Blow the Dandelion

by ShoSpecial

Summary

“You seem to get along pretty well with Shoma, too.”

Mikhail stopped his arm movement abruptly. His focus was totally out of the flowers. It seemed that the world was now only composed of him, the flowers and Deniss.

“Yeah, we’ve got closer recently. He’s a nice guy.”

It was strange how hearing this name sounded so differently to his ears, Mikhail thought. His eyes were locked on the dandelion he was about to pick. It was as if he didn’t see it. He was feeling strange and couldn’t dare to get up and face Deniss.

Shoma and Mikhail slowly come to realise that they care for each other. And maybe they will end up calling what they feel love.

Notes

Hello! This is my first fanfic ever, and I’m here with… a very unique ship :)

English isn’t my first language, I hope there won’t be too many mistakes!

Of course, this work is a pure fiction. None of this is real, nor do I wish it were or expect it to be.
Enjoy!
Mikhail had arrived in PyeongChang in the morning the day before and was eager to start his rehearsal. Although he hadn’t already adapted to the jet lag, he entered the rink with excitement. He was amazed by the bright new building. He already imagined the corridors soon full of people. He took his time in the locker room, carefully lacing his boots tight. He entered the vast hall with the cold white ice surface reflecting the boards and the silhouette of another person, gliding smoothly on it. It was Shoma Uno. Mikhail looked at the place for a moment. In a few days, this now empty arena would be brightened with the colours of a public and warmed by their cheers, while the music would set a different atmosphere in which everyone would religiously watch a person standing alone on the ice, just like Shoma right now, who was doing spins and step sequences with his usual grace; and Mikhail could actually hear the sound of his blades cutting sharply, merciless, the immaculate smooth surface. Mikhail leaned his elbows on the boards and watched Shoma, smiling. He was one of the favourites for a place on the podium. Mikhail thought that he should feel some rivalry, yet he only felt hope for the younger man to do a great performance. When someone skates as well as Shoma does, why would he be jealous of him and his successes?

Shoma went for his last spin. He spun with such a speed that he felt a little dizzy and unbalanced when he stopped abruptly. That’s when he noticed the Russian boy looking at him from the boards, since he stopped his spin to find himself right in front of him. He needed some water and skated towards the exit, not far from where the other skater was standing, while vaguely trying to remember what his name was. As he was drinking, the said man came to him, a sunny smile on his lips:

“Your skating was really amazing. I’ve never seen such powerful and well-mastered spins.”

Shoma smiled shyly: “Thank you.”

“I hope you’ll perform well here. From what I just saw, you totally deserve a high place.”

“Thank you very much.” Shoma was usually awkward when it came to talking with people he didn’t know well, in particular when they were not speaking his language and he had to figure out what they were saying and how to formulate his answers in English, and most especially when he was feeling embarrassed for not remembering what his interlocutor’s name was.

“Can I go and borrow you the rink already or haven’t you finished your practice?”

Shoma tilted his head: “I haven’t finished practice, but of course you can skate too, this is not my rink.”

The blond-haired man thanked him and stepped on the ice. Shoma watched him while he took a little break. Suddenly, he remembered his name. Mikhail Kolyada. Of course, how could he have forgotten? Mikhail was skating in circles, and Shoma found himself looking at him, his head following Mikhail from one part to another, and he felt embarrassed for staring at him like that. He got on the ice as well and worked his steps and spins again.

Mikhail had now started jumping. Shoma glanced at him from time to time, mostly because he wanted to avoid collisions, but only he must admit that it was also because he liked Mikhail’s skating. At a moment, he crossed the gaze of Mikhail, who smiled at him. He smiled in return. They continued skating in silence. They unexpectedly skated face to face at one point, and their eyes met.
just as Mikhail started a jump, and Shoma believed he saw a brief smirk on his face before his fast rotations prevented him from seeing his features properly. Mikhail landed perfectly his triple Lutz. And he looked at Shoma with this definitely not invented smirk as soon as he stopped rotating. Shoma was more amused than bothered. He knew Mikhail was not an aggressively competitive person but the type to smile and congratulate you whenever he saw you. He still wondered what Mikhail had in mind, though, and tilted his head while he smiled, still gliding slowly even though he had stopped skating. It was only a matter of seconds before Mikhail answered his silent questions:

“What did you think of this jump?” he asked with a large grin.

Shoma almost laughed: “I would award you +1 GOE.”

“Only?” Mikhail faked being outraged, which earned him a frank laugh from Shoma:

“Don’t try to corrupt me!”

“I’m not! You just have not judged well! Do you want me to do it again so you can concentrate on scoring?”

Shoma laughed again, a snort that had his nose scrunching and his eyes narrowing, sign that it was a real, free laugh, not held.

It ended up in a collective training. Both skaters came this morning without their coaches, and they played this role for each other. Mikhail gave Shoma some tips for his jumps, Shoma pointed out details in Mikhail’s movements. It was enriching for both of them given that it was an opportunity to get another analysis, different remarks and advice from what they were used to with their respective coaches. They were so focused that they didn’t notice that other people had come on the ice. Even when he almost bumped into one of them, Shoma didn’t become aware that he and Mikhail were not alone. It only clicked when he heard the voice of Mihoko-sensei calling him from the boards. He looked at her with surprise. He had no idea she was there. He skated towards her, leaving Mikhail alone for a moment.

“Shoma, it’s half past eleven. It’s time to have lunch.”

Shoma was totally bewildered and his eyes widened more than ever: “Already?”

“You have already practiced for longer than you were supposed to today,” Mihoko said quietly with a caring smile, still amused by the usual absent-mindedness of her student. Shoma turned around, approached Mikhail to tell him goodbye, and went to change clothes quickly.

They met again the day after. And the day after again. They talked that day, surprised to meet each other each time. They both went to check their practice schedule and realised they shared the exact same timetable.

So it became a habit. Every day, when one of them entered the rink, he looked if the other was already there or not. And every day, when they met, they greeted each other silently, with a gentle smile and a wave from the hand. They often didn’t interact much. They usually stayed away in different parts of the rink, talking with their coaches only. But whenever they crossed, they smiled at each other. Whenever one of them made a loud, hurtful fall, the other always checked if he was okay. Whenever they skated close to each other, they always had a word or gesture of encouragement. And some days they talked more, having skating battles, commenting each other’s skating and exchanging laughs at jokes meant to lessen the pressure that inevitably increased as the date of the short program approached.
After he skated his short program, Mikhail met Shoma in the corridor, sitting with his head in his palms, watching everyone’s performances. Mikhail suddenly forgot everything he had in mind, which is to say, his own performance, his score and the probable rankings, and felt a warm flow of appreciation mixed with a protection instinct for Shoma. As he walked past him, he put his hand on Shoma’s shoulder, which had the Japanese boy turning his face towards him to be met with a gentle and soft smile that conveyed support, admiration and friendship. Before Shoma could answer with the same kind of silent smile to thank, congratulate and reassure Mikhail all at the same time, he was gone, his smile still floating on his lips.

It was only after the competition and before the gala that they got another opportunity to talk. This time, not really about figure skating. The conversation soon became more personal. Shoma was already more comfortable with Mikhail, so he felt at ease speaking about himself and asking personal questions, despite the language barrier. Like many boys their age, they both liked video games. But Shoma totally roared with laughter when Mikhail told him that he liked a game Shoma himself was fond of. He kept his mouth open for a long time, dropped exclamations of amazement and made a long speech to expand on to what extent this game was a marvel. His verbiage was disorganised because of passion, and adding that to his floppy English, his logorrhoea was the longest Mikhail had ever heard from him; and he couldn’t stop talking now that he had found someone who shared his opinions and would actually listen to him and share his enthusiasm. This resulted in them meeting in Shoma’s room, since he had brought the game with him. Mikhail was surprised to know that Shoma was rooming outside the Olympic village because he wanted his mother to stay with him to prepare his food. He found it funny. For now, his mother wasn’t there; he assumed Shoma had asked her to leave for them to avoid an awkward evening that would make both Mikhail and Shoma’s mother stiff.

Shoma was totally into the game, bragging about his skills, defying Mikhail whose character kept dying, having the time of his life and feeling so proud his shyness disappeared.

Until the cataclysm happened. Mikhail won.

Shoma hated losing. He was very serious about games. More serious about them than everything else. Well, maybe except regarding food. But that was another topic. For now, he was so kuyashii that he forgot everything to dedicate himself to his revenge. He killed Mikhail’s character, once, twice, thrice, up to ten times before Mikhail dared to tell Shoma that it was probably enough and that he accepted his defeat and acknowledged Shoma as the best of them.

Later that night, Shoma accompanied Mikhail back to the Olympic village. The cold air cleared his head from the game. They kept talking about games until they arrived close to the hotel Mikhail was rooming in.

“Oh, thank you for the invitation,” Mikhail said, clouds coming out of his mouth, “I had so much fun.”

“Thank you for coming. I am happy to have played with you, it was really fun. I hope we can play more together in the future. I need to show you other games I have, but for now it’s too late.”

Mikhail laughed: “You dread losing because of sleepiness?”
Shoma pouted and replied in bad faith: “I never lose. I could even beat you while sleeping. You won once today but it was only because my controller hadn’t battery anymore.”

Mikhail exclaimed loudly, dying of laughter facing this outright lie, vaguely worrying that he would wake someone up.

They exchanged goodbyes and goodnights. On his way back, Shoma felt sleepy, and the cold hurt his skin, but he could only smile in the collar of his coat as he thought back about the fun night he had just had, with a person he had learnt so much more about in a few hours than he had ever learnt during all the hours they had shared on the ice. He thought that he should try to socialize more with the other skaters. Meanwhile, Mikhail fell asleep in a few seconds. His last thought was that Shoma wasn’t wearing a scarf and might catch a cold with this temperature outside.

In PyeongChang, once all the events he was supposed to take part in were over, Shoma caught a virus and was stuck in bed with a horrible stomachache. He couldn’t get up for anything. He didn’t care about missing the closing ceremony – he would have fallen asleep anyway. He was very upset about his sickness because he couldn’t eat, and he really liked eating. But what surprised him was how upset he was about not being able to see Mikhail. He was feeling as if he was wasting the little time he had left with him. He wanted to see Mikhail and to play games in one of their rooms with him, but he was definitely not in a fit state to do it. He tried to force himself to get up and get dressed to go and look for him, but it was pointless: he couldn’t bring himself to do the slightest bit of these things for anything in the world. Moreover, it would be embarrassing if Mikhail saw him in this condition, even messier than usual. Shoma had a sudden nausea. What if he threw up in front of him? No, it was out of the question to envisage seeing Mikhail despite being sick.

The virus actually had a positive consequence. Thanks to it, Shoma realised how much he cared for Mikhail. He realised how much he liked gaming with him, skating with him, and trying to understand each other. English was almost funny when he talked with somebody interesting about interesting things. He enjoyed thinking of how to phrase his thoughts in English and trying to understand Mikhail’s ones. Mihoko-sensei would be proud of him: he was finally less reluctant to learn this peculiar language, so different from his. He was sure that when she would notice his progress she would be delighted. It made Shoma smile. What a kind person she was. He thought that he was lucky to have her as a coach.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!

I would love to get your feedback, feel free to leave a comment!
"Keiji, are we friends?"

Blunt as usual, Shoma asked Keiji when the latter entered the hotel room they shared in Milan. Keiji gave him a look of incomprehension.

"Of course, Shoma, what even is that question?" Keiji then thought he was a little harsh and added: "I mean, we have known each other for such a long time that it surprises me you ask that. I have always thought we were friends. Well, I consider you a friend, then I don’t know about you..."

"I consider you a friend as well!" Shoma blurted, sensing that he may have hurt him. Keiji laughed.

"So why are you suddenly concerned about that?"

Shoma tilted his head and thought for a while before answering.

"I don’t know... I just try to figure out what friendship means. I consider you a friend, and even a great friend," he flushed, uncomfortable with kind words, "but I know that we may all have our own definition of a friendship. I mean, for me, even if we rarely talk when we’re not in the same place, we’re friends and I care about you. This is also the case when we’re in the same place but I don’t hang out a lot with you."

"I know, Shoma, I know that this is your personality. You know, I don’t talk much either and I can just spend time playing games in silence with someone and I would call that a friendly activity, but there are people who need to talk a lot with their friends to consider them so. They need to know a lot about them, they need to share their thoughts to think of themselves as friends. I don’t blame them for that, it’s just that we have different ways of working with that. And yeah, it can result in disappointment or hurt, because you may consider someone a friend while they think you’re just someone familiar, an acquaintance."

Keiji’s words floated in the air while he looked at Shoma. The latter was feeling suddenly touched, and his heart was full of gratitude and regard for Keiji. With his natural inclination to take care of others, Keiji smiled and moved closer to Shoma with his arms open, inviting him to hug. Shoma’s eyes almost filled with tears.

Damn, Keiji. Keiji was a real friend.
At Worlds in Milan, Shoma wasn’t feeling at his best. He was a little melancholic but didn’t see the exact reason. He wasn’t as excited for the competition as he usually was. Maybe a little tired since this Olympic season had been long. Maybe already nostalgic because it was his last competition before a long time. He didn’t really know. It was just a vague feeling that didn’t trouble him too much. Just a slight impression, too far at the back of his mind for him to be aware of it.

Nonetheless, he sometimes thought about it, whenever he skated in large circles to warm up, lost in his own world, unaware of his surroundings. Shoma liked skating. He loved everything about it, from the competition, the travels, the practice sessions, his coaches, the way from his home to the rink, the sound of the blades on the ice, the cold feeling of the wind whenever he jumped and couldn’t see anything because of the speed, the music he used in his programs which he knew by heart but still didn’t annoy him, to the look in his mother’s eyes whenever he saw her for the first time after a successful competition, the other skaters, his friends; most of his world revolved around skating. It was his passion, what made him wake up every morning, the reason why he lived. He had chosen figure skating and never regretted it. It never crossed his mind that he could ever do something else. If it ever had to come to an end, he would be lost. He wouldn’t know how to survive. Sometimes he thought about Sota, and how crushing his injury was. It made him feel a lot of things, to think about Sota. Sadness, because of this terrible injury and its devastating consequences on his friend’s career and morale. Hope, because he was recovering little by little and would come back to the skating world with him. Admiration, for Sota’s courage and maturity in this trial. And love, because Sota was his friend and this injury had reinforced Shoma’s attachment to him. He missed him. Sota would soon come back to competitive skating. Shoma was so happy for him. So proud of him, too. Now, in addition to a friend, Sota had also become a model. His obstinacy and persistence in recovering. The physical pain that made the psychological wound even more painful. Shoma was very sad about not being able to share most of his recent achievements with his long-time friend. He believed Sota felt the same, so he didn’t bring up the subject whenever they met. They had grown a little apart from each other, but Shoma still considered Sota one of his closest friends. He cared about him with all his heart, and Sota knew Shoma’s heart was enormous and filled with the most generous feelings, even if Shoma himself didn’t believe it.

After one of those deep melancholic and nostalgic sessions – which others would only name a silent practice session – Shoma took a shower in the locker room which made him forget about all these thoughts and put him in a better mood, relaxed. He was on his way to leave the rink with his wet hair dripping on his clothes and colouring them with darker spots when he came across Mikhail in a corridor. They weren’t sharing the same practice schedule this time and hadn’t seen each other much in Milan so far. They were only exchanging quick hellos and goodbyes whenever they met. He knew it was much harder for him. They had grown a little apart from each other, but Shoma still considered Sota one of his closest friends. He cared about him with all his heart, and Sota knew Shoma’s heart was enormous and filled with the most generous feelings, even if Shoma himself didn’t believe it.

“Hi,” Soma answered a little shyly with a wave of the hand. He thought that both of them would continue walking and that the conversation would stop here, but Mikhail went on:

“It’s sad we don’t see each other much these days.” He paused and Shoma nodded. Mikhail added:

“We live thousands of kilometres apart, it would be a pity if we never have a chance to spend time together when we’re in the same place.”

Shoma nodded again: “I agree, if we didn’t have the same practice schedule in PyeongChang we would probably never have really talked.”
“I was thinking the other day that we should make the most of the time we can have with friends. Would you like to share dinner with me one of these days?”

Shoma was a little surprised, but enthusiastic: “Sure, when?”

Mikhail smiled even more and kindly said: “As you like, Shoma, I am inviting you, you decide.”

Shoma tilted his head while thinking, and after a moment he answered: “The short program is in three days, and it’s more reasonable to eat properly and to stick to our usual daily routines the last days before. So… hum, tonight would be a good time, but maybe it’s a bit late to plan…”

“For me it’s perfect, I don’t have anything planned for tonight, do you?” Mikhail interrupted.

“I don’t either.”

“Do you have a restaurant to advise? I can’t invite you in my hotel room, there’s no kitchen.”

“I don’t know, I didn’t go sightseeing…”

“Well, let’s just go to a grill or an Italian restaurant somewhere close to here so we can go on foot.”

Shoma noticed the word “grill” that seemed to stand out in Mikhail’s sentence and agreed enthusiastically, nodding several times: “That’s perfectly fine by me.”

“Let’s say we meet here in half an hour? It’s already late, I just have to change clothes.”

“Okay, it’s fine with me,” Shoma assured, as the thought of meat made his way to his stomach which started feeling ready for a steak.

“Okay, see you later!” Mikhail said with a smile and twinkly eyes while walking away with a wave of the hand.

“Bye!” Shoma answered happily.

Shoma hurried back to the hotel. He just needed to let his suitcase with his skating boots there and to replace his jacket with a real coat. He decided to take the elevator and after struggling a little to find the key card to the room he shared with Keiji in his backpack, he opened the door.

Keiji had put glasses on and was reading one of the magazines that were at their disposal on the coffee table of the room. Seated legs extended on the bed, his back held by the headboard and the softness of several pillows, he was cuddled up in what looked like an old faded brown sweater. A cup of tea was steaming on the bedside table next to him, and Shoma couldn’t help thinking that he was rooming with a forty-year-old dad in winter fashion.

“Why do you read this?” were Shoma’s first words.

“Why not?”

“Since when are you interested in… what is it about?”

“Well, I guess one can say it’s a lifestyle magazine.”

“I didn’t know you liked this kind of superficial writings.”

“I’m not reading this like it’s the best thing ever, it’s just a way to pass the time. I don’t really like the content.”
“So why do you read it anyway? When I need to kill time I just game on my phone, I know you’re gonna say it’s not deep either but at least I enjoy it.”

“I think it’s a good thing to be a bit curious and to take a look at what doesn’t appeal to you at first. This way I learn things I wouldn’t find out about if I stuck to my usual routine. Did you know cabbage could help remove blackheads?”

Shoma rolled his eyes as Keiji turned the magazine around to show him. Keiji carried on: “I’m joking, this is a really bad magazine, but there are others that are quite interesting, you should take a look. There are some newspapers about politics and the economy, it’s fun to compare their approaches. When you read an article on a subject you know nothing about, you tend to believe the writer’s opinion. But then, you should look at another article from another journal and you’ll see the exact opposite opinion, and you’re muddled. Therefore, you know that you have to inform yourself more and from various sources, if possible the most neutral ones, to form your own opinion.”

They remained silent for a moment, then Shoma said quietly: “I can’t believe we’re only three years apart.” Keiji smirked. Shoma added: “When did you become that mature?”

“When will you?”

Shoma didn’t see that coming and kept his mouth half-open for an instant before pulling himself together: “I’m going to grab dinner with Mikhail, do you want to come with us?”

“No, that’s nice of you but I’ll have some salad at the cafeteria later. For now, I’m reading magazines.”

“When you’re done if you want you’re welcome to join us.” Shoma put his coat on while saying: “You know you look good with glasses.”

Keiji looked at him with a large grin: “Thanks!”

“You’ll be a great dad.”

“I need to find a wife first,” Keiji said, distractedly looking at the pages of the magazine.

“No, you can adopt,” Shoma replied as he walked to the door.

“That’s right, I already have you.” Shoma rolled his eyes and shut the door.

Mikhail was already waiting when Shoma arrived at the entrance of the rink. Although Shoma apologised for having made his friend wait, Mikhail brushed away his apologies with the hand, assuring the embarrassed boy that he was still early and that Mikhail had just started waiting.

Both boys made their way to the closest grill they found, casually strolling along the streets without paying attention to their surroundings. On the way, they talked about their impressions of Milan, the upcoming competition, the progress they had recently made, their – for now – rinkmates and soon to be fellow competitors.

The waitress had them sit down at a table in a corner at the back of the room, which was the calmest spot of the restaurant. After she handed them the menus, they resumed their conversation.
“We didn’t arrive early, but we weren’t late either,” Mikhail said. “We walked at a good rhythm, and we looked at the board announcing the departure flights. It was the farthest boarding gate, so we hurried, dropped our big suitcases quickly when we registered, and when we arrived at the boarding gate, it was empty.”

Shoma raised an eyebrow. Mikhail went on: “We checked again the board, and the gate had changed! The new one wasn’t close at all, so we literally ran through the airport with the carry-on luggage. My coach had two suitcases and couldn’t keep up the pace, therefore I sprinted so that I could tell the staff to wait for her if I managed to arrive on time. Fortunately, none of the passengers had already embarked. After making everyone wait for another fifteen minutes, they changed the gate again! Long story short, with all of this we arrived exhausted in Milan, and later than what was planned.”

Shoma was looking up, head tilted, sign that he was cogitating. “This kind of thing had happened to me as well a few years ago… If I remember well, we had a stopover and that delay made us miss the second plane. We never had an explanation on what happened with the gates.”

Mikhail shrugged his shoulders: “I guess we’ll never know.”

Shoma had opened the menu. “What are you going to order?” he asked.

“Probably some roast beef. I’m starving. And you?”

“I thought about pork ribs, but now that you mention it, roast beef sounds appealing.”

Mikhail offered Shoma to share some beef with him, and they eventually decided to take two different dishes. Their orders arrived rather quickly, and Shoma didn’t regret having chosen the pork ribs: they were so delicious that Mikhail thought his roast beef, which tasted good, seemed almost simply average in comparison to the masterpiece Shoma had offered him a bite.

And it could be seen on Shoma’s face that he was delighted. His silence was meaningful. He only had eyes for his plate, his pretty eyelashes fluttering whenever he bit his meat, triggering an interesting contrast with all the sauce and grease that was covering his fingers, his chin, and the corners of his mouth. Mikhail gently smiled at this view. He really liked Shoma’s sincerity, whether in his words or shown on his face, his simple interests most people found him funny for. He liked meat, let him enjoy his meat, it was as simple as that. Why did one need sophisticated distractions when a simple piece of meat could make you ascend to heaven? The more he knew about the Japanese boy, the more Mikhail liked him.

After they paid, they left the restaurant, replete and satisfied. Mikhail noticed a gelateria nearby and suggested to go there for an ice cream dessert. Shoma accepted with enthusiasm.

“Maybe we should be more careful with our diet…” Mikhail worried.

“I don’t care, honestly. We also need to be mentally healthy, and a good, rich meal once in a while makes you happy without compromising your physical condition. If tomorrow you have regrets, just do ten more sit-ups to ease your conscience.”

Mikhail smiled: “You’re right. Let’s go.” Shoma could be assertive when it was important to him. He was convinced of what he said.

Shoma insisted on offering Mikhail the ice cream. He took chocolate, whereas Mikhail chose mango. Shoma struggled with his cone to put the coins in his wallet, which resulted in his hand being stained with a trail of chocolate and a dangerous, melting ice cream threatening his white t-shirt. Meanwhile,
Mikhail was facing the other way, looking at the crowd, oblivious to Shoma’s battle. Shoma had just finally joined him a little away from the waiting line when a well-known figure appeared in front of them.

Misha Ge’s eyes lit up: “Oh, look who’s there!” Emerging from the crowd, Kazuki Tomono and Evgenia Medvedeva joined Misha in the field of vision of the two food lovers. Greetings, exclamations, reunion. Shoma thought that they were a group of only five people, but there were already conversations in three different languages: English, Russian and Japanese – if Kazuki monologuing in Japanese just for him counted, because Shoma was too busy with his aggressive ice cream to reply to him.

Somehow – probably when he was focusing on saving his clothes from an attack and himself from his mother’s fury – they ended up walking to an amusement arcade. By the time they arrived, Shoma had finished his ice cream and could go back to enjoyment with his friends. With a gesture of the hand on his own cheek, Mikhail made Shoma aware of a chocolate spot on his face. Shoma rubbed it off, earning a confirmation in form of a thumbs up and a smile from the Russian boy.

The arcade was very noisy, a cacophony of video game sounds and metallic air hockey pucks that increased Mikhail’s desire to play.

“Let’s compete against each other in an air hockey tournament!” Misha’s proposal was welcomed with hoorays and bright smiles.

Mikhail was the first one to grab the pusher. While everyone was thinking about how the confrontations should be done given that they were in five, Mikhail just wanted to have fun. Kazuki took place in front of him, smiling. He, too, wanted nothing else than to play. Misha assumed the role of the referee who commentated at the same time; he put a coin in the machine, and the game started. Without straining, Mikhail took the lead. Kazuki wasn’t bad, but he was too slow. He probably wasn’t really keen to win. When the blond-haired boy reached seven points, the lights of the game flickered, and Misha screamed that Mikhail was the winner. Evgenia and Shoma went to comfort Kazuki. No one could stand seeing his cute candid face looking sad. Misha spoke:

“I propose a deal: the game of the last chance. If you win against me, you go to the next round. We are in five anyway, we can’t do a proper tournament. Everyone needs a second chance.”

Kazuki accepted, and maybe Misha was too enthusiastic to perform well and Kazuki too grateful to mess up, but he beat Misha easily. Misha covered his face with his hands while everyone teased him about being beaten by his junior. But the Uzbek man hadn’t admitted his defeat:

“Everyone needs a second chance! Shoma and Zhenya, it’s your turn, and the loser is entitled to another game of the last chance against me.”

“What a kind man,” Evgenia said while taking place on one end of the table, “but sadly I don’t think I will have the chance to play against you.” She slyly eyed Shoma with a playful smirk.

“Oh, you’re challenging me like that?” Shoma replied as he put a coin in the machine and took place in front of her. “Beware, don’t brag about your skills before you win. It won’t be that easy. You talk the talk, but do you walk the walk?”

“Ooooh, Shoma has a good comeback!” The three spectators were delighted by the competitiveness of the two opponents.

“Sometimes, a gesture is worth more than a thousand words,” and with that said, Shoma hit the puck with a huge strength.
Without hitting the boards a single time, the puck ended right in Evgenia’s goal before she could react. She looked at Shoma with her mouth widely open, speechless. She took the puck and put it back on the surface.

“Ah, so you want to play this way.”

She struck the puck with rage, making it do dozens of zigzags and as many metallic sounds. Shoma managed to hit it again, and he scored. He screamed with joy, throwing his arms in the air.

The fight would be tough, harsh, and for Mikhail and his friends, captivating. In the back of his mind, Mikhail remembered that he must observe the way his future opponents play – be it singular or plural, with Misha’s confusing rules. But he was enjoying himself watching the game. Shoma was particularly winsome. Mikhail had never seen him like that. He knew Shoma was competitive and wouldn’t refuse a challenge or acknowledge a defeat – he remembered when he had beat him at a video game in PyeongChang and had awakened the sore loser hiding within Shoma – but what surprised him was to see how extroverted and uninhibited Shoma was. It was the first time Mikhail saw him being so expressive and spontaneous. He seemed be having the time of his life and didn’t look shy or uncomfortable at all. He probably felt at ease with them, but even if so, the power of games must have helped. Maybe also the noisy environment, where he had to yell to be heard – and he wasn’t depriving himself. There at the arcade, he was an anonymous young man enjoying an evening with his friends. From the outside, the five of them must have looked like a group of tourists on a holiday, having fun between two days of sightseeing – supposing that some people paid attention to them and noticed them in the middle of this crowded place. As for him, Mikhail only had eyes for Shoma. The short boy looked like someone else, yet at the same time, it was totally him and he couldn’t be mistaken for somebody else. Shoma was a more complex person than one could think at first glance. Mikhail felt as if he had already got deeper into Shoma’s vast personality, and he wanted nothing else than to dig even more into the infinite layers Shoma had inside of him. Mikhail suddenly giggled at this stupid thought. Digging into layers. As if Shoma were an appetizing mille-feuille.

He shook his head and focused on the game again. The battle was raging, and Shoma seemed to play his cards right, judging by his regular exclamations of joy and fist clenching. After an impressive rally, the puck entered Evgenia’s goal for the last time, and the machine displayed the final score: Evgenia lost 6-7, having her screaming in desperation, while Shoma jumped for joy with his arms in the air, a giant smile brightening up his whole face.

The next two games were a little chaotic, especially since only Misha seemed to really understand the way the tournament worked. In their games of the last chance, Evgenia beat Misha. Then, for the first semi-final, Mikhail beat Evgenia after she defended herself with all her heart. The second semi-final opposed Shoma and Kazuki, and it helped everyone calm down because the two Japanese played gently, Shoma tenderly weakening his shots for the battle to be more balanced. The two of them were smiling widely and even conversing during their match, commenting each other’s moves. Despite everything, Shoma didn’t let Kazuki win, but the two friends hugged afterwards anyway.

It was now time for the final game. Mikhail took place first. It didn’t take long for Shoma to leave Kazuki and concentrate again. He slowly walked towards the opposite goal. He settled his feet steady on the floor, gaze firm, ready to confront whoever would dare to. His head was in the game. Shoma’s attitude almost scared Mikhail. He was a soldier ready to fight, even if it meant laying down his life. Mikhail still found it endearing that Shoma took games so seriously, that he lived them with more passion – at least visible on his face – than skating itself.

Misha took his role of commentator to heart and announced: “And now, ladies and gentlemen, the final! The two best air hockey players in the world of figure skating, ready to fight for the title of
World Champion of Air Hockey Among Figure Skaters. Please cheer for them loudly! On my left, representing Japan, the legendary Shoma Uno!"

Evgenia and Kazuki screamed like crazy.

“On my right, from Russia, the one and only Mikhail Kolyada!”

Same volume of cheers from the two spectators.

“Go Shoma! Bring the title back in Japan!” Kazuki shouted. He had obviously chosen his side.

Evgenia wasn’t outdone: “Make our country proud, Mikhail, I believe in you!”

“It seems that I am the only neutral referee available,” Misha stated. He held a coin at the entrance of the gap. “Ready? Three, two, one, go!” and the coin disappeared in the machine.

