Blood, Sweat, and Tears

by Aurum_Auri

Summary

The Hunt is a sport like no other. Alphas and Omegas from around the world compete in an international spectacle designed to thrill. An Omega wins if they can escape the arena. An Alpha’s job is simple: claim the omegas before they can.

When disaster strikes, no one is left more thrown off their game than Yuuri. The path to victory is a long, hard, and desperate one.

Notes

Warning: this does have a heavy dose of pain but a happy ending as well. Check the tags and consider yourself warned. For Content Warnings, check the end notes, which will contain minor spoilers.

See the end of the work for more notes.

Yuuri laid his head in his hands. He had to get a spare key from the front desk in just his robe, but it was so early in the morning that the lobby was not as full as it had been when he’d arrived.

He couldn’t stop shaking. The heat was mostly gone now, but he was left with a burning need to
strip and nest, no matter how soft the robe was. He just wanted to be alone after the long Hunt several days ago.

It was hard to believe it had even been several days. But the heat had made everything a blur, and Yuuri was just thankful he’d ended up somewhere safe. Everything else was gone from his memories.

He took the walk of shame back through the ostentatious lobby and back to his room, his mind clouded.

Everything about Victor was perfection, Yuuri had always known that since the first time he’d spotted the alpha on the front of a magazine. But as he closed the door behind him, leaving the robe on the floor and burrowing into a nest of sheets and blankets, his mind was possessed with doubts.

He rolled over. The ceiling was blurry. His contacts had come out at some point. His glasses were somewhere, though he wasn’t certain where—they hadn’t been in Victor’s room.

Yuuri needed to get serious. Stringing Victor along, baiting him like this… it would hurt them both. Yuuri’s sponsors would want to pull out after another loss, and Victor losing would make his own sponsors leave him.

He rolled onto his side, burrowing deeper into the sheets. He’d sleep off the last of the heat, and then he had a stop to make before going to the airport.

If Yuuri wanted to set Victor free, he had to capture the eyes of every other alpha in the Hunt, which meant he had only one choice.

A flimsy excuse at best, Yuuri knew, but he lost the ability to care. With his fists clenched and his teeth grinding together, Yuuri was set on his plan, and nothing would stop him from doing his job to the best of his own abilities, for the sake of both Victor and himself.

After all, four figure dresses were just a work expense.

Every picture of Makkachin drove another nail into Yuuri’s heart.

Victor was a genuinely good person. He was sweet, a little bit of an overdramatic romantic, but painfully earnest. And they just kept texting over the next few months.

It wasn’t the same as proximity, Yuuri reasoned. Texting didn’t change the way his body reacted to Victor’s scent. He didn’t feel the hairs on his arms raise just because his phone buzzed.

His heart, however, had other ideas, and it raced with every emoji smile and soft goodnight they swapped.

Victor won his nationals, swept Europeans. The omegas he claimed were nothing. They didn’t make Yuuri’s chest flare with something surging and hot, something that clutched tight at his very soul and made him see green.

Victor was just another alpha, and the Hunt was just another contest.

The dress hung on its hanger in Yuuri’s closet, still in its bag and accusing Yuuri of not trying hard enough in the Four Continents and Nationals.
He won. He got away. The alphas were drawn in like flies to honey, just like Yuuri wanted. The
dress did its job, and Yuuri was reaping the rewards.

It didn’t do a thing for the hollow feeling inside him. If it was too late for himself, at least he could
stop Victor from feeling the same.

Yuuri trained alone most days. Texting Victor was his own guilty pleasure, something he indulged in
only when the ache was so terrible Yuuri didn’t think he could bear it. Pictures of Makkachin made
him miss his own Vicchan fiercely. Pictures of his puppy weren’t the same, but his sister tried.

Worlds drew in with all the looming anxiety of an avalanche- unstoppable, massive, a white out of
pressure and noise in his skull. Yuuri took a few pills and slept his way to Sochi. Phichit dragged
him out of the airport. His own flight had landed only a half an hour before, and facetime calls
weren’t the same as face to face interaction.

“-and after grabbing dinner with a few others I was thinking we could go out and see some of the
city before we headed back and- Yuuri?” Phichit said. He lowered his selfie stick and frowned at
Yuuri, waving a hand in front of Yuuri’s face. “Yuuri? Did you leave your brain back in Detroit?”

“Oh! No, sorry Phichit,” Yuuri said. “Sounds great. Let’s get checked in. Where are you staying?”

Yuuri’s hotel was close to Phichit’s.

Sochi was a sparkling little city by the sea. It made Yuuri powerfully homesick. First the Grand Prix
in the United Arab Emirates, then Nationals in Sapporo and Four Continents in Taipei. He’d skirted
so close to home, but there was no time for the two hour flight home after winning Nationals.

He had to keep training. He had to keep working harder.

He was in Victor’s country now. And the home-field advantage would only play to Victor’s
strengths.

His body felt like it was made of lead, and his eyes were heavy. “I actually don’t feel like going out,”
Yuuri confessed.

“Jet lag?” Phichit asked. He looked sympathetic. “Get some sleep, Yuuri.”

Yuuri yawned, a full-bodied thing that forced his eyes shut and brought tears pricking into the
 corners. He was ready to drop. “It’s good to see you,” Yuuri mumbled into his hand.

Phichit patted Yuuri’s back. “Great to see you, too. C’mon, let’s get a taxi.”

The banquet was a very traditional affair held in a hotel ballroom.

Yuuri was dressed early, buzzing under his skin. The dress was unfairly beautiful, a work of bold
blue with an open back, showing off the musculature as well as the attractive curve of his ass. He
draped a stole over his shoulders and mourned the decision not to wear a suit jacket.

Sochi was warmer than most of Russia, but it was still March, and Yuuri had to take a taxi to the
banquet.

He was one of the first few to arrive. Ideally, he could court sponsors while others were arriving,
show off that he was there and leave before he could make a fool of himself. Before the source of
years of sexual frustration arrived, a little voice chimed. Yuuri silenced it quickly.
He felt a familiar, proprietary squeeze on his ass and he knew without looking that it was Chris. The familiar hint of floral overtones, the musk underneath, cut the air like cologne. “You bought the dress!” Chris chuckled. “Been breaking hearts?”

“Chris,” Yuuri said, flushing furiously. “You were the one who suggested I get it in the first place.”

“And I praise every deity I can think of that you listened,” Chris laughed. They caught up a while, chatting aimlessly, paying only half attention to what he was saying. Sponsors came and went, courting Chris like marriage-hungry potentials, politely giving Yuuri the time of day because of proximity.

Eventually Mizuno’s rep pulled Yuuri away, and Yuuri had to confront the reality of his situation. The dress was working. It wasn’t just catching eyes. Every alpha was staring at him, a piece of meat in the midst of starving lions.

Yuuri’s gaze tracked over the room, painfully aware of a wintergreen scent that called him like a siren song. Victor was staring with those heartstopping blue eyes, looking unfairly handsome in a designer suit Yuuri vaguely recognized from their shopping trip.

Victor broke into a smile. Yuuri was fucked.

Victor beelined toward him, offering him a glass of champagne he’d grabbed from a passing waiter. Yuuri held it tighter than necessary.

Don’t down it in one go, don’t down it- he finished the glass with a nervous gulp. “Victor,” he managed. “It’s- been too long?”

Victor beamed. His heart shaped smile set Yuuri’s nerves on end, and Victor’s eyes fluttered as they adopted a heavy-lidded stare. “You look… amazing.” Victor’s voice was husky. Yuuri felt a shiver down his spine. “I had no idea you were interested in high fashion. Valentino?” he asked. His eyes were appraising. “You are… unfairly attractive, Yuuri Katsuki.”

“You look amazing, too,” Yuuri breathed. You could cut the air between them with a knife, scents deepening, lust bubbling up. “I don’t think I ever thanked you properly,” Yuuri said. “For the Makkachin pictures, I mean. She’s too cute.”

“It’s no trouble at all,” Victor said. “Chris gets sick of dog pictures, but I have to send them to someone!”

“Chris doesn’t know what he’s missing,” Yuuri scoffed.

The music swelled in the air, sending little shivers up Yuuri’s spine. Victor offered his hand, and he smiled. “Dance with me?”

“I- We shouldn’t.” Yuuri said, glancing around. He could feel the heavy stares of everyone else.

