feel like he had to compete for Russia. And there was less intense competition in Japanese pairs…

But Yuuri shook his head. “If I was skating with some other skater, the federation wouldn’t be pushing this. They just like the thought of you in a Team Japan jacket.”

Viktor wiggled his eyebrows. “I like the idea of myself in a Team Japan jacket.”

“I bet you do,” Yuuri laughed, but then his smile faded. “When Fumio got caught… The way they treated us both. I don’t know. I always thought I had a good relationship with the JSF, but then –”

“One day, they’ll be sorry for how they treated you,” he said. “We’ve got flights booked to St. Petersburg, anyway.”

And Yuuri looked relieved.

Viktor was pretty sure he ate eight katsudon bowls that last week, trying to soak up all of Hasetsu while he could. If they placed well at Nationals, they would hopefully be sent to Europeans and Worlds – both were held in Europe that year. The Olympics were taking place in Osaka, though, not that they qualified, of course.

On the final night there was a big party for them, and Minako drank plenty and got a little bit too friendly with Viktor, in his opinion. “Ah, don’t worry,” Minako purred, “I’m just an old spinster flirting away. I know you’ve got your eye on someone else. And your hands. And all of this, I’m sure.” She motioned him up and down and winked. Viktor wasn’t sure who Minako was referring to, but Minako continued, “Yuuri is staying with you, I hear, in St. Petersburg. Is your bed king-sized?”

And Viktor, to his embarrassment, flared bright red. “I have a guest room.”

“I bet you do,” Minako said, and Viktor was unsure what that was insinuation of. They were skating partners, and they had become good friends quickly. Viktor knew where to draw the line: his interest was professional. “I want that boy in one piece,” Minako then said. Was that a threat? Advice? “He’s only twenty-three, don’t forget. He’s very sensitive, and you know he’s not very experienced romantically. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

“I have his best interest at heart,” he said. He’d been helping himself to the sake, somewhat. That wasn’t what he’d meant to say: he wanted to say that he was well aware that he was six years older than Yuuri, and that he’d had relationships in the past whereas Yuuri hadn’t. And he wanted to say that when Yuuri was ten, Viktor had been sixteen. When Yuuri was fourteen, Viktor had been twenty. He’d played the figures. When did it stop sounding like Viktor was too old and a creep?

When he was with Yuuri, he didn’t feel the age difference. What Yuuri may have lacked in experience, he made up for in self-awareness. Most people weren’t aware of themselves until their late twenties, if even then. And Viktor had taken note of Yuuri’s gentle smiles, dark lashes, the dips above his collar bones. He knew the shape of Yuuri’s ankles, the firm muscle of his thighs, the weight of Yuuri in his arms. He had noticed the music of Yuuri’s voice and the musk of Yuuri’s skin, and Viktor was not immune. He was not.

And Viktor had meant to say that Minako had it all wrong, that Viktor posed no threat whatsoever to Yuuri’s being-in-one-pieceness. Not in that way, at least: it was just a natural response to spending so much time with someone, just a misguided cluster of feelings that would evaporate soon enough.
But then Yuuri smiled at him from across the room, young, gorgeous, and Viktor ached in a way he only let himself acknowledge when he’d had a few drinks.

So instead he repeated: “I have his best interest at heart.”

He just wasn’t sure what that meant.

* * *

They arrived in St. Petersburg late in the evening, but to Yuuri’s surprise the summer was still full of light. It took an hour for them to get Makkachin from customs, and Viktor was fretting over her well-being, but Makkachin was as delighted as ever, happy to see them and excited to be out of a cage.

Viktor’s apartment block dated to when Russia still had a czar: a cream-coloured art nouveau building with five floors, close to the river. Viktor lived on the fourth floor, and Makkachin darted from the rickety lift directly to the door. They got all their boxes and bags in after three trips to the ground floor lobby, after which Viktor told Yuuri to make himself feel at home while he took Makkachin out for a quick walk.

It was midnight, and still light outside. Yuuri had never lived this north before.

Phichit happened to call him as he was examining the medal cabinet in the living room: Grand Prix golds, world golds – an Olympic silver! Oksana and Viktor had been robbed in Sochi, absolutely robbed...

“I can’t believe you’re living with Viktor Nikiforov now,” Phichit enthused.

“I’m not living living with him,” he objected, looking around the pristinely decorated department: white wooden floors, white walls, tasteful art, an off-grey throw on the smart couch. “I’ll find my own place, I just need to get my bearings first. Learning some Russian would help.”

Phichit let out a dreamy sigh. “Yeah, I can’t believe you’re living with Viktor Nikiforov!”

“You’re not helping!” he objected, but laughed. It was absurd, at the end of the day.

Viktor returned ten minutes later, kicking off his shoes and asking if Yuuri would like a camomile tea before bed. Viktor could put honey in it for him. A good host, definitely.

Yuuri unpacked in the guest room, and Viktor gave him towels and showed him how the shower worked. To Yuuri, Viktor felt happy, if that made sense: sometimes Viktor felt determined to him, or frustrated, or content. Viktor was jet-lagged, but an aura of happiness was about him. Maybe he’d missed Russia more than Yuuri had realised.

It only took Yuuri a day to realise that sharing an onsen with Viktor was rather different to sharing a flat with him. The latter was far more domestic. The latter was them making protein shakes together at six-thirty in the morning, Viktor’s hair a muss. The latter was Viktor planting a kiss on his cheek, thoughtlessly, as a thank you for his morning cup of coffee.

Yuuri steadied himself and focused on the job at hand: six weeks before their first competition. Not a time to get distracted or carried away.

Not a time to wish for things that weren’t possible. Besides, Viktor wouldn’t have acted this way if he’d known the whole story – Yuuri didn’t know if it was a story he could ever tell. No one came out looking good in it, let alone him. Fumio had been right: Yuuri was too weak, too ashamed, to
tell Viktor the truth. All they needed was a real competition to show Viktor that Yuuri wasn’t necessarily as superb as he thought.

He tried not to let himself be weighed down by how little he deserved Viktor’s good moods, and he smiled when Viktor said that he was glad they had been able to build up such a solid trust so quickly.

He flinched first, but covered it up the best he could.

* * *

Viktor wanted to make Yuuri feel welcome at the rink and get off to a good start with Yakov: introduce Yuuri to all the skaters, give him the grand tour, and make him feel like a part of the team! Viktor even made sure that they arrived on time, eight o’clock sharp, jet-lagged as they were. Yakov would be mildly appeased, he was sure.

However, Viktor could only describe the situation they arrived to as a shit-storm.

They got to the rink side in their coats and shoes, intending to say hello and announce their arrival. They halted: a shouting match was going on at the other end of the rink. Yakov was there, on the ice with his skates on, and so were reigning world champions Georgi and Anya. Yuuri looked to Viktor for answers, but he had none. A few other skaters were observing the shouting match from a respectable distance. Anya was yelling something now, and then Georgi shouted, “I will never skate with her again! It is over, over!”

Georgi stormed off the ice. Anya was crying. Yakov was still shouting.

Uh…

“What’s going on?” Viktor asked the tall, dark-haired boy on the ice.

“A lovers’ quarrel,” the man supplied, with a Kazakh accent. It was Otabek, Viktor realised – when had Otabek grown up enough to acquire a deep voice? He’d been a kid with spots last Viktor had checked. “Georgi won’t skate with her anymore. Yakov is raging.”

Viktor had known Georgi and Anya for years – as juniors younger than him and Oksana, first, and later as competitors. It was common knowledge that Georgi and Anya, as well as being a pair skating team, were a couple off the ice. They were known for their overly emotive and romantic skates, the theme of which usually was how much they loved each other. It wasn't promising for them to be fighting in the lead up to the Olympic year.

Otabek was leaning back against the boards, casually and with an aloofness like the scene amused him. Viktor scanned the rink. Where Otabek was, a blond shadow usually followed…

Yuri Plisetsky skated over to them in a flash, sixteen and furious. “So here you are,” Yuri snapped angrily, glaring at Viktor and Yuuri both.

By Viktor’s side, Yuuri appeared taken aback, so Viktor cut in with, “Yuri and Otabek, this is –”

“We’ve met,” Yuri barked, switching to English. “At the Grand Prix Final last year. You were sloppy, came in last. Otabek and I won the Junior Grand Prix, second year in a row. We are seniors now. This year, we will win.”

Plisetsky-Altin were going for their first senior year with high hopes: Otabek had received his Russian citizenship years ago, when he had only been fifteen. But while Viktor knew them to be a
technically accomplished team, being able to get the kind of PCS that Georgi and Anya did was unlikely: that finesse came with time.

“Oh, hello,” Yuuri said, uncertainly. “What’s happening?”

“Anya banged a hockey player,” Yuri said. Oh. Oh fucking hell – this was worse than Viktor had thought! But Yuri only rolled his eyes and looked scornful. “Georgi is being dramatic. Skating comes first.”

Otabek said, “If they don’t skate anymore, it’ll be less competition for the Olympic team. Only benefits us.”

Yuri looked broody. “Perhaps.” Yuri was still glaring at them. “We’ve had to recalculate everything now that you’re here. I’m not convinced you even know how to skate anymore, old man.”

Otabek stood up straight, hit by lightning. “Here comes Yakov.”

“Crap,” Yuri spat and nudged Otabek along, and the two skated away.

Yakov reached them, visibly enraged. If it was true – if Georgi and Anya had broken up – disaster had struck Russian figure skating as a whole. So far this wasn’t going how Viktor had planned at all!

“Vitya,” Yakov boomed, grabbed his face and planted kisses on both of his cheeks, “you are wise to come back to me.”

“Is it true?” Viktor asked quickly, aware Yuuri was standing back nervously, not understanding their Russian. “About Anya and Georgi.”

“Don’t talk to me about them,” Yakov said with such anger that Viktor knew that Otabek and Yuri had, indeed, been right. “Such unprofessionalism! They are fools! You too are a fool! Is this your new partner? I know him, but I am not sure he is what you need.”

“Yakov has just said how delighted he is to help us get competition ready!” Viktor chirped in, helpfully, to Yuuri. “He has seen you skate and is very impressed.” Yakov’s English was perfectly good enough to know what Viktor had said.

Yuuri, who had been waiting to be acknowledged, gingerly approached. “Spasiba!” Yuuri said with the cutest accent Viktor had perhaps ever heard. “Feltsman-sensei’s talent is recognised in Japan, too.” Yuuri bowed politely.

“What is this, this bowing?” Yakov complained, still in Russian. “I do not care for it! Tell him to stop! If Georgi and Anya are over, then perhaps you two will be half-decent.” Then, to Yuuri in English, “Go warm up. On ice ten minutes!”

Yuuri nodded quickly, ready to go.

But no, it wasn’t the welcome Viktor had wanted. The skaters at the rink didn’t seem to know which was bigger news that day: Anya and Georgi, world’s number one pairs team, appearing to call it quits, or Viktor Nikiforov, former world number one, showing up with a new skating partner. Mila, who had been a junior when Viktor and Oksana retired, came to say hello, as friendly as ever. Viktor was grateful someone was being welcoming to Yuuri.

They had agreed to show Yakov their short program so that Yakov could assess their progress.
Twenty, thirty odd people were watching, including Otabek, Yuri and Mila. He knew Yuuri was unsettled, still jet-lagged on day two, in a foreign country, surrounded by people speaking a language Yuuri didn’t understand – but that could be them in any competition, too. They had to suck it up.

“If I catch someone recording this,” Yakov boomed, voice loud enough to carry around the rink, “I will ban you from this rink. Ban you, you understand? Hooligans!”

In a mood like this, Yakov had hated nearly everything Viktor and Oksana used to do. Japan had been easy, Japan had been secluded… Here, Viktor had to face the reality that he and Yuuri might not be as good as he thought they were. Pair skating had moved on since him and Oksana, after all. Viktor might be too old and stiff, and he was about to make an ass of himself in front of the entire rink.

“I want to throw up,” Yuuri said quietly as they circled the ice together to the opening spot.

“He, don’t worry about them,” Viktor lied – he was worrying about them. They stopped, and he clutched Yuuri’s hands in his. “We’ve done this a thousand times already. Nothing’s different today. So come on, let’s give them something to talk about,” he said, pressing his forehead to Yuuri’s.

Yuuri, as always, was worrying on his bottom lip. “Okay.”

“Okay,” he agreed.

They turned to face the crowd, and Yuuri moved into the starting position: head bent aside, eyes downwards, one knee bent and hip a sinful curve, arms relaxed by his sides. And behind him Viktor, hands on Yuuri’s hips, his head curved to the expanse of Yuuri’s exposed neck. A start dynamic of Yuuri giving glimpses of seduction, and Viktor chasing him, while all the time Yuuri was luring Viktor in only to use him.

The music began to play, and they skated – marvellously, even, in the circumstances: they didn’t fall and they landed their jumps (triple Salchows, as they’d agreed for now). Their lasso lift was solid, take-off smooth, Yuuri’s touchdown steady, and Viktor got enough rotations in while supporting Yuuri high up in the air above him. The throw wasn’t bad – double-footed landing from Yuuri, but they were still working on it, and the twist was smooth enough. They weaved the story of passion and seduction in the step sequence and then, after their spins, the dramatic casting aside: Viktor on his knees on the ice, and Yuuri standing tall with his back turned. The music ended. Viktor was trying to catch his breath – god, it was a tough skate!

After a beat people started clapping, and Viktor stood as Yuuri helped him up to stand. He pulled Yuuri into a hug, still panting. “You okay?”

“My throw landing was double-footed,” Yuuri instantly said, sounding anguished. “I’m so sorry, Viktor, I –”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. Early days,” he insisted, but their days were, truthfully, numbered. He gave Yuuri another squeeze. “Okay?”

“Oh, Viktor nodded, but Viktor could tell Yuuri was unhappy. Skaters were perfectionists – they’d get it right when the time came, he was sure of it.

They skated to Yakov, who was glaring at them. “Well?” Viktor asked, one arm still around Yuuri’s waist, reassuring Yuuri with his touch the best he could.
“It’s not terrible,” Yakov said in his heavily accented English. “It needs work. But it’s not terrible.”

When Yuuri asked him, quietly, why Viktor was smiling, he laughed: ‘not terrible’ was Yakov speak for ‘very good’.

* * *

Their long program was behind schedule, although they had started working on it shortly after Eros. Yuuri had been unsure when Viktor played the music to him: it was by a British composer, something Viktor had heard in a concert once. The piece was sorrowful, but full of hope at the same time: delicate, sweet, romantic. A good contrast to Eros. Viktor saw the story in it, he’d explained: two lovers, unsure of their feelings, fumbling their way. From Eros to something softer and all consuming. It was not a dynamic he and Oksana could have pulled off, but Viktor felt it could suit him and Yuuri. The story felt more real, too, because they hadn’t been skating together for a decade – they could make it feel fresh.

Yuuri listened to this explanation and was worried. “Fumio and I skated to something similar some years ago…”

“Oh, yes, the short program in your last junior year,” Viktor agreed. Yuuri was taken aback: how did Viktor even know that? “This will be different, trust me. It’s a different story. And we need to edit the music a little, too. Can we give it a go, at least?”

And, as ever, Yuuri’s doubt faded. “Okay.”

Viktor had given him that bright smile of his. “Okay.”

The piece, called *The Lark Ascending*, had become one of Yuuri’s favourites since, and they began perfecting it with renewed energy when they got to St. Petersburg. They still had plenty of time on the ice, but now had to share it. Yuuri tried not to get distracted by Yuri and Otabek’s AC/DC medley short program (which, as ridiculous as it sounded, was excellent), or their stunningly beautiful free skate to Chopin. Little Yuri seemed determined to win Olympic gold at sixteen, and Yuuri was left in awe of the kid.

For some reason he couldn’t explain, in a matter of weeks he became friendly with Yurio, as Mari had relabelled Plisetsky when Yuuri had skyped with her. Yurio said one day, bluntly, that an old man like Viktor didn’t know anywhere cool in town and that Yurio would meet Yuuri after practice to show him a cool place. Yuuri, who hung out with Viktor 70% of the time, and with Makkachin for the remaining 30%, said why not. He and Viktor needed space, too, although Viktor was suspicious as to what Yurio really wanted.

Yurio took him to a cat café. They had them in Japan, too, and while Yuuri loved dogs, he loved cats in equal measure. Together they talked skating and the current field as Yurio sipped on a hot chocolate and petted the cat purring in his lap. “Don’t tell Potya,” Yurio said seriously. “That’s my cat. She wouldn’t understand.”

“Right.”

“She’d get jealous.”

“Sure,” Yuuri said, trying his hardest to keep a straight face.

“The real threat is JJ and Isabella from Canada,” Yurio theorised. “They’re obnoxious, don’t you think? Skating to Romeo and Juliet like the tasteless idiots they are, but judges lap it up. They’re doing side-by-side triple Salchows, too – that’s why Beka and I are going to do quads as our single
jumps! No one else is doing that!”

“Viktor and I might.”

“I don’t count you as competition,” Yurio said, perfectly frankly. Yuuri wasn’t even offended. “The Crispino siblings are also doing well, but their skates are borderline incestuous. Makes me want to barf. Ji and Bin are also a danger after their silver at Worlds.”

Truthfully, Yuuri had been so focused on getting used to a new skating partner that he’d barely thought of the competition. He and Viktor might face some of these teams at the smaller non-Grand Prix competitions in the autumn, but Yuuri hadn’t even considered how they’d measure up. The thought made him anxious – he’d be compared to Oksana, of course. How could anyone be as ethereal as Oksana?!

“It’s a shame about Georgi and Anya,” Yuuri said. Anya had moved in with the hockey player now, as the entire rink knew, and it had become clear that their skating partnership was over. It left a big gap in Russian pair skating – just as he and Viktor were coming in. Yuuri wasn’t sure if that would work for them or against them.


Yuuri nearly choked on his green tea. “No!”

“No? He’s all over you.”

“We’re skating partners?” They sort of had to be all over each other, physically. That didn’t mean…!

“He’s really old. Did you know that?”

“Uh?”

“And he’s always laughing at your stupid jokes – they’re not funny, your jokes, but he laughs. He doesn’t laugh when I tell jokes, and I’m actually funny. And you live together. Beka and I don’t live together.”

“It’s only temporary,” he explained, “and I just don’t know the city well yet, and my Russian is poor, and… Maybe you could help me! With my Russian.”

“If you teach me how to spin like you,” Yurio instantly countered, like this was a bargaining chip he’d had all along, and the real reason Yuuri had been invited for a coffee in the first place.

“You like my spins?”

“They’re not terrible,” Yurio said, in true Yakov speech. “You spin like Lambiel.” Well, that was certainly a compliment. So Yuuri said it sounded like a deal, and the teenager seemed pleased. Yurio’s face then lit up. “Have you ever had a pirozhki? No? First lesson then!”

Yuuri ended up cheating on his strict diet in the bakery Yurio took him to, stuffing his face and buying a second one to have later – but he ended up eating that one on the way home.

He thus returned later than he’d anticipated, walking in as Viktor was watching his Russian soap opera and grooming Makkachin, who struggled to stay still when Yuuri came in with his spare keys.
“There you are!” Viktor beamed, with an armful of excited poodle. “You took longer than I thought.”

“Oh, yeah, Yurio was actually pretty chatty.”

“Who?”

“Plitsetsky. Yurio.”

“Yurio?” Viktor repeated, sounding it out. “I like it. Yurio. How’s he then?”

“Sixteen and hormonal?” he offered, and Viktor laughed. See, Yuuri was funny – Viktor wasn’t laughing at his jokes out of sympathy! He considered saying that Yurio was worried they were planning to start sleeping together, but then kept his mouth shut. Yurio was just reading into things, in a way a kid would. It was amusing, but Yuuri didn’t repeat it. He felt it might be awkward.

“Well, there’s leftover stroganoff if you want some?”

“Oh yes please,” he said, smiling and sneaking to the guest room to put away his list of ‘Essential Russian’, as scribbled onto some paper by Yurio. When he looked at it, he saw the first sentence was rather long, written in Cyrillic, then phonetically in the Latin alphabet, and finally with an English translation: No thank you, Viktor, I wish to have a professional relationship with you.

“Oh for Christ’s sake,” Yuuri mumbled, embarrassed and heat burning up his cheeks, as he hid the list in his suitcase.

* * *

Yurio, true to his word, came to the rink every few days with a new list of actually useful Russian, and Yuuri started sneaking time here and there to work on Yurio’s spins with him. Summer was somehow coming to an end, and Yuuri realised they had put two solid programs together. They were technically ambitious, pushing both of their limits.

But the atmosphere of the rink remained confused in the absence of Anya and Georgi.

“They walked away from a potential Olympic gold,” Yuuri marvelled one morning, at quarter past seven, when they were at the gym on exercise bikes. Georgi had flown to Cambodia for a two-month holiday to “get away from it all.” Yuuri felt bad for the guy – he had observed, in awe, as Georgi and Anya had secured one podium spot after another, while he and Fumio had stayed in the bottom of the top ten.

“Maybe so, but she cheated on him,” Viktor said. “Not unreasonable for him to terminate their working relationship over it.”

“Well I know that,” Yuuri said, wiping his brow, “but they were the favourites to win, weren’t they?”

But Viktor shook his head. “Nothing’s as awful as being cheated on, trust me.”

Viktor kept looking straight ahead, cycling, but Yuuri stalled. Oh had – Oh. Oh, okay. Right.

He didn’t push the issue, even as he thought it surreal: who would cheat on Viktor Nikiforov? Viktor was – well, a skating god, of course, and stunning from head to toe. But Viktor was also kind and funny and smart, and if Yuuri had such a boyfriend, he’d cherish that. Not that he was of course suggesting someone like him could date Viktor, he was just making the point, to himself,
flustered. But who had hurt Viktor like that? Because Yuuri would hunt them down – he didn’t care who they were! The French swimmer, maybe? It had ended years ago, that Yuuri knew, but if Viktor wanted him to, he’d go give the guy a piece of his mind.

But, not knowing what else to say without probing, he continued, “Wonder who gets the gold now.”

Viktor, still cycling, laughed. “Suppose Yurio and Otabek might.”

Yuuri breathed out shakily, relieved that Viktor wasn’t expecting Yuuri to push the issue further. So he added, “Yurio has his sights on it.” He thought of the fierce determination on Yurio’s face every day. “And whatever Yurio decides, Otabek follows, huh?”

Viktor nodded. “Attached from the hip, those two.” They kept cycling, and then Viktor added, “It’s not just Anya cheating that’s so messed up.” Yuuri hummed in question even as his thighs were burning with the effort to keep going. “Anya also tainted something sanctimonious, in a way. It’s worse than your average cheating.”

“Meaning?”

Viktor let go of the handlebars, sitting up straighter even as he kept peddling. “When she did what she did, she knew she was destroying his career. So a double betrayal: personal and professional.” Viktor shook his head. “You need your skating partner to have your back, not stab you in it.”

Yuuri was sure he paled, a lump in his throat. Viktor seemed to notice because he stopped cycling and said, “Oh, I – I’m sorry, I didn’t mean – You’ve been there, of course, after what Fumio did.”

Fumio? Fumio, of course, and what he did.

“Right,” he said, having also stopped. He stared at his knees, trying to catch his breath.

Viktor reached out to place a warm hand on his shoulder. “Sorry,” Viktor said with a smile, giving him a squeeze, “I didn’t mean to stir up bad memories. You okay?”

He nodded, but wasn’t able to meet Viktor’s eyes. They had each other’s backs – they didn’t cheat and lie and betray each other. They were a team, no matter what, and Yuuri knew he’d been burned in the past, but Viktor had been too. Not by Oksana, and not in the same context by any means – but Yuuri didn’t want to be another person to let Viktor down.

Viktor got off his bike, hand still on his shoulder. “Hey,” he said, and Yuuri looked up. Viktor had infinite warm smiles to give him, it seemed. “You know we’re gonna be different, right? Than Anya and Georgi, or Fumio, or – Well. This is different. We trust each other all the way. I trust you all the way.”

Yuuri made an agreeing sound, but a sense of shame lingered. So, here he was: lying to Viktor Nikiforov already.

* * *

Two weeks before they were due to compete for the first time, Yuuri moved out. Yuuri had been staying with Viktor for a month, and Viktor thought that Yuuri had settled in rather nicely. But then Otabek and Yurio cornered them in the rink café, and Otabek said that a hockey player he knew, some guy called Sergei, was moving to the US as a last-minute NHL recruit, and that the guy wanted a house-sitter who could be trusted to water his orchid collection. Yuuri seemed like the right kind of nerd, Yurio argued. The rent would be reasonable because Sergei would mostly
just be grateful, and the place was central and recently renovated. Was Yuuri interested?

A day later, Yuuri got the keys. Sergei was flying out that very evening, and everything was agreed all too quickly, in Viktor’s view. Yuuri packed up within an hour, too.

What could Viktor do? He helped Yuuri move.

Yuuri was happy about it – a half hour jog to the rink in the mornings, a good warm-up! And the neighbourhood was nice, and there was a supermarket close by, and Yuuri liked orchids, too. Unlike Viktor’s classic century-old building, Yuuri moved into a development that was ten years old, had a modern lift taking them to the third floor, and the apartment even had a small balcony. Viktor did not have a balcony.

The place was full of the hockey player’s stuff, but Yuuri arrived with two boxes and two suitcases. “And, see, the kitchen has all the kitchen stuff in it, so I don’t need to buy anything. This really worked out well, huh?”

Viktor stood in the living room – standard: TV, couch, ugly rug, coffee table – and nodded. The flat was only a third the size of Viktor’s, a practical one bedroom in a downtown development. The door to the bedroom was open, built-in wardrobe with glass sliding doors, a large bed with grey sheets, impersonal and bland.

“Makkachin will miss you,” Viktor said as Yuuri was trying to find a plug for his rice machine on the kitchen counter – one of the rare purchases Yuuri had made since getting to Russia. Viktor’s kitchen cupboards were full of noodles and dashi and mirin and nori and four different kinds of rice. What was he supposed to do with them without Yuuri’s help? He still didn’t understand which rice was meant for what.

It was the first day of September. Viktor had arrived in Hasetsu mid-April. They had been together every single day since – they had slept in neighbouring rooms every day since.

“I’ll come visit all the time,” Yuuri said, still fussing in the kitchen. A kitchen island separated the living room and the cooking area, two bar stools offering the only place to sit down and eat. Bleak and empty… “You’re still sort of my only friend in town.”

“Not true – Yurio takes you on cat café dates. And Mila likes you, too, and those ice dancers you go to yoga with.” Yuuri didn’t appear to be listening. Viktor looked around, helpless. “I guess I’ll… leave you to unpack. See you at the rink in the morning?”

“Okay, I’ll see you there!”

Viktor lingered, then gave up. “Goodnight, then.” He wanted a hug, but felt too needy to ask for one. He drove back home, got Makkachin, and took her to the dog park. She bounced around, full of energy. Viktor lingered in the park too.

When they got home, Makkachin searched the entire flat for Yuuri, even checking the bathroom twice. Viktor was drinking his evening chamomile tea by the kitchen table, alone, when Makkachin returned. She looked puzzled. She sat down, staring at him. “He’s moved out.” Makkachin tilted her head. “No, I don’t know why! Well, I mean – He was only staying in the guest room temporarily. It was only for a little while, see?” Makkachin stared. He sighed. “God, I’m tired. I think this comeback has been more tiring than I realised.”

He hunched over the table, head in his hands. “When did I become so co-dependent and… Oksana and I could never have lived together! We would’ve killed each other in two days flat! Yuuri was
easy to live with, though. It was good, better… It was nice.” Makkachin nudged his leg and whined. He reached down to scratch her behind the ear. “We were alone before Yuuri, weren’t we? And he’ll come visit all the time. We just got a little used to him, that’s all.” Makkachin jumped up, front paws on his thighs, tongue hanging out. He kissed her forehead. “You’re right, of course you are – such a good girl. We’ll just have to invite him over a lot, that’s such a good idea. Pretty girl, smart girl.”

So he did his evening stretches – alone – and watched the news, alone. The weather reporter was wearing his polka dot tie again, but now he had no one to point it out to. Yuuri was an evening showerer; Viktor was a morning showerer. He didn’t have to wait now to go brush his teeth and floss – that was good, the wait had been annoying sometimes…

Makkachin curled up by the foot of his bed to sleep, like she usually did, but Viktor patted the bed beside him and let her sleep right in his arms. The flat was quiet, the other bedroom empty. There was no Yuuri there to greet him in the morning, with bed hair and a faded sleep shirt with a Detroit university logo on it. They wouldn’t do their rink commute together, chatting in the summer mornings and planning their day. It was fine, it was –

His phone buzzed – a text from Yuuri: I miss giving Makkachin a kiss goodnight :( 

Viktor let out a sigh. How stupid! Yuuri was a fifteen-minute drive away, traffic depending. Stupid to be texting when they should be talking in person. Stupid Sergei. Stupid NHL. Stupid to be so far away when they were so close.

Makkachin was snoring next to Viktor, and Viktor kissed her on the ear. Gave her one for you.

Thanks :) See you tomorrow?

The question mark amused him – it wasn’t really optional as they trained together every day, and on a rare rest day they still were hanging out. He hoped that wasn’t going to change. He wanted to type ‘Sure, but where’s my kiss?’, fingers hovering over the screen, and then groaned and put his phone away. Maybe it was good that Yuuri had moved out. Maybe the past few months had been, ah. A bit intense. Maybe on a few mornings Viktor had taken longer in the shower after stumbling into Yuuri wearing nothing but boxer briefs, making coffee in the kitchen, and Yuuri had these power thighs, muscular and thick, that had Viktor hating himself when his hand headed south under the cascading hot water five minutes later.

He’d pushed such incidents – rare! In his defence! – out of his mind and moved on. It’d been a response to visual stimuli: he was a single man with a sex drive, at the end of the day. Pleasuring himself was like shaving, just another thing he had to do every now and then, and he did so whether he shared his place with a sexy twenty-something or not.

God, had he really wanted to type out ‘where’s my kiss’? Pathetic. Pathetic and sad! He would be thirty in a matter of months – old, ancient. Yuuri did not need some old creep sending him suggestive messages, let alone someone who was supposed to be Yuuri’s best friend. What kind of an asshole was Viktor, exactly? More importantly, was he or wasn’t he a pair skater with over twenty years of experience – didn’t he know where to draw the line between professional conduct, between acted out passion on the ice, and unprofessional ogling?

And so Viktor hated himself a little. He read out once more: See you tomorrow? As if Yuuri had to ask, just to make sure.

He wrote, Bright and early, groaned, and buried his face in Makkachin’s neck. He didn’t count the hours.
They had been feeling pretty confident about their programs, ready to take them to competition, and then Yakov brought in Lilya to assess them.

“This is awful!” Lilya bewailed. “Viktor, you are stiff! Yuuri, you skate like log! No, no! Is this pantomime for children?! Is this operetta?!”

And so, instead of a day off on Sunday, they had agreed to train with Lilya. Viktor took a quick selfie of them, wondered aloud what to tag it (#nosundayfunday #hardatwork won), and posted it online. Yuuri was still avoiding social media, but Viktor was posting their activities nearly daily. When Yuuri had let himself take a look at Viktor’s Instagram, he was flustered to see that since they had gone public, he was featured in nearly every other picture. It made him feel kind of warm and fuzzy, really.

“We work on abysmal Eros,” Lilya told them when they arrived at her dance studio on Sunday afternoon.

Yuuri looked at Viktor uncertainly. They had thought they were working on the free skate, which was less polished, and Viktor said so.

“No, no, I saw it, long program is fine. Very beautiful, sensual. Love story, both shy – eager and nervous, but in love. Yes, it was okay. But Eros! No passion! No conviction!”

Yuuri never would have dared to say anything, but Viktor said, “We’ve been told it’s pretty steamy.”

Lilya laughed. “Amateurs! I will show you, I will show you. You start, I will show you.”

They got five seconds in before the first bark of displeasure. “Yuuri, you must look at Viktor! This is romance! Meet lover’s gaze! Sex is easy, love is hard! Is easy! You want him, you desire him! Caress his hair! No, not like that – caress it, caress it! Pull it! Throes of passion! Start again!

“Viktor, grab him! You are consumed by lust! Convince me! Trail hand across chest! This is Eros, no? One, two, three – no, stop. Do that again. Drag him to you, Viktor! You must have him right here, on floor! Audience has to be on edges of seats, thinking you are about to make love!

“No, no, if you are teasing with kiss, I want two millimetres between lips! Two millimetres! What measurement is this in Japan, no – get closer to him! Why you hold back? Stop holding back! Now stare into eyes! Blood boils, body thrums! Feel each other! Good, good, better!”

And then, after hours of torture, “Take break. We continue in ten minutes.”

Lilya strolled out of the studio, leaving them flushed and panting. Yuuri had his hands on his hips, feeling gross and sweaty. Viktor was sat on the floor, catching his breath. “She’s tough,” Yuuri said.

Viktor nodded. “Tough as hell.”

“I thought our Eros was okay.”

“Me too,” Viktor agreed. “Apparently not.”
Well, if Lilya though Yuuri caressing Viktor and shooting him more lingering gazes helped, then he’d do it. Hopefully the judges would throw their appreciation in their PCS. “Maybe we need to work on the characters more.”

“But we have!” Viktor sounded frustrated too. Yuuri passed Viktor a bottle of water, and Viktor took a long sip. “Element of surprise: it looks like I’m seducing you, an innocent victim, but turns out you’re well aware, and once we’ve – we’ve had each other, I’m under your spell but you leave me. That’s the story. Eros: sexual love, treacherous, all consuming!”

“Well, maybe we need to sell it more,” he shrugged as Viktor stood up. “Maybe me as the seducer is a hard sell. Fumio always said –”

“Enough about Fumio!” Viktor nearly snapped, uncharacteristically. “If Fumio didn’t think you could do sexy, he was a moron. The first night I saw you, you were practically having sex with a guy you’d just met, right there on the dance floor of a club. You’d seduced him in seconds!”

“I was drunk,” he said, instantly, rather embarrassed. “I hope you’re not suggesting we start performing our short program with me intoxicated.”

“Well, maybe we should!” Viktor argued. Yuuri stalled – were they fighting? Was this a fight? Viktor was raising his voice, which he hardly ever did. Had Yuuri failed him? Viktor said, “It’s not just you. We’re both holding back, Lilya’s right.”

“I’ll turn it up a notch,” he promised, with rising desperation. “I’ll be – be sluttier, or whatever.”

“Eros isn’t about being slutty, it’s about raw desire!” Viktor now paced back and forth, wiping sweat from his forehead. Then he came to a still. “Can we – try again, except this time pretend I’m that guy at the club. Okay? And we’ve just met, and you want me in your bed, between your thighs, or you between mine, doesn’t matter. You want it, and I just happen to be here. You want me for one night, one mind-blowing night, and then you never want to see me again. And if I get attached, then that’s on me. How’s that?”

Well, Yuuri objected to that on several accounts, naturally: he barely remembered the guy at the club, and he wondered who could have a one-night-stand with Viktor Nikiforov and then think ‘that’s enough for me!’ But it was getting late, Lilya had been dragging them through the mud for hours, and fine, he’d try it. Fine.

He tried to steady himself. He wasn’t dancing with Viktor, or the earlier character he’d been doing the program with for months – who was still sort of Viktor.

This guy was – was nothing but meat, a six-pack, a toned ass and a generous cock, and Yuuri wanted the guy on him and in him. He hadn’t had sex since last year, and he could use some of that pent-up frustration, maybe, as inspiration. And, sadly, what Viktor had just said wasn’t far off: Yuuri didn’t know how to date, was too anxious and awkward to flirt, but he could do drunken pick-ups. On the rare nights alcohol had helped him not to think, and not to be shy and self-conscious, he had gotten laid, fucked into the mattress even on one memorable occasion. And, in the morning, he was out of there – no way was he dealing with the aftermath.

So the scenario Viktor gave him was familiar to Yuuri. He tried to think of the rush when he found someone on the same wavelength: full of lust and the determination to see it satisfied. Sweaty, sexy, unapologetic.

Okay. Okay, okay.
Starting positions, for the umpteenth time: a man standing behind him, hands on his hips. They
didn’t play the music, but it was in their heads, and they were leaving place marks for elements
they couldn’t recreate in the dance studio. Still, this was Eros, once more.

They started the routine and oh, Yuuri thought, as not-Viktor pulled him into his arms and dragged
his mouth across his throat, wet and hot and real – not just pretend like before. Oh, oh. The
program wasn’t foreplay. Yuuri had thought, all this time, it was foreplay. He spiralled away from
the embrace, hand clasped in his conquest’s, them weaving in and out of each other. He was picked
up – triple twist – put down, soon picked up again, lasso lift in the air, his hands dragging down
not-Viktor’s chest when he came down, was spun, and then he sank down to his knees, Viktor
controlling his movement. Then they were embracing again, face-to-face, lips millimetres apart,
and Yuuri pulled on not-Viktor’s hair hard – this wasn’t foreplay. This was sex.

Yuuri forgot who he was performing with, willing his partner into a faceless, sexy stranger who
was going to pin him against the wall and fuck him until he saw stars. He kept pulling the man
back in, back in, hands everywhere – was he even in control anymore, was he –

And then, no, it was done, it was over. Cast aside and forget. He was supposed to turn away, have
his lover on his knees begging for his return. So he moved to rid himself of not-Viktor’s grip, but
to his surprise the grip held and wouldn’t yield. He was pulled back in, forcefully, into a full-
bodied embrace, Viktor’s breath washing against his lips, Viktor’s hands slipping to his ass,
Viktor’s eyes locked on his mouth, and Viktor’s crotch pressed to his, feeling fuller than before,
and it was not a faceless man, it wasn’t a stranger, it’d been Viktor all this time, and Yuuri’s
stomach dropped, a hot wave of desire ran through him, and he needed so badly that –

“See,” Lilya’s voice came, and Yuuri nearly jumped. He and Viktor let each other go like they’d
been burned. Lilya had her arms crossed and was leaning against the door frame of the studio.
“Like I say, sex is easy. Love is hard, yes, but sex – very easy. Hmm?” She strolled in with an air of
triumph. “This ending is better. You use this from now on.”

“Okay,” Yuuri said.

“Yeah, okay,” Viktor agreed.

Yuuri didn’t look to Viktor so he was left unsure if it was just him avoiding eye contact, or if
Viktor was avoiding it too.

* * *

Yakov was, understandably, not pleased by Georgi and Anya’s dissolvement (understatement), and
everyone at the rink suffered as the summer turned to autumn. Yakov was so pissed, in fact, that he
gathered everyone to sit on the bleachers one day, from the novices to the seniors, for A Talk.
Well, Viktor thought, this was going to be interesting…

“We are not here to fool around!” Yakov’s speech began. “We are here to skate! And win! Win
national titles, international titles – World titles, Olympic titles! Georgi and Anya are a warning to
us all that –”

“What’s he saying?” Yuuri whispered to his ear, sounding confused.

Yakov noticed and switched to English. “You athletes – you date pretty girls, boys, fine, you
young, you think romance – fools! Date someone else! This is work! Not here! You understand?”
Yakov glared at them all, from the seven-year-old boys to the thirteen-year-old girls. “No romance
here!”
Someone giggled. Yakov turned red with anger.

The meeting was adjourned.

For the next few days ‘No Romance Here’ was the unofficial slogan of the rink, said only when Yakov wasn’t present. A rumour was going around that Lilya had turned down another one of Yakov’s dinner invites – the true source of his vitriol. But Yakov had always been teased for having a soft spot for his ex-wife. No, it was Georgi and Anya that had Yakov upset: Yakov had worked with them for nearly fifteen years, placing his hopes and ambitions on them, and then Anya went off with a hockey player. Apparently, she was thinking of finding a new skating partner and returning in the new year.

Yakov was hurt, and Viktor understood. He and Oksana had failed in getting Olympic gold four years earlier, and now Anya and Georgi had failed Yakov, too. Yurio and Beka were, understandably, now being trained to fill in that gap. Yakov had insisted that Otabek take a semester off from the university, and Otabek had done so. Yurio, at sixteen, still had to go to school, and the principle wouldn’t let Yurio take a leave of absence even when Yakov called her to complain. “Do you not know what it means to skate at the Olympics?!” Yakov had – allegedly – yelled into the phone. “Glory for Mother Russia!”

‘Glory for Mother Russia’ became the new rink slogan, as ‘No Romance Here’ faded. The younger skaters were having the time of their lives.

“If only you had picked a Russian to skate with, we could send you to the Olympics,” Yakov sighed one afternoon, looking older than Viktor felt Yakov had any right to look. “But you have come back fighting, Vitya, and you chose your partner well – for that, I must respect you.”

Viktor didn’t even know what to say – it was, perhaps, the nicest thing Yakov had ever said to him. Were they all going soft in their old age, he wondered.

But.

But, but, but.

Yakov would not have praised him so if he’d known the truth: Viktor liked Yuuri. He liked Yuuri so much it felt stupid. He was almost annoyed by how much he could like someone – it was irritating, to like someone so much. He’d started driving to the rink, just to have the excuse to drive Yuuri home at the end of the day, to have ten minutes more of Yuuri’s company. And whenever he waved Yuuri goodbye, parked outside Sergei’s stupid building, he was resentful that Yuuri didn’t live with him anymore.

He was at his best when he was with Yuuri. He was his most charming, wittiest, funniest, most sincere and most truthful. He was most himself. He didn’t know how to explain it, but when Yuuri wasn’t there, Viktor felt like he was less. Other people were bland. He kept waiting for Yuuri.

And then they’d be on the ice, acting out a seduction where he pressed his lips to Yuuri’s throat in worship – but he wasn’t acting. He probably hadn’t been acting for months now. One time he had, accidentally, trailed his mouth all the way to Yuuri’s earlobe, and Yuuri’s breath had hitched in the most sinful way, like a moan was trapped in his throat. Was it a weak spot? Was it a patch of skin Viktor could suck on to drive Yuuri wild?

He liked the Yuuri who got lost in Eros with him, and he liked the Yuuri who showed up at the rink with smudgy glasses and toothpaste still in the corner of his mouth. He liked so much that his hands felt idle. If I don’t get to touch him soon, even the smallest caress, I’m going to implode.
But without fail he had Yuuri in his arms every day. He got Yuuri’s smiles and moods and laughs and idle thoughts, the scent of him, the warmth of him. Was this victory? Was this torture?

No Romance Here. Yes, it was sensible. It was a good rule.

No Romance Here.

And if he wasn’t careful, he’d ruin their entire partnership – and with that the trust they had built, Yuuri’s future career, all of it. And hadn’t their Eros become alive when Yuuri pretended he was seducing someone who wasn’t Viktor? Really, how much bigger a clue did Viktor need?

He needed to stop.

Soon. Somehow.

God, he was screwed.

Chapter End Notes

I have so many notes for this! Where do I even start… Oksana and Fumio are not based on any real people, of course, although when thinking of Oksana, she looked a bit like Ekaterina Bobrova, the ice dancer, in my head - fierce AF. Fumio, on the other hand, did not even vaguely take inspiration from real-life, due to his role as an antagonist in this story. Fumio and Yuuri’s doping storyline was somewhat inspired by Carolina Kostner’s boyfriend’s doping scandal. Baby!Yuuri skating to Aladdin was inspired by Nathan Chen’s Lion King number (brb, dying of the cute).

I made Yakov and Liliy speak in clumsy/broken English because that’s where their English skills are in my head. The 55 Essential Questions is a real quiz that I used for inspiration.

I used some of the current/past pair skating teams for inspiration, such as Wenjing Sui/Cong Han, Vanessa James/Morgan Cipres, Aljona Savchenko/Bruno Massot. Valentina Marchei/Ondrej Hotarek’s Instagram was very helpful for insight on pairs off-ice training, too, and I loooove their routines! Meryl Davies/Charlie White were an inspiration (ice dancers, though) in terms of what it means to be a duo on the ice. I let myself form pairs teams from YOI characters rather freely, too!

But I am not a figure skating professional! So I am sure there are mistakes… I also have no idea how rankings work, but knew Viktor/Yuuri wouldn’t make it to the Grand Prix circuit without having placements from the previous year. As for music choices with most teams, I just went for the overused classics than make myself suffer trying to know what people were skating to. Yuuri and Viktor's free skate is to Vaughan Williams’ The Lark Ascending (which, yes, Yuna Kim skated to, I know).

This fic is not a realistic depiction of how ISU’s rules regarding eligibility work. Of course. (In reality, I think Yuuri would have to wait a year before he could compete for Russia. So I said no to that.)

And lastly, a special thanks to National Express for providing plugs in their waiting rooms and coaches, enabling me to write parts of this fic on the go.
II: The Underdogs (No Romance Here)

Chapter Notes

Thanks to all who left kudos on the first chapter, but especially those who took the
time to comment - I was so awed by the response, thank you a million! :33 I wanted to
get this second part uploaded because very soon I am flying to Milan for Worlds
2018!! So psyched! Unlike I said before, this story will have 4 parts instead of 3! xx

See the end of the chapter for more notes

II: The Underdogs (No Romance Here)

Before Yuuri felt at all ready, he found himself on a plane to their first competition. The departure
had been messy: they had no costumes because they had postponed a fitting, and now the
alterations were incomplete; Yuuri had misplaced his keys and was worried Sergei the hockey
player would kick him out (the keys were in his back pocket); Makkachin had run away in the park
that morning, as if sensing she was about to be put in a kennel; and Viktor had forgotten his
favourite Gucci sunglasses at the airport Starbucks, realising this only on the plane.

They would be better organised next time, they both agreed. Yakov wouldn’t join them in
competition until Finlandia Trophy a month ahead, where Yurio and Otabek were competing too.
They were on their own, and Yuuri was a bundle of nerves. Four months of training, of rumours
and whispers… Katsuki-Nikiforov were making their debut.

Northern Italy was gorgeous in September, from what Yuuri could observe from the airport transit
and the hotel-rink transfer service. Their first full day in Bergamo was spent on the ice, sharing the
rink with their competitors, practising and trying to remain focused as reporters milled around them
greedily. Most notably, the Crispino siblings were there as heavy favourites to win. Yuuri had last
seen them in a Fukuoka club, when he’d utterly embarrassed himself.

“Who would’ve thought then that we’d meet here?” Sara chirped at him. Yuuri certainly had never
thought so.

Michele mostly glared at him, but this had been the dynamic as long as Yuuri had known them.
Fumio had once said, “I think Michele is angry he can’t do the romantic types of skates that we can
do… I think he’d rather like to.” Yuuri didn’t dwell into that any further.

Not only were they surrounded by other skaters, but fans had shown up to watch the practice
sessions. They saw their first ever banner: purple and gold, with silhouettes of him and Viktor, and
a gold text of *Skate for the stars, Yuuri and Viktor!* Yuuri stopped to stare at the banner,
astonished. Two women in their mid-thirties were holding it up, Italians by the looks of them. The
rink was small, seats only on one side.

“But you’ve never even seen us skate!” Yuuri called to the women, uncomprehending. This was
their first ever competition!

“But you’re wonderful!” one of the women called back to him, enraptured. “Bellissimi!”

Viktor braked to a stop next to him, and then broke into a grin. “Our first fans, Yuuri! What an
Yuuri thought so too – there was a lump in his throat, and he was worried he might start tearing up then and there. He’d thought no one would ever root for him again, not after what happened with Fumio. And to have someone believe in them without having even seen them?

“Wait here,” he told Viktor, hurrying to get his phone from his sports bag. He stroked back to where Viktor was making conversation with the thrilled women – a charmer, always – and asked if he could have a picture, the four of them and the banner. The women were sat a few rows up, behind the still empty judges’ tables, and he angled his phone to fit them all in the shot. “Arigato,” he said, bowing once he had it.

Viktor skated circles around him as he fiddled with his phone. “Yuuri, watcha doing?” Viktor said in sing-song, clearly already having figured it out.

“Nothing,” he muttered, embarrassed, adding a text of Ready for Lombardia! Thank you for your support! #firstcompetition #katsukinikiforov #grateful

He pressed send, and Viktor grabbed his phone to look at the upload. It was Yuuri’s first social media post of any kind that year. They were both smiling in the shot, Viktor’s arm around his shoulders.

“I’ve looked cuter,” Viktor teased, and Yuuri rolled his eyes. But his insides felt warm, still awed that people had come to support them. To support him, too. “Now come on, let’s do another practice run.”

Their practice was solid, and maybe, just maybe, this time things would go his way. He was cautiously optimistic, even.

They finished their practice day with interviews, and Yuuri wondered if he and Fumio had ever attracted such a large group of reporters (yes, they had – when the doping became public). Viktor was full of confidence, and Yuuri let him do most of the talking when the journalists surrounded them.

“Well, we might not win this week,” Viktor said, “but next year, certainly, when we qualify for the Grand Prix circuit we’ll be aiming to win every time. As for this season, I want us to be at Europeans and Worlds, on the podium. Oh, what standing? Well gold, of course!”

Yuuri stared at Viktor in – awe? Horror? He wasn’t sure. Viktor had never said anything of a world gold to him!

“Knock on wood,” Yuuri said when reporters prompted him – he was too stunned to say much else, but the reporters seemed enthused. He had always wanted podium spots and victories, but he had never been good enough to beat other teams. With Viktor, he was skating better than he ever had been, but even so… world gold?!

“So I’m not too worried about how we perform this weekend,” Viktor continued, “although we of course want to skate two solid programs. But realistically we have all season to catch up to the likes of Crispinos. Right, Yuuri?”

And Yuuri, who had of course hoped that they would do well, slowly began to realise the extent of Viktor’s ambition: Viktor expected them to be winning gold at major international competitions, and soon.

“Yes,” he said, nervously smiling at Viktor’s side.
The excitement began to very quickly feel like dread.

* * *

Something happened overnight. Viktor didn’t know what it was, but something was wrong. When he and Yuuri met on the day of the short program, it was clear to him that Yuuri had barely slept. His questions were met with short nods, and Yuuri had drawn in on himself in a way Viktor had never seen.

When they’d said goodnight after a day of practice, Yuuri had seemed fine. Viktor had been entranced: here they were in Italy, just the two of them, at their first competition. He’d looked forward to the experience as something they could share and bond over, excited to start making more memories with Yuuri. He’d nearly booked them the same hotel room to save on costs, too – skaters nearly always shared, anyway – but then he worried whether his reasons were purely financial. Maybe he was still being clingier than was proper, and so they had their own rooms, but now he regretted it: he hadn’t been there to keep an eye on Yuuri, and this was the result.

They got to the rink and started doing stretches in the warm-up area. Yuuri had headphones in and wasn’t making eye contact with Viktor. Maybe this was Yuuri’s competition mode – pure concentration, not letting anything distract him…

But Yuuri wasn’t even pulling on his bottom lip like he usually did when he was nervous – this body language was much more closed off. Yuuri was full of nervous energy, mouth a tight line. There were ten teams competing, and they were in the middle group. While the first group skated, he and Yuuri got dressed in black trousers and shirts in absence of their intended costumes. Yuuri zipped up his Team Russia training jacket, and Viktor felt a strong tug in his guts. Yuuri in a Team Russia jacket… He’d pictured it so often since they had paired up and would have taken a million pictures, normally.

“Is everything okay?” he asked before the six-minute warm up. Yuuri nodded, and this was the only response he got.

Their group had three pairs, including a local team that the audience clearly loved, but the cheers for him and Yuuri were loud as well – they weren’t complete nobodies, and Viktor’s return to competitive skating was huge news. Everyone was dying to see if Viktor could still skate competitively after a few years out, and people called out his name enthusiastically.

They started their warm-up, going through parts of Eros, limbering up. Yuuri fell on the throw triple Salchow and wouldn’t answer when he asked, again, if everything was alright. They went through their step sequence, and Yuuri barely looked at him, body full of tension, shoulders stiff. Their contact with each other throughout the routine had improved greatly since Lilya’s intervention, but now it seemed to have vanished. All too soon, their time was up, and they got off the ice.

The local team settled in their starting pose to thunderous applause – home crowd – and he and Yuuri stood at the rink side, in matching training jackets, waiting for their turn and trying to stay warmed up. Viktor had approximately two minutes and forty seconds to resolve what to him was going to be a disaster.

People around them watched the Latin number on the ice while he gently pulled Yuuri to the side. “What?” Yuuri asked nervously, averting his eyes.

“You need to tell me what’s going on in here,” he said, motioning at Yuuri’s head. Of course he
was nervous too – he hadn’t competed in three years, eight months, and something days. He was worried he was about to make an ass of himself, no matter how many times they had calculated their TES and performed it cleanly in practice, making sure they were competitive with what they offered. He talked the talk because to show weakness was a mistake: even off the ice, he needed to play a role where both the audience and judges became convinced of their potential. What he didn’t say, however, was that he worried constantly that he had gotten too old for this – but he still intended to go out there, come what may.

Yuuri seemed like he didn’t want to go out there at all.

“Yuuri, please come on – it’s me. We’re in this together, and you can talk to me. Is it nerves?” he ventured. “Something else? Please just talk to me – please?”

Doubt flashed on Yuuri’s face, and when Yuuri ducked his head and made no response, Viktor started to panic. As he didn’t know what else to do, he hugged Yuuri, hard. He hugged Yuuri with more intent than he’d probably ever hugged anyone. Yuuri shivered against him, while on the ice their competitors kept performing. And then Yuuri hugged him back. Viktor had never felt as relieved.

Against him, a small voice: “I’ll let you down.”

Viktor frowned. “What?” Was that what it was? He was quick to shake his head. “Never think that! You never could,” he said, wishing this was a conversation they could be having some other time, ideally weeks ago. Not there and then, a minute away from their debut. Was Yuuri kidding? Did Yuuri not realise Viktor practically worshipped the ground Yuuri walked on?

“I can’t get the kind of scores you want, I –”

“Do you think I care about the scores?” he asked, voice muffled in Yuuri’s hair, ignoring how of course he did care, but right then he would have taken a score of forty if it meant Yuuri would smile again. “You’ve never let me down yet. And you won’t,” he added, when he could feel Yuuri about to protest. “I’m so excited to be here with you. I wouldn’t want to do this with anyone else.”

Yuuri pulled back from the hug, a little doubtful. “Really?”

“Of course really.” Viktor cupped the back of Yuuri’s head, holding him close, keeping Yuuri with him. “I’m skating with you because you’ve made me love skating again. You make me want to keep going and keep trying.”

“Maybe you’ve lost your mind,” Yuuri suggested.

And his heart, his soul – all of it, he imagined. But he shook his head. “Lost nothing at all. You’re gonna have to trust me on this.”

Yuuri averted his gaze. “I just don’t want to embarrass you.” God, Viktor wished they had taken the time before to talk about this! But Yuuri had said nothing of this kind before. “A lot of people think that –”

“No, you can’t listen to those people,” Viktor said. He was aware of their different pedigrees, of his full medal cabinet and Yuuri’s emptier one. So many people kept wondering what Viktor was doing, choosing a lesser skater. But Yuuri was good. Yuuri was amazing and had the potential to be better than all of them, Viktor included! People just didn’t know it yet and hadn’t seen how Yuuri’s edges and footwork had gone from great to incredible under the right guidance! Yuuri had needed the extra attention and a skilled partner, that was all!
“Let’s ignore all the naysayers, all the people saying we can’t do this. Let’s shut them up, okay? You and me, right now. What do you say?” he coaxed, trying to get a smile out of Yuuri — and he managed it, weak and nervous as it was, but Yuuri still smiled. Viktor nearly laughed with relief. “That’s better, that’s good! Now come on, let’s stop being mopey, huh?” He brushed hair aside from Yuuri’s face, gently. “We need to be sexy when we go out there. Sex is easy but –”

“Love is hard, right,” Yuuri finished, and then laughed, wiping at his cheeks. “I’m sorry, I’m not very good with pressure. I’m ruining this for us both, aren’t I?” And Yuuri still looked miserable, so Viktor tried to beam optimism for both of them.

“You’ve got nothing to apologise for. And –”

But the audience applauded, the Italians having finished on the ice. Flowers were being thrown at them, and they were bowing. Yuuri was still skittish and pale, and Viktor knew they were feeling too unsure to put together a strong performance. Were they ready? No. No, they weren’t. They’d been partners for four months! Of course they weren’t ready.

But they got onto the ice anyway, hand in hand, warming up while in the kiss and cry the previous pair waited for their score. It started with a sixty, that much of the Italian announcement Viktor knew, but he decided to ignore the rest. He and Oksana still held the world record for the highest free skate score, but their short program record of 82.14 had been beaten by JJ and Isabella at the World Championships earlier that year. He and Yuuri wouldn’t be scoring such points now — hell, they didn’t even need to medal, necessarily, although Viktor had assumed they would. For them, this was a competition to show that they could medal when the time came — but now Viktor just wanted to show Yuuri that they were so much better than Yuuri thought. Yuuri was so much better than Yuuri thought!