Mikhail had the puck. He had observed Shoma’s way of playing and knew how to attack. Shoma played with a burning rage. He wanted the victory so much that he was able to set himself on fire. It wasn’t competitiveness anymore at this point, it was a mad urge. Shoma always attacked desperately, putting all his strength into his shots, hitting tirelessly the puck every time it came within reach. This strategy had worked so far. Relentlessness could pay.

Unlike him, Mikhail could be seen as the quiet strength. He didn’t need to be explosive to do nice shots, well thought out, precise, efficient. Less blazing than Shoma, but potentially more effective against him. He was going to play him at his own game. First, he would defend at all costs, without doing anything else, until Shoma enraged and probably ended up scoring an own goal. It had already happened in his previous matches. Then, once Shoma was disconcerted and started doubting, he would take the possession back while Shoma would search for another approach. Mikhail would impose his rhythm. Shoma would soon be either lost or so upset he would mess everything up.

Indeed, Shoma was harassing him. He managed to score the first goal of the game, despite Mikhail staying in defence. The Russian competitor had to come back so that his opponent didn’t get too confident. Mikhail kept on defending, and like he had planned, Shoma scored an own goal. But what Mikhail hadn’t planned was that Shoma was aware of his weaknesses and had observed the way Mikhail played. He was able to come up with strategies too. So he abandoned his crazy bombings on Mikhail’s goal and did what Mikhail expected the least from him: he started playing the same way Mikhail usually did, striking precise shots with the right amount of speed and strength, alternating between strong shots straight ahead, confusing bizarre trajectories, classical dangerous angles and other disconcerting things. Each of his shots became unpredictable. Shoma had resources. As soon as Mikhail noticed this change in Shoma’s strategy, Mikhail changed his. Back to what he could do best: what Shoma was doing.

Their ballet was mesmerizing. Both boys had the ability to surprise all three spectators and to impress them by their reactivity to the other’s attacks.

Mikhail scored on a splendid angle after a rebound that took Shoma by surprise. After all, this way of playing was his speciality: he had more experience.

Their rallies were long, much longer than during any of the previous confrontations. Evgenia, Misha and Kazuki were switching between phases of breath holding in captivated silence and diligent gazes following the puck, and phases of screams and exclamations of excitement which the players didn’t process due to their concentration on the game.

Shoma eventually scored. 2-2. Tie. The game was tight. There would be a lot of suspense until the
end, and a lot of frustration for the loser. Everything was possible. One of them could collapse, or one could score two goals in a row which would rattle the other’s confidence.

Little by little, the score progressed. 4-4. The first to attain seven would win. The excitement rose at the same rhythm as the score, reinforced by the important amount of time each rally took between two goals.

Mikhail scored again, on a very Shoma-like strong shot. As he took the puck under his goal, Shoma glanced at the current leader. It troubled Mikhail a little: this look was unreadable, yet it seemed that Shoma was more aware than ever, and that this quick glance gave him the ability to see everything Mikhail had on his mind – especially his planned upcoming moves.

After another long rally, Shoma came back to the score. 5-5. Mikhail took his time to put the puck back on the field. He felt as if the room were silent, only troubled by the regular sounds of the puck he was currently holding against the boards. Their friends had stopped cheering, or at least he couldn’t hear them anymore. All his senses were focused on this air hockey table. He looked up and stared at Shoma in the eye. He felt some sort of connection between them. They anticipated well each other’s moves and were aiming for the same goal. After a few seconds, Shoma’s determined look softened and lost a bit of its intensity. Mikhail smiled at him and immediately hit the puck, partly because he hoped his smile – which had blossomed on his lips without calculation – could destabilize Shoma a little.

Such was not the case. The puck drew again many lines on the white surface, each of them welcomed by the familiar, recognizable jingling that sang the story of their confrontation. A sweet music for an intense ballet.

Shoma hit the puck in such a way that it did a lot of clustered sounds as it touched the boards, and suddenly the puck seemed to lose its speed. It surprized both opponents. The puck definitely stopped in the middle of the table, out of reach of any player. Shoma looked at Mikhail with confusion, wide eyes and parted lips asking silent questions. Mikhail put his hand on the game surface. No more air. He had forgotten there was a timer on these arcade games.

Tie. Emerging from their trance, Kazuki, Misha and Evgenia exclaimed all at the same time, frustrated that the game had to stop before it was won. Misha, going back to his role of referee, declared both players the winners. Both felt a little dizzy from the intense match they had given. They shook hands to congratulate each other. To their own surprise, none of them was frustrated. They were both pretty happy, satisfied with their performance, having no clue if they would have won in the end and therefore rather thankful to the timer for preventing them from a crushing defeat.

They left the arcade soon after. The cold air and quiet sounds of the sleeping city eased their minds.

“How much money have we spent for this tournament,” Kazuki complained. It wasn’t even a question.

Evgenia was entirely of his opinion: “Misha, it’s all your fault! It was your idea! And all of this for nothing: there isn’t even a champion!”

The two young skaters were playfully yelling at Misha, walking on each side of the older man, while Shoma and Mikhail walked silently a few meters behind them.

“I’m tired, but somehow, it’s a good sleepiness,” Shoma said. “I don’t know how to explain that.”

Mikhail looked at him. Shoma’s eyes were glowing in the dark. A slight smile had bloomed on his lips as he looked in front of him.
“I think I see what you mean. I’m feeling the same. Tired but satisfied. Not bothered by anything.”

“That’s what’s surprising. We should be frustrated by not having been able to break the tie.”

“I wouldn’t be anyway. Contrary to you, I’m not a sore loser,” Mikhail maliciously replied, glancing at Shoma to catch his reaction.

The Japanese boy smiled, sportsman-like. “Don’t bring back this old thing, Mikhail.” And then, not so sportsman-like: “This is a myth that never occurred.” Mikhail laughed, and Shoma himself couldn’t hold a large smile as he knew he was the one lying.

Mikhail looked at their three friends ahead of them: “Anyway, I have no idea how much money we indeed spent, but I don’t care. The fun was worth it. Even if I’m going to have difficulty waking up early tomorrow,” he said, holding a small laugh.

Shoma giggled: “Let’s enjoy without thinking of tomorrow.”

They continued walking in silence. The night felt peaceful. In comparison to the very noisy arcade room, the sounds of the half-empty streets of Milan seemed to be faded when they reached their ears. The silence between them felt companionable.

Mikhail turned his head to look at Shoma. His curly hair captured all the street lights, giving his brown bangs a strange colour and preventing his eyes to be illuminated, which prevented Mikhail from seeing the two glowing dark yet expressive pools. The Russian boy eventually spoke:

“I would like you to call me by my nickname, Misha, but I know you wouldn’t because you wouldn’t want to mistake me with the actual Misha.”

“That’s right,” Shoma replied. After a few seconds, he turned around to face Mikhail again: “Would Misha-kun be okay?”

Mikhail was a little puzzled: “I… It’s the Japanese honorific for a friend, right?”

“Yes, it is.”

After a moment of silence, Mikhail added: “But then, how do you call Misha? I mean, in English I noticed you don’t use honorifics, but in Japanese? Isn’t he Misha-kun as well?”

Shoma took the time to think before replying. Finally, he answered: “I don’t really pay attention to or remember how I referred to him if I ever mentioned him in Japanese, but I think he would probably be Misha-san, or Misha-senshu. San is the neutral honorific, and senshu means athlete.”

“It’s more formal and impersonal…?”

“Yes… I am closer to you than I am to him, that’s why. Is it okay if I call you Misha-kun, even in English?”

Mikhail smiled, and he felt his cheeks redden. He was happy to know Shoma considered him a friend. He seemed to get along well with Misha, so knowing he himself was even closer to Shoma pleasantly flattered him. He looked up at the bright moon above them, before offering Shoma a sumptuous smile that had his eyes crinkling:

“I like this name.”
I know, I know, Evgenia wasn't at this competition. But we don't really care about realism anyway, do we?

Also, as you may have noticed, I like to justify my texts. I know that it isn't very common online and I understand that it can turn people off. So, if it's really bothersome, I don't mind changing that.

Thank you for reading, I hope you'll stick around!
Mikhail heard about what Shoma had said about him through his coach. It pleasantly surprised him to know that Shoma thought of him as a friend, even though Shoma had already seemed to imply that they were quite close. It made him feel special to know that Shoma publicly said that him, Mikhail Kolyada, was the foreign skater with whom he got along the best. He hadn’t ever really thought about what they were, if they were close enough to be considered friends or not – actually, he had thought about it and about that night in Milan, but he wouldn’t admit it to himself – but from now on he would think of them as friends. And apparently, people were eager to hear more about them together in the future. Mikhail read again the translation of the tweet from the fan who got this answer from Shoma. Did he actually forget his name? Mikhail couldn’t help laughing, half-embarrassed. That boy was something else. Shoma was very honest, he wouldn’t have said that he liked Mikhail if it was not the case. So, two options left: either Shoma really had forgotten his name – and knowing him a little, that was highly likely – or he had wanted to avoid mispronouncing his name – which would not be surprising either. Well, Mikhail would have to ask him about that. He could even tease him and make a little fun of him, if they really were friends.

Mikhail smiled to himself and stood up in order to go back on the ice. The break had lasted enough.

He practiced his jumps for a long time. He would like to work on other things as well, but he needed to stay at the top and to improve his technical score if he wanted to catch up with the rest of the highest-ranked male skaters. He was impressed by Shoma’s jumps. How could such a small boy jump so high, with so much power, so much speed, and be able to do four revolutions in the air? He was fascinating. Well, Mikhail himself wasn’t what could be called tall, but his long-lasting immersion in the world of figure skating made him believe that he was average. Quad Lutz, quad toe loop. Landed. He went for a triple axel, knew just as his feet left the ice that he would fall, but to his own surprise he somehow managed to land, a little shakily though. His coach called him from the boards.

“Be careful, don’t try to save what visibly can’t be saved, or what you won’t save for sure is your health and your season. We’re not at a competition.”

She was right, he needed to go more softly. There was no need to rush. It was still the off-season. He had time to improve safely, one step at a time. He took a step back and realised that it was because he had Shoma in mind that there he was, wilding on the ice, jumping furiously dozens of times. Was he upset? No, he was just extremely eager to prove to everyone that he was also part of the best skaters. He wanted to fight neck and neck with Shoma next season. He wanted to be at the same level as him. What was this sudden rivalry he felt? Calm down, he thought to himself as he skated in circles, calm down. Just an hour ago, you were happy you were friends, what is this toxic feeling you have now? No, it’s not toxic. It wasn’t because he was Shoma’s rival that he wanted to be, well, his biggest rival. Fuck, he couldn’t focus, he needed to take a break. As he was about to ask his coach if he could stop his practice, she came to him, patted him on the shoulder, saying gentle things, and that he could go home if he wanted, that they had already worked well, and that if he needed she was there for him. She had sensed that Mikhail had turned from a very good mood, smiling and almost singing, to this unproductive attitude, full of concern, lost in his seemingly not good thoughts. He thanked her, left the ice without a look, and locked himself in the locker room. He remained seated there for a long time, trying to arrange his thoughts. What was this sudden mood swing he had?
His phone beeped, and he noticed he had a message. One of his friends was offering him to go and eat together tonight. “Pelmeni at the restaurant for dinner?” Mikhail had an inspiration. Pelmeni. That was it. It was not because he hated or was jealous of Shoma that he wanted to be his rival. It was because he wanted to be with him, closer. He wanted people to talk to Shoma about Mikhail. He wanted people to talk to him about Shoma. He wanted to talk about Shoma as well. He wanted to have even more opportunities to meet him. He wanted Shoma to think about him. But it would be stupid if Shoma thought of him negatively because of rivalry. So, no need to declare Shoma his one rival. No need to try to force fate to make them rivals more than they already were. Mikhail wanted to be friends with him. Actually, they already were, Shoma said more or less so. But he wanted more. He wanted to go and eat pelmeni with him, like friends did. He didn’t remember having ever had the urge, the strong wish to befriend someone that much. He felt like Shoma and he could become something like best friends. Mikhail just wanted more Shoma in his life. Like he wanted more pelmeni.

He changed clothes, in a much better mood than a few minutes ago. He hesitated to go back to the rink, wondered if he should even run in order to catch up with his coach before she left, but changed his mind. He was happy. He could afford a relaxing evening. He was leaving the locker room when he felt his phone in the pocket of his coat. He took it out, typed rapidly and hit the “send” button.

“Sure, I’d love to! Where do you want to go?”

Nathan was not surprised at all. Unlike people on Twitter – through which he found out about that Shoma and Mikhail friendship – he already knew. Although he had noticed for a long time that the two of them got along well and often skated together during practice at competitions, their relationship really struck him at Worlds in Milan a few months ago. Especially, after the competition. During the podium, the small medal ceremony, and the press conference. As the gold medallist, he had been stuck between the two others and had felt quite awkward. Not like a third wheel, but more like he was in the way. He was the one whose English was the best since it was his mother tongue, yet he still had felt the loneliest in that trio.

Lying on his bed, he kept scrolling through Twitter without paying attention to what was displayed on his phone screen. His mind was back in Milan. Then it wandered earlier, in PyeongChang. He had noticed the two guys laughing together once. Then he rewound his memories even before the Olympics; he thought about the Grand Prix Final, the World Team Trophy, but he couldn’t remember anything involving both boys.

Nathan put his phone down. He should have known. Well, he knew, but he should have guessed that earlier. He didn’t know much about Mikhail. But he did know a little about Shoma, and that should have been enough to guess that he would match perfectly with Mikhail. It was during that interview when Shoma had said that he was a recluse and that his life was composed of skating and gaming only. He had even said that Nathan probably knew more about Japan than he did. God, how weird Nathan had thought he was. He hadn’t wanted to judge or to despise him, especially since he knew so little about him, but at the time, when listening to Shoma – or more accurately, to the interpreter – he had thought that they were definitively two very different persons and that they probably couldn’t understand each other – without even talking about the language barrier. Since then, he had got to know Shoma better and now they got along well. Nathan liked Shoma’s way of thinking – calm, thoughtful – that could still be very mischievous whenever he wanted to have fun. How could people so different like the exact same thing, and be two of the best in the world at it? The human race was really amazing.
Nathan picked his phone up, opened Google and typed “Mikhail Kolyada.” He scrolled without stopping through the first links – his Wikipedia page, the ISU one, his Olympic profile – and clicked on Mikhail’s Twitter. Everything was written in Russian: Nathan didn’t understand a thing and thus got back to the results page. He lurked on his Instagram, because even though he couldn’t understand the captions, at least he could see the pictures. Nothing caught his attention, though. He typed the name again, this time in the YouTube search bar, and launched this “Wait What” video from the ISU channel. Soon, Mikhail’s infectious laugh filled Nathan’s earphones. The video dated back from 2016, but Mikhail looked exactly the same.

Mikhail said his favourite destination was Japan. Nathan guessed he would have many occasions to go there again. Maybe he could even convince Shoma to show him around, Nathan joked.

“$\sqrt{324}$?” the text over the video read. Mikhail thought for a moment while moving his eyebrows. Nathan also wondered what the result of $\sqrt{324}$ could be but didn’t think about it that hard.

“18,” Mikhail said, and fake applause was added to the video. Nathan stuck his bottom lip out. Mikhail really did find that out. He was genuinely impressed.

The next video started playing. It was a video that had just been uploaded. It was an interview in Russian, yet luckily it had subtitles.

The interviewer introduced Mikhail. Russian was a language that sounded sweet to Nathan’s ears.

“Misha, first question,” the female voice said – and the subtitles read – “tea or coffee?”


“Cat or dog?”

“Neither one.” Nathan raised an eyebrow. Mikhail explained: “I don’t really have a relation to pets.”

“Are you afraid of them?”

“No, it’s just that in our family we didn’t have pets, therefore I’m not attached to one or the other.”

A very elaborate answer, Nathan thought. Mikhail didn’t need to explain that much for a such a simple question that wasn’t related to figure skating, but it seemed that he liked to be precise.

“Third question: sea or mountain?”

“Sea and mountains, that is the ideal combination.”

Come on, Nathan thought, couldn’t he just choose for once?

“In your room and on your desk, chaos or order?”

“The one and the other, again.” Mikhail laughed. “There can be order and there can be chaos. But if I choose between the two, then it’s order,” he clarified with a hand gesture.

Mikhail answered closed questions the same way Shoma did: without choosing. Nathan remembered that Shoma always took the time to think about his answers to give more developed ones than those the questions originally aspired to get in order to be as sincere as possible even during a casual conversation.

The rest of Mikhail’s interview was the same: he developed each answer and didn’t try to get away with a simple one whenever he didn’t know.
The video ended, and Nathan clicked to prevent the next one to launch automatically. He locked his phone and put it down.

Wow. That was the most Shoma-like interview he had ever seen. And it wasn’t even Shoma who was interviewed.

Mikhail had planned to attend several summer camps during the off-season. He was eager to start training with one of the best retired skaters, Stéphane Lambiel, the master of spins. Having already had the chance to work with him several times, Mikhail knew that they would get along well and that the training camp would come off well.

Indeed, the sessions proved to be interesting and their collaboration was already successful. Moreover, the living environment was exceptional. Mikhail discovered the charms of living in a typical small village lost in the middle of Switzerland, an oasis of calm surrounded by the mountains which offered a stunning landscape to his eyes’ delight. It definitely played a role in favour of Stéphane’s camp: Mikhail felt like he was in vacation. He worked without noticing it. The various types of trainings felt more like as many activities organized to keep the vacationers busy while they relaxed at the same time.

Mikhail found himself enjoying the pilates sessions with Deniss. That was another attribute of the camp: Mikhail had the chance to become closer to Deniss Vasiļjevs, Stéphane’s full-time student. The Latvian boy was more than four years younger than him, but he was already very mature and wise. And he spoke Russian, so it made conversations easier. Mikhail had no one to speak to in his mother tongue in Switzerland except his coach and his training mate who had come with him, therefore being able to talk with Deniss allowed him to take a well-earned rest from English which he had to formulate his thoughts in all day. Despite his young age, Deniss already spoke four languages and was what could be called a language freak. That was the nickname the other skaters affectionately used sometimes whenever they wanted to make a little fun of him for what was otherwise a strong quality that showed itself very useful in their international environment. No one knew exactly when or who started calling him like this, but it came out regularly whenever Deniss used some idiom from another language whenever he spoke. Then, he would translate it literally and have to explain it to the confused person he was speaking to. Deniss himself was aware that he could be annoying and sometimes put many idioms in a conversation on purpose just to have fun. Deniss was a calm and rather introverted person, yet it didn’t prevent him from being a funny dummy.

Deniss was actually the person Mikhail was the closest to at the camp. Since the day he had arrived and Deniss had offered to show him around the rink and the village on his own initiative, they were spending a lot of time together, often sharing lunch or taking a walk in the evening.

One day, Deniss suggested to go hiking on the closest mountain on a day off. The forecast weather was cloudy, and they wouldn’t suffer from the heat or get sunburns, he had said. Mikhail agreed. So far, to his own surprise, he had been enjoying the quietness of the endless nature he had discovered and the rustling sounds of the wind in the trees. And thus, at dawn, they started walking along the track with hiking shoes and backpacks filled with sandwiches as the hidden sun rose higher and higher behind the clouds.

Unlike the Latvian boy, Mikhail wasn’t used to hiking and he soon wanted to take a break. He had no idea how long they had been walking for, but he had an inkling that it had already been hours. Leading the march, Deniss affirmed that they would soon reach a great spot with a picnic table where they would be able to take pictures of the stunning view and rest. But Mikhail wasn’t satisfied:
it was always “soon,” “it won’t be long,” “we’re almost there.” So he started complaining, just a little – it was unusual for him:

“We shouldn’t go hiking on our day off, we’re going to have sore muscles tomorrow. What will Stéphane think when he finds out about our excursion?”

Without even turning around, Deniss answered: “Pūst pīlītes! A Latvian idiom. Literally, it translates as ‘blowing little ducks.’ Meaning: you’re talking nonsense, Misha. Actually, Stéphane already knows we’re going and he totally approves.”

Even if he couldn’t see his face, Mikhail heard the smile in Deniss’s voice. He still grumbled, pro forma: “You two get along too well.”

Deniss turned around and waited for Mikhail to catch him up so they could walk side by side. Deniss smiled brightly, admiration in his eyes and voice: “He is a wonderful coach.”

“You’re like father and son. He knows everything about you and supports you no matter what.”

“You know, some fans actually said we look more and more like each other,” Deniss laughed.

At long last, they finally arrived. Mikhail slumped onto the bench of the picnic table and let out a long sigh.

They stayed there for quite a long time. Eventually, both boys stood up to stretch. While Deniss quenched his thirst and drank half of his bottle in one go, Mikhail took the opportunity to take pictures with his phone given that the sun had temporarily escaped the light white clouds and was shining bright. His friend hadn’t lied: the view was exceptional. They could see all the way down the green valley and admire the reflection of the sunrays on a weaving stream.

The air was fresher at altitude. Mikhail recovered his strength. He let his eyes wander and explore his close surroundings. He noticed some colourful flowers and walked towards them.

He heard Deniss’s voice behind him: “I hope I’ll get two Grand Prix assignments for all my upcoming seasons.”

“I’m sure you will,” Mikhail replied, convinced, “you totally deserve them.”

“It would be nice if we got the same.”

Mikhail turned around and smiled at the younger boy: “This makes me really happy. I like hanging out with you, you’re a very nice person.”

“Wow, thank you for the compliment!”

Back to his flowers, Mikhail crouched down to see them more closely. There was a dandelion clock that seemed only to wait for Mikhail to pick it and blow it.

“You seem to get along pretty well with Shoma, too.”

Mikhail stopped his arm movement abruptly. His focus was totally out of the flowers. It seemed that the world was now only composed of him, the flowers and Deniss.

“Yeah, we’ve got closer recently. He’s a nice guy.”

It was strange how hearing this name sounded so differently to his ears, Mikhail thought. His eyes were locked on the dandelion he was about to pick. It was as if he didn’t see it. He was feeling
strange and couldn’t dare to get up and face Deniss.

“You have a special place in his heart, I think.”

“Ah, you think so?” His own voice sounded odd to his ears. Even though Deniss could only see his back, Mikhail tried to put on a deadpan look.

The dandelion swung slowly with the soft breeze. He picked it, stood up and turned around.

“You know that you should make a wish when you blow a dandelion?” Deniss asked.

Mikhail looked at him. Deniss was sitting on the bench, legs extended in front of him. Mikhail let his eyes linger on the flower again. The white sphere looked very soft. He didn’t really know what he could wish for. He went for the easiest and made a silent wish from what he had in mind at the moment.

*I wish I understood why hearing Shoma’s name makes my world stop.*

And he blew.

“All the seeds at once!” Deniss exclaimed. “Some people believe that it means the person you love will return your feelings.”

Mikhail didn’t reply. He looked at the hundreds of seeds fluttering around in front of him, dappling the blue sky and the green valley with small white dots. Mikhail wondered who they could possibly reach.

Chapter End Notes

Here’s a link to [THE tweet](#) that started it all, the one that made me think: of course! It's obvious! They would get along so well! I live for the Mikhail & Shoma friendship! (I don’t ship them irl... it’s just... how this fic goes lol)

You can find an English translation of the tweet [here](#). Check out the [transcript](#) of the nice interview featuring Shoma and Nathan the latter mentions in the fic, and take a look at the cool [*Wait What*](#) video and the wonderful [*Tea or Coffee*](#) interview of Mikhail, you won't regret it! Special thanks to Tatjana Flade for the permission to use her great work <3

Thank you for reading!
Hello! Here's a new chapter! I included many skaters who won't actually be at GPF because I love everyone and want them to be there and have fun. Enjoy!

Vancouver was very cold in December, and the weather was awful. None of the skaters proposed to venture outside. Or else they had to provide transportation with heating the whole time, otherwise no one accepted to come. That was what everyone required after Misha had tried to organize a thing on one of the first days in the city.

He had called a taxi that came to pick him and Boyang up and brought them to an amusement park. When they arrived, the wind was blowing so hard that they almost couldn’t stand on their feet. They waited in line for several attractions, yet every time they closed one after the other because the weather could make them dangerous. Of course, they filmed all their adventures and shared them on social media for their fans’ greatest pleasure. At some point, when Misha was filming Boyang struggling at the hook-a-duck – one of the few remaining open attractions – a terrible rain started pouring. Boyang’s pole broke, and the duck he had just hooked flew away. And that was how Boyang ended up running after a flying pink rubber duck under a cataclysmic rain in Vancouver. Needless to say, once they had sheltered in a stuffed animal store, Misha posted the video on Instagram, and it went viral. The situation was absolutely hilarious, and all the skaters in Vancouver had seen the famous video and laughed about it for days.

That video was also their excuse to refuse any outside activity. This Grand Prix Final was already legendary. The weather was so horrific that two of the hotels where an important part of the skaters stayed at ended up having a problem with the Wi-Fi. It reduced even more the entertainment possibilities. The hotels were very close to each other – had the skaters got the adequate rooms, they could have waved at each other by the window. That was what the Shibutani siblings ended up doing, sharing their misadventures on Twitter, after a problem with the bookings. In spite of those organizational problems, weather threats and connection failures, everyone seemed to be in a great mood, laughing about their adventures, in expectation of what would happen next. Yuzuru had bet on a problem preventing the skating music to be played, and since then this specific possibility was the only one that actually frightened everyone: the skaters, the coaches and the organizing staff, who checked several times a day if the speakers functioned and had brought extra equipment.

In a way, the proximity induced by the situation forged an even stronger sense of community among the skaters: they were all either stuck in their hotel rooms or gathered at the rink, and each trip to go from one to the other was carefully planned in advance.

In short, contrary to the dreadful weather, the mood at the Grand Prix Final was at its brightest.

Shoma woke up feeling well-rested. It was rare enough to be stressed, and it made him happy. He was energized enough for once. Rays of light poked through the blinds and drew shadows on the walls and the bed. He couldn’t believe that out of all the days he had spent there, the sun had decided
to show itself on the only day when he didn’t have to wake up early just to shorten his night. He rolled over to look at the time on his phone. Eleven. Already? He sank his head under the sheets again. He wanted to enjoy this time during which he could stay in his bed a little longer after waking up. These opportunities had become too rare to be wasted.

But he didn’t manage to fall asleep again. The light bothered him. It was sad enough that he would have to get up to rearrange the blinds correctly.

Or he could just wait for the sun to disappear and stop shining directly on his window, a lazy voice in his head said.

But hold on, it was already eleven. The sun was probably high in the sky already, and not straight in front of his window, right? Couldn’t he have asked Mihoko-sensei to request a room that wasn’t oriented full south-east? He should remember next time. She would say that it was a selfish whim, while it was obviously just for his health. He needed his hours of sleep.

Wait. Breakfast! It was eleven already. Until what time did they serve breakfast? He had no clue. Well, he guessed he would have to get up.

He went downstairs in his pyjamas, eyes squinted to get used to the light. He entered the breakfast room, and fortunately, the dishes were still there. He felt relieved yet at the same time a little irritated because he could have stayed in his bed even longer.

He served himself a hot chocolate and some meat – the buffet offered a wide range of dishes to suit every worldwide athlete’s taste – and sat at a table. He was stirring his hot chocolate with a spoon when he noticed that he was the only one in the room. Then his eyes shut by themselves. He was dozing, still tracing circles with the spoon in his beverage, when he heard a sound close to him. He looked up, awake.

Mikhail pulled the chair in front of him to sit down. His usual smile was plastered on his face, and it was enough for Shoma not to be bothered to be woken up. He smiled back.

“Good morning Shoma, how are you doing?” Mikhail asked, amusement in his voice.

“Mmm’fine,” Shoma mumbled.

“I see you’re still half-asleep, but I can tell that you’ve slept well.”

Shoma answered with a smile. Mikhail understood that it was an assent.

“Well, you should save your energy for more useful things than stirring nothing in a cup with a spoon.”

Shoma opened his eyes fully and looked down. Indeed, he was still doing that. He softly laughed at himself.

“I guess the sound soothes me like a lullaby.” His voice was hoarse. He cleared his throat. Now he was fully awake. He looked at Mikhail and truly saw him well for the first time since he had arrived. He was wearing his country’s tracksuit and the matching jacket.

“Wait, what are you doing here? I mean, you don’t look like you’re about to have breakfast,” Shoma spoke his mind out loud.

Mikhail was still looking at him with a smile, elbows on the table. Before he could answer, it clicked in Shoma’s mind, and he added: “Wait, I know: you just arrived, right?”
“Yes, this morning. Probably when you were sleeping,” Mikhail answered with a grin that showed his teeth. “I’m on the first floor, what about you?”

“Third floor.”

“Great, only two flights of stairs to reach you. I brought my Switch, did you bring yours?”

Shoma’s eyes lit up and he smiled brightly: “Of course I did! It’s so cool, we’ll be able to play together!”

Shoma’s enthusiasm made Mikhail’s smile grow even bigger.

“I sure hope so, my family and my coach made fun of me for bringing my console, the least I can do is to use it! I’m not facing their mocking just like that,” he laughed.

“Do you think we’ll have the chance to play today?” Shoma asked. “I really like playing with you. We like the same games and I can tell you about very specific things not everyone cares about or understands. Also, you’re a good gamer. We make a good team. I… really look forward to beating that boss from last time.” He looked Mikhail in the eye. “With you. I haven’t succeeded alone. Nor with my brother or anyone. But I’m sure we can make it together.”

Mikhail wasn’t as committed to gaming as Shoma, but he understood that it was a very beautiful compliment. The best he could receive from a gamer. Shoma saw the Russian boy’s cheeks get a little rosy, and that was when he realised that he may have come on a little too strong. He felt himself blush as well in embarrassment. He must have sounded desperate. How ridiculous he was.

Mikhail broke the silence: “I’m free tonight.”

“Come to my room,” Shoma assertively demanded, eyes locked on Mikhail. A second later, he noticed the older boy’s wide eyes on him and looked down, more embarrassed than ever.

Mikhail burst into laughter: “Shoma, don’t be embarrassed. You love games, embrace it. It’s really endearing to see you that invested, you become a totally different person. It’s adorable to see this side of you.”

Shoma drank a sip of his hot chocolate to put up a brave front.

Mikhail spoke again, more softly: “I promise, Shoma, you don’t need to be ashamed of your passion. Nor do you need to be shy around me. We’re friends, Shoma, I like your gaming side as much as I like the rest of you.”

Why does everything we say sounds like a love confession, Shoma vaguely wondered, too focused on saving face to really think about it.

“So, are we gaming tonight?” Mikhail asked.

Shoma raised his gaze from his cup and looked at Mikhail. The sun shed its light on his blond hair and made it shine a pretty shade of golden. The sweet smile on his lips inspired confidence.