“If you’re worried about getting hurt, that skating we did in Dubai is much more dangerous than dancing, I think,” Victor said, smiling teasingly. Yuuri closed his eyes.

One more time. They could dance once more. If only because Yuuri was, at his core, selfish, and his body ached for one last touch.

Victor’s hand was warm when it settled on Yuuri’s waist, and Yuuri took the lead without a thought. They moved like they were born for it, dipping, spinning, Yuuri’s skirts flaring around him, Victor so dashing in his suit as they took turns lifting one another into the air.
That night, when Yuuri lay in bed remembering the way everyone had stared, so enviously, so enraptured, Yuuri knew he couldn’t bring himself to be upset. This was how it had to be. And drawing in everyone’s eyes was the only way to put Yuuri’s head in the right mindset.

The chase wasn’t about seducing a single alpha. It was escaping the trials of all dozen of them, fighting furiously and free, untethered and unbeholden. It wasn’t about an alpha chasing down one.

Yuuri could never forget the incident in America, when Victor had pushed other omegas aside, fruitlessly trying to capture Yuuri, only Yuuri. This was not the natural order of things. He was content with his decision. He could almost say he was entirely at peace.

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The morning came too early. Yuuri was still exhausted from the banquet and from flying and he almost fell asleep in the meeting. Even the blood tests couldn’t keep him awake, just made him want to flop onto the bus out of the center of the city and doze off.

The weather was doing him no favors. The sky was roiling with the threat of storms. Heavy black clouds raced across the sky at top speed, the wind whipping them fast enough that they swallowed the last traces of blue sky.

It left everything grey and miserable as they pulled up to the course at last.

It was a great, massive grandstand. Hailed as one of the largest arenas in the world, Sochi also had the dubious claim of being an utter bloodbath. The course was short, the trees thin and easy to see through, and the stands were full of screaming fans when the omegas arrived.

Rumor had it no omega had made it out unclaimed, though Yuuri knew this was false. It was just a silly story older omegas told the younger ones. But seeing the course from the ground as they walked into the changing room, Yuuri could see how people would think that.

It was barely a mile across. The serpentine paths took them across more ground than that, but it bottlenecked omegas into perilous flat sprints. In all, the paths themselves were barely five miles long, snaking through tall, thin trees.

A deep roll of thunder cut through the air, as ominous as it was loud.

Anxiety was eating Yuuri up already. This was not a course that played to his strengths. He would have to be cunning, strong, fast. He could cut through some of the paths if he timed it right. Some of the ridges were perilous but the map had given him an idea of a few places where he could scale the sides so long as he was careful.

He slipped the egg inside of himself with a deep breath. He could do this. He had to win. He had lost too many times already. And if he won, if he escaped every last alpha in this course, Victor included, he could finally take this straight to Victor and end the little game they played.

He would end this once and for all.

He felt a buzz, but it didn’t come from inside him for once. His cellphone, abandoned on the little cot beside him and folded inside his clothes, was ringing. There was a text from Victor, as well as an incoming call. Yuuri answered.

Mari was crying.

“Yuuri, I’m sorry… I’m so sorry. He ran out in the street, there was a car- it happened so fast-“ He almost couldn’t understand her, she was talking so fast, so thick with tears.
His heart raced. “Mari, what- what happened,” he whispered. Thunder roared distantly, and a flash lit up the narrow windows.

“Vicchan didn’t make it,” Mari whispered. “I’m so sorry, Yuuri.”

Everything went silent.

The conversation in the room suddenly muted. Roaring thunder vanished. The ground was falling out beneath him. Yuuri didn’t even hear his own voice over the pounding of his pulse in his ears. “He’s… dead?”

“There was nothing the vet could do,” Mari said. “We rushed him to the pet hospital but-”

Mari was still talking, but the phone had slipped from his hand, his eyes fixed on a single tile ahead of them. Gone. Vicchan was gone.

Yuuri hadn’t even said goodbye.

The first time he’d seen Vicchan, the pup had been a little mess of muddy brown fur, big black eyes, and a helpless little whimper that had stolen Yuuri’s heart. He’d dragged the pup out of the rain, brought him home, and begged his parents for days to let Yuuri keep him.

Yuuri named him after his favorite junior league hunter, and he dreamed of the day he himself would run in the big leagues, just like Victor. Be just as strong. Just as fast. Someone as elegant in motion, a creature of beauty just the same.

But Vicchan wasn’t just a symbol of Yuuri’s dreams. He licked away Yuuri’s tears when his anxieties and self doubts became too much. He was the one Yuuri confided his dreams in. The one who dragged Yuuri out of the house for walks when Yuuri’s anxieties built, until Yuuri figured out running his problems into the ground soothed the ache of his fears better than almost anything.

He wasn’t just a dog. He was family.

Leaving him behind had been the hardest thing Yuuri had ever done. Flying alone to Detroit to train with the best of the best, meeting with the people who would push Yuuri harder than even Minako and his friends ever could.

They would take a freshly graduated omega and make him into a running machine, and Yuuri had to cry and kiss Vicchan and his family goodbye, swearing to be back as soon as he could.

That was five years ago.

Yuuri was numb. He stood on shaky legs and grabbed his phone. “Yuuri? Yuuri, are you okay? Are you there?” Mari was asking frantically.

“I’m here,” he said. His voice was scratchy, even to him. “I… I have to go. Bye.” He disconnected. His hand was trembling.

He’d never again hear Vicchan’s little paws skittering over tatami and the stone floors of the onsen. He’d never feel Vicchan’s tongue against his cheek, or be able to bury his fingers in soft brown curls.

Gone gone gone, Vicchan was gone-

It was his fault.
His body jerked, and he whipped his head around. He had to focus. He couldn’t afford to let this get to him, even as his hands refused to cooperate. His fingers were clumsy and fumbling as he unlocked his screen.

He needed a distraction, needed grounding, needed something, anything- He opened Victor’s text message with shaking hands.

It was a picture of a smiling poodle with soft brown fur, tongue lolling out of her mouth, mid-jump as she leapt toward the person taking the picture.

**Victor: Makka says good luck!!**

Yuuri shoved the phone into his bag and stormed to the bathroom. No one could see him shatter.

Huge, gross sobs rocked his body. The bathroom was eerily quiet, and he could hear every roar of thunder, the screaming of the fans outside, and the sound of his own stilted, shuddering breaths. One minute. Two.

He didn’t have time. The hunt would start soon. Yuuri held his breath and screwed his face up. His chest hurt furiously, but it worked. The sobs trickled off. He mopped away the tears, cleaning himself up. Five minutes.

His eyes were red and puffy. He was trembling like a leaf. It was time to go far sooner than Yuuri would like. He stayed near the back of the pack, avoiding Phichit and Guang Hong and the other omegas who might be able to notice the blotchy color of his cheeks.

He had to pull himself together. He had a race to win.

The omegas stepped out to a deafening roar of fans. Rain spattered Yuuri’s cheeks and arms, bitterly cold, sharpening his mind. It masked any evidence of his tears. He took a bracing breath, and it steadied him, sharpened his mind by degrees. Forget Vicchan. Focus.

He couldn’t afford to break down until after he had won.

The crowd screamed something in Russian. A countdown, he realized.

Helpful numbers were counting down on a very large, box monitor screen overhead, balanced atop a hundred foot tall pole and showing the omegas on all four sides, displaying them for all to see.

There was no hiding anyway. Not on a course like this. Yuuri was breathing hard, inches away from another full blown anxiety attack. He was going to lose this race. He would struggle on a good day but his mind was unfocused and his nerves were shot and he was going to disappoint everyone.

His friends, his family… Vicchan.

Yuuri stumbled into a run, realizing too late that the others had taken off. The crowd was roaring. Yuuri could distantly hear a running commentary jabbering rapidly in Russian. The ground was slick beneath him with damp and mud. He almost lost his footing. Several omegas left Yuuri in the dust.

He struggled to stay in the middle of the pack. His posture was a nightmare, his mind was a wreck. He was right--he was completely butchering this. An alpha leapt from the brush. Yuuri recoiled in shock, but the alpha had already pounced on another omega nearby.

Their bodies rolled along the muddy earth, the omega wrestling back fiercely. Yuuri didn’t look back as he kept running.
He could smell mating pairs already. Crowds were roaring. He was breathing harder than he should have. Something was wrong. But then again, what wasn’t? This whole thing was fucked up and wrong and Yuuri had ruined everything.

