Summary

Victor can handle petty crime like a panther handles prey. It's no problem, but when more super powered criminals and villains start appearing in Spring Gate, he comes up with an... unusual solution. Meanwhile, Yuuri follows his best friend, Phichit to a new city in Michigan. Spring Gate is a fresh start for him, an opportunity to finish what his parents started years ago, but his constant run-ins with a certain burning hero proves to be a bit problematic.

Notes

So here’s the deal with this story. It’s a mess. It will never not be a mess. I’m so sorry, but it is in my nature. Also, my computer recently yeeted itself into oblivion so updating will be interesting to say the least. This is especially true since I typed an entire chapter on said yeeted computer and I will probably never get it back... but because I'm a disaster, I've decided to post anyway LOL.

I'll be using my work computer to post updates, so uuuuh... I apologize profusely in advance for any tomfoolery you will be subjected to. I hope you enjoy this!
See the end of the work for more notes.
Nights that are quiet like this felt innocent to Yuuri, as if he were walking hand in hand with a shy child. This night whispered with occasional passing cars, slow footsteps, the rustle of branches, and crickets. The Mediterranean night air was briny with the gentle autumnal scent of persimmons and olives as it settled on terracotta rooftops. Far from the city, the sky was free from the shroud of smog so thousands of stars winked behind slivers of grey clouds. Yuuri couldn’t ask for a better night for a heist. When he deactivated the security system on the west wing of Madame Stint’s estate and climbed into her bedroom window, he felt as if he were walking into his own home, his own bedroom.

Floor plan memorized from Phichit’s intel, he made his way to the ground floor with ease, as if he did indeed live there. Madame Stint was not home but her lurid sense of style was. Depictions of birds of paradise adorned nearly every surface. Even the ceiling was a swirling mass of tropical feathers, monstera leaves, and gold trim. Her home had the distinct feel of the inside of a jungle canopy as the hurricane of color and deep plum wood surfaces with glimmering accents made one feel closed in by something wild and ever growing. The lady of the house was accompanying her wife on a weekend trip to attend Prince Eric and Lara Byrd’s wedding in London. He assured his buyer that the job would be done long before their return.

The ground floor was just as opulent as the rest of the house with a high ceiling and long, purple satin curtains draped over towering windows. On the wall opposite the entrance that Yuuri stood in was a marble sculpture of Psyche’s limp body wrapped in Cupid’s arms, flocked on both sides by gargantuan flowerpots overflowing with camellias and peacock feathers perched on pedestals. In front of the sculpture, two rows of glass display cases housed necklaces, earrings, and assorted jewels that winked at Yuuri in the night, but none of them interested him. He admitted that he had unfairly specific taste, but at least he had buyers that shared his preferences. He walked past the inviting twinkle of jewels to Psyche and her lover. He cupped Cupid’s cold cheek and probed behind the statue’s ear. He found what he was looking for.

Yuuri pressed the concealed button and Cupid began to sink into the ground, taking Psyche and the wall behind the couple with him to reveal a vault twice as tall as Yuuri.

“Shit, Phichit,” he murmured into his comm link.

“I didn’t say it would be easy, hot shot.”

Yuuri smirked under his mask. “I didn’t say I was complaining.” Phichit chuckled in his ear.

“By the way, I’m meeting with Lam Pok Chi in about five minutes about a deal you might be interested in.”

“You’re spoiling me. Won’t your other clients say that you’re giving me preferential treatment?”
Yuuri whispered, smiling, and pulling out his tools to get to work on the vault.

“They would. And I would tell them they were right because you’re better than them and I don’t particularly care about them.”

“Really, to their faces?”

“Of course. But anyway, Lam is a stickler for time—”

“You’re a speedster so that shouldn’t be a problem—”

“The problem is that I technically double booked. I forgot you’d still be at Stint’s. I don’t think the deal should take longer than an hour, so I can have the cameras and everything back online at Stint’s once I’m done with Lam but… in less than five minutes, I’m afraid you’re going to be on your own.”

“Is that all?” Metal gears in the vault door had begun to whine and spin, much to Yuuri’s pleasure. “I’m a big boy, Phichit. Besides, I’m almost done here.”

“That’s why you’re the best. I love an independent worker. I’ll stay on the line for the next three minutes. I’m still meeting up with you afterwards for the exchange with Gar Blanco so don’t worry.”

“Thanks,” Yuuri let the vault swing open as he readjusted his utility belt.

Here was the real prize.

The space was small and simple with lighting that complemented the facets of the rubies staring back at Yuuri. There were four, each the size of his fist, each a deep, loving red. \textit{Hello, darlings}. Yuuri felt his heart melt a little at the sight, but he didn’t slow down. The glass display case was simpler and seemed lighter than the ones outside—Yuuri noted the wood paneled base and thought that the glass could be easily lifted off it. Madame Stint must have thought that the vault would be enough protection. He bent down to get a better look at the glass, and sure enough, strands of silk and wool clung to the surface, no doubt from Stint’s gloved fingers lifting the glass on and off the display.

He couldn’t blame her.

Yuuri carefully hoisted the glass off and set it carefully on the ground. The rubies shined brighter without a barrier. He gingerly picked one up and angled it in the light to study its clarity. The facets and depth of color seemed never ending, its passionate glittering striking a match in Yuuri’s chest. He felt his arms tingle and he placed the gem in a special compartment on his utility belt before his grip could become too possessive.

There was something about rubies that made him greedier than he was.

He relieved Stint of her entire collection and placed the glass case back on its base before turning to leave, the gems burning a hole on his hip. Using his tools, he shut the vault tight as it was before. He stepped out of Cupid’s and Psyche’s way when he heard the final metallic clang of the vault’s gears. They rose from the ground to protect Madame Stint’s collection which was now bare. He grinned to himself, thinking the mission had been simple enough. He heard footsteps.

Yuuri ducked and rolled behind one of the jewelry displays and listened closely. Someone was definitely coming his way. He adjusted his comm link under his mask.

“Say, Phichit, how much time do I have left with you?”

“None. I’m walking into the meet-point right now. What’s up?”
“Oh, nothing,” Yuuri whispered as he watched a shadow stretch in front of his only exit. “It’s just that I think I might have a guest.”

“I trust you’ll be a gracious host.”

“Of course,” Yuuri breathed into the comm before slinking closer to the entrance, sticking to the shadows along the wall.”

“I’ve got to go,” Phichit whispered.

“Good luck.”

“You too.”

Turning his comm off, Yuuri stared intently at the entrance when the newcomer made their appearance. It was Scavenger. Yuuri rolled his eyes and repressed a sigh when he recognized the tank top and two utility belts strapped across the thief’s thick chest. He also noticed Scavenger’s swishing tail and flexing claws.

What are you doing here?

Scavenger, though skilled, was unnecessarily boisterous. He ransacked the places he robbed, set fires, picked fights when he could, and scratched his villain name onto any surface. He liked leaving evidence. It was nothing like Yuuri’s M-O and though Yuuri got what he came for, he didn’t want Scavenger wrecking the place. It would draw attention where it wasn’t needed and sooner than Yuuri would like. Yuuri didn’t come for a fight, but there was no avoiding it when it came to the 6’6, three-hundred-pound mutant that was Scavenger. He rolled his neck and shook his wrists loose before crouching low.

Yuuri let Scavenger step into the room and just as he raised his thick paw like hand to smash the nearest display case, Yuuri leapt for his adversary’s wrist, determined to get it in a clinch hold, but Scavenger whipped around in time, and Yuuri rolled back into the shadow of another display case. The thief’s furry ears perked up and he leered, revealing yellow fangs.

“I can smell you,” he hissed. Yuuri winced and thought of a way to end it quickly—he did not like being seen, and it seemed Scavenger was closing the gap between him. “I can almost taste your blood.” He was coming at Yuuri head on. There was no way to surprise Scavenger while facing him and without leaving evidence in the room. He screwed up. “What? You don’t want to play with me? Afraid of dogs?” Scavenger howled, a terrible earth chilling noise that shook the walls. Yuuri suppressed a shiver before steeling himself for what he was about to do.

He rose out of the shadows, his suit, an extension of the darkness, was all black, from head to toe, revealing nothing but his hard silhouette. Scavenger tilted his head at him like a bewildered puppy but leered anyways as Yuuri took a calm step to him.

“What are you?” he rasped. Yuuri did not answer. He did not move. He waited. Scavenger’s leer turned to a deep grimace and he growled at Yuuri’s silence, his furry ears falling flat against his skull. “Someone must’ve sent you to play with me. Who was it? Did Agni tip you off?”

Yuuri rolled his eyes at that. Phichit doesn’t deal with hitmen. It was strange to him though that Scavenger knew his friend’s… work name. Was he a client of Phichit’s?

Scavenger was only making himself angrier, raising his own heckles at the thought of an assassin coming after him and when he raised his beefy fist again, Yuuri struck like a cobra, clinching his wrist in both of his hands and slamming Scavenger’s body to the ground in a scissor choke hold. He
bared down on Scavenger’s windpipe with all his might, his legs struggling to make a dent in the layers of muscle protecting him. He grunted with the effort, trying to work quickly, but Scavenger managed to rip Yuuri’s leg off of his throat and toss Yuuri across the room. He landed hard on his back, the wind knocked out of him, but he stood quickly, measured his breaths. He noticed Scavenger rasping too, and he waited for the mad dog to charge at him.

In an instant, razor sharp claws flew wildly at his face and Yuuri side stepped the action, not bothering to parry. He danced around Scavenger as he threw lethal swings at Yuuri who was trying to find a weak point. Just as Yuuri leaned left to avoid his opponent’s deathly grip, Scavenger struck him hard in the stomach with a kick that winded Yuuri for half a second too long. Scavenger knocked him off his feet with a square punch to the chest.

Lying on his back, Scavenger nearly fell on top of him, snarling and barking, but Yuuri caught his hands, gripped hard, and pushed back to keep Scavenger’s gruesome teeth inches away from his face. *Fuck, you’re strong.* Yuuri kicked him hard in the stomach as petty revenge and Scavenger choked on the impact. Yuuri kicked again and held tight to Scavenger’s hands, making sure he didn’t fly across the room and break something.

Scavenger stood to avoid the kicks and brought Yuuri with him, holding him in the air at arm’s length, but Yuuri used the height to swing a kick upwards into Scavenger’s chin. Scavenger dropped Yuuri who squatted low before rocketing the top of his head into Scavenger’s chin. He landed all his strength in a turning kick to his opponent’s ribs. Scavenger dropped to his knees, and to be sure, Yuuri punched him out cold.

Yuuri sighed and rubbed a particularly sore spot on his back before bending down to wrap Scavenger’s meaty arms around his shoulders and drag his unconscious body out of the display room. He reached up to turn his comm back on.

“Phichit, you still busy?”

“Mhmm.”

“Just letting you know I handled the guest and I’m on my way out.”

“Mmmhmm.”

Yuuri giggled. Phichit was probably trying to communicate with Yuuri discreetly while he negotiated with Lam Pok Chi. He didn’t want to distract him from work, so he turned the comm off again as he made his way back to the fourth floor. He dragged Scavenger’s body across Madame Stint’s bedroom and rolled it out onto the roof. He manually reactivated one of her many security systems after shutting her window and made a death defying leap to the ground with his opponent draped over his back. He walked a stupid distance to the gate of Madame Stint’s estate, knowing that it would remain unlocked until Phichit wrapped up his deal with Lam.

His motorcycle was parked outside the gate, but he walked about two miles down the hill from Madame Stint’s estate until another manor was in sight. He dropped Scavenger’s body on the side of the road, far enough away that no one would suspect that he had been in Stint’s home if they found him here. He cracked his neck and stretching, he regarded the knocked-out mutant.

“You probably won’t believe this,” Yuuri muttered, “but I’m actually a huge fan of dogs.” He trudged back to his motorcycle.
Gar Blanco met Agni and the cat burglar in one of his abandoned warehouses with six of his men. There was nothing in the warehouse except a simple table. Gar studied the cat burglar from across the table as one of his men stood between them to count out six hundred thousand dollars for the thief.

Gar couldn’t get a read on him. Agni was easy—he was famous for his animated and deceptively warm demeanor. His friend couldn’t be more different. Agni entertained everyone there with a story about a run in with an exotic animal smuggler in Beijing while the cat burglar stood to his right, arms crossed and silent as a rock. Both wore masks—Agni, a black one with a painted red and gold bird, and the cat burglar, a black one most likely crafted from Pandora’s Iron—but Agni’s personality could not be contained by his.

The other part was that the cat burglar never spoke. Agni had set him up with the burglar without even giving him a name, just telling him that the man before him specialized in stealing rubies. Apparently, he would steal other jewels, but it was rare and would be significantly more expensive. That suited Gar just fine because he only wanted rubies. And the thief seemed to be trustworthy—he brought back the three rubies he wanted and he did it within a reasonable time frame. Agni told him to expect both him and the thief to return from the heist at around midnight and he was right. Gar couldn’t complain. He tilted his head at the burglar when Agni picked up a stack of cash from the briefcase to flip through.

“Agni was right about you,” Gar said, inclining his head to the thief and trying to start conversation. “You’re quite efficient. You must’ve been doing this for some time now.” He sniffed at the lack of response and turned his attention to Agni who shrugged and told Gar not to worry about it before thumbing bills from his own pay back on to the table. Gar raised an eyebrow at him as he closed the briefcase containing the rest of the payment and made to leave with his friend.

“Hold on, hold on! What’s this? I know for a fact we didn’t over pay you so what are you doing?” He picked up the stack and counted ten thousand. He chuckled. “Is this like a discount?” The cat burglar turned back around and stared – Gar thought he stared, it was hard to tell with the mask. Agni spun around and clapped his hands together. Gar imagined Agni smiling sheepishly.

“Ahh, yes, well,” he put a hand on the thief’s shoulder, “my associate insists that we don’t charge full price since he was technically late coming back here.”