“Yes, we are,” Shoma answered with a smile. The embarrassment was gone.

“Great!” Mikhail stood up. “I have to go, I still haven’t finished unpacking, and I have to meet my coach after that… A long day in sight.” He smiled at Shoma again. “I’ll see you tonight!” he said before walking away with a wave of the hand.
Shoma waved at him too. How happy he was to have Mikhail close to him again. He hadn’t realised how much he had missed him during the off-season until now. His focus shifted back to his plate, but Shoma kept on smiling. He shoved a bite of meat in his mouth. He grimaced: it was cold. He realised that he still hadn’t touched his breakfast.

They had beaten the boss. It was a few days ago, but Shoma couldn’t help feeling pride, happiness and admiration for their gaming team every time he switched his console on or whenever he looked at Mikhail switch on his, like at that moment. The console made the jingle Shoma loved, and Mikhail threw the controller at him before sitting cross-legged next to him on the bed. It was their usual routine in Vancouver. They spent their days training at the rink – like almost everyone during the day, what else could they have done? – and their evenings playing games. The atmosphere was cozy, and the contrast between the cold weather outside and the warmth in the hotel made them feel like drinking hot chocolates under a blanket while playing video games all day, but they had professional obligations. Despite the tough competition that approached, both boys seemed relaxed. Shoma laughed more than usual, Mikhail was mellower than usual.

Mikhail launched the game and resumed it where they had stopped the day before. He had seized player one. Shoma was okay with that. They didn’t need to argue about that: the one in the room of whom they were playing was always player one. It was their tacit agreement.

Mikhail wandered through the map, looking for which level to confront next. Shoma saw their progression, which was still quick although they didn’t play the same game depending on whether they gamed in Mikhail’s room or his. Shoma marvelled again at the thought of the boss level they had completed a few days ago.

Mikhail pointed at a level with the controller.

“Are we ready for this one?”

Shoma took the time to think about it.

“I think so. But after that, before going for the next boss we must go to the store to get some potions.”

Mikhail nodded: “Also, the experience we’ll gain will probably make us reach the next experience level and we’ll be more equipped for the boss.”

Mikhail launched the level. No need to speak anymore, both players knew what to do. They had naturally shared the roles. Their eyes were locked on the screen and their mastered ballet. The sounds of the video game filled the room.

That was their evenings. Every one. One day in Shoma’s room, the next one in Mikhail’s. That was how they were spending their time here. They talked. They skated. They ate. They played. Sometimes, they would share breakfast whenever they woke up at the same time. The evenings they spent playing games together were still the best moments. Shoma loved the nightly atmosphere, the silent corridors he walked down, gliding quietly on the carpet while everyone else except him and Mikhail was probably sleeping. He loved it when he knocked the softest possible way on Mikhail’s door, before the ever-smiling head poked through the gap and opened the door fully to let him in. The lights of the TV screen were always inviting, and Shoma had wondered several times why Mikhail’s room looked more welcoming than his although they were exactly the same.
Mikhail got hurt by a monster and his character was threatened to be killed in the next few seconds if he didn’t recover. Shoma pressed the pad of his controller all the other way around. His character turned around and reached Mikhail’s one. He gave him some potion, before hitting the monster with his sword. Mikhail’s character stood up and helped him kill the monster.

“Thank you,” Mikhail whispered.

As they kept on running through the level, Shoma remembered that time yesterday when Nathan had asked him to give Dmitri Aliev his wallet back.

“He forgot it in the locker room and I am in a hurry right now, can you give it to him for me please?” Nathan had asked, short of breath.

Shoma stared at the wallet Nathan had put in his hand. The American boy hadn’t waited for an answer and was already running out of the hotel lobby when Shoma shouted: “Wait, which room is he in?”

“108!” Nathan turned his head and yelled before disappearing in the rain.

Shoma climbed the stairs and arrived on the first floor. It reminded him of Mikhail and the already countless times he had done the same route to meet Mikhail at night. He smiled and went more slowly, since he didn’t know where room 108 was. He passed by Mikhail’s room. 103. He didn’t know the number of his room until now. He just knew the way by heart.

He found Dmitri’s room and gave him his wallet. The Russian boy thanked him profusely and Shoma felt obliged to specify that it was Nathan who had braved the elements for him. On his way back, Shoma glanced at room 103 and started humming, hands in his pockets.

Back on the screen, he and Mikhail were on the verge of the end of the level. Shoma noticed that he was still wearing a smile and shook his head. This was a little too much, he thought to himself. He thought he was weird to be that happy just by seeing the door of Mikhail’s room.

The well-known jingle of the victory filled the room. Level complete. Mikhail turned his head and smiled at Shoma. The former raised his hand and they high-fived.

This banquet evening wasn’t his day. Nathan had been feeling bad for a moment now and this social event that he would usually have enjoyed wasn’t bettering his mood. Since the new scoring rules had come out, he had received a lot of hatred on social media because the ISU was accused of favouring him. He thought that it was most probably partly true, and it made him mad as well. He was even more enraged by the fact that he hadn’t asked for anything, this rule annoyed him as well, but here he was, being disparaged by every fan there was and receiving – according to him – fake smiles mixed with support among meaningful silences from the other skaters. It didn’t help that he won the first competition involving all elite figure skaters since the new rules came into effect, beating the uncontested and most adored king of figure skating: Yuzuru Hanyu himself. Every media present at the competition had been continuously talking only about that, and Nathan was becoming paranoiac as he had the impression that everyone here at the banquet was looking at him from a distance and criticizing him behind his back.

He had isolated himself to brood over his dark thoughts and wanted to go home. He didn’t dare to look at his phone again as he knew there was still certainly a deluge of hateful comments filling his
social media accounts. He tried to take his mind off these thoughts by watching the other guests.

His eyes scanned the place and came across Boyang Jin, standing out in his shiny tuxedo in the middle of the room, having the time of his life taking selfies with Misha Ge. Nathan held back a small laugh. The Chinese boy seemed to handle well the Peppa Pig deprivation he had to face. What a world, Nathan thought. In which world could you be a world-class athlete and travel the world as you’re idolized by thousands of fans who support your childish obsession, and be liked from your colleagues even when you’re striking stupid Instagram poses? Despite its regrettable flaws, figure skating was an incredible environment.

His reflection was interrupted by an overly joyful Yuzuru Hanyu crossing the room with a bright smile, on his way to tease Shoma Uno, who seemed rather annoyed – or sleepy.

Nathan’s eyes then stopped on a group of pair skaters and ice dancers. They looked like upper-class adults having a fancy reception, all well-dressed with sobriety and good taste. Now that he thought about it, it had always seemed to Nathan that pairs and ice dancers were like the parents of banquets, the regular guests who handled them so well, having small talks perfectly made for this kind of event, whereas the kids like Yuzuru were restlessly skipping to talk and laugh noisily with everyone.

As he was overviewing the situation to confirm his theory, he was stunned by Alina Zagitova. Was it really her? She looked very adult with her long dress and hair. She was very pretty. No, he had to say: she was absolutely gorgeous. It filled Nathan with unease. She was only a child, and there she was, looking like a woman to marry, talking maturely with thirty-year-old men. Although she was most certainly old enough to handle pressure, fame or even sexualization, Nathan still felt like she needed to be protected.

His reflection was interrupted again when he suddenly felt a shadow right by him. Mirai and Adam had come nearer without him noticing.

“Cheer up, Nathan, you won the gold medal, but you look even more deadly jaded than usual – if that is possible,” Adam said as he put an arm around his shoulder.

“Are you okay, Nathan? You shouldn’t shut yourself away or you’ll have even less chance of having fun,” Mirai added worriedly.

“I’m fine, I’m just not in the mood to have fun with people.”

Nathan tried to reassure them, but his words didn’t fool his friends.

“Come on, Nate, stop lying, I know you’re feeling bad for winning with those bullshit ass rules. But you know what? Yuzuru made mistakes, it is a fact. You would have won even with the former scoring rules, so stop chewing over that and drink your wine.”

Nathan remained silent and looked at his half-empty glass. He had nothing to say: he knew Adam was right.

Mirai wasn’t looking at them but was sweeping around with her eyes.

“Hey, you’ve found a pretty good observation point here, Nate,” she commented. “Here, we are in the perfect spot for me to expound my impressions to you.”

Nathan looked at her. She smiled mischievously: “Aha, I have caught your attention. Okay, look for yourself: don’t you sense something… something strong? I can see something unusual that makes my mind wonder a thing or two…”
Nathan raised an eyebrow and started scanning the room again, intrigued. But nothing struck him. Adam did the same and eventually gave up and asked Mirai to just tell them.

“Look over there, next to the buffet,” she said as she pointed her finger in the said direction. Standing a little apart from everyone, Shoma Uno was talking with Mikhail Kolyada. So, he had succeeded in escaping Yuzuru’s ferocious hugs, Nathan observed.

“Is it Shoma and Mikhail you’re talking about?” Nathan ventured.

“Yes!” Mirai answered with an excited voice.

“And so, what’s up about them?”

“Come on, just look at them!”

“Yeah, I’m looking, and I don’t see anything special, won’t you just tell us?” Nathan was becoming fed up with this stupid guessing game. Suddenly, Adam drew all attention to him:

“Aaaah! I’m so proud of my gay babies!”

He shouted so loudly that a few persons turned their heads to look at the trio. But they carried their conversations on quickly after when they saw that it was only Adam and his usual enthusiasm.

Nathan sighed: “You’re so embarrassing.”

“Yes, I’m used to your loud remarks, Adam,” Mirai said seriously, “but what would be embarrassing is if the two concerned heard you speculate about them with zero tactfulness. Or if other people like those who looked at you understood what you were talking about. You know you could ruin their careers. And yours at the same time. And even our friendship.”

Adam looked sad. Mirai went on: “You should never assume somebody’s sexuality or relationships and shout it from the rooftops like that. Especially when you’re not a close friend of these persons and you don’t know if they’re okay with that kind of jokes. And especially when those people are famous athletes from pretty conservative countries regarding this topic, reigning over an extremely conservative sport like figure skating.”

Adam looked down, ashamed. Mirai placed a hand on his shoulder: “It’s okay, Adam, I know you didn’t mean any harm. But please be careful. It only needs one stupid mistake like that to literally destroy several persons.”

Adam apologised profusely for several minutes, before someone came to fulfil their glasses and Mirai put the conversation back on its first topic.

“We can still have a little fun. But we have to be extremely careful not to be heard and to do this just for fun, not seriously, we’re not making fun of anyone behind their backs. Okay?”

Adam and Nathan nodded. The mood was lighter, and Nathan now felt quite interested by what Mirai had seen before Adam. She explained:

“I’m convinced there’s something going on between these two. I mean, just look at them: they’ve isolated themselves in a corner where there are only the two of them talking while standing pretty close… Look at the way they look at each other, just look at their smiles! Those are not normal smiles, those are radiating smiles of people who feel more than friendship for each other and who wish this conversation could go on forever. They’re so into their own little world that they’re oblivious to everything that’s happening around them. They didn’t even notice when Alex came to
them to shoot some YouTube videos. You’ve missed such a scene! He got to Shoma and Mikhail, but he retraced his steps a few seconds later when he saw how deep into each other’s eyes they were.”

Nathan stared at Mikhail and Shoma in silence. From a distance, he couldn’t really tell if there was genuinely a flirty thing going on over there, he was too far to see if the boys had sparkles in their eyes or something cheesy like that. At some point, Mikhail said something that made Shoma laugh, and since he was looking at them, Nathan almost heard it – or imagined that he had. He knew that Shoma had a baby voice, and his laugh… Nathan could never decide if it was cute or embarrassing, because he felt both at the same time whenever he heard it. But what was sure was that it was an authentic, bright laugh, free of any shyness. And Mikhail’s face afterwards was similar: a genuine, brilliant smile and twinkly eyes shining for the other boy’s gaze. Okay, now Nathan agreed with Mirai.

“Mirai, I think you may be right,” he said.

“Ah, I’m glad you feel the same! This is kind of obvious, right?”

Adam responded in Nathan’s place: “I saw it right when you told me it was them. You didn’t even need to tell me anything, well, except who it concerned. So yeah, I think we can agree on that. I don’t know if they’re together or just flirting, but maybe we should tell them to be careful with that? Or they’ll end up the new Yuzuvier of figure skating.”

Mirai shook her head: “I don’t think we know them enough for that, we might make them uncomfortable. And imagine if we got it all wrong, I would never be able to talk to them again because of how ashamed I’d be.”

Nathan nodded: “I think that too. If it’s that obvious, Yuzuru won’t take long to warn Shoma. Unlike him, Yuzuru is very aware, and he always takes care of Shoma. I don’t worry for them.”

They remained silent for a moment, before Adam drank the end of his glass dramatically.

“Shall we join the rest of Team USA?” he suggested.

“Sure!” Mirai and Nathan answered at the same time. Mirai led the way to Maia who was waving at them, and Adam went to push Nathan from behind: “And nobody’s looking at you weirdly, idiot.”

At the banquet, he had been teasing Shoma for hours, as usual. Shoma was a little tired of him, but he was used to it. What was this senpai-kouhai relationship in which it was the kouhai who tried to escape the senpai’s intrusive and exhausting behaviour?

“Shoma, are you dating Mikhail-senshu?”

What the fuck? Shoma froze and looked up. Who else than Yuzuru could have asked this question? He was wearing that mischievous smile Shoma knew all too well, it was his “I know I am teasing you and I am very happy to do so” smile of the dork he was. Shoma was used to Yuzuru’s embarrassing questions and he often didn’t really listen to him because the boy talked too much, but this very question really astonished him.

“Wait Yuzu-kun... is this a serious question? I mean, do you think we have this kind of relationship?”
“Oh, you think your couple is so obvious that I shouldn’t even need to ask such a stupid question?”

Shoma grumbled: “You’re so unbearable.”

Yuzuru’s eyes widened as he was shocked by Shoma’s rudeness. Shoma noticed it and looked down:

“Sorry Yuzu-kun, but you’ve been teasing me all evening and I think I have come to my boundaries. I just want to leave.”

“Oh, Sho-chan I am so sorry! I thought it was amusing and I didn’t realise it was too much. I am so, so sorry! I’m feeling so bad right now,” Yuzuru apologised.

He took Shoma in his arms and held him tight, with his head in the shorter boy’s hair. Shoma eventually hugged him back.

They parted, and Shoma softly said: “It’s okay Yuzu-kun. I know you didn’t mean any harm.”

“Oh, I am so glad you forgive me.” Yuzuru held back his tears, he didn’t want to annoy Shoma even more. “I am sorry. Do you want me to walk you to your room or something?”

“Yes, I think I should go to sleep.”

Yuzuru had Shoma say goodbye to Team Japan and discreetly took some petit fours in passing, he specified to Javier who came in a rush as he saw him and Shoma leave that he would be back in a minute, and during all this Shoma’s mind was away, focused on and confused by his senpai’s question.

In the elevator, Shoma spoke again: “Why did you ask me if I was dating Mikhail?”

Yuzuru felt his heart clench: “I am sorry Shoma, I just wanted to tease you. Please, stop thinking about it, it was just a stupid question.”

“No, I actually wonder why you would think that. As for me, Mikhail is a friend, but so are you, so is Keiji, and nobody has ever asked me if we were more than just friends.”

Oh Shoma, you have no idea what is going on on Twitter and in some fanfics, Yuzuru thought. He was thankful to Mihoko-sensei for protecting her student from such things. Should he tell her that perhaps Shoma had better stop learning English?

The elevator’s doors opened, and they got out.

Yuzuru glanced at Shoma while they walked: “Am I the only one who asked you about that?”

“Yes,” Shoma simply answered.

“I would have thought that other people might have already teased you.”

A few seconds went by in silence.

“You and Mikhail have got a lot closer these past few months.”

It wasn’t a question, but a statement.

“Yes, indeed, but we hadn’t talked in months until this GPF. Since Worlds last season I think.”
“Really? You don’t keep in touch?”

Shoma shrugged: “We didn’t, but it may change.” They had just recently exchanged their phone numbers to tell each other when they could meet to play video games. A schedule proposal, “Can I come over?” and “Ok” were the three types of messages that composed most of their written conversations.

They arrived in front of the door of Shoma’s room and stopped there, facing each other. Yuzuru took the plunge:

“Okay, Sho, there it is: I think you and Mikhail look a lot like a couple. I mean, as if you were dating and in love with each other. I thought other people may think the same, but I don’t know at all, to be honest. It’s just an impression. Because no one is used to seeing you act this way with someone.”

“What way?” Shoma interrupted, astounded.

“Looking for him every time he may be there. Talking to him that much, more than with anyone else – and when I say talking, I mean that you are actually talking a whole lot more than usual in your conversations and he isn’t monologuing. Also, you don’t see your own face light up when you spot him in a room. And you laugh very often with him. Loudly. Everyone heard you laugh tonight. We aren’t used to seeing a loud Shoma. Plus, you seem to become even less aware of your surroundings when you’re talking with him, it’s as if you were drowned in his eyes and couldn’t see anything else. The world is Mikhail, isn’t it?”

Shoma’s eyes were the widest they had ever been. He was dumbfounded and didn’t understand where Yuzuru had got all of this.

“Where is the reclusive Shoma? Keiji told me that the last time you roomed together, he was the homebody, and you were a social butterfly.”

What was he talking about? In Milan Shoma and Mikhail had just gamed together a few times after the competition – often in Mikhail’s room because he had one all to himself, whereas Shoma shared his with Keiji, who liked to go to bed rather early.

“Yuzu-kun,” Shoma began, “I don’t get what you’re talking about. I don’t think I am this way when I am with Mikhail, but even if it were the case, we are just good friends. I like him a lot, it’s true, and indeed, I am happy whenever I see him, but it’s because we are friends. It’s nothing romantic, believe me.”

Yuzuru looked at Shoma with an unreadable expression: “Okay Shoma, never mind. Forget what I said, I’m just imagining things.” His gaze staggered a little before setting on Shoma again. “No, actually, don’t forget. Please think about it a bit, maybe you’ll find something out by yourself.”

Couldn’t he stop speaking in riddles? Shoma understood less and less. His understanding may have been below sea level at this point. He was tired and couldn’t properly process what the hell Yuzuru was talking about. He needed to sleep, they could talk about it tomorrow if it mattered to Yuzuru. The latter sensed that it was pointless to continue the conversation:

“I’ll let you sleep now, I’m going back,” Yuzuru said.

“Do you want to come in?” Shoma offered.

“No, thanks, I told Javi that I would be back soon. I want to spend time with him now that we only have rare occasions to meet.”
Shoma picked up on this topic that woke him up a little: “Yeah, I wondered why he was here given that he didn’t compete…?”

“Pre-retirement,” Yuzuru stated. “It’s difficult to change your life all of a sudden, so he takes it slow. He still came to watch the competition and attend the banquet, and I think I’m one of the reasons why.”

Shoma smiled softly, eyelids heavy.

“Have a good night, Sho.”

“Good night, Yuzu-kun.”

That night, the darkness of the comfortable room was not as inviting as usual, and it took a lot longer for Shoma to find sleep.
"Guys, I want to offer you something!"

Saitama, Japan. Mikhail and Shoma had been training at the rink for several hours already. They were standing on the ice and talking about edges when the enthusiastic voice of Jason Brown had them turn their heads.

Jason skated towards them with his usual smile. He stopped close to them, and some ice spattered on the side with a characteristic sound of blades.

"Would you like to play cards tonight? I already offered Wakaba and Kaori, and then I saw you and thought you’d like to as well."

Who could resist Jason’s kindness and smile? Mikhail and Shoma looked at each other, but the answer was already clear in their minds.

The hotel had a common room furnished with some tables and couches, like a lounge. Jason brought them there, and they sat down in a messy arrangement of chairs, sofas and armchairs of different heights around a table. There were Wakaba and Kaori laughing and gently kicking each other as they were both half-lying on a couch. There was Jason laughing with them in his comfortable armchair next to them, and then there was Keiji who had joined them and was sitting straight and stiff on an uncomfortable wooden chair between Jason and Mikhail. The latter and Shoma had sat down on two pretty matching chairs, one light blue and the other joyful orange.

Jason took out a deck of cards and dealt them to the players. He explained the rules of a game called president, and everyone focused on the game.

After a few interruptions here and there at the beginning for everyone to understand the details of the rules, the rounds came one after another, and Jason was the indomitable president – of course, given that he was the only one who knew about the game before that evening. However, Wakaba was becoming more and more skilled, and everyone encouraged her to topple the monarchy of the reigning Jason since they knew she was the only one who had a chance to ever beat him.

When she finally won, Jason left the cacophony of cheers and giggles to bring everyone some drinks from a vending machine.

He came back and saw the two Japanese girls making efforts to speak to Mikhail in English. Jason
observed that Mikhail was the only one who didn’t speak Japanese and made it his mission to make sure the Russian boy didn’t get excluded.

The drinks and the dimmed lighting made everyone relax even more and feel the peaceful nightly atmosphere.

Jason turned his attention back to Kaori’s funny stories – told in Japanese this time – and her laugh was infectious. At some point, he looked up to see what everyone else was doing. He knew Wakaba was listening to Kaori too since she was right next to her and laughed from time to time. Next to Wakaba was Shoma who was in the middle of a conversation with Mikhail. He was leant forward, and his gaze never left Mikhail. Jason felt happy for them to be such good friends. It would also help Shoma with his English, and Jason looked forward to the day when they could converse in his mother tongue and not Shoma’s anymore – even though Jason loved practicing his Japanese. He was glad that Shoma took care of Mikhail because Kaori didn’t seem about to switch to English. He didn’t want the group to split in two either, but it was still better than to leave someone alone.

What about Keiji, Jason wondered. He turned his head. Keiji was looking at Mikhail and Shoma, sunk in a deep reflection. Jason wondered if he could hear what they were saying. Keiji was a little far from them, and the loud chuckles of the girls were probably covering Shoma’s quiet voice – Jason himself couldn’t hear it and he wasn’t farther from them than Keiji was.

If truth be told, Keiji could hear some fragments of sentences every now and then.

“Yes, last year I graduated, and now university is finally over for me,” Mikhail said.

“You seem more relieved than anything else.” Keiji had to listen carefully to hear Shoma’s remark.

“Indeed… I wasn’t really interested in it. What I like is skating. But I have to cover my back because I won’t skate forever, and even an injury can force me to stop earlier.”

Keiji thought that Mikhail was a cautious person. He always saw him quiet and calm before a competition. He didn’t know much about him, but he liked him. He was confident about him and his friendship with Shoma. Their relationship was a good thing.

“How did you say it already?” Mikhail asked. Keiji saw the mischievous smile on his face and deduced that it was a rhetorical question. Meanwhile, Shoma remained expressionless. Keiji hadn’t paid attention to the last things they had said.

Mikhail made a face:

“You study hard? Impressive!” he said with a strange voice before he cracked up laughing.

“That’s not how I said it!” Shoma protested while scowling and digging deeper into his seat.

“Well, I don’t know, it was a written interview!” Mikhail managed to say between two bursts of laughter, “I need to ask Nathan about it.”

Keiji smiled. If Mikhail teased Shoma, it meant that they were both comfortable with each other.

Mikhail was still smiling and laughing. His crinkly blue eyes let his white teeth stand out in the spotlight.

Keiji looked outside. Despite the reflection of the interior lights, Keiji could still spot the moon behind the patio door. The storm had ceased. The night was calm and quiet.
He looked at the people gathered around the table. There was always this particular atmosphere at night. Sharing an evening with friends always seemed different than in broad daylight. It was warmer, everyone was brought closer together by the secret they shared while the rest of the people was sleeping and had no idea of what it was missing. What happened at night, stayed at night. It was never reminisced the day after, when the sun lit the earth. The night was also the time for confidences.

Keiji looked at the two boys again.

“Misha-kun,” Shoma said, seemingly at the end of a sentence. Keiji couldn’t hear the rest.

So, they were already there. At nicknames. And Shoma never used honorifics in English. It must have been affectionate.

He was sure. Keiji trusted his reason more than his intuition, but this time he was completely sure that all the clues were there for him to deduce and figure this out. Although he probably wasn’t aware of every clue at his disposal, his subconscious had registered them. He wasn’t following his intuition blindly.

He was sure that neither of the two boys chatting near him knew already. Maybe they were yet at the stage of questioning a little, but maybe they still hadn’t given them a single thought. Them? Their feelings.

Keiji was willing to bet that Mikhail and Shoma were slowly falling in love with each other.

“So when you can sleep as long as you want, at what time do you naturally wake up?” Mikhail asked Shoma.

“The later the better,” the latter answered.

Yes, Keiji was convinced. They had been in their own little world since they had stopped playing cards and were drowned in each other’s eyes. As if they were soulmates. Keiji knew Shoma very well, and he had never seen him that attracted to someone. Keiji looked at the young boy and smiled. He was so happy for him. Keiji hoped that this thing between them would work.

Jason raised his voice to get everyone’s attention: “Who wants to play another game? I know one that is very funny.”

They all agreed to play pig. The rule was for everyone to pass one of the four cards they had in hand to the person on their left at the same time. Whenever someone had a four-of-a-kind, they must hit the stack made of the remaining cards with their hand, and the last player to follow would lose.

When Shoma hit the pile, Mikhail was the quickest to follow, whereas Keiji was the last. He didn’t react to the other players making fun of him for his lack of responsiveness. He had missed the chance to win, but not the slight stiffening of Shoma and Mikhail when the latter had put his hand on the former’s. And neither did Keiji miss the brief second in which their hands remained on the stack, silently touching, while everyone chattered and had pulled theirs back.

Mikhail had placed third in the short program, and Shoma had placed second. Therefore, for the free program he and Shoma were in the same warm-up group, but Shoma skated right after Mikhail, and they couldn’t encourage each other since Mikhail was at the kiss and cry when Shoma stepped on
Mikhail was disappointed with his score, but he wasn’t surprised. He had fallen on a jump. His score was deserved. He was currently behind Nathan Chen only, who had finished behind him in the short program.

Shoma skated an outstanding program, and the public seemed to have this opinion as well, judging by the applause he was granted and the number of gifts thrown on the ice. Mikhail watched Shoma react to his score from the green room. The Japanese athlete scored a season’s best. He would finish at least second. The delighted smile on his face cheered Mikhail up. He knew that he wouldn’t medal. Yuzuru still hadn’t skated and he would never mess up enough for Mikhail to place higher than him.

Shoma arrived in the green room and they hugged while the audience roared at Yuzuru’s new world record. The sweat on his face didn’t bother Mikhail. He thought it just made Shoma’s features glow for the light to reflect more on his flawless skin; moreover, Shoma usually turned his head towards the exterior whenever he hugged someone.

Shoma said he was sorry for Mikhail.

“I would have loved to share the podium with you,” the younger boy added.

But that was all. Shoma knew that Mikhail didn’t need a ton of condolences. They were too close for such empty words.

Time for the podium. After all the skaters congratulated the medallists, Mikhail patted Shoma on the back. Shoma turned around to smile at him. A genuine smile conveying all his appreciation for Mikhail; a smile no one caught, not even the cameras. And then Shoma got under the spotlight.

Bitterness. That was all Mikhail could feel when he saw Yuzuru shake hands with Nathan and Shoma. How much Mikhail wished he had been there! He liked all three boys and was happy for them, but this feeling wouldn’t let him enjoy the scene.

The silver and bronze medallists joined Yuzuru in the middle of the podium. Yuzuru offered his arm for Shoma to link with his, which he did with a giggle. And that’s when it hit him.

Mikhail wasn’t only bitter because of his loss, he was also terribly jealous. Seeing Yuzuru do the wedding pose with Shoma made a wild flow of jealousy stream through his veins, like a poison filling his entire body. His heart pulsed strongly. The venom prevented his brain from functioning. He couldn’t do anything else but stare at the splendid smile Shoma offered to Yuzuru. He had to stand this view. Yuzuru said something and Shoma and Nathan burst out laughing. Mikhail would have paid to know what he could have said to make his friend laugh that much. He wanted to be the only one to make Shoma laugh this way.

The medallists left the podium to take their countries’ flags for the photographs. Mikhail was still watching with his bloodshot eyes. It was only when they finally left the ice that Mikhail calmed down. He felt exhausted. He needed to rest and to think about what had just happened. Jealousy wasn’t a feeling he was used to. He only very seldom felt it, and it was always regarding skating. He wasn’t sure it had something to do with skating this time. He needed to figure this out.

He gathered his belongings in silence. Everyone looked at him with compassionate looks. They must have thought that he was disappointed with the results, and he wouldn’t contradict them. He left the arena without a look.
Shoma and Mikhail had returned to the good old traditions, and they had been gaming in Shoma’s room since twilight the night after the gala. Now that the competition was over, they could game until way too late at night. After they overcame a difficult stage, Shoma took a break to drink some water while Mikhail checked his phone. It was one in the morning.

“I think I should go,” Mikhail stated.

Shoma looked a little sad, but he accepted his friend’s decision: “Okay. Next time we begin the new quest?”

“Sure, even tomorrow if you want.”

Shoma’s smile reappeared. Mikhail stood up from the mattress and went by the window. He pushed the curtains a little aside.

It was raining, and the slants of water indicated that the wind was blowing hard too.

“Hum…” Mikhail began.

Shoma turned his head and looked outside. “Oh.” He stood up and joined Mikhail by the window. “Do you have an umbrella?”

Mikhail sighed: “No, I don’t.”

Shoma dropped his head: “I don’t either. Sorry.”

They kept on looking silently at the rain disrupting the quietness of the night for a while.

“But I have a hood,” Mikhail said, “I can wait until the rain subsides a little and then run.”

His hotel was a few hundreds of meters away. He could manage without getting too wet.

“Mikhail… you’re not talking seriously, are you?” The tone wasn’t disapproving, Shoma was just showing that he was able to cogitate enough to realise that his friend’s plan wasn’t a good one. “Your hotel is way too far away, and the rain is too strong.”

Mikhail didn’t answer. He was still looking at the water flooding the car park of the hotel with growing puddles. It seemed that the rain was getting heavier. In comparison, it seemed pretty light a few minutes ago.

“Stay here for the night.” Shoma’s voice pulled Mikhail out of his contemplation. He looked at Shoma with wide eyes.

“I have a double bed. It’s not even a double bed, it’s just two single mattresses clustered together,” Shoma added while showing the said bed with his hand.

Mikhail followed Shoma’s gesture and stared at the white sheets, a little untidy because they had sat on their edges when they had gamed. He shifted his gaze back to his friend:

“No, that’s kind of you but I’ll go back to my room. I’ll be okay, the rain will probably weaken soon.”
“You’re sure?” Shoma asked.