He missed home. He missed Vicchan.

Yuuri dodged another alpha leaping for him, dropping out of a tree to try and land on Yuuri from above. Yuuri could smell Victor somewhere, but his head was too clouded, he couldn’t focus, everything was so hazy-

Vicchan didn’t understand why Yuuri left. Vicchan cried for days when Yuuri first flew to America, sat beside the door with his tail wagging waiting for Yuuri to walk back through it. Mari sent pictures for years of Vicchan dutifully keeping vigil, waiting for Yuuri to return.

Yuuri meant to come home sooner. He should have come home, should have visited, should have seen Vicchan at least once-

A warm body tackled him from behind and Yuuri rolled. He couldn’t recognize the alpha that had pinned him to the ground. He let out a helpless roar and shoved the alpha into the dirt and mud.

His body was cold.

He slipped free, slick with rain. He took the path at a flat sprint, his own endurance be damned. He could worry about the end when he got there. There would be no end for him if he was claimed in the first mile’s bloodbath.

Vicchan… Vicchan…

Yuuri lost his footing and he hit the dirt hard as the sky opened up, dumping harder than before. The rain was bitterly cold, lashing right on the edge of painful against his skin. He was sinking into a half inch of mud.

He forced himself up as a strobing flash of lightning cracked. Dirt and mud caked his skin. He couldn’t breathe.

His eyes burned. Vicchan…

The other omegas were gone now. They had either succeeded in pulling ahead, leaving Yuuri in their dust, or they were on the ground behind him, legs spread and moaning as alphas knotted them.

His eyes screwed shut. He had to keep running. Had to win for Vicchan-

But Vicchan was gone and it was Yuuri’s fault-

Wintergreen filled Yuuri’s nose. A silver shape moved, and suddenly it was all Yuuri could see. He choked on air. He couldn’t breathe, tried to run faster, run harder as he hit the third switchback on the course.

“No, no, no,” he gasped. His legs burned. He dodged downed tree limbs as another strobing flash turned the dusky course bright as day. Rain was streaming down his cheeks, but all Yuuri could taste was salt.

Sweat. Tears.

Victor tackled him. They rolled through the dirt, and Yuuri screamed. He shoved hard and broke
“No! No!” Yuuri screamed. Tears were pouring down his face. He had failed.

Everything in Yuuri’s body ached. He felt weak, so weak, like he’d been hauling a thousand pounds over the course.

This was the end.

He didn’t sob. Didn’t feel anything anymore. Tears poured out the corners of his eyes in a steady stream, but Yuuri’s breathing was far more still than it should have been. He was struggling, but it was so pointless. His limbs were so heavy, fighting against them was harder even than fighting Victor.

He let himself go limp in the dirt. Running didn’t fix this. Trying to make this better for Victor wouldn’t save Yuuri.

His heart was lost to Victor, and Vicchan had stolen his soul. Maybe it was time to retire after all.

Victor’s lips roamed hungrily over Yuuri’s skin, pulling cloth out of the way, yanking up Yuuri’s clothes and rolling Yuuri onto his knees.

Yuuri laid facedown in the mud. His eyes closed. “Alpha,” he croaked. His body jerked with a sob. There was a curiously long pause.

The first touch was not to his hips or his waist. It was on his arm, rolling him onto his back again. Victor was leaning over, but his gaze was clearer than before. His hair was soaked and dark from rain, colored like old, tarnished silver and sticking to Victor’s face. Victor’s eyes were more beautiful than Yuuri had ever seen them, glittering in the low light.

The next touch was to his face. Victor was awake and aware, terrifyingly so. “Yuuri, what- I don’t understand-“

Yuuri spread his legs. The rain was like ice against his genitals, and he was completely soft. He turned his head away. “Get it over with. Get your win.”

“What’s going on? This isn’t like you,” Victor said urgently. His eyes were half clouded but the thin ring of blue around his pupil was slowly growing larger.

Yuuri shook his head fiercely. This was worse than being claimed. This was much worse. “Just fuck me already, Victor!” Yuuri screamed. His whole body jerked and suddenly he was sobbing again.

He couldn’t do anything right, could he? Even managed to fuck up Victor claiming him.

Victor growled low, harsh, as another alpha skirted the edges of the path, eyeing Yuuri’s spread thighs with a hungry look. The alpha ducked his head. Victor growled harder, hissing, “mine” in a dark tone, and the alpha bolted further up the path to seek easier prey.

It made a shiver go up Yuuri’s spine, and he cried harder. It was too late for everything. Victor’s rut state was skewed. Vicchan was still dead. Everything was still ruined because of Yuuri. Yuuri weakly gathered his strength and he twitched into a shaky run, sliding out from underneath Victor.

There was still a chance to make this right- not perfect but less terrible-

He was pinned to the dirt again by another alpha, only for a second alpha to come out of the clearing,
dragging him away from the first. They scrabbled on the ground, slinging mud as they tried to pin Yuuri down and force themselves on him.

Victor roared. He fought the second one to the ground, his scent oozing dominance, an alpha among alphas.

This wasn’t a typical alpha bout. The scent deepened. Not possessive. Defensive. Yuuri shoved the first off him, trying to take the chance to run again.

Victor grabbed him. “Yuuri, Yuuri,” he panted. He was holding on too tight. “Something is wrong, tell me what.”

“Nothing-” Yuuri gasped, trying to pull away. The vibrator was purring away inside him, but Yuuri could barely feel it. It was a thousand miles away. He was shivering violently. “Let me go or fuck me,” Yuuri hissed.

The world swam around him. His legs crumpled, and Victor caught him easily, supporting him under a shoulder. Yuuri’s chest hurt. It felt so tight he couldn’t breathe, couldn’t get a single breath to fill his lungs, heart racing, pounding, faster, faster, thrumming in his ears, pulse throbbing-

He yanked free of Victor’s arms. Yuuri couldn’t see a thing through tears and sweat pouring down his face. He gasped for air as he stumbled up the path, breaking into a shambling, drunken sprint.

Another alpha was grabbing for him, and Yuuri was hissing, clawing, screaming, his mind slipping into a fugue state as the freezing cold bit his skin. Up, down, sky, rain, mud, blurring to darkness as Yuuri broke free.

His foot caught on a downed tree limb. This time, when he went down, he didn’t get back up.

Pain rocketed up and down his leg. He dry heaved as the mud turned red around his calf, swirling in streams from rain. Yuuri laid on the ground, stunned into silence. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t even move, still reeling from hitting the ground.

Lightning flashed in slow motion, as though Yuuri could see the way the clouds turned eerily white for a single beat of his heart. His body was deliriously cold, yet boiling over with heat. He closed his eyes.

He let out an animal scream.

Victor crouched beside him, his scent filling the air. Rain dampened it only slightly. It made his scent somehow sweeter, richer, petrichor filling in depths of the wintergreen until Yuuri’s eyes blurred over with tears once more.

Victor stroked Yuuri’s hair. “Please, Yuuri, please. Tell me what’s wrong”

“He’s gone,” Yuuri whispered. “Vicchan… he’s gone.”

It was hard to tell in the rain, the way the drops hit against Victor’s cheeks and lashes. Yuuri wondered if it was tears or rain spilling out the corners of Victor’s eyes. “I’m so sorry,” Victor said. The weight of the words crashed around Yuuri and he knew. He knew. Victor understood.

Yuuri’s back left the earth. Surrounded by the warmth of Victor’s arms, Victor carried him toward the exit, and Yuuri clutched at Victor’s chest. And he cried like he’d never cried before, letting it all pour out as he screamed.
Alphas came out of the woodwork, whatever remained that hadn’t claimed an omega, hadn’t been able to snag one of the ones passing by, but Victor leveled dark looks at them.

His scent filled the air, overwhelming Yuuri’s and sending the others cowing back. It had a different feel to it, a different meaning than dominance, than even general protection. It mingled with Yuuri’s scent, built upon it, balanced out.

Victor was clutching Yuuri’s wrist as he ran, holding it to his skin, against his scent glands, breathing it in deeply. Victor’s thin shirt was already soaked from the rain, clinging to his skin, but Yuuri could still see where his tears were soaking in.

He pulled weakly.

“Let me go,” Yuuri said shakily. “Let me run.”