“Eh?!”

“You see, we agreed to meet up at midnight, and we arrived at 12:05. He regrets breaching such an important part of our contract so,” he pointed at the stack left on the table, “please accept our apologies.”

The cat burglar bowed his head a small amount before turning to go. Agni saluted Gar’s men before following him and leaving Gar Blanco speechless.

Yuuri and Phichit arrived at their apartment with Chinese takeout and a ten dollar bottle of Riesling.
They slumped together on their sofa, Yuuri still in his stealth suit (he had worn a black trench coat into the building for discretion), and Phichit still in his suit-suit. Phichit’s mask, black and adorned with a red bird, was left on the kitchen counter, and he loosened his tie as he sunk further into the cushions. Yuuri shrugged his coat off and threw it across the room. He flicked Netflix on until he found a mindless baking show to play. Phichit took a swig straight from the bottle of Riesling before passing it off to Yuuri.

“How did things go with Lam Pok Chi?”

“Eager, aren’t you?” Phichit smiled through a mouth full of chicken.

“I’m just curious. I didn’t know he had a penchant for rubies.”

“I never said it was rubies.”

“You said I’d be interested!” Yuuri pouted at Phichit who laughed.

“I still think you’ll be interested. I just need to work out the details. And yes. There will be rubies. Eventually.” Yuuri hummed skeptically at Phichit who wiggled his eyebrows at him. “You might wanna start thinking about early retirement.”

“That good, huh?”

“I mean, most likely it’ll be what you’re used to, but how long do you want to keep this up? Stealing, I mean. You’re trying to be a doctor and I think you’re more than half way there at this point.”

“It’s not that simple…” Although Yuuri had ample access to it, he didn’t like talking about money. His nursing school costs were pretty much paid off at this point, Mari’s medical bills were easy enough to handle. All that was left… was his parents’ debt. It was a problem that never slept, but he couldn’t leave them without support, especially since it meant angering the yakuza. His parents had abandoned their checkered past because it had evolved into something darker than they could handle, something so irredeemably sinister that no amount of wealth or familial ties could convince them to stay. The price of leaving was steep and rapidly incurring interest. New fees were constantly and sporadically tacked on to the original cost, at the whim of a particularly nasty denizen of death, Ikki Fujiwara. Ikki set the cost years before even Mari was born. There was no way that their hot spring — which in the past doubled as a front— could garner enough profit to pay them off so when Yuuri was thirteen, he stepped in, training under a family friend to become a cat-burglar. He wanted to free his parents, but that goal seemed so far out of reach. His parents no longer worked for the Yakuza, but became their prisoners instead. It was Ikki’s idea of mercy. Considering the alternative, regrettably, Yuuri had to agree.

“I know but, what’s the goal here, bud? Do you have a timeline,” Phichit asked.

“Do you? Are you getting tired of this?”

“I love being an info broker, but you know me—I get restless staying in one place for too long. And I don’t quite like the criminal label that comes along with the job. It’s not me and it gets me close to matters that are messier than I can handle.”

“Well me too, but I don’t… I don’t know I just don’t see myself as a cut and dry criminal.” Phichit gave him a look, making Yuuri chuckle and back track. “Yeah, I’m technically breaking the law but… I’m harmless. And I’m making a living.

“Speaking of harmless, how was your guest tonight? At Stint’s place?”
“Absolutely terrible.” He had almost forgotten. “Do you make deals with Scavenger?”

“What? Why?”

Yuuri took a big gulp of wine before continuing. “Because! That was my guest! And he mentioned you. He seemed to think that I was a hitman who got information from you about him. Why would he think that?”

“Well… Scavenger is one of my clients—”

“Ugh, Phichit…” he sipped the wine. “Did you… tell him about Stint’s rubies too?”

Phichit’s mouth dropped open in shock, genuinely wounded. “What?! Of course not! I know rubies are your thing, I would never!”

“Why was he there then?”

“I may have told Scavenger that Stint had a jewelry collection, but that was ages ago. He probably thought this was the best night to steal them since she was on vacation.”

Yuuri frowned at that and stirred his cashew shrimp. “He really had it out for me.”

“But he knows as well as anyone that I don’t deal with assassins, human traffickers, none of that. Thieves only. Scavenger is kind of a dirty dog, but he’s not a murderer,” Phichit slurped up some noodles and reached for the bottle of Riesling which Yuuri yanked out of his reach. “What?! He’s never actually hurt-hurt anybody! All the fights he gets in are with heroes and other thieves. And even then, they all turn out fine.”

“He almost killed me.”

“He probably thought you were trying to kill him!” Phichit pointed accusatory chopsticks at him before snatching the wine from Yuuri.

“What?! Everyone knows I’m not a hitman, that’s ridiculous.”

“No, not everyone knows that, Yuuri. No one even knows your name because you insist on being so secretive. You won’t even make up an alias.” He grinned and leaned in with excitement. “You know what some of the people in the underworld are calling you? Agni’s Cat. You know, like cat burglar?”

Yuuri rolled his eyes at that and tried not to laugh.

“You can’t blame everything on Scavenger—you probably acted like a hitman. I bet you scared him.”

“Me? Oh, you know I think you might be right. My fangs and six-inch claws probably freaked him out… oh wait that was him!”

“Tell me something,” Phichit wiped his mouth and pointed his chopsticks at Yuuri again, “Did you say to Scavenger, ‘Hey man, no hard feelings between thieves but I really don’t want you messing up my M-O, so we’re going to have to fight,’ or did you just give him your usual silent treatment, sneak out of the shadows and lunge for his neck?”

Yuuri opened and closed his mouth like a fish before deciding, instead, to take the bottle back from Phichit.
“See?! That’s hitman behavior, Yuuri! Act like a hitman, get treated like a hitman.”

“…fair enough.” He handed the half empty bottle to Phichit who took a small sip. After a few moments of watching a contestant flub their flambé, Phichit, turned to Yuuri, cheeks stuffed with chicken again.

“You want me to cut him off?” Yuuri laughed and shook his head.

“No, you don’t have to do that.”

“I’ll cut him off.”

“No, Phichit, I promise I’m fine,” he grinned at him and stuffed his own cheeks with shrimp. “I was just a little rattled because he actually tried to kill me. He said he wanted to taste my blood.”

“Ah, that’s just Scavenger. Ignore that.”

Yuuri snorted. “There was a point where he had me pinned down and I swear he wanted to bite my face off. His fangs are huge!”

Phichit nodded sagely and rubbed his chin. “I see what you mean. I guess that would upset you since the only person you want pinning you down with their teeth near your neck is Winter Torch.” A timid blush crept up Yuuri’s neck as he threw a crumpled napkin at Phichit’s face. His friend giggled and threw it back. “But am I right?”

“Shut up.”

“But. Am. I. Right?” He punctuated each word by dramatically leaning closer and closer to Yuuri’s face and Yuuri couldn’t help but laugh sheepishly.

“Literally everyone has a crush on him, Phichit.”

“Well, I never said you have a crush on him. And you know I don’t have a crush on the world’s best hero,” he laid an exaggerated hand on his chest.

“It’s not like that…”

“Then educate me—tell me what it’s like!”

“I think he’s attractive—”

“Ha!”

“And he has a good heart. I like that about him.”

“I bet Baker has a good heart. I don’t see you blushing about him.” Yuuri rolled his eyes and laughed—the thought of anyone under the age of forty swooning for the seasoned hero was amusing. Baker was good-natured and one of the top heroes before Winter Torch’s generation, but—Yuuri’s familial past with him aside—his over the top hair and eccentric greetings made it funny to think about Baker having fans crushing on him. “What’s special about Torch to you?”

“He’s just… I don’t know…” Phichit scooted closer to Yuuri so he could rest his head on his shoulder and teasingly bat his eyelashes at him. Why did Yuuri like Winter Torch so much? He guessed it was for the same reason everyone else did. Flame powers by day, water powers by night, he was unique and well balanced. Torch was always a sight to see on the news—he never ceased to surprise Yuuri. There wasn’t a villain or criminal that wasn’t wary of Torch even though he was
exceedingly kind. It amazed Yuuri that Torch was never perturbed, never disheveled or thrown after a difficult fight. His hair was always immaculate, his smile warm, his words gentle and encouraging. Yuuri wondered how he did it. He wondered how Winter Torch could be so… perfect. Yuuri hoped that he could learn something from him. “I guess I like him because… he keeps me guessing.”

“Hmm… that’s true.” That answer seemed to satisfy Phichit for now. He got up and stacked their empty takeout containers to take to the trash. Asking Yuuri if he was done with the wine before closing it and putting it in the fridge, he leaned over the back of the couch next to his friend.

“Who knows? Maybe if you steal enough rubies, rack up a high enough danger rating, you’ll get his attention and then he’ll pin you down and tell you he wants to taste you.”

“Jesus Chr- get out of here!” Yuuri threw a pillow at Phichit’s cackling, retreating form.
A Concerned Citizen

Chapter Summary

He's got bills to pay. And some wild Russians appear.

Chapter Notes

It's been a little while. My students graduated middle school last week and I cried so hard. My eyes were so full of tears that I couldn't see my keyboard which is why I didn't update last week. But yeah. About this chapter, like I said this story is a whole mess. The timeline is everywhere, so I'm sorry. I'll try to keep it as linear as possible. Anyways, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I’m leaving your cut from the Gar Blanco deal on your dresser!” Yuuri called into the bathroom so Phichit could hear him from the shower.

“Thanks, babe!”

Yuuri closed the door for him and went back to his own room. It was small, but Yuuri liked it that way. The size forced him to leave it. It wasn’t much, with a small dresser on the wall opposite his bed, a bathroom to the left of his bed and a cramped, walk-in closet by the door. He had one picture of Winter Torch on his wall that Phichit got for him as a gag gift one year. Torch was wearing his hero suit in the poster. The suit fit his persona well—it was understated with its matte black base but the gradient gold shimmer of the top half tapering into a triangle at his waist was bold and elegant. Winter Torch’s face was opaline, with white flames crowning his head and flickering out of the eye that wasn’t winking. Confident even on paper, Torch stood as if ready to spar, legs apart, fists raised and lit with matching white flames.

Yuuri sighed and tore his eyes away from the poster to the briefcase filled with cash on his bed. He picked up a stack and fanned himself with it—both he and Phichit had forgotten to get the AC fixed—and jumped a bit when his phone rang. He put the stack back in the briefcase and fished the phone from under his pillow. It was an alarm reminding him to call home. He dialed the number and it picked up on the first ring.

“So punctual, Yuuri,” his sister, Mari, teased softly. The sound of his mother tongue coming from a loved family member was soothing.

“I’m becoming predictable in my old age, aren’t I,” Yuuri said. “How are you?” Mari snorted at his joke.

“Oh, same as ever,” he didn’t like that tone, “Just teaching all the hot nurses the names of the Taking Back December members.”

“Do they even like boy bands?”
“Everyone loves Taking Back December, Yuuri.”

“And I bet everyone loves Taka…”

“Takao. And yes, he’s Japan’s sweetheart. Oh my gosh, if I could see his perfect face just once in concert, I would be complete.”

“You will one day.” Yuuri tried to keep the tone light and not think about how his older sister must have looked in her hospital bed. Face wan, cheeks hollowed out, her eyes dimmer than their natural burning brown, her body collapsing under the weight of the effects that dark magic had. Of course, doctors had informed them that there was no such thing as dark magic, only dark intentions. Yuuri didn’t care about the technicalities. Ikki had made sure to send a clear message to his family when he had Mari attacked years ago. He roundhouse kicked those thoughts out of his head.

He only wanted to envision her smirking and whistling a tune from Taking Back December, her eyes boring into him because she knew him probably better than Yuuri knew himself. He would not picture her ill because that’s not who Mari was. Mari was strong. She was perceptive. She was loving. And it showed. He would do everything in his power to see that Mari again. “I promise. I’m going to see to it personally.”

“Oh, what did I do to deserve a little brother like you?” she chuckled. Yuuri fought down the wavering tone creeping up in his voice.

“More than you’ll ever know.”

“Don’t get sappy on me. I’ll have to embarrass you if you do.” He laughed, and she hummed, satisfied. “I think I’ll embarrass you anyways. Since we’ve established that Phichit isn’t your secret boyfriend, you’ve gotta at least give me a hint about who he is. Does he have Instagram?”

“God, Mari.”

“Does he look like Winter Torch? I bet he does. You definitely have a type.”

“For the last time, I don’t have a secret boyfriend.”

“And why the hell not? You’re young. Are you too scared to put yourself out there?”

“We’re not having this discussion. Consider myself embarrassed.”

“Look, I wouldn’t pressure you if I thought you didn’t absolutely crave affection and love. But you do, and you can certainly get it,” she coughed and Yuuri could hear her ask her nurse for another blanket, “you just have to take control of your own love life. Life in general really. Stop fretting over me and our parents and figure out what’s best for you.”

“Never.”

“Ok. I should’ve seen that coming. Believe me though, I’m getting out of this hospital bed whether you pay for my medical bills or not. Mom and dad will live and die like all moms and dads do. When all of that happens, where will that leave you?”

Yuuri fell backwards on his bed and crunched his eyes tight. Now wasn’t the time to talk about his needs even though it was true that he rarely took the time to think about himself. Saving his family, though harrowing, came naturally to him. His purpose provided him clarity and direction. As his heart ached for his family’s strife, it was clear that the answer was to do everything in his power to save them in order to ease that ache, but when it came to his own personal desires, he was at a loss.
Saving his family required self-sacrifice but no degree of honesty, unlike the mountainous task of saving himself, of being attentive to his own needs. He did not want to think about what would make him happy, because he did not know what that thing was. He rolled over on his stomach, and tried to think of something to say, but failed. Mari spared him and changed the subject.

“Will you at least tell me how Phichit’s doing?”

“Pretty good. I think he’s just getting out of the shower now. You want to talk to him?”