Their names were announced overhead again — a moment Viktor had imagined so many times, but he was too stressed to enjoy hearing his own name, once more, as a competitor. It was also surreal that Oksana’s name hadn’t preceded his. People cheered loudly, and he and Yuuri stopped in the middle of the ice, and he pulled Yuuri close, hands on Yuuri’s hips. Seduction, passion, fire — he felt nothing of it. Yuuri felt warm in his hands, and Viktor felt protective and worried. They were both full of dread, he thought, down on themselves before they’d even begun.

Eros, Eros, Eros. Sex was hard, love was easy — no, wait. The other way around?

The music began. In his arms, Yuuri came to life.

* * *

Sat in the kiss and cry with Viktor Nikiforov was a teenage fantasy come true, and somewhere out there a thirteen-year-old Yuuri was fainting. Their score was being calculated, a camera was on them, and a monitor in front of them was replaying their short program from minutes earlier.

Yuuri was distraught: it’d been a mess! Viktor had lost his balance on the triple loop, catching himself with his hand (but it had been fully rotated, Yuuri was sure), and Yuuri had stumbled on the landing from the throw. Their step sequence had been sloppy, and their spins out of sync. He was making a list in his head of all the mistakes and imperfections, concluding that it was a disaster, the entire thing!

But Viktor seemed content to wait and, much more of a showman than he was, Viktor nudged his shoulder with his. “A little heart?” Viktor asked, offering his hand cupped in a C-shape. Yuuri blinked but then copied Viktor, meeting his hand to form a heart mid-air. Viktor gave the camera a charming grin, saying “Thank you!” as they offered the heart to the viewers. Viktor then slid an
arm around Yuuri’s shoulders, but Yuuri kept fretting. Amateurs, losers, unpolished, unrefined, clearly not ready! God, how long did it take to count a –

Voiceover, their names. Numbers in Italian. Yuuri peered at the screen in front of them: 67.74.

Sixty. Seven. Seventy. Four.

“Viktor!”

Viktor was nodding. “Yeah, okay. That’s not too bad. We’ll take that.” Viktor waved at the camera again, but Yuuri was speechless: it was better than any short program score he and Fumio had ever received by three solid points. It was his personal best! “The PCS is promising,” Viktor then mused as the next pair was announced on the ice, and the cameras were no longer broadcasting their reactions. Viktor only then looked at him and frowned. “What?”

Yuuri tried to find words – he’d known, perhaps, that they were competitive, but he hadn’t really believed it. “That was my personal best!”

“It was?” Viktor asked. “I thought we’d score in the 70s, even with the mistakes.”

Even higher? At their first showing?!

“Well, I told you, didn’t I?” Viktor then beamed. “You have to trust me a little!”

“Yeah,” he said, breathlessly. Yeah.

“Good! Now come on.” Viktor stood up, a teddy that had been thrown onto the ice under his arm. “Let’s get the media over and done with so that we can celebrate your personal best!” And Viktor seemed so genuinely pleased for them that Yuuri felt his insides flutter. Viktor wasn’t disappointed! It hadn’t been a disaster! Okay, it hadn’t been perfect either, but a sixty-seven was nothing to scorn at! Yuuri hadn’t embarrassed anyone – yet!

They gave quick interviews in the mixed zone, assessing their score and their game plan for the free skate. Yuuri was excited – a sixty-seven! He never thought he’d get a score like that, so early in the season, with a new skating partner. It helped he was skating with an Olympian, of course, which is what he told the chuckling reporters. The media seemed excited too! Yuuri must have improved more than he’d realised in just a matter of months, and Viktor kept an arm around his shoulders for nearly the entire half hour of interviews.

“I’m really proud of us,” Viktor said to the reporters, and Yuuri flushed with pleasure.

As soon as they were done with interviews, one of the doping officials found them and asked Yuuri to go with him. Protocol, of course, but Yuuri hadn’t needed to give a sample since Detroit, when his result had been clean, and Fumio’s hadn’t. Usually with pair teams, only one person was tested in competitions, and they never knew which one it would be. Yuuri tried not to feel like the medical staff were peering at him with distrust when he showed up in the medical room for the test, but this was difficult to do.

In the cubicle, he had to strip his bottom half completely bare, do a three hundred and sixty to show he wasn’t wearing any hidden tubes or anything alike, and then he willed himself to pee in a cup under the watchful gaze of the official, trying to pretend it was just him taking a casual leak. Giving doping samples never really got less mortifying or uncomfortable for him. Viktor, however, met him afterwards with his usual cheer, and Yuuri put the sample taking behind him.

After the SP, they were in second place with only the Crispinos ahead of them with a seven-point
lead, which they were unlikely to bridge. To be second after World bronze medallists wasn’t a bad place to be in any competition, in Yuuri’s view. And besides, it was a small silver medal! They stayed for the top three interview round – Yuuri had not often had to do so.

Back at the hotel, they ended up spending the evening in Viktor’s room, where they watched Netflix in pyjamas and ordered room service at Viktor’s behest. The day had felt like a dream for the most part, and Yuuri had nearly blown it for them before they’d even started skating! It was difficult, a lot of the time, to control the negative voices in his head. Fumio had known this, of course. They had bombed their first 4CC because Yuuri hadn’t been able to handle the pressure, and he had blown many other competitions for them besides. Viktor didn’t know this about him yet, and now seemed kind enough not to bring it up again.

But as the rom-com came to an end, Viktor’s laptop propped on a pillow in front of them as they sat on the bed, backs against the headboard, Yuuri gathered the courage to say, “I’m sorry about earlier. Competitions make me kind of nervous.”

But Viktor just shrugged beside him. “That’s okay. I was nervous too.”

“Not in the same way I was,” he argued. It could be crippling, how nervous he got.

Their arms were touching, and they’d pulled the covers over their legs, which were tired and sore after the day’s competition. Yuuri found his head resting on Viktor’s shoulder, comforted by the other’s proximity. When had this become normal, he wondered.

But Viktor always seemed to want him close – or certainly never minded him being close. It was rather lethal, at the end of the day, how close Viktor let him get without questioning it. Viktor looped his fingers around Yuuri’s wrist, thumb making circles over his pulse point – it was comforting, gentle.

“Maybe next time,” Viktor said quietly, “when you start feeling bad, it’ll help if you talk to me.”

Yuuri kept his eyes locked on Viktor’s fingers looped around his wrist, wondering how such a simple touch could have his heart racing, how Viktor somehow had the patience to keep skating with him, believing in him. Was he giving anything back in this partnership?

“We’re a team now,” Viktor then continued. “We’ve got each other’s backs: us against the world – right? And whatever happens to you happens to me too.”

And there it was: the familiar bang of guilt.

Viktor leaned his head against his, and Yuuri was grateful they weren’t having this conversation eye to eye. “Do you think you could share that with me?”

“The bad stuff?” he asked, unsure.

“The bad, the good,” Viktor said.

Yuuri hesitated. “I can try,” he then offered.

Viktor brought up their hands and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “That’s all I ask.”

Yuuri swallowed, heart thumping. Viktor’s lips felt soft against his skin, and he wondered. They were alone in Viktor’s hotel room, by themselves in Italy, late at night, in bed. God, Yuuri wondered. His head tilted towards Viktor’s, Viktor’s breath brushing his temple. Viktor pressed a kiss to the side of his head too – affectionate, yes, and… All he had to do was lean up, tilt towards
Viktor some more, to align their mouths. And then what?

He pulled back, blood soaring, stomach in knots, mouth dry. Viktor stayed still for a few beats, and then said, “Time for bed?”

“Yeah,” he said, relieved. “Today’s been a lot to take in, huh?”

“Nothing we can’t handle,” Viktor said, sounding so confident that Yuuri wished he could bottle it up and use some whenever in need.

He felt nearly dizzy as he made his way back to his room, his knuckles and temple tingling still where Viktor’s mouth had made contact. Oh, he was in deeper than he had any right to be.

* * *

All in all, Lombardia exceeded anything Yuuri had anticipated. They could have proved the naysayers right, that him skating with Viktor was ridiculous – but after the free skate the following day, they got bronze with a 199.29. They nearly broke 200! In their first ever competition! And it was another score that beat anything he’d ever gotten with Fumio!

Yuuri couldn’t believe it. Their combined total was ten points more than what he and Fumio had received at the Japanese Nationals nine months earlier, and he had skated with Fumio for years. Moreover, he and Fumio had skated for years before medalling anywhere at all! The Crispino siblings stood to their right on the main podium, smiling and waving. On the other side was a Ukrainian team Yuuri forgot the names of, who had had a much better free skate than them.

But on the third podium was him! And Viktor! Bronze! 199.29!

“Bronze!” he enthused to Viktor when they were back in the hotel after the press conference, which had been followed by taking selfies with fans waiting outside the arena. Being asked to share a selfie with Viktor in itself was surreal, and Viktor had even waited, on a few occasions, for Yuuri before letting a fan take a selfie – it was either the two of them or nothing.

“I expected silver, to be honest,” Viktor mused, “Sara and Michele were the only real competition in my view. Although that mistake in the free cost us at least four points – that would’ve had us on silver, I should’ve thought.” They got in the lift, carrying their heavy equipment bags, still in their Team Russia jackets. “But we’ll work on it for next time.”

“Bronze!” he repeated. They had beaten teams who had been together for years, never mind four months and counting. He was still processing!

“We need to start going through the score breakdowns so we can work on the programs before Bratislava. I refuse to leave there without breaking the 200 mark.”

But Yuuri didn’t care about that yet. He grabbed Viktor’s shoulders and shook him. “Bronze!”

Viktor stared at him, mystified, and then laughed. “You that happy about it, huh?”

Yuuri was on cloud nine. He couldn’t remember the last time he finished a competition feeling so excited and happy. Then he wondered if, indeed, he had ever finished a competition excited or happy. The lift doors opened to their floor, and they stepped out. “Bronze,” he repeated, in awe.

“I’m gonna need you to have higher expectations than this.”

And although Viktor was amused, Yuuri would normally have been stressed that Viktor expected
so much of him. Now he thought maybe Viktor was right: he needed to trust Viktor a little more than he did. He needed to trust what they could do as a team. So he said, “I’ll work my way up to it?”

Viktor laughed. “Okay, deal.”

Alone in his hotel room, he admired the bronze medal, feeling the weight of it in his hands. A medal that he, of all people, had received with Viktor Nikiforov! He placed the medal over his heart and smiled.

A week later, in Bratislava, they beat the Ukrainians and got their first ever gold with a 204.44.

* * *

From the competition streams, their programs ended up online, where they were widely circulated by supportive/critical figure skating fans. Viktor, just to see how his not-comeback was going, casually checked whether their free skate in Bratislava had broken twenty-thousand views yet (it had seventy thousand views).

There hadn’t been much serious competition in Bratislava, of course, but a gold was a gold, and they had improved on their score from Lombardia. He could see the effect that the victory had on Yuuri’s mentality: they got back to St. Petersburg, and Yuuri said he wanted to start doing a quad twist, throw quad Salchow, and change their side-by-side jumps to triple axels, which they had done in practice but not in competition yet. They needed to boost their TES to continue being competitive.

Viktor loved this more confident version of Yuuri. Without ambition, there was no chance that they, as sort-of newcomers, could hope to challenge people like JJ and Isabella, or Guang Hong and Cao. Viktor agreed to start working on the harder elements and have them ready for Nationals, where they had expected to compete against Anya and Georgi, reigning World Champions – now, disastrously, fallen out in the Olympic year.

And Viktor didn’t think of himself as vain, exactly, but he had a certain appreciation of himself and was excited to see how the figure skating world was reacting to them. So he read the YouTube and Twitter comments (brave!), where people responded to Eros with flame emojis and jesus christ i have sinned watching this. Many people were complaining he wasn’t skating with Oksana, but someone said Who needs Oksana when you have chemistry like this! Their free skate also had appreciative comments, and he made a point to share the good ones with Yuuri.

He also stumbled upon a debate on if he and Yuuri were dating. No one has chemistry like that unless they’re a couple! someone argued. They clearly know each other in the biblical sense as my gran used to say, skatingfan496 agreed. Uhhh they’re professional skaters? Who know how to deliver a program? Jennifer W. said back.

People loved to gossip. Viktor returning to skating without Oksana, and with Yuuri Katsuki out of all skaters, when the two of them had never been linked before, certainly begged for gossip. Viktor was sure he had been claimed to be involved with half of his peers at one point or another, so he was used to it. And although they had said in interviews that they met when Viktor was doing ice shows in Japan, and Viktor had gotten the chance to see Yuuri skate, which had inspired him to return to competitive skating – although they told that spiel to interviewers a few times each week – many seemed to think this wasn’t the whole story.

Someone had also made a gif of their SP kiss and cry reaction at Lombardia: Yuuri’s mouth dropping open at their first ever score, clearly blown away, and Viktor taking it in with sceptical
poise. As far as Viktor could tell, it had become a ‘tag yourself’ meme and a ‘There are two kinds of people’ meme. Another popular gif was them making a heart with their hands in Bratislava, Yuuri smiling in the kiss and cry after their solid free skate.

But on one evening (he didn’t google himself all the time, in his defence), he found a picture someone had taken at Lombardia – and not of them on the ice, but from when they had waited to go on for their short program, when Yuuri had been in a bad way. The picture had been taken from the stands above them, and in it they were stood close to each other, and Viktor knew Yuuri had been teary, but Yuuri’s back was to the camera so this wasn’t visible. So instead the image showed Viktor, holding Yuuri’s head between his hands, looking at him with an expression of – of warm affection, to say the least, even as there was concern in the gaze. Get you a man who looks at you like Viktor looks at Yuuri, someone said, and it had been retweeted some three-thousand times.

Viktor had to click away, then. The speculation was one thing – having someone show Viktor just how whipped he really was, when he could do nothing about it, was another.

But the most important thing was that there was buzz around them. Two competitions, two podium spots. Their outfits were ready now, too, and their programs had become more intricate and technically skilled as they kept working on them. They had a bronze and a gold, having medalled in all competitions they had attended. So what it was only two! And travelling with Yuuri had been a pleasure, too, and Viktor thought back fondly to eating pasta in Bergamo together, and to the Netflix hotel nights in Bratislava, with Yuuri falling asleep before Matilda saved the school from Ms. Trunchbull.

Returning to St. Petersburg and getting into separate taxis had been a brutal wakeup call for Viktor, who went home and googled their skates together. He was needy, he knew. It wasn’t an attractive quality. He was old and sad and clearly a little desperate. Christ.

He put the scrutiny of their skates down to work, scribbling notes on their programs. Their free skate score had improved in Bratislava, while Eros had only improved by a marginal 0.32. It had been a cleaner skate, though not perfect, but it was the PCS that had dropped: the French judge had given them a 7.75 for interpretation. 7.75?! Viktor scrutinised the protocol sheet and kept making notes. The Russian judge had given them a 9.25, which frankly was more like it.

He drafted an action plan for their next few weeks of training as he sat on the couch, laptop on his knees and a happy Makkachin asleep on his side. He wondered what Yuuri was doing back at Sergei’s flat after a few weeks on the road together, and he wondered if there had been a moment, back in Bergamo, in his hotel room, when he should have kissed Yuuri, and then he wondered, as he had so many times since that day, if it’d all been in his head.

They’d just spent two very intense weeks together. Yuuri was probably sick of him – he and Oksana relished time spent apart after major competitions, even for a day or two. What was that one song – everybody needs some time on their own? That line. Everyone did, it was true, and three hours after they’d parted, and with a rest day ahead of them where they had not planned to meet, Viktor was left frustrated and idle.

He picked up his phone, fingers hovering over the lit-up screen. Then he typed out Taking Makka to the park in the morning, you can join if you’d like?

He tried to make it sound casual, optional. Something Yuuri could sign off with a ‘no thanks, would rather sleep in/not see you/take a breather from you thanks’. Yuuri didn’t text him back, and he regretted the message already.

He finished unpacking (or that time in Bratislava, when they went to the castle with the little spare
time they had, and it was dusk, and they looked out on the city in the evening glow, and no one else was around, should he have kissed Yuuri then, under the chestnut trees? Had that been a moment? How could he be sure?), and then he brushed Makkachin’s coat (or when they were in the green room in Bratislava, waiting to see if their first place after the free skate would hold, and it did, and they realised they had received their first ever gold, and Yuuri had hugged him, a wide smile on his lips, and Viktor had felt such joy and pride – should he have kissed Yuuri then? In front of the officials and other competitors – would he even care who saw?), and then he showered without hearing back from Yuuri.

He was brushing his teeth when his phone buzzed: *sorry, was napping!* He thought of Yuuri getting home and heading straight to bed, hair now a mess, imprints of the pillow on his cheek, still sleepy. He nearly ached. Another buzz: *sounds good, what time do you want to meet?* A third buzz: *Park, then brunch?*

Viktor caught his expression in the mirror: both relieved and giddy and something that looked like the picture of him and Yuuri in Bergamo, with Yuuri in his arms, Viktor gazing at him with sincere adoration.

(Tomorrow, in the park? By the lake with the swans? Makkachin running around somewhere, Yuuri in a late September morning, air crisp, cheeks tinged, scarf around his neck, the two of them laughing, talking, planning their routines, then stopping where the little bridge was, and he’d turn to Yuuri, look into his eyes – would he have the courage to do it then?)

Would he ever make a move when he couldn’t be sure whether his feelings were returned? Did Yuuri simply see him as what they had agreed to be: good friends – best friends, even, but no more than that.

And Viktor’s longing filled in the rest.

* * *

A cohort of Yakov’s students were competing at Finlandia Trophy, and Yakov had booked a coach to drive them all to Helsinki. Viktor said no thank you, he’d much rather fly than spend six hours on a coach with everyone, but Yuuri said they needed to be a part of the team. Besides, Yuuri didn’t want the others thinking he and Viktor thought they were better than the rest of them!

So Viktor reluctantly agreed, and Yuuri promised that the drive would be fun – they could share earbuds and watch movies together. As a bonus, it would silence Yurio who was going around the rink calling Viktor a spoiled diva.

Yuuri was still reeling that they had broken the 200-barrier in their second ever competition and wanted to push that score even higher. In the lead up to Finlandia, he and Viktor were working late each night, working on the throw quad and quad twist with off-ice gym classes, balance training, weight training, whatever helped, on top of all the ice-time they were putting in. He had added a six thirty AM yoga class to his schedule, which he usually attended with the ice dance pair at their rink, Mikhail and Maria.

“Are you nervous about Finlandia?” Maria asked him one morning when the two of them got post-yoga coffees and were walking to the rink. Mikhail and Maria were the World silver medallists from the year before: Maria was a petite blonde, had talent for days and was full of smiles. Mikhail had curly blond hair and blue eyes, a big toothy grin and was known at the rink for baking cupcakes for everyone on a regular basis. Everyone liked Maria and Mikhail, including Yuuri, and he was happy to have people his own age at the rink as well.
He understood why Maria was checking in on his nerves before Finlandia: Yurio and Otabek would be competing against them, making their senior debut. It would be a clear contrast between the old and the new… and he and Viktor might lose in that comparison.

“I’m pretty nervous,” he admitted. “This competition feels more intense now that we’ve got something to live up to.”

Maria hummed. “Well, you two are definitely getting a lot of buzz right now! But with the way you’ve been skating, you’ll be fine, I know it!” Yuuri appreciated that his rinkmates had started supporting him and Viktor so quickly. “By the way,” Maria then segued, an unfamiliar tilt to her tone, “I was just wondering – if you don’t mind me asking – are you dating anyone right now?”

“Oh! Uhm, no,” he admitted, staring at his coffee. “Don’t really have time for that kind of stuff at the moment.”

Maria exhaled dramatically. “Yeah, tell me about it! Mikhail’s single too, you know. Guess we’re all sort of sad, huh?”

Yuuri agreed that maybe they indeed were.

Viktor was waiting for him at the rink, and Yuuri apologised that Viktor’s coffee may be a bit lukewarm – he’d bought Viktor one on the way, knowing Viktor probably needed it. Viktor looked pleased, and together they sat in the rink café getting their caffeine fixes and going over the day’s schedule.

Viktor was in his grey training clothes, and he’d had his hair cut a few days earlier, the strands a little shorter than before. Yuuri loved the way they flopped over Viktor’s eyes now, light and shiny. Viktor asked how the yoga had been, and he praised it, telling Viktor to come along sometime – but he knew that while the yoga studio was convenient for him, it was the wrong way for Viktor.

“Well, I need to walk Makka in the mornings anyway,” Viktor said. “She keeps me limber, I suppose.”

“I miss walking her,” he admitted, even if he still went around to Viktor’s at least three times a week.

“We miss having you with us,” Viktor said. “You should come around more.”

Even more?

“If I spent any more time at your place, I might as well move back in,” he said with a roll of his eyes.

“Yes,” Viktor said, and Yuuri hid a smile by sipping his coffee, looking at their training plan. He knew Viktor was looking at him, and Yuuri’s heart was doing this stupid fluttering movement it had gotten into the habit of doing lately. He was mainly grateful Viktor couldn’t tell. “Right,” Viktor then said, “let’s look at our schedule…”

They spent the morning in one of the rink’s off-ice training rooms, working on their twist. Viktor repeatedly came up behind him, placed hands on his hips, and Yuuri jumped up as Viktor lifted him, throwing him up into the air above them where Yuuri rotated three times, Viktor catching him on the way down and setting him back on the floor. Repeat. Repeat, repeat, repeat. Three rotations wasn’t enough as they wanted four, and a lift coach was there, helping them add height, speed and another rotation, which they probably couldn’t do without the momentum and speed that the ice
Around lunch time, when Mikhail dropped in with a cheery smile, they had made progress in adding Yuuri’s air time. They were going to start testing a quad twist on the ice after lunch. Yuuri was sore all over, exhausted once more, but also determined.

“You’ll need the extra energy, then,” Mikhail enthused when he heard they’d worked on the quad twist. Viktor was towelling himself off in the corner (sweat was glistening on Viktor’s neck, his scent familiar, with a hint of cologne and musk. Endlessly distracting. Was it normal to like the smell of someone’s sweat? Who could Yuuri ask – Google? Phichit?). Mikhail produced a Tupperware from behind his back. “I made cupcakes! You’ll never guess the flavour.”

They were matcha cupcakes, green frosting and sprinkles on top. Yuuri was amazed, instantly digging in when Mikhail opened the lid. “Oh my god, these are so good!” he enthused, his mouth full. “Where did you get matcha? Viktor, you have to try one!”

“Ah, I went to an oriental supermarket,” Mikhail said, “which was quite exotic for me. But I know you once said how much you love matcha, so…”

“None for me,” Viktor declined, which was his loss because the cupcakes were amazing! Viktor loved matcha too, but maybe he was being better with their strict diet plan.

Mikhail insisted that Yuuri keep the cupcakes, too. “I made them for you, is the thing.”

“For me?” he asked, even as the container of matcha cupcakes had his stomach rumbling. “You shouldn’t have!”

“But I wanted to,” Mikhail beamed, looking at him and then at Viktor. “The, ah. Well, I. Uh.” Mikhail’s smile faltered. “I guess I’ll see you around? For yoga on Thursday?”

“If I can move after eating these,” he joked, waving goodbye as Mikhail hurried out of the training room. Matcha cupcakes! So good! He tried offering Viktor one again, but Viktor declined and said he had his lunch ready packed.

Their afternoon work on the quad twist was less successful than their morning had been, frustratingly. They both went home sore and irritated.

A few days later Mikhail showed up with yuzu-vanilla cupcakes, and Yuuri mourned for his diet. He felt less homesick with anything yuzu-flavoured, however, and happily accepted the cakes. Yuuri couldn’t help but notice that Viktor looked annoyed, so he added quickly that he’d put some in the freezer – he didn’t want Viktor thinking he was binge eating before a big competition. Apparently, Mikhail would have a go with mochi next, and Yuuri accepted an invite to go to Mikhail’s and help him, after they were all back from Finlandia.

“And then we’ll have a go at Zelda,” he told Viktor when Viktor was driving him home after a day of practice. “You should come!”

“Zelda?” Viktor repeated, drumming the wheel with his fingers as they sat in traffic. “Who’s that? Mikhail’s girlfriend?”

“It’s a video game,” he said with a smile. “You’ve seen me play it.”

“I guess,” Viktor said, vaguely, and kept driving. They got home (well, Sergei’s home), and Viktor pulled up to the kerb. “Hang on,” Viktor said when Yuuri unbuckled. Viktor looked restless, and Yuuri frowned. Was something wrong? The quad twist? Did Viktor think they couldn’t do it?
Viktor opened his mouth, said nothing, looked annoyed, then blurted out, “He’s hitting on you.” A pause. “You know that, right?”

Yuuri frowned. “Who?” Viktor raised a meaningful eyebrow at him, and it clicked. “Mikhail?” he clarified in alarm, and Viktor nodded. “No! No, no, we’re just friends!”

Viktor gave him a look that made Yuuri feel young and naïve, and heat rose to his cheeks as they sat in the car together. Viktor said, “You’re going to his place for a date, aren’t you?”

“No? It’s – it’s mochi and video games…” Was that a date? Oh god. What if it was?! “I made you and me okonomiyaki last Friday!” he said feebly.

“Well, I think that’s different,” Viktor said in a pedantic tone that had the tips of Yuuri’s ears burning hot. “I just wanted to spend time with you, I wasn’t – inviting you around for anything more.” Viktor leaned into his car seat, shoulders dropping. “I just really like spending time with you.”

If Yuuri wasn’t red already, he was sure he then was. “Me too,” he admitted. So much. Too much. Did Viktor know?

Viktor added, “Well, he likes you. It’s pretty obvious that he does. So you should – should know that, at least.”

“Oh. Okay,” he said, unsure whether to exit the car or say something else. Viktor probably wondered how Yuuri could perform Eros when he didn’t even realise he was being hit on. It was embarrassing as hell!

“Just don’t get too distracted – we need to focus on Finlandia first of all,” Viktor said. They were leaving in two days.

“No, of course, I wouldn’t – let. I’m concentrating!” he rushed out. “I promise.” He didn’t know what else to say. How useless was he as a skating partner, with his utter lack of understanding of Eros? And what was he going to do when he next saw Mikhail? It was too much, all of it – he wanted the ground to swallow him whole, if possible, so that he wouldn’t have to deal with Viktor’s disappointment or Mikhail’s sudden interest.

He got out of the car with a quick goodbye, mad at himself that he still hadn’t developed the basic skills to recognise sexual or romantic interest. Had Eros taught him nothing? Was he still this clueless? Argh!

Embarrassed, he curled up in blankets, and when Mikhail texted him how far into the new Zelda he’d gotten, he hesitated.

Viktor had to be right – Viktor, who had actually been in relationships and who had probably slept with double, triple, quadruple the number of people that Yuuri had. Viktor, who actually knew how to seduce people! Yuuri sucked at all of that. He thought of Mikhail’s bright smiles and blond curls. Mikhail wasn’t going around the rink baking special cupcakes for anyone else, was he? It had been obvious! God, he was obtuse! To think someone right in front of him liked him, and he was none the wiser. And to have Viktor point it out, too…

He didn’t text Mikhail back and felt like the worst human being for it.

* * *

The Finlandia coach was leaving outside their rink at six in the morning, so Viktor had been up
since four thirty to get ready. Everyone there looked like they were still asleep when Viktor
arrived, and he waited outside the coach in the dark of the early hour, browsing Instagram on his
phone but really waiting for Yuuri.

Yakov was going around, pushing people onto the bus – Otabek was there, so were Maria and
Mikhail. No sign of Yuuri.

Viktor was restless.

For the last few days he had been distracted at best and knew it. Their practices hadn’t been
particularly good, and Yuuri had blamed himself even when Viktor said that no, he was the
problem. Their run-throughs had been subpar.

And Viktor’s restlessness wasn’t a consequence of the bad practices; it was the cause. This was
why Yakov insisted that all skaters focus on the actual skating: look at Anya and Georgi, breaking
up and ruining their careers, look at him, keenly aware that Mikhail was a nice guy, and had thick
blond curls and the flawless body of a twenty-three-year-old (not, say, old and broken) and a sunny
disposition that always seemed to get a smile out of Yuuri. Viktor was regularly on Russia’s Most
Eligible Bachelors lists, but he had a bad ankle and his hairline was receding, and he hadn’t had a
serious relationship in years so something was clearly wrong with him, and now he didn’t have the
emotional finesse or intelligence to deal with actually having strong feelings for someone.

So really, Mikhail was a catch in comparison, what with his cupcakes and Zeldas and beautiful
blond locks of hair, and with the way Mikhail seemed wide awake and ready to go at five-fifty in
the morning, offering cupcakes to everyone. And Viktor had seen the way Mikhail looked at
Yuuri, with wistful adoration and even desire, and he got it, of course, he completely understood
why Mikhail’s eyes lit up when Yuuri entered the room. Why wouldn’t they when Yuuri was so –
And especially so –

The whole thing made him miserable, and certainly hadn’t brought out anything good in him.

Yuuri showed up just in time, emerging from a taxi, dishevelled and stressed. Viktor met him with
an easy smile, helping him with his bags, and Yuuri thanked him, going through his pockets
nervously.

“Passport?” Viktor asked, and Yuuri nodded.

“You got yours too?” Yuuri pressed, and Viktor knew he could be forgetful, but he’d found one of
them in the end!

“Of course. Skates?”

“Obviously,” Yuuri laughed, and together they hauled the bags to the coach. Viktor led them
where he had saved them seats. Yuuri chose the window over the aisle.

They were settling in when Mikhail announced from the front of the bus that if anyone hadn’t
gotten a cupcake yet, he still had plenty left! Well of course he had. Viktor felt predatorial and
defensive all over again, like a switch in his brain had been flicked – primitive. Viktor wasn’t an
idiot and knew he was transparent. Mikhail sort of cowered at the sight of him, actually. What was
it that Oksana had always said? That Viktor could be like a puppy when happy, but cross him and
suddenly Viktor was full of silent fury that had still freaked Oksana out after years of friendship.

Mikhail started making his way through the bus, offering lemon-poppy seed cupcakes to everyone.
Why not fugu flavoured? Why not sake flavoured? Why not – why not ones with pocky sticks for
decoration?

“The frosting comes in red, blue and white for Russia!” Mikhail enthused, and Viktor wondered if there were special Japanese flag ones for Yuuri, though. Next to Viktor, Yuuri was fumbling with his tangled headphone cable.

Mikhail reached them. “What colour for you guys?”

“None for me, thanks,” Viktor said, trying to sound neutral and not envious. He didn’t want any of the (reportedly delicious) cupcakes.

“Yeah, ah – I’m fine, thanks,” Yuuri said, still untangling the cable, barely looking up.


Mikhail kept going, and Viktor watched him go before turning to Yuuri. He nudged Yuuri’s leg with his. “You okay?”

Yuuri nodded, then glanced around quickly, cheeks tinged red. “The, uh. You were right the other day,” Yuuri said in a hushed voice. “About…” Yuuri motioned vaguely with his hand, and Viktor held his breath. “So, I asked him. Or I mean – I texted him, uhm. To clarify? And he was, uh. Hoping that we’d…”

“Oh.” Viktor felt his throat closing up. He had known this anyway, so why did this feel like a new cut that was deeper than the last? “Was hoping?” he then managed.

“Yeah. I – Well, I. Hadn’t realised, uhm. And I wasn’t – into him, so. I thought he just wanted to be friends.”

“Oh,” he said, wishing he’d taken a cupcake after all. But just to make doubly sure, he asked, “It wasn’t mutual, then?”

“No,” Yuuri said, cable finally untangled, and Viktor finally felt like he could breathe for the first time in days.

He remembered Yuuri saying that it was always the wrong people interested in him or the other way around… Yuuri was friendly to everyone, in his own quiet way, so Viktor hadn’t been able to gauge if Yuuri returned Mikhail’s interest. Who was he to say Yuuri shouldn’t go for someone who, on paper, seemed like such a good match? Especially when Viktor was too nervous to make a move of his own. Hell, at least Mikhail had tried. Viktor wasn’t sure what he’d do if he went for it, only to have Yuuri say his feelings weren’t returned. How were they supposed to keep skating then?

But still, he relished Mikhail’s rejection, selfishly, for the little joy and hope it gave him.

“Well,” he said, wrapping an arm around Yuuri’s shoulders and rubbing his arm. “He’ll understand, you know. No harm done, right?”

“I hope so.”

“I know so. Mikhail will bounce right back. And, you know,” he added, “I would’ve had to kill him if he hurt you. So, it may be better for the rink this way.”

Yuuri chuckled, shrugging his arm off. “Sure. And don’t forget about the ‘No Romance’ rule.”
“Ah, yes. That too.” He’d rather forgotten.

In the end, they were five minutes late leaving, waiting for Yurio, who eventually showed up full of hissed curses and glares, and then slumped down next to Otabek, who met him with a fist pump. Teenagers, Viktor thought tiredly.

Yurio dropped his head to his shoulder, settling in to sleep. Viktor’s heart skipped two thrilled beats.

Adults too, apparently.

The coach was quiet as they took off, everyone too exhausted to speak. Yurio fell asleep with his head on Viktor’s shoulder, and Viktor stayed awake, letting himself gently card his fingers through Yurio’s hair. He should have been scared to realise how dependent he’d become on Yurio in only a few months, but the pull of him was too strong. Yurio leaned into him further with sleepy mumbled nonsense, and Viktor was grateful to be where he was – bad ankle and all.

* * *

Chris was competing in Helsinki too, and they bumped into each other in the hotel lobby after the first training day. Chris was delighted and insisted that they catch up! And since they had no evening plans than sleep, they followed Chris to the hotel bar, where they ordered martinis. Yurio, saying that he did not drink before competitions, ordered a lemonade.

They sat close to the faux fireplace, with jazz jangling in the background. Chris kept looking at them knowingly, and Viktor could guess what Chris was thinking with his wide and suggestive grin that did not bode well in Viktor’s books.

“Well, little did I know that when I showed you lovebirds that video of Yuuri and Phichit that I’d be setting this in motion,” Chris said, sounding very pleased with himself. “I’m quite the matchmaker, aren’t I?”

Yurio already looked embarrassed, but Viktor said, “We owe you our thanks, definitely.”

“Eh, make me best man,” Chris shrugged, and Yurio nearly choked on his lemonade. Chris raised an eyebrow at them.

But Viktor quickly led the conversation elsewhere, and they talked of their new programs, the competitions they had coming up, how training was going, and so on. Yurio relaxed, too, and soon was in a good mood, filling in the gaps in Viktor’s narrative. Viktor praised Yurio’s cooking, and Yurio explained how hard Viktor had tried making him feel at home in Russia. They told Chris about the time Makkachin had eaten the leftover pizza they’d treated themselves to on their cheat day, too caught up crying at Titanic, the both of them, to notice that right behind the couch Makkachin had been munching away. And, Viktor said proudly, they planned on introducing the quad twist that weekend.

“Your partnership is like something out of a fairy tale, huh?” Chris asked them, and Yurio looked flustered – but pleased. Viktor adored the look on him. Chris leaned towards them. “Tell me, then, in the short where Viktor sort of – moves his mouth along your neck, are you guys actually making contact? It’s so hard to tell from the camera angles – there’s a whole online debate about it.”

Yurio flushed bright red next to him. “O-Online debate?”

“Mmm,” Chris nodded. Of course there was.
“Sometimes I kiss him there,” Viktor said coolly, aware that Yuuri ducked his head. “Not in practice, obviously,” he then added.

Chris crossed his leg over the other, lifting the martini to his lips. “And why not?”

“Well, it’d be unnecessary to go that far…” Yuuri tried to explain and then shrugged. “We save it for competitions, and – Oh, sorry,” Yuuri said, fishing his phone out of his pocket, the screen flashing. “Ah, it’s Dad. Do you mind?”

They didn’t, of course, and Yuuri greeted his dad in Japanese, and Viktor managed to call after him to say hello from him too. Yuuri nodded with a smile, phone pressed to his ear as he headed to the lobby to talk.

In the meanwhile, Chris had placed his finished martini on the table between them, leaning backwards in his seat. “Viktor,” Chris said pointedly, “what does he mean that you save it for competitions?”

That was all Yuuri meant. Was he supposed to mean something else?

Chris tilted his head to the side, but then gasped. “Oh! Oh! You’re- you’re not sleeping together?!”

Viktor had never heard someone not sleeping with someone sound so scandalous.

“Of course not! We’re skating partners, come on. I know the rumours are rife, but that’s all it is. I thought you of all people would get that.”

“You call it rumours, do you?” Chris practically scoffed. “You clocking him shaking ass in a club and moving to Japan two days later? Hang on, you moved in with him, in fact. And then you show up with two amorous programs where you’re all over each other, and don’t even get me started on your Instagram stories that are thirty percent Makkachin and the rest is constant Yuuri spam and how amazing you think he is. Makkachin has definitely suffered here.” Chris peered at him. “Are you telling me you haven’t even – even kissed? Or given casual handjobs?”

“Jesus!” Viktor protested, nervously glancing out into the lobby where Yuuri was talking on the phone. What the hell was a casual handjob, anyway?! “I came for a drink and a catch up, not a – a grilling of my sex life.” And he did not need to be harassed over his unrequited crush on his skating partner either. “It’s a professional relationship,” he insisted.

“Professional? Did you just listen to the twenty minutes of domestic bliss that you two spewed at me? The bit where you two ogle at each other and finish each other’s sentences? You’re whipped. He’s whipped.”

“We’re friends!”

Chris shook his head. “Well, that’s a lie. Goodness me, when did you get this dumb?” Chris pinched the bridge of his nose dramatically, as if in pain. “Okay,” Chris then said, “Okay, okay. You’ve always been quite the idiot with stuff like this. Like with André, everyone could see he was two-timing you except you.”

“Great. Thanks for that,” he said, lifting his martini in a mock toast.

Chris’s eyes gleamed, perhaps seeing things Viktor would much rather not acknowledge. “You’re not subtle. It’s obvious you like him.”

“Allegedly.”
“Is he playing hard to get or what?” Chris asked, looking to where Yuuri was talking to his dad. “I thought you’d been sleeping with him for months. Is he a prude, or –”

“Don’t talk about him like that,” he cut in angrily. Whatever the situation was wasn’t in any way Yuuri’s fault – it was Viktor letting himself get carried away. “Yuuri isn’t playing anything, he’s not like that. What he is is incredible, he’s dedicated, he’s – What? What’s funny?”

“You prove my point too easily.”

Viktor deflated. “We’re just friends. Best friends.” He’d never had a best friend before who was, well, not Makkachin. It was nice. It was really, really nice.

“Imitating Plato, are we?” Chris asked, and then sighed. “Plato – platonic? Pick up a book sometime, honestly. Fine, maybe I’m wrong, maybe that on-ice chemistry and lust is just a mirage, and maybe this couple act I’ve just seen is also misleading, maybe you’ve never held him close and thought about actually kissing him… Are you blushing? J’accuse, Viktor, dear.”

“Tu ne sais rien,” he said solemnly, twirling the martini glass between two fingers. Chris looked at him with what was clearly pity. Viktor pitied himself sometimes – he didn’t need others to do so, too.

“When you retired, didn’t you give me some spiel of how you wanted to spend more time focusing on – life and love, was it? And here you are, back to putting skating first. What is it – the Olympic gold that’s got you riled up?”

“We’re not going to the Olympics.”

“If you married him, maybe you could,” Chris teased, and Viktor couldn’t help but snort. “Just admit that you like him – trust me, you’ll feel better.”

He hesitated. He had never admitted it to anyone, except maybe Makkachin. “God, what’s the point?” he sighed. “It’s not an option for so many reasons.”

“Such as?”

“Such as – well, I’m too old for him.”

“Oh, please!” Chris scoffed. “Yuuri doesn’t see you as some father figure, if that’s what you’re worried about. That Eros routine of yours is – well, it’s something else. He’s what? Twenty-five?”

“Three. Young, still. I know I wasn’t very, ah, mature at that age. Emotionally.” He’d been drunk on his fame and fooling around – only to end up alone at nearly thirty, with nothing to show for it. He couldn’t bear the thought of being a fling for Yuuri, who Viktor knew had admired him for years. He didn’t want flings, he wanted something real, and if Yuuri was on some other page than him it’d – it’d break his heart. God, Chris had an awful way of picking him apart.

“Okay, fine, you and I were both idiots at his age. But he’s hardly us, is he?” Chris said, studying Yuuri carefully. “He’s – He’s maybe a bit better. Grounded. Point is, you’re consenting adults, and…”

Defeated, he rushed out, “Look, I haven’t kissed him because I’m too afraid of what will happen if he doesn’t kiss me back. Alright?”

If Yuuri didn’t kiss him back, then their skating partnership was ruined, their friendship shattered, Viktor’s sad, wistful heart – bleeding. Or then maybe, just maybe, Yuuri kissed him back, but then
it didn’t work out, and the end result was the same. He couldn’t do that to them, to himself. The hope was a drug, living in the hazy world of ‘what if’, where he could live on the idea that maybe Yuuri could be his in the way that he wanted. He’d invested so much in that hope, months of longing and desire and affection, that the idea of the hope vanishing was painful. Would Viktor recover from Yuuri Katsuki? He’d let his feelings fester for so long.

“Oh, he’d kiss you back and mean it too,” Chris said blithely, and Viktor knew he was alone with his fears. “Come on, give that receding hairline and sort of six pack of yours some credit.”

“I hate you.”

“You love me,” Chris said firmly. They both looked towards Yuuri, who noticed them looking and waved at them, giving them a happy smile. Viktor lifted a hand back, helpless. Yuuri nearly walked into a woman crossing the lobby and started apologising profusely while still clinging to his phone. Chris laughed. “Oh god, if that boy’s not in love with you then I don’t know how to land a single loop. Trust me, he’d kiss you right back.” Would he really? Chris stood up and placed a hand on his shoulder. “But don’t worry, your secret is safe with me for now.”

Was Viktor supposed to say thank you? Yuuri was so private with his feelings – they liked each other, of course, but Yuuri was careful with any romantic affection. Viktor was so full of hope on some days, and on others he thought the best thing to do was to change nothing.

“I’d recommend the old-fashioned tell-him-how-you-feel approach, personally,” Chris continued, “because this? This pining from not afar, but from close up! This pining from close up can’t last. It’s a bad look on you. And sooner or later it will affect your skating too.”

Viktor wasn’t sure if it was this warning, or something else, but the next day they bombed their short program.

* * *

The only comfort in getting a season’s lowest score was that the reporters didn’t keep them around for too long, except to ask how they had managed to fuck up so thoroughly. They said all the usual lines: it wasn’t our day, we’ll come back fighting in the free skate tomorrow, we can do better than our performance here… Yuuri let Viktor do most of the talking.

Viktor’s disappointment was written all over his face. What a mess of an Eros – their first competition attempt at the quad twist had ended with Yuuri misjudging his axis, making it difficult for Viktor to catch him, and so Yuuri had tripped on the dismount and fallen on his ass, which had led to more falls because he’d still been stunned, and they only went for a throw triple Salchow instead of the quad they’d been practising in order not to mess up completely. Yuuri had landed that, at least, but…

Often, when he and Fumio failed like this, he had cried. But he was too sad to cry, too frustrated, too full of disappointment. And so he curled up in the armchair of his hotel room, scrolling down comments on his phone. Saddest attempt at a comeback ever and Hope Viktor’s finally realised he needs to go back to Oksana! and even guess all that doping can’t help without any real talent?? Someone pointed out that Viktor had never received a score so low since that time he and Oksana had skated with Oksana sick with a high fever, years and years ago. Was one of them under the weather, maybe?

No, they weren’t. A more experienced team could have pulled it together after the first mistake: they had unravelled.
Yuuri could hardly speak from how sick he felt. What was another humiliation to him, anyway? But for him to drag Viktor in the mud with him was inexcusable, and Viktor had looked so – not mad, not disappointed. But hollow. “Never mind,” Viktor had said to him, but it had been cold.

He’d known their luck couldn’t last, of course, he’d known Viktor was bound to realise that –

A knock on his door. It wasn’t very late yet, but he’d told Viktor he wanted to spend the evening alone, and Viktor had only nodded. Yakov had told them to get rest and focus on the free skate, and the rest of their rink mates had seemed to realise they needed to lick their wounds. Yuuri imagined someone had mistaken his room for someone else’s, and he curled in on himself further, hoping to shrink into an insignificant blip.

But then Viktor’s voice called out to him from the other side, and Yuuri hesitated. His phone came to life in his hand, and he heard, “I can hear your phone, Yuuri – come open up!”

He’d assumed Viktor didn’t want to see him, but went to the door anyway. Viktor stood in the corridor, having changed into his jogging bottoms that he often wore around the house in the mornings, hair wet and a white t-shirt on. Viktor’s room was a few doors down from his – Viktor wasn’t even wearing shoes. He had a scrolled up paper in his fist – a divorce settlement, perhaps, or as close as they could get to it.

“Just came to see if you’re okay,” Viktor said, and Yuuri avoided his gaze. That seemed to say it all because Viktor added, “Is the bad stuff getting to you?” Yuuri frowned, and Viktor tapped the side of his head. “You know, the bad stuff that’s here sometimes.”

Oh. That.

He hesitated and then nodded: yes. Yes, it was getting to him.

“Can I come in?” Viktor asked, and Yuuri let him. When the bad stuff was getting to him, people usually left him to it. Phichit, perhaps, had been the one exception. Now Viktor walked into his room and sat on his bed, eyes concerned and attentive. Great, now he was making Viktor worry, on top of everything else!

He held back a sigh and closed the door. He tried to keep breathing while his throat was closing up, and he knew that it’d been out of their reach anyway, this entire time. He wrapped arms around his middle, feeling sick to his core, and waited for Viktor to say it. But Viktor just sat on the bed, clearly waiting for him to speak first. He swallowed hard. The bad stuff… Viktor had asked before to be told the bad stuff. So he said what was making him feel worse than anything: “Do you want to stop skating with me?”

Viktor, for all his apparent composure, startled. “Wha – God, no! Do you really – We had one rough skate, Yuuri.” Viktor sounded so surprised that Yuuri couldn’t help but feel a flicker of hope. Maybe the bad stuff wasn’t true.

“It was your worst score since –”

“You have to know me better than that by now,” Viktor said, almost indignant, and Yuuri was a failure as a friend, too, and – “Hey, no – none of that. What I mean is that you know, don’t you? You know how committed I am to us. Don’t doubt that.”

But it was hard not to when Yuuri messed up, and Viktor wasn’t used to failures like this. Oksana had always landed her jumps and dismounts. Yuuri still exhaled, some of the fear in him fading: Viktor still wanted to be there.
Yuuri let himself sit on the floor, back to the wall. Viktor looked at him with a raised eyebrow because there was a perfectly good chair next to him, but Yuuri was worried about vertigo from any height. He felt so drained, and he raised his knees, resting his forehead against them. The day was horrible, all of it.

From above, Viktor’s voice said, “We’re both disappointed, sure, but we need to turn that into something motivating. This is the first hurdle we’ve tripped on – that’s all.”

Yuuri kept his eyes closed. “Everyone thinks you should skate with someone else.”

“Every…?” Viktor repeated. “Ah, right. You really should know better than to check social media during competitions, darling.” Darling? Him? He looked up in surprise, a sudden ball of warmth in his stomach. Viktor looked pensive. “Those people don’t – they don’t know us, and they don’t know what we’re capable of. Okay? And they don’t know how committed I am to us.”

All of that sounded wonderful, but Yuuri knew his time was up. If they were talking about the bad stuff, Yuuri had to keep going.

“There’s something else. Something I- I should have told you a long time ago, and – and I think I need to tell you before it’s too late.” He couldn’t lie to Viktor any longer – the guilt was gnawing at him at all times, and while they’d been scoring well, Yuuri had a reason to say nothing. But now Viktor needed to know.

Viktor looked a little nervous. “Okay. There’s something I need to tell you, too.”

“Me first,” he said instantly, worried his courage would fail him otherwise. He’d kept this locked up inside him ever since they’d partnered up, and now – He felt faint, and although his voice was hardly above a whisper, he said, “Fumio’s doping was my fault.” There – he’d said it. God, finally! Viktor frowned, so he explained, “I struggle – with my weight a lot, it’s hard for me to… And Fumio, he was struggling to lift me, so the drugs – helped. Helped make him stronger. And –”

“Is that what he told you?” Viktor cut in sharply.

“– I didn’t see he was struggling, I wasn’t there for him, and he didn’t feel like he could talk to me, so I pushed him to it! I’m no good in a team, and that’s not even all of it,” he said, voice breaking, a miserable heap of guilt on the floor. “After we won at Nationals, I also –”

“That’s ridiculous,” Viktor snapped, standing up suddenly, and Yuuri flinched. It was easy to forget how tall Viktor was. “Fumio doping was no one’s fault but his own. He blamed you? Your weight?!” Viktor sounded outraged. “God, if I ever meet him, I swear I’ll –” Viktor stopped. Anger was something Yuuri hardly ever saw on Viktor. Viktor frowned, so he explained, “I struggle – with my weight a lot, it’s hard for me to… And Fumio, he was struggling to lift me, so the drugs – helped. Helped make him stronger. And –”

When he and Fumio skated poorly, they had both withdrawn to lick their wounds. They certainly hadn’t tried talking things through, apart from reviewing which elements to keep practising. They had never attempted to ‘talk it out’. Viktor had a different approach.

“I brought you something,” Viktor then said, offering him the scroll he’d come with. Yuuri took it as Viktor sat down on the floor next to him. Yuuri hesitated, but Viktor gave him an encouraging nod, so he opened it up. It was a large drawing, in pencil, of the two of them. “It was tied to one of the roses,” Viktor said. Ah, the gifts fans had given them without them having at all deserved it!
The drawing showed them embracing in what was the final pose of their free skate: Viktor holding Yuuri delicately in his arms, Yuuri resting his head on Viktor’s chest. Whoever had drawn it was incredibly talented because Viktor looked exactly like him, and Yuuri looked – well, nicer than what he actually looked like. He held the drawing, examining the life-like detail of Viktor’s hair and frame, the expression of calm affection on Viktor’s face. And the Yuuri on paper looked graceful and strong – and not a mismatch to be in Viktor’s embrace. Could they really look like this?

Viktor leaned into him, their shoulders touching. “I’d like to have it framed.”

Yuuri swallowed, throat dry. “You would?”

“Yeah, put it in the living room.” Viktor reached to trace the drawing with his finger. “When I skate with you, this is what I see too.” Viktor felt warm pressed to his side, sat on the floor of Yuuri’s hotel room with him. “And Fumio doping had nothing to do with you. If he tried blaming it on you, then he’s an asshole.”

“He isn’t an asshole,” he said quietly. They had skated together for years – yes, it had ended badly. No, they didn’t talk anymore. But they had struggled together, fought together, failed together… Fumio had wanted to win just as much as Yuuri had. They just hadn’t had it in them. He could tell Viktor was displeased with the response, but Viktor said nothing. Yuuri hesitated. “So you… still want to be my partner?”

“Yes,” Viktor said, “of course I do.” Viktor nudged his leg with his own. “Do you still want to skate with me?”

What a question to ask!

In the drawing Viktor was handsome, athletic, sculpted out of marble, and next to him Viktor smelled of his fancy Korean imported shampoo and body lotion, still handsome, still athletic, but soft and familiar – and something Yuuri had grown to need as the months passed by.

“Of course I want to skate with you,” he said, carefully scrolling up the paper and giving it back to Viktor. “But – but maybe our Eros doesn’t work because no one would believe someone like you would –”

“Want you?” Viktor cut in, and Yuuri nodded, eyes on his knees. The drawing was an idealised version of them, of Yuuri. No one would believe that could happen off the ice. Viktor’s hand came to rest on his knee, thumb making circles. Viktor’s head leaned against his. “Why wouldn’t I go absolutely weak at the sight of you?”

“Okay, no need to rub it in,” he protested.

“No, I’m asking,” Viktor said. “I don’t think you lacking desirability is the problem. Maybe the opposite.”

Yuuri frowned, watching Viktor’s hand rubbing his knee, the movement soothing. What was the opposite of desire? “I lack disgust?”

“Wha – No!”

They looked at each other, and Yuuri saw his own confusion reflected back at him. After a few seconds, they both burst out laughing. Yuuri hadn’t laughed all day – the bad stuff was leaving. How had Viktor managed that?
“You lack disgust, what even is that?” Viktor snorted, and Yuuri felt embarrassed, but let himself lean into Viktor more, Viktor’s arm wrapping around his shoulders. God, he felt better – so much better. Since the very first day he’d known one day he’d have to tell Viktor why Fumio had started doping, and at least he’d told Viktor how it all started. And Viktor, somehow, was still there, although Viktor hardly knew the entire story yet.

“Sometimes being the underdog helps,” Viktor mused quietly, voice a murmur in his ear. “We’ll try our best tomorrow.”

“Yes,” he agreed, but his heart was beating fast. He’d mirrored Viktor, placing a hand on Viktor’s leg. Viktor’s arm around him squeezed him affectionately, hand moving up to soothe his neck, fingers gently carding through the hairs at the nape of his neck. A shiver ran through him, and they were too close for Viktor not to notice.

“And maybe we’ll…” Viktor said, voice gone quiet, soft. Yuuri turned his head towards Viktor, and Viktor moved marginally closer. The world felt suspended in air. Was he – Were they…

Viktor’s hand lifted, paused, and then moved under his chin, tilting his face up carefully. Yuuri had plenty of time to pull away or object, but he did neither. Viktor’s face was close to his, Viktor’s breath on his lips. Yuuri was lost. And then he moved – or Viktor moved, he was unsure. But their mouths met. And oh, Viktor’s lips were warm and soft, and Viktor had a taste that sent a tremor down his spine. Viktor had a taste.

Then Viktor’s mouth was gone, but they didn’t pull away. Viktor’s thumb was brushing his jawline. “You kissed me back,” Viktor murmured quietly, and Yuuri had sat down to avoid vertigo, yet there he was, world spinning. Viktor licked his lips, and Yuuri thought that perhaps fainting would be more merciful. “Can I kiss you again?”

He nodded, lost for words. Viktor’s thumb brushed under his earlobe, and Yuuri felt faint. “Do you want me to kiss you?” Viktor then asked quietly.

“Yes.”

And then their mouths met again, and Viktor sat up straighter this time, an arm sliding down to circle his waist and keep him close, and Yuuri kissed back, dazed and lost. The kiss was gentle – or the kisses, as their mouths kept making contact, searching, figuring it out, but Yuuri really wanted to figure it out.

Viktor’s hand on his chin kept him still, locked in the kiss that was slow, but becoming bolder. Yuuri was fumbling returning it, but his nerves were alight.

The kiss deepened, Viktor’s tongue brushing against his, still slow, languid, like there was no rush anywhere, they could just stay here kissing on the floor, and –

A firm knock on the door. They pulled apart, and Yuuri blinked in confusion, his glasses fogged up a little. Viktor had a glorious flush on his cheeks, lips pink and wet. What had – How – What?

“Yuuri,” Yakov’s voice boomed from the door, “is Vitya here?”

Yuuri startled, surprised that Yakov Feltsman, or anyone else at all, still existed.

Viktor looked at him, a little dazed, and then almost groaned as he stood up, but there was a buzz under Yuuri’s skin that he knew was under Viktor’s too. Yuuri stood up with shaky legs, trying to fix his hair, his clothes, as Viktor rushed to open the door. Yakov hummed in a ‘thought so’ tone when he saw them and instantly started spewing Russian at Viktor, and Viktor made annoyed
agreeing noises.

Viktor turned to him and translated, “Yakov wants me to go greet some old sponsors.”

“Yes, now. Vladimir cannot wait.”

“Do I –” Yuuri began, but Viktor said, “No, I explained to Yakov about your headache.” And Yuuri was eternally grateful.

Yakov was already asking Viktor to go change into a suit, at least, from what Yuuri could understand. Viktor rolled his eyes at Yuuri and said, “See you tomorrow?” And they were of course seeing each other tomorrow, so Yuuri couldn’t help but feel that the question meant something else entirely.

And Yuuri said, “Yeah.”

And he meant something else entirely, too.

Viktor broke into a dazzling smile, and Yuuri’s heart lurched, pathetically, somersaulted even. The door closed as Yakov dragged Viktor away.

Yuuri stared, and his hand came to his lips in amazement. Oh. Oh well. Ah. Right.

Oh, god. They had –

* * *

– kissed. It hadn’t been a conscious decision, really. Viktor had intended to admit that their short program was ruined because Viktor was an emotional wreck over his feelings for Yuuri, which he doubted he could hide for much longer because apparently he was a twenty-nine-year-old man-child, and then Yuuri had kissed him anyway and put him out of his misery.

He was relatively sure Yuuri had kissed him first, anyway. It was a blur, but Yuuri had kissed him, and Viktor knew Yuuri well enough to know Yuuri was not in a habit of kissing people for no reason. That if Yuuri Katsuki kissed you (without having had seven drinks to encourage himself), it meant something, and you should consider yourself very lucky.

Viktor did.