“You’re hurt,” Victor said. He never stopped.

Yuuri pulled harder, suddenly jerking his body so hard that Victor lost his grip. Yuuri tumbled to the ground. He rose to his feet, trembling, only for his injured leg to crumple beneath him. He started to drag himself along the ground.

Victor blocked the way, crouching in front of Yuuri. “You can’t even walk. Come on, let me carry you.”

“I’m not letting you give this up,” Yuuri hissed into the dirt. “Don’t you- dare-” Yuuri’s body trembled, and he pulled himself to his knees. He was sinking halfway up his arms in the sludge. A soft, buzzing engine puttered down the path.

No.

Yuuri’s body shuddered harder. He couldn’t let it end like this. He wouldn’t let it.

Yuuri pushed past Victor’s legs, ignoring as Victor jogged up to the little golf cart that had pulled up nearby. Victor was speaking rapidly with the person driving it as a paramedic hopped off the back. Yuuri ignored both. He reached a tree.

It was a thin little thing, threadbare and empty of leaves. He wrapped his fingers tightly around the lower branches and leaned his weight heavily against it, using it to pull himself up.

A cry ripped out his lips as pain shot up his leg. He almost blacked out from pain, but he held on tight until the pain abated into a steady, furious ache. Victor ran over, taking Yuuri’s arm over his shoulder and supporting him.

Yuuri hissed. “You can’t- You’ll be disqualified- I won’t let you-”

The paramedic crouched by his legs and nodded to the driver of the cart. Yuuri watched in despair as the cart was backed up, until the seat was right beside Yuuri and Victor. Victor pulled back, and Yuuri couldn’t pull himself free as Victor took a seat on the golf cart and pulled Yuuri into his lap.

Yuuri whipped his head back and forth furiously, but all the strength was leaving his body. The paramedic wrapped something around his leg and ankle and hopped in the back. The cart set off. “No no no no no-” Yuuri echoed, shaking his head.

Victor’s arms were iron around him, warm, letting blankets of his scent fall over Yuuri until every last protest dissolved. His cries subsided into an endless stream of tears. The course fell away. He
couldn’t feel the rain, or hear the crowd. It was over. It was done.

Vicchan was dead.

Neither of them would win today.

Yuuri was numb as Victor carried him off the cart and onto a medical cot. It was a long time before he realized Victor was swiping mud off his face and arms with a damp cloth. The sting of antiseptic on his leg was the first thing he could feel that wasn’t overwhelming, crashing waves.

“How could you just give up?” Yuuri rasped. He jerked and he shoved Victor away. Victor looked stunned. “How could you disqualify yourself like that? You could have- you should have-” Yuuri was shaking hard. A thermometer was shoved beneath his tongue and he was chided to stay still. Buzzing betas were noting his temperature, cataloguing the abrasions on his legs and the swelling in his ankle and deciding where to send him.

“You were going to kill yourself out there,” Victor said. His eyes were sparkling. His hair was curling faintly as it dried, but his cheeks were still wet. “Do you know how scared I was?”

“You’re crying,” Yuuri whispered. He touched Victor’s cheek, feeling tears.

Victor grabbed his fingers. Yuuri couldn’t help but notice Victor’s hand was trembling violently. “What were you hoping to accomplish?” he asked, his voice broken and small. “Yuuri... please. Talk to me.”

Yuuri jerked his head away, ducking to avoid Victor’s eyes.

“They said your ankle might be broken, but they need x-rays to be sure.” Yuuri said nothing. “Yuuri... You said Vicchan-”

“Don’t-” Yuuri whispered. He shook his head. “Please. Don’t.”

Victor held his hands. “I don’t know how to make this better. Please, Yuuri, you have to tell me what happened. I don’t know- I’m not good at this, I’m not sure what to do.” Victor was flustering around him.

He looked pretty when he was crying. Victor always looked unfairly beautiful, but this new pain made him look even more so. Yuuri held back a harsh sob as he finally looked up. Victor’s eyes were slightly red.

“How do I make it better? Do I need to kiss you?” Victor asked. “What if I went and-”

They were kissing. It was sudden, Yuuri didn’t remember grabbing Victor by the front of his costume and yanking him close, kissing him until they were both sobbing and sucking down air, lips desperately moving against each others.

“Don’t be stupid,” Yuuri breathed into Victor’s mouth. He whined as his leg shifted, sending spirals of pain so bad he had to pull back and cover his lips to keep from throwing up.

Victor looked like a kicked puppy. “I’m getting the medic over here. But then we’re talking about this.”

Victor turned on his heel, and Yuuri could only fall backwards onto the medical bed and watch Victor go. He could still taste Victor on his lips.
Yuuri could see Victor still. The door to his hospital room was wide open, and he was just a short ways down the hall, deep in discussion and gesturing wildly at an official.

Yuuri knew they knew he could see them. Both kept shooting glances into Yuuri’s room, and he knew he was at least part of the topic of their discussion. Their voices refused to rise above a low whisper, though, so their words were utterly lost.

Yuuri’s glazed eyes rolled to the ceiling as the nurse finished explaining something he had tuned out.

“-just a sprain, Mr. Katsuki, which is very good. It should heal quickly.” The nurse was still talking. Not broken.

They said hearts didn’t break either, not really. Yuuri wasn't sure. The pain in his chest felt more real than anything else. If he could bandage it up the way his ankle was bound, maybe he’d be able to put Vicchan behind him. He’d be able to let Victor be free.

The official was likely discussing the terms of Victor and Yuuri’s disqualification from the event. Yuuri didn’t need to argue his case to know how this would end.

The both of them would be considered disqualified, with no points for or against. They’d be seeded lower next time either of them joined the chase, until they’d fought their way back to the top once more. It was a slap on the wrist, but not meant to outrageously punish injuries on the course. Of course, that was just Yuuri.

Victor had walked off the course.

Yuuri felt his chest clench. How could Victor have just given up his win? It was so easy, the road was paved and his invitation was practically embossed. He could have taken any one of a thousand chances to win and he let them all slip away. He could have taken Yuuri or any other omega running past.

“You’ll be hunting again in a couple months, I’m sure!” The nurse was so falsely cheery it hurt. She patted Yuuri’s leg gently.

Abrasions to the skin from where sticks and branches had cut his shins open, risk of infection from crawling in the mud as he bled. And, of course, the sprained ankle. Everything was bound up and Yuuri was just about ready to be sent back to his hotel.

But the official and Victor were still there.

“Just a few things to finish up and you’ll be cleared to leave,” she assured him. Yuuri didn’t look at her as she stepped away from his side.

Victor and the official finished their discussion with Victor looking relieved by whatever was said. Both stepped inside, lingering on the edges of the hospital room as the nurse finished her tasks. The official cleared his throat and stepped up first.

His English was a little rusty, and the accent was distinct, but the words were clear enough. “You were disqualified from the race, as I’m sure you know,” he began. Yuuri’s hands twitched, but he said nothing. “You won’t be penalized, and Victor has argued for neither of you to be seeded lower. However, we need another blood test run to ensure that you won’t go into heat again, the way you did in the previous race.”

Yuuri’s eyes shot toward Victor’s, questioning. “I feel fine.”
“It isn’t a matter of feeling fine or not, Mr. Katsuki. It’s a matter of safety for both you and your fellow runners. Victor has already submitted his blood to be tested, we just need to confirm that we can do the same for you.”

Yuuri nodded. The nurse drew a sample, the same as was always taken before a race. The official thanked him and stepped away.

“I don’t understand,” Yuuri said. “Why do they need to test again? I’m not in heat, and what happened last time was a one-time thing.”

Victor cleared his throat. “That um… may be my fault. I was a little out of it when you arrived. I wouldn’t stop scenting you. They suspected I was going into another rut, and would send you into heat along with me.”

“What does this have to do with last time, though?” Yuuri asked. His voice sounded hollow, even to him, but he already knew the answer without Victor saying it.

They’d sent each other into a true rut/heat last time. That didn’t happen with most hunt partners. The chemicals they were given were designed to suppress that, even in highly compatible pairs. The fact that they had overwhelmed even the suppressants was something that had worried Yuuri through many sleepless nights.

An accident. A messed up dosage of suppressants. Some error somewhere on the line. It wasn’t going to happen again.

“They think we’re uh.. Mates.” Victor said with a cough. “I tried to tell them, and they checked our necks for mating bites, but they didn’t believe us.”