“Nah, I know it’s getting late over there. Kids need their sleep.” Yuuri snorted. “I’m actually going to let you go too, little bro. Just promise me that you’re taking care of yourself.”

“Of course. Tell mom I’ll be wiring the money for this month’s medical bill in the morning.”

“You’re too kind.”

“Good night.”

When the line died, he took a deep breath and tossed his phone onto his pillow. If he could, he would hop on a plane immediately and fly back to Hasetsu, but he came to Spring Gate for a reason. He tried to calm down by reminding himself that the best he could do was continue sending money for her treatment.

He leaned across the bed to count the money. Phichit had insisted on numerous occasions that he would take a ten percent cut instead of the usual thirty-five he charged others but Yuuri always refused. He always felt uncomfortable having such large amounts of money for an extended period of time so he carefully allotted money to his necessities. Shared expenses with Phichit. Tuition. His parent’s debt. Mari’s treatment. The rest went to charity. He never kept more than a couple of extra hundred dollars for emergencies and miscellaneous costs. He felt weird about it at first—he was an international jewel thief—until Phichit confided in him that he was doing the same. When Yuuri asked him why he charged such a high rate to other thieves if he was just going to donate most of it, Phichit told Yuuri that it was just because he could.

Victor first took note of Red Specter when the Daily Eagle named them on their front page: an elusive thief that had robbed several jewel collectors, a museum, an oil tycoon, and a duchess. Red Specter had taken over 10 million dollars’ worth of gems and no one had noticed that they had been robbed until Francine L Stint, Duchess of Delmont, fancied to look at her jewelry collection, one Saturday afternoon.

Except her collection was bare.

There were no prints. No footage. Not a trace of the thief and everything was as it should have been in her home, except all her rubies had vanished. It was as if a ghost had come in and swept everything away. Some guessed that perhaps it was the infamous thief, Scavenger who had done it, as some eye witness accounts claimed to have spotted him several weeks ago skulking about the pubs in a town a few hours away from the duchess’ estate. This conjecture was soon refuted as the public remembered that, though his presence so close to the scene of the crime was incriminating, Scavenger thrived off of leaving evidence. It couldn’t have been him. This rattled those in the jewel collecting community; most waved off the incident by saying the duchess ought to have had better
security, and to bolster their own confidence, they checked their own stores only to find that they had been robbed blind as well.

No one knew how long their gems—all rubies—had been missing. There were no clues, and this intrigued Victor to no end. The Daily Eagle, the same paper that had named him Winter Torch when he debuted as a hero, dubbed the thief Red Specter because it seemed they had a soft spot for rubies.

“How is it that there’s absolutely no video evidence of this person,” Victor asked, bemused grin growing on his face as he closed the paper and tossed it on the cushion next to him. Yakov grunted behind Victor and shook his head as he poured coffee into a mug. “He’s gotta be working with someone, right?” Yakov grunted again and rounded the island separating the breakroom from the kitchenette to sit next to Victor on the couch.

“Could be. Could be a power. Who knows.”

“It’s like they’re invisible… or something.”

“And how would you explain the lack of prints?”

“Gloves?”

“There were no stray threads either.”

“What’s the stuff hero suits are made of these days? Poly-metal fiber? They could have access to a suit.”

“Pandora’s Iron. It’s possible. He might’ve gotten it black market.”

“Are they a he,” he asked. Yakov shrugged and took a swig of his black coffee. He set the mug down on the end-table. Victor eyed it and grimaced. “Why are you drinking it cold? Here,” he snapped his fingers, from which a tiny white spark danced and fell upon the surface of the coffee. It flickered and dived into the depths of the drink and disappeared, leaving ribbons of steam to billow from the mug. Yakov rolled his eyes and grunted his thanks.

“This… Red Specter isn’t of your immediate concern right now, Victor.”

“They stole ten million dollars’ worth of rubies.”

“And no one was hurt. They stole from a bunch of helplessly rich socialite children who make more money ignoring this Red Specter problem than they do paying attention to it. Sure, their egos may be bruised, but they are otherwise fine. You have other concerns right now. Have you done what I asked?” Victor sighed and avoided his coach’s steely gaze, rubbed his hands together in his lap. “Well?”

“Da, da.”

“And?”

“It isn’t Yuri,” he lied. Yakov hummed at that, revealing no emotion.

He picked up his mug again and sipped, electing to stare at the blank TV instead of returning Victor’s nervous glances. An international banker and car enthusiast had reported that her extensive Cadillac collection was missing, an ugly smattering of graffiti in its place. After poking around some, Victor found out that it had indeed been Yuri Plisetsky’s work, something Yakov had suspected but wanted to confirm. Yakov had been keeping tabs on Yuri, hoping that even though the teen had run
away from home, he would one day make his way back to Yakov’s doorstep. Victor saw no need to trouble Yakov with the truth—Yuri was a renegade thief and that much hadn’t changed. More proof of that would just age Yakov needlessly and sour the relationship between the teen and his guardian more if Yuri did decide to eventually come home.

Yakov downed the last of his coffee and got up, moaning as his back cracked. Victor leaped out of his seat and tried on his biggest smile. “Yuri’s a kid, Yakov. Let him make his mistakes and then he’ll be home before you lose the rest of your hair.” Yakov laughed at Victor’s joke, one dead hiccup of sarcasm as he made his way to the sink to wash his mug.

“How big of a mistake do you think it’ll take to make him come running back to me, eh?”

“Parenthood is finding out, right?”

“Parenthood is slowly dying until you do, Victor.”

“I’ll talk to him. I’m sure he’s doing fine.”

“You don’t know where he is.”

“I’ll find him. For you, old man,” he grinned when Yakov chuckled. The laugh was barely there but it was real this time.

“You’ll grow grey in the process. Oh, but it might be too late for that,” he smirked and threw the dish towel on the counter before making his way to the elevator. “I’ll be in my office. Keep your nose clean and ear to the ground. Ah, and forget about Red Specter. They’re a non-factor right now. If you come across them, do what you can, but otherwise, don’t bother.”

“Yes, Boss.”

After yet another strenuous day of negotiating a deal with Lam Pok Chi, Phichit returned, wary, to his room. Frustrated that he had yet to meet a satisfying compromise, he hummed a dull tune and flopped onto his unmade bed. Lam was insufferable—he wanted the world served to him on a platter but he wanted it at a discounted rate. He had no regard for the labor that went into stealing something as valuable as the thing he wanted. There was no way that something like this could be stolen without a little shed blood and, for Yuuri’s sake, he couldn’t accept anything less than what was fair for a job this big. He groaned and stared at the ceiling.

He thought about how much Yuuri was suffering even though his friend may not notice it (he was always a sucker for pain). Even though he had laughed it off when Yuuri mentioned it two weeks ago, that run-in with Scavenger was serious. Yuuri had similar run-ins with other thieves after that. Of course, Yuuri was capable of handling himself but so were the guys fighting him. Spring Gate was too hot. He had chosen the city for that exact reason—the heat’s where the bread is—but he didn’t want Yuuri to get hurt because of him. He was wondering if any of this was a good idea... He turned over onto his stomach and kicked his headboard.

His room was like Yuuri’s in architecture only, as Phichit was not nearly as neat. He covered his walls in sticky notes with everything from server passwords to microwave recipes scrawled on them. Documents recording his transactions with other thieves littered the floor underneath his desk which
was the only part of his room that was subject to any inkling of order. The set-up was modest providing him with the bare minimum needed to gain access to coveted information, but harmonious.

A quiet ping startled Phichit into an upright position. He looked to his laptop to see that a project he had been working on for quite some time had proved successful. Smirking, he jumped up and rushed to his laptop. After typing in a few codes, he hit “enter” with a triumphant flick of his wrist, and sat down in his chair, swiveling in tandem with the dial tone that echoed softly from his speakers. The line died and Phichit sucked his teeth, leaning in to type the same codes again. He repeated the process twice more. Finally, he got a connection.

“Yeah.”

Phichit bit back a laugh, but couldn’t help but leer not just at his roaring success, but at the response from the man on the other end. He rolled closer to the desk, folded his arms in front of him and leaned in.

“I would never in a million years think that the world’s most esteemed hero would answer his comm link that way,” he said, unable to keep the delight out of his voice. There was a strained silence before Winter Torch spoke again.

“I guess you just got the pleasure of getting to know me a little better.” Phichit did laugh this time, though the hero’s voice was pure ice. “May I ask who is calling?”

“Let’s say…for now… a concerned citizen.”

Chapter End Notes

Yeeeeeeeeeeseah boiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii. Phichit is being slippery. Sorry it's shorter. And yeeeah... I promise this is a hero au, they're gonna start being super soon, I promise. Thanks for coming back to read more!!
Chapter Summary

Spelunking.

Chapter Notes

About this chapter:

It's a bit more gory here. I don't think it's terrible, but that's not really for me to say. There is also an implied mention of suicide. I don't want to upset anyone, so heads up.

There is a translation in the end notes for you. Nothing serious.

About other crap:

It has come to my attention that in my story summary, I said Spring Gate is a new city in Detroit... also a city. No one said ZIP! LOL my dumbass panicked when I saw it on my phone and tried to change it. For some reason, it wouldn't let me edit the summary from my phone so I was like "fuck it, Detroit is the mythical 51st state of America, I'm writing it in." I had a story line for it, but thankfully I could go in and change it on my work laptop the next day...
I looked up the state Detroit is in. Michigan??!! It doesn't even sound real. that sounds like a city too.

Anyways, the school year is basically over here. We have spring break coming up which would be good if that meant I HAD A LAPTOP TO POST UPDATES WITH HAHAHAHA. oh well. That's why I threw this mess together for you a little early. I only had a day. There will be editing errors. I'm sorry. :)
I hope you enjoy it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

If Yuuri was being honest, he had let himself go. Yes, compared to most people, he was more than in shape. But for this line of work, he thought, as he sprinted headlong down Spring Gate National’s foyer with another thief hot on his heels, it wasn’t enough. He knew he wasn’t going to shake whoever this person was so he skidded to a halt and rounded on them, effectively throwing them off balance. They tripped, and Yuuri took the opportunity to kick them dead in the gut.

This, it turns out, was a mistake.

The thief’s body turned to jelly and Yuuri’s foot sunk into the space where their intestines would be.
“Argh!” He tried to wrench his foot back. Close enough to see their face now, Yuuri scowled at the man’s smirk.

“Tsk, tsk. Everyone knows not to step in Quick Sand.”

“This isn’t even quicksand!” Yuuri snapped.

“I-it’s close enough!” Quick Sand drove his elbow down hard into Yuuri’s shin. He gasped, but unwilling to let up, he pulled a smoke screen from his utility belt and set it off. Quick Sand shouted his confusion, and his body released Yuuri’s foot as it became solid. Yuuri wasted no time; he clocked the thief square in the jaw, letting him drop like a leaf. His shin was on fire, but pride wouldn’t let him acknowledge it. Worst of all, his chest was burning as he wheezed for breath.

_I need to do stairs or something._ He clicked his comm link on. “Phichit, I need you to disable the street cameras from 5th to Glen Street. I met some guy named Quick Sand and I’m gonna drop him off somewhere,” he panted.

“Again? This is the third time this week!” He could hear a strong whooshing sound which meant his friend was running somewhere.

“Yeah, Spring Gate is an absolute hell hole. Hasetsu wasn’t nearly this hot.”

“At least you’re making more money here.”

“True.” He secured his utility belt, which housed the fat ruby ring he had just stolen from the bank, and hefted Quick Sand into his arms. He was still moaning feebly, but Yuuri could tell he was out for the count.

“You’re good to go, by the way. If you have the energy, now is as good as time as any to tackle that gem-dragon in the sewers.”

“いやだ!”
“Don’t be a baby! Gem-dragon eyes are crazy valuable! And there are only five gem-dragons on Earth, Yuuri!”

Yuuri rolled his eyes as he walked down the corner of 5th and 23rd. It was so late that it was almost morning, so even though he was in the heart of the city, there was hardly anyone around to see him plop Quick Sand onto a bench outside of a Chik-fil-A. Those who did see them clearly thought he was taking care of a drunk, eccentrically dressed friend. Thank God the con was in town… He jogged back up the street, not wanting to engage Phichit in conversations about him wrestling space gators in the sewers. He was not Steve Irwin (nobody could replace Steve). But he did need the money… He wanted to cry as he mounted his motorcycle, but instead he growled like a dying hippo.

“Atta boy, Yuuri,” Phichit said.

He couldn’t even enjoy a nice cup of coffee without some nut trying to blow up the city. Victor sucked his teeth and slammed his mug down as people began to scream outside. The patrons in the café crouched under their tables in fear. Some, who had been hovering over Victor to ask questions or try touching the flames coming out of his head jumped back as he rose from his seat.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said. He pulled a ten out of a concealed pocket and left it on the table before running out the door.

It was chaos. People were running and screaming, in every direction. Some darted into shops like they were supposed to, but others dived behind mailboxes or crawled under cars. Still others ran in mindless circles. Even the birds seemed to be going haywire, zig zagging in the air and dive-bombing the pavement. The city had emergency evacuation measures that Victor was positive most citizens were aware of. He looked around, trying to make sense of the scene when a sword whizzed past his ear, narrowly missing him.

He blinked and looked around. What he had mistaken for birds were actually swords: streaks of silver flying through the air and attacking citizens.

“Well, shit,” he breathed. He almost panicked, but made a decision. He cupped his hands together as if there was a small ball between them and, focusing his energy to the center of his palms, he opened them in a wide arc above his head.
Dozens of blazing white birds appeared above him. Some people, even in their terror, hesitated to watch them flutter. Some of them began to murmur his hero name in awe. Victor turned a sharp eye to them.