They met in the lobby the following morning, where Viktor had eagerly shown up ten minutes early. He paced, fixed his hair, checked his breath, opted for another breath mint. A few fans spotted him and came over for autographs and selfies, which he of course granted. “You’ll do better today!” the man assured him, his beaming daughter nodding in agreement.

Yuuri – shower fresh, in his Russia training jacket, sports bag on his shoulder – found them discussing the old six-point system the daughter was too young to remember. “Ah, here’s my better half,” Viktor said jokingly, but his heart twirled (spiralled? Spun?), and it was all he could do not to pull Yuuri into his arms and just – breathe him in, cling onto him.

Yuuri had not expected to be met with fans, but was polite to the skating enthusiasts after his eyes had flicked to Viktor’s in a tentative, unspoken greeting. Yuuri was, suddenly, a thousand possibilities wrapped up in one person. Viktor was excited. Not about the skate, or the competition, but about them. “You just plunge into these things,” Oksana had once chastised him, “head first.”

Why bother do it any other way?
Katsuki Yuuri had kissed him back, and Viktor wanted to gloat.

They nearly missed the transfer coach to the rink on which, to Viktor’s disappointment, Yurio and Otabek were too, and Yurio hailed them over and began boasting how they were going to get a new career best that day. And at the rink people were waiting for them, and they stopped to do some media, got changed, warmed up with the other skaters, did their stretches, had Yakov lecture them, and the entire time they were unable to get two moments alone together.

Viktor was, of course, aware that they needed to perform nearly flawlessly to recover from the SP disaster – but they were a doable seven points from the podium, the pairs relatively tightly stacked. Otabek and Yurio getting gold was likely, but Viktor was determined to climb onto the podium, if possible. They just needed a cleaner skate than their past competitions. Easy, surely.

He finally got his longed for moment alone shortly before their group needed to go on the ice for their warm up. Viktor had gotten into his costume, and he found Yuuri in the waiting area, sat on a bench with headphones in and skates on. Yuuri had likewise changed, but had his team Russia jacket on too, which always made Viktor a little weak at the knees: it made Yuuri look like he was wearing Viktor’s clothes, somehow. He fiercely liked it.

Their free skate outfits were a clear contrast to the black-red Eros costumes: these were white and blue, with intricate details and sequins, gold lining in the sleeves and collars, while they wore black slacks as a contrast. They had different patterns on their shirts but matched in the fabrics, and Viktor looked forward to the pictures of them skating, knowing they would look glorious together.

He approached Yuuri, who pulled the earphones out and smiled at him nervously. Viktor sat next to him. The night before, they had sat next to each other like this too, and –

“Nervous?” he asked, and Yuuri nodded.

There were other pairs in the waiting area, too – Yurio and Otabek were skating last, so they were in a different group from them. He and Yuuri should get up and start moving to keep their bodies warm, but they didn’t. Finally, no one was within earshot.

“I guess we should talk,” Yuuri said quietly.

“Yeah,” he agreed, leaning into Yuuri. “I heard a rumour you had a boy in your room last night. Is it true?”

Yuuri met his teasing gaze with horror. “Viktor…!”

“Yes,” Yuuri exhaled, clearly relieved he didn’t have to say it aloud.

“I hope you’re not going to get this flustered every single time we kiss,” he said, more boldly than he felt. “Life might get difficult otherwise.”

Yuuri gawked at him, and for a second Viktor worried that Yuuri regretted it: they were skating partners, and any romantic relationship complicated it. They needed to reassess how to slot that into what was already an intense and demanding co-existence, and they needed to be sensible and mature about it. Hell, Viktor was older and more experienced – he probably should have led the
way in this mature approach.

But he didn’t want to do any of that. Instead he just wanted to kiss Yuuri a second time, then a third, and drown in the feel of their mouths together until he didn’t know which way was up. But maybe Yuuri thought it was a bad idea after all, or maybe it wasn’t mutual, Yuuri had just been feeling vulnerable, in which case –

With a sudden look of determination, Yuuri reached out to grasp Viktor’s hand in his, palm warm, fingers strong, although Yuuri did not meet his gaze but seemed to stare at Viktor’s knees instead. But Viktor broke into a smile, squeezing back.

Okay. They were still there.

“Skate first, talk later?” he offered, and Yuuri nodded. A few strands of hair fell over Yuuri’s eyes, and it took all of Viktor’s willpower not to gently push them back, because once his hand was in Yuuri’s hair, he’d caress it, and then he’d probably be leaning in to kiss Yuuri again, in sight of everyone, which even Viktor knew they weren’t quite ready for.

Good things came to those who waited, Viktor had been told.

So they started to walk around the warm-up area, stretching their arms and legs, focusing on the free skate, and soon they were called out with three other teams.

People cheered for them during the six minutes of warm up, and together they traced their free skate, Yuuri in his arms as he went into a spread eagle, balancing Yuuri’s weight on him, Yuuri dismounting with a spin of effortless grace, hand in his as they mounted speed for their quad twist. It was only the warm up, but the twist was where they had failed the day before – they nailed it then, a day too late, and Viktor had a nano-second of fear he’d never felt before when he lifted Yuuri up into the air: he hadn’t caught Yuuri properly the last time, and what if this time he didn’t either, what if Yuuri ever got hurt because of him – because it was a damn dangerous sport, at the end of the day, and the quad twist was one of the most dangerous elements.

The fear was unfamiliar – he’d never felt it before, not with Oksana either – but then Yuuri was already in his arms again, as he caught Yuuri flawlessly and set him down on the ice, the two of them still gliding at a fast speed. People were cheering: a quad twist! Now to do it during the skate…

Yakov met them at the boards when they went to take one last sip of water. The others were called off the ice, and they discarded their jackets. Yakov was tight-lipped. “Sixth place is not where I expect you two to be after this,” he said in Russian, then to Yuuri, “Clean skate, okay? No mistakes.”

Yuuri nodded nervously, and Viktor remembered Yuuri wasn’t used to competition-Yakov yet. So he clarified, “Yakov means that he knows we can skate clean.”

“Yes, yes, in practice you clean all the time,” Yakov said impatiently. “Here, no different. But no throw quad, do triple. Quad twist now, yes, but throw quad later. Yes?”

So they nodded, their names – representing Russia, Yuuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov – ringing overhead. The rink was bigger than the others they had competed at, but still nowhere near the major international rinks. People waved flags and banners enthusiastically. Sixth place. Viktor Nikiforov was not a sixth-place sort of skater. Neither was Yuuri Katsuki, in his view.

They moved to their opening position: back to back, hands entwined and holding on. Yuuri was
gripping his hands in a murderous squeeze, but Viktor gave back one simple squeeze: we’ve got this. And against his back, he felt Yuuri nod.

The music began – softer, more delicate than Eros. Viktor liked this program: two young lovers falling in love – seeking, stumbling, but finding their way. Yuuri was in his arms, then away again, then he was picking Yuuri up for the quad twist, get the hardest element out of the way – and they nailed it this time, people cheering. But there was a long list of elements to survive, their side-by-side jumps, the lasso lift, the first of their spins, the death spiral… Three minutes in, Viktor could hardly feel his legs, but they had to keep up the pretence of effortlessness and ease, but he was also aware that they were absolutely nailing the program so far.

Yuuri clearly sensed it too, eyes bright and eager when they embraced and danced through the choreographic sequence. Oh, Yuuri was beautiful on the ice – black hair shining, movements musical and refined, the perfect lover for their performance.

They skated fast from one end to the other, hand-in-hand, strokes synchronised, and Viktor pulled Yuuri close, his chest pressed to Yuuri’s back, hands moving to firmly grab Yuuri’s waist for the throw, and to his utter surprise Yuuri said, “Quad.”

That was all – Viktor did not have time to do anything other than to register the defiance in Yuuri’s tone – and oh, his partner was a reckless thing, more insolent and ambitious than Viktor had realised.

But then it was already the beat on which the throw began, and Viktor complied: Yuuri launched up from the ice as Viktor hauled him into the air in front of them, the height and speed of Yuuri mind-spinning, and Yuuri did four rotations in the air lasting only a second, like it was nothing at all, and then landed like a weightless, flawless being that was one with the ice, landing perfect, free leg beautifully stretched.

The audience erupted in applause, and Viktor broke out of character, into a grin, as he took Yuuri’s outreached hand and pulled them into their spins – and he was exhausted, out of breath, legs numb, god the routine was harder than anything he’d had to do in years! But they straightened up, and there was one last lift, and he had to muster the strength but somehow did, Yuuri’s hand on his shoulder for the star lift, Yuuri poised above him in the air, Viktor’s hand on Yuuri’s hip the only thing keeping him up – and then Yuuri let go of his shoulder, and Viktor’s arm was trembling but steady when Yuuri’s entire weight was balanced on it, and he counted rotations and ice coverage before Yuuri spun down. He caught him with ease, guiding Yuuri back onto the ice, and –

And then it was over, Yuuri in his arms, head on chest, a loving embrace – like the one in the drawing. The music ended, and they were both heaving, Viktor was shaking, his body pushed to its limits, and Yuuri was shivering against him. They had nailed it! They had absolutely nailed it!

The audience was cheering and waving, and Viktor nearly collapsed into Yuuri’s embrace, holding him close. “Oh, you’re nuts,” Viktor breathed into Yuuri’s ear.

Yuuri looked up at him, flushed and stunned before a wild smile appeared on his face, and then Yuuri jumped to tangle him in an even more enthusiastic hug, which he returned, out of breath as they both were.

“We landed everything! We landed the quads!” Yuuri said, and Viktor really needed to have a word with Yuuri about changing their technical components mid-skate. But, then again, he’d gone along with it, hadn’t he? Oksana never would have dared.

They bowed to the crowds, and Yuuri picked up a cellophane wrapped rose on their way off the

Viktor knew it had been excellent. Clean skate, and while some of the GOEs would be low, all would be positive. Finally the kind of performance he’d waited for them to put down!

They sat in the kiss and cry with Yakov, wiping their sweaty faces, fumbling to get their Russia jackets zipped up again. People were cheering when they came up on the big screens, so they did their by-now signature shared heart. Viktor winked at the cameras for good measure, and Yuuri waved a little nervously, but was clearly happy. That had been much needed after their SP disaster.

“Scores, please,” the PA boomed, and Viktor wrapped an arm around Yuuri’s shoulders in anticipation, giving him a squeeze. “Yuuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov have earned –”

But they were both leaning forward to see the monitor in front of them – a 142.48. Now you were talking! That was the kind of score Viktor wanted this far into the season!

Next to him, Yuuri was staring at the score in utter shock. Viktor laughed and pulled him into a hug, pressing a kiss to his temple. “Welcome to the 140 club,” he whispered, and Yuuri responded with, “Oh my god!”

Next to them, Yakov seemed somewhat satisfied that they had just snatched one of the world’s top fifteen free skate scores.

“But you can do better,” Yakov reminded them sternly when they finally got up to leave, and Viktor was inclined to agree.

* * *

The St. Petersburg Yuuri returned to wasn’t the one he had left: he spent the ride back with his hand in Viktor’s, hidden under the team jackets they used as covers as they dozed off. He had never known that the act of hand-holding could feel so utterly addictive. Viktor fell asleep quickly, and every now and then someone walked past to use the toilet at the back of the bus, and Yuuri sat still, Viktor’s head on his shoulder, Viktor’s hand in his under their jackets – hiding in plain sight.

They came back with a silver, rising to the podium but not defeating Yurio and Otabek, who were clearly mad that their free skate score hadn’t beaten theirs – the short program lead kept the youngsters firmly on the gold, however. And then there’d been the medal ceremony, with flowers and watches given to them, followed by the press conference, the interviews, and they had posed for pictures, signed autographs, taken selfies with fans, done social media spots for their skate provider – the list was endless, and he had slept soundlessly when it had all been done, Yakov directing them to their rooms to make sure Viktor didn’t even think of throwing a party. And in the morning they had rushed for the coach, and at the border Viktor and Yuuri realised they had somehow gotten their passports mixed up, both trying to re-enter Russia with the other’s. The border control staff hadn’t been amused, and Yuuri couldn’t understand how he could be so dazed as to attempt entering Russia with Viktor’s passport, which was a different colour than his own, usually anyway.

But even in the madness of it all, a new current linked him to Viktor. It was their own, invisible and unspoken, but there. Viktor’s touch on him was no longer the same. His touch on Viktor had changed also. Neither of them knew how far that touch would go, circumstances permitting. Yuuri felt short of breath just thinking about it.

Could people tell that something had changed? In less than a minute, with a simple kiss, Yuuri
hardly recognised the world around him anymore. In the few moments they hadn’t been busy, Yuuri found himself unable to think of anything except Viktor’s mouth, and the taste of it, the feel of it, and of all the other places he wanted to kiss Viktor’s mouth if given the chance. After the free skate he’d worried he’d be unable to sleep with Viktor’s hotel room only a few doors away, but at least exhaustion had kept him from tossing and turning.

And now they were home, the rink coming to view, people awaking and reaching for their coats and bags. It was mid-afternoon on a Monday, and Viktor gave him a warm smile that was somehow so different from all other smiles they had shared before. Butterflies fluttered, and he felt dumb and speechless, skin tingling, short of breath…

“How do you need a ride home?” Viktor asked him when they had gotten their bags. Yuuri’s heart thudded wantonly. Viktor was somehow so calm about it all, and Yuuri was full of nerves.

But before he could even answer, Yurio had marched up to them. “I need a ride!” he announced.

Viktor’s smile faltered. “Oh. Well, sure.”

So Yurio stuffed the backseat with his luggage, and Viktor and Yuuri’s bags fit in the boot. “You can drop Katsudon off first,” Yurio instructed, typing away on his phone in the backseat, hood over his head – still brooding, clearly, that Viktor and Yuuri had won the free skate.

Viktor sighed but did as instructed, warning Yurio that he needed to go get Makkachin from the kennel too. Poor girl – the competitive season wasn’t easy for her. Yuuri missed her cuddles, too.

When they got to Sergei’s building, Viktor offered to help bring the bags in, and Yuuri rushed to thank him, the two reaching to unbuckle their seatbelts a tad too quickly. Dramatically, from the backseat, Yurio said, “Fine, I’ll help too.” They shared a look – that invisible chord again, tied up so tight around Yuuri’s heart and guts, tugging. They hadn’t asked for help. They didn’t want it.

But there Yurio was, angrily hauling Yuuri’s bags to the lift. Yuuri kept looking at Viktor, who met his gaze with a hint of frustration in it. Yurio was oblivious. Viktor ended up getting the stairs, and he and Yurio took the lift up with the luggage. Yurio kept talking about a particularly tasty meat pie he’d had in Helsinki, not as good as a pirozhki but similar. Yurio asked when they should go to the cat café again, and Yuuri agreed to go later that week.

Together they got the bags to the living room. Viktor lingered. Yuuri wanted him to linger. Yurio said, “Right, now drop me off so you can go get your dog.”

“Sure,” Viktor said in defeat. Yuuri wondered if Viktor felt even a fraction of the longing twirling in his guts, but Viktor looked at him in a way that was new – everything was so new – and Yuuri realised Viktor did. “I’ll talk to you soon?”

“Yes.” Soon. Sooner than soon.

Viktor nodded, but Yurio was already out the door with a quick wave, calling a “Come on, old man!” Viktor sighed, door closing behind them.

Yuuri exhaled, stood in the living room with his bags. Okay. Okay, maybe they both needed a breather after everything that had happened. The disastrous short program, the talk, him telling Viktor about Fumio, and then the kiss – god, the kiss! – and then the free skate, better than anything Yuuri had ever done. A breather was good.

He hadn’t even decided what to do first – unpack, nap, shower, freak out and gush that Viktor had kissed him? – when the doorbell rang.
He opened it to find Viktor there, alone, and before he could ask anything, Viktor kissed him. Yuuri hadn’t realised how desperately he needed to be kissed again until his arms were looped around Viktor’s neck, nose squashed to Viktor’s, mouths fusing. The kiss felt desperate and rushed, a sense of urgency in it. It wasn’t slow or sweet, or any of those things Yuuri had let himself daydream about.

They stopped for air, Viktor’s hands cupping his face. Viktor’s eyes were focused on his lips, and Yuuri was burning up. And he let out a little choked noise, and then Viktor’s mouth returned, wet and tasting of the cherry flavoured sports drink he’d had earlier, and Viktor pushed closer, harder, and Yuuri’s mouth opened, his brain was foggy, tracing the taste of Viktor until their tongues met. And oh, this was what kissing Viktor was like – hot and wet and cherry flavoured.

And did he intend to stop at a single kiss? He wasn’t sure because their bodies flushed, his hands were in Viktor’s hair, moaning against Viktor’s mouth, and Viktor was kissing him back freely, their tongues brushing together, as Viktor’s fingers were digging into the small of his back.

Viktor broke the kiss. Yuuri couldn’t tell left from right, and his glasses were a little foggy. Oh. Oh, this was maddening.

“Call me,” Viktor said.

“Wha…?” he managed.

Viktor smirked and was gone.

* * *

come over?

That was his line, after hours of uncertainty: come over? Yuuri didn’t know what else to do – he felt like he was losing his mind. Viktor had said call, not text, but the thought of calling Viktor seemed too much. Too needy.

But he was needy. He’d been left aroused and dizzy. He’d tried to will it away, but it had accompanied him to the shower, where he had bit on his lip, hand shooting down to touch himself, and he had gotten off in one minute flat. Then he had napped and woken up with a new hard-on, which he had willed away somehow, but not before asking his dick why must it be like this. His dick had not responded, but had gotten even harder, perhaps in defiance.

He kept pacing, and his clothes kept rubbing his skin in a way that wasn’t at all normal, and the taste of Viktor was in his mouth, the ghost of Viktor’s hands on his hips enough to send a shiver through him. They’d been up close and personal with each other for months now – there was hardly a spot on his body that Viktor hadn’t touched, apart from the obvious. Now all of those thousands of touches weren’t enough – nowhere near enough. Yuuri felt starved.

God, what would Viktor think – it had barely been four hours. come over? It was already nine o’clock, and Viktor would –

A new message: be there in thirty xx

Oh. Ah. Oh.

He swallowed, phone burning in his grip. This was a bad idea. This was the worst idea. Viktor was coming over.
He puffed the cushions on the sofa, put away the dried dishes, went to brush his teeth, changed his t-shirt three times, then panicked and went through his toiletries bag – and yes, an old bottle of lube, half-used, and he had condoms, what was the expiry date on them? Good for two more months! Good! That was good, that…

God, he would embarrass himself, he wasn’t a good kisser, what if Viktor wanted to be deep-throated, Yuuri would choke, he’d seen Viktor in the rink showers hundreds of times by now: a good size even when flaccid. And what if Yuuri just wasn’t very good, Viktor had slept with more people so Viktor might find his love-making skills lacking and immature – Yuuri was twenty-three, but there was probably so much stuff he didn’t even know about!

And yet, even as he fretted, he mapped Viktor’s body in his mind, its contours, dips, the hard muscle, bone, the warmth of Viktor, the smell of him – now, the taste of him. And oh he wanted, he wanted so bad he ached.

Yuuri curled up on the couch, wondering if he’d gone mad. He just wanted to be close to Viktor, closer. As close as two people could get.

It’d been twenty-four minutes when his doorbell rang. He scrambled up to his feet, the door nearly flying open when he got there. And Viktor was – was even better, somehow, than he remembered, stood there in a wool coat that undoubtedly was more expensive than half of Yuuri’s wardrobe put together, and then Viktor was inside, the door shut, and Viktor had picked him up and pressed him to the wall, and his legs wrapped around Viktor’s waist, arms looping around his neck, and Viktor kissed him long and hard. His heart was racing, his body was tingling, and he was so, so screwed.

“Hi,” Viktor grinned against his mouth, holding him up like it was nothing – Viktor spent his days picking him up and carrying him around on the ice as it was.

“Hi,” he managed to respond, mouth chasing Viktor’s. “Thanks for coming.” Thanks for coming?! “Pleasure,” Viktor said and kissed him again. He ompf’ed against Viktor’s mouth, then groaned, carding Viktor’s hair thoughtlessly. Oh, this was good. This was definitely an improvement. Viktor licked over his bottom lip. “Was starting to think you forgot all about me.”

Yuuri whined in protest, mumbling, “Don’t tease,” and Viktor laughed.

They pressed their foreheads together, and Yuuri’s mouth felt warm and tingly already. Viktor’s hands slipped from his waist to his behind, one hand on each cheek, holding him up firmly. Yuuri wished he wasn’t wearing clothes, then felt self-conscious and buried his face in Viktor’s neck and tried to calm down. Viktor smelled good there, and he placed a kiss above Viktor’s collarbone. Viktor swallowed, audibly. Yuuri let himself place kisses up Viktor’s neck to his ear, nose burying in Viktor’s hair, which was so soft and smelled of Viktor’s expensive jasmine-infused shampoo. Was this a good idea? Was this a sensible thing to do?

“You okay?” Viktor asked, voice low in his ear. He made a noise that wasn’t a yes or a no. “You know I am more than fine with a hallway make out session.” Viktor pressed a kiss over his ear. “Slow is good for me.”

Yuuri smiled against Viktor’s cheek. They had taken it slow, if Yuuri took into account how long he’d wanted Viktor. He’d barely dared to ever vocalise the thought, even to himself, because it had seemed so far out of his reach.

“Let’s go to the bedroom,” he said.
Viktor shuddered, but then nodded. “Okay. Sure.”

Viktor put him back down and took off his nice coat, and Yuuri stood there in a rumbled t-shirt and pyjama bottoms as Viktor hung up the garment. He straightened his glasses nervously as Viktor toed off his shoes, struggling with them and mumbling to himself in Russian. It appeared that Viktor Nikiforov, Olympic silver medallist, was nervous. Yuuri instantly felt more at ease.

They walked to the bedroom, hand-in-hand with Yuuri leading the way, during which Yuuri had time to question how this could be real, how was it possible that he was about to have a boy in his room, unsupervised, and that it was Viktor. Yuuri closed the door behind them – he’d made the bed, pillows straight and pristine and – and alluring? Maybe? It was dark outside already, the curtain drawn, and his (Sergei’s) double bed took up most of the small bedroom, lit by the nightstand lamp.

Viktor exhaled and sat on the bed to take his socks off. Yuuri stalled, then took off his glasses, putting them on the nightstand next to the, er, provisions. Viktor’s hair was a mess from Yuuri running his hands through it, and oh, what else of Viktor’s could he make a mess of? Viktor’s t-shirt had a loose neck line, dipping down to expose collarbone and chest, and Yuuri wanted to cover it with marks of his mouth badly.

Viktor noticed the lube and condoms Yuuri had left on the nightstand. “Ah. You, uh. Have the, er, things.” Had he assumed too much? Viktor wiped at his mouth, then quickly added, “Full disclosure, it’s been a while since I –” And Viktor motioned between them and the bed.

But Yuuri knew that already – they had been inseparable for months. Whatever activity Viktor had probably engaged in had been minor enough for Yuuri to not even notice.

So he said, “Yeah, me too. It’s, uhm, been ten months or so.”

“Ten? Ah. Sure. Erm, for me it’s been over two years?” Viktor said with a questioning lilt to his voice, and Yuuri nearly choked on nothing but air. But- But! Viktor shrugged, appearing sheepish. “I mean, casual sex is fine and all, up to a point. But it can become – flat, in a way? I wasn’t getting much out of it, beyond the, uh, obvious. I figured I’d wait for someone I cared about. I mean, at the time I didn’t think it’d take this long, but suddenly it’s over two years later, and, well.”

“Oh,” he managed. In no world had he imagined that his dry spell was shorter than Viktor’s, who was sex on legs, most eligible bachelor, sex symbol, and could have just about anyone. But he liked sockless Viktor. He liked sockless Viktor sat on his bed, with red kinesio tape wrapped around his left foot, saying that he wanted to care about his partner, because that put Yuuri in some other category for Viktor than most other people. His chest tightened painfully, desire making him dizzy. “We’ll ease into it?” he offered, which had been Viktor’s line in 100% of Yuuri’s fantasies about this, but now was somehow his.

Viktor gave him a warm, utterly irresistible smile. “Yeah, I’d like that.” And Viktor held out his hand. “Let’s figure it out together?”

How Yuuri didn’t trip on his feet in his rush to get to Viktor would forever remain a mystery.

He let himself be pulled in, stepping between Viktor’s thighs. Viktor’s hands ran up his sides, and he leaned down to kiss Viktor again. Two years? Viktor should be made love to weekly – perhaps daily. Bihourly. So he kissed Viktor with new determination and longing, and the connection made his nerves ease: kissing Viktor felt so simple and natural, now that he had done it once, twice, thrice…
Viktor’s hands slipped under his t-shirt, and Yuuri nearly stumbled in his effort to get back into Viktor’s lap, straddling him on the bed. There was a little distance between them still, and was he going to – or would Viktor go for it first, or –

It wasn’t as if they didn’t know. The shower room at the rink was a row of showerheads, them nude next to one another, but protocol dictated that they were not to look – or get caught looking. They knew exactly what they were getting into in that respect, at least. And Viktor wasn’t subtle, coming to the dance studio in leggings that did not hide the assets between his legs at all, and Yuuri had accidentally groped Viktor’s crotch during spin practice at least three times and counting.

Viktor’s hands were now under his shirt, trailing over his sides and up. Viktor’s thumbs rubbed over his nipples, which sent a jolt right through him. He gasped and slipped in further, right into Viktor’s lap, and they both stilled. Yuuri’s cock, tenting in his pyjamas, was pressing against Viktor’s stomach, and there was a bulge in Viktor’s trousers, warm against him.

Their lips hovered over each other’s. Viktor slowly circled his thumbs over his nipples again, and then again, and he jerked against Viktor, who had the audacity to smirk.

“Take it off?” Viktor asked, and Yuuri fumbled to pull off his t-shirt, throwing it over his shoulder – Viktor saw him shirtless daily, nearly. But this time Viktor began kissing his chest slowly, starting at the dip of his sternum, mouth wet and hot. Yuuri bit on his bottom lip and whined, and Viktor moved his mouth over his left nipple, tongue brushing over the hardening flesh, and Yuuri all but rutted against him, head rolling back. His fingers dug into the meat of Viktor’s shoulders, and Viktor’s mouth enclosed over his other nipple, sucking and licking over it. Yuuri wasn’t going to survive this – nope, not even a little.

“Your mouth is so good,” he confessed, stupidly, and out of breath.

Viktor chuckled against his chest. “I’m glad.” Viktor’s hands on Yuuri’s hips were pulling him closer, their erections obvious. “Anywhere else you want me to kiss you?”

“Everywhere.”

“Well, that’s a dangerous offer,” Viktor said, peppering languid kisses on his chest, “but okay.” Yuuri leaned down to catch his mouth again.

They ended up lying on the bed, Viktor on top of him, mouths fused, hands restless. Viktor’s t-shirt got discarded quickly, and Yuuri bit into Viktor’s shoulder, pretty and pale, perfect. His pyjama bottoms were hanging dangerously low on his hips, but this was better because now Viktor’s cock, still in his trousers, was pressing against him. Yuuri pushed his hips up to brush against Viktor, and Viktor pushed down to meet him, grinding down. Viktor between his legs, thrusting against him, them practically humping each other – keep it up and Yuuri would come in his pyjama bottoms, no question about it.

His mouth already felt worn and raw, but the feel of Viktor’s tongue was addictive – Viktor was a very good kisser, pulling on his top lip teasingly, licking over his mouth, diving back in. Yuuri was slowly losing his mind.

He slid his hands down Viktor’s bare back – smooth, muscular, down to the dip above Viktor’s ass, and then he gulped before moving his hands between them, across the hard muscle of Viktor’s lower stomach, and to the zip of his trousers. Viktor stilled, heaving. Yuuri stared up at Viktor, maintaining eye contact as he undid the top button and then slid the zip down.
“The, uh,” Viktor said, and Yuuri slid his hand inside, cupping Viktor through the thin fabric of his underwear. Viktor was satisfyingly hard, hot to the touch, hips pushing into the palm of his hand immediately. “Okay, right, ah,” Viktor mumbled, and Yuuri would have smirked hadn’t he been so, so screwed.

Viktor sat up and pushed his trousers down to his knees. Viktor’s black thong – what else had Yuuri expected, really (the thong had starred in so many fantasies already) – wasn’t at all useful in keeping Viktor’s hardened cock modestly hidden. The bulge was anything but modest – straining, in fact.

Viktor glanced down at his cloth-covered erection, then at Yuuri’s tenting bottoms. “Same time?” Viktor offered, and Yuuri swallowed and nodded. Viktor rolled off him, pushing down his trousers, slipping off his underwear, as Yuuri less gracefully kicked his bottoms off until he was naked, lying next to a likewise bare Viktor.

Viktor looked at him – studied him, but Yuuri studied him right back, too curious and too full of need to be shy. Viktor’s body was perfectly carved everywhere, hard abs, muscled thighs, nothing Yuuri hadn’t seen before, the V of Viktor’s hips more pronounced by their months of training, centred by neatly trimmed dark hair around a flushed, fully erect cock.

He moved over Viktor quickly, pinning him against the bed and kissing him. Viktor went down willingly, hands moving to his hips. Their legs slotted together, knees knocking first, but Yuuri quickly moved down, kissing Viktor’s chest in his haste. He grabbed Viktor’s thighs and pushed them apart, and before Viktor could say anything, he had pushed Viktor’s foreskin back and taken the tip of Viktor’s cock into his mouth. Two fists grabbed his hair, painfully, and Viktor tensed and cursed, but Yuuri was pushing his tongue against the hot, taunt flesh, utterly greedy. And now he knew the taste of Viktor’s sex, musky and salty, and he shivered as his mouth moved over the first few inches of Viktor’s cock.

“Oh Jesus,” Viktor breathed, one hand still in his hair, the other on his shoulder. He wanted to make Viktor sound like that all the time. Viktor tasted so good, felt so good, god he wanted to pleasure Viktor however he could if Viktor kept moaning like that… “Oh, okay, ah – Ah!” Viktor groaned, and Yuuri had so many blowjob fantasies involving Viktor that he didn’t even know which one to execute first.

But before he could start, Viktor pushed him off, gently – a wet pop sounded when the reddened head of Viktor’s cock slipped out, bouncing a little. Yuuri made a protesting sound because he’d barely gotten to do anything, but Viktor pulled him up on the bed, arms twisting around his shoulders, and kissed him, tongue meeting his, and groaned. “I’m definitely too, uh. Worked up for that,” Viktor whispered, “and I’d like to last.” Yuuri couldn’t protest too much. Viktor exhaled against his lips. “You taste like me.”

“Yeah?” he asked, dizzy, but the taste of Viktor’s sex still lingered on his tongue. Viktor’s erection was hard against his, and he moved to rub against it. “I like how you taste.”

Viktor’s eyes burned hot. Ah, Viktor liked being told. “You like it?”

“Yes,” he admitted, nearly blushing after all of this already, licking over Viktor’s lips before meeting his tongue in another sloppy kiss. Viktor flipped them around, and Yuuri found himself on his back, Viktor moving on top. His legs were nudged apart, and he obliged, skin burning. Viktor sat between his parted legs and grabbed the lube with determination, pouring a generous amount on his palm.

Then Viktor hovered over him again, sticky palm coming down to circle around his cock. He
jerked, resting up on his elbows as Viktor touched him – hand large, fingers warm. Viktor lowered himself onto him, cock sliding up next to his own, hand looping over the both of them, erections pressed together. Yuuri didn’t have time to settle before Viktor began jerking them off together. Yuuri died, right then and there, mouth slack, Viktor’s lips on his throat, both of their hips restlessly moving to fuck the ring of Viktor’s fist, their cocks rubbing together. Oh, it was good, it was so agonisingly good. Yuuri was trying to hold back the utterly embarrassing noises locked in his throat, his breathing loud and erratic.

“We can get off like this,” Viktor offered breathlessly, grinding his hips down, cock rubbing against his. The lube had made them both sticky. “This is, ah – ngh, this is good.”

“Oh,” he agreed breathlessly. Forget good – amazing was more accurate.

He reached between them, pushed Viktor’s hand away, and began jerking them off, both cocks in one loose fist. Viktor’s hands pressed to the sides of his head, hips pushing down. Yuuri looked down on them, two flushed cockheads shining with pre-come, pressed together in the grip of his fist. Yuuri had to slow down in order not to come from the sight alone.

He licked his lips and asked, “Is that what you want?”

Viktor’s mouth was nibbling on his earlobe now. “I just want to us to come together.” Okay, that was – illegal? Viktor could not say things like that, holy – “Just tell me how you want to come. That this?” And Viktor fucked into Yuuri’s fist, the friction between their cocks maddening. But – But no. He shook his head. Viktor stopped his assault on his ear and throat, and pulled back enough to look at him, silver bangs over his eyes. “No?”

“I want to – us to. Want you inside me,” he breathed, trying to hide the desperation.


But hadn’t Viktor said he’d waited two years to – Unless Yuuri wasn’t special enough, unless –

But before Yuuri could finish the thought that ended in nothing but rejection, Viktor kissed him wildly, swatting Yuuri’s hand away from their cocks. Viktor pushed Yuuri’s legs further apart, hands on the backs of his thighs. Yuuri spread out beneath him, his hole exposed and offered. Viktor kissed his mouth, eagerly, lube back in his hands, and then lube-covered fingers were already reaching between his legs.

Viktor had long fingers – delicate, dextrous. Yuuri had always known this. Now he knew that again, but very differently, as two pushed into him, and he moved against the sudden burn wantonly. Oh, that was exactly where he’d wanted Viktor for weeks and weeks now, stretching him open only to fill him up. Viktor pulled his fingers out, added more lube, pushed in again, and their mouths fused as Yuuri rolled his hips into the feel of two fingers fucking him open, the heel of Viktor’s palm pressing into the sensitive skin behind his balls. Everything seemed to burn and tingle and throb at the same time. He wanted Viktor over him, hand between his legs, forever.

“You’re really tight,” Viktor said against his mouth, but Yuuri was left unclear if this was good or bad. Viktor may even have sounded worried.

But Yuuri kept his hand on Viktor’s cock, stroking him, both of them touching the other and kissing. “You’re really hard,” he returned.

Viktor snorted against his lips. “Touché.”

Yuuri laughed and realised that he couldn’t fathom wanting anyone other than Viktor ever again.
God, there was – there was a thought.

Viktor’s fingers pressed into him further, against his prostate, and he keened. “There, baby?” Viktor asked softly, sounding a little anguished but also pleased, and he nodded, words having left him. Viktor started rubbing him there with two fingers, and everything pulsed, his blood soaring with such heat that his cock throbbed with his heart beats. Their legs were slotted together, their limbs in whatever arrangement worked, sheets getting wrinkled as they rutted on the bed.

“Please,” he asked, and Viktor was kind, pulling his fingers out and reaching for the condoms. Yuuri lay back on the bed, heaving, legs spread wide. Viktor fumbled with the condom but managed to roll it on, rubbing lube over himself. Yuuri knew his mouth had dropped open very ungracefully from watching him.

Then Viktor was lifting Yuuri’s legs onto his shoulders, bending him over as Viktor leaned over him. He’d been left wet and open and needing, and Viktor pushed the head of his cock there, rubbing over him, hot and hard. Viktor’s face was one of concentration, a deep flush on his cheeks, and then Viktor pushed in, slowly.

Yuuri’s back arched with a sharp moan, gripping the sheets in both fists. Viktor was big, filling him up, and Yuuri was vaguely aware he was making sounds that amounted to, “Oh, ah, mmm, a-ah – Oh!” Viktor had pushed in all the way, and Yuuri’s hips lifted off the mattress, adjusting, thighs trembling. Viktor pulsedated inside him, and every miniscule movement of his hips dragged Viktor’s cock in him. He tried to breathe through the sensation.

Viktor was very still above him, one hand squeezing the base of his cock, looking a little pained. “You feel so good,” Yuuri breathed. He felt drunk, nearly.

“Not helping,” Viktor interrupted, eyes shut tight. “Give me just – Oh, fuck.” Viktor thrust in a little and then stopped again. “Okay, I – You’ve got such a tight hole, I need a- a minute.”

Yuuri let himself slowly rest down on the mattress, legs high on Viktor’s shoulders still keeping him tensed. “Please,” he breathed, hand trailing down Viktor’s chest. Please, please, please… Viktor’s eyes snapped open. “You’re lethal.”

“Me?” he questioned, because Viktor was filling him up, but not moving – and all Yuuri wanted was for Viktor to have him.

But then Viktor began to move, and Yuuri was sorry for pushing it. Viktor gripped his waist firmly, and began fucking into him, at first tentatively, but once they knew they had it figured out, Viktor’s movements turned hard and fast. Their bodies smacked together, the bed began creaking, and Yuuri’s toes curled up in the air above Viktor’s shoulders. Viktor filled him up perfectly, pushing him open on each demanding slide. The sensation burnt and tingled, and Yuuri’s cock throbbed and leaked between them.

Viktor’s eyes were fixed on the ceiling above him. His hands slid down Viktor’s sweat-slicked back to Viktor’s ass, muscles toned and tensed, and he urged Viktor in further, eyes nailed on the white ceiling above as Viktor bit into his neck and
fucked him, and Yuuri could only make noise and take it, blissed out of his mind.

He tilted his head to the side, mouth finding Viktor’s. Viktor slowed down in his thrusts, grinding into him. They looked at each other, and how insane was it that their bodies were one in that moment, that they could slot together in such heated pleasure. This knowledge would be the end of them, Yuuri realised, for better or worse.

Viktor’s thumb brushed over his swollen lips, expression gentle. His hips had come to a standstill. Yuuri idly placed a kiss on Viktor’s thumb, and Viktor looked briefly hesitant. Yuuri met his gaze, and Viktor brushed their noses together. “I really like you.”

Sudden heat tinged the tips of his ears. He shivered, cock rubbing against Viktor’s stomach. “I really like you too.”

“Yeah?” Viktor asked, picking up his pace again, slowly.

“Yeah,” he moaned, biting on his bottom lip. Viktor liked him! Which was – was great, because they were sweaty and mid-sex, and Viktor was the prettiest, sexiest thing he’d ever seen, and Yuuri liked him so much that he felt dizzy. His hand snaked down to stroke his cock and he whimpered.

“You close?” Viktor asked, and Yuuri couldn’t even mock the hopeful tone in Viktor’s words because he was, so he nodded. “Me too,” Viktor said, and Yuuri kissed him, stroking himself with a tightened grip. “Wanted this for so long,” Viktor then added, hips forceful and steady, and Yuuri wondered if this was what madness felt like.

“You have?”

“Yeah – you spread out like this, my cock so deep in you. Oh, you’re so pretty like this, you’re taking me so well. God, look at you, so close to orgasm, shaking just like this – Fuck, Yuuri, tell me I wasn’t alone in wanting this, I –”

“No,” he rushed out, stomach in knots, balls drawn tight, trembling. Oh, oh – “I’ve wanted it too, wanted you, always, all the time, oh I’m about to –”

And Viktor pushed in, hard, and Yuuri spilled between them instantly, hand twisting around his pulsating cock, streaks of come splattering Viktor’s chest and his belly in generous amounts. He was winded by the force of it, and his muscles squeezed tight around Viktor’s length, which only made the orgasm that much more intense, his body shaking and trembling as it rattled through him. Viktor was watching him, and Yuuri heard him groan before jerking above him, hips fucking into him, pushing in deep, Viktor gasping, and – and Yuuri watched through half-closed eyes as Viktor came, sweat on his brow, chest and neck flushed, mouth dropped open, gorgeous, gorgeous. Yuuri instantly pulled him down into a kiss, and Viktor nearly collapsed in his arms.

They breathed into each other’s mouths, Viktor throbbing inside him still. Oh. Oh, oh god. His thighs felt sore, but it was a distant observation, Viktor’s mouth languidly slotting with his. Their hips slowly kept grinding together, easing out of the orgasms, until Viktor jerked and stopped – Yuuri felt sensitive all over, especially inside, raw and exposed. He brushed Viktor’s hair, roots wet, scalp warm.

Viktor laughed weakly, their lips still touching. “God, that wasn’t too bad for two celibates, was it?”

Yuuri scoffed, fighting off a smile, not ready to form sentences yet. His nose slid against Viktor’s
Viktor looked at him, expression soft, and Yuuri was vaguely surprised to realise that he had nothing left keeping Viktor away from the most private nooks of him. Viktor had snuck into the core of him somehow.

“Since when, exactly,” Viktor asked, “have you wanted this?”

Yuuri licked his lips, tried to speak. What even was the answer to that? “Uhm, since,” he began – thinking was hard, their bodies still joined. Their voices were barely above whispers, tangled up in each other in the now quiet bedroom. Why be coy at this point? “Since, uhm, Oslo, when you got your first European gold?”

Viktor frowned, but then laughed, pressing his smile to Yuuri’s mouth. “That was ten years ago,” Viktor noted, nudging him with his nose. “I mean since you’ve actually known me.”

In that case… “Since before we came to Russia,” he admitted. “Since the summer.” At least. All their Eros practices leaving him strung up and tense and pining.

Viktor let out a pleased hum, thumb brushing over his ear. “ Hmm, for me it was probably when you first wore your purple leggings to Minako’s studio…”

That would have been – in the very first weeks of Viktor being in Hasetsu. “Oh,” he managed, feeling hot all over again. “Already?”

“Well I wanted you in the club, too – but I didn’t know you then.”

Somehow the thought of Viktor wanting him felt absurd, even in the post-coital glow. Was Viktor sure he hadn’t intended to respond to someone else’s booty call text? But Yuuri steadied himself, his heart bursting, and gathered up the courage to say, “Spend the night?”

It seemed like a stupid thing to ask when Viktor was still in him, now softening – it was a little too needy, perhaps. But Viktor pressed a kiss to his lips, still smiling. “Of course.”

And Yuuri let himself pull Viktor into a hug full of longing that had, at least partly, been satisfied.

* * *

When he woke up, a mouth was pressing to the side of his head in a lingering kiss, which Yuuri didn’t appreciate much through his slumber. He groaned even as he pushed further into the warm embrace engulfing him, because it was damned nice, even with the kiss attack.

“Yuuri,” Viktor’s voice cooed at him, followed by another kiss. Viktor was waking him up with kisses, it seemed, and Yuuri smiled this time even as he longed for more sleep after a night of, er, little sleep. “Yuuri, I need to go.”

He flinched and was instantly awake. Viktor was next to him in bed, under the covers, much more awake than him.

“What?” he managed, throat dry. Their legs were tangled, and Viktor had an arm around him, keeping him close, hand caressing his lower back in gentle circles.

Viktor’s hair was a mess and he looked tired. “I said I need to go.”
“Oh.”

Viktor was leaving.

“Makka’s been alone all night. She needs her morning walk and food.”

Yuuri blinked a second time and realised it was, in fact, morning. He mentally slapped himself.

“Right, of course.” Viktor wasn’t just bolting out the door, then, for no reason, and relief washed over him.

Viktor smiled, exuding warmth, and then pushed him onto his back, and Yuuri took him in. This was a different Viktor. This was the Viktor he’d slept with, not once but twice. And as if on cue, Viktor looked down their bodies, to where Yuuri’s erection was visible through the covers.

“Still?” Viktor asked with an arched eyebrow, sounding rather impressed, and Yuuri felt embarrassed. Viktor had gotten up in the night to use the bathroom, and by the time he’d returned to bed, Yuuri had been awake, hard, and ready to go again. Viktor had matched his enthusiasm, however, or perhaps rivalled it. Now, five seconds into consciousness, Yuuri was ready again.

“Errr, it’s just a – an involuntary reaction to having you in my bed.” In other words, his body was completely overreacting to a little bit of sex with the hottest guy he had ever known.

Viktor pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth. “Trust me, I would offer a blowjob if I didn’t think we’d end up staying here for two hours longer.” Viktor using the word ‘blowjob’ should be made illegal, Yuuri thought, as he felt himself throb with arousal. Not helping. “Can the reaction wait until we’ve seen to Makkachin?” Viktor’s nose brushed his cheek. “You want to join me, right?”

It was awfully early on their rest day, Yuuri hadn’t had much sleep, was exhausted from Finlandia, now also the sex, he was sore and worn out, and really just wanted to sleep and cuddle and maybe have more sex after they’d rested.

“Yeah, I’ll come with you.” Viktor smelled so nice, like sex and sweat, and Yuuri adored it – but found his own scent less alluring. “I’ll shower really quickly?”

Viktor had gotten dressed by the time Yuuri emerged in a towel, his dick thankfully having given up on the whole boner thing (for now). He’d washed away the come stains, soaped over the bruises of Viktor’s mouth on his chest and hands on his hips, flinched in both pain and arousal when he’d reached to scrub off the lube from his hole, and he brushed his teeth, spearmint overtaking the taste of Viktor’s spit.

Viktor was on his phone on the living room couch, with obvious sex hair, fully dressed. Yuuri rushed to throw clothes on, whatever he could find. He felt confused and disorientated, and he couldn’t find his keys, his phone – the sheets were a mess, an empty condom foil peeking from under a pillow, and he hoped Sergei didn’t mind.

He kept patting his pockets for key, phone, wallet as they left. It was hard to think straight at all.

Viktor had parked right outside, and the air was cold in the October morning, and Viktor tuned into a morning talk show on the radio, and Yuuri felt like the whole thing was happening to someone not him. Viktor was talking about Makkachin, who had been so excited to be reunited with Viktor, and how Viktor had given her one of the soft toys fans had given them in Helsinki. And Yuuri asked which one, doubtful that Makkachin would want it if it didn’t squeak, and it was the sort of non-important conversation they may have had on any other day, too.
Makkachin was beside herself when they got in, jumping up at them both, and Viktor kneeled down to pet her lovingly. She hadn’t done any damage, like Viktor had feared – she sometimes retaliated abandonment with getting into the trash and tearing it to bits. Yuuri looked after Makkachin while Viktor went for a quick shower, and he sat on Viktor’s couch, Makkachin stretched across his lap, begging for belly rubs, which he granted.

The day was getting lighter outside. Yuuri was convinced he was still in bed, across town, fast asleep. Not here. Not with Viktor, not like this.

True to his word, Viktor – known for his twenty-minute showers and half-an-hour beauty regimes – was ready to go in ten minutes, hair still wet. Makkachin started barking with excitement when Viktor grabbed her leash, and they headed back out to the morning where commuting traffic was at its worst.

At the end of Viktor’s street, as they waited to cross, Viktor reached out to take his hand. Yuuri stood there, in his winter coat, heart in his throat.

They stopped to get coffee two blocks later at Viktor’s behest, and Yuuri sipped on his beverage as they walked the rest of the way to the park, Viktor with Makkachin’s lead in one hand, coffee in the other. Viktor set Makkachin free once inside the gates, and she bolted off across a field, zig-zagging – but she never went too far from them, smart as she was. And Viktor simply slipped his hand back into his again.

The park wasn’t too busy: a few joggers, parents pushing prams, some people walking their dogs. A winter sun kept appearing and disappearing between grey clouds. The morning was, in all respects, unremarkable. They walked, drinking their coffees, talking about – about what, Yuuri wouldn’t be able to tell anyone afterwards, except that he remembered them laughing and that Viktor’s hand had been in his. They walked in the park, but Yuuri could have sworn he was walking on air. They walked, and Yuuri could still feel Viktor inside him, which only he knew, and Viktor probably guessed at, but all of it was addicting and new and exciting.

They got to the lake where a little bridge cut across it, a pair of swans floating where the lake hadn’t frozen over yet. Makkachin was in the bushes, getting muddy, but Viktor didn’t seem to mind but rather got his phone out and tried to get a shot of her sniffing around.

They’d finished their coffees, so he took the empty cups to the bins while Viktor kept trying to get Makkachin to pose. Makkachin cared little for the photoshoot, coming to Yuuri instead, carrying a stick and showing it to him proudly.

“Oh, I see,” he laughed when she pranced in front of him with the stick. He tried to grab it but she wouldn’t let go. He kneeled, reasoning with her. “I can’t throw it if you don’t let go, Makka.”

She was not convinced. He tried to get the stick again, but Makka pulled back, butt wiggling. Yuuri did a big show of reaching into his coat pocket, pulling out his hand in a fist. “Ah, do I have treats in here? I think I have a treat.”

Makkachin stared at his fist, processing this, and then let go of the stick, eyes on his closed hand instead, sitting down obediently. “A-ha!” he beamed, straightening up and throwing the stick far across the field. Makkachin bolted after it jubilantly, and Yuuri grinned at the sight of her.

He became aware of Viktor beside him a millisecond before he was pulled into a kiss. Viktor cupped his face in his hands, the kiss slow and soft but full of intent, while in the distance some dog that wasn’t Makkachin was barking and joggers were circling the lake to the side of them. Yuuri gulped and felt dizzy for no apparent reason. Their cold noses brushed together, breaths
rising in the air. Viktor wrapped arms around his middle, holding him close, and he mimicked the movement, encircling Viktor in his arms. The wind ruffled Viktor’s hair, the sun catching it, and Yuuri had to squint, the world full of unexpected light.

And oh, that was it. That was why everything felt foggy and surreal, like the entire morning had been an out-of-body experience: because Yuuri couldn’t believe that this was his life now. Yesterday had been one thing, and now he had spent the night with Viktor, and it was coffees and hand-holding and walking Makkachin, and Yuuri was so happy that his knees felt weak.

“You okay, darling?” Viktor asked softly. He thought about it, and then shook his head. Their foreheads pressed together. “Yeah, me neither,” Viktor said quietly, and Yuuri let out a weak laugh.

He kissed Viktor, in the park, by the lake, with the bridge and the swans.

* * *

They returned to the rink two days later, only to have Yakov call them into his office, where they received instant complaints that neither of them had returned Yakov’s calls. As if Viktor intended to take a call from Yakov when in bed with Yuuri!

Viktor defended their prolonged absence, saying that they had needed an extra rest day, which, perhaps, they may or may not have spent making out on Viktor’s couch and watching movies and making love, but this last part he kept to himself. Furthermore, Yakov was going to be unhappy with them regardless, because they would both skate rather poorly that day: Yuuri was sore, as Viktor well knew, to which he had said that it was only fair to level the playing field as he’d pulled Yuuri into the bedroom and now he, too, was rather sore.

Viktor did not feel bad about this whatsoever.

“Well, check email,” Yakov boomed. “ISU harass me because you can’t read email.”

He and Yuuri looked at each other in confusion. They didn’t have another competition for a month, and Viktor couldn’t imagine what the ISU wanted from them.

But he did as he was told, getting his phone out. There were dozens of emails unread – he rarely bothered to check them these days. But sure enough the ISU administration had sent him an email the day before, and Yuuri leaned in to look at the screen, the email in English and addressed to them both. Viktor scrolled down and oh. Oh, well.

Yuuri yelped. “They’ve invited us to the Rostelecom Cup?!”

All the Grand Prix events were welcome to invite a few wild cards, usually skaters of whatever country it was being held in. He and Yuuri had just been extended such an invitation to Moscow, to compete with the best in the world.

“There’s more,” Yakov said, looking moody as always. “Nationals are coming, and once Nationals over, Federation decide on skaters for Olympics. Yuri and Otabek, naturally. The other pair? No promises, no nothing. But Federation call me. We talk.” Yakov shrugged and then dropped a thick stack of papers onto the desk. “This – This, ah. Citizenship. Application. You apply, Yuuri, you understand? You apply. And maybe we know someone, and maybe you become Russian. Fast. Yes?”

Viktor, who had decades of experience in behind-the-scenes politics and scheming, knew his mouth had dropped open.
Yakov shoved the stack of papers at them. “Take! And go warm up. Much work to do.”

They were ushered out of Yakov’s office just as quickly, and then they stood in the corridor, staring at each other. Rostelecom Cup invite – okay. Okay. And then – applying for citizenship? The Russian Federation wanting Yuuri to apply for citizenship, to fast-track it, get it to the right people, so that the two of them could qualify for – for the Russian Olympic team.

Yuuri, who hardly ever said a bad word, clutched the paperwork and whispered, “Holy shit.”

That roughly cut it, Viktor thought.

Chapter End Notes

The drama continues..! Come find me on Twitter or tumblr, or leave some kudos or rec this to your friends if you liked it, and let me know what you thought!

I hope you've continued to enjoy this ball of smutty fluff with skating drama! <3 Part 3 will hopefully go up by mid-April the latest! Thank you!
Aaaah, here it is! God, I struggled with this chapter so much! All you go onto read was re-written at least five times, and the order of events changed so many times. I think I pulled it all together in the end, but by god I'm exhausted! You might notice that for skating scenes I sort of skip the skating, but this is because there is MORE skating still to come and I want to save the blow-by-blow for those moments.

This part got bigger and bigger because I got pulled into developing their relationship and them working through their insecurities / fears to become closer, and it got to 24k and Nationals had‘t even happened yet, and I despaired and had to restructure. Hopefully this still has a nice flow, but I am aware it’s not as smooth as the start of the story! As for one scene close to the start, Viktor was owed, okay? He has waited very patiently for months, and I think we can all agree that it was time he got his. Also do check the tags for any kink warnings - if you don’t like something, just skip it!

Because this was edited so much, there will absolutely be typos from sloppy editing! Please point them out to me, and I’ll fix them! Enjoy the update! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yuuri was scared of Yakov in more ways than one. Yakov was terrifying – picture him shouting angrily in Russian all the time and not having good enough language skills to know what was even being said. Yuuri did not wish to contemplate what would happen if Yakov found out that he and Viktor had engaged in – or were engaging in, er. Or that they were now doing stuff, with each other, that went beyond mere friendship. But it wasn’t unheard of in pair skating, far from it. You spent all your time with someone, you grew close… Fans were suspicious of them as it already was.

Yuuri didn’t want to cause another scandal, on top of the doping scandal and then skating with Viktor – and now this? He didn’t like breaking rules, no matter how arbitrary, and he didn’t welcome the thought of a media frenzy.

Yuuri worried about this until late at night, biting on his bottom lip, distracted only by Viktor running lazy fingers across his belly, hand under his t-shirt. Their legs were entwined, Viktor’s head resting on his chest, while Makkachin snoozed at the bottom of Viktor’s bed. Yuuri needed to leave soon, but this was amazing: holding Viktor, being held in turn…

He softly carded Viktor’s hair, perhaps indulging in yet another teenage fantasy of his, but Viktor’s hair was just as soft as they’d suspected, he would tell his fourteen-year-old self: just as soft! So he kept brushing through it, mesmerised.

“It’s not lying if we just don’t mention to Yakov that we’re doing this, right?”

“Huh?” Viktor asked, sounding like he’d been about to fall asleep. Viktor stretched against him, pushing in closer, using Yuuri as a pillow – he absolutely did not mind. “Please don’t talk about
Yakov when we’re in bed together,” Viktor said, and Yuuri smiled at the ceiling. ‘We’. There was a ‘we’ of some sort that equated to him and Viktor. “So what if he finds out? What can he do? Barge in here and tell you to go home? He’s handled misbehaviour much worse than this, trust me.”

Yuuri kept carding through the silver of Viktor’s hair; Viktor was limp and pliant against him, clearly enjoying the attention. Viktor was so nicely shaped, and there were so many ways to cuddle him and hug him… Yuuri wanted to learn them all, was amazed and grateful he had been given the chance – how, exactly? He still wasn’t sure.

“But even so,” he said, “we need to be careful. Focus on being discreet. More discreet.”

Viktor rose to rest on one elbow, frowning at him. “More discreet? How could we be more discreet? We’ve told no one.”

“Yes, I know,” he hurried out. He’d said that if they were not telling Yakov, then it was best not to tell anyone, and Viktor had agreed. But Yuuri didn’t know how to say that it wasn’t about telling people, it was also about Viktor not sharing an Instagram story of Yuuri sleeping on Viktor’s couch in what was clearly Viktor’s t-shirt, and about not kissing him in the locker room because yes, they were alone, but someone could also walk in. It was about not making Yuuri dizzy with the attention because he was worried he’d get used to it, and in his experience he didn’t get to have nice things, or to keep them for very long. It was about all of those things. “I guess I’m just worried someone will figure it out, and then we’ll be in trouble.”

Viktor shrugged this away. “The whole thing is Georgi and Anya’s fault. They ruined the fun for everyone.”

Maybe that was the word for it: fun.

It’d only been a few weeks, and Yuuri could say, in all honesty, that they had been the best few weeks of his life. And Viktor wasn’t a nobody, Viktor was, in fact, sort of a big deal in Russia and in figure skating, and everywhere Viktor went rumours of his love life followed. Yuuri didn’t want to be caught up in any press coverage, or to be branded as Viktor’s latest conquest or fling. He certainly didn’t want people to think this was why they had started skating together. Besides, when Viktor eventually got bored of him, the break-up would be easier.

“Yakov could kick us out of the rink,” he then said.

“Us? His new Olympic hopefuls?” Viktor questioned, shaking his head.