“Oh. Oh,” Yuuri breathed. Dosages were different for mated pairs, and it was rare to see mates in a hunt in the first place. It could be dangerous for other alphas and omegas who came between them.

“You mean the-”

“Yeah, it didn’t help that I came off the field with you,” Victor said sheepishly. “The organizer, Yakov, he’s an old family friend. He was yelling at me the whole way here. He wasn’t able to come and see you in person, but he wanted me to tell you to get well soon.”

“Why did you come off the field?” Yuuri asked. “You could have still won. I was just going to be carted off anyway.”

Victor let out a soft breath. “I thought about it. I wasn’t actually going to chase you this time, you know? I thought you were mad at me the last time, since… I don’t know. I was the one who ruined your perfect record.”

“What? No!” Yuuri said. “I wasn’t mad you won!”

Victor blinked. “I- I wasn’t sure. I had hoped I was wrong, but… if you were mad, I don’t know how I would ever make it up to you. I still chased you anyway, even though I knew I shouldn’t. Maybe it’s time I retired-”

“No!” Yuuri said. His eyes were burning again. “No, please, don’t retire. Not like this. I can’t- I couldn’t bear-” Yuuri choked, hanging his head in shame. It hurt to admit it, to open up, to be vulnerable. But Victor was crying, and Yuuri was crying, and everything was already lost. “I can’t lose anything else. I’m not… I’m not strong enough. Please, Victor. I don’t want you to retire because of me. I’ll retire instead.”
“You can’t just give up,” Victor breathed. Tears tracked down his cheeks, glittering under the harsh hospital lights. “What if you-”

Yuuri was already scrambling to find excuses, reasons, something to explain to Victor his reasons when Victor suddenly broke off. His eyes went wide.

“Yuuri, I know an amazing physical therapist in St. Petersburg. Come with me.”

“What?” Yuuri sputtered.

Victor’s eyes were alight, sparkling inhumanly bright. He was sweeping tears away. Enthusiasm brought him to life. “You’ve never been seriously injured before, right? Trust me, she’ll work wonders for you. She’s amazing. You’ll be better than new when you’re finished. And then, only after that, can you still tell me you want to retire. Alright?” Victor said.

“I can’t just-” Yuuri started, then broke off. “I don’t have my stuff. I’d need someone to check in on my apartment, and I don’t have clothes-”

“I’ll buy you whatever you need while you’re here. It’s my idea, put it on my dime. Do you have friends back in Detroit who can house-sit?”

Yuuri was getting lost in the sudden whirlwind of ideas. He wasn’t considering it. He wasn’t getting caught up in Victor’s sudden mania and he didn’t feel the draw to go north. “I- well I have one friend who checks in on the place when I’m at competitions-”

“Perfect!” Victor said.

“Wait!” Yuuri said. “I can’t just just come along, there’s visas to consider, and where I’m going to stay in St. Petersburg, and training-” Yuuri broke off. “There’s too much.”

“Nonsense. You can stay with me. I know someone who can take care of the visa issue. And you can train with me! The facilities in St. Petersburg are top notch. I’m not letting you retire, Yuuri Katsuki, not like this.”

Yuuri clutched at the bedsheets. “But why?” he whispered. “Why would you do this? After I made you disqualify yourself?”

Victor smiled, and it was sad and sweet and so inhumanly perfect that Yuuri found himself falling in love all over again. “There are things more important than winning.”

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Maybe Yuuri was a fool.

Scratch that, Yuuri knew he was a damned fool. There was no world in which this made sense, but Victor had a spare room, a dog, a personal trainer, and an open invitation for Yuuri to stay until he either was ready to hunt again or retired.

It was true what they said. Victor never failed to surprise.

Yuuri’s phone had rung while he’d been talking to Victor, so when Victor stepped away to make a call, Yuuri made himself make a call of his own. His hands were shaking. The room was empty.

“Hey, Mom. Were you sleeping?” he asked, as he tried to keep from breaking down.

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Yuuri flat refused the wheelchair. He wasn’t going to be some helpless invalid someone had to
wheel around.

Victor brought their suitcases from the hotel when Yuuri was finally discharged. It felt good to trade the uncomfortable hospital gown for his own clothes. He braced himself on a crutch and hobbled out, Victor following behind. It was an awkward walk, made worse by the tense atmosphere.

The weight of their impulsive decision was hitting Yuuri hard. He wasn’t used to being the one who did crazy things. It was always Victor who surprised him.

But maybe it was the look on Victor’s face when Yuuri locked eyes and said “Sure.” Maybe it was the impulse to do as Victor did. Maybe he just wanted to run away from everything. Maybe he wanted to hide from his sponsors and his family and his responsibilities to the world, and Victor was offering him all of that and more.

Yuuri felt like doing something crazy.

“Your visa is extended to three months,” Victor said as they walked. Well, Victor walked, while Yuuri hobbled along. “I was trying to switch around your flight but they didn’t have any more first class seats for a few days—”

“I don’t need first class,” Yuuri said. “It’s alright, Victor. I don’t want you to treat me differently because of… well. Because I messed up.”

Victor looked wounded. “I… might be able to get business…” he muttered, firing off a few texts. “What about a train?”

“Train is fine,” Yuuri said absently. It was cheaper than a plane, though it did mean a longer time spent in close proximity to the dizzyingly sweet smell of Victor’s overprotectiveness. Still, it had that strange, almost cloying tang to it that Yuuri couldn’t pinpoint, subtle and yet somehow almost overpowering it all.

Almost in a daze, Yuuri followed Victor out the doors of the hospital.

It was like sleepwalking. Maybe he would wake up from this nightmare, or maybe the bittersweet dream would come crashing down around him, leaving him in his apartment before the flight. Maybe he’d wake in a cold sweat, his dog still alive, his ankle uninjured.

Maybe he wouldn’t be following Victor like a lost lamb, not sure where Victor was leading him.

They boarded a taxi, which brought them to their respective hotels to collect their things. A hasty purchase of tickets put them on an evening train, getting them on a two days journey to St. Petersburg.

Victor brought Yuuri to a store. Yuuri paid little to no attention as Victor dressed him up, passed him clothes over the door of the changing room, told him, “This would complement your legs!” as though forcefully pretending nothing was wrong would make it all okay.

It helped, a little. It forced Yuuri to put a straight face on as they marched through the store. Victor flung a pile of fabric into Yuuri’s arms, occasionally holding things up to check the estimated fit. Yuuri didn’t pay much mind to anything he put on, though he did find himself stepping out of the dressing room to show each thing to Victor.

He assumed they were wasting time until the train left. It made the most sense of anything. Or, and Yuuri refused to entertain the thought more than just a passing idea crossing his mind, Victor de-stressed by shopping, and was trying to distract Yuuri the only way he knew.
Yuuri felt so far away from the world. Vicchan was gone. It was his fault. Yuuri had gotten them both disqualified, and Victor somehow still wasn’t furious like he deserved to be. Yuuri shuffled out of the store as Victor headed to the counter.

It was only after Victor came out with an armful of bags that Yuuri startled to life. “Wait, Victor, you didn’t buy all those, did you?” Yuuri asked, alarmed.

“Yes, I did!” Victor said. “You liked everything, right? We can pick up some more things when we get there, I just wanted to make sure you had some basics.”

“I- I have clothes at home- You didn’t have to- I could have paid for those-” Yuuri sputtered, losing track of each thought as fast as he came up with new ones.

Victor shook his head. “I’m the one derailing your life, Yuuri. I invited you to St. Petersburg, and you twisted your ankle trying to get away from me. This is the least I can do.”

Yuuri sputtered out excuses, but short of shoving a few thousand rubles at Victor, nothing could make him return the bags. “Come on, Yuuri, if we don’t leave now, we’ll miss our train,” Victor chirped, and his cheer sounded more forced than before. A little strained on the edges, like he was barely holding it together himself.

Somehow it made him feel more human. He was handling this as well as Yuuri was, deep down. It was more comforting than Yuuri expected, to realize that the wideness of Victor’s eyes, the energetic glitter, it was all the same lost, desperate to keep moving feeling.

Yuuri was dragging his feet, and Victor wasn’t letting him slow down for even a moment.

They navigated the train station and boarded without much issue. Yuuri thought they’d be on the common area, put up in the reclining seats, but Victor whisked him straight to the overnight cabins.