The loud crack of the fall of a branch on the car park startled both boys.

“Misha-kun.” Mikhail slowly turned his head to meet Shoma’s steady gaze. The tone was determined.

He knew what Shoma was about to say, yet he didn’t say anything. He couldn’t hold his friend’s gaze.

“Stay here. Please.” This last word was a lot softer and had Mikhail look at Shoma again. A pleading look made his eyes glow a little, just like whenever he did his well-known puppy eyes that made everyone’s heart melt.

Nonetheless, Mikhail still tried to protest: “No, Shoma, it’s okay. I have to go.”

“But it’s dangerous! You can’t go outside like that!” Shoma screamed. Mikhail was so surprised to hear him raise his voice that he gaped. Shoma’s behaviour was a mixture of anger and concern.

“I don’t want anything bad to happen to you! You… You’re important to me!” the younger boy gasped. “I would never forgive myself if you were to get hurt because I let you go recklessly!”

It took a minute for Mikhail to recover from what had just happened. It looked like Shoma was in the same process. Eventually, Mikhail softly gave up: “Okay. I’ll stay here.”

Shoma let out a sigh of relief.

“Do you want to sleep yet, or…” Shoma wore a mischievous smile. “Or shall we start the new quest?” he asked with a smirk.

“Let’s go for the new quest!” Mikhail answered happily before he jumped on the bed. Any remainder of embarrassment was gone.

They played for a long time until sleepiness forced them to go to bed. Both boys fell asleep in a heartbeat. Mikhail didn’t even have the time to think about the fact that he was going to sleep in the same bed as Shoma.

He woke up several hours after. The first rays of the yellow sunlight of dawn passed through the curtains. He had no idea what time it could be, but he didn’t care. He wasn’t awaited anywhere today, so he kept his eyes tightly closed, hoping to get to sleep again.

The light bothered him. He was on the side of the window, whereas Shoma had taken the bed near the door. Mikhail rolled over in the sheets to face the other way. He felt something touch his hand and stiffened. He quickly pulled his arm close to his chest and opened his eyes.

He had touched Shoma’s arm when he had changed position. The Japanese boy was still on his side of the bed, but his arm had extended beyond the line separating the two mattresses.

Mikhail felt shivers run down his spine. The hair on his arms and legs stood up, and he wrapped himself tighter in the sheets before an insidious shudder climbed his sweaty back up to his neck and made him quiver. He quickly shook his head in an attempt to get rid of this paradoxical sensation of
cold and warmth at the same time.

Mikhail rolled up in a ball. The muscles of his wide-open eyes didn’t work anymore, and he couldn’t do anything else but stare at Shoma’s sleeping body.

Shoma had his left arm extended and his fingers pointed elegantly towards the mattress. The line from his shoulder to the tip of his nails was in a stunning continuity. An overflowing harmony sprang from his entire body. If it weren’t for the regular movement of his chest betraying his peaceful sleep, Shoma could have been mistaken for the statue of an Ancient Greek god: the perfection in the details, the immaculate colours of his skin merging and melting into a watercolour of all hues playing with the shadows, the marvellous twirling curls of his deep, soft hair, lying nonchalantly on the lucky pillow that didn’t seem soft at all in comparison to the perfection Shoma was granting it… Everything about Shoma deserved to be portrayed – carved in wood, painted on canvas, sculpted in marble. And even just the small part of his cheek with the two beauty spots above his splendid jawline deserved to be pictured in a several-meter-wide masterpiece. In spite of everything, even if the most talented artists – Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci – took Shoma as their muse – and God knows they would be right – the final piece of art would never, ever resemble the otherworldly, celestial view the model offered to the poor humankind’s delighted eyes.

The untidy sheets covered Shoma’s lower body – probably to prevent Mikhail from fainting at the surreal view – yet a rebel foot had poked out of the white fabric and offered a glimpse of Shoma’s heavenly leg, bent in a mathematically gorgeous angle.

Shoma lay on his back, his head slightly turned in Mikhail’s direction. A single sunray crossed his face out and illuminated his left eyelid. Thanks to his long eyelashes, a half-moon shadow played on the upper part of his cheek. The line from his forehead hidden by his fringe to his chin was a marvellous road that didn’t suffer any tight bend nor break. The tip of his nose seemed to be calling Mikhail to bop it in a sweet caress. Shoma’s pink lips were slightly parted, just enough for Mikhail to see them curving into a heart shape, waiting for him to feel them against his. Despite the lack of light, every valley on Shoma’s skin was visible and Mikhail found himself craving to trace each line with his hand.

Suddenly, Mikhail knew exactly why he felt strange whenever Shoma was around or mentioned. Even though he didn’t want to, he forced himself to get up. He could have drowned himself in the ethereal sight of Shoma, but he dreaded that it would be like a siren song that would keep him trapped forever.

He took care to fully close the door before he turned the light of the bathroom on in order not to wake Shoma up. The harsh white light hurt his eyes and he stiffened while he waited for his eyes to adjust, tightly shut. Then he drank water from the tap and splashed his face with cold water. It woke him up. He looked at his reflection in the mirror above the sink.

*I’m in love. I’m fucking in love.*

He had no clue how long he stayed there, hands on the cold ceramic of the sink, gasping and sweating as if he had just performed his free skate.

What if Shoma woke up? What if he had already woken up when Mikhail had got up and was wondering what Mikhail had been doing since he had entered the bathroom, hearing his heavy breathing? Mikhail would tell him he had had a nightmare. Maybe it wasn’t fully a lie.

Mikhail managed to calm down and felt ready to enter the room and face Shoma again. Or rather to face his feelings. He turned the light off and left the bathroom. Shoma was still sleeping, in the same position. Mikhail slowly lay down under the sheets. He looked at Shoma again. The overwhelming
feelings that had made him lose his mind were gone. His heart was still pounding fast, so loudly that he feared that this sound would be the one to disturb Shoma’s sleep, yet he managed to stand the sight of a sleeping Shoma next to him.

Mikhail had to admit it to himself: he was in love with Shoma. He couldn’t deny it any longer. Since he had got to know him, he cared more and more about him; he was always looking forward to meeting him as often as possible. He had felt the desire to kiss him. To hold his hand. He had felt jealousy whenever someone else was with him. He had felt his stomach do cartwheels whenever someone mentioned him. He had felt his heart and head explode whenever he saw him arrive. Mikhail cherished every second in which he had the privilege to attend the handsome spectacle of Shoma’s life – whenever Shoma walked, whenever he talked to someone, whenever he didn’t understand something and tilted his head, to say the least. It was useless to hide it any longer. Shoma had made his life a lot more interesting regardless of him overshadowing all Mikhail’s surroundings whenever he was there.

Mikhail’s eyes closed by themselves. Sleep was coming his way again. Maybe, when he woke up, these feelings would have vanished. Maybe this sweet parenthesis in the early morning was only a dream.

Tomorrow would be the last day he would be able to see Shoma before a long time. In the late afternoon, Mikhail would leave and head back home. Having some time home, with his relatives and friends, far away from the competition and its stress, far away from Shoma and his games, his smile, would help him clear his mind and decipher how he felt and what he wanted to do. Resting and thinking. Taking a step back.

Mikhail had thought that he just had a crush on Shoma. He had thought that seeing his cute face peacefully sleeping in the middle of the night when he had just woken up from a presumably fairy dream had caught him off guard and overcome him for a moment. At first, he had decided that it was probably a short crush because he had been with Shoma a lot. But months later, he was still not rid of the feelings that filled his heart every time he thought about his friend. He had taken a step back, a lot of steps back, he had taken the time to think calmly about it, and the truth had emerged: Mikhail was in love with Shoma. It was as simple as that.

Now, he was lying on his bed. It wasn’t night yet, the gloaming had just started shedding its yellow light on Saint Petersburg, and Mikhail was waiting for dinner.

During the off-season, Mikhail had thought about many things revolving around this topic. Innocence and denial were over, so were the times spent with Shoma. He summarized the outcome of his self-examination once again.

When he had realised that he had romantic feelings for Shoma, he had been afraid at first. He had felt like he was trapped. He wasn’t himself whenever they were together, but he still felt like he was pleasantly flying. He had more and more trouble concentrating whenever Shoma was around and Mikhail dreaded that it could affect his practice at the competitions where they would be together again. He tried to do breathing exercises regularly, yet he knew that they probably wouldn’t help him much when the time would come.

He didn’t know what to do about his love: what did he want? What would Mikhail change in his relationship with Shoma if they dated? Probably nothing. Mikhail was content with what they had. He didn’t want to have sex with Shoma. Maybe he would want cuddles. To touch him. Yes, he
desperately wanted and even needed to touch Shoma, to caress his soft skin and to rub his hand in his mesmerizing wild hair, Mikhail thought as he pictured in his mind the gorgeous sight he had woken up to that terrible night in Saitama. This boy was the real sleeping beauty, Mikhail thought. He sighed. He remembered the moments they had shared, in front of a video game, sharing a meal, feeling the same cold air around them at the rink, being hurt by the wind on their faces whenever they went outside. Every time, Shoma had done something adorable without meaning to; every time, Mikhail had either laughed, smiled, blushed, or at least felt something in his chest. He smiled again when he remembered that time in Milan when Shoma had large trickles of grease and sauce from his meat dish on his face and his hands. Shoma had eaten more messily than a child would have, yet he had still managed to be so cute that he could have never been looked at disgustingly and disapprovingly. To be truly kawaii, you probably shouldn’t try to be, Mikhail thought to himself.

He glanced over at his desk, tidy and empty.

He had had a girlfriend. Once. It was during his first year of university. They had some classes together and talked a little. They got along well, but they weren’t what he would call friends. They didn’t see each other or even talked outside of school. One day, she had asked him out, saying that she had developed feelings for him, and Mikhail had blushed hard and felt something in his stomach, so he had said yes. They had told “I love you” to each other. But Mikhail had no idea how to handle a relationship. During the day, he focused on skating only and was busy doing what he needed for university – although it didn’t really interest him. And then, he just wanted to go home and to be alone. She would often call him or message him. He always replied. It warmed his heart to know that someone cared for him. She never came to the rink, though, saying that she wasn’t really interested in skating and that she didn’t want to disturb him. Now that he thought back on this, Mikhail thought that he should have sensed at the time that if she wasn’t at least a bit into skating, then they couldn’t last together.

And one day, she came and said that she wanted to end their relationship. He was dazed. Why? Well, she said, she just felt that it couldn’t last longer, it wasn’t his fault, but it was just that they weren’t meant for each other. Mikhail couldn’t say anything, so she merely left. Mikhail didn’t cry. In fact, he didn’t react at all. He was just unable to think.

Several days after, when he was the only one in the house, he was in his room when he broke down. He sobbed for a long time, and it restored his ability to think. He was devastated. Had he lost the love of his life? She was the only one who had ever seen him, the only one who had found him interesting, the only one who had wanted to be with him, to kiss him, to tell him that he was beautiful. The only one to look at him whenever he was in a group of people. The only one to come and talk to him as soon as she saw him while there were plenty of people she could have come and talked to.

It had taken him a few months to recover. Not to think of himself as the ultimate loser, the most terrible asocial failure in the world. The process had been quite unnoticeable, but looking back on this, Mikhail knew that he was now definitely over her, over those few months that had been both the best and the worst of his life, although when he had been dating her, he had only thought of them as the best, which was definitely not the case.

He didn’t want the same to happen with Shoma. He remembered the times spent with his ex-girlfriend, and he could only feel disgust. That kind of romantic relationship wasn’t for him. He didn’t want to fall in love again. Nevermore. Even though he hid it well, Mikhail actually lacked a little self-confidence, which led him to have a few breakdowns once in a while. During those moments of self-doubt, he thought that he was asocial and that he would never have the life he dreamt of, a “normal life,” living with a lovely wife and children in a cozy house and going out with friends regularly. Well, he already didn’t have a normal life because of skating. But Mikhail had
thought that it would be possible to have both. Or to have this life once he had retired. Now Mikhail had realised and accepted that this so-called normal life was just not made for him and that he would not enjoy it.

He continued his introspection. He would never like to be all lovey-dovey with Shoma. He would never accept to have phone calls every day with him. By the way, neither would Shoma. It wasn’t in their personalities. What he dreaded the most about falling in love with Shoma was to become the same he had been with his ex-girlfriend: a desperate, lonely human, who felt that making their significant other happy was the meaning of their life, their holy duty. Who sacrificed their life and happiness with gratefulness in order to bind their own person to another, for better or for worse. He had never felt as bad as when he had been with this girl: he had felt loneliness, desperation, hollowness, and many horrible things that he dreaded to experience again with Shoma. He could never picture him and Shoma being respectively the only thing keeping the other alive. He couldn’t imagine them spending their time hugging under the sheets and kissing with despair in a bed while telling each other how sad they were, Mikhail didn’t want them to cry once they would be alone again, he couldn’t picture them living together, he wanted none of this, and that was why he was afraid. What good could a romantic relationship bring? Mikhail wanted Shoma and him to be just like they already were; in addition to that, he only wanted them to acknowledge their love, maybe to kiss every now and then, to cuddle a little whenever they wanted, and to rely on each other like best friends did, sharing some personal confidences. That was all Mikhail wanted. He wanted none of the dramatic tragedy he had played with his ex-girlfriend. He didn’t know if it would be his choice – he couldn’t tell if he would ever feel like Shoma was his lord and saviour just like that girl had been, but he promised himself to do everything he could to prevent that from happening. He wasn’t eighteen anymore, he was a responsible adult. Now that he had experience, he would be able to face any danger his heart could create.

Yet, before talking about a relationship, there was still the obstacle of rejection. Shoma probably didn’t feel like he did. He was so cute that he must have already received hundreds of love confessions. Mikhail was almost sure that Shoma didn’t have a girlfriend or a boyfriend, but that didn’t make him feel like the coast was clear. On the contrary, he felt more like Shoma had zero interest in a relationship. Many skaters put their career first when they were competitive, but Mikhail believed that Shoma wasn’t saving his personal life for after he retired. Shoma had most probably genuinely no interest in love. His life as it currently was was enough and perfect for him.

Also, he shouldn’t forget about who they were. They were professional figure skaters. Rivals. From Russia and Japan. They were two men. It amounted to a lot of impediments. Homophobia was still a serious problem in their countries. And Mikhail didn’t know if their families would accept them either. It would also affect their careers, he knew it, they could never come out publicly. They. Mikhail rolled his eyes at his own assertions: he had no clue if Shoma was gay.

He rolled over in bed. He didn’t want to think about homophobia anymore. He had been thinking about it quite enough since he had fallen in love with Shoma, he knew every single aspect of his life it could affect. He didn’t know that he was gay before since he had never experienced feelings for a boy, but in reflecting upon it, Mikhail realised that he had never cared about anyone’s gender. He had met androgynous-looking people, and he had never cared if he couldn’t tell their gender. Besides, he knew many queer people, and he had never felt like their preferences were something bad. In all honesty, he didn’t care at all and never thought about someone’s sexual orientation whenever he met them. Although he had educated himself about the different existing orientations and types of attraction, he didn’t throw himself into labels to the fullest; yet he guessed that he was at least biromantic, maybe panromantic – but he thought that he would need to fall in love with someone else to be sure about it.

Mikhail stood up and shook his head to clear his mind. He walked to the window of his bedroom.
The sunlight was living its last moments of the day, most of the sky was already dark. The famous gigantic star was still shedding a feeble dark purple colour on the city.

Mikhail didn’t feel threatened by anything except rejection. He decided to wait for Shoma to make the first move if he wanted the same, because he didn’t want Shoma to accept a romantic relationship only because why not, a bit like Mikhail himself did with his ex-girlfriend. He wasn’t a coward, he just didn’t want to put both of them in a difficult situation: if he got rejected, Mikhail would maybe overcome it, but he would lose a very precious person who had offered him one of the best friendships Mikhail had ever received; and if Shoma agreed to date him, they would have to face many other problems: homophobia in the figure skating world, in the media, maybe in their families, toxic perfectionism that would lead Mikhail to do the utmost for them to comply with the social norm of a good relationship even though it wouldn’t work for them and would result in them breaking up, the cultural differences between a Japanese boy and a Russian one, the difficulties that usually appeared with a long-distance relationship…

Was he still ready to brave all headwinds? Yes, love was a huge force that guided the lover through thick and thin and gave him an unwavering will and an unshakeable faith. Yet wisdom hadn’t abandoned Mikhail and his brain told him that the best thing to do was to not do anything unless Shoma asked him out or confessed his love first. He couldn’t jeopardize everything. They would remain friends no matter Mikhail’s feelings.

The last ray of sunshine had just left Saint Petersburg when the lovely voice of Mikhail’s little sister called him from downstairs and announced that dinner was ready.
Shoma was pretty happy to be assigned to Rostelecom Cup. When the assignments had been announced, he had sent a message to Mikhail to happily tell him that they would compete together – as if Mikhail hadn’t looked at the other names himself.

Mikhail had replied that spending some time with Shoma would please him, especially if Shoma agreed to do some sightseeing with him. Mikhail had been enthusiastic about showing Shoma the Russian culture and heritage, although he was less attached to Moscow than to his city, Saint Petersburg.

That written conversation had been one of the longest they had had. They rarely messaged, only to congratulate each other on special occasions or when Mikhail sent Shoma a meme that always got the younger boy laughing every once in a while.

They didn’t talk much when they were apart. But from time to time the two of them were connected online on the same game and they would turn their mics on to talk while wandering around an imaginary countryside. Their meetings were never scheduled and always happened by chance, yet the two boys had noticed that, due to time zones, it was often during the weekend when it was afternoon for Mikhail and evening for Shoma that they met.

Shoma had decided to arrive early in Russia in order to have the time to do all the sightseeing Mikhail wanted without compromising all the gaming that mattered to him. Anyway, he always arrived early at international competitions because he had huge difficulties in coping with jet lag.

This time, he had to share his hotel room with Sota, yet his fellow countryman was supposed to arrive a few days later, which meant that Shoma had the room all to himself in the meantime. He could sleep and game at ungodly hours.

He had already spotted several other skaters at the rink and had practiced a little. He had also met Mikhail who had taken the time to explain which tour around the city he wanted to take Shoma on to get his approval. Although Shoma wasn’t really interested in touristic activities, he had already been to Moscow and had visited the famous Red Square and Saint Basil’s Cathedral. Mikhail had planned to take the metro to reach Izmaylovsky Park. Shoma had never heard of it but he trusted Mikhail’s taste and his enthusiasm convinced him. Therefore, he had accepted to go with him on their day off.

Mikhail wasn’t rooming near Shoma’s hotel, and Shoma had insisted on meeting directly at the metro station. After many enquiries, Mikhail had accepted to let the Japanese boy go on his own and had left detailed instructions for him to find his way.

The date was at eight in the morning, which was a cursed hour to get up for Shoma, but since he was still a little jet-lagged, he had had his amount of sleep and he felt ready for this unusual day. He took a hot shower, swaddled in warm clothes, had breakfast, and exited the hotel.

It was mid-November, therefore it was still dawn at this time of day. The streets were quiet. Shoma walked confidently towards Shelepikha station. It wasn’t the closest station to his hotel, yet it didn’t bother him to walk.

The sun rose behind the clouds and managed to cast its glorious shade of orange on the trees and the
streets around Shoma. He felt like this show was performed for him only, since he was almost the only one outside at such an hour, and the few people he passed by weren’t nearly as interested as he was to deign to look at the marvel the sky was offering Moscow. He forgave them, though: they were probably all heading to work, and the lack of sleep had them looking at their feet.

Shoma felt blooming and strolled at a slow pace, admiring the colour mix of the trunks and the few surviving green leaves lit up by the rare sunrays. Yet the sunbeams became rarer and rarer, until none of them remained, and before Shoma knew it, it was raining. He started running. He didn’t need to look at Mikhail’s notes anymore: he just had to go straight ahead from now on. It was more difficult to see well with the rain, and even though the slants of water soaked his hair and clothes and felt cold on his skin, Shoma kept looking around him in order to avoid missing the station. Even in his hurry, he thought that the lighting was strange: despite the rain and the absence of sun, the orange light was still present and created an odd setting. Shoma didn’t know if it fell more under the apocalyptic atmosphere or the exciting supernatural event.

Finally, he saw the metro station. He ran even faster. He would wait for Mikhail inside, unless he was already there. He went around the building to find the entrance, and that was when he noticed Mikhail’s figure. He was turned away from Shoma and the station and faced a meadow behind a low fence.

There Mikhail was standing, under a black umbrella, blurry through the rain. The sound of the cloudburst toned down all the other sounds of the city, preventing them from reaching Shoma’s ears. The scene felt hazy, there was nobody in the street, only this handsome man looking like a gentleman, a responsible adult looking majestic with his long coat, holding his umbrella firmly. Seeing him from behind, he looked like a mystical creature, like the wanderer above the sea of fog, although even more fascinating, but not less mysterious even though Shoma already knew what his face looked like, his face that would erase all the rain and replace it with the sun in Shoma’s heart because it shone and radiated warmth like his heart did, like his smile did, like his blue eyes did, the storm would wither away, and without knowing it Mikhail would replace it with another one in Shoma’s heart, overwhelming his stomach which would turn in all kind of loops, but never as precious as the ones Mikhail did on the ice, and

He turned around and Shoma felt it, what he hadn’t foreseen but had unconsciously felt coming: the thunder. The lightning in his heart, emphasized by the one in perfect synchronization striking the Earth, enlightened for an instant his whole existence, turned his heart upside down, his stomach inside out, making him forget everything; it was a short death that felt like paradise, an orgasm, an ecstasy: the sight of the marvel he had in front of him, who was blessing him by looking at him; their eyes met and locked, and Shoma could swear it lasted for an eternity. At this exact moment, he met life, or maybe death, both at the same time but it made perfect sense and oxymorons were the only way to approach and describe life and the reality of feelings. He felt like he understood everything, every bit of how nature worked, and he was himself a creature of nature, he was like a blossoming sakura tree during hanami, spreading feelings like pink petals, and he felt, oh! he felt, and he prayed, as he was standing still, like the tree steady on the earth, for just one of these petals to reach the other man, who seemed to be intangible, ethereal, like the god he was, the unreal magnificence one couldn’t even start to imagine even in one’s most powerful dreams; and Mikhail, Mikhail, all Shoma could think about was his name, he was looking more and more like a real sakura tree, unable to move nor think, unable to look away from this majesty which was now walking so seemingly slowly in his direction, Mikhail, Mikhail; he felt everything, he was just exploding with love, burning with this fire, he felt like his sakura self was about to burn beautifully out of love, Mikhail, Mikhail, can you hear it, can you feel it, Mikhail, I love you, it was even more than that, but there was no word, so he just stayed there, like struck by the lightning, looking at him, Mikhail, Mikhail.
protected from the rain, Shoma emerged, with his big doe eyes wide open and bejewelled with a look of confusion and unawareness.

It seemed that Mikhail was the sun. How come, in the middle of this raging storm, a sunray lit him beautifully? How come Mikhail was still glowing with his sun-coloured hair?

“Hi Shoma,” Mikhail said. The godly voice seemed to come from far, far away. Mikhail was smiling. Shoma felt like the sunny boy was able to read him like an open book, whereas Mikhail remained undecipherable.

Shoma looked at him blankly. Thunderstruck. Another thunderbolt. Mikhail made an almost unnoticeable head movement, and Shoma realised that he was spoken to and had to answer.

“Hi… Misha-kun,” he managed to say.

“Let’s go inside, you’re already soaked and panting,” the sun said.

Shoma clung to Mikhail and his umbrella, and they walked inside. Shoma noted that the station was named Shelepikha and curiously wondered what it meant.

Once they were in the dry, sheltered from the water and the loud sound of the rain, Shoma finished emerging. They stayed for a few minutes in the concourse, the platform in sight. Shoma watched the numerous thick trails of water wave from where he was standing to Mikhail. When the first one reached the taller boy and melted with the few drops that had fallen from his clothes, Shoma was stunned: the water flowing from his body was dirty compared to Mikhail’s clear droplets.

He suddenly heard the metro arrive and raised his head. Mikhail guided him from the platform to the inside, and they sat on two seats facing each other near the window. The metro was clean and almost empty. It started moving. Mikhail watched the storm outside. They were not underground and could admire the landscape. A rumble of thunder tore the sky up. Yet the steady rhythm of the moving metro soon soothed Shoma and he fell asleep.

Later he woke up, neck a little stiff. For an instant, he forgot where he was. He opened his eyes and saw Mikhail in front of him, still looking out the window.

Mikhail had his chin on his fist and his head slightly turned towards the outside. The moving panorama reflected on his light blue eyes. They had the colour of the sky: the storm had stopped, and a plain unvarying blue swathed the countryside around them, enhanced by some pure white swirls of clouds. As fair as his skin, Mikhail’s hair overshadowed the sun. As bright as an ear of wheat, it jealously captured all its light to reflect it on Shoma’s eyes. His silky hair was thin, just like his lips, half-covered by his hand. All Mikhail’s features were from the same harmonious colour palette: pastel, sweet, reassuring, gentle, pretty; many adjectives applied and even billions of them couldn’t be enough to describe what the sight of Mikhail inspired Shoma.

The fair colours of his features contrasted with his black coat and jeans, which were now dry and somehow looked darker than ever.

He was so, so beautiful, Shoma thought, half-asleep, half-awake. What could he be thinking about?

Mikhail left his contemplation and sat up straight. He looked at Shoma. A faint sound was made by the thunder in the distance.

Mikhail laughed softly and Shoma suddenly died. From a heart attack.

“Did you sleep well?” Mikhail asked with his lively voice.
“Yes, but my neck is stiff. Too bad I didn’t see the landscape,” Shoma said while glancing out the window.

Mikhail reassured him with a smile:

“Don’t worry, you’ll be able to watch the same on the way back.”

“If I don’t sleep again,” Shoma snorted. Mikhail laughed likewise:

“Indeed, that was a bold assumption.”

A recorded voice announced: “Sokolinaya Gora. Sokolinaya Gora.”

“This is our stop,” Mikhail informed.

They got off the metro and entered the huge park. Seeing all the green grass, the brown trees and the blue sky displaying three big horizontal stripes of colour made Shoma feel good. This sunny nature hadn’t been expected when they had entered the station in the company of a dark grey grumbling sky in an urban area.

They walked alongside the banks of a pond, before they arrived close to a big wheel. Shoma had an inspiration:

“What about going on the big wheel to get a view of everything?” he offered.

Mikhail turned his head and offered Shoma an excited face: “Sure! I didn’t think you would want to.”

“I am not afraid of heights. I like it when you can see a long way off.”

“I love big wheels as well: the view is so different than when you’re on the ground.”

“Yes, everything is questioned: distances, perspective, dimensions…” Shoma enumerated as he dreamily looked at the metallic construction.

“Exactly. Let’s go straightaway, there’s no waiting line.”

They walked fast. Mikhail had twinkles of eagerness in his eyes.

Shoma jokingly complained: “Of course there’s no waiting line, nobody wakes up this early just for a ride on a wheel.”

They hopped on the wheel and slowly rose. Shoma was impressed by the outstanding view of the gigantic park and the city around it. The contrast was magical. One just needed to hop on a metro to reach any kind of landscape in a matter of minutes.

At some point, he pointed at a spot in the park: “Is this an amusement park?”

“Where? …Oh, yes, but there are only attractions for children. We wouldn’t enjoy it.”

“Too bad, I like amusement parks,” Shoma said, disappointed.

Mikhail seemed to think for a moment. Eventually, he gestured towards the forest: “If you like thrills and altitude, we can go on a high ropes course.”

Up on the big wheel, they made plans for the day. Alone and closer to the clear blue sky, the two
friends felt like they had eternity ahead of them. When the wheel brought them on the ground again, they had planned several activities and they happily jogged towards the high ropes course.

They had become two energetic and lively children again. Shoma went first on the tree climbing course and progressed quickly. Mikhail followed him. The Japanese boy regularly checked if his friend wasn’t left behind. He was keeping up pretty well, but Shoma was faster. Mikhail told him that unlike him, he was taking the time to relish each obstacle, whereas Shoma was rushing without enjoying. It wasn’t true: Shoma was highly concentrated, he was just efficient.

The high ropes course was very fun, and they didn’t notice it wearied them before it was finished. They ate a snack made of fries and nuggets from a nearby food truck at a picnic table. After that, they took a digestive walk in the forest.

The nature was standing still. It was perfectly silent, only the sound of the two friends’ steps on the pebbles betrayed the presence of movement. From time to time, a gust of wind made the autumn leaves swirl and added warm shades of red, orange and yellow to the unmoving background of brown trunks to remind the two boys that nature was alive too. The whiff of the damp soil was particular. Musky, mysterious, natural. Even though Shoma was more of an inside, home-loving person, he enjoyed taking a breath of fresh air in the forest. He usually stayed inside because it was the most peaceful place he could get to be alone in, yet the quiet and dense forest protectively enfolded him to hide him from other people. If there was an outdoor environment Shoma liked, it was definitely the forest. The weather had calmed down since this morning, its electric discharges belonged in the past. Likewise, Shoma’s outpouring of feelings and emotions was now over. Now he knew that he was in love with the boy walking silently next to him, and he strangely felt very calm about it.

It was the first time he experienced love, yet Shoma was sure that he wasn’t mistaking his feelings. He had never been in love before. He didn’t know what he wanted regarding love and relationships. He welcomed his feelings with a desire to discover the galaxy that had remained unknown to him until now.

Shoma looked down at his feet, before shifting his gaze to Mikhail’s. They were walking at the same pace, right, left, right, left.

Mikhail had become one of the closest persons to him. Shoma didn’t have hundreds of friends, and he never talked about personal things with them. Whenever he met them every now and then, they never talked about themselves. Even when he hadn’t seen Kotaro in weeks or months, when they saw each other again, no talk to know what the other had been up to was needed. And nothing felt awkward. Shoma didn’t know Kotaro’s deep, personal feelings, and neither did Kotaro know about Shoma’s, but somehow, it was fine. Maybe they didn’t know each other that well, even after all the time they had spent together. But maybe that was also how some friendships worked. In spite of everything, Kotaro figured among Shoma’s best friends.

Shoma was an introvert, he knew it. He was not the type to talk much – especially about himself – and he usually had the role of the listener in conversations. In a group, he tended to withdraw and to be unable to talk at all: too much anxiety, inability to keep up with the flow of the conversation, feeling of talking to a brick wall. Except for when he was with his friends, he totally disappeared if a third person joined the conversation: no one seemed to care about him anymore. Was he supposed to say something, or was he so excluded that he shouldn’t even be listening to the conversation? Social interactions stressed him a lot, and he needed some time alone to rest and recharge his batteries afterwards.