“We’re not mentioning the O word!” he chastised Viktor, who rolled his eyes like Yuuri was being silly. It was a pipe dream in his view: they needed to get at least silver at Nationals to be put on the Olympic team! Who was to say they would be? If they were to have any chance at all, they needed to stay focused and not get carried away by premature ambition or, as tempting as it was, each other. “You promised we’d focus on one competition at a time.”

Viktor gave him a sleepy smile. “Whatever you say, darling: one competition at a time.”

And so: Rostelecom Cup, where Yurio and Otabek were competing, but so were JJ and Isabella, and Guang Hong and Cao. Yuuri thought it unlikely that they could be on the podium this time, when truly thrown amongst the best in the world.

But Viktor disagreed. “Of course we can beat them,” he said blithely as Yuuri was putting on his shoes. “Our long program is already in the 140s. We just need to get Eros perfected too.”
Viktor wanted a 75 for their next Eros. Yuuri had never scored in the 70s for any short program – his best was their 67.74 from Italy. He told Viktor as much when they were saying goodnight at the door, Viktor having thrown on his luxuriously soft silk robe.

“Ah, but it’s different now,” Viktor said, hands moving to Yuuri’s hips, Viktor’s mouth ghosting over his, “because now you have me.”

A hot wave of want thrummed through him – even then, at eleven o’clock on a Tuesday, after an exhausting day behind them and when they’d already had each other earlier that evening. Helpless, he asked, “Can I come over tomorrow night too?”

Viktor pressed in close, their noses touching. “Of course. But you know, you could just spend the night.”

Yuuri tried not to swoon. “I have the orchids to tend to.”

“You have me to tend to,” Viktor pouted, and Yuuri laughed into the goodnight kiss Viktor gave him.

He felt light-headed as he made his way back home.

* * *

To be fair, the orchids were having a hard time: he tended to them haphazardly when he would return late at night to sleep, spending nearly all evenings with Viktor and Makkachin. And when he was at Sergei’s, he invariably missed Viktor and felt like they hadn’t seen each other in days. Was it ridiculous? Who could he ask? (Again: Phichit? Google?) He knew it was at least 30% hormones, but what was the rest?

Perhaps the time to think about this wasn’t when, for once, he was at Sergei’s, but he was also sprawled over the bed, naked and legs far apart, sputtering on his breath. Viktor, head nestled between his legs, was undoing him with nothing but his mouth. Hadn’t they come over to pick up clean clothes for him before heading to Viktor’s for dinner? How had they ended up pulling each other’s clothes off instead? Yuuri was left unsure, but he completely blamed Viktor for being so sexy that Yuuri wanted him all the time. They should have been at Viktor’s, overviewing their training schedule, and instead…

“I shouldn’t have told you,” he managed, body thrumming with heat.

“What’s that?” Viktor asked, mouth trailing over his perineum back to his hole, tongue rubbing where he was already sensitive. “That you’ve never been eaten out?”

Yuuri whined, back arching. Viktor had seemed to make a point to push Yuuri’s legs apart and put his mouth on him on a regular basis since finding out a week earlier, and Yuuri had already come more than once from Viktor’s tongue in him. He barely knew his own name at this point.

God, if people knew – if anyone knew…! Yuuri was keenly aware of the mirrored sliding doors of the wardrobe, taking up the wall to the right of them, the two of them reflected there. He was too embarrassed to look: to see himself on his back, naked and flushed, legs bent over his stomach as Viktor kept hands on his cheeks, head dipped down to pleasure him.

“God,” Viktor breathed, “to think no one else has gotten to do this…” And then Viktor dove right back into eating him out, having already spent a long time licking and sucking over his hole. Yuuri was losing his mind, pre-come smearing his stomach, his balls aching. He was on edge when Viktor’s tongue pushed into him teasingly, hands sliding up the backs of his thighs, keeping him
At some point there just wasn’t any point being quiet, and he found himself muttering praise about Viktor’s mouth and tongue, struggling for breath as Viktor fucked him with his tongue like there was nothing else Viktor ever planned on doing. Viktor liked knowing, liked commentary, and although it was embarrassing for him, he always passed a point where he didn’t care anymore. His hole felt sensitive, Viktor placing kisses on him, pushing his tongue in. And just when it got too much and he thought he’d come, Viktor moved away, licking over his perineum to his balls, leaving a wet trail of saliva.

“Viktor,” he breathed, or whined, or begged. A bit of all of them.

Viktor sat up on his knees and wiped at his reddened mouth before grinning. Yuuri realised he must look a mess, but Viktor was hard – oh, Viktor was very hard, cock jutting out, flushed a deep red, and Yuuri was about to spread his legs wide just from the sight of it when Viktor tapped his hip. “Turn around.”

“Wha – Huh?” he managed, breathing through the daze.

Viktor smirked, grabbed his hips and flipped him over onto his stomach. Yuuri felt his insides drop, a renewed heat trickling down his spine. Viktor’s lips brushed the nape of his neck, moving downwards, Viktor’s cock brushing over his left buttock. Oh, god, would – He swallowed thickly, moving his legs further apart.

“God,” Viktor murmured against his back, “you’re so sexy.” Yuuri didn’t even know what to do with that.

Viktor placed a trail of wet, open mouthed kisses down his spine before grapping his hips, pulling him up until he got on his hands and knees. Viktor smiled against his lower back, and then Viktor’s mouth was between his cheeks again, tongue licking over him.

Yuuri gasped, dropping down to rest on his forearms, ass offered – he didn’t even care. His cock throbbed as Viktor pushed his tongue in and moaned, then pulled back again. “You’ve got the most perfect hole,” Viktor breathed, “do you know that?”

Yuuri flushed – yes, he’d taken some spread-eagled hole selfies when younger (hadn’t everyone?), but he didn’t particularly think about that part of his body much. Now, on his hands and knees, nearly biting into the pillow, he felt a weird sense of pride. Viktor had spent far too much time eating him out for it to count just as foreplay – the other day Viktor had made Yuuri come with his mouth and then had jerked himself off, which had taken Viktor approximately three strokes – even Viktor had seemed embarrassed. But god, it was a rush to realise they were both getting off on this.

And although he didn’t want to pull away, he did, just to test a theory. Viktor let out a frustrated groan, grabbed his hips, and pulled him back onto his mouth. Yuuri laughed, delirious, which earned him a smack on his left buttock. It stung, but he rather liked it.

“Behave,” Viktor said, biting onto the curve of his ass just a little too hard.

“Or what?” he breathed, surprised by his own cockiness as he felt Viktor’s spit rolling down towards his balls. Oh god, what had happened to him? Was he out of his mind? Probably.

Viktor rubbed two fingers over his hole, then pushed them in without warning. Yuuri gasped, even as he pushed back onto the fingers, pleasure radiating up his spine. Oh that was good, that was – He licked his lips, letting out a soft moan. God, he could easily come from Viktor’s mouth and
fingers if he touched himself at the same time, no question about it.

“There’s something I’ve wanted to do,” Viktor said, “for a very long time.” A hand ran up his back, the other still working the fingers in him, but he was wet and relaxed, grinding back against the fingers. “Give me a condom.”

Yuuri had never reached for the nightstand as fast in his life. Viktor told him to stay still, voice commanding in a way that had heat pooling up in his belly. Soon Viktor had his cock rubbing between his cheeks, and he keened, trying to push back.

“God, Yuuri,” Viktor said, cockhead pushing against him. “Thought about this so much that –”

And then Viktor pushed in, and Yuuri cried out against the pillow, his breath leaving him. Viktor opened him up, filled him completely. Viktor soothed over his back, coming down to kiss his shoulder blade.

“You okay?” Viktor asked, hand moving to twist in his hair. Yuuri was more than okay, but he also realised that he was about to be sorry he’d tried teasing Viktor. Viktor thrust into him, steadily but not too fast – warming up.

“I’m okay,” he managed. Oh, this was bad, this was going to leave Yuuri with nothing but –

“Good,” Viktor said, pushed Yuuri’s head down, and began to fuck him. Yuuri was left without thought, only distantly aware of the loud moans escaping him. He’d gotten better at taking Viktor, having gotten used to the stretch of him, but getting fucked like this was another thing entirely. He was already so sensitive and wound up, and Viktor’s hips snapped with forceful thrusts, pushing in deeper and deeper. The slaps of their bodies joined the headboard banging the wall, and the walls weren’t even that thick, all of the neighbours could probably hear, and Viktor said, “Oh, look at you taking it – god, wanted to fuck you like this for so long.”

Yuuri whined at the back of his throat. “Viktor, oh god, that’s – Ngh, god just like that.”

His throat burned, his hole stretched as Viktor pushed in so deep, and then all he could do was hold on and let himself be fucked, senseless moans filling up the room. Every now and then Viktor yanked him by his hair, and Yuuri’s cock throbbed on the edge of orgasm. It was good, too good, his body tingling.

“No you want it harder?” Viktor asked, when it already was hard enough to make Yuuri’s mind black out. He made noise – inconclusive, both yes and no. “Talk to me.”


“Fuck,” Viktor breathed and did just that, one hand holding the back of his neck. Yuuri was so loud it was embarrassing, but Viktor responded well, too, giving it to him harder but slowing down a little if Yuuri’s moans turned too sharp. He reached down to touch himself, finding himself leaking. His knees ached, his hole felt sore, and yet nothing had ever left him shaking like this, like the hot burn of their joint bodies.

He looked over his shoulder at Viktor, whose chest and neck were reddened, sweat glistening on his throat, silver bangs glued to his forehead. Viktor’s eyes were dark, muscles of his stomach tense, one hand gripping the back of Yuuri’s neck as his hips moved against him, keeping them locked with hard thrusts. Viktor’s mouth was hanging open, breaths unsteady, and they looked at each other.

Viktor’s pace faltered. “Fuck, darling,” Viktor breathed out, leaning down to catch his lips. Yuuri
strained to meet Viktor’s mouth, Viktor’s arm circling around his chest, pressing them together. The kiss broke, and Viktor kept fucking into him, glued to his back, mouth against his shoulder blade. Viktor’s cock rubbed against his prostate, and Yuuri felt a fresh push of pre-come smearing the head of his cock. Oh, oh *fuck* –

Yuuri turned his head to face the wardrobe, where the mirrored wall of sliding doors reflected them. It was evening, the room was well lit, and there they were: him on all fours, flushed and sweaty and out of it, and Viktor hovering over him, cock buried deep in him. Something throbbed inside him with a new, darkened need, but he made a point not to look at himself, but to focus on Viktor.

And Viktor was stunning. He admired the perfect rhythm of his hips, the beauty of Viktor pressing worshipping kisses on his lover’s back. He loved the way Viktor’s back arched when he began pounding into his partner with renewed vigour, hips full of brutal force – his eyes slipped shut from how overwhelming it was, and Viktor stopped. Why did he stop?

“Keep watching,” Viktor said, and Yuuri flushed, realising he’d been caught.

“You look so good,” he admitted, eyes still firmly shut.

“So do you,” Viktor said, warm palm brushing over his back. “Are you watching yourself? Because you should.” A wet kiss on the nape of his neck – Yuuri shivered. “Watch yourself. You’re so sexy like this.”

He let out a hesitant noise, and Viktor’s mouth was at his ear and suddenly biting on his earlobe. Yuuri’s eyes opened instantly, almost trying to elbow Viktor off – Viktor let go with a laugh.

“This way,” Viktor said, directing them until they faced the wardrobe head on.

Viktor yanked him up from his hair, unapologetically, which just about made him come then and there. He was pulled to sit up on his knees, with Viktor behind him, still in him. He saw himself from knee to groin, groin to chest and the top of his head, which he didn’t love. Viktor nuzzled into his neck.

“Remind you of anything?” Viktor asked, hands settling on his hips. Yuuri dared a longer look at their reflection: his neck exposed for Viktor, who had his nose pressed to the skin there. Viktor embracing him from behind, hands on his hips, Yuuri’s hands at his sides. The starting position of Eros, or a version of it, in his bedroom, with their bodies worked up, sweaty and warm, with the two of them joined. Viktor moved one hand to fist him lithely, his cock flushed, the tip wet – Yuuri whined at the contact.

Viktor’s mouth trailed to his ear. “This is what the skate’s about: desire… Need. Making the audience wonder about this.” Viktor shamelessly squeezed his cock, and he jerked. “How’s it make you feel?”

Yuuri kept his eyes on their reflection, on himself. He had mouth-shaped bruises on his chest and stomach – just a few, but telling, although a bruise on his hip might also be from practice. But there was no denying that he had been marked by Viktor, and now he was throbbing in Viktor’s hand. And Viktor wanted people to picture this?

Yuuri tried to breathe as Viktor’s other hand trailed over his chest and stomach. “I feel exposed,” he answered, honestly. For some people being exposed could be a turn on, but not for him.

“Why? Christ, have you seen yourself?” Viktor thrust against him, and Yuuri bit on his lip to stop a
moan, overstimulated as he already was. “You’re so unbelievably sexy. No one can take their eyes off you when we skate to Eros, don’t you know that?”

He looked again: he was in great shape, in all fairness. He was muscled and toned, he was sweaty, he was leaking. Viktor trailed a hand from his thighs to his chest, intimate and possessive. Sex was easy, love was hard – Viktor made sex easy, that was for sure. And maybe, if he was being honest, a part of him was turned on by seeing himself like that; seeing them both like that.

Yuuri moved to find Viktor’s lips. “We look,” he began, pausing briefly, “good together.”

Viktor smirked, pecking his lips. “Yeah, we really do.” Viktor pressed a palm to his back, guiding him back down to his hands and knees, and he dropped down to all fours willingly. “Now keep watching.”

Viktor began to fuck him, and Yuuri’s hands gripped the edge of the mattress as the speed and depth of Viktor’s thrusts returned. “God, I could fuck you like this forever,” Viktor groaned, mouth brushing the nape of his neck.

And suddenly Viktor pushed him down, and Yuuri groaned so loudly he even surprised himself, resting on his forearms, forehead against the sheets. He was so far gone, every thrust sending throbbing heat through him, pooling at his stomach and groin. Viktor grabbed his hair, pulling his head up from the mattress, and Yuuri was face to face with their reflection, Viktor looming over him, and him getting fucked. He whimpered to the rhythm Viktor dictated, Viktor’s eyes dark in the mirror.

There they were: fucking, getting each other off. Viktor looked absolutely sinful, groaning, one hand gripping his hip, the other clinging to his hair, and Yuuri couldn’t help but breathe, “Please, ngh, please, don’t stop, don’t – Viktor.” This only coaxed Viktor, who swore, fucking into him so hard it hurt. The slam of their bodies sounded in the room as sweat dripped down his back.

“Touch yourself,” Viktor said, and Yuuri obeyed instantly, reaching for his aching cock. “That’s it, that’s good – Oh fuck, fuck. You gonna come like this?”

“Yeah,” he breathed, instantly.

“Yeah? Let me see it,” Viktor said, breaths laboured. “Let me see you come from my cock.”

Which, pathetically, is all it took – he would have collapsed on the bed hadn’t Viktor snaked an arm around him, his come splattering over his fist, on the sheets, on his stomach, and Viktor yanked his head back, his scalp burned, and Viktor bit the side of his neck as Yuuri came, shaking and shivering, the world vanishing. Viktor groaned, picked up his pace, fucked into him so hard that he could only hold on, come still dripping out of him and over his knuckles – and then Viktor’s groan was cut short with a “Fuck, fuck – Ah!”

And Yuuri breathed, looking at their reflection, Viktor’s face buried between his shoulder blades; them heaving, come on his fingers, Viktor pressed to his back and shivering.

Yuuri closed his eyes and licked his lips. He didn’t feel vulnerable. He didn’t feel exposed.

“Oh god,” Viktor groaned into his ear, chest rising and falling rapidly. “God, I came so hard.” Yuuri laughed, and Viktor grinned against him lazily. “You okay? I didn’t hurt you?”

He ached all over: his scalp, his hole, his thighs, his neck where Viktor’s teeth had sunk in too hard. All of it prickled. “I’m so okay,” he breathed. He’d also come hard – so hard that it’d nearly hurt.
Viktor pulled out gently, and Yuuri collapsed on the mattress, moving only to roll onto his back. He kept his eyes closed while Viktor got off the bed, counting his breaths to calm them. Viktor returned quickly, laying down next to him, hand trailing up his stomach to his chest, brushing over a nipple, over the scattered drops of come. Yuuri’s eyes fluttered open to see Viktor admiring him, for the want of a better word. And Yuuri didn’t feel exposed – he enjoyed the attention.

“How bad is it?” he asked, bearing his neck to Viktor.

Viktor brushed his fingers there, over the bite mark. “Maybe a bit like you were attacked by a vampire.”

They both laughed, but he said, “Worth it.”

Viktor grinned, leaning down to press a kiss on his chest. Oh no – no, Viktor was – yes, he was definitely licking up Yuuri’s come. Viktor had no mercy on him whatsoever.

“Hey,” he protested, nudging Viktor’s head up.

“I’m just cleaning,” Viktor said, a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Do you want it to just dry on you?”

“Maybe.”

Viktor quirked an eyebrow. “Really? That is – strangely hot. God, you’re amazing.” And then Viktor kissed him, unhurried but deep. Yuuri felt his chest expanding in his chest, nearly painfully.

“We should get going,” Yuuri said.

“Yes,” Viktor said, not moving whatsoever, and Yuuri smiled. Viktor brushed his cheek gently. “Do you remember when we did that online quiz? Back in Hasetsu?”

“Yes?”

“Well, I know I concluded that we weren’t sexually compatible, but,” Viktor grinned, “I’m starting to think I was wrong.”

He laughed, tucking stray hairs behind Viktor’s ear. “You’re not sure?”

“Mmm, let me think about it,” Viktor said, and he shoved Viktor back gently, earning a laugh that was cut off by a kiss, and they pushed against each other, right there in the wrinkled sheets.

How they survived their training days without people figuring them out, Yuuri didn’t know.

* * *

They were figured out two days later.

Well, sort of. It was only the entire rink, from the novice kids to the janitor, who knew. These people didn’t know the whole truth, thankfully, but what they knew was almost worse. Yuuri had assumed that if anyone caught whiff of their affair, it would be because someone caught them smooching in the car park, or because Yuuri wasn’t a very good liar and he would ogle at Viktor too longingly, his infatuation written all over his face.

God, he was a terrible liar.

And so, predictably, Yuuri had only himself to blame at the end of it, although Viktor should at
least take some of that blame. It was late afternoon, they had finished their on-ice training and were sat in the canteen going through their schedule for the next two weeks. Yuuri read through his schedule as he sipped on his post-workout nutrition shake, Viktor having thoroughly accounted for everything. He read up to Friday evening: Recovery: foot massage at Viktor’s with lots of TLC ;)

He choked on his shake, coughing. Mila and Mikhail looked over from where they were sat a few tables away, and Yuuri tried to breathe. Viktor also was looking up at him from his tablet on which Viktor was booking them in for physio.

“Didn’t you give a copy of this to Yakov?!” he whispered in alarm.

“Oh yes, an abridged version. Why?” Viktor asked sweetly, and he nervously looked around and pointed at Friday. “Oh, that? Mmm, I hear Viktor’s is a brand-new spa. I’ve managed to put you on the VIP list.”

And then Viktor winked at him, and Yuuri feverishly looked around the canteen, embarrassed but also pleased. Viktor flirted with him all the time now, and he didn’t know whether to preen or be mortified.

“Aww, is my Russian bride embarrassed?” Viktor asked him, sounding pleased with himself. Two tables over, Yurio and Otabek were joining Mikhail and Mila, Yurio asking after Maria who had a new kitten – she’d been showing them all pictures.

“I’m not your you-know-what,” he protested faintly, although yes, he was a little.

They had sent off the citizenship application after several evenings of gathering paperwork and filling forms. The whole operation was top secret – only they and Yakov knew, but Viktor had started calling Yuuri his Russian bride at the rink anyway, with a wide grin. When Yurio and Otabek had first heard the new nickname, Yurio had angrily spat, “What does that mean? You’re being weird – stop it!”

Viktor had not really stopped it.

He and Viktor got ready to head out because they still had a Skype interview with a Japanese skating magazine. Viktor and Oksana had always been popular in Japan, and now a lot of Japanese fans seemed to adore Viktor skating with him, which was ironic at best, considering how quickly some had been willing to disown Yuuri – but he couldn’t blame them. He and Fumio had let their fans down, he knew that. But he had a chance to make up for it now, and he would try his hardest to make fans proud again!

Viktor went to use the toilets quickly, saying that he had sent Yuuri the videos of their practices. So Yuuri remained at their table, going through their videos on his phone, clicking on one showing him practising his spins. He scrutinised his leg bend and the way he positioned his arm, sipping on his shake and watching himself straighten up from the spin, coming to a stop. “Was that better?” he asked in the video, hands on his hips and out of breath. Viktor’s voice said, “Oh, definitely. That looks great to me.” Viktor was zooming in on his crotch.

Yuuri choked on his shake, a second time within minutes, this time copiously spilling some down his front as others turned to look. He was quickly reaching for the napkin dispenser, tapping tissues onto his ruined jumper, and wiping the table because the lady behind the canteen counter was glaring at him. He was also probably bright red.

Mikhail called out, “Yuuri, you alright there?” Their entire table was looking at him, Mila and
Yurio sniggering, but Mikhail looked genuinely concerned.

“Yeah, just a little accident!” he rushed out. “I’ve got it under control!” And then he laughed awkwardly, wiping at his jumper that was soaking his tank top underneath. He pulled the jumper off and shoved it into his sports bag. He knew he was bad with his infatuation with Viktor, but Viktor was somehow even worse! Wasn’t Viktor worried people would realise what was going on? And wouldn’t Viktor mind? These sorts of videos definitely didn’t help!

Otabek was staring at him keenly, face expressionless but eyes attentive. Yuuri nervously gathered his things, but from the corner of his eye he saw Otabek lean into Yurio and mutter something in his ear.

Yurio’s head snapped to stare at him. Yuuri blinked back and gave a nervous smile.


Mila and Mikhail instantly looked at him. Yuuri stared back at them, mortified. What hickey? Where? What?!

His hand automatically went to his throat, and sure enough the side of his neck felt sore to the touch, right above his collarbone. Oh god! He didn’t need to see it to know it was there, he’d just forgotten about it: red and round and shaped like Viktor’s mouth.

Mila looked victorious. “Well, well, well! Come here and spill the beans, Yuuri!”

He fidgeted, panicking. He had two teenagers glaring at him, and he and Mikhail had sort of moved on from the whole crush thing and they were still going to yoga together, tentatively friendly, but Mikhail clearly didn’t look impressed, while Mila was full of mirth.

Like a cow to slaughter, he approached them.

“Soos,” Mila cooed, “who you been necking with?”

“No one here certainly!” he blurted out, in fear this would be reported back to Yakov. “I just, erm.” Think! Was he being slutty on St. Petersburg Grindr? Did he have a sugar daddy? Had he somehow done it to himself? Was it some complicated skin disease? That sounded good! That –

“I’ve been seeing a guy,” he admitted lamely, opting for the truth when everything else sounded too ridiculous. He kept it as vague as he could.

“Uh huh,” Mila said, “and?”

“And, er, he – he gave me this hickey. Heh.” Please, Lord, let it end now. He was clearly expected to elaborate, so he went on with, “It’s not serious! Uhm, he’s just a guy I’m seeing. His name is, ah –” Something Russian, think! But not Putin, not Putin, not – “Dostoyevsky! Dostoyevsky, yeah, um, Boris? Boris Dostoyevsky?” He was beginning to believe his lie! This sounded pretty convincing!

Mila frowned. “Oh, ah. Interesting name?”

“Yeah,” he chuckled. Oh crap, was it not a good name? Should he have gone with Putin?!

“Well, congrats,” Mikhail now said, and Yuuri squirmed. “How’d you meet him?”

“Great question! He…and I… Oh! He lives in my building!” He was on a roll! “Which – which
explains how we met! Yup. That is – that is it. So. So yeah. It’s casual fun. With Boris.” He would not be winning any Academy Awards any time soon. Thankfully Viktor returned then, and Yuuri rushed out, “Well anyway, we have a Skype interview so –”

“Hey Viktor,” Mila called out, “you know anything about Yuuri’s mystery lover?”

Viktor frowned as he walked over to them, intelligent eyes washing over them all. Yuuri tried to send some sort of panic signal, but Viktor simply repeated, “Yuuri’s mystery lover?”

“Boris is an old guy’s name!” Yurio then retorted like he couldn’t hold his tongue any longer. “He sounds gross and old!”

Viktor looked doubly confused, so Yuuri added, “No, Boris isn’t – ah, Boris is the guy I’m seeing,” he related to Viktor, who quirked an eyebrow at him. “He is – isn’t gross. No. He’s sexy. I mean, he’s a bit older but – experience can be sexy, uhm. You’re – Okay, you’re too young for me to tell you that even,” he said to Yurio.

“I know stuff!” Yurio complained as Mila was doubling over laughing, Otabek seemed unamused, and Mikhail looked unimpressed. Yurio kicked Mila’s chair. “Hey, shut up, hag! I know enough not to leave stupid hickeys like a twelve-year-old!”

Viktor unceremoniously grabbed Yuuri’s chin and pushed it both sides, as if checking. “I don’t – Oh! Oh, I see. That is – that is an impressive hickey. How did I not remember?”

“Why would you!” Yuuri rushed in, panicking.

Mikhail asked, “So have you met this Boris, Viktor?”

“Oh, briefly,” Viktor said, his confusion fading and a devilish grin emerging on his lips. Viktor wrapped an arm around his shoulders. “But let me tell you, this one’s lucky. The guy’s sex on legs – tall, handsome, blue eyes. Extremely muscular.” Viktor was enjoying this too much, turning to Yuuri with innocent eyes. “Didn’t you – didn’t you tell me he’s the best sex you’ve ever had?”

If Yuuri had been drinking his shake, he would have choked on it a third time. Viktor was sounding rather smug, and maybe Yuuri had said that, in private, really how was that so surprising given his expanse of experience and then Viktor, but Viktor wasn’t supposed to be going around the rink telling that to people! Mikhail wasn’t looking too thrilled. Yuuri hated everything.

Otabek said, “Hey, Yuri’s sixteen.”

“Fuck off, Beka, I know how sex works!”

And with this Yurio stood up, glaring at him and Viktor before storming off, blond hair flicking. Otabek hesitated for two beats and then muttered to himself and followed. Oh god, why was this such a fuss?!

Otabek said, “Hey, Yuri’s sixteen.”

“Fuck off, Beka, I know how sex works!”

And with this Yurio stood up, glaring at him and Viktor before storming off, blond hair flicking. Otabek hesitated for two beats and then muttered to himself and followed. Oh god, why was this such a fuss?!

“Jeez,” Mila said with a roll of her eyes, “hormones!” She quickly leaned over in interest. “Hey, does Boris have hot friends? Oh, what am I saying – it’s a casual arrangement, you’re not seeing his friends. That’s what I’d want, though! A casual fuck buddy! No feelings, just a good grind, you know?”

Yuuri didn’t want to visualise Mila in the middle of a good grind, so he quickly made his excuses, dragging Viktor with him before things could get even worse.

Mikhail and Mila would of course tell Maria, who, lovely as she was, also acted as the rink’s
official gossip girl. God, soon everyone would know Yuuri was banging some guy called Boris who lived in his building and that apparently Yuuri was climbing the man like a tree whenever he had the chance!

Yuuri kept his face buried in his hands on the ride back home. “God, that is so embarrassing!”

“So people know you have a lover,” Viktor shrugged. “I mean, have you seen you? It was more bizarre that you didn’t.”

“Viktor…!” he protested. “People will talk!” About his sex life! *Their* sex life!

“It’s hardly anything,” Viktor assured him. “You said it’s casual, right? I mean, that’s what you told them, didn’t you?” Viktor asked, pausing. “That it’s sort of meaningless?”

“Yeah,” he sighed.

But he remained embarrassed and later that evening ordered three turtlenecks with next day delivery. They did their interview, Yuuri with a scarf around his neck, and he nervously clutched Viktor’s hand – thankfully off-screen – as they answered the questions, Viktor turning to him regularly to give him a turn. Viktor’s Japanese was surprisingly good after his time in Hasetsu, although Viktor still preferred to answer in English, and even the interviewer noticed. “I studied Japanese in my teens,” Viktor said, “but I’m afraid I’ve forgotten most of it.” Yuuri was still learning new things about Viktor – even now!

Afterwards, Yuuri made a mental note not to be so engrossed in having sex with Viktor that he didn’t even notice where Viktor bit him mid-sex, or to at least check afterwards if he was too caught up in the moment, which he often was.

“Boris Dostoyevsky isn’t the best fake name I’ve ever heard, though,” Viktor said to him after dinner.

“I panicked,” Yuuri lamented. “But it was better than telling them the truth, right?”

“Yeah, sure.”

And sure enough, the next day the entire rink knew that Yuuri had gotten himself a Russian boy toy. The girls giggled when they saw him while the boys were trying to see the infamous hickey. Even Yakov commented on it, unprompted, suddenly telling him that Russian men were strong and sturdy quality men, who made good husbands. “Firm lovers also,” Yakov told him, and Yuuri couldn’t look Yakov in the eye for three whole days, that was how embarrassed he was.

Viktor waved it off with a grin, but Yuuri crept around the rink, trying to keep his head down.

* * *

The truth of it was that Yuuri had Viktor wrapped around his little finger, yet seemed to absolutely not know it. Viktor probably would have gone on Good Morning Russia to declare his infatuation if given the chance.

As he waited for that invite, he both relished and resented the secrecy. He couldn’t deny that there was a strange sort of pull to being in a busy rink, surrounded by their friends and rinkmates, and simply being able to *look* at Yuuri in a certain way that revoked the intimacy between them, a gentle flush forming on Yuuri’s cheeks. Better yet, there were times, though much rarer, when Yuuri simply met his gaze, eyes dark and knowing, and Viktor realised how utterly fucked he was. He nearly skated into the boards once.
When not at the rink, life was blissful: they cooked together, watched TV, took Makkachin out for walks, did their evening stretches – a lot of it identical to what their schedule had been like when Yuuri had stayed in the guest room. Except now, when Yuuri stayed over, he read books in Viktor’s bed, under the rumbled covers, glasses smudgy, with a toothpaste stain on his sleep shirt. Viktor had always been generous with his lovers, enthusiastic about them, wanting to show them off, and that included the amount of affection and adoration he ladled on them. And with Yuuri, he wanted to ladle an awful lot.

But he also felt grounded, having a reference point that was something other than himself. Someone had recently been to Michigan, oh well you know Yuuri studied there. Or someone came in with grey Converse shoes, and Yuuri has that same pair, you know. Or someone had seen a film recently, well Yuuri thought it long-winded. A sense of calm came with these statements, of joy and pride. He felt at home with Yuuri in a way he couldn’t recall having felt in past relationships, and he was grateful that they had been given the chance to get to know each other inside and out before they had ever even kissed, rather than play catch-up after a hook up.

But after this calm, which filled Viktor up from head to toe, came the time Yuuri left again, or the times they were out together, and Yuuri fidgeted with nervous glances when Viktor tried to hold his hand. “The paparazzi, Viktor!” Yuuri had gasped. What paparazzi? Where? “People of – of Russia, then! You get recognised all the time!” Viktor sometimes coaxed Yuuri into spending the night, but Yuuri usually went home to sleep. Maria picked Yuuri up for their morning yoga on Tuesdays and Thursdays, after all, not to mention the orchids and a fresh change of clothes, and this Boris figure supposedly lived in Yuuri’s building anyway.

For the record, Viktor disliked Boris. He disliked an entirely fictional person, even though he tried to be a good sport about it.

It was fine, really. It hadn’t even been a month since Finlandia, and they weren’t living together, they were just sort of dating, maybe, even if Yuuri had told everyone he was having a casual, sex-based relationship (with Boris). Viktor knew, rationally, that it was more than that for both.

But ever since Yuuri had conjured up Boris, Viktor had realised that maybe Yuuri’s desire for secrecy wasn’t motivated by an ardent desire to nourish their relationship in a protected cocoon. Maybe Yuuri wanted secrecy for other reasons, a nagging voice in his head said. Because what if Yuuri hadn’t lied when he’d told people he was in a casual fling with someone? What if cuddling and making out was casual in Japan, sleeping in together on Sundays, showering together, laughing into each other’s mouths mid-kiss – maybe all of that was casual. Who knew?

Viktor didn’t mind if people found out. Sure, Yakov would be pissed off, but what of it? And hundreds of Viktor’s fans would be heartbroken, not to mention Yuuri’s hardcore fanbase from way before, and Yurio would probably say that they were being gross (Boris seemed to have been hard as it was), and Chris would be smug about it, and everyone would have an opinion, including officials and nosy reporters, and it would absolutely affect how people viewed them on the ice, including the judges scoring them. He and Yuuri might not look as, ah, professional. Even he knew that.

But on the other hand, people had always rumoured that his choice of a new partner had been motivated by them banging in the locker rooms twice a day. Which they weren’t. Not a bad idea, though. Maybe one night, when they were the last ones at the rink…

When he met Yuuri in the mornings, he had to say a simple, “Hey, there you are.” And then he had to pretend he didn’t want to scoop Yuuri in his arms, say that he’d missed him, peck his lips, breathe in the scent of Yuuri’s skin. And as the days rolled by, he realised how much the pretence
was getting to him. People kept asking questions about Boris, in a friendly way, and Yuuri got flustered and gave vague answers. Viktor didn’t like people thinking that Yuuri was with someone not-him, especially when he was right there, getting ignored and becoming increasingly paranoid.

But Yuuri remained reluctant to tell anyone. Viktor didn’t want people intruding on them either when things were going well – hadn’t he messed up all of his relationships thus far? Didn’t that mean that he had to work harder on this than any of the others? And that maybe he shouldn’t embark on this relationship with a list of demands?

He didn’t want to come on too strong too soon, so he tried to get a grip. He mostly continued to be amazed that Yuuri had kissed him back in the hotel room in Helsinki, and that they hadn’t stopped kissing each other since. It made Viktor want them to succeed even more. It made him push himself and Yuuri even harder when they were training. He felt a new sense of purpose, was more energised, was happier than he had been in a long time, so he tried not to get caught up in the fact that it wasn’t entirely perfect.

He put his newfound vigour into good use. He was working on a project in the evenings, making notes on Yuuri and Fumio’s skates on YouTube, and he was busy revising choreography and element patterns for Eros and The Lark, taking on board feedback from the judges he’d spoken to at Finlandia. He worked on compartmentalisation, like he’d promised Yuuri, focusing on winning the Rostelecom Cup (and the Russian Nationals, the Olympics and the Worlds, in that order).

But even so, the feeling remained that they were after different things. Maybe Yuuri wasn’t ready for the kind of relationship Viktor longed for. Maybe it was casual, and not intended to be more.

And on top of it all, they had competitions to train for, and Viktor couldn’t open his mouth without jeopardising all of it.

Somehow, getting together had made nothing simpler.

So he kept this to himself.

* * *

The time difference between St. Petersburg and Hasetsu made training with Minako difficult, but Minako joined him via Skype in one of the rink’s training rooms once a week. She remained the best dance teacher he had ever had – but no one should tell that to Viktor, who would probably get upset.

Eros and The Lark were full of intricate choreography that Yuuri had spent months memorising. With average teams, a program could look like a string of elements put together, with the pair simply skating from one end of the rink to the other in between. But not Bosava/Nikiforov, or Katsuki/Nikiforov, now. Viktor insisted that the audience should not even be able to tell when a big lift or throw was going to happen; it should be so embedded into the choreography that everything was one fluid movement.

Hence Yuuri’s despair.

Minako knew their programs by heart, and together they had been working on the seamlessness of Yuuri’s movements, conveying the fierce, burning lust of the short, and the delicate, ardent longing of the free. The way Viktor moved on the ice was mesmerising: Viktor had complete awareness of his body, from his wrists to the tips of his fingers, the stretch of his leg, the bent of his ankles. When Viktor moved, it was magical. Yuuri needed to catch up to Viktor if they wanted to keep improving.
Sometimes he danced for Minako alone, and sometimes Viktor joined them. This was such a week, the two of them going through the routines together, Eros playing in the dance studio as Minako scrutinised them. She usually told them to stop, for Yuuri to come to the laptop and watch her demonstrate how to roll his shoulders, move his hips, bend his head in a certain moment. Viktor hardly ever disagreed, and Yuuri knew he’d gotten better as the weeks went by, but this time he was surprised when Minako didn’t interrupt them halfway through.

Instead they finished the off-ice, studio friendly version of Eros, Viktor pulling him in seductively, trailing the shape of him with wanton desire, and Yuuri meeting the intensity with his own, their eyes locked on each other.

They stopped in the final pose, out of breath, Yuuri warm under his leggings and turtle-necked training shirt, for obvious reasons. The laptop was on the table in the corner, facing the room, and as they stepped back from the run-through, he went over. “What do you think?” he asked Minako, whose mouth was tightly pursed, her eyes thin slits.

““What do I think?” she echoed, while in the background Viktor was helping himself to some water. “That you’ve finally figured it out.”

He beamed. “You think so? It wasn’t too stiff like last time? Lilya always accuses us of holding back.”

“Oh, I hardly think you’re holding back.”

He faltered. “Well, that’s – that’s good, isn’t it?”

Minako was scrutinising him, and Yuuri finally picked up on the suspicion. “Anything you want to tell me?” Minako then asked. And oh. Oh, er. Crap?

“Oh, uhm –” Don’t blush, don’t blush, don’t blush – “everything’s fine, you know, nothing new!” He was blushing. Viktor was changing shirts in the background, a vision of perfect abs and muscular arms, and a love bite on his hip bone that he could only hope Minako couldn’t see – not exactly helping! But at least Viktor wasn’t within earshot to understand the Japanese, he hoped.

Minako tutted her tongue, but she was too gracious to say anything more. Yuuri had no poker face whatsoever, and he could have spewed on about Boris like he had to others, but Minako knew him too well. So he stared at the keyboard, flustered. “And are you okay?” she asked. “You’re taking good care of each other?”

“Yes,” he said, not entirely sure what question he was answering anymore. But the answer to all of it was yes: a million times yes. It could be stressful at times, pretending they were just skating partners, but the secrecy kept them safe for now.

Viktor had changed and walked over to the laptop, looking pleased with the practice. Yuuri’s heart leaped at the sight of him, even as he was quick to motion at the laptop and say that Minako had been impressed by their routine.

Viktor leaned towards the screen. “Thank you, Minako-sensei!” Viktor chirped. “Hasn’t the choreography improved? And hasn’t Yuuri improved?” Viktor snuck an arm around Yuuri’s waist and pulled him closer as he squeaked. “He’s really become one with the music!”

“Amongst other things,” Minako retorted. Yuuri wanted to die.

Viktor was none the wiser. “Will you be watching us at the Rostelecom Cup?”
Minako seemed to give up, a smile crossing her face. “Yes, of course. But just keep in mind children will be watching it too – nothing too spicy, alright?”

Viktor placed a finger on his pursed lips, thoughtful. “I can’t promise that, I don’t think.”

“I-I can! It won’t be too spicy, I promise!” Yuuri intervened. He rushed quick goodbyes to Minako, promising to catch up with her again soon for another session.

The call ended, Minako disappearing, and Yuuri knew he was bright red. Minako had known him since he was a child, and to have Minako guess anything of Yuuri’s sex life was a definite no-no.

“Minako knows,” he whined, pressing his forehead against Viktor’s shoulder. “Or suspects.” Why was his life nothing but an endless cycle of embarrassments, in front of his rink mates, in front of Minako – the world too, probably?

“Suspects what?” Viktor asked, and Yuuri made a whining sound of annoyance. He didn’t want to have to say it! Viktor’s arms came to circle his waist. “Oh, I see. Well, didn’t you tell her about Boris?”

“I think she very well knew it was you.”

“She did? Huh. Observant,” Viktor said, sounding like he approved. “Well, between you and me, I think she’s suspected for a while.”

“She has?”

“Well, uh, let me just say that I don’t think I was as subtle as I thought back in Japan. She knew I wanted you, I’m pretty sure.”

Yuuri’s insides fluttered and he finally smiled. Viktor had wanted him. Him! All the way back then! And Viktor liked him – he’d said so several times. Viktor wanted him and was attracted to him, which Yuuri could hardly believe. Viktor was going around the rink calling him with a pet name that was an inside joke for the two of them, somehow still humouring Yuuri’s decade-long crush, and Yuuri’s mind was spinning with Viktor’s affections.

“I know you want to keep this between us,” Viktor said gently, “but is it so bad if Minako knows?”

Well, Minako might tell his entire family, of course, and Mari might call him and demand answers. But Minako was far away and it wasn’t too likely that she would immediately gossip to anyone. And then, when Viktor got bored of him, well – he’d suck it up, somehow, and maybe Minako wouldn’t notice, and they’d focus on skating together. It wouldn’t have been the worst thing, would it, to have once been Viktor’s lover?

“No, it’s fine,” he said. “It’s not a big deal.”

“Well, that’s a start,” Viktor said happily. Start of what, he wondered. “And does she know about the application?”

“No. No, I haven’t mentioned that.”

Who knew if he’d even get citizenship! Viktor had casually said that they should get an Olympic medal if they were able to qualify and provided they kept working hard! Managing Viktor’s insane expectations was quite enough as it was – best not to tell anyone else about that either.

But Viktor was in good spirits for the rest of the afternoon when they were on the ice, working on
The Lark. Yakov went home after six o’clock, leaving them to it – Yuuri wanted a few more run-throughs. Viktor said Yuuri was exhausting, but Yuuri could hear the admiration in Viktor’s tone.

So they skated to The Lark, Viktor lifting him effortlessly, them spinning around each other, Yuuri letting Viktor carry him across the ice in his arms, spinning around Viktor on the landing, their skates scraping the ice in matching strokes.

In the final pose, embracing each other, Yuuri melted with Viktor’s arms around him, the two of them heaving against each other. Yuuri’s arms slipped around Viktor’s waist, heart thumping wildly, the two of them alone at the rink.

Viktor’s nose brushed against his temple. “Do you want to come over after this?”

He nodded, feeling like it’d been forever since he’d been able to have Viktor to himself. “Yes.”

Viktor leaned down, and Yuuri tilted his head up. “Did you miss me last night?” Viktor asked, mouth hovering over his.

Yuuri had stayed at the rink with Yurio, working on spins together, and afterwards they’d gone out for hot chocolates – not in the cat café, sadly, as it had closed already. When they parted Yurio had huffed and said, “You smile more now, so congrats or whatever.” Did he smile more now? Well, he could certainly see why he would, but maybe that meant he needed to hide it better, not be so transparent with his feelings in front of others. Someone would catch on.

But in Viktor’s arms, being asked if he’d missed Viktor, he could only say, “Yes.” He pushed nearer to close the gap between their lips.

“Good,” Viktor said, and then stepped away. He stared after Viktor, shocked. “Gotta leave them wanting more, right?” Viktor said with a wink.

“You’re awful,” he protested, and Viktor grinned.

Yuuri pitied himself tremendously.

* * *

The night before their flight to Rostelecom Cup, Yuuri stayed at Viktor’s to make the departure easier (as they had told Yakov). When he got to Viktor’s with his two suitcases and backpack, struggling getting out of Viktor’s rackety lift, Viktor said he had something to show him. Makkachin was fussing, unaware she would be taken to the kennel again in the morning, while Viktor pecked his lips in greeting.

Viktor sat him down on the living room couch, with Viktor’s laptop on the coffee table. Maybe it was more paperwork for the application.

He was mostly ready for Rostelecom. He’d competed at Grand Prix events before with Fumio, even making the final once! (Yes, that time they came last. Of course.) Yuuri knew he had panicked at Lombardia, but Bratislava had gone okay. Finlandia had been a bit of a mixed bag, of course.

Truthfully, he’d wanted to stay in the smaller competitions with less pressure for a while longer. Now he’d had a nightmare in which he was skating with Viktor at Rostelecom Cup, only for Viktor to ask, halfway through, “Yuuri, why are you wearing geta instead of skates?”

But he didn’t want Viktor to worry, so –
“I know you’ve been worried lately,” Viktor said, sitting down next to him on the couch, “about this competition.” Oh. Well. So much for that.

“It’s nothing,” he mumbled, petting Makkachin who was pushing against his legs. “It’s just nerves.”

It was never ‘just nerves’, not with him. But he had a fresh anti-anxiety prescription, although he hadn’t resorted to it yet. The knowledge that he could, however, was comforting.

“Nerves or not, I’ve been doing some research,” Viktor said, clicking away on the laptop. Viktor had so many YouTube tabs open that only the first letter of each page was visible. Yuuri frowned and leaned closer. “I’ve been thinking about what you said at Finlandia, that Fumio started doping because of you. Which, by the way, is ridiculous. And I wanted to prove that to you.”

“What?” he asked in alarm.

“Like I said, I’ve been doing some research,” Viktor said blithely.

“Some?” he repeated, because it soon became apparent that Viktor had open two dozen past skates by him and Fumio, all paused in different parts of the programs. Viktor appeared to have quite the YouTube collection ready, in fact, but Yuuri did not want to revisit any of it right then, the day before they left for their own Grand Prix tournament.

But Viktor said, softly, “Just let me show you. Please?”

Yuuri didn’t try to hide the fact that he was uncomfortable, but Viktor began clicking between different tabs. “You told me it was last summer Fumio started doing illegal substances, right? So I looked at your skates pre- and post- of him doing drugs. And he gets stronger, sure – look at the height of this twist and – ah, here, look at the height of this twist only a month later. He’s giving you more height, right? Having much more strength all of a sudden, out of nowhere? And so you do better, you make the Grand Prix Final for the first time –”

“And come last.”

“– okay, yes, but this is what I wanted you to see. Look at the entry into this throw,” Viktor said, tapping the screen from his and Fumio’s free skate the year prior. “See where his hands are on your waist? Because I would – well, my hands go here, and here.” Viktor was showing on the screen, and then placed hands on Yuuri’s waist, demonstrating as he snuck an arm behind Yuuri’s back to grip him. Yuuri looked down at Viktor’s hands, then at the screen. Okay. He saw the difference.

Viktor kept going, sounding vaguely like a conspiracy theorist. “And then Fumio does the same bad positioning on the twist dismounts, see – yes, here.” Another video. “His technique is bad! It’s hard to see, but it’s bad. Did anyone – Celestino? – ever call you out on this? He’s making you work twice as hard on landing cleanly with this. And,” Viktor said, scrolling back left again through the various videos, “Fumio doesn’t change his technique after the doping. Grand Prix Final, look at him here. I would never put my hands in that position, I know it’s not going to balance you well. Fumio just isn’t. He isn’t very good?”

Yuuri didn’t know what to say, but Viktor continued. “Also the way he positions his feet is poor, he’s in too much of an angle there, which makes him unsteady as your lifting partner. And his knee bend is weak, and he’s not bringing his free leg back around properly on his landings, and I could trace that back to your junior days at least. Ah, yes, this is from 2013, I mean is that a lutz or a flutz, and look at that outside edge, because to me –”
“Okay, can you just – Give me a moment,” he requested, feeling a headache coming on.

The screen was showing him and Fumio in their notorious frilly pink flamingo outfits that Fumio’s mother had made the costumes for when they’d been juniors. Yuuri had thought they’d looked like a million bucks at the time. They’d placed sixth at Junior Worlds.

“Point is,” Viktor said after a silence that Yuuri hadn’t filled, “that whether you’ve gained or lost half a kilo, or a kilo – hell, two kilos, wouldn’t have made a difference when Fumio’s technique was poor to begin with. He was trying to fix the wrong problem with his doping.”

“But he found it easier to lift me when he was doping.”

“Well sure, that’s the point of drugs. I’m sure I could do a million things better doped up, but then I’d get banned for cheating.” Viktor looked at him expectantly. “None of it was your fault.”

Yuuri stared, a lump in his throat.

Viktor hesitated. “You’re right, sure, that you guys improve. But it’s only because he’s starting to catch up with what you can already do, and if you had been skating with someone better all along, someone who could match your natural skill set, then you would have been on the world podium by now. So my point is that Fumio was holding you back, and that’s what I want you to really think about.” Viktor paused, and they both stared at the laptop. “How about I go take Makkachin out for a walk? And you just – just take a look at the videos, before and after. Take a look. Please.”

Viktor planted a kiss on his cheek and left, Makkachin rushing after Viktor when he went to put his shoes on. Yuuri exhaled when the door closed after them, feeling limbless sat on Viktor’s couch. He didn’t want to watch the videos. He didn’t want to relive what he’d thought was their breakthrough season, only to have it all come crashing down around him. It’d been his fault – hadn’t it? All of it had been his fault.

And what, him – on the world podium? Him with a superior skill set, held back and limited by a subpar partner? That didn’t sound like the version he knew. They both had always worked equally hard, slaved away for years and years.

He reluctantly clicked between the tabs, but then found one that wasn’t of them skating, thankfully, but was a YouTube channel run by two Canadian women, who analysed competitions together. This, like all other videos, had been paused in a certain moment, so he clicked play, the two women becoming animated once more, and the brunette said, “So a friend of mine texted me this week and asked who would have thought that Nikiforov could bring life to a skater as bland as Katsuki.”

He flinched – this was why he tried to avoid –

“And I told him!” the woman laughed, her co-host already grinning. “I told him are you nuts? Katsuki has been one of the most beautiful pair skaters of the last five years! The quality of his skating is sharp, it’s on-point, it’s elegant! When he and Sano skated their free skate at the Grand Prix final, I was in tears!”

“I remember!” the other woman laughed. “There were actual tears! And this is what gets me with the people who have been so disbelieving of this duo, right? Do people really think someone of Nikiforov’s calibre doesn’t know what he’s doing? If someone knows what genuine, raw talent looks like, it’s going to be someone with Nikiforov’s experience and knowledge.” They were both nodding. “Katsuki has been brimming with potential, and it’s been so frustrating to see that lack of development! But you know why there hasn’t been any?”
“Sano,” the first woman said, rolling her eyes. “Sano, a hundred percent. I mean, I thought so before, but now we have proof!”

“God, am I glad Katsuki is skating with someone else now!”

“Finally, right?”

“Right!”

“So I called my friend,” the woman continued, laughing, “with a bit of a rant on how Katsuki deserves this, because he elevates pair skating with what he can do. He elevates it, he adds musicality and expression to it, really turns it into art, and now with these quad throws and twists that Nikiforov can do with him? And Nikiforov’s own mastery? And their chemistry?!” The woman fanned herself dramatically, and they both laughed.

“It’s been a long time coming, Katsuki! We’ve been waiting!”

“We really have!” And then the two moved on to Yurio and Otabek’s AC/DC medley, debating whether it was genius or atrocious. He paused the video again, unsure. He elevated pair skating? He was brimming with potential – had been, for years? Other people thought that too? Viktor wasn’t just being nice when he said he had been the better skater out of him and Fumio?

Unsure, he started watching the videos of them skating.

He couldn’t change the fact that Fumio had resorted to drugs, nor that Fumio had pinpointed Yuuri as the cause. But maybe – just maybe – Fumio had been wrong about why they had struggled for years to move up the rankings. Maybe it hadn’t been because of Yuuri’s inadequacies.

It was simply everything that happened after the Nationals that was his fault, when the officials showed up at their rink for the doping test…

Yuuri twisted his hands. Half-guilty was better than full-guilty, though.

So he watched one video. Then another. Then another.

* * *

Ah, the Grand Prix! The flashing lights, the throngs of fans, the drama, the excitement! Viktor had missed the tension, the cut-throat atmosphere, people out for blood to make it to the final. No such pressure for them, of course, as they couldn’t qualify with only one event, but for him and Yuuri the competition was about upsetting the status quo and showing where Katsuki-Nikiforov could place internationally. They could challenge the JJs and the Caos when the time came for other title showdowns!

Some skaters choked under pressure, while Viktor found pressure immensely helpful: it forced him to focus.

The atmosphere was already tense when they got to the hotel and went in for accreditation in the conference room. They sat together at one of the tables, filling in the paperwork that the officials had given them, other skaters around them doing the same. Viktor penned in their planned technical components for both skates, putting in the quad twist and the throw quad Salchow. Go big or go home.

“Has magnesium got two Es in it?” Yuuri asked, filling in his medical sheet, listing all substances and medicines he was taking. “It doesn’t, does it?”
“No, it’s an e and an i,” he responded, then spotted something on Yuuri’s list he didn’t recognise. “What’s the clona – however you say that?”

“Hmm, what?” Yuuri asked, clearly feigning innocence. His cheeks reddened. “That? Oh that’s just – nothing, it’s. It’s, uhm. For anxiety.” Yuuri looked nervous. “I haven’t needed it yet, but I thought –”

“Oh. Oh, of course! Yeah, write it in,” he said. “That’s good.”

He gave Yuuri a smile, and Yuuri relaxed, finalising his forms while Viktor did the same. It seemed Yuuri thought taking pills during a competition was some sort of sign of weakness, but it wasn’t; it was self-awareness and having the maturity to medicate yourself with what you needed. Like taking calcium, say, or iron tablets.

After they were given their passes, soon hanging around their necks, Yuuri looked around the room. “Phichit should be somewhere here. I’m not sure if he’s arrived yet.”

Anything that made Yuuri look forward to the Rostelecom Cup rather than dread it was a win in Viktor’s books. Thankfully, they were sharing a room this time, as organised by the ISU, so Viktor was ready to keep an eye on Yuuri, providing all determination and moral boosting necessary. It was a twin room, sadly, but Viktor was still grateful they could be together.

They already had training that afternoon, the short program kicking off the next day. They were met by a large number of fans crowding the skaters’ entrance when they got to the arena. Viktor had a certain dramatic flair, waving at the onlookers stood behind the gates. Next to him, Yuuri was flustered by the response and the size of the crowd. “Look, Japanese flags too!” Viktor enthused, waving enthusiastically, hoping Yuuri would cheer up from seeing the support.

The training rink was underground, below the arena itself, and they spent their afternoon there with other pairs. Otabek and Yurio were there and competition ready, going through their short program. He and Yuuri worked on Eros, their movements refined, their quad throw ready. Reporters milled by the rink to record the practices, but they weren’t doing any interviews.

Off the ice, in the locker rooms, Viktor got out of his boots while Yuuri was in the showers. He rolled his left ankle – it felt tight. He massaged it gently – it was swollen. Fuck. Was it painful? No, no pain. Just discomfort. Overworked.

No. Not now, not here. He refused.

When Yuuri came out of the showers, Viktor got up quickly to wash off. Yuuri waited for him, typing away on his phone, and looked up at him with a smile when Viktor was ready to go. Outside the locker room, a woman with red hair was chatting to an official wearing a jacket with the anti-doping symbol on it.

Viktor halted, but in the next second he’d already rushed over for a hug. “What are you doing here?” he asked happily, squeezing Oksana to him.

“I live here, don’t I?” Oksana asked, beaming. Right – Rostelecom Cup, in Moscow, where Oksana had lived for some years now. But with the way Oksana lived, she easily could have been in New York or Hong Kong for the week. “Come on now, how could I miss your Grand Prix debut?”

“My second debut,” he reminded her with a grin. Yuuri was staying back, but Viktor pulled him over. “You remember each other!”

“H-Hi,” Yuuri said, and Viktor realised Yuuri was star-struck. But Oksana was pleasant with
Yuuri, even giving him a hug that Yuuri clearly didn’t know what to do with. Oksana then nodded towards the official trying to get their attention.

“Mr. Katsuki,” the man said, wearing the official jacket with WADA’s logo. “Could you come with me, please.”

Right, doping sample time.

Yuuri flushed a little red. “Oh, but I – I just went – before, uhm.” Yuuri motioned over his shoulder at the locker rooms, but there was never any reasoning with these officials, who had no sense of humour whatsoever. “But maybe I’m ready to go again?” Yuuri ventured helplessly, with a quick glance at Viktor and Oksana.

“This way then, please.”

Yuuri reluctantly went with the official to the medical rooms.

Viktor headed upstairs to stadium level with Oksana, where they found a mostly deserted café, as the rink was still closed to the general public. Viktor was thrilled to have her there, talking excitedly about their season and about competing again. Stressed looking coaches seemed to be the main customers around them, all ogling at the two of them as they sat in the middle, happy to be reunited. Oksana had seen their skates online, of course, and liked both programs.

“So you’re doing the quad twist, then,” she said, somewhat coolly. They had done it together in a few competitions, but its success rate hadn’t warranted them including it regularly, and they had let it go. His and Yuuri’s quad twists were much more consistent.

“We’ll be doing side-by-side triple axels too,” he said. Triple axel was a jump Oksana had never managed.

“God, you’ll be doing quad loops next,” she said, shaking her head. “All this at your age, Mr. Thirty?”

“Hey, I have a month left before that!” he protested. He wished he could tell her about the citizenship application and the Olympics, but it was top secret, to be kept even from Oksana.

“How’s your ankle holding up?”