“There was a last minute cancellation!” Victor sounded pleased. Yuuri was holding his breath as he studied the (likely very expensive) room. “The rest of the seats are booked up through next week.”

Yuuri let out a deep breath. It was too late, and Victor was beaming in pride at what he’d found, like a cat bringing a bird he caught into the house. Yuuri closed his eyes. “Well. At least the next few days will be a little less cramped?” he said weakly.

And that’s when it fully hit him, staring at the small room. Two bunk beds were set into the walls, able to be folded up to make room for a soft-looking pull out couch. There was also a little bathroom, and a small amount of living space. It was a rather tight fit, but far more space than Yuuri expected to have to themselves.

Just him and Victor. For two days.

His blood was pounding in his ears as he tilted his head, painfully reminded suddenly that he was an unmated omega fresh off an unsatisfying hunt, sharing a room with an alpha that smelled like heaven on earth.

No, no, this was everything Yuuri had been hoping to avoid. “It’s lovely,” he squeaked. Then he edged out of the room. “I’m going to uh. Grab some dinner. Bye.”

Food, always a source of comfort. He could drown his pain and sorrows in the buffet style dinner in the dining car.

Yuuri doled out first portions of everything that looked remotely edible, moving mechanically, not
certain exactly what it all was. The labels were printed in Cyrillic and he couldn’t read them. His hand trembled as he spooned a generous helping of some red soup that looked like beets into a bowl.

There was another car behind it with a few tables and seats and Yuuri took an empty one. The first bite was tasteless. He assumed it was more him than the culinary abilities of the resident chef. Yuuri spooned another tasteless bite.

Forget. Breathe. Avoid Victor like he avoided all his problems in life.

There was a soft clatter as a plate and silver dropped beside Yuuri. Victor slid into the seat opposite. “Not very authentic,” he said cheerily, sampling the red soup. “The borscht is better than mom ever made.”

Yuuri wasn’t sure how to react as Victor started to eat with gusto.

A round pastry was on a small dessert plate beside Victor’s dinner. Victor caught his eye and beamed. “Vatrushka,” he said.

“Bless you,” Yuuri said, and Victor laughed. It was beautiful and made Yuuri’s cheeks grow warm.

“No no, it’s what it’s called. It’s a little ah… bun? I like mine best with jam,” Victor explained. “I always have one when I come home after a win. They aren’t fancy, but… they feel like home.” Victor smiled wistfully.

“My mom always made me katsudon when I won, when I was young,” Yuuri said wistfully. Five years since he’d eaten his mother’s katsudon. His lower lip wobbled, and Yuuri bit his lip hard. “I would sit down to eat, and any time any fell on the floor… Vicchan would—” Yuuri’s breath caught. His eyes were threatening to start swimming. He had to hold it back carefully, unwilling to let his voice waver. Unwilling to let Victor see how it affected.

“When did you get Vicchan?” Victor asked.

Yuuri was quiet. His voice was rough when he choked out, “Twelve? Thirteen? I… don’t remember exactly.” He trailed off. He wasn’t hungry anymore. His food was half-eaten and tasted like sand. “I don’t think I can talk about Vicchan without… well.”

“Yes,” Victor said, and suddenly all traces of the cheer were gone. His voice was low and serious. “If anything in the world happened to Makkachin, I would be an absolute mess. But if you want to talk about him, I’ll listen.”

Yuuri cleared his throat, looking anywhere but at Victor. He laid the silverware aside. “Only back in the room,” he said. “Not here.”

Victor blinked, surprised, then nodded. “Of course, sure.” Victor finished the last few bites and stood, carrying the bun with him as he followed Yuuri back to their room.

Yuuri sat on the edge of his bed, quiet, as Victor dropped to take a seat beside him. Their thighs were touching, but it wasn’t a kind of invading closeness.

“So, Vicchan?” Victor asked.

“Vicchan,” Yuuri said softly. “When we first got him, he was a terrible little dog. He was impossible to house train, and spoiled rotten, and I loved him. So, so much.” Yuuri’s voice cracked and he broke into soft sobs.
He tried to hold it back, tried to bite his tongue while his eyes burned. Victor looked startled, unsure what to do, and it made it better and worse all in one. Emotions conflicted in Yuuri, the pain of loss, the ache of failure, but the small, bubbly little thing in the back of his mind that couldn’t believe perfect Victor could be so completely unprepared for waterworks.

Victor finally seemed to decide on a course of action and wrapped an arm around Yuuri’s shoulder, and Yuuri found himself burying his face in Victor’s chest before he fully knew what he was doing. Victor rubbed his back.

And Yuuri told stories, so many stories of everything Vicchan did that Yuuri loved, the things Yuuri was annoyed by but would miss, the things he had missed out on while away.

Yuuri hated people seeing him crying. Hated the idea of anyone thinking he was weak. But Victor didn’t make him feel weak. Victor wasn’t pitying him. Victor understood the pain. He had tears in his eyes as he talked about Makkachin as a puppy, and the things she had done, and how it would destroy him if something happened.

The windows were dark when Yuuri shifted, finally pulling out of Victor’s embrace. His eyes were heavy and red from crying. Victor’s eyes were no better. His body was curiously heavy. “You look tired,” Victor said. “I should let you sleep.”

Yuuri couldn’t even respond. He wavered and fell back on the bed. “I miss Vicchan,” he whispered, closing his eyes for just a minute. One last hot, wet tear spilled down his cheek. And that easily, just like that, Yuuri was asleep.

Yuuri didn’t move when he first woke up. Sunlight streamed through the car’s window, but the motion of the train was smoother than Yuuri expected, and the sound of wheels over rails was somehow soothing.

Maybe Yuuri just wanted to stay in bed and never move.

The door opened and Yuuri heard someone enter. Then came the smell of breakfast. “Good morning, Yuuri!”

Yuuri pulled the blankets over his head.

“Tsk tsk, sleeping beauty, time to rise and shine!”

The blankets pulled off and Yuuri grumbled something uncharitable under his breath. He buried his face in the pillow, smooshing his cheek against the pillowcase.

Oh god, Victor was a morning person.

Victor was still chattering as he pattered around the room, folding things up and pulling the sofa out. Breakfast did smell good… Yuuri blinked one eye open, not quite willing to move just yet, but begrudging Victor at least that.

He saw a decadent plate of bacon, eggs, and some pastry looking things. “Why did you do this…?”

“I’ve been up a few hours already. Been circling the cars to stretch my legs, chatted with a few other passengers. They’re fans of ours, some of them! I thought I’d grab some breakfast for you before they put it away.”
Yuuri rubbed his face and sat up slowly. Half his hair was sticking up crazily. Victor was staring, so Yuuri tried to comb it down with his fingers. “What do you plan to do today?” he asked. There wasn’t much they could do on a train, and they had another 36 or so hours before they arrived where they needed to go.

Not to mention Yuuri’s mobility was hampered, and without ice on his ankle, he was still barely hobbling around.

Victor shrugged. He had a small bag on his shoulder, and when he set it on the pull out table, Yuuri realized it had a few books inside. “I thought I might catch up on some reading, if that’s alright? I don’t often get leisure time like this,” Victor said.

Yuuri nodded. “Sure,” he said quietly, watching as Victor circled around and sat on the couch. The room felt claustrophobic with the couch and Yuuri’s bed out. Yuuri forced himself upright and changed clothes, dressing with slow movements.

He felt so sluggish today, favoring his bad ankle, and feeling generally out of sorts. He pushed the bed back up into the wall, then sat beside Victor with the plate. It was good, better than it had tasted last night. No more taste of sand.

Yuuri set the plate aside, and then pulled out his carry-on bag. The rest of his luggage was tucked away in the luggage car, but his games were all safe here. He pulled his handheld console out.

He kept the volume low, out of consideration for Victor, and for a few hours, it was peaceful. Nothing pressing to do. Nothing urgent awaiting either of them. There was just leisure time. Yuuri shifted on the couch. The only comfortable position put his thigh along Victor’s, and the warmth of Victor’s leg sent a tremulous little shiver up his spine.

Victor smelled sweet, floral and pine and winter fresh.

The world was at peace.

“What’s your game?” Victor asked.

Yuuri glanced up, a little surprised at the broken silence. “It’s ah… just Animal Crossing. Collect items. Make friends with villagers. It’s… it’s cute.”