Mikhail was probably a little like him. Maybe not as introverted as he was, but he was a calm and
mysterious person who could enjoy solitude. He wasn’t probably that secretive, it was just that he wasn’t the type to tell his life story to anyone around. He had better things to do.

In this way, Mikhail was companionable. The silence between them didn’t bother any of them, and Shoma wasn’t panicking because he didn’t know what to say. Gaps were okay. They were part of their interactions. Shoma knew that he was comfortable around Mikhail because his presence didn’t drain his emotional energy. Shoma genuinely enjoyed spending time with Mikhail, and although he still enjoyed being alone, he liked Mikhail’s company as much as Itsuki’s, and that was quite something.

Shoma and his brother were very different, yet, given that they had known each other since Itsuki’s birth, they knew each other by heart and understood each other fully without the need for words. Itsuki was probably Shoma’s best friend. And yet again, they never talked about their feelings. They kept everything for themselves, but it felt right. It was how their relationship worked.

A rustle of leaves in the undergrowth near them made Shoma turn his head. The two friends stopped walking for an instant. The sounds had already faded.

“Probably a squirrel or a fox running away,” Mikhail supposed.

They resumed walking in silence. Shoma realised that they had actually talked a lot today. It was the first time they remained silent for such a long time since this morning – except for when Shoma had slept, but conversation had just not been possible at that time. Now they could talk if they wanted, but Shoma knew that, like him, Mikhail delighted in the beautiful quietness of the forest.

Today was the first time Shoma consciously felt love. He had felt it in his body. This morning, he had experienced the physical numbness, the illness that had made him feel like he had been about to do anything and everything yet ready to die at any moment. Today, he had felt love in his heart and soul. But it wasn’t love at first sight. Deep down in his heart, he vaguely knew that this day would come. He knew that he was falling in love, and that it was only a matter of time before his body made him understand it. It had hit him like a wave: violent, cold, unexpected, asphyxiating, brief yet regularly coming back.

He hadn’t been confused about how he felt for Mikhail before. Well, maybe just a little, but he hadn’t been able to relate his impressions to the idea of falling in love. For now, Shoma felt good, but he knew that later, alone in the dark of his bedroom, he would anguish over his feelings for Mikhail and everything they implied for him and his life, and that the cuticles around his nails wouldn’t remain neat and healthy, just like his lips wouldn’t remain moisturized for long.

Now that the feelings were present, he couldn’t escape them. He would have to live with them. They were inside of him, he couldn’t hide them from himself. He accepted his fate. He hadn’t wanted to fall in love. This thing wasn’t high on his priority list – it most certainly wasn’t on the list at all, for now.

Here, on this path in the middle of the forest, Shoma admitted his feelings to himself.

He didn’t know what he wanted, yet this new realisation didn’t frighten him. He would just wait and see how things would go. Maybe he would eventually get rid of these feelings, like everyone did at some point or another.

The boys emerged from the forest and found themselves near the exit of the park. Mikhail offered to continue to walk to visit the picturesque and colourful neighbourhood he himself had never been to.

Shoma agreed. In the course of this afternoon, he had the time to look at Mikhail among the pretty
architecture and to get used to these newfound feelings. He had already noticed Mikhail’s beauty a while ago, he had already felt things in his stomach whenever he looked at him, his heart had already jumped whenever Mikhail entered the room. Now Shoma knew what all these things had meant at the time.

Today, these sensations came again. And today, Shoma felt the longing to kiss Mikhail.

On the way back, Shoma still couldn’t enjoy the landscape from the metro: he fell asleep again.

_I made it! I made it!_

Shoma won gold at Rostelecom Cup. It was a long shot after the difficult short program. He had fallen on Mihoko’s neck as soon as he had left the ice after the free program, before even putting his skate guards on. He hadn’t been that effusive in a long time, he thought at the kiss and cry, adrenaline still rushing.

Any attempt to control himself was tossed aside as soon as he saw Mikhail backstage. The Russian boy welcomed him with the happiest face he had ever seen, and it was really something because Mikhail was always wearing a happy smile.

For the second time in a row, Shoma abandoned any restraint and threw himself into Mikhail’s arms. The blond-haired boy lifted him off the ground, and when he felt the wind playing around him, Shoma felt safe flying in Mikhail’s tight embrace.

_We made it._

Shoma won, and Mikhail was second. Mikhail felt happier than if he had remained in first place after Shoma’s skate. Love had many powers, including the one to replace an expected disappointment with the biggest possible joy, bigger than it would have been if Mikhail had won.

Mikhail hopped up and down behind Sota, who had placed third. The three medallists waited for the podium in single file. Sota’s name was called by the speaker and he drew the curtains. Mikhail caught a sparkle of light before Sota disappeared.

His name was called after. He entered the light too and waved at the audience, who cheered as if he were a rock star. Mikhail was at home. He came closer to the podium and Sota. The Japanese offered him his hand to shake, but Mikhail was filled with emotion and felt like hugging. The two of them didn’t really know each other, yet their hug was real and sincere. If Shoma’s friend was with them on the podium, what else could he wish for?

The speaker announced Shoma’s name. The audience went crazy. The short boy entered the rink under a stream of screams, and Mikhail’s usually shy friend waved at them with a smile. Shoma looked too small to carry the weight of the world on his shoulders, but he knew perfectly well how to deal with it and Mikhail knew that he wouldn’t swap his place for anything in the world. Shoma joined the bronze and silver medallists, waddled a little with his skates on the carpet and hugged Sota. A sheer feeling of accomplishment and joy brightened their faces. Mikhail applauded. He wanted to cheer and to congratulate them as much as the audience did, but it was their moment, and Mikhail knew how to remain in control of himself in such situations. Then Shoma moved to hug him as well, and this time, he didn’t turn his head to prevent his slightly sweaty face from touching Mikhail. The Russian boy’s smile got lost in his friend’s hair.
Shoma climbed on the podium and received his medal. Mikhail was proud. Shoma looked genuinely happy and radiant, Mikhail thought as the Japanese national anthem filled the arena. Mikhail felt admiration for Shoma.

Once the anthem was over, thunderous applause started again. Shoma knew all eyes were on him, all cameras zooming in on his face, yet he felt at peace, relieved to be able to tell himself that he did it, he did the job – and even better than expected – and he was rewarded with the best podium he could have wished for.

He invited his two friends on each of his sides to join him in the middle of the podium. Sota put a hand on his waist, and Shoma comfortably did the same. Sota was back. Definitely back. For many, many years to come, Shoma hoped. His friend deserved it. Seeing his smiling face and knowing that Sota’s happiness was full because the two of them had achieved what they had wanted made Shoma’s heart full of joy.

Mikhail joined Shoma on his other side and offered him a large smile. They looked at each other. A strong connection was established between their eyes. Shoma welcomed the warm feeling in his heart. Would he be able to tell him how he felt one day? Could he scream his love in front of the cameras, like, right now?

Shoma was surrounded by the two persons he had wished at this competition. They posed for the photographs, and throughout the next days Shoma’s favourite photo ever was displayed everywhere in the media and online, for his greatest delight.

Mikhail was about to leave the locker room when he heard the first piano notes come from the main rink.

He recognized the music and headed out, and his smile remained on his lips all the way, even when he stepped over a cardboard box and disturbed the music by hitting its edges with his foot.

He entered the ice rink, where the music played the loudest. He hadn’t entered by the main doors, so he was in one of the corners. Nobody was there: the other skaters present were drawn together near the main entrance and were either chatting or watching the one who was performing on the ice.

Shoma was practicing his exhibition program for the gala. He glided smoothly to the romantic music, matching the rhythm as if he were the piano itself. Mikhail put his elbows on the boards and his head in his arms and lost himself in the piece of art performed in front of him, moonstruck.

Only the sound of his blades carving lines out of the pure surface betrayed that Shoma was human. The artist drew the story of his exhibition program in the form of arabesques on the ice as much as he danced it gracefully and seemingly effortlessly. His movements were fluid, his facial expression overwhelming, and the shadows displayed by the low lights played with him and enhanced his performance even more. Whenever Shoma passed close to him with a gust of wind, Mikhail could hear his blades on the ice and admire him in his splendid costume closely, which made him feel like Shoma was performing his marvellous exhibition program for him personally. Mikhail felt honoured and special because he had the impression that he was the chosen one, the only one who had access to every detail of Shoma’s performance, whereas the other spectators could only see him from a distance.

It was already pretty late. The early evening. Gloaming had already played its part, now was the time
for the moon to shine: Shoma.

The moon was often forgotten: in daylight, it was eclipsed by the sun, and everyone was too busy celebrating the sun to care about the missing moon. But at night, for those who cared enough about it to look up, the moon shone brighter than the sun; it emerged among the stars and exhibited its splendour to those who deserved it. The moon was caring, because although it was the prettiest celestial body in the sky, it was humble and considerate and never overshadowed its neighbouring star friends.

Shoma was just like the moon: so tranquil and serene that he was sometimes forgotten in the middle of all the shining suns in the world – which he didn’t deserve – but absolutely lovable. And now, he was offering the other skaters a celestial performance, pouring his heart and soul into telling the love story the music was about, in order to offer it at its best to the audience later.

Mikhail’s eyes filled with tears. They blurred his eyesight. His throat hurt. His eyes didn’t leave Shoma. Mikhail felt the urge to take him in his arms. He wanted to hold him tight and never let go. He wanted to touch him and to breathe in his scent. But Shoma was unreachable, alone on the ice. Mikhail couldn’t cross the boards, they were standing like a wall between him and Shoma, they materialized the impossibility for Mikhail to ever get close to him, to know him entirely, to earnestly tell him how he felt. He was in love. He loved Shoma, desperately.

Mikhail was about to cry. The dramatic last piano notes filled his ears and Mikhail felt the urgent need to escape, to run away at least as fast as Shoma rotated during his final spin.

Shoma struck his ending pose and the music was cut off abruptly. The small audience of skaters in front of Shoma applauded him and Mikhail moved away from the boards as if they had burnt him. He looked again at Shoma, who had joined the group of skaters and was hugged, patted and complimented by several of them.

Mikhail left the ice rink before anyone noticed his sobs and went straight to his hotel room, locking himself up in the dark for hours, feeling lonely and abandoned.

Yet Mikhail didn’t notice the tiny frame of Satoko Miyahara, who looked at him curiously when he ran away from the boards of the rink, her team jacket in her hand. She remained where she was standing for a few seconds after Mikhail disappeared in the corridor, too baffled to do anything, before feeling worried and being mad at herself for not having enquired if he was okay. She fiddled with her jacket in her hand, wondering what had happened to Mikhail. She raised her head and noticed Shoma, who was surrounded by other people and was apparently the centre of attention. Maybe Shoma knew what was happening with Mikhail. They were very good friends. Maybe if she told him that his friend wasn’t feeling well, he would know what to do, whereas she had never talked with Mikhail and didn’t know him at all. She looked at where Mikhail had stood.

No, she decided against it. It was rude. Mikhail probably didn’t want anyone to poke their nose into his business. Satoko resumed walking to where she was originally supposed to. She wouldn’t do anything about what she had just witnessed, except being silently sorry for Mikhail’s sorrow.

Chapter End Notes

I won't be able to update as often as I've done so far, but I promise I will. As always, thank you for reading: a story lives only when it's read.
Mikhail felt like he was about to become crazy. Every time he met Shoma, it was an emotional rollercoaster that left him exhausted for hours and obsessed for days. Every time he met Shoma, his brain was only capable of thinking “It’s him! It’s Shoma!” while his heart took over his body, and especially his mouth. Afterwards, he would dwell for hours on the absurdities he had said in front of the person he loved.

Sometimes, he just saw him with someone from a distance and he became jealous at the time but mostly hugely sad after.

Like that time – just the day before – when he had walked in on Shoma walking Masaru with Alina.

Mikhail was on his way to the rink in Montreal when, after he turned a corner, he saw them slowly walking together, while the Akita Inu scampered around them. His heart skipped a beat, before it bled for a long time. They were a couple dozen meters ahead of him, and although they were turning away from him, they seemed to be close to each other: they were leaning a little towards each other as if they were whispering secrets in each other’s ears. From time to time, they would turn their heads to look directly at each other, and Mikhail could see the wide smiles blossoming on their faces and catch a gleam in Alina’s eyes as they lingered on Shoma’s features Mikhail wished were only his to see.

But the worst was yet to come. At some point, a few raindrops started falling. Shoma took his backpack off his back, opened it, took out an umbrella, opened it, and held it above Alina’s head. The Russian girl drew closer to him so that Shoma could enjoy the shelter as well, and they continued walking like a young couple, with Alina laughing brightly and Shoma being a gentleman. And Alina was gorgeous and Mikhail was jealous.

He rushed towards the rink, whereas the infatuated-looking couple followed Masaru behind the building.

Mikhail had a very bad practice that day, and his coach worried for him. But he couldn’t tell her what troubled him, or she would believe that his rival had found a new way to get rid of him.

Today, Mikhail wondered to which sight he would arrive at the rink. He walked along the same street as the day before and thought about what he had witnessed again. He took his time to breathe deeply. He managed to slow down his heart rate. He entered the rink, looked around like a sharp-eyed vulture to make sure not to miss any sign of Shoma’s presence, and went to the locker room. There, he recognized Shoma’s belongings: his creased clothes dumped on the bench and his big backpack with the small stuffed mascots and the pink hand sanitizer couldn’t be mistaken.

Mikhail felt a warm flow of blood supply to his chest at the idea that Shoma was there, in the same place, reachable, so close he would be able to see him and to talk with him.

He stood up and entered the main rink. He looked around and saw him.

Another gunshot in his heart, before the well-known sensation of bleeding flowed again.

Shoma. Talking with Satoko. His smile. Her soft voice. Of course, Mikhail thought. Of course. It was obvious. How come he didn’t think about it earlier? They had known each other for years,
probably since their first junior days. They knew each other very well. They were the same age, they were both shy, they shared the same mother tongue and culture. It must have meant a lot to have someone who you knew could understand you. Furthermore, Satoko was shorter than Shoma, which must have been really something for him. He must feel adult and manly next to her. Of course, she would be the one. There wasn’t any other possibility.

Walk away, just walk away, Mikhail told himself. It’s useless to hurt yourself. It doesn’t help anything to look at that.

Mikhail turned around to go back to the locker room. He needed to calm down; but anyway, he had forgotten his gloves. He crossed paths with Nathan, and they both nodded to greet one another. Before he left the main rink, Mikhail turned his head and glanced again. This split second was enough to see Nathan ruffle Shoma’s hair, and for Mikhail to take another bullet in his chest.

Mikhail sat down again in the locker room. Please stop. Please stop. He wouldn’t be able to bear this any longer. Mikhail felt like he was dying.

And now Nathan? Why did he ruffle his hair? Why did Shoma smile so big? Were they dating? That was it, Shoma was dating Nathan. Or Satoko. Or Alina?

Mikhail sighed. This situation couldn’t last anymore. He was becoming crazy.

Mikhail ploughed through his practice, and somehow managed to do better than the day before – especially after Shoma had left the arena.

Practicing helped Mikhail calm down. He took a hot shower, put his casual clothes on again, sat down on the bench, neatly folded his training clothes and put them into his bag. He felt invigorated. It was the end of the afternoon and Mikhail wondered what he would eat with Team Russia for dinner.

Deniss entered the locker room and gently closed the door.

“Hi Misha,” he greeted him in Russian with a soft voice.

Mikhail smiled at him: “Hi Deniss, had a good practice?”

“Yes, I’m pretty satisfied.” He paused for a moment and remained standing in the middle of the room, looking awkward. “I was more concerned about you.”

A rush of panic took hold of Mikhail. He feared that Deniss might have understood what was troubling him. He feigned surprise:

“Really? I’m good. Yesterday was a mess, I fell on almost all my jumps, but today was fine.”

“I saw that. But… that’s not really what I meant.”

The two boys remained silent for a while. Mikhail had a foreboding of what Deniss was thinking about. Deniss’s voice sounded odd and distorted, but maybe it was just because Mikhail’s heart was pounding so strongly in his ears that it prevented him from hearing properly.

Mikhail eventually dared to ask: “What did you mean, then?”
Deniss stopped staring at the ground and looked Mikhail in the eye.

“Misha… I can see you’re not okay. You know you can talk to me if you want.”

This time, it was Mikhail who couldn’t hold Deniss’s gaze. He fiddled with a thread on the sleeve of his jacket. The last sentence Deniss said was almost a question.

Deniss was a calm person and a reliable friend. Wise and mature, he could tell whenever someone was having a bad day and took care of people whenever they needed it without being invasive. Mikhail trusted him. He felt like Deniss already knew him well and appreciated him. If he told him, he would certainly understand and be supportive. Mikhail couldn’t imagine Deniss rejecting him or criticizing his behaviour. Neither could Deniss betray his trust and divulge his secret.

Mikhail looked at Deniss again. He was still standing, looking at him. Mikhail really needed to talk to someone, and Deniss was the best person for that. He was lending a helping hand, it would have been silly to reject his offer. Mikhail took his decision.

“Can you keep a secret?” he tentatively asked by way of introduction.

“Of course,” Deniss solemnly answered with a bow of the head.

“Okay…” Mikhail sighed. Deniss came closer and sat down by his side. “God, it’s so hard to say it,” Mikhail blurted.

“Don’t worry, Misha, take your time. I’m here. And you’re not compelled to tell me if you don’t want to,” Deniss reassured.

“No, no, I really need to talk about it. I’ve been keeping all of this to myself and I feel like it’s brimming over. I’m tired. I need to open the floodgates, you know?”

Deniss nodded. Mikhail thought about how to formulate what he wanted to say. He opened his mouth and inhaled, but just as he was about to speak, loud footsteps passing by the door restrained him.

“Would you like to go to a quieter place?” Deniss offered.

“Yes. I can’t talk with the fear of being heard.”

Deniss led them to the grandstands and had them sit on two seats in the highest row, their backs against the wall. The rink was now empty, except for the Zamboni slowly resurfacing the ice. From where they were, Deniss and Mikhail had a panoramic view and would be able to notice anyone approaching before they got too close to them. Mikhail felt safe.

He took the plunge.


“In a romantic way?” Deniss helped him.

Mikhail looked at the seats in front of him, his hands between his thighs. His knuckles were white from squeezing.

“…Yes.” He swallowed.

He remained silent, anxiously waiting for Deniss’s reaction.
“That’s rather good news,” Deniss said. Mikhail looked at him in bewilderment, yet with some relief. Deniss was smiling.

“I’m happy for you. Love is a great driving force. But it seems that for now it’s mostly hurting you. Have you told Shoma?”

“No!” Mikhail cried out, eyes wide open with shock: Deniss was crazy. “I can’t tell him!”

“Why not?”

Mikhail looked at Deniss suspiciously. Was he dumb or what?

“Because it won’t be reciprocated, and I don’t want to lose a friend. And also, because of a lot of other things I think you can figure out by yourself.”

Deniss softly replied: “I’m not dumb, Misha. I know the fear of rejection makes it difficult. But who knows, it may not be unrequited love.”

Mikhail raised an eyebrow: “What do you know?”

“Misha, stop looking at me with disdain. I want to help you. My remark was clumsy, but what I meant was: take a step back and look at how much Shoma cares about you. You’re so blind you don’t realise how much you mean to him. He always looks for you. You’re the person he talks to the most. You put him at ease, he is comfortable around you. I’m sure you’re very important to him. Det är ingen ko på isen. There’s no cow on the ice, in Swedish. Only a Zamboni.”

Mikhail gave him a confused look and Deniss laughed heartily. He caught his breath and went on:

“Joking aside, it means that there’s no need to worry. With that said, I’m moving on to the main topic: I don’t know if Shoma loves you back. I don’t know if his feelings for you are of the same nature as yours. He didn’t talk to me about it, and I don’t want to make suppositions, to draw hasty conclusions or to listen to gossip. But I know him a little, and I can tell that he is very kind. Even if he doesn’t love you back, he won’t hurt you and hate you, he won’t withdraw his friendship. He values your relationship, and I’m sure he would rather try to maintain it despite the two different levels of feelings you have than remain in a relationship that is based on unsaid things, hypocrisy, pretending and without trust and sincerity.”

Mikhail looked at his feet. He extended his legs and stretched.

“You’re making me feel mixed emotions,” Mikhail said. “On the one hand, what you say gives me hope and reassurance; on the other hand, you make me feel guilty for not telling Shoma everything.”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant,” Deniss vigorously denied, visibly embarrassed. “I mean, Shoma wouldn’t be mad at you for not telling him, but he would rather know as soon as possible.”

“I’m not sure about that,” Mikhail said. He looked at the white ceiling, high above their heads. “Shoma and I don’t tell each other everything. We don’t talk about how we feel, or what we have done the day before, or what’s the weather like. We don’t have this kind of relationship.”

“I see. I didn’t know, actually. But I understand: no unnecessary words. Makes me feel like you are even closer than I thought. You don’t need words.”

Mikhail didn’t reply. Deniss spoke again:

“I don’t like to do this, but I have a serious intuition that I trust and I think you’ll be glad to hear it: I
think it’s mutual, Misha.” Deniss looked Mikhail in the eye and put his hands on his shoulders, forcing the Russian boy to face him and to look at him. “I think Shoma loves you back, Mikhail.”

They remained silent for several minutes, following the Zamboni crossing the ice and leaving it immaculate and shinier behind it.

Mikhail felt better. Deniss accepted him and tried to help him. Even though he had been a little clumsy, he had tried his best, and he had stayed true to himself. Mikhail knew Deniss was genuine and caring. He hadn’t meant any harm and had tried to be patient and helpful. Moreover, Deniss had given him hope and taken him out of his lonely madness.

“Thank you,” Mikhail said. It looked like he was talking to the Zamboni, although the words were addressed to Deniss. He suddenly furrowed his brow and looked at his friend:

“But hey, you didn’t seem surprised at all when I told you.”

Deniss laughed: “Indeed, I had a hunch about it.”

“You have no idea how much it cost me to say it! I felt like I was about to die!” Mikhail groaned with a smile. He felt light and relieved now that he had said it. In the end, it wasn’t that difficult. He had really had an irrational fear. Deniss was his friend, what had he dreaded? He laughed freely at himself.

“Am I really that obvious?” he asked between giggles.

“I don’t know… I just had a feeling. Also, I heard Zhenya mention that you two were cute.”

“What?” Mikhail’s laugh was cut off sharply.

“Yeah… Once I came across her and a few people and I overheard what she said because she speaks pretty loud and she said that you two looked adorable together and that she was eager to see how your relationship develops.”

Zhenya! No! She was so reckless. Mikhail started panicking again: “Did she scream that in front of a thousand people?”

“No, there were just three or four, I don’t remember who it was exactly…”

“Oh my God, I can’t believe she really did that! Is she aware that it’s super dangerous?” Mikhail was frightened and angry at the same time.

“I think she was just joking, she said it with a light tone. She didn’t mean any harm, I’m sure she knows when to keep her mouth shut, but you know how she is…” Deniss put his sentence on hold.

Mikhail understood. Evgenia was fond of anime and manga with gay relationships. But she was playing an extremely hazardous game. It was unthinkable. Mikhail could already imagine the headlines: “Yuri on Ice confirmed: Japan’s and Russia’s top figure skaters involved in gay romance.” Mikhail broke out in a cold sweat.

“I don’t want everyone to know about that, and I especially don’t want any press leak,” Mikhail angrily said with his fists clenched.

“I know, Misha… I know it can threaten your career and Shoma’s.”

Mikhail sighed with despair: “See? That’s also why I can’t tell Shoma. It’s pointless to ask him out,
we can’t date anyway.”

“Mentalities evolve,” Deniss stated. “In both of your countries, gays don’t have equal rights, and they certainly face a lot of hatred, but at least homosexuality isn’t criminalized. Same in the figure skating world: look, there are active skaters who are out. It’s hardly a bed of roses, but it’s improving. But above all, no one said you had to make this public. You can remain closeted and hide your relationship as well, that’s what many celebrities do.”

“Yeah, but in the end it’s always revealed. And it must be awful to live a secret life with this fear of getting caught that never lets you go. I can’t imagine how you must feel when your own family finds out about your privacy in the media. Forget it, Deniss, it’s hopeless.”

Deniss stood up and crouched down in front of Mikhail who was so bent forward that he could only see his knees. Deniss took his hands in his.

“Hey, look at me. Misha, look at me.” Mikhail raised his eyes. “Fuck what people think. Live your best life and stay true to yourself. Do whatever you want without fear. You,” Deniss pointed at Mikhail, “you can be part of the process of acceptance of LGBT folks. And you deserve happiness.”

Mikhail smiled sadly: “Okay, Deniss, I get it. I stop being in the doldrums. And I see some hopeful and positive signs: I think my family would accept me. But I don’t like talking about that. It’s all very new to me. I don’t care about my lover’s gender, I’m not gonna get worked up over people’s irrelevant opinions. Let’s stay in the personal sphere. What scares me the most is rather how me and Shoma could ever last together when we don’t even speak the same language, live thousands of kilometres apart, have two very different cultures and lives, are rivals in the same sport that also happens to be our profession, and you know that it’s not good to blend work with personal life, and the list could go on forever.”

Deniss looked at him for a while. Eventually, he spoke:

“I’m not going to disprove everything you’ve said point by point because some things fall under the same category, so here is a short answer: dude, you’re an international figure skater, you know more about many cultures than most people. And come on! You’re already so close to Shoma, proof that you understand each other perfectly and that distance is inoffensive and doesn’t affect you, don’t tell me you do have this kind of concern. Moreover, you could learn Japanese, and Shoma Russian, while you both continue to improve your English together, it’s so cool!”

Mikhail laughed: “Yes, but Deniss, not everyone is like you. You have a thing for languages,” he said with a knowing look. Deniss sat back down next to Mikhail.

“True. But since I’ve been able to speak in French with Stéphane, our relationship deepened and we’re closer than ever. Hearing him speak in his mother tongue makes me feel closer to him and I feel like I can really enter his mind and thoughts. Also, the French language is beautiful: it has so many nuances, and such an imagery!”

Mikhail laughed again: “See, you’re already rambling.”

“Ah yes, once I get started, you can’t stop me,” Deniss said light-heartedly. “Anyway, don’t worry about that. Out of everything, how you two would handle a romantic relationship is the least of my worries.”

The two friends remained silent while the Zamboni finished its job. Once the rink fell fully silent and empty again, Mikhail glanced at the jumbotron which displayed the time. He stood up:
“I’m feeling better. I’m going now, I have to be on time for dinner.”

Deniss stood up likewise: “I’m going to leave as well. We’ve been talking for longer than I thought. Now it’s up to you to decide what you want to do about your feelings.”

“Yes. But since we cleared the air, I’m more at peace. I think I’ll suffer less from now on.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I’m gonna rush to pack my things, see you!” Deniss exclaimed and waved at Mikhail as he went down the tiers haphazardly.

After a few seconds, Mikhail called: “Deniss!”

The latter stopped and turned around. Mikhail smiled: “Thank you. Thank you so much. I really needed this.”

Deniss grinned and gave a thumbs-up: “Don’t mention it, that’s what friends are for!” He jumped off the last seats before rushing out of the rink.

Mikhail remained standing alone in the tiers with a genuine smile on his lips. For the first time in months, he saw the light at the end of the tunnel.

Shoma glanced at Mikhail. The latter was lying on his belly, his lower legs up and swinging from time to time. His back was arched because his elbows were sunk in Shoma’s bed and he held his phone close to his face. Peeping noises of a video game escaped his phone.

Shoma focused back on his own phone. They were both playing games on their respective phones. Shoma’s position was the reverse of Mikhail’s: he was lying on his back, his head on his pillow. Mikhail had his face at the level of Shoma’s feet, and vice versa.

They had gathered in his room, Shoma didn’t remember how exactly. It just happened. They had met in a corridor and it ended up like this. Maybe Shoma had offered Mikhail to come, or maybe Mikhail had asked. He didn’t know. Maybe Mikhail had invited himself when Shoma had implicitly invited him in. It didn’t matter anyway.

They were just casually chilling in Shoma’s hotel room after a day of practice. Neither of them would have wished to do something else. They were neither interested in going out nor in hanging out with someone else. They didn’t have any plans. Shoma thought that some people might find it strange that they were in the same place yet weren’t involved together in the same activity. From the outside, they must have looked like two strangers who just happened to be in the same place at the same time. However, it was peak friendly hangout for Shoma: he just knew Mikhail was there, and he felt close to him. Even though they weren’t talking, they totally could, and despite being silently gaming in their own corner, Shoma felt like they were together. Mikhail’s presence warmed his late afternoon and his impersonal hotel room.

They had probably reached a high level of friendship to enjoy such a thing, Shoma thought while he pushed his fringe backwards as his phone screen displayed his score and rewards.

Mikhail had completely changed him. From isolated and shy, he was becoming more and more outgoing and had gained confidence. He often found himself wanting to try new things he would have never dared to before. He felt totally at ease with Mikhail and less and less uncomfortable speaking in English out of shame of his accent and mistakes. The fact that Mikhail was at the same
level of English as him forced Shoma to listen carefully to what he said. He was a little impressed by
how good he was at listening. He was surprised that it didn’t bother him to concentrate and to be
patient as the words came out with difficulty from both parts, resulting in anything but smooth
conversations. Shoma didn’t know he could be a good listener and enjoy listening to Mikhail,
because, for a long time, he had usually been uninterested in people’s stories. In return, he didn’t
know he could enjoy talking about himself to Mikhail since he was a secretive person who had
trouble opening up.

And, the icing on the cake, all of this drastically improved his and Mikhail’s English skills, as much
as it deepened their relationship.

Mikhail’s voice suddenly broke the silence: “Oh, no, so close!”

“You lost again?” Shoma asked without looking up from his phone.

“Yeah, it’s like the fifth time I fail this level, I’m fed up,” Mikhail grumbled.

“Switch to Vainglory like me.”

“Nah, after I beat this one.”

Silence set up in the room again. Only the music and the sounds of the two friends’ phones disturbed
the quietness of the late afternoon. The sun started to set and cast a light of the same colour palette as
the bedroom’s furniture: warm yellow walls, old natural wooden furniture and floor, and thick
carmine curtains gave the room a warm and welcoming character. But it was most probably the
presence of a dear friend that enhanced the comfort of the room, because as soon as he was alone in
it, Shoma found it sadly impersonal again.