“Keep running! Go!” he bellowed as, in one sweeping motion, he urged the birds to attack. The flaming birds swarmed on the dive-bombing swords, swallowing some, and melting others into a pile of molten magic. Civilians shrieked as they ran in the opposite direction. Victor reached for the sword that almost killed him; it was stuck in the brick wall behind him. He felt the hilt as it frantically twitched in one direction: the town hall, just a block away. That must’ve been the source of the magic. His body reacted immediately, phasing into a stream of fire to fly to town hall and rematerialize again in front of none other than five star villain, Tim Fair.

Tim Fair was like a tree: tall, solid, and rugged. For some reason, most villains that Victor confronted smiled maniacally, sometimes even sweetly. They all had a manic jubilation that Victor often equated to children hopped up on sugar and running wild. Tim Fair was different. He was like a tired, stern father who was often quick to anger. He even looked the part. He wasn’t flashy; he usually wore a plaid shirt and rough jeans or something similar. Tim’s black eyes met Victor’s blazing ones with a strange mingled look of relief and exasperation.

“Morning, Winter. Dragging your feet today, aren’t you?”

“I was enjoying a cup of coffee when I noticed you were back in town,” Victor frowned at him. Protocol with five star villains was different than the protocol for other villains. For one thing, you don’t negotiate with them. Ever. It was useless to tell him to stop, to give him a chance to turn himself in. Of course, Victor rarely followed that guideline anyway—the people he fought never went down without a fight. In any case, he needed to keep Tim talking until he knew how to handle him.

“I just want to get this over with, Winter. The sooner you’re out of the way, the better.”

“So you think you can take on Boss and Iron Angel by yourself?”

“That doesn’t matter. They can come if they want, but they’ll be too late.”

“What do you want, Tim?” Victor eyed the halo of swords floating eerily around Tim’s head. That was definitely new.
“Everyone keeps asking the same questions. What I want hasn’t changed. I want to make this city pay for taking my son away from me.”

“You know I’m sorry about what happened to your son, Tim, I really am,” Victor said, edging closer, “but you know he wasn’t the only person in this city who was bullied.”

“He’s the only one that mattered to me.” Without warning, the hovering swords shot through the air at Victor and he dived to avoid them. Still more came. They materialized in the air and flew at him as he ducked and swerved to avoid them. “I want to make the people in this city suffer,” he said, sounding merely irritated though his face was something from hell. “I want to torture them the way they tortured him.” His words were punctuated by the impact of magic swords colliding with concrete as Victor swerved and danced around them, sometimes conjuring birds to swallow them up. “You might want to call for back up, Winter.”

Victor took a deep breath. The air around them grew deathly cold for a split second making Tim shudder, and then there was nothing but bone-melting heat. A ring of white fire snaked around them as more flames poured out of Victor’s eyes and flickered dangerously on his head. His fists glowed with power. The swords turned into glittering soup and, in midair, dripped onto the ground.

“Why? Am I not enough for you Tim?”

The villain roared his anger. What looked like a hundred more swords appeared in the air, all pointed at Victor. “You are nothing!” he shouted. “This is nothing compared to the pain I’ve suffered! Your fire means nothing! Swords are forged in flames!”

“And how hot are those flames?” Victor walked confidently closer. He knew Tim wouldn’t want to get too close. “I would argue that I’m far hotter.”

The swords that hadn’t yet melted joined the new ones that had materialized, circling high in the air away from the heat.

“I will see your blood today,” Tim whispered.

Victor didn’t reply, but waited. The swords above him whirred sickeningly until they had merged into one, enormous weapon, twice Victor’s height and blindingly glittery. The point was directly over his head, but Victor didn’t move.
It dropped. Victor breathed in and the ring of fire vanished. In one fluid motion, he raised his arms, as if reaching for something and a pillar of white fire surged from his fingertips. Tim shrieked and fell to the ground, shielding his eyes. Victor’s shoulders ached, but he kept his arms steady, willing the fire to stay hot. The air shimmered around him and the sword got progressively smaller until it was no more than a dagger. Dropping his exhausted arms, he ducked and rolled out of its way. Small and feeble, it followed, but Victor vaporized it with a look, white lasers shooting from his eyes. Panting, he looked over at Tim Fair. He was drenched with sweat and shuddering to catch his breath. Victor lifted his hand and a net of fire sprouted from the ground around Tim, trapping him.

Victor stood, relieved it was over. The sound of sirens grew in the distance; the police were on their way. He stretched his arms and walked over to Tim. The burly man scowled up at him, and boy, if looks could kill. Victor sighed.

“Today’s the anniversary, isn’t it,” he asked softly. Tim didn’t reply but looked down. “This is probably just an insult to you, but… I’ll be sure to put some flowers on his grave.”

“Don’t you dare go near him,” he spat. “I’ll be out again to do it myself.”

“I know, Tim.” There must’ve been something wrong with him, Victor thought. He didn’t know anyone whose heart would ache for someone like Tim Fair, a murderer, but here he was, feeling sympathy for a man who he wouldn’t hesitate to barbecue if he needed to.

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“We haven’t pulled an all-nighter since our Grand Prix days,” Phichit reminisced through Yuuri’s comm link. After robbing Spring Gate National, Yuuri went back to their apartment to regroup. At least that’s what he told Phichit he was doing. He was actually brooding, spread eagle on the sitting room floor, trying to wrap his mind around spelunking in the sewers. “It brings back memories, doesn’t it?”

“I don’t recall us ever sloshing through human excrement in our school days. Was that an extracurricular I didn’t know about?”

Phichit chortled. “Yuuri!” He chimed. “It’s not that bad. It’s mostly water!”

Yuuri grimaced and looked around at the slimy, stone walls, the river of sludge beside him. “Come down here and say that to my face, you coward.”
“Is it that bad?”

“It’s a fucking sewer, what do you think?!”

“But all the good stuff is down below! Just ask Sebastian the crab!”

“What?”

“You know! Darling, it’s better down where it’s wetter. From The Little Mermaid!”

“Ariel didn’t live in a sewer—she lived in the ocean!”

“Sebastian didn’t specify when he said wetter, did he?”

“He definitely did. You didn’t even watch the movie.”

“Don’t need to. I’ve downloaded all the songs, so I get the gist.”

A rat scuttled over Yuuri’s foot and he whimpered. “Phichit, I’m gonna cry.”

“Do you want me to come down there with you?”

“Yes, please,” he gasped.

“Ok. I’m in Moscow right now. I’ll be there in a couple of minutes.”

“What? Moscow? What are you doing there?”
“Trying to get this bread, of course. But it’s ok. I didn’t have an appointment or anything.”

“No, no, stay there. I’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure? You know I’m a speedster right?”

“Yeah, it’s not that. I don’t want you to stop working. I can handle this.”

“Ok, if you’re sure…because I’m literally on the Atlantic right now…”

“I… the Atlantic? Why didn’t you cut through the Pacific?”

“I hate Alaska.”

“Since when?”

“It creeps me out. But anyways, are you sure?”

“Uh, yeah,” he said, not sure why Phichit didn’t just skip over Alaska. Maybe he forgot that was a shorter route and didn’t want to admit it. Whatever. “I’m fine. Sorry I made you start running.” He raised the flashlight he was carrying to see further ahead of him.

“I wasn’t really running as much as I was briskly walking. To be honest, I’m not too excited about sashaying in the sewers either. Besides, I’m in Berlin now, so at least I got to go to my favorite bakery!”

Yuuri laughed, but his amusement didn’t last long. The smell in the sewer was absolutely foul, like a rotten egg French kissing a sweaty sock filled with shit. Rats and roaches scuttled along the walls, and something Yuuri couldn’t identify, swam languidly in the grey water. Every now and then, he thought he heard voices, but he was sure it was his nerves. He was hunting an animal, not a person. “How do you know the gem-dragon is in this quadrant?”

“I don’t see it.”

“Well it isn’t going to be out whistling and airing its laundry is it?”

Yuuri groaned. “Raise the service fee for this job.”

“Absolutely.”

A low rumble resonated through the sewer walls. Yuuri froze. He flashed the light around him, trying to find where it came from. He looked up and saw several shining circles. He was under a manhole so there were cars above him. But that sound couldn’t have been a car. It was somehow different. “I think I found it,” he whispered. “I’m signing off for now.”

“No, Yuuri, let me stay in case you need help,” Phichit whispered back sounding frantic.

“I’ve got this. I’ll switch it back on if I need something.”

“But,”

“Gotta go.” Before Phichit could say anything, Yuuri switched off the link and his flashlight. The rumbling sound came back, low and forbidding. Rats scurried away in the opposite direction, apparently fleeing. The thing in the water disappeared. Yuuri gulped and kept creeping forward. He shook his head clear as he thought he heard voices again.

A forked path appeared before him; four tunnels were carved in the wall in front of a large pool of rank water. Yuuri took the one on the far left as he watched more rats swim out of it. The path along the river had disappeared so, slowly dying inside, he waded into the murky water. He moved slowly, not wanting to make too much sound. Something dry was scraping against the walls ahead and… there were more voices. This way… it said. Yuuri whipped around, his heart bounding in his chest. There was no one there.

Hurry, it’ll hear us! Faint splashing sounds bounced somewhere in the distance.
“What?! Who’s there?” Yuuri hissed. The splashing stopped and a terrible silence replaced it. Yuuri looked around again.

Did you hear that? Was it...

Of course not, he’s dead... I saw it happen.

Yuuri sped forward, not caring about the sounds he was making, the water sloshing around him. The splashing in the distance got louder too—whoever it was, was on the move. He reached another forked path, this time with two tunnels. He kept barreling left until a blood curdling roar shook him to the core. The gem-dragon. It had to be to the right. He backtracked and went that way. He heard screams and he began to sprint in earnest.

Yuuri thought he would never stop running, that maybe he was going the wrong way until something mowed him over, knocking him flat on his back. He jolted up, acrid water spilling over him and looked to his left. The scaly rear end of something three times the size of a bear was closing in on something cowering in the shadows. The dragon had two rows of bony plates along its back and down its oddly stubby tail. He drew his grappling hook and shot it at the beast’s flank to get its attention. It didn’t budge. He retracted his hook and aimed higher, trying to hook it on one of the plates. It stuck and he hoisted himself onto its back. The thing roared and thrashed and somebody, several somebodies, shrieked. He scrambled to find purchase on its back as he looked down in shock to see three people huddled in the dark water.

“Wh-what are you guys doing down here?!”

“Hiding!” one of them shouted. The gem-dragon shook Yuuri off and turned its ugly head to face him. The bony plates extended down the bridge of its snout. Rock like protrusions circled its pinched looking eyes... its valuable eyes that turned into diamond-hard rubies when removed from the head. Except, this gem-dragon had no eyes. Yuuri gasped as it stepped into the light that was cascading from an overhead manhole. Gory gashes painted the spaces where the eyes should be—someone had beat him to it. His heart sank. The gem-dragon threw back its mutilated head and roared. It charged at Yuuri. His first instinct was to dodge, but then he remembered the people behind him.

He stood his ground, trying to dig his feet into the slippery pavement. The dragon rammed its head at him and Yuuri cried out, the scales digging terribly into his palms, the alien creature’s brute strength nearly crushing him as he struggled to keep standing on such wet, uneven ground, but he held it steady. Every fiber of his being was screaming with the effort of pushing the beast’s head back.

“Run,” he choked out.
“B-but… we can’t just—”

“Go!” He didn’t let go of the gem-dragon’s head until he couldn’t hear the footsteps behind him anymore. He collapsed again, putrid water closing over his face. Screeching, the gem-dragon stood on its hind legs and fell down on top of Yuuri; again he found himself pinned, with something bloodthirsty hovering over him, trying its best to devour his face. His arms shuddered under the dragon’s heft in his hands. Suddenly, the scales pierced through his armor and dug into his palms. He screamed, water threatening to penetrate the fabric in his mask. The monster was far heavier than Scavenger, and Yuuri was already so tired.

He snapped his wrists away and folded forward into a somersault under the gem-dragon. He rolled out of its way as it clambered blindly in the tunnel. Yuuri looked down at his shuddering hands through the shredded material. They were ravaged. He looked back up at the dragon; it took one long, rattling sniff and turned its head to him. It could still smell him. Yuuri took three steps back before sprinting back at it, jumping to kick the crown of its head. Foot met scales, and though pain ripped through him like a flame, he put as much force behind it as he could muster. The thing shrieked and stumbled backwards.

Yuuri didn’t let up. He balled up his fist, gasping out in pain as he did, and uppercut the thing in its rocky jaw. It shook its head and opened its mouth wide to scream at him, revealing several rows of lethally sharp teeth. Yuuri blanched, feeling weak on his feet but, instinctively, he drew his grappling hook again. The thing snapped at him—Yuuri threw up his arm to defend himself and it sunk its teeth into his forearm.

Yuuri didn’t hear himself scream but he knew he must have. Get it together! It’ll heal! He tried to steel himself with those thoughts to keep himself standing. Shuddering, vision blurred, he raised the grappling hook and shot it at the dragon’s scarred eye. It let go of him and screamed again. Yuuri took his shot—he aimed the hook down the gem-dragons throat. It gargled and spluttered and Yuuri could feel that the prongs found something. He pulled it, and the odd, sloshing resistance made him queasy, but he yanked it hard, fishing a bloody mess from its jaws. It staggered back, its pained roars deafening. Someone would surely hear it down here.

“Come on! This way!”

Yuuri looked around to find a man’s grimy face inches from his own. “W-what? I thought I told you to run!”

“We couldn’t leave you here! Let’s go!”
“It’s not safe here! Go!”

“Don’t be crazy! Look at that thing!” Yuuri turned back to the gem-dragon. It was screeching louder than ever. Standing on its hind legs and flexing its claws it seemed like it didn’t know what to do with itself, but it was clearly anything but tired. Yuuri looked lamely down at the bloody organ in his hand.

“That didn’t kill it… it’s just… angry.”

“Come on!”

He looked at the man, who seemed a bit worse for wear, but otherwise unscathed. “The other two that were with you—are they ok?”

“Yes, yes! Let’s go already!”