Victor leaned over, and now the entire side of his body was flush with Yuuri’s as he watched Yuuri’s character move through a tiny world, gathering fruits and fish. Yuuri glanced sidelong at the book Victor was holding.

“What are you reading?”

Victor’s eyes sparkled. “Well, it’s this historical romance about a man who thought his best friend was lost forerver…”

As Victor continued to talk, Yuuri’s mind slipped away. He paid attention, but also allowed himself to close his eyes and listen, only occasionally commenting on a particularly interesting part of the story Victor was telling.

Yuuri would have rather listened to Victor explain the story than read it. He’d rather hear Victor’s take on any book in the world.

It was strange, to realize that Yuuri didn’t feel as bad as he had. It was a sudden, startling revelation to have, and one that send him back to thoughts of Vicchan, of failure, of all the waspish, nagging
thoughts stinging his brain again and again.

Victor slid a hand down Yuuri’s arm. “I know you probably don’t want to talk about Vicchan right now, right?” When Yuuri hesitated, Victor nodded. He was right, after all. “We don’t have to talk about Vicchan, but tell me about something else in your life. Anything. What about home?”

“No, I’m fine,” Yuuri said. “You can keep talking about your book. I like hearing about it,” he said.

“Yes, but Yuuri, I want to hear about you. Please? How many siblings do you have?”

“Just one, a sister. But it’s okay, I know it isn’t that important.”

Victor was… pouting, Yuuri realized. “What about your parents? What do you think of them?”

“They’re fine,” Yuuri said. “They… had a viewing party… of Sochi,” he admitted with a note of embarrassment. “They saw me fail.”

“They saw me disqualify myself, too!” Victor chirped, and Yuuri hung his head in shame. “No, no, that wasn’t meant to- ok, okay, what about friends? You have friends at home, right?”

And Yuuri reluctantly began to talk about Yuuko, her husband Nishigori, and their three daughters he hadn’t seen since they were small. Then the conversation flowed into the first chases Yuuri ran, and the first chases Victor ran.

How Victor’s family thought he would be an omega, so they sent him to compete in the omega side. Then when he presented, he found himself at a disadvantage compared to other alphas, who had grown up knowing how to chase omegas.

Yuuri told how his family had always suspected. These things always skipped two generations on his side, and his sister was alpha. His grandfather had been omega, too, so his parents were fairly certain.

Yuuri’s stomach was rumbling for lunch by the time Yuuri realized what Victor was trying to do. He puffed up. “You were distracting me,” he accused.

“Maybe a little?” Victor said. “You looked sad.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Yuuri said. “I’ll be fine, I don’t need to be coddled.”

“I wasn’t coddling you. I just thought it would help for you to talk about other things for a while. You always look so much happier when you do, so I thought-”

“I don’t like being treated like I’m some… pathetic, weak omega who can’t take care of himself. Bringing me food, and… and… taking care of me like this.” Yuuri shook his head and forced himself to his feet, immediately regretting it when pain shot through his ankle. “I can take care of myself,” he spat. He left the room.

He hobbled down the hallway to the dining car, fuming. Between the cars, there was a moment of fresh air. It was cool on Yuuri’s skin, and he paused between them, watching the scenery go by. His head fell into his hands.

He had blown up at Victor. Things had been so nice, but Yuuri was wound too tight, and he’d snapped. He turned, only to find Victor on the other side of the door, just as surprised as Yuuri was to see him.
Yuuri hung his head once more. “I’m sorry, Victor. I shouldn’t have acted like that.”

“No, I’m sorry for pushing you,” Victor said.

Yuuri shook his head. “No, pushing me… it’s fine. I like when you push me. I just… I don’t like to be coddled. I don’t like being treated like I can’t handle it, but this is… so hard. This is the worst I’ve ever felt in my life and I have no idea what to do anymore. I only thought about retiring because… honestly I just have no idea what the best thing to do really is.”

Victor’s gaze was soft, but serious, and he laid a hand on Yuuri’s shoulder. The weight made him want to tip his head toward the touch, instinctively curling toward contact. He barely resisted. “Why do you want to retire?” Victor asked. “Why is retirement the best option right now?”

Yuuri shook his head. “It’s stupid. I know it is.”

“If it’s stupid, then it isn’t worth retiring over, right? Why did you race this long?” Victor pressed.

“Because… I love it. I still do. But…” Yuuri looked out at the Russian countryside streaming past them, the air sharp and cold on his skin. “I’ve been avoiding things for too long. It’s time to accept that I’ve messed things up by staying away.”

“What kind of things,” Victor asked. His hair was swept around his face, and it was so beautiful it broke Yuuri’s heart.


Victor’s reaction was instantaneous. “Other racers? Have others been saying things? Who was it—”

“No no,” Yuuri said quickly. “No one said anything. It’s just… I don’t know. I guess I don’t want to retire. But I know I should. And it’s tearing me apart because I feel like I’m caught between what I should do and what I want to do.”

“And what do you want to do?” Victor asked.

Yuuri looked away. “I have to think about that still.”

Victor’s hand on his shoulder started to move, lingering for a moment on Yuuri’s cheek before settling against his hair. He stroked at Yuuri’s bedhead, and his expression was painfully soft. “Don’t forget,” Victor murmured. “Sometimes, it’s okay to be a little selfish.”

Yuuri leaned into the touch and closed his eyes.

It felt strange, to spend so much time with Victor at his hip. They went everywhere together, and instead of feeling crowded, it felt right. Yuuri liked having Victor nearby, occasionally petting his hair, his scent reassuring in a way Yuuri had never thought about before. Victor smelled warmer than before, a little happier.

That was when Yuuri realized his own scent must have been pure misery, and having it lighten a little had to be having a positive effect on Victor as well. They napped half the day away, Yuuri dozing off with the game in his hand, Victor nodding off as the book slipped lower in his hand.

He woke up, and it was late afternoon already. The day passed too fast, and he woke up conspicuously curled up with Victor’s arms around him, his arms around Victor. Victor’s fingers
Yuuri shifted. “You don’t have to do anything,” Victor murmured. He stroked Yuuri’s hair. “Just what makes you happy.”

What made Yuuri happy...

“You too,” he murmured sleepily. “Don’t try to please others so much. Do things for yourself, too, because you want them, not because you think you have to. You’re prettier when you smile for real.”

Victor was quiet for a long moment, but his hand never stopped stroking Yuuri’s hair. “I want to do this,” he said.

Yuuri’s heart was racing. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut, burying his nose into Victor’s neck. He could be a little selfish. Just this once.

They woke up a few hours outside of St. Petersburg, stiff from sleeping on the couch. Yuuri was uneasy, his skin buzzing hard from being in such close proximity to Victor for so long.

Yuuri had always thought he was doing the right thing by working hard. He was trying to make his family proud of him, make his city proud, make himself proud of the things he had done. But Yuuri didn’t feel very proud. Just full of regret and missed opportunities.

He guiltily scented Victor. He could allow himself to indulge in just a little more selfishness before Victor woke up. Victor shifted, scenting him back. Yuuri’s mind felt so deliciously numb.

It didn’t feel like the bad sort of numb Yuuri had gone through after he’d gotten the bad news before the race. It felt more like he was at peace. He felt quiet, and he let his mind wander with a little more control than before.

The personal trainer was a severe woman with pinched cheeks and a bun so tight that Yuuri wondered if it was pulling her skin back from her face. Lilia Baranovskaya was said to be one of the best in the world, though and Yuuri would put his trust in her abilities more than his own.

She took one look at Yuuri’s ankle, told him to walk for her, ran a few short tests, and told him to start slowly stretching it, and that the next two weeks, he was sentenced to upper body athletic training only.

Yuuri nodded, and he vowed to follow through. Victor showed Yuuri to his apartment.

It was roomier than Yuuri had expected, on a very nice block in a clearly wealthy neighborhood of St. Petersburg. He was bowled over at the door by Makkachin.

He found himself laughing helplessly as Makkachin licked his face, pinning him to the floor under scrabbling, overjoyed paws and a tail that was wagging fast enough to take off.

It hurt too. Makkachin reminded him acutely of Vicchan, and it was impossible to see the excitable poodle and not think of past mistakes.

Victor’s cabinets were bare. He always let groceries run down before he went out of town on a trip, he claimed, so Yuuri elected to go along with him on a trip to the grocery store.