Shoma heard Mikhail roll over before his voice drowned out his game’s music:

“Is it a portable speaker you have there?”

The gamer lowered his phone and bent his head towards the table Mikhail was pointing at: “Yes, it’s
a present from my parents for my birthday.”

“It’s nice,” Mikhail nodded.

Shoma was about to resume his game when it crossed his mind: “You finally won?”

Mikhail let out a sigh of relief and smiled: “Yes, finally. Now I’m done with this game, I’m taking a
break. I’m tired.”

Shoma resumed his game and lost right after. “I’m stopping too.” He glanced at the speaker, then at a
smiling Mikhail sitting cross-legged next to him.

“Would you be up for listening to music?”

“Oh yes, I’d love to know what kind of things you listen to,” Mikhail answered with enthusiasm.

“Oh, I was more thinking of you trying out the sound quality of the speaker with your usual music,”
Shoma replied as he stood up to take the speaker.

He switched it on, connected it to his phone via Bluetooth, and tossed it on the mattress. He sat in
front of Mikhail in the same position as him and opened his music application.

He came across the last search he had made. Actually, it was Yuzuru who had searched this.
“Yuzuru recommended me a band but I haven’t listened to them yet.”

A wry smile flourished on Mikhail’s face: “You know how to arouse my interest. Let’s go, I’m keen to know about it.”

“I’m more worried than excited, to be honest,” Shoma laughed.

“Let me guess, it’s one of those Japanese rock bands,” Mikhail said with a knowing look.

“Yes, I think. Let’s see.”

Shoma launched the first song that was displayed. Some guitar riffs escaped the speaker. They listened to the song without talking for a minute.

Mikhail headbanged a little: “I like it, it’s some good music!” Shoma smiled, amused by Mikhail’s antics. “You’re a scandalmonger, Shoma. And the sound of the speaker is great, by the way.”

They listened to several other songs and Shoma noticed that all the lyrics were in Japanese. He scrolled through the albums of the band on his phone.

“They have also made albums in English. Maybe you’d enjoy them more.” He remained silent for a moment, then he added: “You know, Keiji suggested that we listen to English music together to practice and improve our oral comprehension of the language.”

“It sounds like a good idea. Put on one of their English songs,” Mikhail asked.

The music changed, and the two boys listened attentively. This album was really good, Shoma had to admit it, he liked it a lot. He looked at his phone: by One Ok Rock. Who would have thought Yuzuru had good taste in music, he joked internally, affectionately making fun of his friend behind his back.

He smiled and lay on his back with his hands behind his head and looked at the ceiling and its wooden beams. He was happy.

Their practice soon turned into a battle for being the first one to correctly understand the lyrics. They were neck and neck, yet Shoma wanted to stick to songs that were mostly in Japanese, and Mikhail laughed:

“No, no, you have to practice!”

“But that way you can learn Japanese as well!” Shoma pleaded.

“Stop trying to trick me, it won’t work,” Mikhail giggled.

“But Japanese is a beautiful language! Moreover, isn’t it important to know the language of your friend? Think about it: that way, you’d be able to tell when I laugh at you while I lie and say that those words are kind ones!”

Eventually, they stuck to albums in English. But some songs still had some parts in Japanese, and Shoma couldn’t help bragging that he won their battle:

“I still have an advantage over you! I can guess the other lyrics with the ones in Japanese,” he proudly albeit impishly said.

“You shouldn’t be proud of that, at least I have more merit since I understand as well as you do without tips.”
The end of the previous song let silence enter the room for a few seconds before the next song launched automatically. The gentle guitar felt familiar to Shoma. He frowned. He didn’t know why, but this song made him a little afraid. The first lyrics filled the bedroom.

Shoma gave way to panic. He knew this song. He knew what it was about.

“I'm telling you
I softly whisper
Tonight, tonight
You are my angel”

Shit, shit, oh shit!

“Aishiteru yo
Futari wa hitotsu ni
Tonight tonight
I just say...

Wherever you are, I always make you smile
Wherever you are, I'm always by your side
Whatever you say, kimi o omou kimochi
I promise you forever right now”

And Mikhail repeated afterwards. Oh God. Shoma felt his heart pound louder than the music.

“Eh, there are some fragments of Japanese,” Mikhail said above the music, “what do they mean?”

Shoma couldn’t move. His eyes were wide open and his gaze was fixed on the black speaker, nonchalantly spilt in the middle of the messy white sheets. He suddenly felt very hot, yet a cold shiver ran down his spine.

I love you. We will become one. You’re always on my mind. That was what it meant, Shoma thought. But he couldn’t open his mouth. Not to say those words.

The music got faster, and the electric guitar drowned out the crystalline voice of the singer a little, making it sound frail. Vulnerability seemed to enter Shoma’s warm room.

“Kokoro kara aiseru hito
Kokoro kara itoshii hito
Kono boku no ai no mannaka ni wa
Itsumo kimi ga iru kara”

Stop, stop, stop. Shoma wanted to disappear.

“Hey, Shoma, what does it mean?”

The last notes of the song resonated in the bedroom. Shoma got up from the bed and went to the table near the window. Without looking at Mikhail, he found the courage to answer:

“Someone I can love from my heart. Someone I love from the bottom of my heart. In the centre of this love, you are my heart. That’s it. The lyrics.”

“Oh, romantic.”

Shoma drank a sip of water from a bottle that was on the table. Another song started to play.
Thankfully, the aggressive music and screams indicated that it wasn’t a love song.

Shoma’s embarrassment melted away. He threw himself on the bed and sat across from Mikhail again. The blond-haired boy smiled at him. Shoma felt genuinely safe with him. And loved. Not in the way he wished he were, but in a strong and unbreakable bond of everlasting friendship.

They resumed guessing the lyrics. But this song was beyond understanding. The instruments drowned out most of the voice – which was screaming like crazy, which didn’t help. Mikhail and Shoma attempted many far-fetched and hilarious things, mumbled unintelligible syllables pretending to sing in English, created absurd puns, but most of all, they had uncontrollable fits of laughter.

Another song came along. This time, the lyrics were understandable.

“On one lonely night
Drenched in rain
Oh what can I see?
And you wander about
Feel the pain
You know how far we came from home?”

“It sounds like what I could have told you that time you wanted to go back to your hotel in the middle of a stormy night,” Shoma stated.

“Who’ll let you know if I’m safe,” Mikhail sang the next lyrics in rhythm after he heard them. “I,” he stressed, “would have let you know that I had got home safe,” he replied to Shoma. The chorus burst with energy:

“Don’t be shy whenever you want something
What you waiting for?
Find your door
Gotta hold your own and stay don’t run away
When you show will to live there’s no way you
Will lose it after finding that “anything”
‘Cause life is full of points you score
You’ll see brighter days coming
All the nights becoming day
On your mark!”

“This song is so cool,” Mikhail said as he banged his head to the music. Shoma watched him and smiled. Mikhail was funny and endearing.

“Let your mind set you free!” Mikhail shouted after the singer did with his fist raised. Shoma laughed with his nose scrunched. Mikhail was so into the song.

Shoma looked very quiet compared to Mikhail. He brought his legs close to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. He put his head on his knees, leaning a little to the side, and watched Mikhail take himself for a rock star and sing the chorus again, although he didn’t know the lyrics. Shoma couldn’t stray from an amused yet fond smile.

He liked the song likewise. It was a dynamic and motivating song that aimed to put in a good mood and called for daring to do what matters to us.

“On your mark!” Mikhail screamed the last sentence and struck a pose for several seconds after the song ended. Shoma giggled and applauded the performance.
Mikhail panted and looked at the table: “I want kiss.”

“What?!” Shoma yelled, conspicuously shocked.

“What, ‘what’?” Mikhail looked at him with a confused frown. “I said I want this,” he said as he pointed at the water bottle on the table.

*Oh.*

“Sure, you can have some,” Shoma said with a voice he wanted to sound flat and impassive. “But wait, I have one that isn’t begun.”

He stood up and rummaged through a grocery bag on the floor. Wow, he was really tired, he thought. Or in love. Madly in love.

He handed the bottle to Mikhail. He grabbed his own, and they drank on the bed, listening to the music.

Shoma put the bottle on the bedside table – which made a solid sound – and lay down on the mattress. This late afternoon – or maybe already evening by now – was timeless. Here, in this closed bedroom, Mikhail and Shoma were in another world with eternity ahead of them. Shoma felt utterly happy. He was so grateful to fate for making his path cross Mikhail’s. The Russian boy had become so important to him.

Shoma glanced at him. Mikhail was like a steady rock he could always turn to whatever the circumstances. If the world ever went mad, Mikhail would be the only one to remain here, his usual self, reassuring. He would tell jokes that would downplay the situation. The sun poking through the storm.

Mikhail was still sitting cross-legged, his back bent forward. His phone he was holding in his hand shed a blue light on his flawless face, while his other hand was wrapped around the bottle Shoma had given him. A slight smile played on his thin lips. A happy Mikhail was a restful sight for Shoma.

Shoma gawked at him enraptured. He bit his bottom lip – in passion or because he was embarrassed to have such feelings, he didn’t know – and its dryness pulled him out of his daydreaming. He brought his hand to his mouth. His lips were chapped and painful to the touch. He let out a little moan and winced. Mikhail raised his gaze. Shoma noticed it and explained:

“My lips are chapped.”

“The only solution is to moisturize them,” Mikhail stolidly replied.

Shoma looked around: “I don’t have any lip balm.”

“Do you want some?” Mikhail offered.

“Thanks, but it’s not something you share…” Shoma declined.

“Oh, but mine isn’t a stick.”

Shoma tilted his head.

“Look,” Mikhail said. He searched in his bag at the foot of the bed and took out a small round pot he showed to Shoma. He then placed it in his hands. Shoma opened it. The pot contained white cream. Shoma looked at Mikhail with confusion.
“You’ve never seen lip balm in a pot?” Mikhail asked although the answer was quite obvious. “You just take some with your finger and apply it on your lips,” he explained.

Since Shoma didn’t say anything, Mikhail went on: “Here, let me do it for you.”

Mikhail took back the lip balm in his hand and looked at it with concentration while rubbing his finger along its inner side. He raised his hand and approached Shoma’s lips.

Shoma was speechless. Petrified. Mikhail looked concentrated on his task, and Shoma could only stare at him in anticipation of what was about to happen, on tenterhooks. His heart beat faster than ever and every part of his mind was tense and focused on Mikhail’s slim finger. The world stopped. Time stopped. Maybe the music stopped too, Shoma didn’t know: all his senses only processed Mikhail’s movement. Mikhail’s eyes looked more blue than usual.

It was the last thing Shoma could think before Mikhail’s finger brushed his bottom lip. Shoma’s heart exploded and stopped beating.

He was overwhelmed. Mikhail was touching his lip with his finger. And it didn’t seem to do anything special to Mikhail. His finger brushed Shoma’s lip, slowly at first, so slowly it seemed not to move at all. It felt cold on his lips. The cream wasn’t, but Mikhail’s finger was. Cold and soft. Like his eyes, still locked on Shoma’s lips: they were of a light and cold blue, but the look was soft and warm. Mikhail’s finger wandered a little farther on Shoma’s lip. It brushed from the left to the right, to the left again, and performed this little journey several times. Then it explored Shoma’s upper lip, thinner, and Shoma had the impression that the finger was about to enter his mouth. How was it possible to feel so much with just a single light touch of the finger? How was it possible that it made Shoma feel so many things; how was it possible that the lines Mikhail drew seemed to mean so much; so, so much more than just moisturizing Shoma’s dry lips?

Mikhail’s touch became more confident and he pressed Shoma’s lips a little stronger. He wandered on his bottom lip again, caressing each chap tenderly, making Shoma discover details he didn’t even know he had.

Shoma was about to explode. He couldn’t bear it anymore. Was it some sort of provocation? Was Mikhail doing that on purpose?

Shoma’s head spun upside down and inside out, every which way; he couldn’t think properly; he wasn’t in control of himself anymore and he didn’t know what he was doing.

Without really realising what he was doing, Shoma grabbed Mikhail’s wrist.

Mikhail’s right hand stopped its exploration, while his left hand dropped the lip balm, which fell on the sheets between them with a faint muffled sound.

Shoma pulled Mikhail’s wrist towards him, and before he knew what was happening, their lips touched.

The world exploded.

Only a brief second was enough for Shoma to travel to the moon and back, to experience death and resurrection, to discover this new yet already so addictive sensation, and Shoma wanted more, more of it. Mikhail’s lips were soft and this contact was so different than everything he had ever imagined. He didn’t know his lips were warm and slightly moist, he didn’t know it felt like this when two thin lips met his, he wanted to taste it longer, he needed time to get used to this new sensation; and the feelings he felt in his body! His heart, his lungs, his stomach, his head, his eyelashes that couldn’t
stop fluttering, and

The kiss was abruptly cut off. Cold void suddenly replaced Mikhail’s lips and Shoma opened his eyes.

Mikhail was pure shock. His eyes were so wide open that the circles of his blue irises could be seen in their entirety. He was staring at Shoma in the eye with more fear than if Shoma had been the devil. His mouth was open and it seemed like he couldn’t breathe.

The two boys remained staring at each other in shock for several seconds. It probably lasted longer than their kiss.

All of a sudden, Mikhail jumped off the bed without warning. He took a few steps back at a very slow pace, still staring at Shoma with his terrified look and open mouth, before he ran away from the bedroom.

The slowness of the closing door contrasted with the storm that had just escaped. Shoma watched the silent movement, very slow thanks to the door damper.

The door shut with a quiet sound. No sign indicated the presence of Mikhail just a few seconds ago. Silence and stillness enfolded the impersonal room again.

Shoma let his back fall on the mattress, his arms alongside his body. The breath he had been holding since it had caught in his throat exhaled from his lungs. He found the ability to inhale again. He caught his breath and looked at the beamed ceiling.

*What have I done?*

Mikhail was in another dimension. When he woke up this morning, he still felt extremely strange. A bit as if he were ill and had hallucinations due to drugs. The lighting of his bedroom was odd today, he thought as he looked at the ceiling.

He had no clue how he had managed to go back to his hotel the day before. He had just run away from Shoma’s room, then he must have slowed down at some point because he remembered walking like an automaton with his eyes still wide open and thus dry.

He lacked memory of other things that must have happened once he had gone back as well. For instance, Mikhail couldn’t tell if he had slept this night. He was currently feeling neither well-rested nor tired. He was insensitive. Emotionless. Brainless, too. He still hadn’t processed what had happened.

Shoma had kissed him. It was the only way to say it. He remembered it. It did happen. It did happen, right? Otherwise Mikhail wouldn’t be in this condition at the moment.

It was Shoma who had done this. Not him. It was all Shoma. It was Shoma who had pulled Mikhail’s wrist while looking him right in the eye, forcing him to lean forward for his arm to remain attached to his shoulder. Then it was Shoma who had tilted his own head forward and upward, it was Shoma who had closed his eyes, Shoma who had turned his head to the side. It was Shoma who had kissed him. Not the other way round. Shoma and Shoma only. Mikhail hadn’t done anything. He had been unable to move at that moment. But his brain had still been working and had retained what had happened.
Mikhail remembered that Shoma’s lips had felt strange on his. They were chapped and had some unevennesses, yet since Mikhail had just applied lip balm on them, they were greasy and tasted, well, like lip balm usually did.

Mikhail had felt Shoma’s warmth close to him, and the soft skin of his face had touched his own. It was sublimely smooth. Mikhail didn’t know skin could be so soft. His own skin wasn’t nearly as pleasurable to touch at all in comparison. It was Shoma’s clothes that must have been grateful to be worn, and not the opposite.

Mikhail had felt a strand of Shoma’s hair on his forehead. Oh God, they had been so, so close to each other. They had even touched.

Why did Mikhail back away? He didn’t know. Surprise. Shock. He had panicked. He had wanted to scream during these never-ending seconds of shock after the kiss, but he hadn’t been able to do anything but stare at Shoma. And when his body had worked again, he had fled. What a stupid reaction, he thought. He would have loved to stay and to kiss him more. Now Shoma probably thought that Mikhail had rejected him.

Had Mikhail gone too far when he had decided to apply lip balm on Shoma’s lips himself? He hadn’t waited for Shoma’s consent. Maybe Shoma had seized his wrist to dispose of his intrusive behaviour – no, obviously he wouldn’t have pulled it towards himself, Mikhail thought. He was just trying to make excuses. Shoma had deliberately kissed him.

Kissed.

For now, Mikhail’s brain was incapable of telling why Shoma had done that. Mikhail wondered if it had just been an accident, or a dream. It may have been him, after all, who had fallen on Shoma’s lips because he had been unable to remain sitting straight. He wondered if Shoma might share his feelings. But mainly, he wondered what he would do from now on.

Maybe they would avoid each other forever. Maybe they would never talk to each other again. Maybe their friendship was over. Maybe they would act just as usual and pretend that what had happened the day before had never happened.

They needed to talk. It was the only thing Mikhail knew. What to say, he didn’t know. But they needed to talk.

Still in a daze, he got up. He took a shower, had breakfast, brushed his teeth, oblivious to everything around him. He was on another planet where the film of yesterday’s events was shown on a loop.

Mikhail put his phone in his pocket, took his wallet and the key to his room, and went out.

Without his brain telling him anything, Mikhail found himself walking in the direction of Shoma’s hotel. He entered the lobby without looking at the reception, and his feet guided him directly to Shoma’s room. He only stopped once he was at the door.

Mikhail stared at the handle. What would he tell Shoma? Why did he even come in the first place?

He didn’t know. Mikhail watched his arm rise as if it weren’t his but belonged to someone else. He looked at the wrist extend as if he were watching a close-up scene in a movie. He wasn’t controlling what his arm was doing. He didn’t even know what it was doing.

He looked at the fingers extend the way he tried to remember to do when he skated.
The fingers bent and the knuckles hit the door. Three times. Like one usually did when knocking on a door. Internalized habits were the only thing keeping Mikhail functioning.

The sound disrupted the silence. But it came back right after. Mikhail half-hoped Shoma was out. These seconds of waiting were torture. How soon could he start thinking that nobody was there so that he could relax?

The handle went down. The door partially opened, slowly. Shoma’s pretty head appeared in the gap. His mouth was closed like it usually was when he was uncomfortable. Shoma opened the door wider. His big eyes expressed anxiety, questions and hope.

The door opened fully and Shoma remained in the centre of the frame, his hand still on the handle, the same look on his face, his small feet close together. Mikhail stared at him. So did Shoma. Mikhail forgot everything he had considered saying. There were only him and this pretty boy in the doorway.

Mikhail threw himself into Shoma’s arms.

He impetuously took Shoma into his arms, making the short boy step back to avoid tumbling, he held him tight, with his arms crushing Shoma’s shoulder blades and pressing his skin. His face was again in the addictive hidden heaven of Shoma’s hair, he breathed again in his scent; Mikhail was living again. He was overwhelmed, he was overflowing with feelings, he felt love, so much love, he was surprised how much he was able to feel.

Eventually, Shoma’s arms hugged Mikhail back, slowly – maybe shyly, Mikhail couldn’t tell – and Mikhail knew that the anguish was over. The anxiety was over. The worry that had never let him go for months was now gone. He had won. He had won Shoma’s heart. He wanted to cry. Shoma had returned the hug. Yesterday wasn’t a dream.

Mikhail held Shoma even more tightly. He couldn’t let go. He needed to hold Shoma for hours, as tight as possible, to convey all the feelings he had kept locked inside him for so long when they had wanted to escape. Now that he could, he needed to express them, to let them leave his body and reach Shoma.

Mikhail moved his head back and looked at the one who made him feel so many things. Mikhail kissed him. Finally. The kiss was filled with despair and relief – it was filled with all the other kisses Mikhail wished he could have given earlier.

Shoma returned the kiss. This one was their first real, deep, mutual and conscious kiss. The previous one was an enabler. Mikhail thought he was about to cry.

They parted to breathe. Their breaths were as heavy as their gazes were intense. It was only the two of them. Shoma was the only one in Mikhail’s world, Mikhail was the only one in Shoma’s.

The yearning soon came and became pressing again, and as if they had a mutual consent, they hugged again. The fierceness due to the aching for the last hug had decreased a little, and they were able to bask in this cuddle to the fullest. Shoma was a whole new world for Mikhail. He discovered how it felt to hold him, he discovered the texture of his hair, the softness of his skin and the firmness of his muscles under the fabric of his shirt… It was incredible. Everything about Shoma felt like a marvel.

Mikhail felt Shoma move his head. Shoma’s soft voice whispered in his ear:

“Ya lublu tebya.”

And Mikhail’s heart ignited and melted. He hadn’t expected neither the language nor the meaning. It
was too much emotion. He couldn’t hold back anymore. The tears sprang. He held on to Shoma but he had to resolve to let go of him when he couldn’t breathe anymore. Shoma looked at him and held his hands.

Mikhail managed to say among his sobs:

“I love you. I love you, Shoma. I love you!” He sniffed. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

He would have liked to say so many things, yet those words were the only ones he was able to say at the moment.

“I love you too, Mikhail,” Shoma replied quietly.

It made Mikhail’s sobs intensify. Shoma wrapped his arms around him – not too tight so that Mikhail could still breathe. Shoma led the two of them to his bed and had Mikhail sit down close to him. Little by little, Mikhail calmed down. The two boys cuddled silently for a while before Shoma spoke:

“I thought you rejected me when you left yesterday,” he said.

“No, how could I ever reject you… I just…” He gestured vaguely. “I was so surprised that I panicked,” Mikhail’s voice was still filled with emotion.

“With you, I discovered a feeling I had never experienced,” Shoma confessed. “I thought I liked you as a friend, but at some point, I had to admit that what I felt for you was different. I never thought about telling you, though. But yesterday… I don’t know what happened. I think I just couldn’t hold back any longer.”

Mikhail tittered: “We could have waited much longer…” He took a tissue from the box on the bedside table. He chuckled: “My reactions are so unpredictable. I usually almost never cry. And why in the world did I run away yesterday?”

Shoma laughed as well. Mikhail carried on: “I’ve been in love with you for months, maybe more than a year. It’s been so long. I never considered telling you… I never thought it could be possible you felt the same. And I never thought it could be possible for us to be in a relationship.” Shoma opened his mouth to say something but Mikhail went on before he could: “Now, I feel like I’m able to do anything. Everything seems possible. I believe so strongly that we can make this work. I mean, if you want to… be in this with me…”

“Of course I want to!” Shoma exclaimed. Then, more softly: “So… are we… boyfriends, now?”

The butterflies in Mikhail’s stomach started flapping their wings again: “I would love to,” he solemnly said.

Shoma’s smile grew wider and he threw his arms around Mikhail’s neck, making both of them flop and lie on the bed: “I’m so happy to call you my boyfriend, Misha-kun. I’m going to say it all the time.”

Mikhail grasped Shoma’s hips to lay the latter next to him instead of having him on top of him, without his boyfriend letting go of his neck. Mikhail wrapped his arms around Shoma’s back and kissed him.

They cuddled in this position for a long time. So long that they both missed practice without becoming aware of it until their respective coaches called to scold them.
I trust Genius for the translation of the Japanese lyrics of Wherever You Are, but I’m sure the original wording sounds much better lol, let’s assume Shoma isn’t a professional translator either haha
The second song is also by One Ok Rock and is called Juvenile, check it out!
So, yeah, I really like this band, and I would like to thank Yuzuru for introducing me to them, I owe you my life dear GOAT.

Thank you for reading, I wish you all a happy new year!
The Ice 2020, Nagoya

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry it took me so long to update... I hope you'll enjoy this chapter even so :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Mikhail had just arrived in Nagoya. The flight had been long, but he had slept all through it, so he was in great shape. Shoma had said that he would let him sleep before they see each other, but Mikhail had insisted on meeting right away. Shoma had joked and threatened to turn around and leave within a second if Mikhail had bags under his eyes.

So there Mikhail was, unpacking his things in his hotel room. He had been invited to take part in The Ice, the show organized by Mao Asada. It was the first time he participated, and he suspected Mao of knowing that he was Shoma’s boyfriend. Shoma never answered whenever he asked him if he had been the one who told her.

The ice show was held in Nagoya, Shoma’s hometown, and his boyfriend had enthusiastically promised to take Mikhail to his favourite yakiniku restaurant – although Mikhail would have liked to visit the city as well, but for that he would have to ask someone else.

Mikhail heard a knock on the door and jumped to his feet. He ran to the door and flung it wide open. Shoma was there, his small adorable self, with a cheerful smile radiating sunlight all around him. They hugged. They hadn’t seen each other in months, although they talked very often. Shoma had presented him with a game in which players could log and play online together. They usually talked only about the game they were playing, but sometimes, they would whisper very sweet nothings that highly contrasted with the violence of the fights they had on the screen.

“Wait, I need to shut the door,” Mikhail remembered. They parted, before Mikhail carefully closed the door. Fortunately, no one had seen them. They went back to their hug. It was a very long one. It did them good. It felt good to feel Shoma’s heat again, to breathe again in his scent which hadn’t changed yet still felt like a new exhilaration, to discover again the power of holding a loved one in your arms. When they parted again, they remained standing in the room, gazing lovingly at each other. Shoma took Mikhail’s wrists in his hands and swung them, a childish yet thrilled and blossomed smile lighting up his face. He looked closely at Mikhail:

“You don’t have dark circles under your eyes. I stay.” He stood on his tiptoes and pecked Mikhail on the lips. The Russian boy’s smile grew wider.

“I slept during the whole flight, I’m as fresh as a daisy.”

“You’ve reached the point of knowing idioms in English? You?” Shoma moved back and smiled archly.

Mikhail smirked: “Chase me, you dunce.”

“I don’t know what dunce means, but I can tell it’s not something kind. Admire my skills in deducing from the context.” Shoma said with his jocular I-know-best look he only wore whenever he was with friends.
The two lovers sat down on the double bed, talked about everything and nothing, lay down and cuddled. Shoma may even have napped for a minute. After a while, Mikhail resumed unpacking and put his clothes away in the wardrobe, while Shoma looked at the jumble on the floor, unimpressed: he was messier than his boyfriend.

After Mikhail tidied the room and the boys could see the floor again, Mikhail took the last bag that had remained unopened and took a rectangular box out of it. He handed it to Shoma with a smile. The latter looked at him with curiosity.

“It’s for you,” Mikhail stated.

“But… Why? It’s not my birthday or anything.”

Mikhail shrugged without straying from his smile: “I know. I just wanted to give it to you.”

Shoma put the box in front of him on the mattress. He crossed his legs and looked at the mysterious package.

“You really brought such a big thing like that from Russia in your luggage?”

“Yeah,” Mikhail laughed it off, “Come on, open it.”

Shoma cautiously lifted the box. He drew it closer to his ear. And then he shook it. It made a sound he didn’t manage to interpret.

Mikhail facepalmed. Shoma retorted: “Oh, come on. You wouldn’t have put crystal or porcelain in it.”

“What do you know?” Mikhail replied.

“Unless you don’t know me at all you wouldn’t offer me some dinnerware set.”

“There could be an implied hidden meaning.”

Shoma didn’t note the remark. Mikhail noticed that his T-shirt read “The message is subtle” and found it irritating.

Shoma opened the box. It contained a delicately painted wooden matryoshka doll.

Shoma looked at Mikhail with a puzzled look before shifting his gaze back to the doll. He opened it: a second one, similar but smaller, was nested inside. Shoma opened it, and he repeated this gesture until seven matryoshka dolls lay on the bed. He took the smallest one in his hand and observed it. He smiled:

“Most surprising is that I actually like this cliché Russian gift a lot. The dolls are lovely and… in a way, comforting? They feel like you.”

Mikhail smiled: “I’m glad you like them. I hesitated quite a lot because I know it’s not the kind of thing you’re interested in in general. But I don’t know,” he shrugged, “I just felt like offering them to you. Actually, it’s more a present for me than for you”

“Why?” Shoma asked while playing with one of the red dolls.

Mikhail thought for a moment before he wore an enigmatic smile: “I’m not telling you. The only thing I can say is that they remind me of you.”
Shoma put the two halves of the doll together. He tried to put the dolls inside one another in a wrong order but he soon found himself unable to insert a big one in a smaller one.

“Do I look like a round shapeless red girl?” he asked.

Mikhail laughed. He had missed Shoma’s dry humour. Shoma spoke again: “I already know where I’m going to put them. They will be very well on my desk. I can already picture my brother changing their order whenever he enters my room just to annoy me.”

Mikhail fondly watched his boyfriend play like a child with the wooden dolls. After a while, Shoma raised his head: “You really won’t tell me why they remind you of me?”

Mikhail remained quiet for a moment, before he answered mysteriously: “Think of them as a mille-feuille.”

Mikhail sat down on the bed next to Shoma and turned the television on. They both looked at the channels flash by one after the other, hardly interested. Hotel televisions always had channels from all over the world. At some point, they recognized the Shibutani siblings and Mikhail stopped scrolling.

It was an American sports channel, and the two skaters were apparently giving an interview.

“Do you know about the origins of figure skating?” the journalist asked. Alex nodded and the microphone approached him.

“Yes, it has very ancient roots. Several thousand years. It’s Jesus Christ who invented it.” He paused to enhance his impact, while Maia kept on smiling politely. “Because, in the Bible they said he walked on water, but they didn’t specify in which state was the water. But I tell you: it wasn’t in its liquid form. Ha! Jesus thought he could fool everyone, but I unveiled his secret! Jesus Christ invented skating!”

The image moved on to an American football game review. Mikhail and Shoma watched without really seeing for some time before Shoma broke the silence:

“I think I have understood something, but I seriously doubt it’s correct,” he said without looking away from the screen.

“Me too,” Mikhail replied likewise. They remained there for several minutes, unmoving, still confused by what they had just seen, before Mikhail stood up:

“Well, let’s move,” he suggested enthusiastically. “Isn’t it time for you to bring me to your vaunted yakiniku restaurant?”

These words made Shoma jump off the bed and put his shoes on with energy:

“Yes! Let’s go! Go, go, go!” he excitedly hurried Mikhail. The latter laughed and deliberately took his time to get ready. Shoma looked like a child: easily readable, hyper enthusiastic whenever he wanted something, and overly cute and annoying about it. He had missed him.

Mille-feuille? Shoma loved mille-feuille. Did it have something to do with his little indulgence in sweets, Shoma wondered later, waiting for sleep to take him to the sweet world of dreams. Maybe
Mikhail had wanted to make fun of him for his bad eating habits, and he had been too dumb to catch the underlying message. But he wasn’t convinced.