Yuuri sprinted in the direction he was pointing towards, the gem dragon in close pursuit.

“You pissed the damned thing off and now it won’t let up! How it’s following us when it can’t see —”

“It can smell us!” Yuuri remembered. He fumbled in his utility belt and pulled out his last smoke bomb. It was a dud; Phichit and Yuuri had unwittingly bought this one from some idiot who didn’t know what they were doing. Word spread that the screens from his smoke bombs were weak and had an acrid smell, which made this the only time that it would be useful. He threw it at the center of the gem-dragon’s ugly face and it didn’t recoil until the smoke poured into its nostrils. It choked and shook its head as if trying to ward off gnats. “That should keep it. Let’s go!”

“It’s just over here,” the man panted, clutching his side. He led Yuuri down a wider tunnel with what looked like algae sprouting from the walls and, up ahead was the glorious exit.
“How were things with Tim Fair?”

“I won’t lie, it was a bit messy.” Victor told Yakov on his comm link as he politely shook his head at the timid EMT offering him a shock blanket. “He can conjure a lot at once now, and make them track people. There were quite a few injuries.”

“Any deaths?”

“Thankfully, no.”

“For a five star villain, that’s a win. Wrap up there and make your way down to the river by East Avenue. Reports are coming in about a disturbance in the sewers there.”

Victor pursed his lips. The flames on his head shrank ever so slightly. “A disturbance?”

“Screaming. Some people think there’s some kind of creature down there.”

“In the sewers.”

“Yes.”

“That’s where you want me to go?”

There was silence before Yakov gave one of his long suffering sighs. “What’s the problem here?”

“No problem. Just clarifying. You want me to go…”

“Address the disturbance in the sewers.”

“And the disturbance is… definitely in the sewers?”
“I’ve been clear, Victor.”

“I have to… uh… go in the sewers or…”

“I will say this one last time and I promise you if I have to repeat myself I will—”

“No, I got it… I’ll…’ he dragged his hand down his face, questioning his career choice, “apparently I’m going to the sewers.”

“Report back immediately,” Yakov growled before clicking off.

Chapter End Notes

いやだ、 means something like "I don't wanna" here

Thanks for reading!
Don't Go Behind My Back

Chapter Summary

High grade neosporin

Chapter Notes

The more I try to make chapters, the more I'm faced with the reality of how much damage my previously yeeted laptop has done to my progress. Entire documents of timelines and character development lost. Now I'm just hot glueing a bunch of junk together and hoping it makes sense. Oh well. It's spring break here, but teachers still have to work which means I have more access to a working computer than I thought I would. I hope you like this one!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Twenty-two years ago, Earth was visited by a colony of Venetians. The people of Veneto are smugly proud of this term, but nowadays it doesn’t just refer to their nationalist movement but to the people of Venea, a planet several galaxies away suffering from the throes of war. The colony that arrived on Earth were all refugees. Earth welcomed them with curious and capitalistic arms. Bracing themselves for more intergalactic contact, Earth dumped more money into their space programs and travelled to stretches of the galaxy that had never been explored before. But, they didn’t know what they were doing and unwittingly brought death back with them in the form of several alien eggs.

One such egg was that of the gem-dragon. PETA had a field day when it was unanimously decided that the dragon would be considered a dangerous, invasive species that should be terminated on sight. Of course, no one cared about PETA’s views as people began to disappear or else turn up with their bottom halves chewed off.

Because of the new population of dangerous, alien species, several safety pamphlets began circulating to give people information on how to handle them. All of them listed gem-dragons at the end as an “it’s-unlikely-that-you’ll-ever-encounter-one-of-these-but-just-in-case-you-do” kind of endnote. Victor remembered those notes as he felt the bone rattling roar beneath him.

One: Don’t panic. He watched, bemused as four people—one of them in an all-black stealth suit—frantically tried to push an ancient looking grate back over the tunnel entrance of a sewer.

“Where are the screws?! Are there no screws on this thing?!” Someone was shouting. The stealth-
suit person?

“I don’t know, it was like this when we got here! Just push!”

One of them began to sob.

*Two: Get behind it.* The grate was propped up against the entrance, but without being secured with screws, it was worthless. The man in the stealth suit put his back against it and dug his heels in the muddy earth, as if it to brace the grate against impact. “Get out of here,” he cried. “I can take it!” The other three looked stricken, torn between running and staying as they took fearful steps back. The roaring was getting closer.

*Three: Make a fire.* Victor snapped back to reality and flew to them, a ribbon of fire in the sky, and rematerialized by the nearest of the three that the man in black was trying to save. They all jumped and screamed as he appeared.

“That’s enough! Let me handle the rest,” he said holding up his hands with great, raging flames in his palms. The stealth suit man stumbled away from the grate and Victor got his hands on it just in time. As the rusty metal began to weld firmly together, he saw the approaching scaly face of the demon that had been causing the disturbance. It rammed its ugly head against the grate but it was too late. It was sealed shut. The gem-dragon growled at him, raising a clawed fist. “I bet it’s freezing in there. Why don’t you come here and warm up?” Victor teased, raising his flaming hand as close as he could to the gem-dragon’s face. It growled and shrank back. Victor didn’t stop, and sent dancing sparks after it until it had vanished into the darkness of the sewer. He turned to the four behind him. “Is everyone ok?”

The three not wearing masks nodded. Two young men and a woman. One of the men pulled the other into a trembling hug as the woman fell trembling to her knees. They would be fine. He found the man in the black stealth suit frozen, as if caught in some petty, infantile offense, staring at him. Victor thought he was staring, but it was hard to tell through the black mask. He didn’t know why, but he blushed at the attention.

“Um, are you ok? Do you need… medical attention?” the man didn’t answer. He must be shy, or else shocked that Winter Torch had come to save him… but then again, this person clearly wasn’t normal. The stealth suit was proof. Was he a hero too? Vigilante? He did almost sacrifice himself to save the other three by holding the grate. Did he have super strength? Or was he a psychic type with enhanced strength? Victor had always secretly been envious of those with psychic powers. Well, if this person was a fellow hero, there was no use being cagey. He turned on the charm and grinned, the flames on his head and coming out of his eyes turning pink. “How about a commemorative photo?” he joked.
The man bolted. Cutting through the surrounding trees, he left Victor, feeling just a tad bit rejected.

* 

*That was Winter Torch. The Winter Torch. I just met Winter Torch. And I’m covered in sewer water.* Somehow, that last part only mattered to Yuuri, not because it was, well, sewer water, but because he *had just met Winter Torch.*

* 

“Boss, I’ve arrived on the scene. Send someone into The Valley Woods to find a man about five foot seven, maybe five foot eight. All black stealth suit, soaked. I’ve got three here who are injured but otherwise safe. The disturbance in the sewers was caused by a gem dragon.”

“How did black stealth suit get away?”

“He uh…ran,” Victor mumbled the last part.

“I thought you could fly?" Yakov sounded dry and sarcastic.

“You know I can’t actually fly! I… I was caught off guard, and I couldn’t leave the other three to chase him.”

“I didn’t say you had to chase him, but there’s no reason why you should’ve let him go.”

“It’s not like he was doing anything wrong!” Victor was stung by the implication that he had let a criminal slip past him.

“He saved our lives. Twice,” the woman on the ground said with fervor and a wavering voice.
“One second, Boss.” Victor crouched down to talk to her at eye level. “Can you tell me what happened,” he asked softly.

She rubbed her nose and gave her companions a furtive look and they shrugged. “That thing found us. Sniffed us out. If that other man hadn’t come and held it back, we would’ve been killed. Just like…” tears fell down her cheeks and she bit her lip.

“Just like our other friend,” one of the men said. Under the grime and muck, he had dark red hair.

“I’m so sorry,” Victor said. “Do you know where that other man came from? Or why he was down in the sewers in the first place?”

“No. We didn’t get much conversation in.” The other man rolled his eyes and crossed his arms.

“Of course not. Can you tell me why you three were down there?” They all exchanged looks again.

“We were hiding,” the red haired man finally said. “Someone dangerous is looking for us and we had no place to go.”

“Who were you hiding from?”

“It’s safer not to say,” the other man spat turning his back on Victor. He frowned and stood up.

“Is there anyone else in there?”

“We need to get Kai’s body,” the woman whispered.

“We can take care of that for you. Help and reinforcements are on the way,” Victor said in what he hoped was a reassuring voice. He reported back in to Yakov then ran them through the basic post disaster information about the police, the paramedics, and the services that he would be able to offer them if they needed it.

His thoughts wandered into The Valley Woods after the man in the stealth suit. Now that he was
thinking more sensibly, he wondered if the man was injured. What if he needed help? Why had he run? And why had he been in the sewer in the first place if it wasn’t to protect these three? A terrible rumbling echoed from the sewers and Victor shuddered at the idea of having to fight the thing at night. By day, it would be difficult but doable since gem-dragons feared fire. But at night, his water would be useless in taking it down. It was one of the few scenarios he would prefer fire over his ice and water. He wondered how that German hunter did it four years ago. He was the first person to ever incapacitate a gem-dragon. It seemed as if the things couldn’t be killed, so incapacitation seemed pretty impressive to the public when the German guy presented the beast’s eyes to the world. He refused to tell people how he had done it. Some thought he wanted to keep the glory for himself. Others thought he was trying to protect people from these vicious alien creatures. Victor was of the mind that he was simply in shock and reliving the events might set him off. He looked pretty shaky on TV. He walked back over to the grate to peer into the sewer’s depths.

He didn’t care what anyone said. Nothing, no form of pay off could make him willingly go fight a gem-dragon. But people did it anyways. Thrill seekers, alien creature life enthusiasts and…

His jaw dropped. “Jewel thieves!” He had let a criminal escape! He turned to the three behind him who looked nervously at his sudden outburst. “Did that gem dragon have eyes?”

“Uh… no. It was already blinded when we saw it,” said the red head.

“So the man in black hadn’t done it?”

“I don’t think so.”

Victor pouted. If that man wasn’t a jewel thief, why was he there? He tapped his opal mouth thoughtfully and began pacing. He clearly wasn’t one of these three. He wasn’t a thrill seeker—thrill seekers didn’t need masks. The same was true for alien creature nerds…. Maybe he was a jewel thief… but someone had beaten him to the punch? He stopped pacing at the thought of international jewel thieves traipsing in and out of the sewers. If someone had stolen the gem-dragon eyes before this thief, then what reason did he have for sticking around once he saw that the thing was blinded?

The police and paramedics had arrived. Police had already begun the process of roping the area off, and a young hero dressed in pink and yellow had taken off into the woods. Victor watched as EMTs tended to the three, administering first aid. One EMT rubbed the woman’s shoulder as she cried. The two men held hands, answering questions together. If that mysterious man in the black suit hadn’t shown up, the fate of those three was certain…just like their friend’s. Victor answered questions and smiled for cameras in a daze. This conclusion lingered in his mind the rest of the day: maybe the thief was just a good person.
Phichit nearly murdered him. Nearly. But there was no time for that—agreeing to the exorbitant price was faster than breaking the scientist’s neck and trying to find someone else. He established a payment plan for the serum, and sped back to Spring Gate to Yuuri. He might murder him too. He knew Yuuri needed help, but Yuuri was stubborn. He always insisted on doing things by himself and, for the most part, Phichit humored him, not wanting to make him feel infantilized. But this was so different. This was life or death. Yuuri should’ve called. Phichit could’ve been there in less than a second, he thought as he slipped his shoes off at the door. Yuuri was in the sitting room, on the couch with his back to Phichit. There was also a bag of something green on the coffee table but he ignored this for now. He rounded the couch at break neck speed to face his friend.

He was an absolute mess. His hands and left forearm were punctured in places. Yuuri’s foot was propped on the cushion beside him, so he guessed that got injured too. With shaking but surprisingly precise hands, Yuuri tended to his wounds.

“You should’ve called,” Phichit fumed.

“Yeah,” Yuuri breathed.

“How could you get down there and think that you didn’t need me? I was going to ignore you and come anyways but I wanted to respect your wishes!”

“I’m sorry.”

“You don’t need to be sorry. You need to think!” Phichit sank onto the arm chair behind him, dragging his hands down his face, trying to steel himself. He needed to be stern. This was serious. Tears fell anyways. “Are you ok,” he asked without moving his hands from his face.

“Yeah. I heal fast. Not as fast as you, but good enough.”

“Ah,” he got up from his chair and sat down by Yuuri. He took the package he got from that penny-pinching scientist out of his coat pocket to show Yuuri. “Before you stitch up, put some of this on your wounds. It’s fast-acting healing serum. There are instructions in here somewhere…yep, here… I’ll read it.”
“How… where did you get that from?” He looked shocked.

“Some prick in the Alps. He experimented with speedster DNA and made a serum that exponentially speeds up the process of healing. I have reason to believe that he somehow got his grubby little hands on my DNA too so I will be going back to investigate. Maybe I can even renegotiate the price…”

“Oh my god, Phichit… thank you so much.”

“You don’t need to thank me for something like this.”

“I bet it cost a fortune.”

“Nah.”

“Liar.”

“I mean… a few charities won’t be getting their donations this month… or the next. Or… for the next few years, but it doesn’t really matter. I can pay for it.”

“I’ll help you,” Yuuri said sternly.

“No,” Phichit said, “Your money goes somewhere a little more important than to some idiot boob in the Alps.” They worked together to dress Yuuri’s wounds. Yuuri, Phichit noticed, had a disturbingly high pain tolerance. He barely winced when the serum touched his injuries, though he knew it must have felt like acid. He of course knew this from their school days when Yuuri was being trained in secret by a family friend to be a cat burglar. He often showed up to school looking beat up, but he played it off to teachers saying he bruised easily. Phichit knew that whatever he was doing wasn’t easy, but it was Yuuri’s choice. “Damn. It sure does pay to have super strength.”

Yuuri snorted. “I don’t have super strength.”