Yuuri was surrounded by the sights and sounds of Russia, and was almost overwhelmed, if not for Victor pulling him between vegetable bins to the meat counter. Yuuri stared wistfully at bags of what
were unmistakably russian sweets and salty snacks. If he’d been home, he’d have drowned his sorrows in junk food.

But Victor was a man on a mission, stocking up on fresh-looking fruits and vegetables and, to Yuuri’s horror, all sorts of extremely wholesome good carbs and fats, everything a peak athlete would ideally consume. Yuuri was missing his katsudon more than ever.

He was slowing down again, tired after limping on his ankle for too long. Victor tried to help him to the couch, but Yuuri shrugged it off. He did, however, accept an ice pack to help with the dull ache.

The first night was rough.

Sleeping on the train had been easier than nighttime in St. Petersburg. Yuuri had no troubles sleeping on flights, but he couldn’t make himself unwind when everything in the apartment smelled so much like Victor, when he could hear Makkachin’s paws clicking softly against the wooden floors as she walked to her water bowl for a midnight drink.

He laid awake for hours, too bothered by a scent that was just close enough to set his veins on fire but far enough away that Yuuri felt it like an ache. His cheeks grew hot and wet, and he eventually settled into a fitful kind of unfulfilling sleep.

He did his workout routine without complaint, and spent the afternoon watching movies with Victor in some stunning vision of domesticity Yuuri never in his wildest dreams would have imagined.

He kept stealing looks at Victor, not sure that this really wasn’t some kind of wild dream.

At night, when he couldn’t sleep, he rose out of bed, clutching his borrowed pillow under his arm. “Do you mind if I sleep on the floor?” he asked. “It’s… too quiet.”

Victor looked half out of it as he pulled the blankets back on the bed. “Not the floor,” he mumbled. He turned over, asleep again. Yuuri hesitated. But he was trying out his new selfishness, and it had gotten him this far. Yuuri slid under the covers. It was just for tonight.

Victor wrapped an arm around his waist, and Yuuri fell asleep easier than he had in days.

The next night, Yuuri was heading toward his own room, but noticed his pillow was gone. When he peeked in Victor’s room, the blankets were already pulled back for him, and Yuuri wasn’t strong enough to leave.

The first two weeks, Yuuri was drifting. He did everything he was supposed to. He stretched the way he was told, followed Victor to the top notch training facilities to lift weights and build his core, back, shoulders, and arms. Victor never went easy on him, and that was something Yuuri appreciated. Yuuri asked for another rep, and Victor gave him two or three, leaving Yuuri’s muscles pleasantly burning at the end of the day.

When the pain in Yuuri’s ankle lessened, they started going on evening walks with Makkachin. Yuuri could feel every one of his two weeks off his feet.

He added isometric exercises into his routine, slowly flexing his ankles against resistance until they started to grow stronger.

When Lilia gave him the okay for non-running cardio, he and Victor took bike rides through the city. Victor took him on sightseeing tours that gave Yuuri some of that welcome burn in his thighs and calves he’d been missing.
It was surprising, how nice it was to be around Victor. Even the filthy, filthy dreams Yuuri had at night were nothing compared to Victor’s reassuring scent. It made it easier to forget the sting of everything that had happened. It wasn’t perfect. Yuuri and Victor weren’t perfect, but Victor made Yuuri want to try.

It was too long before Lilia studied the way he put weight on his ankle, eyed the strength he had built, and judged him fit to run again. Yuuri let out the most relieved sound when he got the word.

“I’m going tonight,” he said.

Victor laughed, bright and beautiful. “Don’t you want to wait until tomorrow?”

Yuuri shook his head. “It’s been long enough, Victor. I want to run.”

And Victor smiled. “If that’s what you want, I’ll change the workout schedule around. I’ll bike two laps around the block. You run one, alright?”

Yuuri nodded.

The pound of asphalt beneath his shoes, the wind on his face, he’d forgotten how this felt. The burn in his legs as he pushed himself as fast as the wind, for as long as he wanted. He ran one lap, then started on another. He couldn’t let this end so fast.

He was free again. He loved this, more than anything in the world, Yuuri loved running himself until he dropped, pushing himself to his limits. He could see Victor’s apartment, and he could see Victor leaning against the bike out front, waving, cheering.

Yuuri was laughing as he ran up. He loved this. He loved everything about it, the pain and the struggle, the heartache, the desire. He smelled Victor and then suddenly he was surrounded by it, as Victor picked him up and spun him around.

They were both laughing.

Yuuri teasingly pushed Victor away, sprinting for the stairs. Victor gave chase, following him up to the top. They were breathing hard as Yuuri fumbled with the key, letting them both inside. Yuuri stumbled away again, letting Victor chase him through the apartment.

They were breathless and giggling, delighted as children.

Victor leapt over the couch and scooped Yuuri into his arms, tossing Yuuri onto the cushions. Victor followed him, pinning Yuuri’s wrists to the arm of the couch above Yuuri’s head. “I love this,” Yuuri said, looking up into Victor’s eyes.

He needed to rebalance his life, sort out his priorities, figure things out but… “I don’t want to give this up,” Yuuri realized. “Thank you, Victor, so, so much. If you hadn’t been here, if you had gone easy on me, or gave up on me, I don’t know what I would have done. Maybe fallen apart. But you didn’t do that. You kept me steady, and… I feel better than I did, I think,” Yuuri confessed.

Victor stroked Yuuri’s cheek, looking so painfully soft that Yuuri’s chest ached. Then he pulled away, hesitating. “I’m happy you’re feeling better. Do you remember, when we were on the train?” Yuuri blinked, trying to remember. “I asked you want you wanted to do, and you said you didn’t know. It’s your choice, Yuuri, but… hunting with you is the best I’ve ever felt in my life. If I could, I wish I could make you smile like this forever.”

Yuuri’s heart was pounding. It sounded like a proposal. Victor had to know- or maybe he didn’t,
and it was just Yuuri’s imagination, or- “Did you realize how much like a proposal that sounded like?” he whispered.

Victor went red, but he didn’t take it back. He kissed Yuuri’s hand, then tilted Yuuri’s wrist up so the scent gland was exposed. He pressed a kiss there too, then laid it beside his throat. Yuuri shyly scented Victor, letting their scents combine.

It was heady, like the dizzy post-hunt feeling bubbling through him, even when his head was clear and focused. “I wish I could stay and hunt with you,” he said. “I wish we could stay like this forever.”

“Can I- nevermind-“ Victor broke off. He was staring at Yuuri’s mouth. His own lips had that little curl to them, one Yuuri realized was want. He almost missed it. It was small and subtle and so barely changed from Victor’s usual expression, because Victor so rarely let himself want.

Yuuri tilted his head up and kissed him.

It was so easy when Yuuri wanted just as badly.

Victor let out a surprised, pleased little noise, his grip loosening for one startled moment. Yuuri took the chance and slid out from Victor’s arms, wearing his most teasing grin. “You should really hold on tighter to your omega or he’ll get away,” he said.

Victor’s eyes sparkled. Yuuri turned and ran, letting Victor chase him into the bedroom. He was tackled onto the bed, gently pinned under Victor’s body weight. Victor was just rough enough to make Yuuri feel alive, but still so gentle.

Yuuri turned around, and their lips met. They rocked together, sweaty from their workout, skin sticking and skidding as they shed their clothes. Yuuri was a fool. Yuuri was selfish.

But this felt more right than anything else in the world, and Yuuri wanted another taste. They didn’t just fuck. This was not another rough tumble on the fields of the hunt, or the angry roll of bodies in the aftermath of one. This was making love, slow, sensual, their minds their own.

Victor could have stopped Yuuri any time he wanted. He didn’t have to chase Yuuri when it became a game. It meant something more to Yuuri than he could ever put into words.

They moved as one, and Yuuri was crying when he came, unwilling to let Victor go for even a moment. Victor stroked a hand down Yuuri’s sweaty face, chasing his lips with kisses.

The pain of loss would never fully go away, but with Victor, Yuuri felt strong enough to move on.

“Return to the hunt with me?” Victor asked. “Please?”

“Yes,” Yuuri managed, a wet smile sending tears down his cheeks. “Forever.”

End Notes

Content Warning: Pet Death. This is set in Sochi.
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