“It’s fine,” he lied. “Hasn’t bothered me at all.”

“Well, that’s good,” Oksana said, “what with you clearly favouring your other leg when we came up the stairs just now.” Viktor nearly choked on his coffee – was she a witch? A shaman? A prophetess? But she brushed him off with, “I skated with you for how many years? Come on, now, I know exactly how you move. Is it bad?”

“No,” he sighed. “No, it’s not bad. But I’m worried it will get bad.” He and Oksana had always been able to be honest with each other – one of the strengths of their partnership. “I don’t want Yuuri to know, though, he’ll worry, psyche himself out… It’s fine. I’ll rest my ankle after this week.”

Oksana hummed. “And you’ve been sleeping with Yuuri for about a month or so, I take it?”

This time Viktor did choke on his coffee, and Oksana had to pat his back, assuring him that no, Yakov definitely didn’t know as Yakov’s eye for romance was rather blind, really, unless Lilya perhaps was involved. Oksana had simply known Viktor for two decades and, “I’ve seen you
through all of your relationships. You’re clearly in the infatuation stage – it’s all over your face, really, the way you stared at him go with stars in your eyes, so it can’t have been too long. Maybe three weeks, I thought.”

And, because he really hadn’t had anyone to gush to yet, he said, “God, it’s been so amazing!” And then he went on a bit of a rant/speech on how great Yuuri was, how they had finally gotten together at Finlandia, how much Makkachin loved Yuuri, how smart and funny and sexy Yuuri was, and how Viktor was so excited for them to explore their relationship further.

“But…” Oksana coaxed him. They had long finished their coffees, and Viktor wondered why Yuuri was taking so long.

“There’s no but,” he insisted. At eighteen: he’s so amazing, Oksana, but he’s just not entirely sure he could have a relationship with another man. At twenty: he’s so amazing, Oksana, but he also thinks we should see other people. At twenty-three: he’s so amazing, Oksana, but he is still living with his husband. At twenty-seven: he’s so amazing, Oksana, but he’s not looking for anything serious right now.

He didn’t want Yuuri to be added to that list.

“So Yuuri Katsuki is the perfect match?” Oksana asked. “He’s not one of these vain narcissists who wants to fuck an Olympian and brag to their friends about it?”

“God, he’s nothing like that,” Viktor assured, “I nearly wish he did brag about it.”

“Meaning?”

He waved her off. “Nothing, we’re just not telling anyone yet.”

“Ah. Why not?”

“He doesn’t want to.” And there it was. At twenty-nine: he’s so amazing, Oksana, but he wants our relationship to be secret. Yuuri actively lied to make sure no one knew. “Because of Yakov, and the press, and the judges,” he said, because they were all valid reasons. “And Yuuri isn’t great with media exposure, so I understand that. He’s got a point.”

“Okay.” Oksana’s mouth had pursed. “But it bothers you.”

“No, it – no, it’s fine!” Why did this feel like a conversation he and Oksana had had a dozen times before? “It’s completely fine, I just wonder – I mean. What if – what if he wants to keep it secret because of those other reasons.”

All those other reasons why his relationships had never worked: the unwillingness to commit, the desire to fuck others, being more interested in someone else, finding Viktor a bit too much to handle. Maybe Yuuri at twenty-three, nearly twenty-four, thought relationships just didn’t have to be that serious, and Viktor was panicking at nearly thirty. What if Viktor was fundamentally kidding himself?

He sighed. “I know this isn’t the time to press the point with him, or to be so needy –”


His phone buzzed, Yuuri saying he’d found Phichit and asking where they were. He typed a quick reply and then waved it off. “It’s really nothing,” he insisted. “It’s going really well, and the past
couple of weeks have been amazing. I’m really happy! And it’s too early to be telling people – he’s right. Just forget I said anything.” But Oksana looked displeased. “Anyway, enough about me and Yuuri. How’s your love life?”

By the time Yuuri and Phichit found them, he and Oksana were reminiscing over their second world title, and Viktor was happy to see that Yuuri was a little less tongue-tied than before as Yuuri started gushing over his and Oksana’s perfectly timed side-by-side 3S-1L0s-3Ts in their program that year. Oksana and Yuuri seemed to get on, and Viktor felt confident that their Rostelecom Cup would be a success – as long as his ankle didn’t give him trouble.

* * *

The four of them had dinner together that night, and Viktor kept an eye on Yuuri throughout. But Yuuri seemed to be in a good place: chatting to Oksana excitedly, happy to have Phichit there, and Yuuri even took a picture of them all having dinner, posting it on his Instagram. Viktor relaxed.

He did try and figure out if Yuuri had told Phichit about them, however, especially because Phichit was smiling at him knowingly. Minako knew, and Phichit and Yuuri were close, so… But he didn’t ask, noting that Yuuri didn’t sit next to him during dinner at the swanky restaurant that they walked into without a reservation – and full as it was, a table materialised for them, with a complimentary bottle of wine. Oksana took it all in gracefully like a movie star, Viktor was amused by her, Phichit was thrilled, and Yuuri looked nervous, declining the wine and asking if whoever the table had been intended for would be upset.

But when they were getting ready for bed that night, he finally asked: had Yuuri told Phichit about the two of them? And, to his disappointment, Yuuri said no, which – was fine, absolutely fine. Yuuri said it was private, and Viktor agreed, but the disappointment bubbled beneath his skin. He pushed it out of his mind the best he could, especially when Yuuri ignored his single bed and automatically joined Viktor in his.

On the day of the short program, they slept in. Fine, Yuuri was up at six in the morning, fretting, but Viktor grabbed his hand and pulled him back under the covers with him for three more hours. Only eight pairs were skating per Grand Prix, in two groups of four. They were in the first group, having drawn the fourth slot the day before.

The other competitions had been them in warm-up mode. Now was the time for them to show up with their improved Eros, perfected and ready to wow the judges. Waking up next to Yuuri, who was drooling on the pillow a little, was in Viktor’s view the best way to start their day. He kissed Yuuri’s shoulder, and Yuuri bolted upright with, “Did we miss it??”

Two hours later they were in the dressing rooms of the rink, having checked in, warmed up, gotten a pep speech from Yakov. Viktor helped Yuuri get zipped up, and Yuuri did the same for him, and Viktor fixed Yuuri’s make-up a little (primer, moisturising foundation, all skaters wanted to look good out there. Fun fact about Yuuri Katsuki: no mascara needed, his lashes were naturally that dark and long. Viktor marvelled). Yuuri was muttering his pre-skate mantras to himself as he did up his laces, and Viktor put some more tape around his ankle for extra support. He’d broken his ankle back when he’d been twenty and had been out for a season, Oksana supportive but of little faith. The ankle had healed, had supported him to world titles and Grand Prix medals, had been strong again, but never quite the same. His ankle certainly didn’t like what he was doing to it now.

He taped it up in the bathroom, noticing that the swelling hadn’t gone down. That wasn’t a good sign. But his ankle fit into his boot without hassle, and hadn’t Viktor gotten his first world title with Oksana when he had been recovering from a fractured collarbone, anyway? He didn’t see why there should be a problem with that.

He sat in the dressing room, watching the other skaters go. Some were nervous, some were excited. He was nervous and excited. He didn’t know what to expect. He wanted to do well, he wanted to win. He wanted to make sure he got his revenge on...
was the combined length of a short and a long: all he needed was to will his body to be at a hundred percent for seven and a half minutes of each competition. That was all.

So he sucked it up, ignoring the soreness in his ankle, and went to meet Yuuri.

They got onto the ice with three other teams for their warm-up, the arena larger and crowd bigger than at any of their previous competitions. Viktor was flattered when the audience started chanting his name after he and Yuuri were introduced, and he kept holding Yuuri’s hand while with the other he waved at the fans in appreciation. Yuuri was tense, and Viktor felt adrenalin pulsing through them.

Their warm-up went fine, they landed their jumps and the quad throw, which got huge applause from the fans. Viktor’s ankle didn’t feel too bad – he could work with this. He had never been a skater to announce injuries ahead of a competition because it was the same as making pre-emptive excuses for failure. No, he skated come what may, and if an injury affected the performance, he’d own up to it afterwards – but never before.

Soon they were backstage as the first pair went on. Yuuri was in his team Russian jacket, jumping up and down in place, rolling his shoulders, trying to stay warmed up as they waited for their turn. Their Eros had been mediocre all season, partly due to mistakes on their part, but also because it hadn’t clicked in competitions. It had clicked in practice, though.

A shocked gasp from the rink echoed backstage, and Yuuri looked at him in alarm. Had that been a botched-up throw? A fall on the side-by-side jump? Not a clean skate, anyway, but he simply shook his head: that didn’t concern him or Yuuri. Set it aside.

And Yuuri nodded, nervously. He reached out to take Yuuri’s hand again, the pair who were skating before them heading for the rink-side, leaving them as the only competitors in the corridor, waiting, with Yakov some feet away, arms crossed, not interfering. Yuuri was crushing his fingers, but Viktor let him. They were soon invited to the rink-side to get ready.

A lot of pairs that Viktor knew didn’t talk to each other at this point, standing by the boards while the competition was still skating: most pairs were getting themselves in the zone, having no eye contact whatsoever with each other. But they held hands and talked, in hushed tones, and he told Yuuri they had this. That Viktor knew they had this. He’d figured out that until the day Yuuri truly believed in himself, Viktor was going to have to do that leg work for him, and that was fine with him.

They had trained hard, they had perfected the routine, made improvements. “And you can sell it,” he said to Yuuri quietly as they clasped each other’s hands, stood close to one another, heads bowed conspiratorially. “The entire story, of you seducing me – you’ve done that, you know.”

Yuuri flushed a little red. “And do I still set you aside once I’ve had my way with you?”

Viktor felt an ache inside him. “Don’t you dare,” he said – utterly honestly, because how was he supposed to survive life post-Yuuri, how was that an option for his wasted, overinvested heart, but Yuuri took it as a joke, clearly, because he laughed. Viktor added, “You and me, that time at Sergei’s? When you look at me when we’re out there, think of that, of us and how good we looked.” Because clearly, at some point, the skate had stopped being about two strangers sharing one night of passion. Clearly it was now a lot more to do with the burn Viktor felt for Yuuri, and how he knew the taste of Yuuri, and Yuuri knew exactly how to look at Viktor to signal a simple ‘I want you’.

Their Eros didn’t need to be fake or imagined. He didn’t want Yuuri to feel exposed either, but
confident, self-assured – cocky.

Yuuri still looked stressed, so Viktor added, “Hey, if you feel like you can’t trust yourself…”

“Trust you,” Yuuri finished for him, briefly biting on his bottom lip in worry. And at last Yuuri nodded, just as their turn came.

* * *

For the record, Yuuri absolutely had told Phichit about him and Viktor. Phichit had squeezed it out of him in approximately two minutes flat. If anyone knew of Yuuri’s hapless adoration towards Viktor Nikiforov, it was Phichit, who had seen the posters in Detroit and heard Yuuri’s swooning remarks.

Of course Phichit had demanded details, and Yuuri had said they’d kissed at Finlandia and sort of gotten together afterwards. Phichit had then asked for sexy details, and Yuuri had squirmed before saying that he now understood the appeal of exclusivity. His few alcohol-induced one-night-stands hadn’t led to many revisits, but having sex with someone multiple times was actually very worth it, because he’d gotten to know Viktor, intimately. This had led to some rather amazing encounters, instead of just humping in the dark with a stranger and hoping for the best.

But there was a whole other thing that he’d never felt before, which was that he didn’t want to have sex with Viktor purely for sex, because sex, it turned out, was also about other stuff. Like sometimes he felt about to burst with how much he liked Viktor, and he didn’t know how to express that except be as close to Viktor as he possibly could. This usually involved nudity, melting into the feel of Viktor on him, around him, and making Viktor feel good. Or sometimes he just wanted proximity, or he wanted affection and often he wanted to give affection, or sometimes sex was just fun, them giddy and laughing, excited to have each other, and what he had learned was that with Viktor the entire process of sex, and not just the climax, was meaningful.

He said a little bit of that to Phichit, vaguely, and Phichit mostly looked at him like he was an idiot for saying that sex improved as you got to know the other person better. But in his defence, he had never experienced it before.

“Can’t believe you’re all grown up and in love,” Phichit had cooed at him as they’d been making their way to Viktor and Oksana on their first day at Rostelecom.

“No, no, no, we’re not – No. Not there. No,” he said, because he couldn’t let himself think of it in those terms. They were hooking up? Having sex? Cuddling? Kissing? Hand-holding, cooking, watching TV, skating, doing yoga, talking, playing with Makkachin, doing push-ups, skating, skating, dancing, joking, skating, hitting the gym, skating, and sometimes sharing the bed, talking late into the night, laughing, holding each other…

Yuuri wasn’t about to ruin that by making any sort of demands or by trying to say what it was. He just wanted it to last however long it could, and he wanted to show Viktor that he could apply the changes in his private life to their performance on the ice.

They scored 77.08 for their Eros at Rostelecom Cup; a further ten points added to their personal best. He had stepped out of their triple axels and almost lost the plot there, but Viktor had met his gaze calmly, with steel cold determination that made Yuuri realise why Viktor had won so many world titles. So he put it out of his mind, and the rest of the skate was perfect. Their PCS had never been as high, and their step sequence had been labelled as ‘the mating dance’ by one enthusiastic reporter. (Yakov had jumped up with a roar when the score came, and Viktor had practically scooped him into his arms. Yuuri had mostly been staring at the score, bewildered, because he’d
known the skate had gone better than he’d hoped, but oh my god –

Viktor had wanted to score in the 70s, ideally around 75, he’d said. They had exceeded even Viktor’s expectations, and Yuuri was relieved and happy, but also just stunned. They got a small silver medal, because JJ and Isabella’s skate hit the 80-mark, but the press was still all over them, and Yuuri let Viktor do most of the work because Viktor was good with the press. Questions centred on their rapid rise in pairs skating: Viktor still was one of the best in the world, even after a few years out, so that explained most of it. But as for Yuuri? “You have truly blossomed under a new coach and partner,” a journalist had told him, “and made huge personal improvements! How do you account for that?”

How else could he except thank Viktor and his genius a thousand times.

Now he didn’t know how to follow up after such success, at their first ever Grand Prix event, where they could perhaps medal unless they simply fucked up their free skate. But he tried to stay calm and focused, not thinking about how they might bomb now that they were favourites to medal. Sure, don’t think about it – nope, not even a little… Yakov told them now was not the time to get ahead of themselves, but to stay focused on the long program.

Yuuri tried to follow this advice, but he wasn’t normally pitched as a potential medal favourite in any competition, apart from Japanese Nationals. But after their staggering 77.08, Yuuri realised he had to anticipate the unexpected.

Even with this in mind, he had not expected Oksana Bosava, who cornered him on the day of the long program.

Perhaps ‘cornered’ was a bit much – Viktor had gone to the seamstress for a last-minute emergency to fix the sleeve of his costume, having noticed the stitching coming undone, and Yuuri remained in the warm-up zone eating a protein powder/banana mush that came in a bag for him to suck. He had his headphones in, music blaring, as he stretched on the floor and tried to evoke some of the confident semi-calm of their short program.

And then Oksana was there, and Yuuri was pretty sure she shouldn’t be. Then again, who dared tell Oksana Bosava where she was or wasn’t allowed to go? And when she asked if they could have a chat, he of course said yes. She’d congratulated them when they had briefly seen her after the short program, which had only made the whole thing more magical, again.

Oksana now led him into the wide corridor outside the warm-up area, where competition schedules were taped to the walls and odd fold-up chairs stood forlornly. Her red hair was in a neat bun, she was wearing a smart skirt and jacket, high heels, and looked stern. Yuuri continued to be in utter awe of her.

“So, Yuuri,” Oksana said, “ready for the free skate?”

Yuuri made a non-committal noise. Now they were in the final group, and in the warm-up room he could feel Isabella and Yurio glaring at him – or maybe he was imagining things, he wasn’t sure. He mostly hoped that Viktor would be back soon.

“Well, Eros went well, uhm, so –”

“Yes, you two certainly sold that to the arena,” Oksana said, without the friendliness of before. Yuuri stalled. This wasn’t a casual check-up, was it? She looked around them, as if to check no one could hear, and said, “It’s not my place, really, I know, but – I’ll cut straight to the chase, then.” Yuuri didn’t like the sound of this anymore. Oksana stood tall. “What are your intentions with
Viktor?”

Yuuri blinked. Oh! Uhm.

“Our intentions are to try our best to medal here, and at Nationals get silver or gold!”

Viktor had talked a great deal about vocalising their goals as a way of achieving them. Viktor was right, in a way: the more often Yuuri said their plans aloud, the less ridiculous they sounded. It became normalised, rather than some ludicrous fantasy.

But Oksana looked at him in clear annoyance. That hadn’t been the right answer, then.

“I didn’t mean this season,” she corrected him and snuck a glance at the Chinese team now coming out of the warm-up room and heading down the corridor. Yuuri shuffled awkwardly. Oksana, with impatience and in hushed tones, said, “Are you in love with Viktor or not?”

“What?!” he squeaked, terrified and stunned, heart suddenly pounding fast.

“It’s a simple question, isn’t it?” she said. “Because after dinner that first night I thought no, you’re just using him. But then the short program was – was something else, and not just sexy or whatever they’re saying, there was a – a real intimacy there. And I know real when I see it.”

“You think I’m using him?” he repeated, horrified, as he also took in the fact that Viktor had told Oksana about them.

She looked accusatory. “When we went for dinner you didn’t as much as brush against Viktor, not once, and Viktor is – tactile, from what I’ve always known. Besides, it’s typical Viktor to end up in a one-sided arrangement. So either you truly care for him or you’re just stringing him along, and Viktor deserves to know which one it is.”

He was dumbfounded. Had Oksana only pretended to like him the night before? Had that all been a front because now she was – not being unkind, no. She still seemed kind. But also terrifying and like she wouldn’t think twice about cutting Yuuri down. She was right, Viktor was tactile, Yuuri more than knew that. But this was Rostelecom Cup, competitors and journalists everywhere, and Yuuri was only trying to make sure they survived it! He hadn’t meant –

“Did Viktor say I’m stringing him along?” he asked in anguish. Viktor had told her about them! And Oksana didn’t approve, and Viktor – “Is that what he thinks?”

“No, he –” Oksana began, then shook her head. “He never said that, no, not exactly.” But Viktor had clearly told her *something*. And of course she didn’t approve, when Viktor could do so much better, have someone who was a better skater, and smarter, and more accomplished, and Viktor probably regretted getting involved with such a liability and –

“Whoa, are you okay?” Oksana said, placing a steadying hand on his shoulder. “Yuuri, I’m just – Viktor’s falling so desperately in love with you, and he’s been hurt too many times before, you know?”

“Viktor’s in love with me?!” he shrieked, not even knowing if this was good or bad anymore. He had trouble breathing.

“O-Oh, oh fuck! I- I think I’ve broken you, I – Ah, crap. Come on. Sit down, here, come on.” She helped him onto a lone fold-up chair by the vending machine, and Yuuri tried to breathe. She rubbed his back soothingly. “Okay, there you go, just breathe – Four seconds in. Good, good. Six seconds out. One, two – Good, that’s it. Okay, repeat. In.”
And, exhale, out.

Yuuri tried to calm down, head spinning. He’d known Viktor would probably say something to Oksana, considering their history together. When he and Phichit had joined them, he had been under no illusion that they had been talking about him. But – but stringing Viktor along, and there was that L word again, desperately, with who, what –

“Viktor’s gonna kill me,” Oksana bemoaned above him, and Yuuri shook his head, trying to get his vision to clear. Did Viktor really think Yuuri was just using him to win at competitions?! Viktor knew that Yuuri was intoxicated, enamoured, whatever it was, didn’t he? Yuuri was trying to not get caught, be professional. People gossiped about them as it was with a skate like Eros!

Oksana’s hand rested gently on his shoulder. “I meddled, I’m sorry.”

“Did he really say he was falling in love with me?” he asked quietly, torn between shock but also an astonishing amount of hope. They’d never talked about that, or anything related to that. It was too soon – was it too soon? He’d never made it this far in before – he hadn’t even dared hope that what he and Viktor had was something that could progress to another level.

Oksana crouched down, moving to clutch his hands in hers. “All he told me on my first day here is that he’s never been this happy. Okay? But also – he’s dated some not so nice people, you might know that, and now he wants to – to settle down, you know, find someone good. So Viktor just needs some – some reassurance that he’s, uhm. That he’s in a safe place with you. Does that make sense?”

He looked at his hands encased in Oksana’s warm grip and nodded. Viktor needing reassurance seemed absurd – Yuuri was the one who always needed it. But also did Viktor… mean it then. The two of them, together. Viktor meant it?

“He really wants to be with me?” he echoed in wonder.

Oksana frowned. “Of course. Why would – Oh, honey,” Oksana sighed, with perhaps a pitying smile, “you’re both being idiots, huh? Listen, he’s nuts about you. And I’ve seen him infatuated, sure, but even I’ve never heard him ever talk about a guy the way he talks about you. Trust me on this, alright?”

And he did trust Oksana, absolutely. He had not followed their entire career, copied their skates, watched their interviews, without seeing for himself that Viktor and Oksana understood each other completely. Whatever judgement Oksana made on Viktor was true – she would know.

Viktor wanted to be with him! It wasn’t convenience or boredom, it was them after all. Oh god!

“Have I messed it all up?” he asked in desperation.

“Oh, no! No, of course you haven’t. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you. You’re skating soon, and –”

“It’s okay,” he said. “It’s okay, I’ll be fine.”

That was how Viktor found them, him on the chair, Oksana crouching to his level, them clasping each other’s hands. Yuuri heard Viktor’s rushed footsteps before he saw him, and then Viktor was there, a flash of silver hair and concerned blue eyes, and, “Oksana, hold this.” Viktor’s costume was dumped in her arms.

“Yuuri, how you feeling? You’ve gone all pale – is it the skate? Do you need water?” Viktor was
patting his arms up and down in concern, as if to check for broken bones. “Are you dizzy, nauseous? Do you want your meds? I can go get them, I –”

“I’m okay,” he repeated.

“Really, it’s –”

“Viktor, I’m okay,” he insisted, standing up. Viktor ceased fussing, almost reluctantly. Yuuri stared at him, dazed.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Viktor asked, and he nodded. Viktor pressed a hand to his forehead for good measure, then eyed Oksana now stood further away. “Well, what happened?”

Oksana looked guilty as anything, but Yuuri was slowly coming around. He wasn’t having a meltdown like Viktor had feared. He was rattled – and nervous, and that ever-persisting guilt was there – but it was a good kind of rattled. Viktor – falling. Madly? Really? With him?

“Grand Prix, isn’t it?” Yuuri then asked, but quickly added, “Oksana was giving me advice.”

“She was? Well, she’s got plenty of experience,” Viktor said, still not having let go of Yuuri fully, a hand on his waist. Yuuri stared at Viktor in wonder: he’d spent the past few weeks wondering why Viktor was sleeping with him. Yes, the sex was amazing (for him – Viktor too, he was pretty sure), and they were doing a lot of coupley, lovey-dovey sort of stuff, and he knew Viktor wasn’t pursuing that with anyone else either. But there was some other reason Viktor was with him than him – convenience, hormones, who knew. But if Viktor felt what Yuuri did then that changed everything.

“We better go get ready,” he said, but Viktor still seemed suspicious. Oksana promised to cheer for them, giving a somewhat unconvincing smile. Yuuri saw her mouth ‘prosti’ to Viktor as she left: sorry. Viktor’s frown deepened.

They had changed into their outfits and were putting their skates on in the dressing room when Viktor said, “Oksana tried to give you one of her talks, didn’t she?”

“No,” he lied. “What about even?”

Viktor tied his laces tighter, over where Viktor had taped around his ankle. “About you and me.”

This wasn’t the time to talk about any of it – even Yuuri knew that. So he said nothing, because he would – would show rather than speak, determination setting in when their group was called onto the ice for warm up, this time surrounded by the top teams: Yurio and Otabek, JJ and Isabella, and Cao and Guang Hong.

The Lark was soft, sensual, delicate. Him and Viktor together, waking up next to each other on Sundays. That fluttering feeling when Viktor left a lingering kiss on the back of his neck before getting out of bed. The way Yuuri’s heart pounded, dizzy, overwhelmed, unsure but hopeful all the time.

They were the second to skate, and the arena was chanting Viktor’s name again, Russian fans enraptured after their Eros. They hadn’t had an audience this receptive or large before, and Yuuri kept his breaths steady as they circled the ice hand in hand. Yakov was by the boards, giving them a nod of ‘off you go then’. Yakov wanted them and Yurio and Otabek to medal here.

Their names were announced, and they moved to the middle of the ice together, lifting their arms to acknowledge the audience. Viktor gave his hand a reassuring squeeze, and Yuuri played key
words in his head, the ones he had assigned to each element: tight, high, clean. Strong, long, poised. And then they were already in the starting position, back to back on the ice, but hands entwined. Yuuri’s heart was hammering at a million times per minute, and Viktor was warm against his back.

Yuuri didn’t want Viktor to think Yuuri was frivolous with what he felt, but he didn’t find it easy to put into words either. But if Viktor was in deep, then Yuuri knew he was right there with him. He’d never intended Viktor to think that he was alone in that. It was just scary, that was all, and Yuuri didn’t know what he was doing most of the time, and he hadn’t dared hope for anything more. He just wanted Viktor in whatever little ways he could get.

Lilya had been right: sex was easy. The other part was so much trickier.

But Yuuri was determined to show he could do both.

* * *

The media circus was to be expected, but even Viktor hadn’t anticipated how hotly sought after they were going to be. He and Oksana had been Russia’s sweethearts, six-time Rostelecom Cup champions, and had always done a lot of media and filled up the press rooms.

Well, ah. He was a seven-time Rostelecom Cup champion, actually, as of forty minutes ago.

They had taken their skating to a whole new level, just as Viktor had intended. Yuuri had been flawless, graceful and refined, selling the skate with conviction. And it had fed Viktor’s performance, until it had only been them on the ice, the audience and judges secondary. Most importantly, his ankle had held up, sore as it had been. During their performance, Yuuri’s touch had lingered and ached, promising everything, and Viktor had been helpless, trying to put something as abstract as hopeless yearning into physical movement. He’d wanted to caress Yuuri in the end, there on the ice, in front of everyone. Just a gentle kiss on his lips, a kiss in the form of a question. Some kind of a question – maybe he would have needed to be down on one knee for it.

Whatever it had been, Viktor had experienced such a skate only a few times in his life, and Yuuri had shivered in his arms when it was done.

And then Yuuri had pulled him into a fierce hug, and Viktor had laughed into his hair, dizzy with their success, unbelieving. In the kiss and cry, when their total score of 221.90 came up, Yuuri had been too stunned to even speak, while Viktor had simply hugged Yuuri tight. First place, of course.

And after Yurio and Otabek, and JJ and Isabella had skated, they remained in first place. Granted, JJ had popped their side-by-side salchows, costing them several points, and Isabella had fallen on the dismount of their second throw. And sure, Cao and Guang Hong had lost a point on time violation, too, which abled Yurio and Otabek to snatch bronze after nearly identical scores.

But nothing could change the fact that he and Yuuri had come out on top at the end of it all, giving the most consistent and well-executed skates of the week. They had won gold at the Grand Prix, when absolutely no one had expected them to, with a score that at the World Championships the previous year would have gotten them bronze. They were going after the big spots, they were competitive, they were a threat, they were there to do a job: all that Viktor had intended for them to prove, they had.

Now the press room was filled to the brim to interview the top three pairs teams. JJ and Isabella, peeved off, sat to their right, while Yurio and Otabek were on their left. Yurio was furious not to be on top in his first senior grand prix event.
Yuuri and him were getting a disproportionate number of the questions coming from the press, the black horses of the competition. (“If,” one of the reporters joked, “we can call a three-time world medallist a dark horse.”) Yuuri sat to the right of him in the middle of the long conference table facing the room. Viktor couldn’t hide his excitement but gushed about their performance, how happy they were, how hard they had trained. Yuuri nodded in agreement, all tentative smiles.

A Japanese reporter then asked Yuuri about his development that season, and the translator lady at the end of the table said to the room, “How do you account for your significant improvement since taking on a new partner?”

Yuuri didn’t like doing media, but he took the microphone Viktor offered him, cheeks pink, and began answering. Viktor didn’t listen because Yuuri had been asked the question so many times already, but suddenly a few journalists gasped and shot up their hands at something Yuuri said. Viktor frowned. The non-Japanese press were looking around curiously. Viktor wished he’d paid attention.

The translator looked up from her rushed notes, flustered. “Since I began training with Viktor, I have discovered a new strength within myself that was not there before,” she related to the room, and Viktor smiled. He felt the same way! “Skating with Viktor has brought out the best in me. My professional and my private life have both changed because of my feelings for Viktor – gratitude, respect, and love, which all helped me perform on the ice today.” The woman paused briefly, then pushed on with, “I want to skate with Viktor until one of us retires, but when we skate together, I wish we could keep going forever.”

Yuuri nodded, as if to confirm the accuracy of his statement. Viktor sat very still, heart in his throat, suddenly aware that Yuuri had that stubborn look on his face where Viktor could do very little to stop him.

A journalist that ran a figure skating gossip website had already shot his hand up. “You have just talked about Viktor and having strong feelings for him. Are you referring to feelings beyond skating partners?”

Yuuri’s jaw set tight, cheeks red. “These feelings are –”

Viktor placed his hand to cover the microphone, pushing it down and away from Yuuri. Yuuri looked at him in surprise, and Viktor did a miniscule shake of the head. Yuuri’s eyes darted quickly between him, the microphone and the sea of journalists.

Someone a little less refined belted out, “Yuuri, are you confirming the rumours that you and Viktor are in a relationship?”

Yuuri opened his mouth, and Viktor snatched the microphone from him and gave the room his most charming smile. “No comment.”

This caused oohs and aahs from around the room, cameras flashing wildly, while next to them JJ and Isabella were looking on with stunned expressions. On the other side, Yurio spat out an angered, “What?!”

Yuuri shuffled in his seat, still with that stubborn look on his face. Viktor’s hands were sweaty, and he was trying hard not to smile, or swoon, or to give the game away. What was Yuuri thinking?!

“Well, Isabella and I are dating!” JJ then offered beside them.

“Yes, we’re engaged!” Isabella reminded everyone, showing the room her ring.
“Otabek and I are not dating!” Yurio snarled into his microphone. “Just to make that clear.”

Viktor really couldn’t have cared less, but there was nothing he could say to Yuuri in front of the entire room that someone wouldn’t try and lip-read from recordings later on.

So they had to sit there for a further ten minutes, during which they were asked twice more to clarify their relationship status, and Viktor shook his head – teasingly, now. “No comment.” And he gave the room a wink for good measure. The journalists were beside themselves.

But Viktor’s calm was all for show because once they left, Viktor had to rather unceremoniously drag Yuuri to the toilets, checking that the three cubicles were unoccupied before saying, “What were you thinking?”

After they had agreed not to tell people? And if they were telling people, then friends and family first, perhaps, and not a room full of journalists!

But Yuuri looked stubborn. “I was thinking that – that I want you to know how I feel. And that I’m willing to put it on record!” Yuuri motioned vaguely in the direction of the press room. “That’s how I feel about you, about us, and that matters to me more than who knows or doesn’t!”

Viktor stared, even as his chest felt full of joy. “Okay,” he said, erupting in a smile. He was utterly enamoured. Forget flowers and chocolates – Yuuri Katsuki about to declare their relationship in the middle of a press conference was perhaps the smoothest move any man had ever pulled on him. He snatched Yuuri up in his arms, hands firm around Yuuri’s waist, smiling brightly. Yuuri looked both flustered and pleased, and Viktor ached – but a good kind of ache. “But we definitely can’t tell anyone now.”

Yuuri frowned. “Bu – Why, I mean –”

“No comment,” Viktor repeated. “It’s admission and denial wrapped in one. I mean, if you – if you’re ready to tell our loved ones, then I’m ready for that too. But as far as the fans go, the media, then we gotta sit tight on it.”

“So who do we tell?”

Viktor shrugged. “You’ve just made us famous, so we gotta keep this are-we-or-aren’t-we thing going for now. It’s our new storyline.”

“I didn’t know we needed a storyline,” Yuuri frowned, but there Yuuri was wrong. Figure skating, especially in an Olympic year, was all about storylines. Theirs had been an unlikely partnership from the ashes when people had thought neither would compete anymore. Now it was perhaps the unspoken romance of the century.

Viktor cupped Yuuri’s face with one hand, leaning in close. His chest felt awfully tight. “Do you really want to skate with me forever?”

“No just skate,” Yuuri insisted. “But be with you. And –”

He kissed Yuuri. He kissed the living daylights out of Yuuri.

“I told Phichit,” Yuuri then mumbled when they came out for air. “I know I said I didn’t, but I did.”

“Yeah?” he grinned. “That’s okay with me.”
When they staggered out of the toilets, they nearly walked into Yakov, who hadn’t been at the press conference but was clearly trying to find them. “Otabek tell me you two viral on internet. What is viral on internet?” Yakov asked, befuddled. “What happen?”

Turned out, #KatsukiNikiforov was trending in Russia and Japan. An hour later, it was trending in five furthers countries.

* * *

In Viktor’s view, it wasn’t that bad. All publicity was good publicity! Like a ten second clip of them at the press conference, of Yuuri starting to respond to the question if Yuuri’s feelings went beyond a skating partnership. And then Viktor interceding, pushing the microphone away gently, looking at Yuuri in clear alarm, and Yuuri sat there with a flush on his cheeks. And then someone belting out if they were dating, and the obvious flicker on Viktor’s face into business mode: “No comment.” And then he had looked smug, even he could admit that.

With 35.7k retweets and 145k likes, Viktor didn’t think it would particularly harm them. #KatsukiNikiforov is real someone insisted, concluding I want to die!!! That seemed a little extreme.

“It’s a classic publicity stunt,” Viktor breezily told Yakov as they sat around their banquet table, the hotel’s large ballroom full of skaters in smart suits and evening dresses. On stage a Russian folk dance troupe was performing, and the attendees had finished their dinner, people watching the show, clicking their drinks, chattering.

Yakov, in an ill-fitted suit, was grumpy. “How do you need a publicity stunt?” Yakov demanded. “You’re the most famous skater in Russia!”

“Yes, but up until the press conference, we were not the most talked about pairs team this season. Now we are.” And he gave Yakov a sweet smile.

Yakov had not appreciated Twitter knowing before he did, because Viktor had come clean – to Yakov, not anyone else. And Yakov had asked what was Viktor thinking, hadn’t he learned anything, the season was about them breaking into the pairs top five again, and not about Viktor’s invariably doomed love life. “I wouldn’t say doomed,” he’d protested, but Yakov had ignored him and kept yelling for five minutes longer.

“That Japanese boy was the one person you needed to keep your hands off!” Yakov had declared, and then, predictably, gone into a rant on Georgi and Anya. But Viktor had no plans whatsoever to run off with a hockey player, for starters, or to hide out in Cambodia on a wellness ranch like Georgi if things turned sour. In the end Yakov had said, “And don’t tell me you can’t help it, that you’re in love – I’ve heard it all before, coming from you.”

But Viktor shook his head, because yes, Yakov had seen him lose concentration and sneak out of practices early, and Viktor had called it love or having found a soulmate, or whatever he had thought love was at the age of twenty or twenty-five. This, with Yuuri, was nothing like that – and Yakov would eventually see what Viktor already knew.

Yakov was sucking it up, grumpily, annoyed. “Idiots!” he had huffed more than once.

The day after the long program had been the gala, where Yurio had demanded answers too. Was Yuuri dating Boris or Viktor, or was Yuuri cheating on Boris with Viktor?!

And Viktor, who had gotten very sick of Boris, said, “Yuuri and Boris broke up, actually.”
Yuuri had looked surprised to hear that he’d split up with his fake boyfriend, and Viktor marveled how easy, in the end, it had been to kill off Boris Dostoyevsky, like a bad soap opera character hit by a bus.

“And what, now you’re dating each other?” Yurio asked, eyes darting between them.

“We’re close,” Viktor had consented, which had caused the teenager to stomp off, muttering to himself. Yakov deserved to know their relationship status, but a loud-mouthed Yurio less so. Keep them guessing.

Their gala performance had been to Stammi vicino, but the version he and Yuuri had made, a Stammi vicino 2.0. They had chosen a slightly different musical arrangement than his and Oksana’s version, and the crowd had seemed to swoon. The skate probably did not help the rumours of their now supposed passionate yet secret love affair whatsoever. Yuuri had been stunning in the new costume, and they had stood on centre ice at the end of the gala, with a dozen other skaters, holding hands and waving at the crowds. Golden confetti had been raining from the ceiling, landing in Yuuri’s black hair, and Yuuri had laughed, carefree and happy, and Viktor had been unable to look away.

Now at the banquet, sat next to Viktor, Yuuri was anxiously downing his fifth flute of champagne, in an ill-fitted suit. But even so, Yuuri was stunning there too, carrying the scent of pine-scented aftershave. Across the round table were Otabek and Yurio, annoyed by their bronze, annoyed by the conference room drama, and annoyed that Viktor and Yuuri were partaking in antics that Yurio claimed were ‘childish and desperate’.

After the speeches and entertainment were done, pop music started blaring from the speakers. Yuuri instantly stood up, his suit well-fitting, Viktor was pleased to observe. “Yuuri,” Yurio snarled. Yuuri perked up from his seventh (?) champagne flute. Yurio nodded towards the dance floor, heat high on his cheeks. “Let’s go dance or some shit.”

Bewildered, Yuuri looked to Viktor, who shrugged. If Yurio wanted to dance with Yuuri, so be it. Otabek was nursing a beer, while Yurio was too young to drink. Yuuri, obviously tipsy, stood up and followed Yuuri to the floor – Viktor knew well that Yuuri was an excellent dancer, and perhaps even more so after a few drinks. And, sure enough, Yuuri took Yurio’s hand, spun him around, and securely caught Yurio in his arms, tipping him down for show. Yurio seemed infuriated by how smooth Yuuri had been.

Viktor moved from one table to the next, chatting to old friends and competitors. He loved a good gala, and his suit was new and his $400 tie was from the new fall collection! People congratulated him on the gold, saying it was a shame they couldn’t qualify for the Grand Prix to really mix things up! But he said it was no problem, they intended to medal at Worlds. (And the Olympics – but Yuuri’s citizenship application remained secret.) People were too polite to ask about the press conference, although many eyes lingered on him and Yuuri.

Phichit appeared to have joined Yuuri and Yurio on the dance floor, Phichit and Yuuri engaged in some kind of a dance off, people laughing and cheering them on.

Viktor no longer was under any doubt that Oksana had said something to Yuuri. She was like that: impatient, intrusive. She’d dumped at least two boyfriends for Viktor when they’d been young, Viktor whining that having The Talk was too hard. Whatever she had said, though, had worked for Yuuri, because they had skated one of the best performances of Viktor’s career – not to mention Yuuri’s.

He was chatting to Cao and Guang Hong’s coach when someone tapped his shoulder firmly. It was
a slightly drunken Yuuri, eyes gleaming, a grin on his lips, tie askew, suit jacket missing. Viktor was instantly reminded of the night they met, Yuuri sat in their booth, their thighs touching – how many months ago now?

Yuuri held out his hand. “May I have this dance!” Yuuri yelled. And then Yuuri bowed, unnecessarily.

Viktor was instantly up on his feet, letting Yuuri pull him onto the dance floor. No one knew whether they were together or not, but many now assumed that they were. ‘An open secret’, people would call it – but as an official confirmation was lacking, no one could say for sure.

So let them speculate and wonder and gossip… As long as they didn’t full out snog on the dance floor, they could do as they pleased, and Viktor relished that he didn’t have to not touch Yuuri in public anymore.

Which was good, because Yuuri had arms around his neck, hips swaying against him, and the music was blaring with shut up and dance with me! Yuuri was laughing into his neck, and Viktor held Yuuri tight, lifting him up and dancing with Yuuri’s feet off the ground. “You’re the sexiest thing on this dance floor,” he whispered, rather loudly, into Yuuri’s ear.

“Pfft!” Yuuri disagreed, poking his chest when Viktor set him down. “You are!”

They ended up in who knew how many selfies with others, arms securely around each other, some with Viktor planting kisses on Yuuri’s cheek. Viktor’s jacket got lost somewhere along the way, Yuuri snaking through the crowd to him with two tequila shots, which they downed, arms linked, and Viktor grabbed Yuuri’s hand to lick the salt from his palm as Yuuri doubled over laughing. And they danced. God, did they dance!

And then the songs turned slow, and JJ and Isabella were swaying on the dance floor with a few others, including an angry looking Yurio and a severely embarrassed looking Otabek, the teenagers holding each other awkwardly and much more loosely than they did on the ice. Viktor had his arms tight around Yuuri, whose head was pressed to his shoulder, them moving in slow circles, lights glittering around them, the ballroom half-empty, and Viktor was buzzed, he knew that, but he also wondered if there was such a thing as a perfect evening. Yuuri smelled of tequila and pines and wanted to skate with him forever. They had gold medals in their hotel room. Yuuri was perfect and humming along to the song, the sound vibrating against Viktor’s chest. A perfect evening – absolutely perfect.

They snuck out of the gala like teenagers, Yuuri kissing him in the lift in a way that had Viktor’s mind spinning. Down the hotel corridor, stumbling on their feet, laughing – hand in hand. Forgetting their room number, pressing their key cards on random doors, shushing each other, snorting and giggling. Yuuri pulling on Viktor’s very, very expensive tie to bring him in for a kiss. And the door, then – finally!

Kicking their shoes off.

Viktor wasn’t sure what it was: the competition, or the dancing, or the endless pressure and stress he had put on his body in the past few weeks. All of it combined.

He kicked off his shoes, felt a sharp pain in his ankle, but Yuuri was still a little drunk and had collapsed on the bed – and Viktor followed by launching onto the bed next to Yuuri, landing with a thud. Yuuri laughed.

It saved him from having to limp to bed.
He didn’t have to look to know his ankle was more swollen than before. He pushed it under the covers lest Yuuri notice.

“Tonight was the best night of my life,” Yuuri said, and Viktor agreed.

He refused to do anything other than agree.

* * *

When they returned to St. Petersburg, Viktor went in for anti-inflammatory injections. His physician Dr. Rostovzeff recommended that he take a few days off training and rest his ankle, which was clearly overworked. Viktor refused an X-ray and an MRI – he had mildly sprained his ankle at some point, that was all, and he knew what a sprain felt like without needing all the faff. He’d take it easier, he promised.

He was on the ice the following day, saying nothing of it, having spent his evening and morning with an icepack wrapped around his ankle and foot. The last thing he needed was to upset Yuuri, who would probably blame himself for Viktor’s pained ankle, knowing him. So he took some painkillers, wrapped the ankle up in kinesio tape, and carried on.

Yuuri had his first citizenship interview, which he passed. Apparently, there were three more stages, and Yuuri was asked to come for another interview a week later, after which there would be a test. Yuuri bought a citizenship test study guide, cramming late at night, and even between practice sessions. Someone saw Yuuri with the book and hours later the entire rink knew – there would be only one reason Yuuri was reading for a citizenship test, three months before the Olympics. A day later, the rumours had reached the Internet, too. They refused any official comment.

Even so, the Olympics felt more and more real to Viktor every day. Rationally, of course, everyone knew that the Olympics was just one competition out of many, and that doing well there didn’t define one’s entire career – except that it absolutely did define your career, it was all about winning at the Olympics, and no one would remember who medalled at the Four Continents, but everyone knew who the Olympic medallists had been for decades to come. Skaters’ careers were viewed with their proximity to the next Olympics as a four-year-cycle, and the pressure of doing well there was more immense than any Grand Prix final or Worlds – which were annual events, at least.

The Olympics were different. It was a statement of who were the best skaters in any four-year generation and who were able to put down the best performance of their life when it really mattered.

Viktor had been to the Olympics twice: they had come fourth the first time, which had been a bitter disappointment, and silver the second, only a marginal 0.73 keeping them from the gold. Oksana had cried herself to sleep that night. Who knew an Olympic silver could feel so bad? They had retired a month after their Olympic silver when the season had ended, having scored a World gold with a higher score – showing a month too late that the Olympic gold too should have been theirs. It was a mixed bag, all of it: triumph, disappointment, victory, loss.

He had not intended to aim for a third Olympics. He’d wanted to compete again, sure, with Yuuri – that was all.

But Viktor wondered if he’d always had the Olympics in the back of his mind, even with the knowledge that they couldn’t qualify without Russian citizenship. Wasn’t that one of the reasons he had wanted them to relocate to St. Petersburg? To have Yuuri be in the right country just in case? And then the Federation had practically pushed them to it!
But Viktor liked to give himself the benefit of the doubt: they had walked away from Japan and an offer to compete for the Federation there. Had Viktor only been thinking about the Olympics and easily qualifying, surely he would have convinced Yuuri to stay.

In any case, now only Nationals kept them from being chosen for the Russian team. They worked on Eros and The Lark, because they might have won at Rostelecom Cup, but if Isabella and JJ had skated clean, they wouldn’t have. Viktor woke up at six o’clock every day, sixty push ups, sixty sit ups, took Makkachin out, showered. Painkillers, tape foot and ankle, protein shake, vitamins, head to the rink.

Meet Yuuri in the lobby. Sneak a kiss in the locker rooms, lace their fingers together, murmur words of longing and desire and affection against Yuuri’s smiling lips, watch Yuuri’s eyes light up, sparkling and warm.

They came home as an open secret, which was much better than a hidden secret. Viktor no longer had to pretend his feelings weren’t there. Paparazzi followed them around for a couple of days, real paparazzi this time, hoping to see them kissing and sell the pictures onwards – but the paparazzi got bored when they only saw them going in and out of the rink and the gym, sometimes stopping for coffee. Every now and then Viktor would throw his arm around Yuuri’s shoulders, but that wasn’t conclusive evidence.

Yuuri’s twenty-fourth birthday came, and Viktor booked them a private cabinet in a restaurant in town. He offered Yuuri two dozen red roses, had a limousine pick them up, they ordered champagne and oysters and ate pristine little dishes that cost who knew how much. And when they left after three hours of fine-dining, they realised they were both still hungry after their elegant seven-course meal for mini-people but not two athletes, and the limousine dropped them off a few blocks away from Viktor’s, where they went into an all-night corner shop that had microwave pirozhkis, and they bought some, queuing in their suits and ties and polished shoes, and the cashier looked at them funnily. And they walked back hand-in-hand, talking, breaths rising in the freezing winter night, and then ate the pirozhkis in the kitchen, giving some for Makkachin too. Yuuri was pleased and happy all night, and Viktor kept pulling him in for hugs and caresses. They made love into the morning hours.

Viktor was aware that he was living a golden era, that when he was much older, he would remember his evenings with Yuuri and the scent of his hair, and them talking in bed until late at night when Yuuri stayed over. And they needed to talk, too, because Rostelecom had been hard for their relationship.

“I thought you didn’t want to tell people because this wasn’t, uhm, something you wanted to announce,” Yuuri said on one evening when they were in bed, still awake at midnight. “In case you wanted to take it back, I guess.”

And Yuuri’s voice sounded small in a way Viktor absolutely loathed, but he only tightened his hold of Yuuri in his arms.

“Never,” he said. They were still figuring out how to talk to each other about their relationship. Viktor was trying. “It was just that,” he said, hesitating. His eyes had adjusted to the dark long ago, and they talked quietly, his fingers moving up and down on Yuuri’s back, Yuuri’s head resting on his chest, as Makkachin slept by their feet. “In the past, I’ve sometimes come on too strong too soon, and I didn’t want to repeat those mistakes.”

Viktor had grown up since those failed relationships, he liked to think. Oksana had always told him to stop dating pretty boys who had little substance to them, and then be disappointed that they were vain and self-involved. Yuuri certainly was pretty – god, was he ever. But Yuuri also had
immeasurable depths to him that Viktor was only beginning to explore.

Viktor felt warm from the tips of his toes to the crown of his head as Yuuri nuzzled against his chest. “Too strong how?”

Viktor didn’t like admitting to mistakes, but in the dark with Yuuri, in the cocoon of his bedroom, cuddled under the covers, he figured he could allow himself to be imperfect. “Along the lines of oh come meet my family, and here’s my overzealous missionary grandfather, and let’s go to the Maldives for two weeks! And all of that after one or two dates,” he said. So clueless and naïve.

“I want to go to the Maldives for two weeks,” Yuuri said with a smile in his voice, and that was why Yuuri was different from the others. It wasn’t infatuation, but something more like – “You can come too, I guess.”

And then Yuuri smirked against his chest, and Viktor reeled. “That’s mean!” he protested, and Yuuri laughed. “That’s unnecessarily cruel! Don’t tease me, Yuuri, I’d wither without you.” And crap – that was the kind of ‘coming on too strong’ he’d been trying to limit.

But Yuuri said, “Okay, after the season’s done, we can go together,” and Viktor would have swooned hadn’t they been in bed together already. “People like making holiday plans,” Yuuri then mused, “that’s not a crime.”

He carded through Yuuri’s hair gently, a lump in his throat. “Well, no but – I make all sorts of plans very early on, getting carried away, and I freak the other person out.”

“So have you made us plans? Other than the Maldives?”

 “…Yes,” he admitted, with a sigh. He had learned to keep his mouth shut, though, but Yuuri asked to know. He shook his head. “You’ll walk right out that door, and I’ll never see you again.” He motioned to the door in the dark. “Because this isn’t Maldives level sort of stuff. With you, I’m – I’m making plans I’ve never made before.”

Yuuri seemed to hesitate. “Like… serious relationship stuff?”

“Proper, grown up relationship stuff.”

“Oh.” Yuuri sounded nervous – but excited nervous, Viktor realised with relief. “Try me?”

“It’s bad,” he said in warning. He swallowed thickly. “And uhm, I – I know we might be in… different life stages right now, and –”

Yuuri lifted his head, a frown on his face. “What do you mean?”

Viktor had not anticipated this conversation right then, but he couldn’t see a way out of it. So he said he was going to be thirty soon, he was thinking about thirty-year-old stuff, and he completely understood that Yuuri was younger while he was significantly older, and he didn’t mean to demand too much, and Yuuri said, “Significantly older? You make it sound like you’re fifty.”

“Well in figure skating terms, I might as well be.”

“You’re in amazing shape,” Yuuri disagreed.

He was – thank you. But he pushed it aside with, “Not just – I mean off the ice, too. I’m still six years older than you.” He awkwardly brushed hairs away from Yuuri’s face. “And some might – some might think that makes me, uhm. Too old? For you?”
And Yuuri just looked confused. “What? No, it doesn’t. Unless – unless you think I’m too young for –”

“No, that’s – no, I don’t feel an age difference when we’re together,” he rushed to say, giving Yuuri a smile before Yuuri could misunderstand him. “I guess I just, uh. My plans are – are big, and maybe if you dated someone younger, the plans would be different, more – more casual, and I don’t want you to feel like…”

“Like I’m missing out?” Yuuri finished for him, and he nodded. Yuuri looked – no, was upset. “I’m so grateful all the time, I’m – I’m so lucky, and I’ve never, not for a second, thought you’re not enough for me, in any way.” Yuuri said, quietly. “I don’t think you’re too old for me. I don’t think you are old, so… so try me with the – the serious stuff. I want to hear it.”

Viktor breathed in deep. God, here went nothing…

He closed his eyes. “Well, I’ve been thinking about us buying a bigger apartment.”

“Oh?” Yuuri said with a hint of defiance. Then, more softly, “Um, but we don’t live together?”

“Oh, but we will.”

“We will?” Yuuri asked, and he nodded. “Oh, I see.” Yuuri lay back down against him, and Viktor tightened his arm around Yuuri again. “When will we live together?”

“Very soon,” Viktor said, “if you’re willing.”

He waited for two agonising beats before Yuuri said, “I’m willing. I’d – I’d like that.” Yuuri’s hand was drawing circles on his stomach. “I’m not good with casual, never have been, so… yeah, I’d like that.”

And Viktor smiled. “So that’s something we have in common: being awful at keeping things casual.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Yuuri laughed. “Okay, what else?”

Encouraged, he said, “Well, I’ve been googling real estate companies to see what the market is like right now. I thought June might be a good time to move, and – and I’ve narrowed potential neighbourhoods to a top three. And after we’ve upgraded, we should get a second dog, a friend for Makkachin, so I called the lady I bought Makkachin from to see if she was planning on any litters because it’d be cute if they were related, and she thinks there’ll be a new litter in October, which is the start of the next season, but the puppy couldn’t come home with us until it’s a few months old, so we could get her after Nationals, and then we’ll live together, you, me, and the dogs, and that’s just the beginning, because I also think about marrying you, god I think about marrying you all the time, in Hasetsu, at Yutopia, maybe in a couple of years, I think about dancing with you at our wedding, and you are never going to speak to me again, are you?”

Yuuri was silent long enough for Viktor to feel cold sweat forming, and then Yuuri said, “You were right: that is a lot.” Viktor hadn’t even gotten to the part where they adopted kids and started their own skating school. “Wow,” Yuuri breathed, and Viktor knew it was too much. It was always too much, and Yuuri would pull away from him, like they all had – for much lesser offenses, for drawers and copies of keys and wanting to meet the parents. And Yuuri had indulged him already with a promise to listen to his fantasies, had already done more than anyone he’d dated before, so he shouldn’t be too disappointed when –

“I’d like a puppy,” Yuuri then mused, nuzzling in, head resting on his chest.
And more to the point: Yuuri didn’t get up, walk out, or say that he needed space. Yuuri did not tell Viktor that there would be no Hasetsu wedding in their future either, or that Viktor was freaking him out by talking about moving in together and getting married when they had only been together for a month and a half.

Yuuri simply said, “Makkachin might like a friend.”

Viktor stared at the top of Yuuri’s head in faint disbelief. “…You’re not going?”

“No,” Yuuri said, “no, I’m good.”

“…You sure? Because you know now that I’m a special kind of crazy, don’t you?”

“I’d expect nothing less,” Yuuri said, sounding happy, and Viktor swore he could have danced an entire musical right then, from start to finish, Fred Astaire style, even with his sore ankle. He opted for grinning wildly at the ceiling instead.

“Okay then,” he beamed. First time for everything. First time him falling for someone who was worth falling for. You only needed to do that once, he’d been told.

When Yuuri didn’t pull away, Viktor not only regained his confidence, but fell harder and deeper than before.

And when everything was perfect, and Viktor was wondering when would be a good time to say ‘I love you’ for the first time, it happened – just weeks before the Nationals.

They were on the ice late in the evening after others had gone home. Viktor was exhausted, his thighs had stopped feeling like thighs, his shins like shins, his arms like arms – he felt heavy and weighed-down, but Yuuri was still energised.

They stood on the ice, Viktor trying to catch his breath. “So, Mr. Stamina, what else do you want out of me? My heart, my soul? A run-through?”

“We can start with the run-through,” Yuuri conceded, a cocky grin on his face that Viktor absolutely adored. So he gathered whatever remained of his energy to please Yuuri.

Afterwards, he couldn’t have said how it happened. They got back to work on The Lark, skating through the choreography, perfect copies of each other as they gained speed across the ice, and then they went for their side-by-side triple axels.

Yuuri landed his. Viktor didn’t.

His blade hit the ice, and his ankle just sort of – rolled out from under him, bending in an angle that wasn’t natural. He felt rather than heard a crunch, and then he smacked against the ice, hard, sliding on its rough surface towards the boards.

“Viktor!”

Two hands were on him, and he tried to come to. “It’s fine, I’m fine,” he instantly said, and then the pain hit him – sharp and radiating from his ankle. “It’s nothing,” he said, trying to get up, dizzy and disorientated – except he couldn’t put any weight on his leg and nearly fell into Yuuri’s arms with a sharp cry.

“I’m taking you to a hospital.”
“No, it’s —”

“This isn’t a discussion,” Yuuri said, picking him up, bridal style – and Viktor had the sense to let him, going limp in Yuuri’s arms.

* * *

Yuuri spent his evening in a hospital with Yakov Feltsman, the waiting room magazines wrinkled and faded. Viktor had insisted that calling Yakov was overkill – he wasn’t bleeding anywhere! But when they had taken off Viktor’s skates, his ankle was swollen up, discoloured with hues of purple and dark red, and Viktor couldn’t walk. They had taken a taxi to the emergency room where the staff, upon recognising Viktor, realised it really was an emergency and treated it as such.

And now he and Yakov waited in the orthopaedic ward.

Two options: it was broken or it wasn’t. If it was broken, then their season was over – no Nationals, Worlds, let alone Olympics. Months of rehab. Viktor unable to skate until the summer, probably, and if the fracture was bad, Viktor would need surgery, which would be another ordeal entirely.

Second option was that it wasn’t broken, that the injury was milder, and he and Yakov both, in their own ways, prayed for this option.