“You tossed Scavenger across a room. You don’t just toss Scavenger. He’s an absolute unit. And you fought a gem-dragon. Anyone who can do that has super strength.”
“The King uses minivans as free weights! That is super strength! It takes a lot of effort for me to do that,” Yuuri countered.

Phichit scoffed. Of course he would use JJ as an example. The hero had been in some of their classes back when they all attended the Grand Prix together. “Boy. You can still lift a minivan! No one cares if you have to take a deep breath and stretch before you lift a minivan, if you can still lift a minivan. And you’d be way stronger if you started training again.”

“Meh. You were right though. I need to start thinking again. I completely forgot about using fire against the gem-dragon. I didn’t think about it until Winter Torch showed up.”

“WINTER TORCH SHOWED UP?!”

Yuuri started and dropped his roll of bandages. “Jesus, yes! He was there!”

“Why didn’t you say anything?!”

“Because you were yelling at me!”

“You deserve to be yelled at, you were being a knob for not calling, but when I was done yelling, you should’ve mentioned that your husband came to rescue you!”

If Yuuri hadn’t been almost eaten alive that morning, he would’ve had the strength to suffocate Phichit, but for now, he just sighed. “He’s not my husband. I doubt he would even notice me if I wasn’t crawling out of sewers and covered in blood… it’s not a good look.”

“Give it time.”

“Yeah, sure.”

He flicked Yuuri on the nose. “We’re gonna beat some confidence in you one of these days. Anyways, care to explain what that sack of slime is on the coffee table?” Phichit pointed at the
Ziploc bag of eerily green muck.

“I… pulled it out of the gem-dragon’s throat. With my grappling hook.”

Phichit winced but began poking the bag anyways. “That’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever heard. What is it?”

“Some kind of organ, I don’t know, to be honest.”

“Can I have it?”

“Sure…”

“Where’s your stealth suit? You didn’t bring it inside, did you?”

“I burned it. After that fight it was useless, but I would’ve done it anyways because of the sewage.”

“Good. I’ll get you a new one.”

They had him properly treated and wrapped up by noon. Yuuri gingerly stretched out on the couch, his legs resting on top of Phichit’s. He let out a long and deep sigh. Phichit pursed his lips, not knowing how to say what needed to be said.

“Yuuri.”

“Mmm.”

“This plan… isn’t sustainable.”

Yuuri didn’t say anything for a moment, so Phichit thought he hadn’t heard him. He was going to drop it until Yuuri spoke. “What do you mean?”
“I mean… that you can’t keep stealing for Fujiwara.”

“And what do you suggest that I do instead?” Yuuri mumbled. "Just give up and let him do what he wants to my family?”

“In what world would that ever be my suggestion?”

“It just seems like that’s the only other alternative,” Yuuri whispered.

Phichit chose his words carefully, not wanting this discussion to turn into an argument. “Let’s say you keep doing this. You keep giving Fujiwara the money he wants. Eventually, he’s going to realize that he could be asking for more. And then let’s say you do give him more. Then, he’ll realize that you’re pretty strong, pretty useful if you can handle stealing jewels from dangerous and risky places.” He drummed his fingers nervously and continued. “He’ll tell you to do more than just steal for him. He might ask you to do something that… you just can’t do. And then you’ll be stuck. You won’t be able to say no and you won’t be able to ask for help because you’ll already be in too deep with Fujiwara. You’ll be one of him.”

“I am not one of Fujiwara’s,” Yuuri said with venom in his tone.

“I know. But he’ll make you his and you won’t have a choice at that point because you’ll still be doing it for your family. But right now, things are different. You still have hope. In fact, we’re in a city that heroes fly in and out of all the time. They could be our allies in this.”

“No… Phichit I can’t go to the heroes for help, are you kidding me? They’d have me arrested in a heartbeat!”

“Maybe… but I think that if they knew your circumstances, that might change things.”

“Change things how? I think that would just create more problems than it’s worth.”

“It would change things because they would see that everything you do, you do to protect the people you love. And even then, you don’t let that get in the way of helping others. You could’ve run today, Yuuri, but you didn’t. You stayed to help those people. If you didn’t, they would be dead.”
“Well yeah, I couldn’t let them die…” he said, blushing.

“People may have a similar mindset as you, but they would never actually do what you did—stay behind to fight a gem-dragon by themselves so that some randos they don’t even know can live. Only heroes do that Yuuri. You do stuff like that all the time. That makes you a hero.”

“That’s… a stretch.”

“No, it’s true. If the heroes here knew what kind of person you are and why you’ve been stealing, I think they’ll want to help you and your family.”

“I… I can’t risk that right now, Phichit. We don’t actually know how they’ll respond if I turn myself in. I can’t afford to get put away when my family needs my help. I’ll… think of something else. I might talk to Fujiwara about the payments. It’s been years after all.”

Phichit raised his eyebrows at him, deeply disturbed by this suggestion. “There are some people you just don’t negotiate with, Yuuri. If you would just let me—”

“Phichit, I can’t! I just… can’t do that, ok? And I don’t need to worry about you going behind my back to do something like contact any heroes about this either. Promise me you’re not doing something like that.”

Clenching his teeth, Phichit carefully lifted Yuuri’s legs from his lap and set them on the couch as he stood. He faced Yuuri, arms crossed and trying to swallow swelling waves of emotion.

“I promised you that I would help you protect yourself and your family. And that’s what I’m doing. I would do anything to protect you, Yuuri. I’m pissed that you would even suggest otherwise.”

Yuuri sat up on an elbow. “I’m not, I just don’t—”

“You just don’t trust me enough to keep that promise.”
“That is not what I said. Why are you… so upset? I’m surprised you would even want to take such a risk.”

“Imagine you were the one who left their family to come to America to help me pay off some gang boss with stolen money. Imagine you were the one who did everything in their power to help me and protect me. Imagine yourself suggesting a safer alternative, one that won’t get me killed or worse, and me responding with don’t go behind my back.”

“Phichit… I’m sorry,” he said, aggressively rubbing his eyes before the tears in them could fall. “I didn’t mean it that way.”

“I know. That’s why I need you to think.”

Yuuri bit his lip and looked away as silence fell between them. After a while Phichit dropped his arms and made his way to the kitchen for something to do, anything that kept him from looking at Yuuri, anything to distract him from the guilt that ate at him for not telling the whole truth. “I’ll… make some tea. And then you should get some rest.”

Chapter End Notes

I have no idea how long this story is going to be, but maybe I should tag this as slow burn? I definitely left some characters out of the tags that will definitely be in this story at some point... If you haven't noticed, I'm not the best at tagging. Anyways, thanks for reading again! :)
Makkachin almost knocked Victor over when he opened the door to his loft. He chuckled and scratched her ears before putting his take-out—coconut curry and mixed veggies—on the kitchen counter. “Potty time? Who needs the potty,” he cooed as he rubbed her furry cheeks. She barked happily when he put her leash on and took her outside. After a short walk, he poured her dinner, then took a shower and slouched into some pajamas. He scooped his own food out into a bowl and turned the TV on for background noise. He never actually watched, but Makkachin seemed to like it. She wagged her tail and only looked up to occasionally beg for bits of broccoli. Victor sighed contentedly and sank into his couch, holding his bowl close to his chest as he ate.

“You actually watch this garbage?”

“Ёптель-мопсель!” Victor jumped, spilling coconut curry down his front. He looked up and found Yuri sitting with his feet folded in a chair next to him. He was scowling at the TV, picking his nails absentely. Victor sucked his teeth and tried to stop Makkachin from licking his shirt off. “What on Earth are you doing here?!”

Yuri scoffed at Victor who went into his room to change his shirt. “You’re always trying to sniff me out, but now that I’m here you’ve got a problem?” he shouted so Victor could hear him.

“It wouldn’t be a problem,” Victor huffed as he reappeared in clean clothes, “if you showed up like a
normal person by calling or at least knocking. Not appearing like some poltergeist.” He took the
bowl into the kitchen and Makkachin followed. “Well?”

“I figured you’d have some questions, so I’m saving you the trouble by coming to you.”

Victor ran a weary hand up through his silver bangs. He had forgotten about the banker’s missing
Cadillacs. The jewel thief and the gem-dragon had completely driven the thought from his mind,
especially after he went back to headquarters. He found the newspaper he had been reading a few
days ago, and he was now almost certain that he had come face to face with Red Specter. But Yakov
told him to forget about Red Specter, so he tried to do just that when he went back out on patrol
before returning home. And here Yuri was, a ready-made, though unwelcome distraction. He did
promise Yakov he’d talk to Yuri. Victor gave him a wry smile. “Why would I have questions?”

Yuri scrunched his eyebrows. “Because you usually do whenever I…”

“Well your answer hasn’t changed, has it? I don’t think I have any new questions, or anything new to say, Yuri. What you’re doing is still wrong. It’s still dangerous. Yakov still wants you to come home. Do you have anything new to say?”

Yuri glowered at him, seemingly to prideful to grace Victor with an answer, but Victor knew better.
There was something on that twisted teenage mind and he knew it. He decided to wait it out and
plopped back onto his couch with his phone after he finished up his dinner. They sat in silence for
hours before the show that mostly Makkachin had been watching—Seinfeld—had finally gone off.
Victor got up and stretched, making it clear that he was about to go to bed. Yuri glanced nervously at
Victor before blurting out.

“Yakov doesn’t care about her. That’s why I left.”

“I’m sorry, what was that?” He yawned for effect. Yuri practically growled.

take matters into my own hands.

“And what makes you think Yakov doesn’t care about Mila?”

“Because he hasn’t found her yet! He left St. Petersburg without her!”
“So did you, but you clearly care. Why should Yakov be different?”

“Because I’m actually trying while he’s busy being a fucking hero,” he fumed as he shot out of his chair. “He’s trying to save everyone except her!”

“Just because Yakov doesn’t explain everything he’s doing to you doesn’t mean he’s not doing anything. He’s got allies in Russia looking for Mila, but reports say she’s been dodging every authority figure that comes after her. I understand why, but it still makes it hard to help her. Have you considered the possibility that maybe you jumped the gun when you ran away from home?” Yuri was clearly grinding his teeth together, as he was apt to do, and when he balled up his fist, Victor wanted to laugh. He was still a child, after all. “But you have, haven’t you? That’s why you’re here.”

“I honestly don’t need your condescension, old man.”

“Can you blame me,” he snapped. “You have been absolutely impossible to deal with and you’ve just been making your situation worse, digging a hole that’s too deep for anyone to reach in and help you out of.” He knew he sounded harsh, but Yuri could have stolen one of Iron Angel’s jets to fly to Russia and still be in less trouble than he was now. It was irritating to think about the whole “plan” that he had.

Someone, Victor still didn’t know exactly who, had made a deal with Yuri. Steal expensive cars for a cut of the profits. Yuri agreed to it, thinking he could save enough money to buy a plane ticket back to St. Petersburg to find Mila.

He and Mila were like brother and sister, and when they had no one else, they had each other. Yakov became Yuri’s legal guardian but since Mila was of age, there wasn’t much he could do but welcome her into his home. All was well until one day, not long before they were due to leave for America, Mila vanished. Yakov waited as long as he could—Iron Angel and Baker had already moved to Spring Gate—but she never returned. She started turning up in the news though. Factories and abandoned buildings gone up in flames; it was all her doing. News outlets named her Paprika and gave her a four star villain rating for “extreme second degree arson”. It was bullshit. They were just afraid because she was doing it with her powers. Victor knew Mila was afraid because she couldn’t actually control her powers... they were all accidents. Yakov never stopped looking for her, but just saying that to Yuri was never enough. Nothing was ever enough for that short temper. He just had to find his own way, had to do something risky and quick like stealing cars for money.

But apparently, the money wasn’t good enough because he didn’t stop stealing. Victor sighed, arms akimbo as he shook his head slowly at Yuri. “What do you want to do?”
Yuri looked like he wanted to cry, but Victor knew he would grow a pig’s tail before he ever saw Yuri Plisetsky shed a tear. “I want to come home,” he said gruffly, “and find her.” The last part sounded good and stubborn. As it should be.

“That was never off the table, Yura.”

“But now?”

Victor shrugged as he began to move about the kitchen, washing dishes. He could practically feel the teen fidgeting behind him at the silence. He decided to have mercy on him. “Tell you what,” he said turning to face Yuri. “Stop stealing cars. Cut ties with the people in that world completely. Come home. Apologize to Yakov and Lilia. If you do that, I’ll talk to Yakov for you. We might be able to work something out.”

“What about Mila?” he rounded the sofa, stomping into the kitchen. “Get it through that thick old skull, I’m not coming back if we’re not going to help Mila!”

“As I’ve said before, we’ve been looking for Mila and—”

“That’s not good enough!” He slammed a fist on the island counter and grew red as he yelled. “It’s never been good enough!” Victor met Yuri’s poisonous glare without flinching. He dropped the dish he was holding in the sink and turned to face him completely. He smiled, but there was no good humor there, only danger, and he waited. Yuri, slowly regained his composure, and when he wasn’t breathing so fast, he said “I think we can do more than what we’ve been doing.”

“Oh?” Victor said. Yuri pursed his lips waiting. “Fine, Yuri. If you agree to my terms, I will personally come with you to St. Petersburg to find Mila.”

“W-what?” Previously puffed up with anger, he seemed so deflated now, shock diffusing his cantankerous mood. “You would?”

“I promise.” Yuri was clearly trying to fight back a smile so Victor had enough tact to turn back to his dishes to let him do it behind his back. He finished up and opened the fridge to pull out last night’s leftovers: beef stew. He nuked it, spooned it into a bowl, and slid it across the island counter to Yuri. “Just don’t ever say that we don’t care, because we definitely do.”
Makkachin, recognizing family, padded over to Yuri to beg for scraps.