The first show was today and everyone was excited. The cast was grandiose this year. Shoma could notice a great and famous skater running around every time he looked up from his phone. It seemed that he was the only one who was ready – though he should warm up, a slightly insufferable voice in his head kept on telling him. Everyone else was in a rush, whereas he was quietly sitting on a chair in the room full of costumes. He worried that he might have forgotten something: it was unusual for him to be fully ready so early, especially if he was the only one – even Keiji was nowhere to be found.

He checked again: he had his skates next to him. He was already wearing the costume he had picked for the jump contest. The annual jump battle tournament would be his first appearance on the ice. Fate or not, it had been decided that the first round would have him face Mikhail.

Speak of the devil, Mikhail entered the room. He looked as relaxed as usual, although he visibly wasn’t ready.

“You have already chosen your costume?” he asked, rummaging through the clothes racks.

“Yes,” Shoma answered as he tugged at his clothing. Mikhail stopped exploring the tons of garments at their disposal and came nearer. Shoma had chosen a kind of Totoro jumpsuit.

Mikhail pouted: “Not particularly wild. On top of that, you’re gonna have trouble jumping well with that: it’s too loose, it’s gonna slow you down.”

Shoma shrugged: “I like it. It’s not like there’s actually a chance of you beating me,” he teased.

Mikhail laughed mischievously: “Watch out, I’m going to serve such a look Nobu won’t even look at your jump because he’d have already decided I won.”

“Then dress as a girl, that’s how I won once.”

Mikhail stepped closer to Shoma and looked at him straight in the eye: “Next time you do this, show me beforehand. I may want to ruin your lipstick before you get in the spotlight.”

And on that note, Mikhail grabbed a few pieces of clothing and walked out.

Shoma blushed very hard. He felt his ears ringing and a yearning down his stomach but he didn’t get flustered. With a clear voice, he confidently replied out loud to Mikhail’s back: “It would be a pleasure.”

Nobu was wearing an atrocious shiny artichoke green suit with sequins and glitter and warmed up the audience with his usual funny effervescence. He introduced Mikhail who entered the ice. Shoma wondered if he had understood what Nobu had said about him since he had spoken in Japanese, but at least he had recognized the moment he had to go. Shoma was introduced next and he joined Mikhail and Nobu in the middle of the ice, waving and smiling at the audience.
Nobu announced that Mikhail would be the first to jump. The public cheered, and Mikhail gestured for them to scream even louder. He was having the time of his life being the centre of attention. Shoma was entertained. Mikhail had put on a sleeveless mesh T-shirt enhanced by fishnet gloves and skinny ripped jeans. He hadn’t lied, he had really outdone himself and had come up with a terrific total black look. Needless to say, he was tremendously hot, and the audience showed their approval. It was unusual for Mikhail to show off like this, Shoma thought, but his boyfriend was clearly having a lot of fun.

Mikhail got ready, did a few crossovers, and out of the blue his toe pick hit the ice. The audience gasped and fell silent until the sound of the blade hitting the ice again was heard and the audience roared wild in admiration.

Shoma was speechless. Mikhail had presented his speciality: the quadruple Lutz. This jump was his. No one could do it as well as he did. He reached such a height, such a speed! The position in the air was perfect, so was the landing. Shoma suddenly felt concerned about his chances of winning.

Once the audience recovered from the storm they had just witnessed, Nobu made them cheer again for Shoma. He waved happily at them. He looked at his too loose jumpsuit. Although he probably looked cute in it, it couldn’t compare with Mikhail’s outfit.

Shoma traced large circles on the ice. Nobu held a long “Oooh” to increase the tension. The audience were half-screaming, half-holding their breath. Shoma had already decided what jump he would do. Upon seeing that Mikhail had chosen his signature jump, he was bolstered in his decision to jump his famous combination: triple axel, single loop, triple flip.

He positioned himself. First jump. Landed. The single loop went well, he retrieved a good position for the last jump. He hit the ice, rotated enough, landed firmly. He held his leg in the air with his arms extended for a second before he allowed himself to smile with satisfaction. He merrily threw his arms in the air and grinned at the audience. He skated towards Nobu and Mikhail.

As he expected, Nobu raised Mikhail’s arm and declared him the winner. Shoma clapped as a sign of respect for the judge’s decision. He congratulated Mikhail and they shook hands.

It was only when they exited the ice that Mikhail let out the words he had suppressed for too long: “I finally beat you at something!” he delightedly exclaimed while putting an arm around Shoma’s shoulder. “I know you’re frustrated, you sore loser. I look forward to suffering your mad revenge, tigryonok.”

“I’m going to watch the fireworks tonight,” Shoma announced to Itsuki when the latter passed by his bedroom. Shoma didn’t look up from his phone, pretending to say something trivial and trying to look nonchalant.

He had offered to Mikhail earlier that day, after the afternoon show. After they had both returned to regular clothing.

“Hmmmm, with your blond Russian boyfriend, right?” Itsuki teased. He entered the room and
narrowed his eyes. He stared at his brother lying on the bed with a knowing look.

Shoma was a little disconcerted. He was torn between replying that the blond Russian boyfriend was called Mikhail and pretending that he didn’t know what his brother was talking about. Since he didn’t know what to say, he kept quiet.

“Shoma…” Itsuki called to get his brother to look at him, lengthening the last syllable. Shoma still didn’t move, so Itsuki put his hand in front of Shoma’s phone screen.

“Hey!” Shoma protested. He had now lost his game.

“It’s the only way to get you to pay attention to me!” Itsuki defended. “Stop pretending: I know that this Mikhail is your boyfriend.”

Shoma felt his cheeks redden and it embarrassed him even more because he knew it would reinforce Itsuki’s conviction.

“I know you better than anyone, probably even better than yourself,” Itsuki carried on. “I read you like an open book. I noticed you were infatuated with someone even before you started to go out recently. Even before you started talking to him all the time on that game.”

“Itsuki!” Shoma yelled. “You eavesdropped on our conversations?” He was outraged.

“Nah, don’t worry, you’re not interesting to listen to,” Itsuki said with fake disdain, “but hearing you speak English was shocking enough for me to make my own enquiries,” he evasively said.

Shoma protested, rose up against this obvious infringement on privacy, reminded about the fundamental rights in their free country, looked for the article of the constitution his brother had blatantly violated, threatened to report his acts to the police, and worst: to their mother. Itsuki didn’t listen to him and went on:

“I found out that it was Mikhail, but I have still one question left: when did you hook up?”

Shoma sighed. He had inescapably lost the losing battle. He replied shyly: “…A few months ago.”

“Oh, so you’re still two baby lovebirds!” Itsuki teasingly said with an exaggerated fond voice. “How do you do things if you can’t share the same bed?”

It took a few seconds for Shoma to understand that Itsuki was talking about sex. Once he got it, he literally shrieked, appalled: “Itsuki!”

“Is my name the only word you know?” He rolled his eyes before returning serious: “Anyway, don’t worry, I’m not going to tell anyone. Mom and Dad have already guessed anyway.”

“Really?” Shoma was extremely embarrassed. Itsuki reassured him: “Hey, don’t worry, I told you. They’re supportive. They’ve watched his skating and they liked it as well. Also, they have seen some of his interviews and Dad said that he was like you but smarter.” He laughed heartily. “And they have also discussed with Ohama-san to decide what was the best thing to do about that. Ohama-san even talked to Mikhail’s coach. Everything is under control, so just focus on not falling asleep when you kiss him.”

Shoma remained speechless after these revelations. He had never thought all those persons could find out. He covered his face and turned his back to Itsuki at the idea that his parents and his manager had seen right through him and protected their relationship. How could he ever face them from now on?
He suddenly thought about two other important persons:

“Do Mihoko-sensei and Machiko-sensei know as well?”

“Of course!”

Oh no. He would have to bear the meaningful looks of Machiko-sensei during competitions in Japan when she would see Mikhail.

“Other people may have guessed, I think,” Itsuki said. “Like Kana-chan or Mao-chan. They just know you so well. But I have to say that you’re pretty obvious too. You get all nervous whenever someone mentions Mikhail. Everyone thinks it’s so cute.”

“Do you think… it’s a matter of public knowledge?” Shoma worried. He dared to remove his hands from his face and to look at his brother.

“Honestly? No. You can’t hide from us because we’re close to you and we know you well, but you’re very good at hiding your emotions in public. You always look dead inside. And your manager and Mom and Dad have come up with a plan that could protect you and your relationship even from an alien attack. No need to stress out.”

Shoma was astonished. He would have never thought about his relatives developing a protection plan.

“I don’t think Mikhail knows about that either,” Shoma simply said.

“You should tell him. Just get ready for your date already, you’ll need some time to fix the mess that serves you as hair.”

Shoma looked at the time on his phone and cursed. He hadn’t realised he had gamed for that long. He quickly rummaged to find some clothes.

Itsuki lay down on Shoma’s bed and heaved a sigh of relief. He crossed his arms behind his head.

“I’m glad this Mikhail exists. It was high time you had found someone because I am not going to feed you forever. Now I can finally focus on my own love life. Plenty of fans await me. You’ll need to introduce me to your boyfriend: this guy is doing God’s work. I should also warn the poor boy about what he got himself into.”

Shoma rushed in the bathroom without a glance at his brother and his teasing jokes.

Shoma and Mikhail had their date not long before the fireworks started. They were in Nagoya, Shoma’s city, where figure skating is very popular, and they risked being recognized, especially since the fireworks on the beach were an event that attracted thousands of people. Therefore, Shoma had recommended not to walk around too much in public.

Mikhail arrived at the meeting point a few minutes early. It was dark already. He didn’t know where he was, but fortunately Google Maps had helped him. He sat down on a step and waited for Shoma to take over as his guide.

He heard footsteps approaching and looked up. Shoma was standing in front of him, hands in his
hoodie pocket, the street lights displaying shadows on his face. Both of them smiled and Mikhail stood up. They greeted each other and Shoma offered:

“How about some dango before we go to the beach? Everyone is going right now, I think we’d better arrive at the last moment so that no one notices us.”

Mikhail nodded. He had never eaten dango before, but he was sure it tasted good if Shoma liked it. They bought one skewer each from a street food truck and Mikhail wasn’t disappointed.

The two boys walked slowly towards the beach. They still had some time ahead of them.

Mikhail felt his heart pounding. It was like a romantic date. Watching fireworks just the two of them was typically a date thing. Everyone among the local population intended to attend the show. If Shoma had offered to go with Mikhail, and Mikhail only, it meant... something.

They had been dating for a few months now, yet Mikhail still felt dizzy and excited at the idea that he was currently on a date with the person he loved. He had clammy hands and the desire to kiss Shoma. But he knew that kissing him in public wasn’t an option.

He felt the longing to hold Shoma’s small hand, which was currently swinging in step with his pace, so close to Mikhail’s own hand. He hesitated to take his hand, but eventually decided against it. Shoma would probably not want to, especially in front of people – and people he could know or who could recognize him.

They arrived at the beach just when the first rocket broke the darkness of the night sky. They heard people clap eagerly. Shoma led the way and stepped on the sand, without regard for his shoes. Mikhail followed him. The sand felt cold. He wasn’t used to going to the beach at night. In his mind, sand was always hot in the summer, but he had never thought that it was because it was heated by the sun whenever he went to the beach.

They found a low wall that demarcated the limit between the beach and the street and they sat on it, apart from everyone – people were closer to the sea.

The show actually started. It had been a long time since the last time Mikhail had seen fireworks. They created huge circles in the sky. The colours lightened up the water for a few seconds before it returned to a deep dark black. The sound was impressive as well: it reverberated on the buildings behind them, therefore each explosion of colours was followed by two distinct sounds, two notes echoing like in a song: the first one, clear, strong, unexpected, when the rockets exploded; the second one, a little muffled but not less loud, a heavy thud, a worrying roll that gave an idea of the strength of the sound.

Mikhail glanced at Shoma. His boyfriend was covering his ears with his hands. Despite the sound that must have been hurting him, he was raising his head and looking at the fireworks, totally absorbed in the pool of colours. The flashes illuminated his beautiful dark eyes intermittently. His small lips were closed in an attentive attitude.

He was beautiful. Mikhail fell in love again, or rather even more than before. Every time he saw Shoma reminded him how much of a marvel he was. Every time, he found a new detail that made his stomach twist and turn, and he loved Shoma even more. Whenever he thought that he had seen all the beauties of his smiles, Shoma only needed to smile once more for Mikhail to feel the lightning in his heart once again. Every time he saw Shoma was like coming home: still the same, comforting, welcoming, warm and familiar; yet it was like a discovery every time: Shoma had always something new or special to amaze Mikhail once again, he had always new roads on his skin Mikhail had never traced, new jokes he had never told, new thoughts he had never expressed... Even the things
Mikhail already knew by heart never failed to overwhelm him like the first time, such as Shoma’s laugh, Shoma’s voice, Shoma’s tiny hands, Shoma’s gaze, Shoma’s verbal tics, Shoma’s way of speaking, Shoma.

The real spectacle was actually sitting next to Mikhail.

Shoma turned his head and glanced at him. Mikhail smiled fondly: Shoma looked so ridiculously cute with his hands on his ears. Shoma removed them and smiled at him:

“Look at the sky, dummy, you won’t have time to look at it later, unlike me,” Shoma playfully said, with obvious tenderness. He looked up again. Mikhail did the same.

“I never have enough of looking at you,” Mikhail replied. The late hour of the night and the darkness he was hidden in disinhibited him.

Shoma didn’t reply. Maybe he hadn’t heard, with the fireworks and his covered ears. Mikhail enjoyed the fireworks in silence. At some point, he felt a weight on his arm.

Shoma had put his head on his shoulder. Mikhail’s heart beat stronger. He resumed looking at the fireworks. In that position, he couldn’t see Shoma, except the top of his hair. He thought his boyfriend was an amazingly special person.

It was the grand finale. The rockets blew up one after another, so fast the strong sounds they created in Mikhail’s rib cage harmonized with his heartbeat. Mikhail suddenly felt emotional. He was in paradise: he had his boyfriend close to him, the person he trusted the most, who knew him the best and still loved him more than anyone else, and they were watching a beautiful show on a sweet summer night. What else could he have ever wished for?

Mikhail dared to put an arm around Shoma. He rested his hand on the younger boy’s hip. He wasn’t sure but he thought he heard Shoma sigh and felt him relax in his embrace.

The last rocket exploded in a glorious stream of lights. The night fell silent as the last sparkles shone and faded away. Applause marked the end of the sweet parenthesis of noisy stillness and the first persons from the audience started to leave.

Shoma sat up straight and Mikhail asked him:

“What do we do now?”

“First, we put our hood on. There are too many people, we’re going to be caught in the crowd. It’s dangerous if we’re seen together.”

The two boys were wearing hoodies to shield from the cold of the night sea wind and they pulled their hoods over their heads. Shoma’s fringe poked under the hood. He looked very cute.

“Now… I don’t know, let’s try to move away to a quieter place. We should hurry before there are too many people: most of the crowd is still on the beach for now.”

Mikhail followed Shoma and they walked their way into the stream of people along the promenade. But the crowd was bigger than expected. Mikhail started to panic a little: it was more and more difficult to follow Shoma. He was short and his head appeared in Mikhail’s range of vision more and more rarely. At some point, he saw him better. Shoma had stopped and was looking at him. He determinedly took Mikhail’s hand and guided him behind him. Mikhail stared at their intertwined hands. Shoma really did that. In public. The shy Shoma. The not-fond-of-touching Shoma. The short boy slipped fast through the crowd, overtaking everyone and slaloming confidently between people.
He turned at a corner and they entered a narrow and empty street.

Shoma looked at Mikhail: “It’s better to wait for the crowd to scatter. I’m sorry, I’ve underestimated it.”

“No need to apologise, I’m not looking forward to coming back to my hotel. And you seemed to cope well with the crowd.”

Shoma had an apologetic smile. Mikhail noticed an outside staircase and it gave him an idea:

“Follow me,” he ordered and took Shoma’s hand. They weren’t in the crowd anymore, he didn’t need to do this, Mikhail thought. But he wanted to, so he didn’t let go.

He led Shoma to the staircase and climbed the first steps. He felt Shoma stop behind him. The younger boy hesitantly ventured:

“You’re sure… it’s allowed?”

Mikhail turned around and held Shoma’s hand tighter: “No, but it mustn’t be the first time someone goes there. At worst we’ll be kicked out.”

Mikhail seemed so determined that Shoma dropped it.

They climbed the stairs up to a flat concrete roof. Guardrails prevented from falling, and they leant their elbows on them. They had a large view of the seaside and the crowd slowly walking away from it. The moon was shining bright and lightened the sea. The boys remained there for a moment, enjoying the fresh breeze and the panorama. They overlooked the crowd, and its muffled brouhaha was the only thing that troubled their quiet spot.

Eventually, they sat down on the floor. Mikhail even lay down and looked at the stars. In spite of the city lights, they were quite visible.

“The sky is beautiful,” he stated, breaking the silence.

“Yeah. We should take the time to raise our gaze more often,” Shoma replied.

Mikhail looked at him. Shoma was sitting cross-legged and had his head craned backwards to look at the stars. He had taken off his hood. The light fell on his pale skin, and his chiselled jawline shed a shadow on his neck. The soft breeze had made a thin strand of hair prick up like an antenna. He looked angelic. He pulled his knees up to his chest and his small hands wrapped them. Then he spoke with his soft voice:

“You know, my family, my coach and yours know about us.”

Mikhail didn’t answer immediately. Instead, he watched the stars shining above them. Eventually, he replied softly:

“I’m less surprised than I should. I’m even relieved.”

Shoma looked at him: “I was dumbfounded when my brother told me they knew. Did you know they prepared a plan to make sure it doesn’t get revealed?”

Mikhail couldn’t suppress a small laugh: “No, but this is even less surprising. Our teams… they’re the best.”

“Of course they are,” Shoma approved.
“Hey, Sho,” Mikhail suddenly said. “I’m… really happy.”

Shoma smiled. He drew closer to him and took his hand. Mikhail sat up.

“Let’s stay here for a long time,” Shoma said.

“You mean: on this roof? I thought you weren’t much into illegality.”

“Is it illegal to quietly look at the stars with your boyfriend?”

They remained in that position for a few minutes, before Mikhail demanded: “Put your hood on.”

Shoma glanced at him with confusion, but he did what he was asked to do. Mikhail drew his face closer to Shoma, who still had a questioning look on his face. The Japanese boy seemed to suddenly understand what Mikhail had in mind. Mikhail wanted them to be hidden, unrecognizable. Most certainly no one could have seen them on the roof, but one couldn’t be too careful. Shoma smiled and closed the gap between them. It was a very soft kiss, feathery.

“I love you, Misha-kun.”

“Daisuki da yo, Shoma.”

Shoma looked embarrassed and delighted at the same time. He tried to cover his large grin with his hand, bashful. He laughed a little: “You’ve revised, haven’t you?”

“Indeed. The first time you told me you loved me… You said it in Russian. I was impressed. And it made me feel something very special to hear it in my mother tongue.”

“That’s why I did it. My pronunciation must have been catastrophic.”

“Yes, but a lovely catastrophe. The cutest. I wouldn’t mind if it happened again.”

Shoma’s phone suddenly beeped and he checked it. He seemed to think for some time before he spoke:

“Misha-kun… Would you like to, hum… tomorrow…” He nibbled his lip, visibly uncomfortable. Mikhail gave him a bewildered look.

Shoma looked at him. Mikhail tried to convey encouragement through his eyes. Shoma spoke again:

“Would you like to… come to my place?”

Mikhail felt anxious, excited and flustered at the same time. It was a strange feeling. Shoma went on:

“I just received a text from Itsuki. He said he’s going to sleep at a friend’s house. And my parents had planned a long time ago to visit some relatives for a few days.”

Oh. In that case, it was less embarrassing. Mikhail didn’t know if he was ready to meet Shoma’s parents. He wouldn’t mind Itsuki – after all, he was Shoma’s best friend – but he would have been uncomfortable if Shoma and him stayed together while his brother haunted the house.

Mikhail’s embarrassment disappeared and only the excitement remained: “I’d like to. I look forward to entering your messy lair – I mean, your room.”

Shoma laughed and elbowed him. They lay down on the floor again.
“I hope one day you’ll visit me in Saint Petersburg,” Mikhail said.

“I’d love to meet your younger siblings.”

“Really?” Mikhail was genuinely surprised.

“Yes, I would be uncomfortable around your parents and your oldest siblings, but the children… Children are kind. I like that they don’t pass judgements and always speak their mind.”

“That’s nice. I’m sure they’ll love you.”

They fell silent for a while before Shoma added:

“I highly suspect Itsuki of having deliberately done this for us to be alone.”

The second day of ice show went well. Yuzuru gently forced Shoma to do the wedding pose although they weren’t on any podium. Both of them left the ice and headed to the lounge, still laughing out loud and walking with their arms linked. Yuzuru came up to Mikhail who was sitting on a couch, dragging Shoma along, and announced with amusement:

“I’m borrowing your boyfriend!”

Mikhail smiled, but he was surprised as he didn’t know Yuzuru was aware of their couple. Besides, the Japanese skater was speaking a little too loud for such a topic. Yuzuru noticed it:

“Don’t worry, pretty much all the skaters know more or less. We’re a supportive family and nothing will get out of the ice rink. Shoma told me about you two this morning. But I had already figured out a long time ago. I teased him once about it, and at that time you weren’t even together. I’m proud to be the first one who figured out you love each other. I knew even before you did. One more world record,” he said with a stupid happy face. He was definitely enjoying himself.

Mikhail was entertained. He knew Yuzuru would be hyper elated – and teasing – about their relationship. He played along and mischievously joked:

“Now that Shoma is my boyfriend, the wedding pose is exclusively reserved to me only. I won’t tolerate Shoma cheating on me and marrying someone else.”

Yuzuru made a sad face. He was so expressive, Mikhail thought, so good at this game. Yuzuru spoke in a disappointed voice:

“But it’s been our little thing, our little secret for years, what will we have left if you take our tradition away?”

Mikhail pretended to weigh up the pros and cons before he made a concession:

“Okay, you keep the right to do the wedding pose, but only if I’m with you on the podium so I can chaperone and make sure you don’t do anything inappropriate.”

Yuzuru’s face lit up with a grin and he happily exclaimed: “Deal!”

The two boys high-fived and laughed, while Shoma was still stuck in Yuzuru’s arm.
“And of course, no one asks for my opinion,” Shoma said.

“Because we both know you’re totally open to polygamy,” Mikhail wittily reposted.

Yuzuru burst out laughing. He howled with laughter, so loud that everyone in the room heard him. Shoma seized the opportunity to extricate himself from Yuzuru and removed his skates. He took his phone out, lay down on the couch next to Mikhail and started gaming.

“Anyway, Shoma is married to gaming already.” Mikhail and Yuzuru turned around: Keiji was joining them as he had overheard their conversation.

“And niku,” Shoma himself added without looking up from his phone, making everyone laugh.

“And Itsuki?” Yuzuru asked.

Keiji shook his head and vigorously corrected him: “No, Itsuki is his brother, it’s another kind of love…”

“As if he would actually marry a slice of niku!” Yuzuru interrupted him, pretending to take offence at being contradicted.

“Well,” Mikhail began, “It’s no secret that he has already sung odes to niku, marriage is the next step.” Everyone laughed noisily at the memory.

“Niku, niku, niku,” Keiji quietly began, playful, matching the rhythm of the original song.

“Poteto!” Yuzuru exclaimed blithely, his eyes narrowing to two tiny crescents surrounded by sunny wrinkles.

“Nagetto!” all four boys finished the famous song together before they guffawed. Between giggles, Shoma managed to add:

“Sorry Misha-kun, but I am already married to the niku!”

And Yuzuru almost died laughing: “The Niku, with a capital N!”

“The only Japanese kanji I know, thanks to him!” Mikhail said.

Once they all caught their breath, Mikhail re-entered the fray: “Anyway, why do you want to do the wedding pose so much? If we didn’t know you, we would have doubts about the true nature of your feelings for Shoma.”

Yuzuru answered: “I already said that Shoma is more like a puppy to me; I don’t plan to marry a puppy.”

“Yuzu-kun! I’m twenty-two!” Shoma frowned and sat up.

“Are you comparing my boyfriend to Masaru?” Mikhail asked with a fake threatening look.

“Masaru isn’t a puppy anymore!” Yuzuru replied.

“Me neither!” Shoma protested.

Mikhail’s look softened at the thought of Alina’s dog. “In my eyes, he will always be a puppy, even when he is very old,” he solemnly said, palms on his heart and staring into space, misty-eyed.
“I agree! He is just so cute! And it’s the same with Shoma…”

“Yuzu-kun!”

“…I don’t care how old he is, he will always be my lovely puppy.”

“Yuzu!”

Shoma opened the door and invited Mikhail in. They took their shoes off. Shoma went straight to the kitchen while Mikhail sat down on a couch in the living room. He heard Shoma open the fridge and deduced that he was bringing them some drinks. While he waited, Mikhail looked around the room. It was furnished with old and fancy furniture: heavy curtains, imposing albeit soft sofas, wooden cupboards and outdated television. Shoma came back with two glasses and handed Mikhail one.

“It’s my parents’ house,” Shoma informed.

“I know, you live with your brother most of the time. I mean, I doubt you’d furnish your apartment this way – with even a television.”

After they quenched their thirst, they went upstairs in Shoma’s room. As could have been expected, it was a little messy – but way less than one may have thought.

The show had ended in the middle of the afternoon and the two boys had come to Shoma’s place directly after. The sun was still shining bright when they had entered the house: they would have plenty of time together.

They spent the afternoon doing what they loved the most; in other words, what other people would call doing nothing: playing games in bed, together on the console or each on their own phone, talking, drinking sodas, ordering pizza for dinner, not going out at all. The lazy day of their dreams.

After their pizza, the two of them lay down on the bed, lost in their thoughts. Eventually, Shoma nestled against Mikhail and shyly slid one arm under his waist. He placed the other hand on his torso. Mikhail looked at him: “What’s got into you?” he asked, pleasantly surprised – enraptured.

“I just want to cuddle,” Shoma answered.

It was rare that Shoma initiated contact. It was half because of shyness, half because he wasn’t very touchy-feely. Yet, he never refused Mikhail’s advances. On the contrary, Shoma often refused to let go of Mikhail once they were hugging. Mikhail knew that, deep down, Shoma craved for touch. It was just that he was seldom the one who initiated it. Mikhail’s need for touch suited Shoma well.

“I’m always up for cuddles,” Mikhail replied. He turned on the side and took his boyfriend in his arms. Shoma was so tiny that he could wrap him entirely. His hair smelled of fresh shampoo, and Shoma’s own scent was like a drug to Mikhail.

They remained tightly hugging for a long time.

“You know,” Shoma said with his voice muffled by Mikhail’s collarbone, “I know I couldn’t date anyone other than you. It wouldn’t work.”

“I think so, too,” Mikhail replied. “I didn’t think a life as a couple would please me.”
“Me neither. See… we’re more like very close friends, just with more affection and cuddles. Because my feelings for you are different than just friendship. But…” Shoma drew back from Mikhail’s embrace a little and looked at him. His voice was now clear: “At first when I realised the true nature of my feelings for you, I wondered what I would like to do about it. I wanted to tell you how I feel, I wondered if you felt the same, I hoped we could be together, but at the same time, I was like: ‘What for? What would I like to change in our relationship if we dated?’ In the end, the answer is: not much. I just want us to acknowledge our love. Also, I want to be able to do things I normally don’t want to do with my friends. Things that are too ‘romantic’ for friends to do. But that’s all. I don’t want to deeply change the way we were acting as friends just to conform to the norm of what dating is supposed to be.”

Mikhail smiled and nodded: “I had the same thoughts. I don’t know if we have the most conventional kind of relationship, but I don’t care.”

“Yes, I just want to take our relationship as it comes one day at a time. But I’m sure it won’t fundamentally change from how we were before we were dating, because we were already quite close to each other, we already knew each other well and we had established some kind of routine that suited us well. I mean, we were already not talking every day for instance. I’m still okay with that now that we’re dating. And the norm would be to pine to talk to your lover every single day, to tell them everything… That’s not what I want. I’m absolutely fine the way we are now.” A slight yet beaming smile blossomed on his face. “I don’t know if I’m making any sense.”

“Yes, I totally understood,” Mikhail reassured. “I thought about this as well. It took me one other relationship to realise there isn’t a right way to date. I came to the same conclusions as you, although I didn’t formulate things this way. I’m so grateful to have you in my life,” he said as he held Shoma tighter. Shoma cupped Mikhail’s cheeks with his hands and kissed him. Slow, meaningful. They parted, both drawing back as if they had finished to convey what they had meant to. The two boys smiled and gazed at each other, aware that they shared something strong.

Shoma spoke again: “It was aesthetic attraction in the beginning. I think. Like, you’re really handsome.” He laughed bashfully while Mikhail blushed. “Then it turned into something different.” He tilted his head – which made him look at the ceiling since he was lying on his side – before he went on: “I wonder why friendship is taken for granted, whereas love has to be confessed to the other person, and even just admitted to yourself before. Also, why is love recognized by the way you want to touch, to cuddle, to kiss the person you love? Can you love someone without wanting this? Conversely, can you want this without loving the person?”

Mikhail shrugged and smiled: “I don’t know, Shoma. Love is so complicated. I guess everyone may feel differently about it.” He fell silent for a moment. “Since we’re discussing this kind of things, here’s what bothers me: why do people care so much about gender? Look, it’s the first thing someone asks when you have a baby or a pet. What does it change whether it’s a boy or a girl? Also, what’s the thing about romantic relationships that makes people want to know who you’re dating? There is so much gossip from everyone, be it the media or the fans. Even my family asks me about that. Have you ever had to stand the recurring questions from your relatives: ‘Misha, when are you bringing us a girlfriend?’” Mikhail said with a mocking voice as he made a face.

Shoma answered softly: “I understand why it bothers you… Honestly, I don’t know either. Love has to do with intimacy. It’s a private topic. Maybe people are just voyeurs,” he said with a shrug.

Mikhail laughed. Shoma went on: “Let’s forget about that. No need to bring sullenness when we have the chance to be together. It’s too rare. Let’s go back to some lovely mushy things: I love you, my funny nerd.”
Mikhail laughed heartily: “I love you too, you small mushroom.”

“My solnyshko. Little Russian ray of sunshine. And just because I’m smaller than you doesn’t mean I don’t have the right to call you little, so shut up.”

Mikhail laughed again. He then murmured in Shoma’s neck: “You always find the right words to cheer me up and reassure me. Then you laugh it off and I can move on. You’re amazing, tigryonok. That’s also why I love you. One of the many reasons why.”