After an agonisingly long wait, they were fetched for by the doctor who had taken Viktor in. She had to warn them: an intern had given Viktor a bit too much morphine, and Viktor was rather high as a result. She assured them that it wasn’t harmful – mainly Viktor was groggy, but in a happy place, one might say.

This explained Viktor’s exhausted but loopy grin when they entered the examination room. His ankle and foot was wrapped up in bandages – not in a cast, Yuuri thought frantically, but then he saw the crutches balanced against the examination table Viktor was lying on. Viktor looked grey and sickly under the bright hospital lights.

“We’re very lucky the entire ligament wasn’t torn,” the doctor said, her mouth pursed with displeasure. “It’s a moderate sprain and will need plenty of rest. But that’s your main culprit, right there.” She pointed at an MRI scan mounted on the wall, showing a shadowed picture of Viktor’s foot. She pointed at a bone in the ankle. “That’s a stress fracture in the fibula, which I can only imagine has been painful for a while now.”

And, somehow, that was worse than option one or option two.

“Vitya!” Yakov gasped. Yuuri was speechless, while Yakov was swearing heavily in Russian.

“Yakov, not now,” Viktor sighed, lying on the examination table, his face buried in his hands.

“I’m aware you will consult a specialist, but I have recommended six weeks off the ice,” the doctor continued, “to start with.”

Viktor was handed over to Yuuri’s care as Viktor was on a 48-hour watch for any concussion symptoms after the fall on the ice. Viktor was drowsy but giddy, managing the crutches okay, even if he was slow hobbling out of the hospital. It was clear Viktor wasn’t really processing the extent of their situation in his current state.

Yuuri hovered, opening doors for him, constantly worried Viktor was about to fall. In the taxi, Viktor rested his head on Yuuri’s shoulder, linking their hands together, and instantly dozed off.
Yuuri tried to keep it together.

Russian Nationals – their ticket to the Olympics – was three weeks away. Viktor had a stress fracture in his foot and a partially torn ligament in his ankle. They weren’t going to Nationals. Euros, maybe, Worlds, maybe. But no Olympics or National title.

Yuuri stared ahead of himself, the weight of their dreams crushing him. It had been his fault – let’s do another run-through, Viktor! Just one or two more! Moron. Moron, moron! How had he not seen Viktor was in pain?!

Makkachin was delighted to have them back, and Viktor manoeuvred himself onto the couch clumsily. The crutches fell on the floor beside Viktor, and Viktor moaned in discomfort, spreading out, long limbs everywhere. Yuuri quickly placed cushions under his bad foot to keep it elevated.

“Hey, I’ll take Makka for a walk, okay?”

A groan in response.

Yuuri walked to the park in the dark December evening, letting Makkachin run around. And if at one point he let himself let out a scream – of frustration, out of fear and stress – then he felt a fraction better for it.

When he got in, Viktor was snoring on the couch, and at least he was getting some rest. He re-arranged Viktor’s bed, fluffing pillows to rest the foot on, drawing covers aside. Then he returned to the living room and picked Viktor up, carrying him as gently as he could.

Viktor was half-asleep, face pressing into his neck. “My knight in shining armour,” Viktor murmured, and Yuuri tried not to roll his eyes. “Mmm, my prince charming.”

Yuuri focused on getting Viktor through the bedroom door without hitting Viktor’s feet in the door frame, in the end entering sideways. He gently lay Viktor on the bed, sliding a pillow under Viktor’s bad foot, and then preceded to get Viktor out of the training clothes to pyjamas. Viktor perked up in his drugged up state. “You’re undressing me.”

“Not for the reasons you think,” he said, helping Viktor into a pyjama shirt, buttoning it up for him. Viktor looked at his shirt, frowning. He pushed Viktor gently back down to lie on the bed. “Tired,” Viktor mumbled, and Yuuri shushed him, trying to get the joggers off Viktor gently, apologising when he pulled the pant leg over Viktor’s foot, causing Viktor to wince. He somehow managed to get pyjama bottoms on Viktor, too.

“All done,” he said, relieved.

Viktor had swapped mental planes in the meanwhile. “You’re mad. Course you’re mad, I’m sorry.”

Yuuri sat on the edge of the bed, smoothing over Viktor’s brow. “I’m – I’m not mad. I’m worried. And scared, and –” He stopped. “I always do this: I fail as a partner.” Fumio hadn’t told him he was struggling; Viktor didn’t tell him he was struggling. Yuuri was weak, always had been, and his partners protected him by lying to him. He could never be strong enough to win over that trust completely, and then when adversity happened, he –

Well, what did he do? What had he done when he’d found Fumio’s syringes and drugs after Nationals, going through Fumio’s gym bag to find some gum? And he’d stood there, frozen to the spot, hands shaking. He had found the gum. Fumio always had gum.
A thousand Did you know about the doping, Mr. Katsuki? s, and he had said he hadn’t covered up Fumio’s doping.

But he had known.

And did he confront Fumio? Had he been strong enough for that? No. He had been a back-stabbing coward instead.

But this time had to do better because it was Viktor. He had to be strong because Viktor deserved a partner who could handle an injury, a sprain, a fractured bone.

Viktor wasn’t a small man – he was tall and lean, and over the summer and autumn months had been gaining muscle. But resting against the bed, drugged on morphine and in navy pyjamas, Viktor looked wounded, vulnerable – small.

Viktor looked like he was falling back asleep. “So good to me,” Viktor said, eyes already shut. “This is why I love you.”

Yuuri sat on the edge of the bed, staring. No one, apart from family, had ever told him they loved him – on drugs or not. And the L word was around, it had been mentioned in the past few weeks: by Oksana, by Phichit. But they hadn’t said it, although Yuuri knew that for himself that feeling was bubbling under his skin, even then when he was a bundle of worry and regret, overpowered by gentle concern. He bit on his bottom lip, gathering nerves. He was going to be stronger from here on out – not a liability. He refused to be one.

Viktor was out of it – it was fine, it was –

“I love you too,” he whispered, and then waited for the world to explode, maybe. But nothing happened, apart from Viktor sliding into faint snores again. He pushed stray silver hairs from Viktor’s face. His heart felt humbled – did that make sense? He’d have to ask Viktor, some other time. “I love you,” he repeated, more firmly.

He curled up to Viktor’s side, careful not to touch his foot. Makkachin jumped on the bed next to them, settling down with her head on Viktor’s thigh. She looked concerned, in Yuuri’s view, and he reached down to pet her head. She licked his hand. Between them Viktor was sleeping, taking in deep breaths, enjoying drug-induced dreams.

Yuuri would handle this. He would handle the shit out of this.

* * *

Yuuri moved in with him two days later.

“We did it,” Viktor told Makkachin conspiratorially, sat on the couch with her as Yuuri carried his belongings upstairs. She quirked her head to the side, ears lifting. “We sweet-talked him into coming back.”

They hadn’t.

Yuuri moved in with him because he was so annoyed Viktor wasn’t resting his ankle properly and had tried to take Makkachin out for a walk on his crutches. Neither had theirs been an amiable nurse/patient relationship, far from it – when Viktor had woken up with the drugs worn off, they’d had their first ever fight. Yes, Viktor had technically not told Yuuri that his ankle had been hurting, but –
But nothing, according to Yuuri. Fumio had been struggling and hadn’t told Yuuri. Viktor had done exactly the same, and he was ashamed. So he had steadied himself and told the truth: he’d been in pain before Rostelecom, and during, and after. It was his old broken ankle, and Yuuri said he knew that, of course. Why hadn’t he gone to his doctor? But Viktor had.

“You went to see Dr. Rostovzeff?” Yuuri had asked, shocked. God, Viktor was fucked. “You went, without telling me? And what did he tell you?”

“I got anti-inflammatory injections, refused an MRI. He told me to rest my leg.”

Yuuri stared at him. “And you didn’t.”

“I didn’t realise it was a stress fracture!” he said in his defence, and Yuuri had looked so hurt that Viktor hated himself. “Look, darling, I – I didn’t want you to get worried! I know you blamed yourself for what happened with Fumio, and I didn’t want you to think that my ankle had anything to do with us, but I – I realise now that I didn’t tell you something was wrong, which is – god, is exactly what Fumio did to you. I get why you’re so mad. I’m sorry. I’m –”

But Yuuri had stood up and walked out, not answering Viktor’s panicked questions as to where he was going. He wasn’t fast enough either, on the crutches, to catch up, and he’d heard the front door slam before he even made it to the living room. Makkachin was looking at him questioningly. Viktor realised that Yuuri might have just left him.

He’d been on the phone panic ordering chocolate boxes and flowers when Yuuri returned with an overnight bag because Viktor was still on concussion watch.

“You just rest there!” Yuuri had ordered, sitting Viktor down on the couch, placing Viktor’s foot on the cushion on the coffee table. “Don’t move! Watch some TV, okay? And I’ll bring you whatever you need.”

“I’m not an invalid!” he’d protested, but had never been as grateful for Katsuki Yuuri as in that moment, when Yuuri hadn’t dumped his underserving ass.

“That’s exactly what you are, an invalid!” Yuuri had argued back. “Now, do you want katsudon for dinner or not?”

Viktor had shut up. He would die fat and one-legged, but happy.

The pain eased in the days that followed, and as there was little benefit to silence, Viktor posted a picture of his wrapped up foot with After a fall on the ice earlier this week, my foot now looks like this! We’ll keep you up to date, but we are currently recalculating our plans for this season. Don’t worry, Yuuri is taking good care of me! #KatsukiNikiforov #notasbadasitlooks #wegetup

After their Rostelecom Cup victory, throwing out one of the best scores in pair skating history, people were distraught by the news of Viktor’s injury. He, too, was distraught. But on the plus side Yuuri moved in with him, bringing back his suitcases, game console and skates, and this time Yuuri settled in Viktor’s bedroom, so as warped as it was, a part of Viktor was thrilled. The other part was aware that his career might very well end there.

But when Dr Rostovzeff returned from his holiday to the Bahamas, it became clear that the fracture wasn’t as bad as they had first thought. “But you still can’t compete with this,” Rostovzeff said.

“You mean I shouldn’t,” Viktor pointed out, “not can’t.”
Both Yuuri and Rostovzeff glared at him – it was an uncanny likeness.

But look: Viktor didn’t need his ankle to be perfectly healed for Nationals, it just needed to be sort of okay. If he and Yuuri skated poorly, scoring in the mid-60s and low 130s, they would still probably get silver. Hell, even in low 60s and 120s, they had a good shot at silver. Let Yurio and Otabek have gold – Viktor didn’t care. They just needed to beat the other Russian teams to get onto the Olympic team, and frankly their realistic competition was limited after the teenage duo.

“And then I’ll recuperate,” Viktor promised Yuuri as they sat in the car outside Rostovzeff’s office, taking in the news. Yuuri was driving, having said Viktor shouldn’t even press a pedal with his feet. It was snowing heavily, the December afternoon gloomy, and they were digesting the medical update quietly.

Yuuri was heavily reluctant. “You can’t walk.”

“Sure I can! I mean, it’s sort of a shuffle, but it does the trick,” he winked.

Yuuri shook his head. “You’re not well enough for Nationals.”

“Not now – not today,” Viktor agreed. “But in two weeks –”

“The doctor said –”

“I’ve competed while injured before. Hell, when we got our first world gold with Oksana, I was recovering from a fractured collarbone.”

Yuuri sighed. “I know. I remember. But this is serious, Viktor. You’ll make it worse if we keep competing.”

“And that is why I’ll rest in January, and we can skip Europeans, be ready for the Olympics. Look, I’m ready for Nationals! I’m ready, no matter what anyone says, and the only person who can make that call for me is me.”

“Well what about me?” Yuuri asked with obvious anguish in his eyes.

And in that second Viktor realised that Yuuri was right: he’d back down if Yuuri told him to. If Yuuri absolutely forbade him, Viktor would withdraw from Nationals, and Europeans, and Olympics, and Worlds, and whatever Yuuri wanted. Oh god, all those years of Yakov bellowing, “One day you’ll have to listen to someone!” Well, here he was: concerned brown eyes and silky black hair, and Viktor was helpless.

“Yuuri,” he said softly, “you have to let me try.”

Yuuri worried on his bottom lip. “If it’s still bad when Nationals come, if you’re in too much pain, we’ll withdraw. Even if it’s on the day of the competition, an hour before it starts. Okay?”

Viktor nodded. “Okay. Deal.” And when he offered his hand to shake on it, Yuuri frowned and kissed him instead. It was the best skating partnership he had ever been in.

So he went to physio like a good boy, and they put together a training schedule for him that kept him off his foot until Nationals. Then it would be go time: regardless of how he felt, he had to put on two skates and give the podium his best shot. He assured Yuuri time and time again that it’d be perfectly safe, and Yuuri kept reminding him that he had the veto right if he so saw fit. But his ankle did feel better and stronger, there was less pain, and he was adamant to make it.
He graduated from the crutches to a medical walking boot, a long black contraption with a dozen straps to hold it together, covering his foot, his ankle, and shin completely. He walked slowly and carefully on it on the day he got called into Yakov’s office. When he arrived, Yakov looked gloomy, but also strangely settled.

“What is it?” Viktor asked, only growing concerned when Yakov said he should sit down.

Yakov eyed him with pity. “You’re like an angel with its wings pulled off,” he said – oddly poetic for eight thirty in the morning. Yakov then said, “I’ve got some news that are good and not good.”

“Okay,” he said, steadying himself. “What is it?”

Yakov huffed. “Yes, well.” Yakov’s eyes were focused on the table between them. “Georgi and Anya are coming back.”

He blinked. “What?”

He hadn’t seen either since the summer. He had largely forgotten they existed.

Yakov sighed irately, like Viktor’s questioning was too much. “They’ve made up or some such, how am I supposed to know? They’re idiots, missing half of this season already! But now they want to come back for Nationals.” Yakov paused. “They have been practising in Kazan since last month but are returning here as of tomorrow. They’re planning a wedding for the summer, apparently.”

In normal circumstances, Viktor would have shrugged it off – he’d always been somewhat cocky when it came to competition.

But this time he found himself stuttering. “But – But we – Yuuri and I. We – Isn’t there…? God, I don’t know if we – not with my ankle how it is, I – Yuuri’s worked so hard, I don’t want him to –”

He paused, taking in Yakov’s grim face.

Right. Okay.

What neither of them said was this: there were two spots on the Russian Olympic team for pairs. Otabek and Yurio had just gotten silver at the Grand Prix final and were favourites for gold at Nationals, and gold at Nationals was a ticket to the Olympics. That left one spot.

Georgi and Anya, as reigning World champions, three-time Russian National champions, two-time European champions, had a damn good shot at a further National title and a spot on the Olympic team. Him and Yuuri? They had wowed everyone at Rostelecom Cup, and now Viktor was injured.

“Well, maybe they’re not very good after all the time off,” he joked.

“Vitya,” Yakov said quietly, “they’re good.”

“Yeah, I know. Of course they are,” he smirked, but there was no joy in it. “Fuck,” he let himself swear. He looked at his wrapped-up foot, at the medical boot, thought of Yuuri and how much he wanted to take him to the Olympics. He thought of how he’d spent days convincing Yuuri to go to Nationals, because who was there to challenge them for the silver and the second spot?

Maybe the reigning world champions.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” he swore, and Yakov let him. Yakov had known for weeks about Georgi and Anya, but had kept their secret, just like Yakov kept several of his and Yuuri’s, and Viktor wanted
to be mad that this was as much of a heads-up they were going to get, but he couldn’t be. Yakov
wasn’t only their coach – they didn’t get priority or special treatment.

Yakov grunted. “I’m sorry.” Yakov never apologised for anything.

And Viktor nodded. It was all he could do.

So that was how dreams died, then: from an off-hand piece of news in the dim lights of Yakov’s
office.

Chapter End Notes

I really hope you enjoyed this chapter and that it wasn't a huge mess because I swear
writing it was a huge mess! Random notes: of course Yuuri and Viktor dance to Walk
the Moon’s Shut Up and Dance because of all the epic Viktuuri fan videos made to
that song. 110% their anthem. My medical knowledge comes from Google. I'm sorry,
scientists reading this. And for those who squinted, I absolutely confirm Yurio having
a massive teenage crush on Yuuri and having secretly adored him for years because
that is a head-canon I fully support. (Don't worry, he'll grow out of it and move on.)

And the drama increases! Who will win at Nationals?! Is the Olympic dream dead?!
When will I find the time to write the last chapter?! We shall all have to wait and see!
;) And if you have time to comment, please do so - I love knowing what you thought!
:) xx
IV: The Defectors

Chapter Notes

Aaah, guys! This is hot from the press - genuinely just wrote the final line. What do I say?!

Well, firstly: I'm sorry it took so long for me to write this last chapter! I was trying to make it fit into a box, and I had to let it go and be however long it is - I spent a day last week writing more to the story, and I have spent all of today, since nine o'clock (it is now three) working on it. AND SO, it is done! I've been working this on and off for six months - DONE! So thrilled! And while I could have spent even more time on this, I can't: real life calls. An extra thanks to the reader who bought me two Ko-fis: I put them into use, trust me! :D

There are typos here - I have not had time to edit this massively; just tell me where the typos are and I'll fix them! :) And feel free to correct any bad Russian or Japanese (aka languages I do not speak.) Oh, and there is a plot twist here I don't think anyone called... So if you're going WTF, then yes, it was foreshadowed, more than once. I was just sneaky about it. ;)

This chapter is no reflection of 1. ISU eligibility rules, 2. Olympic committee protocols, 3. citizenship processes. It's fan fiction. I made my own rules. *fist pump*

Thanks so much for reading! This last chapter is looong (cough 31k cough)... Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

IV: The Defectors

Yuuri wasn’t stupid: Georgi and Anya were back, and he knew exactly what that meant.

Any had dumped the hockey player and flown to Cambodia to get Georgi back as a grand gesture, and it had worked. Most of Yuuri’s gossip came from Maria and Mikhail, who knew just about everything that went on at the rink: Georgi had said he could no longer trust Anya, not after what she had done! But she was sorry! Sorry?! That was hardly enough! (Which was fair, in Yuuri’s view.) But, Georgi had said, if she agreed to marry him they could work on their trust issues. (Wasn’t that blackmail? Clearly Anya hadn’t thought so because she had agreed.)

The two were planning on an engagement photo shoot so they could sell the pictures to a Russian celebrity magazine.

Yuuri didn’t know enough about love or relationships to judge whether Georgi and Anya had really pulled through or if they needed plenty of couples therapy. The pair were using their programs from the year before, not having the time to create new ones.
But Georgi and Anya were both in great shape, despite a few months off. Georgi was going around the rink saying that he expected to gain an Olympic gold and a wife in the next six months, and the two did seem madly in love, canoodling on the ice like Anya hadn’t cheated on Georgi at all.

“I don’t get it,” he said to Yurio, who was also broody about the sudden change.

Yurio kept his arms crossed, staring across the ice at Anya giggling in Georgi’s arms. “They’re gross,” Yurio complained. “I officially hate them more than you and Viktor.”

“You hate us?” he asked sadly.

“No,” Yurio huffed, “but if we don’t make it to the Olympics because of you or because of them, then – then fuck this.” And Yurio skated away, visibly upset.

Yuuri hung his head. The added pressure wasn’t bringing out the best in any of them.

Georgi and Anya were still an amazing team, no question about it. Yakov now had three world class teams and seemed like he didn’t know what to do with that at a time like this, so Yakov was simply telling them all to fight it out at Nationals. Yurio and Otabek, realising their Olympic spot was in jeopardy, were clearly out for blood, and with Yuuri’s citizenship application public knowledge, the atmosphere was tense. He had never had much of a relationship with Georgi and Anya – he and Fumio had hardly been their main rivals – but Viktor and Georgi were friendly. Or had been: Georgi did not seem upset about Viktor’s injury whatsoever. At least Yurio and Otabek had seemed genuinely sorry.

Yuuri knew it was time to reassess their plans. “We could just skip Nationals, you know, and focus on Europeans if they send us there. It’ll be fun – I’ve never competed at Euros before. We might be at their level by then.”

He was in the middle of gaming, sat on Viktor’s couch as Viktor used his lap as a pillow, bad leg stretched out and elevated on the arm rest. Viktor was there for company, not the gaming, typing away on his phone, but now Viktor paused and looked up at him with a frown. “Babe, we’re at their level now.”

Yuuri snorted. “They’re world champions.”

“Yes.”

“We have three good legs out of four.”

“I’m aware.”

Yuuri shook his head. “We can’t beat Georgi and Anya at Nationals.”

“We’ve beaten everyone else,” Viktor said, and Yuuri wanted to say that they’d been lucky so far, but knew what a lecture he’d get for that. Viktor continued with, “Georgi and Anya haven’t competed since March. You’ve seen them – they’re rusty.”

They looked pretty damn good to Yuuri.

“No, but – Look.” Yuuri paused the game, trying to find the words. The Federation had approached them with the citizenship plan when Georgi and Anya had been out of the equation, perhaps panicking about Russia’s Olympic potential. Now the rightful king and queen were back, and Yuuri still had his citizenship test to pass. They could win gold, and if Yuuri failed the test, they still wouldn’t qualify! “I just want to be realistic,” he sighed in the end.
Viktor frowned. “Us winning these Nationals *is* realistic,” Viktor argued, like he wasn’t lying there with a bandaged-up ankle. Viktor’s never-ending stubbornness amazed him. “When we moved here, we assumed we’d be skating against them, before they ever broke up. So they’re back.” Viktor gave a little shrug. “We’re better. Trust me.”

Even now? Even with Viktor’s injury?

But he had decided to be stronger now – when Viktor was injured and somewhat delusional of their chances – so he nodded. If there was a time to have even a fraction of Viktor’s endless confidence to boost them, it was now.

So Yuuri stuck to the training schedule the best he could, but was doing shorter days, coming back in time to cook dinner so that Viktor wouldn’t stay up on his feet cooking for too long. Viktor said he didn’t need a house husband to dote on him, but always looked happy when he got in earlier than expected.

Viktor was going to a recovery centre during the days to train on their specialist equipment, working with a physiotherapist there, staying fit while also resting his foot. Yuuri kept going to the rink to work on the ice, but practising without Viktor felt awful. Practising his spins and jumps without Viktor felt sad, Yuuri automatically trying to spot Viktor mid-spin to synchronise with him – but Viktor wasn’t there. He’d try and skate to Eros or The Lark, but without Viktor on the ice, he felt lost.

One afternoon, out of pity, Otabek asked if Yuuri wanted him to do some throws with him, maybe. Yuuri appreciated the offer, but in the evening as they were getting ready for bed, Viktor said, “That’s the last thing I need! Some virile eighteen-year-old lifting my boyfriend around the rink while I’m forbidden to go on the ice!”

“Oh, I hardly – Oh. Am I – Am I your boyfriend?”

Viktor looked up from where he’d been pulling the bedsheets aside. Viktor was wearing an oversized jumper that dipped down to expose collarbone, tight boxer shorts clinging onto muscled thighs, his injured foot hovering above the floor. Perfect, even with an ankle taped together.

Viktor looked at him with some concern. “I hope you’re my boyfriend.”

Yuuri was surprised he didn’t melt into a puddle of goo. “Uh huh, okay,” Yuuri said, nodding too much. “Sure, I knew that. I mean I am. Yeah, of course.”

He quickly went to the bathroom where he fist-pumped, then caught himself in the mirror, and was embarrassed.

Viktor’s physical therapist was great, and his ankle was healing: Yuuri saw the improvement himself when Viktor stopped hopping around but walked normally again. And walking was fine, if you were an average person, but not when you were a professional athlete and skater, who needed to do much more than walk.

The problem was that they didn’t have enough *time*. They needed two more weeks, a month maybe – and they didn’t have that.

Instead Viktor returned to the ice for ten minutes with five days to go until Nationals. Viktor got onto the ice, testing it out – Yuuri had feared Viktor would look like a new-born fawn attempting to walk for the first time, but Viktor was steady, stroking slowly across the ice and then coming back to them.
“How’s the pain?” he asked instantly.

“It’s there,” Viktor admitted. “We’ll have to change things around to minimise the discomfort.”

“Okay then. What can I do?”

They sat on the bleachers with Yakov, reworking their elements – taking out their quad twist and throw, but Georgi and Anya weren’t doing them either yet; they replaced them with triples. They took out the triple axel next, replacing it with a triple Salchow. Yuuri watched their TES drop and drop…

“We’ll get back some of the points with GOEs and PCS,” Viktor said. “And this is Nationals, we can lower the technical side without panicking.”

“If you skate clean,” Yakov mused, “podium is not impossible.”

With four days to go, Viktor was on the ice for fifteen minutes, for twenty with three days to go, for twenty-five with two… And Viktor was in pain. It hadn’t gone. The injury was still there, and they were struggling.

The day before they were due to fly out, they had a closed session at the rink, the two of them, Yakov and Viktor’s physiotherapist. Viktor was visibly nervous – Viktor was never nervous, or showed vulnerability like this. Yuuri was at a loss but put on a brave smile, and their Eros and The Lark weren’t awful, they fought through them, but that was the problem: it wasn’t graceful and effortless. It was a struggle.

After their practice of half an hour on the ice, marking some of the elements without executing them, Viktor excused himself to the locker rooms quickly. When Yuuri met him in the lobby twenty minutes later and they headed for the car, Yuuri realised Viktor was limping again.

Outside the December night was dark and snow was falling.

Yuuri knew that this was it: he had to say no. He had the veto right. Viktor was damaging himself further by going back on the ice too soon. It was Viktor’s health and his future and his career, and Viktor Nikiforov should not go out like this, forcing himself to skate when injured and –

They got to the car, and both stopped. There was doubt in Viktor’s eyes, which – which Yuuri had never seen before, not once in his life.

“That went well,” he said.

Viktor looked uncertain. “It did? I thought –”

“No, we’re good.” He reached out for Viktor’s hand and squeezed it. “We’ve got a decent shot.”

Viktor stepped close to him. “You really think so?”

Technically he thought they were as ready as they ever could be, given the circumstances, and the circumstances were dire.

But he said, “Yeah, I think we’ll get on that podium. I think we’re going to the Olympics.”

And Viktor gave him a hug, long and hard, and Yuuri hugged him back with all he had.

They packed their bags and flew to Moscow for Nationals. Viktor wore his medical boot on the plane.
Viktor woke up in a hotel room in Moscow on the day of the short program. Yuuri was already up, moving around the room quietly. Viktor buried his face into the pillow further. He didn’t want to get up or face the new day. It was, decidedly, the worst day of his life.

His ankle felt fine, but when he got up, he knew the pain would follow. No one had to tell him he was being foolish – he doubted his decision every minute of the day. Was he being too stubborn? Should they have withdrawn already? Viktor was an Olympic medallist already, so why couldn’t he let it go?

He rolled onto his back and saw Yuuri now approaching the bed with a breakfast tray fully loaded: a small pitcher of orange juice and a single rose in a tiny vase, and maybe the sight of Yuuri, in loose pyjama bottoms and Viktor’s t-shirt – maybe the sight of Yuuri early in the morning, soft and sleepy and his – was the reason Viktor was being so stubborn about this.

Yuuri began singing ‘Happy Birthday’, which was very sweet, of course, but Viktor groaned in protest. Yuuri stopped and tilted his head. “Not so happy?”

Viktor sulked and shook his head. Yuuri left the tray on the nightstand and sat on the bed. Viktor reached out to brush his knee. “But thank you,” he said, nodding at the tray. “That’s very thoughtful.”

“No need to thank me,” Yuuri said with an air of concern, reaching out to brush hairs from his eyes.

Viktor stared at the ceiling, and then at his hand when Yuuri reached out to squeeze it. He sighed again – dramatically, he knew – and then moved to bury his face in Yuuri’s midriff with a groan.

“Bu – Viktor!”

“I don’t want to be thirty,” he told Yuuri’s stomach as hands settled in his hair, familiar and gentle.

“Oh.” Yuuri’s hands carded his hair. “Well, you’re gonna have to be, because that’s how time works.”

“Time is stupid,” he declared – yes, he planned on starting this decade with a tantrum. He didn’t care. Yuuri smelled nice, though, comforting and like something of Viktor’s own. He wrapped arms around Yuuri and clung on. “I’m sucking out your youth. I need it. I need the life force.”

Yuuri started laughing, and Viktor let himself be pried off, flopping down on the mattress in defeat. Yuuri was smiling down at him, and Viktor tried to trace signs of nerves on him, about the competition, but Yuuri appeared calm. Viktor wasn’t calm. He was putting on an act.

“You’ve done pretty good for thirty,” Yuuri said, brushing over his brow. “Look at your medal cabinet.”

“Mmm, look at you,” he said, and Yuuri flushed even as he rolled his eyes. Was this what thirty was supposed to feel like? When he’d woken up on his twentieth birthday, at Nationals, he had thought there would be no way he’d start thirty the same way, yet here he was: messed up ankle and all. God, he’d better wake up in a beach front luxury hotel in Greece for his fortieth. Yuuri better be there with him.

They ate breakfast together, talking about anything except the competition looming only hours away. Yuuri asked how his ankle felt, and he shrugged. The same: weak, in pain.
“I got you a present too but it’s in St Petersburg,” Yuuri said after they’d finished the food, the empty dishes and tray on the floor. “And I’ll take you out for food too.”

“Not out dancing?” he asked, and it wasn’t like him to be self-deprecating, but here he was.

“Not yet,” Yuuri said, seriously.

“I liked your birthday better,” he said, tugging Yuuri from the wrist to lie down with him. Yuuri followed willingly, pressing a kiss to his lips. And oh – that sent a shiver right through him. He chased Yuuri’s mouth, and Yuuri kissed him again. Mmm, maybe this wasn’t so bad – maybe a new decade didn’t have to be awful. He inched a little closer, with obvious intent, and Yuuri broke the kiss with a worried expression.

“I don’t want you to strain yourself.”

“Come on, we talked about this,” he said gently. “You know, how I broke my ankle, but the rest of me is fine?”

Yuuri had not touched him for a good week and a half after the hospital trip, which of course wasn’t abnormal for many relationships, except that they were still in a phase where they had difficulty keeping their hands to themselves. Viktor had missed the intimacy, the heat, the sounds and the taste and the feel of Yuuri – the feeling of warm affection when they kissed in the afterglow.

He’d eventually managed to show enough physical prowess for Yuuri to realise Viktor could be touched without him combusting, although Yuuri kept worrying about ‘strenuous activities’.

Now Yuuri kissed him, wet mouth pressing against his, and Viktor opened up for him. Yuuri’s hand settled on his bare stomach, and Viktor shifted his hips, making himself as available for Yuuri as he could. Yuuri’s hand slipped down to the top of his pyjamas, and Viktor gave an encouraging sigh.

Yuuri pulled back, mouth hovering over his. “I want to spoil you,” Yuuri said, and Viktor definitely liked the sound of that. “But we also need to save our energies for the short program.”

“Maybe we need inspiration?” he ventured, thinking of their upcoming Eros as he leaned up to kiss Yuuri.

“Mmm, maybe,” Yuuri mumbled against his mouth, voice low. Viktor had him, he could tell from the needy edge in Yuuri’s tone, which was good because the taste of Yuuri had want curling up in his guts. “But I can’t give you this,” Yuuri said, squeezing his left buttock. They had agreed, once their relationship became sexual, that they had to schedule their sex life according to training and competitions. And although that took some spontaneity out of things, it also meant that they could look forward to indulging each other – the build-up left them both on edge sometimes.

And it wasn’t like the stuff they could still do whenever wasn’t good. The other stuff was also amazing, and Viktor was more than delighted when Yuuri moved down the bed, leaving kisses down his chest and stomach.

“Oh, maybe,” he rushed to say when Yuuri went to remove his glasses. Yuuri stopped, eyes steady on him – dark and determined. God, he was fucked. “Maybe keep your glasses on,” he finished lamely, because he was but a man and so weak for Yuuri, who thankfully grinned.

“Okay, sure.”
And as Yuuri went down on him, Viktor thought maybe this wasn’t such an awful day after all, that maybe this was, in fact, a pretty great way of starting a new decade: getting pleasured by his boyfriend.

Yuuri tasted like him afterwards, and Viktor wanted to return the favour, but instead Yuuri came from fucking himself between Viktor’s thighs, which drove them both absolutely crazy. They were sweaty and in need of a shower when they were done.

“That wasn’t too much, was it?” Yuuri asked, already sounding doubtful as they lay next to each other, catching their breaths.

“No, it was the perfect amount,” he said, sated and still riding the high of his orgasm.

“God, we’ve ruined the hotel sheets,” Yuuri then said, and Viktor laughed.

“They’ll have seen worse, I promise.” He reached to press a kiss in Yuuri’s hair. “Thank you.”

Thirty wasn’t bad at all.

So maybe he was wrong about the other stuff too: maybe – maybe – Nationals didn’t have to be a disaster. Maybe his ankle would hold up. Maybe they had a chance.

* * *

Nationals was a disaster from start to finish. Viktor had injections into his ankle an hour before their skates, and the pain lessened both times. But even so, the mistakes were many, and they had lowered their TES considerably and were clinging onto the podium as it was. Viktor doubled his Salchow in the short and then fell on the ice, and the timing was off after that, and they completely missed out a lift because they couldn’t fit it anywhere after his mistake; and when they did better with The Lark, coming back fighting, his ankle gave up somewhere at the two-minute mark, not handling the added weight of one of their lifts and he had to bring Yuuri back down too soon, and –

They fought – let no one say that they didn’t fight like hell, that Viktor didn’t fight through every second of it. But his ankle wouldn’t cooperate, and he didn’t have the stamina to pull off their skates while injured and in pain.

After The Lark, he had limped off the ice, Yuuri supporting him. The gasps and pity applause had been something else.

No cheeky winks and shared hugs in the kiss and cry. They had sat there, heads bowed. Yuuri had clutched his hand, and Viktor had willed himself to feel nothing because he didn’t want to have a meltdown on National TV, and when the scores were announced, they knew. Yakov said nothing, but his face was ashen.

Yurio and Otabek were National champions, Georgi and Anya second, and a team from Moscow got bronze, two points ahead of them.

They came fourth. They didn’t get medals, and they weren’t in the medallist interview room nor were they invited for the photo shoots, nor were they at the centre of any of the glory Viktor was used to. Since he had turned senior with Oksana, he had medalled at every single one National championship – he had never not been on the podium before.

And the Olympics – ha, well. They knew what it meant. The Russian Olympic Committee was to announce their selection the day after, but he and Yuuri would not be on the team. Fourth? Not even close. Not after a performance like that.
And so the next day, when they were packing up and getting ready to check out of their hotel room, Yuuri looked up from his phone and said, “They’ve made the official announcement.”

And he froze, in the middle of folding a shirt away, a lump in his throat. And although he knew, he had to say it anyway: “Yurio, Otabek; Georgi and Anya?”

“Yeah.” Yuuri put his phone away. “You know, they uh – they’ll do good. In Osaka.”

“Yeah, of course they will. Yeah.”

Viktor couldn’t blame the Federation: he wouldn’t have chosen himself either.

* * *

The Committee’s decision was controversial, and Yuuri was aware that the internet was full of debate as to who should have made it: him and Viktor, because clearly Viktor was injured and everyone knew that normally they would have scored much higher, and besides, Viktor would be better by the Olympics, and more to the point they should have been rewarded for having the guts to come and skate at all! But courage and guts didn’t get you on the team, others pointed out, results did, and there was no guarantee how quickly Viktor would heal, and Yuuri didn’t even have citizenship yet.

Others thought it scandalous Russia was sending Yurio and Otabek with their AC/DC medley to the Olympics for the world to see, finding them unpolished and junior-ish, with a high TES but lacking PCS, while their fans raved that Yurio and Otabek had been working to earn this since they had been twelve and fourteen! And then there was Georgi and Anya, and so many fans were thrilled to have them back, while others complained they had not evolved as a team in years, but kept doing the same overdramatic, nauseating OTT romance skates with different music year in year out – and now were recycling their programs from the year prior on top.

There was no way of ever keeping everyone happy – and neither were they.

Viktor, to his credit, attempted to remain optimistic, but Yuuri saw that this was a struggle. Normally Viktor was always cheerful, full of determination and ambition. To see Viktor push away his rehab schedule and sink onto the living room couch to watch a soap opera omnibus was nothing Yuuri knew how to deal with, except that he brought blankets and let Viktor explain the plot lines to him, and they let Makkachin sleep on their laps, and together they quietly mourned the death of their dream.

And so late December and the first few days of January were some of the hardest of Yuuri’s life. Not as bad as life had been after the doping scandal, of course, but Viktor wasn’t in a good place, and neither was he. They were still happy, but they were also a little lost. They’d allowed themselves to dream and hope, and now disappointment had taken that place. Viktor’s progress with his ankle had also taken two step backs after Nationals, and Viktor seemed to think for the first time it wasn’t going to get better.

“It’ll improve,” Yuuri insisted, “you just need time.”

He still went for his citizenship test, though he wasn’t sure why. The test score would determine whether he qualified for the final interview, and some questions seemed straightforward and some answers he simply had to guess or bullshit. Would it be enough? But more importantly, what was the point now? Yuuri could not see them going to the Olympics next time around, in four years when Viktor would be thirty-four and he was twenty-eight. It wasn’t completely impossible if they both stayed healthy, but it seemed so far away. He and Fumio had talked about the Olympics too,
after their doping-sponsored win at Nationals. If they could stay as the top Japanese team for another year, then they should be selected for the Olympic team, they’d thought.

Back in St. Petersburg, Yuuri watched the Japanese Nationals retrospectively, and Kenjirou Minami with Hikaru Fujiwara won National gold with a relatively modest score. He and Fumio would have beaten that, maybe, even without the doping. Maybe in some other world he was now going to the Olympics after all.

But that wasn’t regret: not for a single second did he wish for anything else than to be skating with Viktor, come what may. Whether they stumbled and struggled, whether the performance was perfect – being on the ice meant Viktor to him now, and he never wanted that to change. Japan hadn’t officially announced their Olympic team yet, but he wished Kenjirou and Hikaru all the best. He hoped that Fumio, wherever he was, did the same, without being resentful.

Viktor continued with his physio at the specialist centre, but wasn’t allowed on the ice, so Yuuri returned to his own training, one of their jump coaches doing throws and lifts with him so that he could keep developing his consistency and technique in Viktor’s absence. God, he hated training without Viktor. He loathed it. He was so used to their timetables bringing them together for several hours a day, and even the gym time and stretches and post-training ice baths and massages that they didn’t have to do together, they had done anyway. Training without Viktor felt like he was missing his better half, all the time, so he sent texts and pictures throughout the day, and perked up when Viktor replied. The rest of the time he was pining.

The world didn’t stop just because they had failed to make the Olympic team; they didn’t stop competing or being professional athletes because of it. Now their goal was to have Viktor better by Europeans, because they had, at least, been assigned to that after Georgi and Anya had announced they wouldn’t be going – they were training for the Olympics, keeping their eye on the prize.

So Yuuri tried to remain optimistic: Sara and Michele would be there, Yurio and Otabek too of course, and it was being hosted in France, and maybe they could stay for a few days after to do some sight-seeing. Maybe, if Viktor’s foot was better, they could finish in the top five, even. They could even get on the podium if their quad twists and throw quads were back!

But when coming home, Yuuri was never sure if he was returning to a cheerful Viktor or a taciturn Viktor, but he tried his best to support Viktor through whichever mood he found him in. And after he had been living at Viktor’s place for three weeks, with quick pit-stops at Sergei’s, he finally called Sergei to give up the flat because there was little point paying for it. Sergei was disappointed but Yuuri was happy to compromise.

And so, when Viktor got in that night after taking Makkachin out, Yuuri called out a greeting from the kitchen and then waited.

“Youri,” Viktor said tentatively, coming to a halt in the living room. Yuuri kept fixing them quinoa and chicken in the kitchen. He knew exactly what Viktor was reacting to, of course, but only hummed in question, chopping up the parsley while Makkachin rushed to him, staring at him because he had food, her butt wiggling in excitement.

“Yes?” he asked, trying to sound innocent but he was nervous. ‘Very soon’, Viktor had said, but what if Viktor had reconsidered since?

Viktor was taking off his coat and scarf. “The, uh – why are all these orchids here?”

He paused, took a breath, then said, “I promised Sergei I’d take care of them until the hockey season was over. You know, since I gave up the apartment.”
Viktor froze in the living room, scarf in hand, blue eyes staring at him intently. “You – Since when?”

He put down the knife. “Since today?”

And Viktor began to smile – he beamed – and then he had walked over and lifted Yuuri up like he was nothing, and Yuuri said, “Your foot, Viktor!”

“Fuck my foot,” Viktor said and kissed him, and Yuuri’s legs wrapped around Viktor’s waist, arms looped around his neck, kissing Viktor back while on the pan the chicken got burnt.

So they had their moments, too many of them to count – warm and glorious. It wasn’t all bad in those few weeks. They were learning, and they were recovering.

And one day, maybe, they could look back to when they didn’t make the Olympic team and even see some good in it.

Maybe it’d be the best thing that ever could have happened to them.

Maybe.

* * *

Yakov had been in touch with Carol Pietri, who ran a renowned skating rink in Switzerland, where many skaters over the years had gone specifically for injury recovery and physio. Carol had cleared time for them, Yakov informed them one day: two weeks in the lead up to Europeans, and Yakov could fly over for a few days too.

Yuuri was thrilled because the rink had exactly the kind of specialist equipment Viktor would need – and they could train together! And Carol, if anyone, was the perfect person to ease them back on the ice and get them ready for Euros!

“That’s great!” he enthused, but Viktor frowned.

“So you want us out of the way while the others train for the Olympics?” Viktor asked instead. It seemed that so many of their friends were going: Mila for Ladies, Mikhail and Maria in ice dance, too. The rink was full of Olympic buzz – but not for them.


And Yuuri couldn’t say that Yakov was necessarily wrong about it. But it occurred to Yuuri that Viktor was, perhaps, experiencing for the first time what it was like not to have one’s Federation backing you all the way. For Yuuri, this was nothing new.

Yakov gave them the dates for their Swiss training, and, back home, Yuuri looked up flights to Geneva, as Viktor was lying on the couch, forlorn. This was the best option for them, he was sure of it, and he tried to ignore how badly Viktor had wanted to go to the Olympics – how badly he had wanted to be there with Viktor, and to show Viktor that he could skate to the level Viktor wanted them to. Of course Yuuri had always dreamt of being an Olympian, just like any other skater, to be there in the spotlights, on Olympic ice, the whole world watching – excitement and dread had both epitomised the dream. He probably would have made a mess of it, anyway.

He sat at the kitchen table and looked up flights, and Viktor brought him their passports so he could check if they had the visas required. He flicked Viktor’s passport open, reading over Viktor’s
hometown and birthday, admiring the picture of a younger Viktor – always so handsome. Then he stopped to wonder why Viktor’s passport was in Japanese. He closed it and looked at the cover: the same red as his own, with the Imperial Seal in the middle, and beneath it JAPAN, and PASSPORT.

Viktor was making them coffee. Yuuri was confused.

“Viktor,” he began, unsure, “your passport is Japanese.”

“I couldn’t find the Russian.”

Yuuri stalled. “What do you mean?”

“It’s here somewhere, I’ve just misplaced it. Will that one do for now?”

He was still unclear. “You have both? You – I’m sorry. Are you Japanese?”

“Well no, obviously,” Viktor laughed, leaning against the counter. The coffee machine gurgled beside him. “But technically yes,” Viktor then said. Yuuri stared – what on earth did that mean? Viktor motioned at the passport he was holding. “I got that in my teens, since it made travelling to competitions in the Far East easier. A lot of paperwork, but it’s come in handy.”

“But you’re not Japanese,” he pointed out, still confused.

“Mother was born in Japan, when my grandparents were doing their missionary travels,” Viktor said and then frowned. “I told you that, didn’t I?” And yes, Viktor had: his grandfather preaching the fear of the Lord to a Russian-speaking community of the coast of Japan. “We had to find Mom’s birth certificate and all of it, and I had to learn Japanese for the citizenship interview… Not that I’ve used it much – you’ve heard how rusty my Japanese is now.” Viktor shook his head and then got them mugs for the coffee.

Yuuri had followed Viktor and Oksana’s career rather obsessively, but he had never known that Viktor had dual citizenship. Huh. Well he supposed it explained how Viktor had gotten basic Japanese skills so quickly in Hasetsu. And –

“Oh, I guess it explains why immigration let you stay in Japan for so long after you did those ice shows.” Not that he had ever even questioned it at the time.

“Handy, right?” Viktor beamed and gave him his coffee and placed a quick kiss in his hair. “I’ll go grab a quick shower.”

Yuuri nodded, still surprised, but also pleased somehow. Viktor had a personal relationship with Yuuri’s homeland, and it meant a lot to him. He liked to think it was a sign that they had been meant to be, cheesy as it was.

Makkachin snoozed by his feet, and he heard the shower run as he booked them their flights to Switzerland. Who would have thought: Viktor with a dual citizenship! The Japanese press clearly didn’t know because otherwise they would have advertised it everywhere, especially in Oksana and Viktor’s hay day: Viktor Nikiforov, citizen of Japan! God, how funny that they were both Ja –

They were both.

They were.

Yuuri stared into space.
Oh.

Oh god.

His chair screeched as he leaped up, scaring the life out of Makkachin who barked in fright. He ran into the bathroom, yanked the shower cubicle’s door open and yelled, “We’re Japanese!”

Viktor jumped under the cascading water, hair lathered. Viktor blinked at him.

“Viktor! We’re! Oh god, I need to – We can – We can!”

And then he ran out of the room, not even closing the cubicle door.

* * *

There were strict rules for skaters who wanted to change Federations. You could do it mid-season, but this was followed by a grace period that forbade you from competing under the new country’s flag for twelve months.

…Unless you had been with your current Federation for less than nine months, in which case the grace period went from twelve months to a month between your last competition for the old Federation and the competition for your new alliance. Say, a minimum of one month between Russian Nationals and the Four Continents, maybe. Or even the Olympics.

Yuuri had contacted JSF for them, and the response had been… vague? Lukewarm? There was interest there – definite interest. It hadn’t been a ‘no’, in any case, when his citizenship had come up. The Japanese Federation were still putting their Olympic team together, and – not to be too hedonistic – it was clear JSF liked the idea of Viktor representing Japan. And so the JSF had said they would talk to the Russian Federation and call them back.

When JSF did call them back, they were told that the Russian Fed would only consider releasing the two of them against a payment from the JSF – they refused to say what the price was – and that the JSF would need more time to consider if this was an investment worth making.

Viktor wouldn’t believe it: the Russian Federation was holding them for ransom, which was ridiculous because they had been booted off the Olympic team without even having been given the chance to try. It was common for federations to ask for release fees, fine, but from what Viktor could gather Russia wasn’t asking for a sum that could be called humble, really.

It was all in the hands of the officials so there was nothing they could do except hope for the best. Yuuri had said Japan would not in years pay for them! For Viktor, maybe, but not him!

Viktor had never seen Yuuri so stressed, which was a healthy distraction, at least, from Viktor’s bad ankle. They waited for a day… Then another… Japan’s Olympic Committee was meeting in a week. Yuuri had barely slept since they came up with the idea.

And so Viktor made a decision: they had to pack up for Japan if they intended to pursue this.

“But shouldn’t we wait to see if they’ll have us?” Yuuri fretted.

“No,” he disagreed, “we have to leave for Japan now. Show them we mean it, that we’re there, and we’re ready.”

He called their JSF contact as well, trying to negotiate, and had some success: there would be an evaluation once they were in Japan, by JSF officials, to assess them. In other words, they wanted to
see if Viktor and Yuuri would be worth the investment.

But of course that was a logistical nightmare with their training, his physio, Makkachin, the orchids, the rink, accommodation… And they had to talk it over with Yakov, and that would be tough. Viktor had skated for Russia his entire career, brought home medals and glory with Oksana. Russia’s sweethearts, the pair of them, and there would undoubtedly be a backlash of ‘traitor’ and ‘sell-out’ if they switched federations.

Viktor didn’t know how to tell his coach he was considering representing not-Russia for the rest of his career, and Yakov would be furious, no doubt, would think it –

“Treason!” Yakov yelled. “Treason for Japan that you have not skated for them sooner!”

…Oh. Well.

Yakov turned out to be more interested in their career than in any nationalistic or patriotic sentiment. Yakov shook his head when Viktor expressed his surprise. “I train skaters! Professionals! Athletes! Most Russian, yes – but also Kazakh, Finnish, German, Ukrainian, even Mexican – I don’t build Russian heroes here. I build heroes for the world!”

(The unofficial slogan of the rink for the next few days was ‘Heroes for the World’.)

They arranged everything in only a few days: they got flights, booked private ice at Ice Castle, convinced Carol to fly from Switzerland to Japan for a week, contacted a physiotherapist in Fukuoka who could look after Viktor’s recovery, gave the orchids to Mikhail, got Makkachin a new pet passport because the old one had expired, attended the leaving party in the rink’s canteen that Anya, of all people, organised for them (was she happy to see them leave or being genuinely nice, Viktor didn’t know), and if JSF agreed to pay for them, and if they made the Japanese Olympic team, then they would see most of their rinkmates in Osaka in a month’s time, and once their position with JSF was secure, they could return to Russia to train in the spring.

But for now they had to leave, the sooner the better.

And so, when they got on the plane – ten suitcases, Makkachin in her dog cage – they were still competing for Russia, travelling to a country that might want them or might not. JSF was waiting to see them in person.

But Viktor had the feeling Japan wanted them. He hadn’t forgotten how JSF had approached them before they had chosen Russia, because Yuuri hadn’t felt comfortable with JSF after the doping incident. And Viktor had never, not once, questioned it: Yuuri didn’t want to compete for Japan. That was it. And he had placed that above any Olympic ambition of his own because Yuuri’s wishes had come first.

Yuuri willing to compete for his country again had come as a surprise for him. Or, well – their country. He thought Yuuri had known about his citizenship – hadn’t he mentioned it? Yuuri maintained that Viktor never had; he could be forgetful at times, he admitted this. Most of the time he forgot he even had the passport.

And after all the planning and all the organisation and all the stress, they landed in Fukuoka, exhausted, and headed for Hasetsu. But tired as he was, Viktor was thrilled to be back in Japan. Yuuri, running on four hours of sleep in two days, also seemed to perk up when the car Viktor had insisted on booking on account of their luggage approached his hometown.

“You excited to be back?” Viktor asked – so much had happened since they’d left. The
competitions, settling in St. Petersburg, their relationship – god, in what? Six months?

“Yeah, I’m excited,” Yuuri smiled.

Yuuri’s family was waiting for them, and Makkachin bounced out of the car, seeming to know exactly where she was. Everyone was helping with the luggage, insisting Viktor not carry anything on account of his foot, although he felt fine – it was being on the ice, in his boots, trying to do jumps and lifts that was the problem.

They were jetlagged and exhausted, their bodies telling them it was morning instead of the afternoon. Still, Viktor handed out the various presents they had panic-bought at the airport, and since Yuuri’s mother had made them katsudon to welcome them, they couldn’t pass on that, of course. As they ate together, Yuuri did most of the talking, Viktor trying to follow the conversation to the extent that his tired brain let him.

Mari offered to take Makkachin out for a walk so they could get rest, and Yuuri helped his parents to clear the table, everyone again insisting that Viktor rest. They finally headed up for a quick nap, just for an hour or two after which they could wait until night in their new time zone. Viktor had travelled around the globe long enough to know what methods tricked his body to adjust quicker.

In the corridor of their old bedrooms, he came up to Yuuri from behind, wrapping arms around Yuuri’s middle and hooking his chin on Yuuri’s shoulder. “Mmm, let’s go sleep,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to Yuuri’s neck. The banquet room hadn’t been touched since they’d left, he’d been told.

But when they got to the door of the banquet room, Yuuri halted. “Um, listen, I – I should probably, uhm…”

“What, baby?”

“Erm, I took my bags to my old room,” Yuuri said with a nod to the door further down. “Oh, good idea,” he said, “Can I leave mine there too? It’ll be good for stora – Oh.” Yuuri looked a little guilty as Viktor turned him around so they were face to face. “Wait, you’re staying in my room with me, aren’t you? I’ve got the bigger bed,” he pointed out. And the bigger room – they could live in there. “Yuuri?” he prompted.

“Uhmm,” Yuuri mumbled, hand in his hair, “my parents don’t know we live together, technically, uhm…”

They had told Yuuri’s family about them after Rostelecom, and they had been happy for them (Mari had not been surprised – merely rolled her eyes with ‘Yeah, no kidding.’), and they had seemed pleased to have them back now too. But was Viktor expected to have his boyfriend stay in another room than him? Would it be uncouth to share? Or did they really think Viktor was a cradle snatcher, and their relationship was fine in theory but –

But no, they’d been holding hands earlier and he’d definitely kissed Yuuri’s cheek more than once since they’d arrived, and Yuuri hadn’t minded any of it, and neither had his family.

“Maybe we should… tell them we live together?” he then asked, clasping Yuuri’s hands with his. “Unless you don’t –”

“Yeah, I mean – Okay, it’s not… that either, erm.” Why did Yuuri seem nervous now? Yuuri blurted out, “Uhm, I’ve never brought a boy home before, and I don’t – don’t know what the rules are.”
Viktor couldn’t help but feel like a special badge of honour had just been handed to him, even as he laughed. “The rules? Honey, you’re twenty-four. You can probably make your own rules. Or, well - I think you should stay with me.”

Yuuri flushed a little red. “I want to, I just – Don’t want my parents to think we’re, er.”

“They know we have sex,” he said matter-of-factly, and heat rose high on Yuuri’s cheeks. “There’s nothing embarrassing about it!” he insisted, and Yuuri nearly squirmed. “These are people who have seen us do Eros, don’t forget.”

Yuuri groaned and pushed into his arms, face pressing to his chest, and Viktor laughed and wrapped him up in his arms. “Mom called our Eros steamy,” Yuuri mumbled into his shirt.

“Well, she’s right,” he said, laughing harder.

And Yuuri, disgruntled, followed him in the room.

When Yuuri’s mother dropped by five minutes later to give them towels, Viktor was going through his many suitcases to find his pyjamas, and Yuuri was lying on their bed – and sat up, instantly, hesitant looking.

But Yuuri’s mother just smiled at them, handing them the towels and then affectionately patting Yuuri’s head. She said something about cute – they were cute, Viktor realised, and Yuuri flushed once more with an “Okaa-san!”

But she just smiled widely, came to him and patted his cheek with approval, and then told them to get some rest. Viktor was grinning when the door slid shut, turning to Yuuri still sat on the bed with their towels. “She loves me,” he said.

“Yeah, they all do,” Yuuri said, and Viktor bit back the ‘Do you?’ that he was about to blurt out. He had always been the first one to say it before, and he didn’t want to pressure Yuuri in any way. This time he’d wait, patiently, for the other person. Okay, maybe a bit impatiently.

But they finally got their nap after seemingly endless hours of travel. And later on that evening, when they’d forced themselves to stay awake late enough, Yuuri joined him in bed and was asleep before Viktor had even turned off the lights.

He curled up around Yuuri, breathing in the scent of his hair, and tried not to think of the assessment.

Were they insane, the two of them? Could they really pull this off?

But then there was Yuuri, and Viktor was beginning to realise that when he doubted himself – his own strength, endurability, what his body could still do – when all of that had been lain to doubt, there remained the man asleep next to him.

And Viktor didn’t doubt him, not even once.

* * *

“This is never going to work,” Yuuri said, “this is madness!”

“I think it’s sort of brilliant,” Viktor mused.

They hadn’t been in Japan for even twenty-four hours before they were on the train to Itoshima for
their meeting with JSF. If they showed the officials the kinds of skates they had had at Nationals, then Viktor held little hope JSF would cough up the release fee for them.

But Nationals had been nearly three weeks ago now, and his ankle was much better. However, they were still jet-lagged and they hadn’t been skating together back in Russia for a few weeks either. They had woken up at five thirty that morning to rush to Ice Castle and get twenty minutes on the ice before heading for their train.

They were not ready, but you never truly were: you just had to do it anyway.

So they got to the rink – closed to the public – and shook hands with the officials from JSF, followed by a lot of bowing and formulatic pleasantries. But Viktor could tell, easily, that Yuuri was uncomfortable in his skin that went beyond nerves. Were these some of the officials that had handled the doping scandal? Were these the people who had told Yuuri that he had disgraced them? Viktor didn’t know and Yuuri was taciturn.

Then it was down to business, and Viktor had rarely been the subject of such scrutiny: they both underwent medical assessments behind closed doors with the doctor from JSF, giving blood samples, urine samples, and the woman spent a long, long time examining Viktor’s foot and ankle, making notes and even taking pictures.

Afterwards they all sat in a conference room, and he and Yuuri presented their training plan and intended TES as the officials made notes and calculations, the business thankfully being conducted in English. Figure skating was, at the end of it, about maths, and JSF meant business.