The speedster serum was no joke. Yuuri felt as if someone was trying to pull his skin back together with a metal rake. He focused on blocking it out; he ran through a list of the fish his parents used for making sushi at the onsen. Albacore, Amberjack, Bluefin… dull, mindless, brain work specifically designed to keep him grounded when he was in pain. He focused on fish while he rinsed bean sprouts in the sink. Unagi… what was the English word for it? Freshwater eel… He began shakily chopping veggies. It was 2am, but he wouldn’t go to bed without properly apologizing to Phichit, and the only way to do that was with food.

He had never fought like that with Phichit before. He wasn’t even sure if it was a fight. He felt a bit blind-sided because he never knew Phichit felt that away about coming to America with him. Phichit was the one who had insisted on it after all. Everything Phichit did, though it seemed chaotic on the surface, was thoroughly calculated. He didn’t make a move unless he knew the risk was worth it. So why would he want Yuuri to risk getting himself and Phichit thrown into jail for the rest of time for crimes against the aristocracy? It didn’t make sense to him, but what did make sense is that Phichit was his friend, his best friend, and he trusted him. He just couldn’t do what Phichit was suggesting. He, Yuuri thought, would just need to settle for his apology in the form of pad thai.

When the food was ready, he gingerly poured it onto a plate, his arm still quavering. It was a mess to look at, but at least it smelled good. He fell back against the counter to steady his breath before picking it up and walking to Phichit’s room. He knocked on the door and when Phichit sleepily said come in, he did.

He stood awkwardly in the dark doorway, not knowing what to say. “Um…

Phichit shifted under his covers. His head popped out from the blankets and, in the dark, he looked like one of his hamsters. “I already told you, you’re not my type Yuuri.”

“Well then you need to stop saying that to me because that’s some of the only Thai I know.”

Phichit sat up in bed and turned his bedside lamp on. He rubbed his eyes which grew twice their size when he saw Yuuri. “What the- Yuuri put that down!” He jumped out of bed to grab the plate from Yuuri’s trembling hands. “What are you doing up? You should be resting. You were almost eaten
“I’m fine,” Yuuri said, though not carrying the plate anymore was a huge relief. He sighed and limped over to Phichit’s bed to sit. Phichit followed him and put the plate on the covers between them.

“Don’t lie to me. I know all of it hurts like hell.”

“It’s fine, I’ve had worse.”

“That doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt,” he looked down at the plate. “What’s this?”

“An apology,” he shrugged shyly. “I’m sorry I made you think I don’t trust you. Or appreciate you. I really do, Phichit. I know you gave up a lot to—”

“Stop.” He held up his hand. “That was my choice. I… accept your apology, but you shouldn’t feel bad that I came to America with you. I shouldn’t have mentioned it. I wanted to do that. I wanted to do all of this. I just don’t want you to think that I’m not thinking about… what’s in your best interest.”

Yuuri thought ruefully about what Phichit apparently thought was in Yuuri’s best interest and bit his lip. Now was the time to make amends, not start up an argument he was trying to kill. “It’s nothing like what your parents used to make me when I came over, but I hope you like it,” he said instead as he pointed at the plate. Phichit eyed it, poked it with the fork.

“You’re just trying to get me to eat vegetables again, aren’t you?”

“You need fiber,” Yuuri said firmly. Despite everything, he was a nurse at heart.

“I’m an adult!” He ferociously bit into a forkful of the noodles. “You better be glad this is actually good,” he said, shoveling more into his mouth. “Hold on, I’m going to get another fork for you.” He came back with one and handed it to Yuuri. They ate in comfortable silence for a while.

“I have another job for you.”
“Already?”

“I have them queued up.”

“You really are spoiling me,” Yuuri laughed, wincing as he tried to hold his fork steady.

“It’s not major. It’s just something to do until I can get Lam Pok Chi to pay more than two dollars and a gum wrapper for a literally priceless artifact.”

“You need to tell me what the Lam job is. I’m dying.”

“Die until I tell you to stop then.” Phichit roared with laughter at Yuuri’s affronted gasp. They finished the noodles and Phichit slipped the plate under his bed. “I hear that serum works fast so you’ll be back in action in a matter of days. I want you to have something to do when that time comes.”

“Sounds good.” Yuuri was grateful—he hated not having work because that was just more time for him to think. He never thought about anything that wasn’t stressful, so he needed to keep moving, keep working to some sort of goal.

Phichit, Yuuri noticed, seemed to be thinking about something; he was drumming his fingers on his thigh and whistling short bursts of nervous sound. He knew his friend never actually needed prompting because Phichit always said what was on his mind when he was ready. Yuuri plopped down on the bed, waiting.

“It’s a shame your power doesn’t work on animals,” he said.

That’s not what he was expecting. “Um… I wouldn’t necessarily say it’s a shame… I think the idea of controlling people is enough for me.” Phichit hummed thoughtfully at that, still drumming his fingers. “What made you think about that?”

“Well,” he seemed hesitant to answer. He fell down next to Yuuri, propping his head on his hand. “If it did work on animals, you could’ve just told the gem-dragon to fuck off and then none of this would’ve happened.”
Yuuri laughed. “I guess you’re right, but I think that whoever or, in this case, whatever hears me needs to understand me in order to obey me. I think. I don’t know about the specifics.”

“Yuuri, I know you said you wouldn’t use your power…”

“I’m definitely not going back on that one. It’s not worth it,” Yuuri shifted on his side so he was looking at Phichit, letting him know he wasn’t upset about the conversation. It was a little uncomfortable, sure, but this was his best friend. He could talk about this with him.

“You never told me what happened back at the Grand Prix…” Phichit said, hedging but his goal was clear.

“What do you know?”

“Well… I know that in your fourth year, something… happened. With that kid who can change the colors of things, Corentin Thomas. I’ve heard rumors, but those are the only facts that I know.”

Yuuri took a deep breath. It wasn’t true to say that he hadn’t thought about the incident, because in reality, it haunted him. He may have never purposefully thought about it in years, but what he did stuck with him no matter how hard he tried to push it out of his mind. He hadn’t even told Phichit. Yet.

“When I was fourteen, I lost control and hurt my classmate, Corentin Thomas,” he began. It was difficult and he was glad that Phichit didn’t press him to continue. He just watched and waited patiently. “We were supposed to be practicing basic execution—using our powers on the smallest and most basic scale. I was paired with Corentin. I was never… good at controlling my power. It always felt like it was right there beneath my skin, about to overflow with no way for me to hold it back. I kept telling Celestino that I wasn’t ready, but he insisted. I… Corentin turned my shirt blue and I… tried to make him raise his hand. It wasn’t working. I was trying so hard not to lose control but restraint wasn’t working and I let up just a little bit and…” he paused to wipe his eye. Phichit told him it was ok, to take his time. “Everyone in the class stopped what they were doing to pay attention. It was crazy, like a meteorite had just crashed into the room and I was it. And even though I was gone—I wasn’t remotely in control—almost like I was watching from afar—I could feel the attention. I could feel it turning into power. If another teacher hadn’t passed by the room at the time, I don’t know what would’ve happened. I don’t know how they did it, but they got everyone but Corentin to snap out of it. I didn’t even make him raise his hand. I don’t even think I asked that time. The power just… poured out of me and paralyzed everyone.” He was annoyed at himself for letting tears fall. But what was he expecting. He rubbed his eyes on his sleeves and waited for the you-should’ve-skipped-class and the I-wouldn’t-use-my-power-after-that-either.
“Doesn’t your power need the attention of everyone in the immediate vicinity to work? How did you do that without anybody paying attention to you?”

Yuuri shrugged. He hadn’t thought about it, but it hardly mattered.

“Well, it doesn’t matter.” Could he read Yuuri’s thoughts? “You were just a kid, Yuuri.” No, he was just a good friend. “Everyone has had trouble controlling their powers. That’s what the Grand Prix Academy is for.”

“Not like that, though.”

“Exactly like that. That’s why we keep practicing, so that we know how to prevent it in the future.”

“I can’t just practice at someone else’s expense, Phichit.” Practice makes perfect. Yuuri shuddered at the thought. How many times would he have to practice and harm someone until he got his power under control?

“You obviously need to start small. Like with, I don’t know, meditation to figure out where the root of your power is and why it feels so… prominent.”

“I don’t know about that. I don’t really need it anyway. It feels like a violation of free will.”

“Oh please,” Phichit sat up and crossed his legs. “It’s not like you’re going to tell someone to jump off of a cliff. You used it on me when we first met.”

“Yeah, and I still lost control!”

“Apparently, you didn’t lose control as badly as you did with Corentin! I’m fine… for the most part.” Yuuri scrunched his brows with worry and Phichit laughed. “I’m joking! I’m really fine!” Yuuri rolled his eyes and struggled to sit up too. “Look. Everyone screws up. I screwed up.”

“Your screw ups don’t hurt people, Phichit. Corentin lost his memory. I hear that even now, he
barely knows who he is,” Yuuri said huskily, trying so hard not to cry-cry. Phichit took Yuuri’s face in his hands and moved it back and forth as if he were examining a melon. Yuuri laughed in spite of himself. “やめろ。”

“No,” and he kept turning Yuuri’s head in his hands. “My screw ups can hurt people Yuuri. I did hurt people.”

“What?” Yuuri sniffed.

“I… can’t tell you the details, but in my second year, I went back in time,” Yuuri rolled his eyes when Phichit let go of him. “No, I’m serious. It was the fastest I’ve ever gone, and I went back and made a huge mistake.”

“What?” Yuuri looked at him with a mingled sense of disbelief and amusement.

“I’m telling the truth! I messed up big time, and if I hadn’t met another older speedster, things would be very… messy right now. I can’t tell you any details, but he cleaned up the timeline for me. Well, he did his best anyway.”

“What do you mean you can’t tell me details? You’re supposed to tell me everything. Whatever happened to the best friend code?”

“I invented the best friend code, you dork. And if it was anything else, I would tell you but I’ve already caused enough damage. I don’t want to risk messing up the timeline by letting anything slip.”

“Oh my god… did you shoot JFK?”

“You know I couldn’t tell you that even if I did, Yuuri! Why would you ask me that?” He threw his pillow at him. Yuuri laughed.

“Is this true or are you just lying to make me feel better?”

“Best friend code,” he said and crawled under the covers. Yuuri didn’t know what to make of that, but he figured it was pointless to pry. He scrambled under the covers too, not feeling like going back
to his own bed. He sighed, feeling a bit emotionally raw, but content, especially since Phichit clearly wasn’t mad at him anymore.

“Phichit?”

“Hm?”

“What does ■■■■■■■■■■■■■■ mean?”

“It means I want to suck your nips,” Phichit yawned. Yuuri laughed so hard it hurt.

“You say that to me... all the time! I thought you said I wasn’t your type!”

“You aren’t, but I like to mess around.”

“Ok, good night.” Yuuri chuckled and rolled over.

“It means we were meant to be together.”

“That’s pretty gay, bud.”

“Thank god.”

“Good night.”

Chapter End Notes

Ёптель-мопсель (Yoptel-mopsel... maybe. I'm not russian.) : Jesus Christ!/goddammit!
やめろ (yamero) : stop
■■■■■■■■■■■■■■ (Rao gòet maa khûu gan... maybe. I actually lost this translation and I'm too lazy to find it): We were meant to be together.
btw I water my crops and season my food with comments. If it's ok with you, please talk to me so that I may have a good harvest and a hearty meal. <3u
“I have a feeling that you know you’re not perfect.”

Victor did not like the way Agni was answering his question, but he didn’t want to stop him. He was itching to hear more. It had been weeks since the last time they talked, and despite his best efforts and what he had promised Yakov, he couldn’t get Red Specter out of his mind. He just needed to know why Agni was so keen in helping him catch Red yet so secretive about important details. Victor couldn’t be choosy though. He wanted answers. “No one is perfect,” he said.

“And most are far from it. That doesn’t mean they’re not good people. That’s what I want you to keep in mind. If I help you catch Red Specter, I need you to remember that.”

“Why is it so important to you that I remember that?” He wasn’t good at interrogations, subtly extracting strands of truth to weave into a clear, big picture, but he had to try.

“I’d argue that it should be important to everyone, regardless of their circumstances. We should always try to remember that nobody is perfect. And speaking of circumstances, circumstances are what makes achieving perfection or anything close to it so difficult. Remember that too.”

“Should I write it down or...?”
“Save it for a future conversation. If all goes well, we’ll talk about it again.”

“Ok. So, are you going to tell me who Red Specter is, or am I going to have to beg?”

“That would be a sight,” Agni chuckled and Victor looked over his shoulder, checking to see if someone was actually watching him. It was night and he was patrolling, walking down streets a block at a time. He was supposed to be keeping an eye out for an escaped rabbit-gator. Everything seemed normal—no rabbit-gators—but he couldn’t help imagining someone in a trench coat lurking behind a tree or fire hydrant, watching. “But no, I can’t just give you information like that. I can only tell you where he’ll be and when. What you do with that information is your responsibility.”

“I just think it would be easier if I at least had a name or an address.”

“Absolutely not. If you do this, you’re catching Red Specter the international jewel thief, not the person behind the mask. That person is a product of their circumstances, like everyone else. He doesn’t deserve to be gunned down in his pajamas… and you’re not allowed to use guns, by the way.”

“Victor smiled at the image but didn’t want to convey any humor to Agni. ‘I’m assuming you two are close then?’”

“Yeah, he’s my hairdresser.”

“Seriously?”

“Only when I’m thinking about treating myself.” Victor shook his head. “Do you want the information, Winter?”

Yakov told him to forget about Red Specter unless he came across him. But even that couldn’t get Red Specter off his mind and he couldn’t tell if it was just morbid curiosity or something like a teenage crush… This encounter with Agni was basically the same thing as coming across Red, Victor thought. “Of course I do.”
“Yuuri!”

“What?”

“Come here, I want to show you something!”