Just before they went to bed, a roll of thunder disrupted the quiet night. Shoma drew the curtains: a heavy rain was pouring and the window was soaked. He couldn’t discern the outside.

“Rain,” he merely stated. “I feel like it’s always raining when we’re together. Not all the time, but way more often than when we’re apart.”

Mikhail glanced at the window: “Maybe rain and storms are our element. Or maybe it’s just because you never go outside except with me so you don’t notice,” he impishly added.

Shoma muttered. He closed the curtains and walked to his desk. As expected, Itsuki had messed up the matryoshka dolls, but Shoma had put them back in the right order when he and Mikhail had entered a few hours earlier. He took the smallest one in his hand.

“Misha-kun,” he called. Mikhail raised his head.

“Take it,” Shoma said while showing the little doll.

“Why? I gave it to you as a present, keep it,” Mikhail replied, surprised.

Shoma observed the wooden figure: “I want you to keep it with you.” He looked at Mikhail again and added: “Keep it with you like a lucky charm, or just leave it at the bottom of your bag, or put it in a drawer or something – I don’t care. But I want you to keep it.”

Shoma looked solemn. He was talking seriously. Mikhail was a little perplexed, but he smiled: Shoma’s endeavour was touching. He stood up and took the matryoshka.

“Okay,” he agreed with a smile.

Had Shoma understood the odd metaphor? Mikhail didn’t know. But it was sweet of him. Maybe Shoma had the impression that this small doll represented Shoma himself, and thus he wanted it to be with Mikhail at all times. Mikhail lay down on the bed again.

“For now, it stays on the bedside table,” he said while placing the doll next to him. He curled up in the bed and looked at the tiny matryoshka. It would keep watching over Mikhail’s sleep tonight.

The last day of ice show, before it started, Shoma looked for Mikhail. He found him in a corridor, warming up. Mikhail was intrigued by the slightly shy yet very confident look on Shoma’s face.

Shoma stopped right in front of him, forcing him to do the same, and remained standing still, silent
and smiling. He was obviously up to something.

“What?” Mikhail asked, wary. Shoma’s smile grew larger and his cheeks reddened. He looked Mikhail right in the eye and took out a tube of lipstick. Mikhail gasped.

He watched Shoma slowly open the small tube, swivelling the base so that the dark red lipstick rose. He gazed intently as Shoma applied some on his lips – slowly, so terribly slowly – while the bold boy maintained eye contact all along. Intense. It was outrageously sexy. Mikhail felt himself sweating, he was so hot that he couldn’t tell whether the heat he felt on his cheeks stemmed from the arousal or the embarrassment. Mesmerized and speechless, without a breath left, he watched the lipstick rub against Shoma’s plump lips, colouring them a deep dark red that suited him so well – especially since the two blotches had appeared and highlighted his sinfully tempting jawline – parting them a little, making them look smooth, soft, luscious, voluptuous, kissable – Mikhail was running out of adjectives, he was losing his train of thought.

Shoma closed the lipstick and pinched his lips together. Now that he had finished his sensual show, he looked a little shyer.

“I found it on the make-up artist’s table,” Shoma said.

Mikhail took Shoma’s arm vigorously and pulled him inside a storage room nearby. Luckily, it had a lock and in spite of his haste Mikhail took the time to bolt the door. He then faced Shoma again, noticed his pleased smile and ferociously kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading! For the next (and last) chapter, expect a shorter one, as an epilogue that will hopefully come more quickly.

By the way, Shoma’s niku song is still at the top of my personal billboard hot 100 and will forever be. If he ever actually records it accompanied by Mikhail on the ukulele then my life will be complete.
Grand Prix Final 2020, Barcelona

Chapter Notes

Turns out the "shorter chapter" isn't very short...

Who knows where GPF will be held in 2020? Here is my wild guess: Barcelona!

Enjoy! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Do you believe in fate?”

Mikhail’s coach gave him a strange look. He knew that saying such things right before his turn would make her worry about him becoming superstitious and starting to obsess over pre-competition rituals. But Mikhail wasn’t being superstitious. He just knew what was about to happen on the ice.

Covering his ears hadn’t been enough to deaden the eruption of cheers from the audience when Nathan’s scores had been announced. He hadn’t caught neither the scores nor the place, but he knew all the same.

No matter what he would do once the music started, Mikhail would place third, behind Nathan in first place, and Shoma in second.

“Next to skate, representing Russia,” the announcer’s voice resonated in the rink.

Mikhail took a tissue from the box his coach kept on the boards and quickly blew his nose.

She finally replied as his name was announced under a stream of applause: “No, but I believe in you.”

“Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for the national anthem of the winner.”

The applause ceased and the anthem of the United States filled the arena. Thousands of kilometres away, Adam and Mirai stood up straight. Adam proudly watched the camera zoom in on Nathan’s face with their country’s flag fading in. When the music stopped, Mirai and Adam applauded again, although no one could witness their support in Adam’s house. The television screen displayed a wide shot of the three medallists and caught the moment Nathan invited Shoma and Mikhail to join him in the centre of the podium.

“When do you invite me to dinner?” Mirai asked Adam.

“And what exactly do you think I’m doing right now?”

Mirai sighed: “First, it’s breakfast time. Second, you know I meant taking me out to that fancy restaurant you promised we’d go.”
“Right: when these two make it official,” Adam answered. Mirai slumped onto the couch and sighed once again:

“But they’ll never do that. The longer you wait, the higher the interest rate gets. So, the sooner the better.”

Adam sat down beside her: “I said I would take you out for dinner when Shoma and Mikhail start dating because you were the first one who predicted the future accurately. It was needless to mention that dating implied admitting it, because otherwise we won’t ever know the specific date.”

Mirai elbowed him: “You always make excuses.”

“Watch the show instead of messing around!” Adam gestured towards the television.

It felt good, Nathan thought. This podium reminded him of the Grand Prix Final in Nagoya, of Worlds in Milan. There was a special feeling, he thought while the anthem played. Deniss had an idiom for it. He just needed to remember it.

Okay, he got it. *La boucle est bouclée*. The loop is looped, we’ve come full circle. Well, he had actually underrotated his quad loop in the free. Nathan suppressed a laugh. It was probably not very appropriate to laugh during the anthem, especially when a close-up of his face was broadcast. So Nathan tried to keep an impassive look on his face.

This podium really felt good, he realised once again as each of his two friends put an arm around him. He felt Shoma’s and Mikhail’s hands collide with one another, on his lower back. Hold on, were they trying to get married behind his back? No, they weren’t. Only Yuzuru could get such a well-behaved boy like Shoma to do something that made Nathan uncomfortable.

Such a podium felt familiar, yet Nathan didn’t feel awkward. He wasn’t a third wheel, he wasn’t in the way, he was with his friends.

Shoma gave him a smile. He returned it. Nathan had noticed how much Shoma had matured and seemed more relaxed and more radiant than a few years ago.

It was Shoma who had taken the initiative to tell him that he was in a relationship with Mikhail. Such trust made Nathan respect Shoma even more. Since then, their friendship deepened, too. Somehow, the fact that he was dating Mikhail didn’t make them grow apart. On the contrary, it had enabled Nathan to get to know Mikhail better, and now they were friends.

His hold on Mikhail’s waist unintentionally tightened. He felt Mikhail’s hand on his own waist stroke him gently, barely noticeable. He looked to his left and was met with a warm smile.

Nathan dearly wanted a group hug right now.

Little did they know that it was at this exact moment that a loud cry was heard backstage.

Yuzuru felt Nobu’s arms wrap him. It relieved him a little but not enough to stop his sobs – it was
quite the opposite actually, it allowed him to let go. It was just... too many different emotions, too
strong. It was painful to watch the victory ceremony that he could – should – have taken part in,
instead of watching it on this tiny screen lost somewhere backstage. Yuzuru had had to withdraw the
day just before the short program due to an injury during a practice session.

Yet this pain merged with another feeling, just as strong, of affection. His kouhai had earned the
silver medal, which was a big achievement Yuzuru was proud to witness, and seeing Shoma’s bliss
at the moment made him feel gleeful. Of course, the three medallists were his friends, three
colleagues he respected the most. They deserved to be there, to experiment this feeling of total
satisfaction for their success. He was genuinely happy for them. But especially for Shoma – Yuzuru
had to admit that he was mostly thinking about him right now. Yuzuru felt like Shoma’s life was
complete. He had reached considerable heights in the sport, and he had found love.

Yuzuru raised his runny nose from Nobu’s shoulder and looked at the television. The source of
Shoma’s joy was currently standing next to him, with a bronze medal around his neck, and only
Nathan between them – yet somehow it didn’t look like Nathan was in the way. A close-up showed
a panicked Shoma overwhelmed with his prizes: the bouquet, the medal, the certificate, the watch,
the bags he didn’t know what they contained. Yuzuru snorted. Shoma was funnier in real life than he
would ever be in the craziest fanfictions. Yuzuru forgot about his own situation for a moment and his
sobs intensified.

Nobu patted him on the back. He understood. He understood how his friend felt. Yuzuru didn’t need
to tell him anything – although he may do it later – for Nobu to know what was making him cry.
Nobu knew that Yuzuru wept for two separate reasons that couldn’t ever be confused in his heart.
Yuzuru was able to differentiate the grief resulting from his injury from the esteem he had for his
competitors and the happiness he felt for Shoma. Yuzuru sniffed and hugged Nobu back:

“Thank you, Nobu.”

“You know the way I am, if you don’t stop crying you increase the chances of me crying too,” Nobu
said half-laughing, half-holding back tears.

Yuzuru tittered in Nobu’s shoulder and held him tighter.

From her seat in the grandstands, Satoko saw the medallists get off the podium to take flags and open
them out for the photographers. She saw Shoma having trouble unfolding the Japanese flag while he
held his prizes and she smiled. She heard Wakaba and Kaori laugh next to her and glanced at them.
She didn’t know how, but her friends had found three well-placed seats for them to attend the men’s
free skate.

Satoko looked at the ice again and saw Mikhail help Shoma with the flag. The Russian boy seemed
beaming. She didn’t need to worry about him. She had made the right decision when she had chosen
not to tell anyone about Mikhail’s breakdown she had witnessed once. When Shoma had told her
that he and Mikhail were dating, she had felt relieved. Inwardly, she knew Shoma was the cause of
that dejection.

When Shoma had told her that Mikhail was his boyfriend, what she had felt the most was honour:
she had felt honoured and touched that Shoma trusted her enough and considered her close enough
to confide this intimate piece of information to her. She hadn’t been surprised at all by the secret
itself, she had felt delightedly surprised that it was his friend’s own initiative to tell her. Since then,
Satoko knew Shoma held her in high regard. She clapped even stronger. Shoma seemed to look in the direction of the three friends with a smile. And she smiled wider.

Satoko wondered what Keiji knew about and thought of Shoma’s love life.

Keiji’s ringtone resounded in the bedroom. He picked up the phone without looking away from the television screen.

“Hello?”

“Hi, you’re watching?”

Hearing Kazuki’s voice didn’t surprise Keiji.

“Of course I’m watching!” he answered, staggered by the question.

“I don’t know, you could be sleeping,” Kazuki argued.

“Come on, it’s midnight,” Keiji groaned. He sighed: “Stop thinking I’m a grandpa.”

“Okay, sorry.” Silence took over between them, while the television blasted the victory ceremony’s music all the way from Spain. Kazuki spoke again: “So, what are your thoughts?”

“Shoma did great. I think he can be satisfied with his performance. Two clean programs. But Nathan was just on a whole other level tonight, despite the problem with the loop. Really impressive.”

“Yeah, I totally agree. He was remarkable in the free. I don’t know what exactly happened with his step sequence, but it looked more vivid than ever. Just like Mikhail: have you seen how smooth his movements were?” Kazuki’s enthusiasm was infectious. Keiji could hear his smile.

“And those spins! Just wow!” Keiji added.

“I think the results reflect well the performances. I’m a little sad for Boyang because he skated well, but there are only three places on the podium.”

“Yeah…”

The two boys watched the ceremony silently. Keiji could hear the sound of Kazuki’s television through the phone. They were watching the same channel, however, there was a slight interval between the two times Shizuka’s commentary reached his ears.

“And then, what do you think of them?” Kazuki asked.

Keiji didn’t answer immediately. He took the time to think. On the screen, the three medallists were still posing with the flags.

“I think what they have is great,” Keiji answered at last. “And I think what they’re doing with it is great too.”

He heard Kazuki agree and visualized him nod. It was funny how Keiji had understood what Kazuki was talking about. The screen displayed a close-up of Shoma’s smiling face.
“Shoma looks glowing,” Kazuki stated. “I had never seen him that relaxed before. Since he met Mikhail… it feels like he’s reached the point where he considers his life complete, and now he makes the most of it. Like he has achieved what he had wanted in his life and now he can enjoy it to the fullest. He looks so… adult. And at the same time, he’s still the same. It’s like everything falls into place. I don’t know if I’m making any sense,” Kazuki’s laugh was distorted because of the phone and sounded tinny. “He just looks genuinely happy.”

Nathan slipped away from his place between the bronze and silver medallists and skated backwards until he was out of the photographers’ shot. Shoma and Mikhail drew closer and smiled at each other with a knowing look before they looked at the cameras again. The broadcast showed Nathan clapping for them on the side.

“Yes… Now, everything is fine,” Keiji said with a smile.

“You know,” Misha said, “I’m impressed that you can watch the podium without feeling bitter.”

Boyang turned away from the screen in the lounge and looked at Misha while he continued to stretch, sitting legs spread on the floor and bent forward.

“Why would I be? I’m happy I skated well. I wasn’t expecting to be fourth in the first place.” He bent towards his right leg. “I wasn’t even expecting to make it to the Final.”

“Oh, Boyang… I already told you what I think about that.”

“Of course you did, you’re always everywhere, even though it’s not really clear why.”

Misha crossed his legs and leant back on his chair. He watched the screen showing the three medallists starting a victory lap. “I’m a coach now. A choreographer. I have students. And how about you, why did you come here to watch the ceremony like your life depends on it?”

“I like seeing my friends happy,” Boyang simply stated. He stretched his arms. “And I like victory ceremonies in general. I applauded the ladies earlier.”

The door of the lounge suddenly opened and Deniss and Dmitri entered, jovially babbling in Russian. They greeted Boyang and Misha and sat close to the latter.

“Have you seen the plush Dima received?” Deniss asked Misha.

“The Mario-dressed Pikachu? Yeah, I saw him play with it in the kiss and cry,” Misha answered with a grin.

“I love it!” Dmitri exclaimed. “Maybe it’s from the same person who offered Marin a big one with her program’s dress at Rostelecom.”

“Blah, blah, blah, I don’t speak Russian!” Boyang interrupted them.

“Feeling left out, Boyang?” Misha asked him in English.

“No, it’s just that you disturb me while I try to watch the ceremony. Hey, Deniss and Dima,” he looked at the two persons concerned behind him, “you should pay attention to the guys who beat you.”
The three boys laughed. Boyang’s words had an effect: they all watched the screen in silence for a while.

Until Nathan tripped over the carpet and would have fallen if it hadn’t been for his legendary coolness. He tried to act like nothing had happened, though it didn’t prevent the four boys in the lounge from bursting out laughing, and the broadcast showed that Mikhail and Shoma chortled likewise. Shoma’s laughter made him drop the watch offered by a sponsor, and the chuckles in the lounge intensified. Mikhail skated closer to the silver medallist and leant over to help him pick the watch up, but Shoma did it faster, only to have the bouquet fall down instead. The four viewers had tears in their eyes. On the ice, Mikhail was laughing so hard that he had to kneel down. He let his own presents lie on the ice and covered his face with his hands, while his mouth remained open in a wide grin – or more likely, a loud fit of laughter they sadly couldn’t hear. Shoma told him something that couldn’t be heard but was probably a complaint for his mockery, although he himself was laughing. Nathan suddenly re-entered the shot, placed himself between the two others and crouched down. He put his arms around their shoulders and the photographers shot the happiest and funniest picture they had ever taken during a victory ceremony.

“Now, that’s what I call genuine smiles!” Boyang managed to say in Mandarin as he still laughed.

“You were right, we couldn’t have missed such a victory ceremony,” Misha replied in the same language.

“Blah, blah, blah, I don’t speak Mandarin!” Deniss exclaimed.

Evgenia was chuckling loudly and Alina had trouble keeping her own laughter at a reasonable volume too. The two girls were watching the men’s ceremony in the hotel room they had expressly asked to share in Barcelona. Alina glanced at the watches the two girls had also received earlier that day. Each watch was rather massive and was thus placed in a big box that had been difficult to hold with the medal, the bouquet, the flag and everything. Thankfully, the girls had managed to keep everything in their hands. Alina was sure that she would have been too embarrassed to laugh as much as the men’s medallists currently were – as much as the audience, and Evgenia next to her, and Alina herself.

Alina was satisfied with this Grand Prix Final. Everything had gone well for her and for her friends. She was happy for Nathan. He had become a close friend. At first, she didn’t think she would go along with someone everyone described as cool. But the cool kid turned out to be also cool in the sense that he was a very nice person in all respects. She was eager to have fun with him during the gala rehearsal tomorrow.

She would also see Shoma and Mikhail. She often got paired with the former during ice shows. Shoma was kind and Alina felt at ease with him. Group programs were less stressful when she shared a part with someone she was used to do these things with. She was grateful to him for making her feel comfortable, even without really talking. Shoma was one of a kind. And he was dating Mikhail – according to Evgenia, they had started dating a long time ago, but her friend had been super ecstatic about them since forever, so Alina didn’t know for how long they had actually been dating. She just knew that Evgenia’s dreams had been fulfilled at some point, because other people had talked about them as a couple in front of her and it wasn’t gossip, and then one day Mikhail had confirmed those assertions to her. She had known Mikhail for a long time, and she liked him, so if he was dating Shoma, whom she liked too, she was happy for them.
“They’re so cute!” Evgenia was elated to see Shoma and Mikhail together. The adorable Shoma and the mysterious yet lively Mikhail. Evgenia had been going into raptures every time the two of them did anything since the ceremony had begun. When Mikhail had come to tell her that he was indeed dating Shoma, Evgenia had screamed and bounced. The very next day, she had offered Mikhail a cake to celebrate. He had warned her that their relationship should remain secret, which she already knew but made it even more thrilling. Catching the quick glances the two lovers exchanged during ice shows or competitions was a funny game. She would have the chance to play this game again tomorrow during the gala rehearsal. Nevertheless, she would of course keep her mouth shut and wouldn’t tease them: there would be people in the tiers.

She looked at her Twitter feed.

Jason Brown (@jasonbskates): Congratulations to all the medalists! Much love to all the participants from Jun and I from TCC! [media]

Ted Barton (@tedbarton7): I just had the chance to talk with the sunny Sota Yamamoto. Take a look at his optimistic and wise thoughts on his skating and this season so far: [URL]

Elizaveta Tuktamysheva (@TuktikLiza): I wanna go shopping with Shoma just to see his scared face when he sees all the bags I can carry at the same time

“Zhenya look!”

She heard Alina giggle and looked up.

Nathan and Mikhail were lifting Shoma. Evgenia started screaming with excitement again.

A beep.

Mao Asada. “Congratulate your brother for me, I know he won’t answer me if I do anyway, supposing that he even reads his messages.”

Itsuki rubbed his eyes and reduced the brightness of his phone screen before he typed his answer. “I will. But you know that he probably doesn’t really care. He won’t notice if you don’t congratulate him.”

He put his phone down and watched the said brother wave at the audience on the television screen before Mao’s reply made his phone beep again.

“I know, but still. It’s not because Shoma is one peculiar boy that I will abandon good manners.”

Itsuki smiled. “I totally agree with you. Imagine how it feels to be his brother and to have to look at people like ‘sorry, he’s like that, I know, he makes me ashamed too.’ Believe me the struggle is real.”

Mao’s answer arrived almost immediately: “Tell him Dai is also loved for his politeness.” Itsuki giggled: Mao knew Shoma’s weak spot.

He snorted when he hit the “send” button. “I can already tell you what he’ll reply: he’s gonna say that his politeness is inside him and in his discretion and that if people judge him by an element of external appearance like that then they’re not worth his politeness anyway.”
“LOL Shoma is amazing. His boyfriend must be just as incredible to love and be loved by such a guy.”

Itsuki decided to be playful: “I love and am loved by Shoma too, can I qualify as incredible too?”

His phone screen lit up again: “Of course <3”

Somewhere in Barcelona, a television in a hotel room was on, but the occupant of the room was snoring. It didn’t prevent the British commentators – why British, one may ask – from doing their job.

“With those medals, these athletes are making their mark a little more on figure skating. This competition is very important for the rest of the season. With what they have shown today, they’re warning everyone that they’re here, they are ready to conquer all the other titles.”

“Today, Nathan Chen proved again that he’s one of the top contenders for a World title this season. Unfortunately, Yuzuru Hanyu had to withdraw, but he’ll be back very soon, he confirmed his injury isn’t serious. He doesn’t need to worry anyway: Shoma’s there. Shoma Uno just proved once more his consistency at the highest level. He’s an Olympic silver medallist, he will most likely enter those in Beijing in 2022, and meanwhile, he’s improving step by step, each competition a bit better than the previous one. And with the new skaters who turned senior this season, and the promising young ones still in junior, the future of men’s single skating is bright.”

The sound of the television crackled for a second and the image lagged a little, but the high quality came right back. The sleeper didn’t react. His breathing was still deep and steady.

Javier Fernández was just supposed to take a quick power nap before the men’s free program. He was tired after the festive night he had had the day before. But he had forgotten to set an alarm, and his phone screen remained desperately black. He would certainly regret having missed the competition. He was supposed to watch it live from the grandstands, just like he had done for the short program and all the other disciplines. If he didn’t wake up very soon, he would run the risk of missing the free dance too.

“We should also talk about the brilliant – absolutely brilliant, I weigh my words – the brilliant performance Kolyada delivered today. This young man is insanely talented. A splendid position, impressive skating skills, a superb jump technique…”

“That quad Lutz, have you seen that quad Lutz!”

“I’m in awe of the height he reaches on that jump! Mikhail Kolyada has struggled a lot with consistency over the past years, but this season he has been able to show what we know he’s capable of. When he performs clean, he’s a whole different skater. He truly reached a milestone this season: he won his two Grand Prix assignments, which is even more impressive considering the heavily packed field there was at Skate Canada. Kolyada at his best is a delight to watch.”

Javier’s phone vibrated. Someone was calling him. A series of five long vibrations, then silence again. It was a pity the sound of his phone was off. The vibrations started again – had Javier been awake, he would have seen Yuzuru’s smiling face gracing his screen, a stark contrast to the probable anxiety he was undergoing at the moment: recovering from a crying fit, looking for Javier in the arena, anticipating questions from inquisitive media. Maybe Yuzuru would scold him if he picked up
the phone, but since Javier was sound asleep, he would never know.

“I’m really thankful to all the participants for having blessed us with such outstanding performances today – I’m also talking about the ladies, this morning, Mai Mihara was an absolute marvel…”

“Oh, hoho! Would you look at that!”

“Ah, it’s adorable!”

“That’s also why this generation of skaters is one of the greatest in the history of figure skating: their great sportsmanship is precious – that’s the word, precious – when you think of what happens in other sports or what happened in the past in figure skating. This – this kind of attitude is really heartwarming. You see these men being rivals on the ice, you see them being compared all the time; they always compete against the same skaters, sometimes they miss a medal by a tragically narrow margin, and you would think that they don’t want to befriend them, their rivals, but… But it’s the exact opposite,” the commentator said in a whisper. “Those three medallists right there… They are truly good persons. They have a level of professionalism that is mind-blowing, when they face the media, when they interact with the fans. And they appreciate and support each other, I guess we can say they are friends…”

“Well if that isn’t friendship then I don’t know what is!”

“And it’s just… It’s just wonderful. So beautiful. Ah, I’m moved now.” The commentator laughed and sniffed quietly. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay, Simon, those skaters have this ability to make us marvel at everything they do, because they are amazing people in addition to being great athletes.”

“And we’re lucky to be able to see them, and to commentate their performances. I wouldn’t change my job for anything.”

Javier missed the entirety of this emotional moment. He rolled over in his sleep, sighed contentedly, and his regular breathing accompanied the commentators’ speech once again.

“All right, now is time for the competition to resume. What an exciting segment ahead! The scores in the rhythm dance were tight, let’s see how the ice dancers will perform today.”

After having missed the moment Nathan ruffled Shoma’s hair right before the three medallists hugged, Javier missed the ice dance.

Shoma was tired. Nothing unusual. But what he felt right now was a good kind of exhaustion. One he knew would be gone after a good night’s sleep, one that wouldn’t prevent him from having a good time tonight; on the contrary, one that would put him in this strange yet pleasurable mood tonight – when he felt utterly happy, yet with a tight-feeling skin and slightly heavy eyelids; when surrounding sounds were a little dull yet one particular voice reached his ears, crystal clear, euphonious, prettier than usual; when conversations couldn’t be followed, yet just hearing this voice babbling nonsensical words lulled him to the most peaceful state of mind; when his eyes were too sensitive to perceive anything yet the person the voice belonged to looked better than ever, the only person he could see.

But he wouldn’t be lost and half-asleep in a noisy group of people tonight – the banquet was
tomorrow, after the gala. Tonight, he would spend a quiet evening with Mikhail. He would take a shower beforehand, so maybe he wouldn’t be too sleepy when they met – he may even have time for a quick restorative nap, Shoma thought as he looked at the sun that started to set. The sky was already adorned with an orange colour, but it was December, therefore it was probably not late. Shoma smiled to himself: if he was fresh enough to crunch numbers right now, he would undoubtedly be in great form after a shower. He walked on towards the hotel. Mihoko-sensei had already taken his suitcase when she had left, he only had his backpack with him.

Mikhail had told him – why was he thinking about that right now? – that he had been jealous once when he had seen him with Yuzuru on a podium. But later, when the same situation had occurred at NHK Trophy a few weeks ago, Mikhail had apparently felt perfectly fine watching him and Yuzuru pose together, even when they had got married in defiance of Mikhail’s ban. Shoma’s boyfriend had sworn that he had seen Yuzuru wink at the camera, and he was sure that this wink had been specifically aimed at him. Yuzuru never confirmed, but he didn’t deny either. Shoma had told Mikhail that he had thought about him as he did the wedding pose with Yuzuru, knowing perfectly well that his boyfriend was watching live on television, and impishly enjoying exchanging looks and smiles with Yuzuru.

*Misha-kun.* He missed him, although it had only been a matter of an hour or two since the victory ceremony and the press conference had ended. Mikhail was already back at the hotel, whereas Shoma had had to give more interviews. They wore him out yet didn’t bother him. At least not this time. “What do you think of the other medallists’ performances?” they had asked him. He had answered with a significant number of things about Mikhail and Nathan that he didn’t even remember now, but that had truly come straight from his heart, heartfelt words naturally pouring out as his brain had been too tired to answer. Who knows what kind of articles he would wake up to tomorrow? He just hoped he hadn’t said he was in love with Misha-kun. Well, he… also hoped he hadn’t referred to him that way. Nothing that compromised their secret relationship, but it was an affectionate and intimate nickname he didn’t want to be known by everyone.

He wondered what they would do tonight. Game. Or talk, Shoma was in the mood for talking. He didn’t have anything in particular to say, he just wanted to tell Mikhail whatever would go through his mind at that moment. He would also tell him the sky had been of a beautiful orange when he had gone back to the hotel. He would gladly listen to Mikhail telling him whatever he would want to tell him, too. He would just let his head rest on Mikhail’s lap and would listen to him, feel the slight vibrations of his boyfriend’s body as he would speak, Shoma’s eyes would be closed, his hand would be resting somewhere – on Mikhail’s knee, or somewhere on his T-shirt (or under), maybe on his hand – and he would eventually fall asleep.

Shoma felt light. He fully opened his half-closed eyes, letting the cold air wake him up. He had almost arrived at the hotel, he was already entering the car park. A jolt of happiness made him smile. He was eager to meet his boyfriend after a competition that had been successful for the two of them. Hadn’t Deniss mentioned that he wanted to try to bake a mille-feuille? Shoma wondered where he intended to find an oven, but he hoped he would find one. If there was cake on top of everything, saying that he was over the moon would be an understatement.

Some flowers caught his attention. A clump of dandelions, on the car park. He smiled – tiredness really changed him, why was he smiling at flowers? – and came nearer. He almost greeted them – ¡Hola! – but resolved to only do that in his head in Japanese, a silent konbanwa – if the flowers had a soul, they would hear it, he was sure.

The flowers remained silent, but they swung slowly with the wind, and Shoma knew it was their way of communicating with him, of returning his greeting – maybe a nap was seriously needed before he went to see Mikhail. In the middle of the dandelion clocks, a single young dandelion
flower stood out. Yellow, bloomed, truly itself. Not a puffy, fluffy ball yet. It looked happy. Shoma wanted to pick it. He hesitated for a second: it wasn’t nice for the flower, it didn’t ask for anything, it would wither soon, and it surely wanted to stay with his friends. But he felt the flower calling him, telling him it was okay, or more accurately, the flower and its friends made him feel that picking it was the right thing to do.

So he picked the flower.

He looked at it. It was really pretty. The flower hadn’t started to close and turn into a bud yet. Shoma twirled it between his thumb and his index finger. The flower spun like figure skaters on the ice. It looked flourishing, blossoming, and bright, bright yellow. He lifted the flower before his eyes, in front of the sun. It was the same colour. He wished he had known the name of this beautiful shade. He wouldn’t be surprised if its name was happiness. Or serenity, maybe quietude. Joy would suit it too. Shoma named the colour “dandelion yellow.” He would know what this colour embodied and carried.

He would ask Mikhail what the name of the colour was, tonight, and what it evoked for him. Shoma smiled once more – at the flower, the sun, himself, Mikhail, and no one in particular – and put the flower in his hair, tucking the stem behind his ear for the flower to remain steady and comfortable. He resumed walking.

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU SO MUCH for reading this story, I'll never thank you enough! I'm glad I managed to write a pretty big piece like that. I hope you enjoyed reading, and I hope I drew your attention to this rare pairing hehe ;)

I’m sorry I gave Yuzuru such a hard time in this… But I wanted a Nathan Shoma Mikhail podium, and I don’t see how Yuzuru could not be on the podium himself if not for such a sad reason. Lots of love for him.

Fun fact: I had already written the part where Nathan trips over the carpet before the incident at US nationals this year. I’m a visionary.

Thank you again ❤️

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!