“Triple Salchows?” one of the officials asked halfway through. “You did triple axels at Rostelecom Cup. That’s a 4.1 base value difference.” She sounded disapproving. “Are you not able to go back to that yet?”

But it was the 3A on which Viktor had fallen, and mimicking the jump still caused pain shooting up his leg.

So he said, “We might consider quad Salchows if the training goes well.”

Yuuri stilled next to him, but Viktor simply clasped his hand under the table to keep him calm.

The officials were intrigued. “Quads like Plisetsky and Altin,” the woman said. “Interesting.”

“Yes, and I think that’s two points more on the base value than a 3A,” he added charmingly, leisurely – it would be that easy, of course.

The officials stayed to confer and run some calculations amongst themselves while they got ready to go on the ice. In the locker rooms alone, Yuuri watched him inject some painkillers into his foot; Dr Rostovzeff had shown him how to do it. The skin was a sickly yellow from faded bruises, and he had blisters on his toes, and he taped it all up the best he could. They didn’t discuss it, and Yuuri went to change into his training clothes while Viktor put on his boots and then held his ankle and prayed. He didn’t believe in much himself, but he was the grandson of missionaries, and so he said a prayer to whatever force might be out there.

The officials had asked to see The Lark, which had been a disaster at Nationals. They had expected this, of course: make them do the harder, longer and more strenuous program.

They got on the ice, skated around to warm up, the scrapes of their skates echoing around the rink. They ran through some of the choreography and did a few lifts, and Viktor managed to get Yuuri up and down easily enough. At Nationals, by their third lift, he’d ran out of strength.
When warmed up, they moved to centre ice, the technician who worked for the rink waiting for their signal to start the music. Yuuri’s hands felt sweaty in his, but there was also a set certainty in Yuuri’s gaze. Go time: no options, no second guesses. They had done this routine hundreds of times: on the ice, off the ice, under Yakov’s scrutiny, their own, under Lilya’s. They could move through it in perfect unison: every rotated wrist, every pirouetted circle, every extended leg, and Yuuri coming into his arms for lifts, throws, twists in flawless movement. They just needed to do it like that again, perfectly, when rusty and still injured.

“I wish we were at Ice Castle,” Yuuri told him quietly. Familiar rink, familiar environment: home advantage.

“Let’s pretend we are,” he said. “Let’s pretend it’s you and me skating, not to train or to compete, but just us skating for ourselves.”

“And are they still here?” Yuuri asked with a nod to the JSF officials: at least one was an ex-judge, another a technical specialist. They had pens and notepads at the ready: every edge of their blade, every stroke would be scrutinised.

Viktor shook his head. “They’re not here. Just you and me.”

“Okay,” Yuuri agreed and nodded to give the go-ahead for the music as they moved, back to back, into the starting position.

Viktor closed his eyes, felt Yuuri’s warmth against his back – let himself sink into the music as deep as he could.

And sure enough, it was better: they didn’t do a throw quad or quad twist, or 3As or 4Ss for that matter. Instead they kept the easier technical components from Nationals, and this time they would have been on the podium with a clean performance – an under-rotation from Viktor permitting. But his ankle had the strength to finish the program, and he didn’t collapse into Yuuri’s arms either.

Instead they survived into the final pose, the music cascading around them to a poignant finish. They had changed some of the choreography after Nationals too, and now The Lark finished with them on their knees on the ice, Yuuri’s hand on his cheek, Viktor’s hand on Yuuri’s knee, them looking deep into each other’s eyes. The music ended, and they didn’t break eye contact, heaving and exhausted as they were. And Yuuri’s eyes asked, ‘Are you in pain? Are you okay?’

And yes, he was in pain. Yes, it hurt. God, the adrenalin had carried him through, but the pain was sharp and still there. But he just nodded to say ‘I’m okay.’

No applause as they stood up. Yuuri had scraps of ice on in his hair from the death spiral, and Viktor brushed them off before they made their way off the ice.

They shook hands with the awaiting officials who murmured and nodded but didn’t actually comment on the performance. The woman who had been grilling them over their jumps in the conference room had disappeared, and Viktor felt worry seep into him: she had appeared their toughest critic. Another official, the ex-judge, said that JSF would think about it and be in touch soon. Neither of them knew how to read that: a rejection or a promise? It wasn’t very clear.

Yuuri, tired, nodded off on the train back, and Viktor watched the view, happy to be back in Japan, happy to be trying rather than admitting defeat, because for a while there, in St Petersburg, they had really struggled. Viktor had felt like giving up. But now he was happy to be with Yuuri, even when times were tough. He wondered when JSF would tell them – it had to be soon, because the Olympic team was going to be announced any day now. How would they cope not knowing in the
meanwhile? And what would they do if it was a second ‘no’?

They’d give up, then. Two countries, two tries, two rejections? They’d have to give up.

They were undoubtedly better than the Japanese Nationals winners, Kenjirou Minami and Hikaru Fujiwara, whoever they were, Viktor didn’t know, but Yuuri had said it was their first senior year now and if they went to the Olympics they were expected to have a top 15 finish. He and Yuuri were on a completely different level, but their Lark wasn’t Olympic podium worthy either right then. Would JSF care between a top 15 and maybe a top 7 if they didn’t get their technical components up?

He tried not to think about it when it was beyond his control. He took a picture of the countryside, of the fields, and posted it with Back in Japan for training! We’re tired and a little bruised, but going strong. Couldn’t do this without my Yuuri, who never gives up on us. #bestpartner #KatsukiNikiforov #jetlagged. As an Instagram story, he posted a picture of them on the train, Yuuri with his head on Viktor’s shoulder, fast asleep, beautiful and peaceful. He added a little heart emoji to it – were they or weren’t they? The debate continued as the likes and comments instantly started rolling in.

Back in Hasetsu, they soaked in the springs and then went straight to bed: Viktor’s body had no idea what day or time of day it was, but it knew it wanted sleep.

When he woke up it was a new day, well into it because the sun was up. Makkachin had fussied in the room a little after seven, and Yuuri had gotten up to let her out of the room, and then come back to bed. Viktor woke now again and was mildly shocked to see it was five to noon; Yuuri remained asleep beside him. They had been even more exhausted from the travelling, training and the assessment than he’d realised.

He reached for his phone and frowned at the unusually high 1000+ Twitter notifications. God, had they gone viral again? Was it the train selfie – had the heart been too much? Was the rumour mill at a breaking point?

He updated the comment feed and saw a post with five hundred reblogs from three hours earlier in which he had been tagged by @skatingupdates: Whispers from Japan! JSF rumored to request the Russian Fed for the release of @vnikiforov & Yuuri Katsuki.

Viktor perked up. How did the Internet even know?! But – but also, rumours? That didn’t mean anything, that – Oh, there’d been another tweet from skatingupdates since: My source says JSF may even be seeking immediate release! If true, #KatsukiNikiforov might be competing at 4CC in two weeks’ time!

Viktor sat up instantly, the covers pooling down to his waist. Yuuri shifted in his sleep but didn’t wake up. What source? How was it possible Twitter knew more about their career prospects than they did?!

He started clicking on the comments and threads feverishly. He scrolled past the ‘they were robbed, should be on the Russian Olympic team, they deserved better at Russian Nationals’ – which was all very nice to read, but – Ah, someone was on it: Hey @skatingupdates, where’s this coming from??

skatingupdates had retweeted this and added: VN/YK were in Itoshima today for a meeting with JSF. Source says they made the deputy director of JSF cry with their free skate! Recovered from injury well! Also see V’s Instagram, confirms their location. Updates as they come!
Deputy director in tears? But… that was the woman who’d disappeared during their free skate. Oh. To cry, maybe?! Viktor was thrilled!

skatingupdates, forty-five minutes earlier: BREAKING!! I have just been told that Viktor Nikiforov holds Japanese citizenship!!!, followed by responses of @skatingupdates what?!!?!!; @skatingupdates omg did they elope?!; @skatingupdates THERE IS NO WAY

And then, half an hour ago: JSF will be releasing a statement at noon JST.

At noon? That was – that was three minutes ago! He refreshed skatingupdates’ page because they clearly knew what was happening, and sure enough there was a new tweet with a It’s official: Russian Fed have released #KatsukiNikiforov with immediate effect to JSF, JSF confirm Nikiforov holds Japanese citizenship and a link to the JSF’s website, where a press release had been uploaded a few minutes earlier.

“Yuuri.” No response. “Yuuri!”

Yuuri jolted awake, looking around in confusion but then woke up fully, and instantly. “What’s wrong?” Yuuri rushed out, sitting up and looking between him and the phone.

“The JSF!” he said, and Yuuri suddenly seemed wide awake. “They paid! They paid Russia, we’ve been released! They – Oh, oh hey,” he said when tears welled up in Yuuri’s eyes. They reached for each other instantly, the phone getting lost in the sheets.

“I don’t know why I’m crying,” Yuuri sniffled against him, but Viktor understood it, of course. It’d been an awful month: the injury, the pain, Anya and Georgi, one piece of bad news after the next, and then Nationals, the failure and the disappointment, and just not making it, just not being good enough. And now they were thousands of miles away, and someone had finally looked at them skate and thought ‘that’s good’ or even ‘that’ll do’. Hell, rumour had it they had made that tough lady cry, even!

Someone had finally thrown them a lifeline.

When Yuuri finally pulled back and smiled, Viktor realised that all the pains and aches in his body had been worth it for that moment alone. He’d do it all a thousand times over if it made Yuuri smile like this.

“If they paid, you know it means they want us on the Olympic team,” Viktor then said.

“You really think so?” Yuuri asked with a tentatively hopeful smile. “What did the press release say?”

He found his phone and went back on Twitter to find the link. But before he could click on it, he saw a new tweet from skatingupdates: #KatsukiNikiforov have been assigned to the Japanese Olympic team, JOC press release confirms.

Viktor stared, clutching at his phone. And he began shaking. He –

“What is it?” Yuuri asked in alarm and snatched the phone. Yuuri stared at the screen. “Oh my god.” Pause. “Oh my – Oh, we – We’re going,” Yuuri breathed. “We’re going! We’re going!”

Viktor nodded. He was unable to speak.

“We’re going to the Olympics!” Yuuri almost yelled. “We’re going!”
And then Yuuri pulled him into a new hug, and this time it was Yuuri calming him down as he tried to remember how breathing worked, and then he was in tears, and Yuuri’s hands were in his hair, whispering calmly in his ear for him to breathe through it, calm down –

But Yuuri was right: they were going. Viktor had dreamt, for months and months now, of skating with Yuuri at the Olympics. And they were going. He was getting a final – third – shot at coming out on top there.

They had barely managed to make it downstairs for lunch when Minako burst through the door with, “Oh my god, have you heard?!”

* * *

The next week for a blur of travel, interviews, photoshoots, JSF meetings, Olympic outfit fittings, nights in a Tokyo hotel room, mixed media reactions, getting stopped on the streets for autographs. Japan, as the hosting nation, needed a lot of promo material that would be aired worldwide, and they even did an on-ice promo clip – the two of them skating under spotlights, with hair and makeup done by professionals, doing lifts that were filmed with slow-motion cameras, and afterwards they were in a studio recording their voice-overs of See you in Osaka!, which was easy enough except Viktor couldn’t quite get the accent right, and they were exhausted and laughing over each other trying to correct it.

Apart from hitting the hotel gym three times, they had no time whatsoever to do any training during their first week as Olympians.

Because they were, you know: Olympians.

Yuuri woke up in disbelief every day that he got to call himself one now. And when he didn’t quite believe it, he went to the official website of the Olympics and waited for the banner where he and Viktor, touched up and both looking flawless, stood on the ice with the Olympics logo in the corner. That Yuuri was there was insane – that he was there with Viktor Nikiforov was even more insane.

They declined Four Continents because they wanted to focus on the Olympics alone and, to be fair, they needed to maximise healing for Viktor. Kenjirou Minami with Hikaru Fujiwara would be sent instead, and Yuuri felt guilty that they had snatched the Olympics from such a young and enthusiastic pairs team. Well, he felt guilty, anyway, until he was alerted to a vlog by Kenjirou, in which the young skater was crying his eyes out that Yuuri Katsuki, his idol, was finally going to the Olympics. “I am so excited!” Kenjirou squealed. “They will bring Eros! They will bring Lark Ascending!” Kenjirou’s t-shirt was white, with a black text of #KatsukiNikiforov on it.

So, Yuuri felt less bad about it after seeing the video. He was a little bit worried – was Kenjirou okay? – but he no longer felt like he had made enemies. Well, out of Kenjirou and Hikaru anyway, but they definitely had enemies elsewhere: some of their fans had been ecstatic, but they had also been called desperate by others. Several Russian fans were furious with Viktor, clearly taking a different view on ‘treason’ than Yakov had: Their Nationals performance showed that they suck!! If they wanna go to Osaka to embarrass themselves under the Japanese flag then go ahead but god, desperate much?!

Viktor caught him mid-social media browsing and confiscated his phone for the rest of the evening. “We’re gonna do stretches and cuddle instead,” Viktor said firmly, and Yuuri much preferred that over being upset by cruel internet anons.

But there was one person he thought about most of all in that first week, though he said nothing to
Viktor. He found himself clutching his phone late at night, while Viktor was in the shower. To call or not to call? To text?

But what could he say? How could you bridge such a determined silence?

He was so lost in the overwhelming power of their mutual silence, especially now when a dream he and Fumio had shared for years had come true – for him – that Viktor walked in on him sat on the hotel bed, clutching the phone. He brushed it off quickly, pushing his phone away.

Nothing – he’d been doing nothing.

He let it go.

When they got back to Hasetsu after their week of media, Carol Pietri arrived fresh from Switzerland, to work with Viktor and to see what they could do with Viktor’s injured ankle. Yuuri had a session with Minako while Carol and Viktor headed to the rink for Carol’s initial judgement of how well the injury had healed. She wasn’t only a figure skating coach, but also had a medical degree. Yuuri constantly checked his phone, worrying and wondering what Carol’s assessment of Viktor’s condition now was.

Viktor sent an update that they were done at the rink and that he was going to show Carol around Hasetsu – maybe they could meet at Minako’s bar in a few hours?

So he waited there, nursing his one beer, picking on the label nervously. Carol rehabilitated injured skaters for a living – if Carol said it was bad, then they were in trouble. Minako told him to relax, but this was easier said than done.

He heard Viktor’s laugh from the alleyway and stood up in anticipation. Viktor sounded happy, at least, so –

Viktor and Carol walked in, and instantly, with a grin, Viktor walked up to him and picked him up. And not pick him up in his arms, mind you, but hoisted Yuuri high above his head, and Yuuri’s muscle memory automatically kicked in as to what kind of lift it was, his hand finding Viktor’s in the hand-in-hand lift: Viktor holding him up with one arm, and Yuuri’s hand locked in Viktor’s, his body tensed up, balanced up in the air.

Carol laughed, and Minako said, “Hey, mind the lamps!”

But Viktor swirled anyway, holding him up firmly, and then in a slow, controlled motion Viktor brought Yuuri back down, and he landed softly. Viktor was grinning widely. “Guess who’s been given the green light to start lifting you again?”

His heart leaped. “Really?” he asked, looking to Carol for confirmation while Viktor pulled him closer, arms circling his waist.

“Hey, I’m not leaving until that ankle’s strong enough to lift you and me both,” Carol laughed, and Yuuri was so thrilled that he hugged the life out of Viktor, who picked him up – only a little this time – and swirled him around the bar.

They stayed for two more celebratory drinks, and Yuuri was full of hope when Carol started saying how they could work them back to their tougher technical elements. “I mean, you’re going to the Olympics,” she said, “go big or go home, right? The time to play safe is long gone.”

And Yuuri, knowing this was very likely to be their only ever shot at an Olympic medal, agreed. They were lagging behind – they couldn’t play it safe. Not this time.
“Um, Viktor,” Carol said when they were walking back to Yutopia, the evening dark and cold around them, “maybe you’re taking the lifting sanction too far?”

Viktor, walking down the street, holding Yuuri high up in the air above him, with one hand on Yuuri’s hip as their only point of connection, and Yuuri balancing himself there, said, “I don’t know, I’m alright.”

But then Viktor pushed him upwards and let go, and Yuuri rolled down to Viktor’s arms waiting to catch him, and in a pendulum motion he swung from Viktor’s arms onto the street with light steps. An old woman outside her house clapped. Viktor bowed her way, and Yuuri laughed, Viktor pressing him to his side with a quick kiss to his temple and an arm around his shoulders.

“God,” Carol sighed, rolling her eyes, “pair skaters.”

* * *

Carol left after a week and a half, having installed a new hope and vigour in them. Viktor’s ankle wasn’t perfect – it never would be – but they had worked on his jumping technique to minimise stress, and had changed some of their program elements around to help Viktor’s ankle last until the end. Carol’s tips and insight were working – they could tell the difference in just a few days – and he and Yuuri were full of renewed hope.

They watched Europeans together with Minako and Mari, and Viktor thought they could take them all on: Michele and Sara, Yurio and Otabek. Georgi and Anya weren’t at Europeans, though, and after Michele and Sara were crowned with gold, and Yurio and Otabek with silver and one new personal best, Viktor had a feeling that if Georgi and Anya had shown up, they would have won. Only a few teams were polished by years of training like Georgi and Anya, or him – and Yuuri, though in different teams.

The Olympics were approaching faster than ever, and Viktor didn’t quite know how to explain it, but getting back on the ice, knowing they were soon heading to Osaka, was sort of an aphrodisiac. Maybe it was partly because they returned to the physical contact they had had pre-injury, pressing into each other’s arms, enjoying constant physical proximity and touch. They were professional about it, of course – Viktor was working when they were on the ice, but when they were done he was filled with the fresh memory and feel of Yuuri’s shape pressed to his.

And maybe it was this rediscovered energy, their hopeful regaining of confidence, and the hot springs and how Yuuri soaked in the pleasant water, droplets dripping from his hair, every inch of his skin perfect and toned… Maybe it was all of those things, and how Yuuri got out of the water, skin pale apart from ghost bruises of Viktor’s hands on him – from training – thighs thick and muscled, the V of Yuuri’s hips pronounced with dips of bone and skin, and Yuuri’s cock, god, nestled in dark hair…

Those factors, perhaps, explained the tension under Viktor’s skin.

He no longer had any idea how he had survived those months in Hasetsu, working with Yuuri every day, joining him in the springs, running his hands up and down Yuuri on the ice and the dance studio and the gym, breathing in the scent of clean sweat on Yuuri’s skin after long training sessions, watching Yuuri bend in his arms, move his hips, roll his neck…

But, perhaps a little annoyingly, he didn’t feel like Yuuri was reacting to their renewed proximity with matching fire. A video game Viktor knew nothing about had just been released, and Yuuri was playing it obsessively on his little handheld console – Viktor didn’t know what those were called. Be that as it may, he could hardly get Yuuri to look up from the damn thing.
And so he lingered out of his clothes for very long after soaking in the springs, and he decided to
sleep in the nude – February be damned – and he flicked his hair and batted his eyelashes and held
Yuuri’s hand throughout breakfast and hand-fed him some pineapple, and Yuuri said thanks and
didn’t look up from the game, except to absentely peck his cheek once. Mari stared at them from
across the table, disbelieving.

Viktor could handle a challenge, however.

And so, after a day of Viktor low-key (high-key?) working on this, Yuuri finally said, “Viktor.” He
said it in a certain tone. Viktor was, very innocently, going through one of his suitcases, trying to
locate his favourite moisturiser.

“Yes?” he asked, a quick glance shot over his shoulder to where Yuuri was sat on their bed. Yuuri
was looking at him – well, a part of him. Yuuri was rather partial to his black thongs, as he well
knew, and if prancing around naked wasn’t enough eye candy, then maybe covering himself up a
little had the right tantalising effect – and it did.

“What are you –” Yuuri stopped, swallowing thickly. “Can you –”

“I need to moisturise this,” he said, motioning at his face. “I’m thirty. I need help.” But he was also
cocking his hips just so, and although Yuuri had his portable game console in his hands, Yuuri was
also very much not looking at it.

He bent over to search through a bag he’d already looked in, ass perhaps pointed towards the bed,
and Yuuri said, “Okay, that’s – That’s it. Come here.”

And so – not that it was a competition, of course – victory was his.

Yuuri was still being overly cautious about his foot, but having his legs on Yuuri’s shoulders
conveniently solved the problem. And god, Yuuri was in such great shape this far into the season,
six-pack more pronounced than before, thighs muscled and firm, and Yuuri had recently trimmed
his pubic hair, the black of it short and coarse, which made Yuuri’s cock look very generous, and
fuck it was sexy, and Viktor adored being fucked into the mattress late afternoon, Yuuri keeping
him nearly doubled over.

And then there was Yuuri like this: chest and neck flushed red, mouth open as deep breaths rattled
through him, a sheen of sweat forming on him as he worked his hips. And god, Yuuri was always
so concentrated on the task at hand: fucking him. Yuuri was always watching him, watching where
their bodies joined, watching him again. And then there was the stamina. No one – no one – had
fucked Viktor as thoroughly as Yuuri had. Yuuri could go on for ages without coming, turning him
around, onto his back, onto his knees, onto his belly, varying positions, pressing kisses to his chest,
neck, back, shoulders, mouth, ears, leaving Viktor panting and sweaty and – he could admit it –
whimpering and fucked.

Once, back when they’d still been figuring this stuff out, Yuuri had said, “Um, sorry it takes me so
long to, um, finish.”

Was Yuuri kidding? Was he unaware that most men Viktor had been with were ‘finished’ after
two, three minutes? (And then they muttered something like ‘Aw babe, sorry about that – you’re
just so hot.’ Which, okay, was perhaps a compliment, but not how anyone wanted to finish what
should have been a tantalising encounter.) Of course quickies were nice too – and if they were
pressed for time, Yuuri could finish quickly as well. But when there was no rush, Yuuri liked
taking his time, working himself up to the orgasm, fucking Viktor deep and hard, slow and
shallow, steady but firm…
There was a methodology to Yuuri’s fucking that Viktor was still figuring out. Yuuri enjoyed being inside him, clearly got pleasure out of it and wanted to pro-long it. And Viktor, well, flourished under the attention, finding himself much needier than he’d known himself to be. He longed for the raw, sated feeling that lingered when they were finally done.

The greedy need was coming out that afternoon, every inch of his skin alight. Yuuri had already had him on edge of orgasm twice, but Viktor wanted to last longer. “You can come if you want,” Yuuri said against his mouth, “I can keep fucking you until you’re ready to come again.”

And how, exactly, Viktor didn’t climax from that alone would forever remain a mystery.

But he was worked up and on edge, and he didn’t trust his body to be able to get hard after coming once, so he decided to hold on until Yuuri was ready too. Yuuri had him on his back, hovering over him, lips locked with his. Viktor ran hands down Yuuri’s sweat-slick chest, urging Yuuri in deeper – and groaning, helplessly, when he got his wish. Yuuri felt big inside him, throbbing, and Viktor’s body, from his toes to the top of his head, tingled and flashed with heat.

“We gotta stay quiet,” Yuuri chastised him, even as he kept thrusting into him.

“No one can hear us,” he argued – their bedrooms were at the far end of the house. His hands twisted in the damp strands of Yuuri’s hair, their mouths brushing.

“It’s the middle of the day,” Yuuri countered, and so? Viktor loved an early evening fuck. It felt a little bit naughty, knowing the inn still had guests in the springs, that the bar was still open – and they were upstairs, fucking.

“You feel so good,” he groaned – Yuuri’s thrusts were sharp and deep.

“Yeah?” Yuuri asked, tone breathy and low.

“Mmm, yeah,” he breathed, a little urgently. “How’s it feel for you?”

Yuuri inhaled shakily, fucking into him a bit slower now. Their bodies made a slightly wet sound when meeting – they’d been overgenerous with the lube – but the glide was hot and filling.

“So good,” Yuuri groaned, head dropping to Viktor’s shoulder. Yuuri’s lips brushed him there. “You’ve opened up so well for me,” Yuuri breathed, “god, but still so tight, so – *god.*” Yuuri kissed his chest, hips moving steadily, and Viktor’s back arched when Yuuri sucked on a nipple. God, his cock leaked between them, and he needed Yuuri to maybe finish soon, because Viktor didn’t know how long he could hold out.

He let his legs slip from Yuuri’s shoulders, wrapping them around Yuuri’s hips instead. Yuuri moved further atop him, grinding into him hard, hands balanced on both sides of Viktor’s head. Viktor stared up at him, loving the pleasured look on Yuuri’s face, and when they locked eyes, Viktor kept the eye contact, letting Yuuri watch him get fucked, and –

“*Viktor,*” Yuuri groaned, with a renewed desperate edge and began fucking into him in earnest.

“Want you to come inside me so badly,” he said because he knew what that did to Yuuri, and Yuuri almost groaned in response – perhaps annoyed.

“*Viktor.*”

Not sultry this time – definitely annoyed. Viktor didn’t care.
“Need you to fill me up,” he added, and Yuuri kissed him almost violently, fucking him harder. “Please, baby, I –”

“Oh shut up,” Yuuri said, and Viktor grinned against Yuuri’s cheek when Yuuri grabbed his hips and started really working his hips in Yuuri’s tell-tale effort to get himself there quicker. And this worked fine for him, because Yuuri hit his prostate dead-on, and Viktor’s hips lifted in instantaneous response, a sharp ‘Ah!’ escaping between his lips. Yuuri licked his lips. “There?”

And Viktor nodded – a little too eagerly. Yuuri’s hands slipped to both of his cheeks, keeping him lifted off the mattress as Yuuri’s hips snapped forward, Viktor’s shoulders pressing into the mattress as his body arched, and oh god, he was going to come, Yuuri was fucking him just right and his belly and groin were full of heat as his muscles tensed, and Yuuri looked sinful, so sexy, fucking him hard, and Viktor whimpered and –

And then someone was knocking on their bedroom door. Yuuri froze, buried in him, and Viktor blinked in confusion. They stared at each other for a split second, and in the next Viktor had wrapped his legs around Yuuri in a deadly grip. Yuuri’s mouth dropped open in horror. Viktor said, “Don’t you even think about stopping.”

Yuuri went from horrified to panicked.

Another knock, which was followed by the voice of – ah, Yuuri’s mother, right. Viktor tightened his legs around Yuuri, and Yuuri, realising he couldn’t pull out or even move, called out something in very rapid and choked Japanese. Viktor translated in his head.... Oh, they weren’t decent, don’t come in. Well, that was one way of saying Yuuri’s cock was deep in him, and they were flushed and sweat-slick and wrecked.

Yuuri seemed frozen in place, horrified, as his mother’s cheerful voice asked if they would come down for dinner soon.

The panic on Yuuri’s face would have been funny, really, hadn’t Viktor been grinding himself against Yuuri even that very second. Yuuri’s breath came out unevenly, shakily. “What do I do?” Yuuri hissed urgently.

“Mmm, tell her ten minutes,” he said as he pushed his hips to get more friction, and then moaned.

Yuuri instantly clasped a hand firmly over Viktor’s mouth, which – kind of worked for Viktor, if he was being honest. Gagging? That could be a thing for them. Oh, Yuuri in a suit, gagging Viktor with his tie, that – that was going on the list. Yup, for sure.

Yuuri called back to his mother, and Viktor grinned against the hand over his mouth – five minutes, Yuuri had said.

“Don’t take too long!” a response came, and the hand over Viktor’s mouth now muffled a gleeful snort. Yuuri shot a that’s-not-funny glare at him that would have made most men back down. Viktor held his ground – or rather, his hold of Yuuri trapped between his thighs.

Yuuri did not move or look at him until the sound of footsteps heading away and downstairs faded. Then Yuuri exhaled, hand slipping from his mouth. “Oh my god, my blood froze.”

“Mmm, did it?” he asked, squeezing himself around Yuuri’s cock.

“Ngh, that – Viktor, god, that uh,” Yuuri mumbled, looking at him again with that appreciative, desiring look that Viktor loved.
“We’re living with the in-laws,” he said, pulling Yuuri down to a soft kiss. “We’re gonna have run-ins.”

Yuuri kissed him back, and Viktor adored his taste. “Well I’d rather not be traumatised,” Yuuri said.

But even the potential trauma had not been enough for either of their hard-ons to go away.

Viktor looped his arms around Yuuri’s neck. “Did you tell her five minutes?”

“Yeah.”

“Ambitious, don’t you think?”

“Not really,” Yuuri said, “five ought to do it.” Yuuri grabbed his hips, still lifted off the mattress, and fucked him with renewed purpose, picking up exactly where they’d left off. Viktor lost his breath, lower body lifting even further, to get closer to Yuuri. Oh god, what had he done in a previous life to get this lucky?

And Yuuri was right, too: five minutes later Yuuri, at least, was downstairs, presumably sat down for dinner with his family. Viktor was in the shower, trying to remember how to fucking walk after being pounded so hard he’d come all over himself, Yuuri letting out such a glorious groan when he’d followed, mouth dropped open, eyes on Viktor – god, he loved seeing Yuuri come.

His boyfriend was a fiend, or a – some sort of thing that look innocent but could reduce you to a mess. Viktor wasn’t sure. Words were difficult. Thoughts were difficult.

God, he could still feel every inch of Yuuri inside him. God.

When he showed up for dinner, only Yuuri was left and his bowl of yakisoba had gone cold. He apologised – he’d needed to find his moisturiser.

But Yuuri assured that his parents hadn’t minded – some guest had shown up unannounced, and the others had gone to see to him.

Viktor sat down next to Yuuri, who leaned into him instantly, and Yuuri smelled of them, but you’d have to be this close to catch it. Viktor wrapped an arm around his waist, and Yuuri pressed his lips to his shoulder affectionately before hooking a finger under his chin, turning Viktor to him and kissing him. The kiss was slow and content – happy.

Viktor had never been his happy. He blurted out, “I love you.”

And then he froze, because he hadn’t meant to say it, and he’d told himself to wait this time – this one goddamn time – and not be so needy with his feelings and put pressure on Yuuri, because he had learned from his mistakes, and –

“I know,” Yuuri said warmly, voice light and affectionate, the smile reaching his eyes, which – which was lovely, but…

“No, you don’t,” he disagreed, mystified this was the response he got. He’d imagined emotional tears and clinging – definitely them clinging onto one another, and then love-making and – “You know?” he then asked in disbelief because Yuuri sounded so sure.

“Yeah, you told me when you were high on morphine after the hospital,” Yuuri said simply, and Viktor jerked. What had his drugged up version done?! This had been supposed to be a moment,
something they would cherish for the rest of their lives!

“That was a- a month and a half ago! Nearly two months!” he said in horror. He had told Yuuri he loved him two months ago?! And no one had told him – Yuuri hadn’t told him?!

“Oh, I –” The situation seemed to dawn on Yuuri, who panicked. “Did you – Was that supposed to be…? Oh god, can we do it again? Do you want to – We can re-enact the –”

“No, it’s – I just. I mean, what did you say? When I told you I loved you?” Two goddamn months ago, when he was high as a kite! And now Yuuri flushed, and Viktor felt his heart begin to race. “I mean, you don’t have to say anything, now or –”

“Erm, well you sort of passed out right after you said it.”

“Ah.” How romantic. He looked around the room, at the door, at his cold yakisoba, at a loss. God, he’d ruined this one!

“But I said it back.”

His heart leaped and he turned back to Yuuri. “You did?” What he meant was: do you love me? Do you really? Yuuri nodded, but he needed more. Oh, this was cruel – had Viktor lost two whole months of ‘I love you’? That was the best part! That was admission and promise and strength, and god he loved Yuuri so much it made him ache. “And do you still, now, ah – Do you feel it now too?”

Yuuri frowned at him, but then moved to clasp his hands. They were a bit cold and clammy, and Yuuri cleared his throat, heat high on his cheeks. “I –” A sigh. Yuuri fretted. Viktor didn’t breathe. “I love you.”

Viktor pulled Yuuri into the tightest hug he had ever given anyone, hiding his smile in the crook of Yuuri’s neck, where Yuuri smelled like the two of them, was warm, was his. Yuuri hugged him back and asked, in a small voice, “Was that okay?”

But it’d been perfect, absolutely perfect, and he said so. “Why didn’t you tell me I’d already said it?” he asked.

“Wait, I should have told you that you love me?” Yuuri asked, incredulous, and Viktor laughed. He saw Yuuri’s point.

“God,” he breathed. “I can’t wait to open that skating school with you.”

Yuuri frowned. “What skating school?”

“Oh, uhm, never mi – God, this yakisoba is really getting cold!” He began eating in earnest, mostly to shut himself up. Yuuri eyed him suspiciously. Nope, no skating school, no, no, Viktor was absolutely not getting carried away with his boyfriend, who loved him. Yuuri Katsuki loved him.

He (almost) wondered who even needed an Olympic medal after that.

He clung onto Yuuri even as he ate, as he only needed one hand for the chopsticks, anyway, and the intimacy between them felt just as private and intense then, sat together in the dining room, as it had in the privacy of the bedroom – and now it had a golden glow because love. There was love! And had been for months now, even before Viktor’s hospital trip. The difference was that they openly acknowledged it now, and Viktor wasn’t sure where he began and Yuuri started as Yuuri rested his head on his shoulder and talked about the different levels in the video game he’d been so
obsessively playing – and Viktor, as a good boyfriend, listened.

They were still canoodling – Viktor could admit that they were – and more to the point they were sharing another content, affectionate kiss, when the door slid open and a familiar voice, in Russian, said, “Oh for god’s sake!”

It was Yuri Plisetsky. Behind Yurio was Otabek, and behind Otabek was Yakov, and behind Yakov was Yuuri’s father, who said, “Yakov-sensei is here!”

Yurio appeared to be seething, Yakov looked unimpressed to find them mid-embrace, but Otabek, at least, seemed to smile with his eyes – not his actual mouth, of course.

Yakov was two days early, and with two teenagers they had not been expecting. But, after limping around for weeks with a medical boot on, Viktor had learned to roll with the punches.

“Ah,” Viktor said, keeping his arm around the love of his life as he smiled happily, “there you are.”

* * *

If there was such a thing as ‘warrior mode’, Yuuri was in it. Yakov was in Japan ahead of the Olympics, and Yurio and Otabek had come early with their coach for final pre-Olympic training. Yakov had, apparently, asked Viktor if there was room at Yutopia for Yurio and Otabek too, and Viktor had said yes, but Viktor maintained he had no recollection whatsoever of this exchange, which was typical Viktor, to be fair.

But there was plenty of ice time for them all at Ice Castle, and having Yurio and Otabek there helped set the bar for them too. They needed their quads back and fast.

When Viktor was back on the ice with him, Yuuri realised just how miserable he had been skating without him every day. He felt himself rediscover their programs, which were meaningless without the intensity and artistry of Viktor. And when not on the ice, they were in Minako’s studio, and Viktor wasn’t showing him any mercy: “No, it’s more like – look, you twirl, stretch, and then bam with your whole upper body. Right? With the music. Once more, come on.”

It was the Viktor he knew – driven and ruthless. Yuuri let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding, matching Viktor’s grin with his own.

But they still hadn’t managed a throw quad or a quad twist, and they were struggling with lifts. They watched from the rink side as Otabek threw Yurio high into the air, and Yurio rotated four times before Otabek caught him, smoothly, like it was nothing. To be sixteen or eighteen again…

Yakov left for Osaka four days before the opening ceremony when his other proteges landed there, including Georgi and Anya. Yuuri knew they were the competition Viktor was the most concerned about, because at Nationals there had been no competition between them: Georgi and Anya had wiped the floor with them. Yurio and Otabek, at least, they had beaten once before.

But going into the Olympics, he and Viktor were the dark horses. They had put together an amazing performance once at the Rostelecom Cup. After that, with Viktor injured and an embarrassing Nationals, the general public had little idea whether they would end up in the top or bottom five.

Yurio spent an afternoon with them trying to get their quad Salchows in order, snapping every few minutes. “It’s not like it’s hard!” Yurio snapped. “You just do it!”
Yuuri wasn’t sure Yurio would go on to have a career in coaching, but at the end of the day he and Viktor were doing side-by-side quad Sals. Both had done them before on their own – neither Oksana or Fumio had been able to do them. Now, they were doing them together, because even Georgi and Anya, or JJ and Isabella, weren’t doing quad jumps. Putting them into their programs, with such limited experience and never even having tried them in competition, however, was insane.

But they were landing them.

The day before they left for Osaka (as Olympians, Yuuri was an Olympian!), Viktor gave him enough speed and height for him to land a throw quad Salchow again.

The day that they left, when they went to the rink six in the morning before their flight, they did their first quad twist in nearly two months.

* * *

The Olympics were like an ants’ nest: people absolutely everywhere, in a hurry and with their own mission. The airport at Osaka was packed with athletes and their teams coming in, mountains of luggage everywhere, everything delayed, and fans crowding all public spaces to spot their favourite athletes. They walked out to a mixed paparazzi and fan welcome. “Is it true you eloped?” one young man asked them eagerly, in a #KatsukiNikiforov t-shirt. When had those become a thing?!

“Um, we’re not mar – Erm, no comment?” Yuuri said. That was their line: no comment.

But the man was far from disappointed: “You make a wonderful couple! I hope you medal!”

“No comment,” he repeated – sheepishly, with a pleased smile on his face. And then Viktor was there, an arm around him casually, agreeing to a group selfie, of course!

Yuuri’s mind was spinning when they got to the shuttle bus. “Do you know some fans think you have citizenship because we eloped?” he asked Viktor.

“Mmm, dramatic!” Viktor grinned. “I like that! Impulsive and romantic. I’d love to elope, hadn’t I so many ideas for a dream wedding!”

Yuuri quickly looked out of the window, his insides hot. Viktor’s dream wedding, which – which he knew included him. Viktor had said as much: that he often thought of them getting married. It seemed too fantastical to ever be real, and Yuuri didn’t let himself think about it.

(He thought about it: Viktor in a tuxedo, or perhaps a wedding kimono, on their wedding day. God, to be so lucky! He was sure no one person could ever deserve such privilege.)

The bus took them to the Olympic village, which housed some six thousand athletes, coaches and officials in thirty-story buildings, behind tall security fences and multiple check points. There, too, people were everywhere, speaking dozens of languages, and everyone was excited and buzzed. Yurio, Otabek and Yakov were staying with the Russian team, of course, while he and Viktor headed for the Japan House – which was easy to find, because Japanese flags had already been hung from the windows on multiple levels. As the host nation, their house was also ideally located: close to the main gates, with a park and a small artificial pond outside.

The shared apartment came with a communal kitchen, living room and a balcony, and they shared the place with two Japanese ice dance teams and their coaches. Viktor was quickly making friends with everyone, working through the language barrier with his broken Japanese and big smiles, and
so, within five minutes, Viktor had the entire flat eating from the palm of his hand.

“Oh, no, no,” Viktor said, “you must take the biggest bedroom! No, I insist! The bedroom is yours!”

They got the biggest bedroom.

It came with two singles, but Viktor stubbornly pushed the beds together. Yuuri asked wouldn’t that compromise their ‘are-they-aren’t-they’ narrative, with an apartment full of witnesses, but Viktor said he wasn’t going to spend the entire Olympics pretending they weren’t together – if rumours of their sleeping arrangements leaked, so be it: rumours couldn’t be verified. Besides, fellow skaters were unlikely to rat them out as there were a lot of ‘open secrets’ that people knew not to discuss with the press.

But they had no time to unpack – they barely even had time to change into the official Team Japan outfits: white winter boots, blue and rustling ski trousers, a thick, red coat, zipped from the knee all the way to the throat, striped woollen scarf, and a hat and mittens to match. The scarf read Japan, and Yuuri could hardly believe that Viktor, stood in their new bedroom with all of the gear on, was about to walk in front of thousands – and to be viewed by millions – beside him, as representing Japan with him.

“How do I look?” Viktor asked, arms outstretched, the hat pulled too far down, silver hair peaking from under it.

“Perfect.” He was choked up.

“Yeah? I call it third Olympics chic,” Viktor grinned, and Yuuri didn’t resist at all when Viktor wanted selfies of the two of them for Instagram. For once Yuuri wanted the entire world to see this: him with Viktor, Viktor with him, in their matching Olympic outfits. Viktor Nikiforov – a three-time Olympian! And Yuuri refused – refused – to be a disappointment, refused to not be the partner Viktor needed for these games. He refused to let Viktor down.

There was another shuttle bus waiting for them, and onboard all the team Japan athletes were jubilant and excited. As the host nation, they would be last to walk onto the full stadium, and the first country – Greece – was already walking onto the pit when they arrived. They were ushered into a massive underground hall, usually used for parking, but now full of all countries, sectioned off from one another, waiting to march out with their flags. People were partying and cheering, singing different national anthems, and the atmosphere was infectious. It hit him then: he was on the Japanese Olympic team, surrounded by his peers – forty-three of them – about to march out as Olympians! Out of all the people in his entire country, only they had made this select team! Childhood dreams did come true – and then some, he thought, as Viktor pulled him by his hand for a selfie with their barrier-neighbours from Tajikistan.

Yuuri wondered where Team Russia landed in the procession because he couldn’t see them anywhere, and if Viktor was sad not to be with them – there would be so many athletes there that Viktor knew. But Viktor was such a hit with Team Japan that at least it didn’t seem to Yuuri that Viktor was sad. Two skeleton athletes wanted selfies with them, and after someone had the courage to approach Viktor first, a small queue quickly formed, with the Japanese bobsleigh team next in line, and the snowboarders behind them. Viktor wasn’t only a figure skating legend – his fame transcended disciplines, and their change of federations had been all over Japanese press, too.

The wait was long, and the hall was freezing, their breaths in the air, as countries disappeared one by one. Yuuri was feeling stiff from practice, but none of it mattered, really, when their turn finally came. Yuuri had watched every single Olympic opening ceremony since the age of five, and he
remembered the two times Viktor and Oksana had been there, too, waving and handsome. But nothing, really, had prepared him for what it actually felt like.

The flashes of the stadium were blinding, Japan as the home team getting the most uproarious applause. It was already dark outside, and the stadium gleamed around them in the dark with bright lights and fireworks, and music and cheering thudded in the air, and Yuuri didn’t even know which way to look and wave – that was how excited he was.

But chaotic and bustling as it seemed, Viktor never seemed to lose sight of him, or fall out of sync from his side, even as Yuuri staggered – mind-blown, overwhelmed – amongst the Japanese athletes. He couldn’t stop smiling for a single second of it, no matter how cold and tired he was. His hand found Viktor’s in the crowd, and they finished their round hand in hand. Viktor took plenty of selfies of them, and Yuuri was so full of love and gratitude that he barely knew what to do with himself.

“Is it what you thought it would be?” Viktor asked him, eyes sparkling.

But Yuuri didn’t know how to say it was the best moment of his life, that since a kid he’d dreamt of this. He didn’t know how to say how many times he’d told himself it would never happen: not good enough, not skilled enough, not talented enough. How after a decade and a half of skating and thousands of hours spent on the ice, in competitions, travelling, failing, falling, getting up again, trying, struggling – how after a life dedicated to being the best skater he could be, he still never thought he would make it this far.

Yet there he was, and it never would have happened without Viktor. Never in a million years.

“It’s so much better,” he said, and Viktor wrapped an arm around his shoulders, pressing a kiss onto his hat.

* * *

They didn’t stay in Osaka in the week between the ceremony and the short program, but rather relocated to Kyoto where JSF had booked them private ice with some of the other Japanese skaters. The rink belonged to a university, and they got to stay in an unused dorm, void of students and ghost-like.

When they were told of their relocation, Viktor had been pleased: relatively close to Osaka with good facilities, and the rink was only a few years old. But Yuuri had been dreading it: Kyoto wasn’t his city, and the university wasn’t just any university. It, too, belonged to someone else. He kept getting startled at the sight of men of the right stature: a little taller than him, with broad shoulders, strong legs, black hair, aged twenty-six or so. They were always strangers, and Viktor frowned at him more than once.

They were being careful not to overwork Viktor at this point: they only allowed one full run-through of the SP and the LP each day, after which it was quickly into recovery and ice baths. Viktor checked his ankle and foot each day with a sports doctor from the university as well – it wasn’t fully healed, so they had to exercise damage control.

In the evenings, they watched the Olympics on Japanese TV, and when ice dance began halfway through the week, they cheered Maria and Mikhail on fervently as they got Olympic bronze, followed by the Men’s event, where Phichit came second in the short program! He was on his way to an Olympic medal!

They were rushing their practice that day because Yuuri wanted to go to the dorms to watch the last
two groups of the men’s free skate. Maybe this was why they didn’t have the patience for the Lark: they started their once-a-day run-through, every delicate movement as close to perfection as they could manage. They started with the quad twist, followed by the throw quad, but Yuuri stumbled on the landing. Goddammit, goddammit, this was like Nationals all over again, this –

But they worked through their first lift, managed their side-by-side Salchows (!!), the second lift was wobbly but okay, the death spiral, their triple jumps, and on and on, all movements designed to smoothly glide into the next for a complete performance, and the skate was going well – but then they got to their final lift, and Viktor brought him down almost as soon as he’d lifted Yuuri up, mouth tightly pursed as Yuuri touched the ice again and kept skating, them moving to centre ice. They clasped hands, weaved in and out of an embrace to the music, and then Viktor pulled him into his arms. They embraced firmly with the final notes of the music and, in the end, they were on their knees, facing each other, enough space between them for their outstretched hands to nearly touch: fingers brushing.

The music ended, and the magic was over.

Heaving in the silence of the rink, Viktor instantly shook his head and said, “I’m sorry. I could feel my ankle about to give in during that last lift, I had to –”

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s fine,” he said. But it wasn’t fine, and they knew it. Viktor had been struggling with the final lift for days, his ankle too tired for it. “We nailed nearly everything else!” he pointed out, some rough moments ignored. “We did so well!”

“Yeah, that’s a top five finish,” Viktor said, slumping down to sit on the ice, rubbing at his ankle. When Viktor was frustrated with himself like this, Yuuri struggled: he couldn’t fix Viktor’s ankle. God, he would give anything if he could.

Of course Viktor didn’t want a top five. Viktor wanted gold. Yuuri, if he was being truthful, also wanted gold. Why not? They were at the Olympics! Why not want gold, as ridiculous as it seemed, and when the other top five teams were much more well-prepared and experienced than them?

Yuuri then became aware of someone at the far end of the rink, watching them. Viktor had his back to the direction and remained unaware, but Yuuri startled. He blinked and was sure: oh.

But he met Fumio’s gaze with surprising calm: he had known, after all, what Kyoto meant, what coming to this university campus meant, when Fumio’s girlfriend still studied here.

“I forgot I promised Mari I’d call,” he mumbled. “So, um, I’ll meet you in the locker rooms?”

Viktor was still rubbing at his ankle and only nodded.

Yuuri skated off the ice quickly, skate guards on fast. Fumio hadn’t waited but was already gone, but Yuuri rushed to catch up – for no reason, in the end, because Fumio was right outside the main entrance to the rink, in the cold but sunny February afternoon, smoking.

And Yuuri, rushing out in his skates, not having seen Fumio Sano for a full year, not having spoken to him since the summer when they had exchanged hurtful text messages, came to a stop, frowned, and said, “You’re smoking?!” He had never seen Fumio smoke. It had never occurred to him that Fumio could or would smoke.

And Fumio, to his credit, smiled. “Why not? Don’t have the Olympics to go to, do I?” But Fumio flicked the cigarette to the ground and stepped on it, and only then did they regard each other as their breaths rose in the air.
Fumio looked perhaps a little softer than Yuuri remembered: an out-of-season body mid-season, but Fumio’s face with the angular chin and intelligent eyes were as familiar to him then as they ever had been. Somehow, Yuuri felt like they had never even parted, like they were about to head inside for a practice session together.

Then he blinked against the sunshine and realised no: no, this was different.

Fumio motioned at the rink. “I couldn’t help it: knowing you guys were training here. I mean, hell: knowing Viktor Nikiforov is training on campus.” Yuuri said nothing, while Fumio seemed to brush off the embarrassment. “So he’s all real, huh?”

“Yeah,” was all he said. They’d used to joke about that: how could Viktor and Oksana perform skates like that? How were Viktor and Oksana even real?

He wasn’t sure if this would be a fight or not – if he should apologise again. “Your hair’s shorter.” Nearly a buzz cut.

“Mmm,” Fumio agreed, shoulders tensing – he clearly didn’t want to talk about his hair. “I’ve watched all of your competitions – well, after the first few. I didn’t want to watch at first, but then… And at Rostelecom Cup, I mean I don’t know what’s in Viktor’s drink but it’s clearly magic of some sort.” Yuuri hoped that Fumio wasn’t suggesting anything about Viktor’s training methods – Viktor was clean, in all accounts. Yuuri never doubted Viktor, unlike… Fumio frowned. “So are you really dating him or was that just some PR trick?”

He hesitated: Fumio would laugh and say Viktor was with him for pity or that it couldn’t last or that Yuuri didn’t deserve to be with someone so amazing when he was just him, all of those things Yuuri tried not to believe and which Viktor had clearly rebuffed, but the fear persisted sometimes, like then when Fumio asked, and – and he swallowed.

“Yeah, we’re dating.”

And Fumio let out a low whistle and then laughed with the disbelief Yuuri had expected. “Look at you, all grown up – and dating him, of all people. You never even spoke to Viktor when we saw him in competitions.”

This, too, was true: before Viktor and Oksana retired, Yuuri had been mortified by the sight of them. He had ducked behind Fumio’s back once just to avoid Viktor seeing him in the locker rooms, not that Viktor would have even known who he was, of course, but…

“What happened to the shy Yuuri I knew?”

“Maybe I’ve… Maybe I’ve changed!” he said, surprised by the volume of his own voice. But he had changed! He must have! Because here he was as an Olympian, against all odds – here he was with Viktor, who believed in him. Viktor had never stopped or wavered.

And Fumio looked like he knew it too.

“Well, I hope you really have changed. I hope you treat him more fairly than you treated me,” Fumio said, and here it came, anger surfaceing in Fumio’s voice: “You couldn’t just come speak to me, could you? That’s all you had to do, for god’s sake.”

And Yuuri shrunk, instantly, the guilt returning. “I know, I –”

“An anonymous tip – on me! Me!” Fumio’s voice bounced back from the building, across the car park. “Weren’t we friends? Couldn’t you – see how that was going to destroy my entire career?!”
“It destroyed mine too!”

“Oh, did it?!” Fumio snapped and motioned at the rink. “Did it really, huh, Mr. Olympian? Here you are as Viktor Nikiforov’s arm candy!”

Yuuri flushed despite the cold.

Fumio stared at him with anger and then shook his head. “God, Yuuri! I could have- I could have stopped if you’d talked to me! I could have stopped taking the stuff, and we never would’ve been caught, we would have been fine! I spent years with you and you didn’t even ask me first! You just ratted me out!”

They had had this fight on a much bigger scale on the last time they had seen each other: Fumio saying he never wanted to speak to Yuuri again, that Yuuri had destroyed Fumio’s career, that he had only doped because Yuuri was out of shape, and then Yuuri had gone behind his back to alert the anti-doping officials about it – anonymously, of course, but he’d stupidly confessed to Fumio what he’d done. And Yuuri had tried to explain his side of things: he’d found drugs. He’d found needles and drugs, and he didn’t know what they were or what for – and he hadn’t wanted to upset Fumio by accusing him of anything, so why not make an anonymous tip? If the drugs Yuuri had found were harmless, then the tip would be harmless. Nothing would come of it, and Yuuri would have his answer on the drugs without having offended Fumio, who had been his partner through thick and thin for five years and counting.

But not so: Yuuri’s worst fears had been confirmed. Their careers were over.

Or that was what he’d thought because then Viktor had appeared out of nowhere, full of goodwill and smiles, saying he wanted to skate with Yuuri.

And Yuuri wasn’t sure when, exactly, he had fallen in love with Viktor, but maybe it had already been on their first day at Ice Castle, tracing Stammi vicino together. The second he got to skate with Viktor, feeling their immediate connection on the ice: Yuuri had been in love.

Fumio said, “Maybe it’d be us in there now, getting ready for the Olympics, if you’d come to me first. Do you think about that? Did you think at the Opening Ceremony that maybe that could’ve been us?”

And Yuuri blinked, surprised: “No.”

Fumio frowned. “Not even once?”

He had thought about Fumio a lot in the lead-up to the Olympics and how they had dreamt of competing there. But now that Fumio brought it up, Yuuri realised something: not once had he visualised Fumio with him there now, not for any of it.

“I can’t imagine being here with anyone other than Viktor. I wouldn’t want to do this with anyone else,” he said, honestly. And because he could anticipate Fumio’s rebuke, he said: “And Viktor knows I left the anonymous tip on you, of course he does.”

It was a lie, of course: Viktor ‘Us Against the World’ Nikiforov, Viktor ‘We Need Complete Trust’ Nikiforov, Viktor ‘No Lies Between Us’ Nikiforov. If only. Unlikely.

Fumio was, incidentally, fuming. “And Viktor thinks you had the right to do that?! Imagine Oksana outing Viktor, or – or the other way around! He doesn’t think you were out of line? You’re a team! You’re supposed to be a team! We shared everything for years and that’s how you reward me!”

Fumio said, and Yuuri agreed with all of it: if they didn’t have each other’s backs, who did?
Oksana would never have done such a thing, Viktor neither. What could be more hurtful, more of a low blow, more stinking of utter betrayal? But Yuuri had done it, and the shame of it lingered.

“If Viktor doesn’t realise you can’t be counted on when things get tough, then I guess these Olympics will be an eyeopener! Because the pressure they’re gonna put on you? After JSF paid for you two and you’re all over Japanese press getting betted as the wild cards coming for the gold? God, Yuuri, you’ll crumble, and we both know it.” And Fumio closed his mouth, angered but silent. Yuuri felt cold to his core.

The door opened and Viktor appeared in Team Japan’s red coat and white winter boots. Fumio blinked at him with a slightly star-struck expression, but Viktor looked more taken aback to see Fumio. Then Viktor looked to Yuuri and said, sharply, “Are you okay?”

Yuuri nodded as Viktor walked over. “Fumio just came to say hi.”

“Oh,” Viktor said, expression oddly blank. Viktor regarded Fumio; Fumio regarded him. The day felt chillier. Viktor didn’t offer his hand, but nodded. Then Viktor’s arm came to circle his waist, pulling Yuuri closer, and he felt utterly relieved for it. Viktor practically tucked him into his side.

Fumio’s mouth pursed. “I came to wish you luck at the Olympics,” Fumio said, switching to English.

“Thank you,” Viktor said, like it was in interview, “we look forward to competing.”

More staring. Yuuri fidgeted. Fumio said, “You two are – astonishingly good for how short you’ve been skating together. In there, doing your long program? Most pairs skate for years and never come close to that quality and expression.”

“Thank you,” Viktor said again – coldly.

Fumio looked annoyed. “You’re good. Yeah, you’re really good, but you won’t medal here – you’ll run out of steam, Viktor, on that broken foot, just like you did in practice now, and that’s where the younger teams will beat you.” And Yuuri couldn’t say Fumio was lying, because that was exactly what he thought, too. “That, and he’ll have a meltdown.” And Fumio nodded at him.

“He won’t,” Viktor said, and he sounded so sure that Yuuri perked up from having hung his head.

Fumio huffed. “Yeah, well… I hope not. It’d be a nice surprise if he didn’t.” And with a nod, Fumio started heading back across the car park, and Yuuri watched him go.

Viktor’s arm around him didn’t loosen but tightened, and then Fumio quickly turned around and said, “Maybe you should lift him.” He was talking to Yuuri in Japanese, and he flinched. “You know at the end? You lift him.” Fumio shrugged. “You have the strength for it, you know.” Fumio paused. “You always did.”

And only then did Fumio go.

* * *

Yuuri was awfully quiet the day after Fumio dropped by. Viktor couldn’t tell if Yuuri was upset, exactly – pensive was perhaps the right word.

Viktor didn’t know what the two had talked about before he’d found them, but it placed a cloud over Yuuri that Viktor didn’t need. They were heading back to Osaka the next day to compete, but for now they were in their ascetic dorm room where – again – Viktor had pressed two single beds
together. It was needy, perhaps, but he had a habit of reaching out to Yuuri in his sleep, and Yuuri’s absence would wake him up if he wasn’t there.

Neither of them could sleep. The dorm was quiet, although there was a big party going on somewhere on campus, echoing outside. Viktor lay next to Yuuri and stared at the ceiling. How could they climb onto the podium – for a medal of any kind? He wanted Yuuri to have an Olympic medal: he deserved one. Yet the chances of them giving a blowout performance for The Lark were slim – and while the two of them had been out with injury for the past few months, the Crispinos, the Canadians, Georgi and Anya had all been working to peak right then, at the Olympics.

“Fumio said something,” Yuuri then said, breaking the silence.

Now, Viktor didn’t hate people – perhaps strongly disliked some. But he loathed Fumio Sano and the manipulative web he had spun around Yuuri where Yuuri had accepted the blame for Fumio’s mistakes. Meeting Fumio hadn’t changed this: the man had seemed calculating, spiteful. Sorry for himself, clearly, playing the victim card.

Yuuri was too kind to people, certainly was too kind to Fumio. Viktor couldn’t explain it: Yuuri should know better. Yet Fumio was a weak spot, and Viktor didn’t know if it was the former friendship, or perhaps the two had been lovers (they hadn’t been, he knew that), or perhaps Yuuri had wished they were lovers (unlikely, he knew that too)? Whatever the reason, Yuuri carried Fumio Sano around him still.

“What’d he say?” he asked, looking at Yuuri in the dark.

“Well, he had an idea, about The Lark,” Yuuri said slowly. “He said I should lift you.”

He blinked. “Lift me where?”

“No, for the last lift. I could lift you instead of you me,” Yuuri said, and Viktor stared. He was the lifting partner. Yuuri was the lifted partner. He didn’t – “There is no rule against it, by the way: I already checked.”

Their long program was, perhaps, some two and a half days away. It was an absurd idea.

“Could you do it?” he asked instead.

Yuuri nodded in the dark. “I think so. We could try – see how the short program goes first, I guess.”

And Viktor took this in, lying in the dark. It was cold outside, but the dorm was warm, and through venetian blinds orange street lights shone in. “Okay,” he said, “we’ll think about it.”

Yuuri nodded, silhouetted against the wall. Viktor reached out to brush his hair gently. Yuuri didn’t move. “There’s another thing too. Something you should know about Fumio.”

And ah – right. Yuuri’s silence explained. Yuuri had been in love with Fumio after all? As long as it was in the past, then Viktor could deal with it. But if Yuuri said he still was, then – then Viktor didn’t know what he’d do because he was so pathetically in love with Yuuri that –

“Yeah?” he asked, encouraging but dreading.

Yuuri had his eyes closed and his jaw clenched. “You have to understand how hard it was for me. It wasn’t easy, it – But I can’t compete with you anymore without you knowing.”
This did not sound good. Viktor rose to rest on an elbow, looking down at Yuuri, a hand pressing softly against Yuuri’s warm stomach. He felt the deep inhale under his palm, and with the exhale, Yuuri said, “I’m the one who told the ISU that Fumio was doping.”

Viktor blinked. What?

And then it was all coming out: the drugs Yuuri had found, how he didn’t know what to do, how he hadn’t told Celestino or Phichit even, or said anything to Fumio because how could he? And how he’d tipped the officials off – anonymously – and then pretended he too was surprised when they showed up at their Denver rink, and Fumio had looked panicked, at which point Yuuri didn’t even need the tests to know. But they had given samples: Fumio too. What else could he do? And three days later Fumio was caught, and Fumio knew all of this.

“So you see,” Yuuri finished, “you see now why you should have chosen someone else to skate with, someone who deserves your trust completely, someone who is- is strong enough when times get tough.”

Viktor stared. It made sense – absolute sense, and Viktor didn’t understand how he had never figured it out before. “But why didn’t you confess publicly to tipping off the officials?” And when he realised Yuuri was going to say guilt, or shame, or a mix thereof, he said, “Yuuri, you’ve spent a year letting people speculate what happened! People accused you of doping, and this entire time you could have told everyone the truth! Clear your name!”

Yuuri blinked at him in the dark. “What?”

This never seemed to have occurred to Yuuri. Viktor reached out to the table lamp and sat up in the glow of it. Yuuri looked frightened and nervous even then, and what was he dreading? And then it clicked.

“I’m not mad that you reported him, Yuuri.”

Yuuri sat up too, covers pooling around him. “But –”

“You thought I’d be mad?” he asked in astonishment, and Yuuri shrugged a little. Viktor ached and reached out to brush Yuuri’s cheek.

“But I betrayed him,” Yuuri said with hunched shoulders. Viktor understood the bitterness in Fumio’s eyes now; he understood it completely and realised how skewed Fumio’s version was.

“Honey, he betrayed you,” he said slowly, and Yuuri blinked at him owlishly. “He betrayed you, and your partnership, and your entire career, the second he started doping. Not when you reported him – not then. But when he started taking illegal substances that can jeopardise the entire sport! Sure, you could’ve asked him when you found the drugs, but what – he lies? Says they’re legitimate? So you run it through Celestino just to be sure, and he’s busted anyway? Or he confesses on the spot, but asks you not to tell? That never could have been an option. And I’m glad you reported him because I – well, I got you instead. We wouldn’t have met, or be at the Olympics, or –” He swallowed thickly, realising it as he said it, “We wouldn’t be in love.” The thought of not having met Yuuri, not having fallen in love with him, was terrible and daunting. Viktor shook it off quickly. “Reporting him is the best thing you’ve ever done, if you think about it. Right?” he asked softly.

Yuuri did seem to think about it, that same pensive expression on his face. “But I thought you’d be so mad,” Yuuri said, visibly confused that it hadn’t happened. “You always say how we need honesty and trust as a pairs team. I thought you’d be disappointed in me.”
“Yes, honesty and trust are important! But baby, you – you and Fumio had neither. I’m sorry to say it, but…” He took a deep breath, reaching out for Yuuri’s hand. “But us? We have so much of it. We have so much that we can talk about the tough things, whereas you two didn’t have that. I’m not mad, okay? I’m not mad.”

And Yuuri nodded before pushing into Viktor’s arms for a hug, and Viktor hugged him back tightly. He understood Yuuri’s guilt – finally, after all this time. “You made such a tough decision: you’re right, that can’t have been easy, and I’m not disappointed, I’m proud, although – although a little upset you didn’t make it public at the time.”

Against his shoulder, Yuuri mumbled, “I’m so glad you didn’t walk out just now.”

On Yuuri? Was Yuuri kidding?

Never. Absolutely never.

They talked until late into the night, although both knew they desperately needed rest. Some things, though, were more important than Olympic medals and clean programs: Yuuri began with the day he was introduced to Fumio, and by the time Yuuri was back to the three of them outside the rink the day before, they could hear voices of people walking to work in the early hours of the morning.

* * *

The pairs short program started on a Wednesday morning, with the long program to follow on Friday for the teams that qualified. They were back in Osaka, back in their Athletes Village apartment, where Phichit – Olympic bronze medallist, after Chris had secured gold and sobbed on the podium like a baby – Chris! – had come to wish them good luck.

“I made banners!” Phichit informed Yuuri, who was sat on the living room couch while Viktor was getting dressed. Viktor was a marvel to him: Yuuri had been convinced, in that dark dorm room, that Viktor would be upset by what he’d done. Ever since they’d met he had instilled in himself the conviction that Viktor must never know of his betrayal. But it turned out Viktor was upset over what Yuuri had done.

He was finally ready to accept that there was a murkier and more complex truth behind the doping scandal than most thought: that Fumio had betrayed him, and not the other way around, or that there had been double-betrayals, at the very least. Despite what Viktor said, however, Yuuri had no plans of coming forward with who the anonymous tip had been: it was over and done with. No more. They had the Olympics to compete at, he had a new partner: no more dwelling on the past.

Phichit was a welcomed distraction. “Which one do you like best?”

The first banner – a large square piece of cardboard – said Katsuki-Nikiforov: soulmates on ice!, which was a little heavy-handed, even for Yuuri. “I have more!” Phichit assured him and pulled out a Japanese flag with Yuuri and Viktor – heroes of Japan! written on it.

“Uhm,” Yuuri scratched the side of his face, “do you have anything… subtler?”

Phichit blinked. “So I assume you don’t want the banner that says ‘Marry me, Yuuri and/or Viktor’?”

“Who’s marrying Yuuri?” Viktor asked, sounding somewhat alarmed as he walked into the living room, coat on, ready to go. Phichit grinned and winked at Yuuri, who flushed. (And yet he was thinking about it more than ever: Viktor’s Yutopia wedding. Viktor in a black kimono. Some years down the line… Why so far away? Were they supposed to wait for something? Public approval,
Viktor gave him a bright grin, and Yuuri’s heart lurched – pathetically, full of ardent adoration and hope. “Who’s ready for the Olympics?”

He jumped up quickly: that was probably supposed to be him.

And he was ready, really. He was ready! He was going to be strong, and he was okay. He was okay. He was okay, he was –

At the rink, in the bathroom, throwing up. Oh god. They needed to be ready for their warm-up in half an hour: they had been placed in the middle of all the pairs, not anywhere near the final group of The Big Stars: JJ and Isabella and the lot. Yet the audience was waiting for the two of them too: incredulously but eagerly.

A preview had been on in the canteen, the Olympic Channel showing clips of people’s skates on the screen as commentary played over the footage: This pairs short program is going to be a tough battle! Reigning World Champions Anya Zaitseva and Georgi Popovich sat out the first half of the season, but have returned with a strong performance at Russian Nationals with silver. Known for their nerves of steel in difficult competitions, they are by far the favourites here!

Going for the gold are also Italy’s sibling team Sara and Michele Crispino, who have been building momentum all season, winning gold at the European Championship a few weeks ago! At their heels are Russia’s newcomers Yuri Plisetsky and Otabek Altin, who, at just sixteen and eighteen, have said that they want Olympic gold! Also aiming for the podium are Canada’s Isabella Yang and Jean-Jacques Leroy, who last season broke a world record; and China’s Guang Hong Ji and Cao Bin, this year’s Four Continents Champions. There are only three places on the podium and many talented teams fighting for spots.

The feed cut into him and Viktor, then, from Rostelecom Cup when they had nailed The Lark.

And, of course, the Japanese home crowd has its eye on Olympic medallist, two-time world champion Viktor Nikiforov, who shocked the skating world by returning from retirement to skate with Katsuki Yuuri. This is their first competition representing Japan! Nikiforov, however, suffered a serious foot injury in December: they could shock here and upset the top five – or perhaps not.

And here the video showed Viktor’s fall during the free skate at Nationals, in slow motion, and Yuuri had to look away.

Viktor dragged him away after that, but once Yuuri was in his Eros outfit, he excused himself and went to throw up. He sat in the cubicle, on the floor, long after he had flushed the toilet. He kept his eyes closed and tried to breathe. The arena hummed and thumped noise during the ice resurfacing break: not a single empty seat in the arena. Many Japanese fans, of course, were supporting the only Japanese team: him and Viktor.

Once every four years. The Olympics. The biggest sporting event in the entire world. He was there, and he couldn’t move. He couldn’t breathe. Oh god, he couldn’t –

A knock on the stall door, Viktor’s nice shoes visible to him. “Yuuri? Honey?”

He’d disappoint Viktor. He’d disappoint Japan. They should leave, get out, become farmers in Hokkaido, get married, buy a second dog – do all those nice things Viktor had talked about. And never, ever subject themselves to this again.

Weakly, he reached out to unlock the door.
Viktor was a vision in his red-black Eros outfit, the unzipped Team Japan jacket on, holding a water bottle with the Olympic rings on it. Viktor took one look at him, stepped inside, clicked the lock into its place, and sat on the floor beside him. Yuuri let his head rest on Viktor’s shoulder when Viktor wrapped an arm around him.

“I threw up,” he confessed. God, they would need to be on the ice soon!

“That’s okay,” Viktor said, rubbing his back. “Do you feel better?” He nodded because he did. “I’ve got my toothbrush, you can use it before we go on.”

“That’d be nice,” he mumbled against the fabric at Viktor’s shoulder and felt a kiss in his hair. He had been annoyed earlier that he was being weak, but somehow, with Viktor there, he didn’t feel weak. Pathetic, yes – absolutely. But Viktor had told him over and over again that being nervous didn’t mean he was weak. He finally seemed to believe it: there was strength in being nervous, too. In wonder, however, he asked, “How are you not terrified?”

Viktor pulled back a little, with a frown. “I am. So many people think I’m clinging onto past glory for even being here: they think I’m a fool. And when I think about that, I am terrified,” Viktor sighed but then smiled. “But I know something they don’t: I’ve got the best partner in the world.”

And Yuuri, ridden with guilt, smiled. Viktor said, “Hey, you are. I know now, remember? I know all of it, and I can say you are, still, the best partner.”

“Okay,” he said.

If they were to have any kind of a chance, he had to stop feeling so guilty all the time.

Viktor had brought him his pills, just in case, and Yuuri was grateful as he took two, sipping on Viktor’s Olympic water bottle. Viktor needed injections for his ankle; Yuuri needed pills for his brain. What a pair they made – in so many meanings of the word. The two of them against all those other teams – well, you had to laugh. What else was there to do?

They left the toilet together, and Yuuri quickly brushed his teeth in the middle of the waiting area, spitting water into a plastic cup one of the volunteers rushed away. Viktor was doing stretches against the wall while Yakov lingered around them in a Team Japan jacket of his own.

And then they were by the rink with the other pairs, and the sheer amount of Japanese flags (and Russian flags too, which was nice: not everyone had cried ‘treason’!) was overwhelming, and they joined the other pairs in a line mid-ice, waving as their names were called. No jumps, throws or lifts in the warm-up, they had decided, and so they simply worked through the choreo while other teams were doing throws to try and psyche others out.

Beneath the blades of Yuuri’s skates, embedded into the ice, were rings: blue, yellow, black, green, red. He was skating on them. Him. God, he had to remember to keep breathing!

Yakov was happy when they got off the ice because they hadn’t defied orders by doing jumps anyway. In the waiting area, Yakov tapped his head. “Is okay?” Yakov asked, well aware of Yuuri’s medication.

And Yuuri nodded because he was finding it easier to concentrate, he felt calmer, his thoughts no longer running around like terrified rabbits, burrowing in and making him feel sick.

“Scared,” he said.

Japanese fighters.”

And Yuuri smiled at that: he had wanted, after all, to be a ninja once.

“Thanks, coach,” he said, and Yakov blinked at him, perhaps a little flustered, but then grunted and gave him and Viktor space. Yuuri needed to stay focused – don’t get scared now. Don’t listen to the negative voices.

The competition was back on: the arena shook with the power of cheers and applause, vibrating off-ice to where they stood in the corridor, waiting. Their team jackets were zipped up, covering the upper halves of their matching outfits. Yuuri had never heard a crowd so wild or loud.

Another burst of noise. How many people were out there? Fifteen thousand? Twenty? How many would be watching them live on TV and the Internet, on their phones and tablets?

Millions.

Viktor was nervous, standing next to him – Yuuri saw the tension in his shoulders. To the side, organisers and journalists kept a polite distance to let them wait for their turn. Determination had set in Viktor’s jaw, even as he flinched at the sound of a standing ovation – a clean skate, clearly.

Viktor never got nervous enough for it to show like this. Yuuri worried on his bottom lip, heart pounding, hands twisting.

They couldn’t do this. God, what had they been thinking, ruffling people’s feathers, causing three scandals and counting in just a single year? Were they mad?! And maybe Viktor belonged at this competition – Viktor absolutely belonged there – but Yuuri next to him, skates on, pretending to be a worthy half of this partnership, was just kidding himself, and –

“Hey,” Viktor said. He startled and met Viktor’s gaze, blue eyes somehow calm. Viktor smiled. It was a smile he’d given Yuuri a thousand times since the first day, a smile of pure trust and confidence. Even now. Even at the end of their road. Viktor even smirked.

And Yuuri nearly stumbled in reaching out to clutch Viktor’s hand as tightly as he could, even as every loud exultation sent a shiver down his spine. Viktor took his hand, warm palm pressing into his, their fingers entwining. Viktor squeezed back firmly, and he didn’t have to say anything – Yuuri got the message.

They could do this.

So he nodded. Okay. God, okay.

“Nearly time,” Viktor said.

Millions of people. Months of training. The underdogs, the past-his-prime and the not-good-enough, the sympathy entry. The two of them on the ice, giving their unexpected, at times unwelcomed, but utterly stubborn, mad and wayward bid for foolish glory.

“After we’re finished here,” Viktor said, “you wanna grab a bite to eat?”

Yuuri almost snorted, but then smiled. “Yeah. Yeah, sounds good.”

“Yeah?” Viktor teased – a front, but he still teased. Viktor tugged on his hand, a persistent, magnetic pull.
“I’ll check my schedule.”

Viktor raised a disbelieving eyebrow. “Schedule? Wow, so that’s how it is. A couple of podium spots and all of a sudden it’s ‘I’ll check my –”

“Mr. Katsuki, Mr. Nikiforov – this way, please.”

If it wasn’t for the hand in his, Yuuri wouldn’t have been able to move. If it wasn’t for Viktor now giving his hand another reassuring squeeze, Yuuri would have packed up and left on the first flight home.

But he took one step, then another, and soon they were at the curtains, which two volunteers parted for them, and the arena came into view: milling officials and photographers in the entryway, beyond them the boards and the battered ice, and then all the thousands of people, the cameras, the lights.

The stadium felt bigger than any Yuuri had ever even seen. The noise was deafening. The pair currently on the ice were coming to the end of their program, and Yuuri forced himself not to look at their superb death spiral or the flawless lasso lift, or the level four – He gulped, looked away. The applause washed over them all when the pair finished, gifts were thrown onto the ice, and the sweepers began collecting the flowers and presents as the gate was opened for them to go warm up.

No matter what happened next, Yuuri knew one thing: he would not let go of Viktor’s hand. They got onto the ice, skate guards and jackets discarded, and all he had to do was to keep holding Viktor’s hand.

Because never again would he stand in the middle of the ice without the firm and calm feel of Viktor’s grip. Never did he want to, and never did he intend to.

The lights were blinding them both. They circled the ice, had a go at some of their choreography. Yuuri tried to breathe. Viktor’s mouth was a thin line. The latest score was announced overhead – high and speaking of perfection, and Viktor always told him to ignore how other people scored, just focus on their goals. But god, he hadn’t expected that kind of a score.

The two of them really were insane.

Viktor circled an arm around his waist, keeping him to his side. Their feet, perfectly synchronised, scraped the ice.

The past ten months had been about this moment – this precise moment. And somewhere overhead, endlessly far away, the PA shouted, “Next, on the ice, representing Japan, Yuuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov!”

Viktor was a vision of seducing black and sinful red, rolling his shoulders. Yuuri breathed: Eros. Sex, lust, passion. He was comfortable with it now, after months and months: it didn’t feel ridiculous anymore to play out such romance with Viktor. It was real. It had always been real.

And so they got into position, Yuuri cocking his hips, arms aside. Viktor came up behind him, hands on his hips and head pressed towards his neck, already chasing skin to kiss. Yuuri couldn’t see; the blood soaring in his ears, the frantic thud of his heart blurring his senses. Into his ear, Viktor whispered, “I love you.”

And Yuuri took in a breath, and he felt himself smile – but no, it was a grin, a cocky grin if there ever was one. “Love you too,” he said, and he winked at one of the judges who had clearly lip-read him. The man’s mouth dropped open.
And then the music began, and instantly Viktor had yanked him into his arms: the chase had begun. But nuh-uh, Yuuri wasn’t giving in easily yet, and they soared across the ice for their quad twist, and in that split-second that Yuuri was spinning in the air, he knew Viktor would catch him: and Viktor did. The cheering was deafening and hadn’t lessened when they followed the twist with their quad throw – get the hardest elements, as usual, out of the way.

People knew, of course, that they were doing quad Salchows next: they had announced it on their protocol sheet, and it had been met with derision: only Otabek and Yuuri, and the Chinese pair, had ever managed quads in competition. The two of them, at twenty-four and thirty, had to be kidding. They landed them.

Yuuri nearly got pulled out of the skate but the deafening response, but no, audience reactions weren’t allowed to distract him!

And then they were in the step sequence, his hands in Viktor’s hair, the dramatic acting out of passion, remember to eye-fuck the judges here, and – god, okay – then Viktor lifted him, but there was only the one lift in the program, thank goodness, before the two-minute mark, and Viktor didn’t struggle as Yuuri was carried from one end of the rink to the next, Viktor’s hand on his hip the only thing keeping him up and horizontal to the ice, and Yuuri rotated in the lift smoothly. He rolled down to Viktor’s arms on the beat of the music and swung back onto the ice (their passion had thus been consummated), and they moved into the death spiral, his hand clasped to Viktor’s as a single blade formed a perfect circle around them on the ice surface, and then Viktor already pulled him up. The combination spin – Yuuri was drenched in sweat, he couldn’t feel his legs – and then no, he would cast Viktor aside!

But Viktor’s grip on him wouldn’t yield, and he was yanked back into Viktor’s arms, and into a fiery kiss, as the music came to an end. Yuuri didn’t particularly realise Viktor was kissing him until the deafening screams broke into his consciousness. They stepped back from the embrace, heaving, looking at each other. A standing ovation was happening somewhere very far away: Viktor was leaning forward with hands balanced to his thighs, trying to catch his breath; Yuuri’s body was trembling with exhaustion. The noise wouldn’t stop, roses flying onto the ice like arrows onto a battlefield, which was fine with him: they were warriors, after all, and out of range.

That had been their Olympic debut.

They had nailed it, they both seemed to realise at the same time: Yuuri pulled Viktor into a wild hug.

“I didn’t mean to kiss you,” Viktor laughed, joy everywhere, but Yuuri didn’t even care. Why not kiss him? Yuuri couldn’t have thought of the program ending any other way.

They clasped hands and bowed: From Japan: Yuuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov! They bowed in all directions, and Viktor kept waving to the crowds as they skated off, Yuuri keeping an arm around Viktor’s waist.

Yakov was – was smiling? “Dobro! Dobro, dobro!” Yakov was patting his shoulder so hard that he shook, and then Yakov clasped his face and planted a kiss on Yuuri’s cheek – which he had seen Yakov do for Viktor before, but never him.

Yuuri didn’t even know what was happening when they made it to the kiss and cry, sandwiched between the two Russi – oh, his mistake, between a Russian and a fellow Japanese. It was only then registering with him that the skate had been phenomenal.
“How’s your leg?” he asked Viktor in sudden realisation, and Viktor said, “It’s been a lot worse – don’t worry.”

“You take lead!” Yakov predicted – which they probably would at this point, with ten more pairs to go. It didn’t mean they’d stay there.

Then whistling and cheers sounded once more, and Yuuri looked up to the big screens to see himself be kissed by Viktor Nikiforov mid-ice: he had a hand on Viktor’s shoulder, the other on his chest; Viktor had a hand on his ass, the other mid-back. No tongues, of course, but the kiss looked fiery and intimate, and Yuuri hadn’t realised how filthy it had looked, and then they were on the screen, live from the kiss and cry. Viktor beamed and waved, and Yuuri offered his hand in a cupped C shape for Viktor to match: their shared signature heart for the fans.

“The scores, please,” a voice boomed, and they stiffened, became alert. Oh god. “Yuuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov have scored for their short –”

Yakov roared beside him, and Viktor jumped up. Yuuri peered at the screen: an eight. It started with –

“– 81.78 points.”

That was – that was a phenomenal score. That was –

“There’s a deduction,” he said as Viktor hugged him. Viktor twirled around to look at the screen: Deductions: 1. “Why is there a deduction?” he asked because – “It’d be a world record without that deduction!”

Turned out, kissing during a performance was a violation of ISU rules as it counted for ‘indecent conduct’. Maybe someone should have checked: they hadn’t. Lilya’s two millimetres had been there for a reason, in the end.

* * *

The kiss was making news quickly – Things Are Getting Heated at the Olympics! with a picture of them mid-kiss – but when Viktor realised that the cameras had caught him whispering “I love you” to Yuuri, which he had somehow imagined to be a private moment because of how he’d bowed his head, he felt a little unsettled.

But this did not interfere with their are they/aren’t they game! Incriminating evidence? Hardly!

“Talk to me about that kiss!” one interviewer in the mixed zone asked them minutes after the kiss and cry, a camera pointed at them.

“We were just caught up in the story of the skate,” he said – which was true.

“So it wasn’t planned?” she persisted and turned to Yuuri. “Weren’t you shocked when Viktor kissed you out of nowhere?”

“No, it made sense for the characters,” Yuuri said, like a pro. They beamed at the camera. (One fan would later call these expressions ‘lovestruck’.)

“Worth the deduction?” she asked with a laugh, and they looked at each other.

“Maybe not quite worth losing a world record on,” Viktor then said.
“No,” Yuuri agreed. “Has to be a pretty spectacular kiss to warrant that.”

The interviewer swooned. “Well, it looked spectacular to me!”

(She was right: it had been spectacular.)

However, the deduction felt all the more frustrating when they ended fourth after the short program. They had done their absolute best – exceeded expectations, their own and everyone else’s, becoming the third ever team to land quads! – and were fourth: JJ and Isabella had thrown out a new world record (so even if they hadn’t lost a point, the record would have been theirs for only an hour and ten minutes), Georgi and Anya had got an 82.05, and the Crispinos beat them by 00.06. The judges hadn’t warmed up to Yurio and Otabek’s AC/DC medley, and the two were in fifth place.

Without the kiss, they’d be second, not fourth.

Viktor apologised a hundred times: he had fucked up. But Yuuri disagreed – they were so tightly packed that anything could happen: getting on the podium – and falling off it – was anyone’s game. So many teams scoring over 80 was also unprecedented. The competition had never been this tough.

But this was the problem: Eros was easier for them; for Viktor’s foot and his limited stamina. If they wanted a medal, they had needed a strong lead in the short program. They didn’t have it.

Yet the media frenzy around them was bigger than the top three: coming back from an injury! A clean skate! Quad Salchows! Only been skating together for one season! Switching federations! Kissing on the ice! Refusing to comment on their relationship!

Anya and Georgi’s drama looked secondary to theirs.

Once the injection had worn off, too, it hurt to walk again. Better than limping, Viktor supposed, but it didn’t bode well for The Lark.

And so, the day after the short program, they were at the practice rink early. When Yakov arrived at seven, he was pleased they were on time!

But they had been there since five o’clock, teaching each other technique: Viktor on how to lift him, Yuuri on how to be lifted. Viktor shouldn’t have been surprised by how strong Yuuri was, but the first few times he’d been amazed: Yuuri, shorter than him, slight in stature, lifting him up?

“Ah, well, I sort of got a new coach last year,” Yuuri said, “and he’s a slave driver and kind of an annoying perfectionist, so yeah, now I’m strong as hell.”

“Well, he sounds ama – Wait, an annoying perfectionist?” he demanded, and Yuuri laughed.

Yakov wasn’t pleased by their new plan and called Viktor to him. “Vitya, this is madness! You’re skating tomorrow! You don’t know you’ll mess up that last lift – you might skate clean as it is, without a change like this!”

He shook his head. “Yakov, I’m in pain.” And Yakov instantly looked down to his foot. “I won’t make it for four and a half minutes: this is the only way we have a shot at a clean skate, and I’m not going to make it to another Olympics either. This is it: all or nothing.”

Yakov stared at him. “Fools.” Then, with a sigh, “Show me.”
So they showed Yakov what they had: the music started halfway through The Lark, and they skated it – marking the difficult elements – and at the very end, Yuuri lifted Viktor up as Viktor leaped with momentum, spinning onto Yuuri’s shoulder, from where Yuuri lifted him into the air where Viktor rotated as Yuuri moved across the ice, and then, as Viktor came down, Yuuri caught him in his arms and placed him back beside him. They were both pleased.

Yakov scoffed. “You learn this morning? Looks this morning! Bad ice coverage! Sloppy! Clumsy! Zero GEO!”

Viktor jumped on this: “A-ha! So the lift meets the element criteria!” Which is what they wouldn’t meet if he brought Yuuri down too soon again.

Yakov opened his mouth, then shut it. Then he swore heavily.

And so, they had a new plan in place.

Viktor went to meet Chris after their practice, Yuuri declining and saying he had to go buy them toothpaste – there was a shop in the Olympic village – and Viktor told Chris that they planned on changing the last lift. Chris, somehow, was completely unsurprised: “At this point, nothing you two do would surprise me.”

Yuuri was in the shower when Viktor returned, and he quickly greeted the other athletes in their apartment before retiring to their bedroom. Yuuri had been shopping: there was a bag with the Olympic logo on their bed, from the large shop in the middle of the Athletes Village. Viktor, nosey as he was, wanted to see what Yuuri had bought: a bone-shaped squeaky toy with the Olympic rings on it – Makka would love it! – and a small white box, perhaps for a ring, he noted as his world slowed down. He stared at the ring box. He looked around the room. A souvenir for Minako, probably, a –

He opened it: two matching rings, expensive, made of gold, perfectly smooth, and too large to fit Minako’s pristine hands. Some might say they were engagement rings. Some might –

He snapped the box shut, panicked, and put it back in the shopping bag, placing it back on their bed fervently, fiddling as he wondered what angle the bag had been in. Then he bolted out of the room and went into the living room because he didn’t want Yuuri to find him there, and sat down with the Japanese ice dance coaches for a quick chat. Inside his head, however, all he could hear was oh my god oh my god oh my god he’s gonna ask oh my god he bought rings oh my god ohmygod

When Yuuri came out of the shower and saw him in the living room on his way to the bedroom, towel wrapped around his waist, Yuuri flinched. “You’re back already!” And then Yuuri looked towards their bedroom in alarm.

“How just got in!” he chirped. “Like, twenty seconds ago!”

“Okay, just – stay there!” Yuuri said and practically ran to their bedroom.

The ice dance coaches were frowning. Viktor beamed at them kindly. “Today is the best day of all time, isn’t it?” he asked conversationally.

Viktor had no idea where the ring box ended up, but he saw no signs of it that evening. Yuuri looked suspicious when Viktor beamed and grinned and preened; he was elated but kept his mouth shut.

He’d waited, since puberty perhaps, for this moment.
He could wait a little longer.

(But he preened.)

* * *

Unbidden and inevitable, the day of the long program was there: Viktor insisted that they sleep in, but in reality this meant that they simply lay in bed, unable to get much sleep. Viktor had dreamt of rose bouquets and training Makkachin to be a ring-bearer, and only a little about the Olympics, which was actually nice.

But even the knowledge of a ring box couldn’t quite hide how crucial the day was.

Viktor had been here twice before, when he and Oksana came fourth, and when they came second. A gold medal? Not for him. He’d learned to accept it, as bitter as that pill had been. A gold was what he wanted – why aim for anything less? – and they were right behind the others. But he was tired: his body was exhausted after the season he had put it through. He breathed in slowly, silently willing his body to just hang on for one more day – then he’d rest. He’d take Yuuri to the Maldives, he’d rest his foot, let it heal without constantly pushing it; and he’d say yes, by the way, never mind that they had been together as a couple for only four or so months: he would say yes. God, he had never been so sure of anything in his life.

And, of course, he would do all the things his doctors told him: just give him one more day.

They had breakfast together in the small kitchen, and although Yuuri was nervous, Viktor had never seen anything as beautiful. They called Yuuri’s parents too and got to speak to Makkachin, who stared at the screen, tail wagging, head tilted. God, he missed her! Mari and Minako were in Osaka, would be somewhere in the stadium. Oksana would be somewhere there, too – oh god, Viktor wouldn’t be able to not tell her when he saw her! Their loved ones would be there to cheer them on, and Viktor was aware that Yuuri wanted to impress them. Perhaps even Fumio was there, although he doubted it. But all the other teams had loved ones in the audience too: the pressure was thick like smoke, difficult to swallow.

But nothing could stop the steady beat of time, and all too soon they were there: at the bursting, loud rink, waiting to go on with the final group. None of the teams had as much as spoken to each other in the warm-up area or the waiting room: Georgi and Anya were doing Black Swan, her outfit white with feathers, his black and glittery; JJ and Isabella were skating to a rock song some Canadian band had written them, their outfits matching purples, hers a stylish dress, his trousers and jacket; the Crispinos were skating to Puccini, an ice interpretation of an operatic love affair (appropriate for siblings?).

And next to him was Yuuri, in his blue-white costume full of intricate detail and lacing at the cuffs and gemstones at the collar, and Yuuri looked so beautiful that Viktor knew he would never, as long as he lived, stop admiring the beauty of him.

But not all was so glorious: Viktor had received more injections from the Olympic organisation’s doctor, supervised by an ISU official, all recorded and legitimate. His ankle felt better – numbed. As good as it would get with ligament damage. Yuuri hadn’t taken his pills, though: “I don’t need them today,” he’d said stubbornly.

But today was the biggest day of their lives, he’d pointed out. (Or was it really? Maybe not… Maybe another day would get that title.) But Yuuri sounded sure, and if Yuuri was sure, then that settled the matter for Viktor. Yuuri was strangely settled – even distant. Whether this was good or bad, Viktor couldn’t gauze, but he’d realised very recently that Yuuri was even more goal-driven
and resolute than he had given Yuuri credit for.

They stood, hand-in-hand, waiting.

After the draw, they were second to skate in the final group. Yurio and Otabek had skated before the ice resurfacing break and gone into the lead with a notable personal best: now the pair was in the green room, waiting to see if they would medal or not. That was probably the worst part: waiting after your skate to see whether in the end you were first, second, or something else. The teenagers might fall from first to fifth: they waited.

And then the PA boomed again, the rink darkening and light spots flashing around: *Please welcome onto the ice the next group of skaters!*

In order, they entered the rink: Crispinos, them, JJ and Isabella, Georgi and Anya. They were introduced one by one, and the audience roared at them all – perhaps a little more loudly for him and Yuuri. They were the local pair, after all, and no one had thought they would be in the final group in the free skate.

None of the pair teams spoke to or looked at each other during the warm-up. Viktor could feel Georgi, JJ, the lot of them, staring at him and Yuuri once in a while, trying to figure out what the hell they were doing in the last group, and if their medals were in jeopardy. He knew that for the other teams, they were the usurpers: the three medals should be shared between the others, in some order. Not them. Not *Viktor*, who had had his hay day, and had retired already, for god’s sake, and then when Russia had turned them down, the two had switched Federations last minute in a desperate attempt to make the Olympics – this is what many thought.

And yet there he was: as stubborn as ever, not caring what others thought.

They were called off the ice as the Crispinos were the first to skate. As the next ones up, they stayed by the rink side, ready for their turn.

Yuuri’s hand was shaking in his. He squeezed back, but Yuuri looked awfully pale.

He pulled them to the side the little he could: they did not need to watch Sara and Michele. “You okay?” he asked quietly and was reminded of their first ever competition in Bergamo, not even six months ago! It felt like an age. Yuuri had been nervous then; he was nervous now.

“Viktor, this is *it,*” Yuuri breathed and met his gaze: Yuuri looked very close to freaking out or, perhaps, throwing up again.

Viktor frowned and shook his head. “You know what? I don’t care how we do out there,” he said. Yuuri flinched, shocked. “Darling, even if – even if this is a splat fest, I’ll still think we’re magnificent, that *you’re* magnificent. Because you are – you’re so magnificent.” He swallowed hard. “I couldn’t do this without you.”

And, realising it as he said it, thinking to all the late practices when he’d been exhausted but Yuuri kept insisting they do one more run through, and whenever he thought he was too old to compete anymore but Yuuri somehow coaxed another performance out of him, and then the injury, when he’d felt himself slip away into defeat and misery, and Yuuri hadn’t given up on him, not once, not even when Viktor had been moody and distant, but Yuuri had supported him every step of the way, god all of it: “You’ve been giving me strength since day one. God, you give me such strength. I’m so grateful. And this isn’t where our story ends, okay? This is just our beginning, and no matter what happens next, this journey with you has been the best thing I’ve done in my entire life.”
Yuuri breathed out shakily. “Me too.”

Viktor smiled, and Yuuri hugged him fiercely. Oh Viktor would say yes a thousand times!

Then the Crispinos were done, and they got onto the ice, taking their Team Japan jackets off. Thousands of people were staring at them, Olympic logos everywhere, cameras everywhere. The man back for his third Olympics: what for?

Viktor tried to breathe.

Yuuri’s hand was still trembling in his, but Viktor was mainly relieved that there was someone who was as co-dependent as he was. He and Oksana had needed each other, naturally, but with a difference: Viktor had been confident then – maybe even arrogant. Now, that confidence had a crack in it, and Yuuri was the piece holding him together, whether Yuuri was aware of this or not.

The Crispinos’ scores were announced: only second place after some mistakes. Viktor glanced at the screen showing the duo’s distraught faces. Yurio and Otabek were still in the lead.

They stopped to confer with Yakov one last time.

“With short program, nearly world record,” Yakov told them. “No luck then. Luck now: make new record.” Then, as an afterthought, Yakov added, “No kiss kiss.”

(They didn’t know this at the time, but the cameras naturally caught this conversation too. ‘No Kiss Kiss’ became the slogan of their St. Petersburg rink for a solid six months. And a decade later, when Yakov finally retired, he was still – at times, and behind his back – called Yakov No Kiss Kiss Feltsman.)

“Go,” Yakov said and motioned at the ice, and he looked Viktor in the eyes: go do the job I’ve been training you for since you were a child. Go do what I know you can do.

Viktor simply wished, ardently, that he had two good feet to rely on.

They got onto the ice, and someone – against the common rules – threw one more bouquet onto the ice for the Crispinos (or perhaps them?). There was a delay when a sweeper was sent out to go get it, and he and Yuuri stood in the middle, waiting.

Then their names were announced overhead, and the countdown began: thirty seconds for them to be in their starting positions. They were taking no risks and moved immediately to centre ice where they held eye contact and nodded, and then they were back to back, hands clasped together, in their starting position.

Viktor closed his eyes, felt the warmth of Yuuri against his back. Okay. Okay, okay – give it everything you’ve got. Nothing to lose, all to gain – push yourself harder than you ever have in the last twenty years. You haven’t worked so hard for nothing; you haven’t been through hell for nothing.

The music began a few beats later: The Lark Ascending, echoing in the rink like the spring sun and as soft as a bird flies, gentle and loving. And they were to be one with the music: like their bodies created it.

They both glided forward, then turned to each other, fingers touching. Slowly, the program began to build – not rash and fiery like Eros, but the opposite of it.

They started with the quad twist again – no problem there, he caught Yuuri smoothly as the
audience cheered. They moved across the ice: Yuuri was in his arms, and he twirled Yuuri around, then with the music followed the bend of their arms, elongated necks, synchronised stretches of their legs, like two ballet dancers (Lilya’s influence there). The quad throw and the first lift went fine, too: it was only after them that the ghost pains started radiating from his ankle. The last time he had attempted The Lark in competition he had nearly collapsed in Yuuri’s arms, limped off the ice…

He had to be stronger than this, had to! They gained speed across the ice for the side by side quad Salchows – fuck, underrotated? It’d be a close call, might get downgraded. He didn’t have time to assess his performance because he already picked Yuuri up in a second lift, rotating on the ice while holding Yuuri up, and with the swell of the music, Yuuri landed. His ankle was starting to waver.

But the music kept building up, full of youthful yearning. There was Eros, and then there was this: ardent, hopeful love, the feeling that you had found the right person, that stupid, giddy, disbelieving feeling when you found a little ring box and realised that the world was full of hope and joy and endless possibilities. It was their skate, more so than Eros ever had been: the program was about the two of them, how they had found each other, and what that felt like.

And Viktor tried to show it the best he could, looking at Yuuri skating beside him like Yuuri was, in fact, the centre of the universe.

He wasn’t there for himself, he realised at that moment, aching, exhausted – whether or not he ever got Olympic gold wasn’t so important. He’d made his mark on the sport.

But Yuuri needed a medal. Yuuri, who had worked for a decade and a half, who was so incredibly talented and expressive, so skilled and flawless. If that didn’t warrant an Olympic medal, what did?

And so they glided to the far end of the rink for speed into their triple toeloops, and his ankle throbbed with pain when he landed, but he did because he had to – not for his own sake. And then he looped an arm around Yuuri’s waist, spinning him in his arms as the music turned more joyous, and Yuuri had his eyes closed, moving with the music: the most beautiful thing Viktor had ever seen.

They moved into the death spiral, and he used his good foot as the anchor, at least, taking most of the pressure and giving his bad ankle a break. And then they were up again, and a second throw followed: triple flip, Yuuri landing it perfectly, gliding backwards on the ice, eyes locked with his.

No disasters, no perfection either – their spins followed, and then they were in the choreographic sequence, their arms and bodies moving with the music that picked up again, not a note was missed that they didn’t portray in their movements: first perfect mirror images of each other, and then he took Yuuri’s hand and pulled him into a mesmerising mix of footwork and crossovers, edges deep and crisp, the music echoing what they felt. Delicate, soft – an illusion effortlessness and of a coming spring.

And then it was there: the final lift, which was such a bad idea, but they gained speed across the ice and then Yuuri’s hands were on his hips, gripping, and with his good leg Viktor lifted himself up – surprised gasps from the audience, but he was already in the air, and he felt Yuuri’s arms trembling from the effort, not steady like his own normally would be, but Yuuri spun him, and they needed the rotations for the points, they needed Yuuri to cover enough ice with him up in the air, and whereas Yuuri would have varied positions in the air for extra GOE, Viktor lacked the skill of it after a day (understandably) – so as a lift it was basic, but the element was executed fully, and he landed on his good leg while the bad ankle throbbed in protest.
The start of their final spins was on his good foot, at least, but when they changed positions and changed feet, Viktor drew blood from his cheek as he bit down and forced himself to hang on. Then the last of the choreo: weaving in and out of an embrace, and he skated one-footed, which was harder and he hoped the judges didn’t notice it was because his ankle was fucked, and finally they glided to the centre and slowly descended to their knees, then drifted apart until only the fingers of their outstretched arms touched, eyes locked on each other’s.

The violin faded: they stared at one another. Somewhere a standing ovation and an onslaught of roses was happening, but Yuuri had started to cry, rattling sobs that made Viktor realise just how terrified Yuuri had been – but Yuuri had kept it together from start to finish, had controlled himself so well Viktor hadn’t even realised.

And so he was up on one foot (not two), and pulled Yuuri protectively into his arms. Yuuri collapsed against him, and Viktor held him tight. “Like I said: magnificent,” he whispered, this time making sure no camera would be able to read his lips later.

They bowed out – from the Olympics. Thousands of people were cheering for them, and Viktor hoped that the moment could last forever, that Yuuri could bask in people’s worship and applause forever.

But that was all it was in the end: seven and a half minutes with the two programs put together.

Yuuri wiped his face as they went to Yakov, not as victorious as from Eros, because they simply didn’t know: it had been a good performance for them. Maybe – maybe – enough for the podium.

In the kiss and cry, Yuuri blew his nose and Viktor drank water to calm down. Their personal best for The Lark was 144 at Rostelecom Cup. Their TES should be back to match it, depending whether Viktor’s Salchow was called under or not, although Yakov hadn’t thought the Salchow was under, but Viktor wasn’t sure; and who knew how much the basic lift had cost them too, but Viktor knew he wouldn’t have had the strength to lift Yuuri: his ankle had been too weak.

“You need 147 to beat Otabek and Yurio,” Yakov said, who, naturally, dreamed of all of his skaters on the podium. The duo would have a higher TES, but they should have better PCS… If he and Yuuri came first now, with only two teams to go, it meant they had at least bronze. If less than first place, a medal was altogether unlikely.

Someone was about to be elated – someone heartbroken. A 147? That was high, that was damn high.

“Youuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov of Japan –” the PA boomed, and Yuuri clutched his hand. He clutched it back. Neither of them breathed. “– have received for their free skate a total of a hundred and fi –”

The screen finished it for them: 153.25. Their PCS was nearly perfect. Total score 235.03. Currently first place.

It was a medal. It was enough for a medal!

The sound he made was an “Aaaahhh!” and then he was hugging Yuuri with all he had. “We’ve got bronze!” he yelled, and then there were tears on his cheeks? Was he crying?! Maybe he was!

Yuuri was looking between him and the screen, pointing and in shock. It wasn’t a world record, but it was one of the best free skate scores ever recorded. Yakov was planting wet kisses on their cheeks, clapping their shoulders and ruffling their hair.
Yuuri remained in shock: “Have we- Do we?”

“We have a medal! You have a medal!”

“No,” Yuuri gasped, eyes wide like someone was tricking him, but waved to the crowd and their fans – who, by the sounds of it, were losing their shit – as Isabella and JJ took to the ice. Yakov rushed off the instant the cameras cut away from them as he had Georgi and Anya still to tend to. The two of them kept sitting on the couch in shock.

“Oh my god,” Yuuri breathed, astonished, and then: “Oh my god.” With a frown and a flinch, Viktor looked to the ice where JJ had just fallen flat on his face from their jumps. That didn’t look promising at all. JJ was scrambling up to his feet and quickly rejoined Isabella, who was lifted into a messy lift.

Oh my god was right: maybe they had silver.

* * *

They were ushered out of the kiss and cry and into the green room where the Crispinos were with Yurio and Otabek: the three of them now formed the top, all waiting to see where they would land. Sara and Michele were looking at the screen hopefully as Isabella and JJ’s messy skate continued, while he and Viktor hugged their rinkmates – Yurio was not happy with how their Olympics had gone and was furious that they had been knocked down from first place.

But Yuuri was shaking – from adrenalin and shock, but from the fact that they had a bronze medal! He was an Olympic medallist, and nothing could happen on the ice that was taking that away from them! He barely knew how to speak!

He and Viktor sat in the middle of the U-shaped couches, and Yuuri was not used to being in the green room of any competition to see where he’d medal. Flustered, he began loosening the laces of his skates to let his muscles relax, while Viktor and the rest stared at the screen intently. He looked up quickly: Isabella and JJ finished – it hadn’t been a good performance for them, not after a world record the day before. Isabella was sobbing on the ice, but not like Yuuri who had shed tears of relief and tension: Isabella looked furious. JJ guided her off the ice.

But Isabella and JJ weren’t a team they could beat, he was sure of it. Next to him, Viktor was awfully rigid.

The green room was being recorded, too, and while Isabella and JJ sat in the kiss and cry, the feed cut into them, all anxious and waiting – and Yuuri waved at the screen happily because bronze! They had a bronze! Viktor had gone very quiet and barely waved.

Isabella and JJ got their scores: third place. To their left, Yurio and Otabek jumped up and hugged each other, and Yuuri beamed at them: the teenagers were still in second place, behind him and Viktor! That meant they too were getting a medal!

“We’re all getting medals!” he told Viktor excitedly – was this what taking drugs felt like? He was high as a kite! An Olympic medal! A bronze! They – Oh, hang on. Not bronze. They had at least a silver?!

They were in first place, with one more pair – Georgi and Anya – to go. They had a silver!

He startled, shocked. Viktor was staring at the screen, unflinching: Viktor knew.

The Crispinos, saddened and upset, left the green room as third place holders Isabella and JJ
arrived to wait for the final results. Isabella was still upset about their mistakes; JJ looked guilty and was angry too. They had let a gold medal go – now they might not medal at all. Isabella sat down and began tearing her laces open. Yuuri was staring at her in wonder, not at all understanding what was happening.

“Anyā just fell,” Otabek then said, voice alert, and Yuuri turned to the screen. Georgi and Anya were doing Swan Lake: him in black, her in white.

Yuuri couldn’t look away now. “That’s a deduction,” he said slowly, “and negative GOE…”

He only then realised what being in second place meant, when the final skaters fell. His hand found Viktor’s. Viktor gripped him back tightly. Anya and Georgi kept going, but the program had cracks in it, obvious cracks where the frustration of the two bled in. When the music ended, Anya was drooping dramatically in Georgi’s arms: a dead swan. The stadium boomed approval and applause.

Yurio said, “It might be close between you and them, I think. Wouldn’t it be ironic if your deduction for the kiss makes the difference?”

Viktor froze next to him. What if Yurio was right – what if the difference between them was so slim, less than a point, that Viktor kissing Yuuri determined where they placed?

Viktor didn’t smile: Viktor was clutching his hand. Viktor was breaking the bones in his hand. He let him.

Yakov was in the kiss and cry with Georgi and Anya, who were sending kisses to the screen, but they were tense and anxious. Yurio and Otabek were now awfully quiet and still, but Yuuri mostly stared at the screen in disbelief. They were broadcasted around the stadium: no cheerful waving this time.

Viktor laced his fingers with his. Yuuri looked at him: it would all be fine, whatever happened. Anya Zaitseva and Georgi Popovich have scored for their long program – Yuuri steadied himself: they could handle whatever came next. – 144.35. Their total for –

The screen showed their placement: fourth. On their right, Isabella and JJ jumped up and began clutching each other and cheering, while on their left Otabek and Yurio yelled.

Yuuri blinked. He was confused. If JJ and Isabella had bronze, and if Yurio and Otabek had silver, then they had silver, and there couldn’t be two silvers, so…

Next to him, Viktor had silent tears rolling down his face, but they weren’t sad tears. They were relief and joy and disbelief, and then Viktor stood up and pulled him up too and gave him the biggest hug of all time, and Yuuri shook his head – no, they –

“No,” he breathed, “no, really?”

“Yes,” Viktor confirmed – Viktor Nikiforov, Olympic gold medallist, said.

“No!” he yelled, “No! Oh my god, Viktor! Viktor!” They could hear the audience cheering and yelling louder than ever, and they were being broadcast to millions from the green room. He clasped Viktor’s head with both hands, and Viktor was beaming with tear-stained cheeks, was starting to grin, and he asked, “We won?”

“We won,” Viktor said, and there was no recovery for the are they/aren’t they when Yuuri kissed
his boyfriend right there in the green room, and Viktor kissed him back – no, there was no
ambiguity about it when they laughed and smiled against each other’s mouths, staggering with
disbelief, or when Viktor picked him up and kissed him again, twirling him around, and Yuuri felt
joy like he had never felt before.

* * *

The hours after their victory were a blur of interviews and press and photo shoots, and they
confirmed their relationship status to the journalists – might as well – and Yuuri thought of the
engagement ring he’d bought for Viktor too. He had impulse-bought the rings, he could admit that:
but why not? Viktor had grand wedding plans: it would take years for Viktor to have everything
ready for their wedding. So if he wanted to be married to Viktor in, say, two or three years, which
he did want, then he had to start proposing sometime soon to allow for the wedding to take shape.

Buying the ring was step one. Gathering the courage was step two.

But then he had never thought he would win an Olympic gold medal either, so he was clearly
capable of much more than he’d ever thought.

The medal ceremony took place on the outdoors stage built for the purpose. The plaza in front
of the stage was full – it reminded Yuuri of a music festival – and on stage was the podium. He barely
remembered any of it, only had vague memories of being escorted onto the stage with the other two
pairs, all teams in their national Olympic outfits, and he and Viktor then stood behind the centre
piece of the podium, waiting with massive grins on their faces, while first JJ and Isabella were
announced – medal, flowers, bowing – then Yurio and Otabek.

*And the Olympic champions, representing Japan, Yuuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov!*

Only then did they leap (they leaped) onto the centre podium as cameras flashed around them.
Neither had ever been on that podium before – Viktor had been everywhere but.

Then an older woman, a vice president of something, came to them with medals, and they each
bowed as she slipped the heavy golden circle around their necks. Yuuri straightened up, marvelling
it, and then Viktor did the same. They stared at each other. Someone gave them flowers next, and
the Japanese anthem played, both of them singing, the crowd singing, lights flashing, and
triumphant music played when it was done.

It was all a blur, but when they got off stage, Yuuri took his medal from his neck. “Nikiforov-
sensei,” he said, and Viktor stopped abruptly, frowning at him. Yuuri bowed deep. “This is for
you.”

He offered the medal to Viktor, not knowing how else to express his gratitude. Viktor hesitated but
then took it, weighing it in his hand. Viktor removed his own medal and slipped on Yuuri’s,
pressing it against his chest.

“Thank you. This is for you.” Viktor slipped his medal around Yuuri’s neck, and Yuuri clutched at
it in horror, about to object. “Also, never call me Nikiforov-sensei again, you make me feel a
hundred years old,” Viktor said and kissed him.

Yuuri wished so hard he could retain every second of that day – but all of it was so magical, so
marvellous, that it blurred together in endless amazement.

* * *

Thankfully Yurio had been wrong: the deduction for their Eros kiss had not cost them Olympic
gold. Viktor would never have forgiven himself if he had.

His doctor banned him from skating for a month after the Olympics, and while other skaters were competing at Worlds, he underwent a small operation on his foot at a St Petersburg clinic and was ordered a second month off the ice, which was fine: they had booked two weeks at a five-star resort at the Maldives, with an infinity pool and four bars and three restaurants and an Olympic sized pool as well, and it also came with all the massage and beauty treatments they (Viktor) could want, and an over-water bungalow of their own built along a pier above the turquoise water, with a jacuzzi and a deck with deck chairs, facing the Indian Ocean, and steps into the water for them to slip into whenever they so wished.

Viktor wasn’t allowed on the ice for a month?

He wasn’t complaining.

Unsurprisingly, the place was filled with honeymooners and anniversary commemorators, enjoying the white sands, the soft winds, the sunny weather, there to be in love and to make love, and then eat and drink and swim and repeat. They talked to a French couple who were there for their sixtieth wedding anniversary! “Imagine, Yuuri,” he crooned, “to be married for sixty years!”

(Was he preening again?)

Whatever he was, wasn’t subtle, because on day four, as they were lounging at their bungalow, basking in the sun on their own private deck, Yuuri said, “You know, don’t you?”

Viktor flinched, but his sunglasses (Gucci, thank you) were large and hid his eyes. He remained motionless, staring at the sun. “What do I know?” he asked breezily. “Babe, can you lotion my back? I want to turn over.”

Yuuri remained suspicious. Shit.

So Viktor tried to tone it down, although they celebrated their one year anniversary there: marking the day Yuuri had drunkenly danced into Viktor’s heart. (“This cannot be our anniversary!” Yuuri argued. “Why can’t it be the day you came to Yutopia?” “We can celebrate that too!” “Viktor!”)

But their sort-of anniversary clearly wasn’t what Yuuri was waiting for. Viktor wasn’t being optimistic for nothing: Yuuri had hid the ring box in the second drawer of the guest room of their St Petersburg home, as Viktor had accidentally discovered when searching for Makkachin’s nail clippers. He knew by then, of course, what the ring box contained.

And before they had left for the airport, Viktor had casually checked the drawer – as he had every now and then – and the box wasn’t there anymore. Yuuri had packed it.

Ten days in their love nest bungalow, and Viktor remained patient. Impatient.

Well, he waited.

The rainy season was nearly on the islands, however, and on one day they woke up to heavy rain battering the roof. It was humid and hot, partly because of the weather, partly because they stayed in bed all day, making love. Outside, the Indian Ocean mimicked the way they moved against each other.

But cabin fever did not do the trick either.

And then he realised that Yuuri was waiting for the final night – they had booked themselves into
the island’s most exclusive restaurant, had been promised oysters and champagne and candles under the moonlight. Of course!

So Viktor was, in the end, caught completely off guard, because they were taking a walk along the seemingly endless white-sand beach, hand-in-hand (was Yuuri’s hand oddly sweaty?), when Yuuri interrupted their gazing of the sun setting into the ocean by suddenly bending down to one knee with the ring box in his hands.

And Viktor, for the life of him, startled – because he had imagined this a thousand times, had waited and plotted and hoped and fretted – and yet he had never actually realised what it would feel like to have Yuuri look at him and ask: “Will you marry me?”

And Yuuri looked sickly pale and nauseous as his hair was ruffled by the gentle tropic breeze, the nervous look of him reminding Viktor of when they had won the Olympics, much to the annoyance and astonishment of the figure skating world: by returning from retirement, by swapping countries, by changing lifts and doing quads and persevering through injuries because they were amazing together – this was an unquestioned fact – and hardly anyone could beat them when they joined forces.

They had been asked so many times how they had done it: how was it possible that after only ten months as a team, they had been the best pair skating team in the world? Was there a formula to it – a guide perhaps to follow? But they had said no: you just needed to have the perfect match.

Yuuri was waiting.

“Yes,” he said, feeling very dizzy. He had never thought someone could love him enough to ask – to want to be with him forever. He had given up, nearly, that such a person could come along.

Yet there Yuuri was, slipping a ring onto his finger, right there on the beach, saying, “I bought two,” and right, of course, but Viktor’s hands were even sweatier than Yuuri’s, trembling, but he managed it: and then they stood there, rings on their fingers.

The extravagant dinner hadn’t been intended for a proposal, he learned, but for the celebration of their engagement.

“How long did you know?” Yuuri asked him afterwards – after the tears and kissing and seventy-two pictures on Viktor’s phone.

“Oh, you know,” he said vaguely, “only since the day you bought the ring.”

Yuuri groaned. “Ever since then?!”

No: since they first skated together.

Ever since then.

fin.

Chapter End Notes

Take that fluff and choke on their love, people. It is beautiful and pure.
Did you love it? Hate it?! Tell me (j/k if you hated it please don't tell me)! If you have the time, do comment - I really appreciate it when you guys do! Find me on Twitter and tumblr where I scream about figure skating.

And so, with a bow, what started as a "pair skating!AU" in the autumn of 2017 is complete... It was so much fluffier than I thought, I learned a lot about pair skating in the process, and I thank you all for having been a part of the ride! Feel free to rec it, pass it on! Thank you <3

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