Yuuri rolled off of the sofa and jogged to Phichit’s room. His wounds had pretty much healed. Instead of angry red punctures, his skin was pocked with pearly circles. It had only been three days. He was even able to work his “day-job” while he healed. He was ready to get back out there, but the nurse in him told him to pace himself. He was ready though—Phichit had even gotten him a new suit in record time. He just needed to be patient until his body fully bounced back. He found Phichit sitting, legs crossed, in his computer chair. “What is it?”

Phichit pointed at his laptop screen. “Look at this.” It looked like a stat sheet—similar to the ones used for villains who were processed, but there was no danger rating. A man’s face was pictured next to a list ranging from things like height to ability, and even preferred food. The man, had piercing blue eyes and silver hair crowning a charmingly statuesque face. Yuuri tried not to look too long but he couldn’t help but notice the man’s inviting, pink lips and faint blush on his high cheeks. The man, Yuuri thought, was absolutely breathtaking. He felt Phichit looking at him and saw that he seemed a little too satisfied, eyebrows raised and arms crossed smugly. Yuuri cleared his throat.

“Ok… who is he?”

“You don’t recognize him?”

“Uh… should I?”

“I think so. It helps to know the face of your husband, don’t you think?”

He was completely lost. “What?”

“That’s Winter Torch.”

Yuuri choked. His heart beat like a taiko drum in September. “へー?! うそ!ほんまに?!”
“ほんま!” Phichit cackled as Yuuri immediately sat down in his lap and pulled them closer to the laptop. He eyed the screen hungrily. Victor Nikiforov. Six feet. Twenty-eight years old. Russian. His favorite food was listed as poutine but it had question marks by it. *His name is Victor Nikiforov…*

“What the fuck…” Yuuri whispered in awe. Winter Torch had skin like the surface of an opal, refracting an array of pastel color. But, Victor Nikiforov was fair. Winter Torch had either flames or an icy fog instead of normal hair, and the same was true for his eyes. *Victor Nikiforov…* Victor Nikiforov was a *normal* person. Normal hair, skin, eyes. He had a hometown and he (maybe?) liked poutine. He wondered about that… Poutine wasn’t Russian. That didn’t matter because Yuuri was looking at Winter Torch, no, *Victor Nikiforov*, and he had zero words for how he felt.

“Well? He’s hot, isn’t he? A whole honey-baked ham.”

“He’s… he’s…”

“Take your time, use your words.”

“How did you find this?”

“I’m Phichit Chulanont. You should be asking how I haven’t found this sooner.”

“Do you think his favorite food is really poutine?”

“That would be so weird if it was true.”

“Yeah…” Yuuri sighed and tried to regain some dignity. He stood up and turned his back to the laptop, forcing himself to stop looking. “Do you uh… have anything planned for the day?” Phichit laughed at Yuuri’s transparent attempt at playing it cool.

“I’m going to print it out for you.”

“What?! No, no, no! Don’t do that!” *Please do it.*
“Move,” Phichit rolled himself closer, but Yuuri was standing in front of his laptop. “That does nothing,” he said, and reached around his friend’s waist to type the command. Yuuri roared and tried to push his friend away from the laptop, but it was too late. The printer had already spat the picture out.

“Why’d you do that??” Bless you, Phichit.

“Because you wanted me to! Here!” He thrust the beautiful photo at his friend who refused to look at it. “I’m just going to slide it under your door later if you don’t take it now.” Yuuri was too stubborn. He crossed his arms and continued to look in the complete opposite direction. “Fine, you big baby.” He folded it up and shoved it in his pocket. “You’ll see this later. Anyway, about that job—are you ready for it?”

Yuuri stood straighter. Fuck patience. He needed to work off some steam. “I was born ready.”

“Alright, that’s what I like to hear. Suit up.”

※

These past few weeks had not been kind, Yuuri thought. On almost every job he’d been on, another thief had showed up to slow him down. It was becoming a real workout, dodging them or else incapacitating them. He didn’t care what Phichit said; he wasn’t having any conversations with anyone dressed in tights and running at him in the dead of the night. That was completely out of the question.

Except this thief was different. He was in a custom stealth suit too—probably made from Pandora’s Iron—but his was sleeveless and he didn’t wear a full mask like Yuuri’s.

He wore a small purple one that only obscured his eyes. He was perched on the bank teller’s counter, legs crossed and eyeing Yuuri curiously. Yuuri didn’t move. This guy seemed confident and Yuuri had a feeling that the thief had good reason to be. He smirked at Yuuri which, for some reason, felt familiar.

“I love having company but I tend to like the names of those joining me…” he drawled. Weak. Yuuri wasn’t that easy, but it was possible the thief knew this and was just testing the waters. Yuuri crossed his arms and waited for the stranger to make a move. He chuckled before sliding elegantly from the
counter. “I see you like to take things a little fast. No matter, I like it that way too. Straight to business.” The thief didn’t move from where he was standing either. Yuuri hated stalemates and he didn’t fancy going into fights blind. He turned on his heel and walked to the exit.

“I love watching you go,” the thief called after him.

Of course, Yuuri wasn’t actually leaving. He just needed another way in, preferably somewhere far away from the other thief to give him a head start if he needed to run. He clicked his comm link on for Phichit. “Did you get a good look at him?”

“Yes, I’m ID’ing him now. Rotten luck these days, Yuuri.”

“Tell me about it.” He climbed onto the roof and found an unlocked entrance—thanks to Phichit’s interference—and he slinked inside. It was a good thing his goal was somewhere different than the main vaults where the other thief was undoubtedly headed. They need not fight over glittery things when there was enough for everyone. He would drop in and drop out before the mystery man even knew what happened. He almost rounded a corner and blew his cover—the man was on the other side of the wall.

The mystery thief was walking in the other direction, as if he was looking for Yuuri. He held his breath and flattened himself against the wall.

“Yuuri.” He didn’t dare speak. “I’m assuming you can hear me because the link is on. Unless you want to get found out, don’t talk to this guy. He’ll recognize your voice. It’s someone you know.”

_Huh?_ The footsteps faded away and Yuuri exhaled, backtracking to find another way to his goal in the labyrinthine bank. “What,” he snickered, “like a friend?”

“Hey, that’s not cool. You have friends.”

“Name _one_ that isn’t you,” he whispered defiantly.

“Excuse you. I’m your _best friend_ so I’m definitely counting myself. That’s one. The Nishigoris make six.”
“Children don’t count as friends.”

“Says who?!”

“If I can’t do shots with them, they’re not my friends.”

“Ok, whatever, three is still a good number. And Christophe Giacometti from your pole dancing class makes four. Boom.”

“What?! That’s Chris?!”

“Admit it. You have friends.”

“Chris is a jewel thief?!”

“Uh. You are too. Don’t judge.”

“I’m not. I just…” he thought about Chris, tall, flirty and fun. He was a bit too… extroverted for Yuuri, but he liked him well enough. He never would have guessed. He just didn’t seem like the type but, then again, did Yuuri seem like the type? “Oh my god, is he Dick Cartier?”

“The one and only. He’s world class so be careful. But you’re world class too. I believe in you, buddy.”

“Yikes.”

“There’s a saying in English about this very thing. It’s about bird plumage or something. Birds that have… the same plumage… get along ok and are sometimes friends.”

“That can’t be right, it doesn’t even rhyme.”
“It doesn’t necessarily have to rhyme, Yuuri, Christ.”

Yuuri shook his head wearily as he crept down a deserted hallway on the second floor. If he was being truthful, he knew the saying too but it was on the tip of his tongue—it had one of those unnecessary prepositions… Wait. Why did this matter? He needed to get the ruby from the bank teller’s personal safe and get out. “Whatever the saying is, it doesn’t apply to this situation. If he catches me, I have a feeling it won’t be two birds getting along ok as much it’ll be a cock fight.”

“I just want the record to show that you said cock this time, not me.”

“The record will show no such thing,” Yuuri said, ignoring Phichit’s mumbling about Yuuri being able to remember “cock fight” and not the saying about bird feathers. It really was annoying that he couldn’t remember it though, he thought as he crouched down behind a counter to find a small safe, tucked away behind a filing cabinet. He pulled it closer to him and set to work. He listened intently for the sound of footsteps in case Chris was still looking for him. He really didn’t want to hurt him. He was certain Chris didn’t know who he was though so it was likely that he would not hesitate in fighting Yuuri if it came down to it. Yuuri had to be quick. He thought about the birds again…

“Any sign of DC?” Phichit asked.

“Nope,” he breathed into the link. “Birds of a feather survive any weather... right?”

“You’d think so since it rhymes.”

“Nah, I think it’s still off.” He ignored Phichit’s salt. The safe’s lock was digital, so it required a bit of tinkering. Phichit was much better at this, and it wasn’t because he could try every combination in a matter of seconds. He was just brainy like that. Yuuri was still decent enough, just slower. He picked at the circuitry with his tools and he was soon halfway there. Footsteps echoed in the hall and Yuuri jumped. He crouched low and folded himself behind the filing cabinet under the counter. He waited. Closing his eyes in concentration, he listened.

Chris swept the room, moving slowly and deliberately. Why was he so adamant about finding Yuuri? The footsteps eventually faded away, and Yuuri sighed, tumbling easily from behind the filing cabinet to resume his work. He was starting to wish Phichit was here so he could distract Chris. They never did things like that, but the more he encountered other thieves, the more working closely together was starting to sound more appealing. Then it clicked.

“Until the cat comes,” someone purred in his ear. He jumped a mile. The safe fell out of his lap as he backed away. Chris, it seemed, was hovering in midair and smiling at Yuuri, whose heart was racing. “Who’re you talking to?” he asked softly.

“Yuuri?! What’s happening?” Phichit asked frantically. He could tune into the bank’s surveillance—Yuuri didn’t feel like answering at the moment.

“That saying is actually about fair-weather friends; friends stay friends until the going gets tough,” Chris explained. Yuuri was silent. “Are you shy? You know, you seem familiar, but I can’t quite place you,” he said, languidly hovering in circles around Yuuri. “Have we met?”

There was no time left. When Chris hovered behind him, Yuuri ducked and rolled to the safe. He picked at the wiring as quickly as he could. Chris put a hand on his shoulder, and Yuuri instinctively grabbed it, clenching Chris’s wrist in place. Chris hissed in pain while Yuuri worked one-handed.

“I admit, I like it rough sometimes, but now isn’t the time or place,” he landed a firm kick to Yuuri’s back and Yuuri let go. It didn’t hurt much. Chris didn’t have super strength, or even enhanced strength like Yuuri which most likely meant no psychic abilities… Chris had elemental abilities then—some kind of physical manipulation, like Winter Torch.

He was in trouble. There was no use trying not to leave evidence anymore if he wanted to get out of this in one piece without hurting Chris.

“I have a feeling I’m evenly matched? That was a very tight grip…” Chris seethed. Yuuri turned to him and his blood ran cold. Several filing cabinets were hovering in a circle around his head before soaring in Yuuri’s direction. Yuuri dived and caught the safe he was working on just in time before it too flew into the air. He smashed it against the teller counter and it burst open, the ruby tumbling out of it. He caught it and threw the safe aside. He ducked as another filing cabinet narrowly missed him. Chris made him dance, jumping, weaving and stooping to avoid getting hit. In the middle of ducking one, another came right for his face and he punched it hard in the opposite direction. Chris whistled. “You are strong, aren’t you?”

Yuuri ran for the door, checking the reflection in the glass for incoming cabinets. He was too slow; they all beat him to the door, piling on top of each other, blocking his way out. He pulled at them, but it was useless—Chris was holding them there with his power. He rounded on him, ready for a fight, but not sure what kind of punch would be best. Chris looked relaxed though, arms akimbo and hovering idly in the air.
“Look, I admit, I lost my temper there, but you did hurt my wrist,” he rubbed it for show. “I’m assuming you’re Red Specter? Otherwise, you would’ve targeted the vaults instead of that one little gem.”

Yuuri let him talk. He was scanning the walls and windows for an exit. Chris hovered closer. “I’m also guessing you were the one who disabled the security. I arrived expecting to do more work, but the door was open when I got here, so thank you.”

“You’re welcome, dick head,” Phichit spat through Yuuri’s comm link. He must’ve been watching through surveillance now.

“I propose that we forge a… partnership. You scratch my back, and I scratch yours. We could start tonight and split the bounty here. I think that’s fair since I arrived first, but you disabled the security. And, don’t be mistaken, it doesn’t always have to be about money in the future. We can help each other out when we get in trouble. And, if for whatever reason you feel like I’m not satisfying you, we can go our separate ways. What do you say? Care to be birds of a feather?”

Yuuri considered Chris. As appealing as it sounded, his reasons for stealing were personal and far too important to risk messing it up or splitting costs with someone he barely knew. What’s worse, he could inadvertently get Chris involved with Fujiwara. It was too dangerous. He shook his head, and to be sure, he tapped his index and middle fingers to his thumb, signing his refusal. Chris’ shoulders slumped; he looked comically disappointed.

“Suit yourself, hot stuff,” He waved his hand nonchalantly. The filing cabinets behind Yuuri clattered and Yuuri stiffened bracing himself for impact, though he didn’t look away from Chris. To his surprise, the cabinets didn’t attack him, but floated gracefully back to their original spots, freeing the exit. Chris took something out of his pocket and kissed it before flicking it at Yuuri. He caught it and turned it over in his hands. It was like a business card but metal—it only had a phone number engraved on it and a faint, pink kiss mark. “Let me know if you change your mind.”

* 

The Next Day…

“Victor, forget about the rabbit-gator on 3rd and head to West Avenue immediately. Pyre broke out
again and your presence is needed there.”

The flames coming off Victor turned blood red. “I’m on it.” Victor spun, mid-sprint and headed the opposite direction after Pyre, his nemesis. Was it cliché to have a nemesis? If it was, it wasn’t Victor’s fault, as one doesn’t choose these things— they just happen. And, as it happens, Pyre, a pyro-kinetic maniac, had it out for Victor. For whatever reason, he, Pyre, wanted to kill him, and Victor thought it might simply be that Pyre was vain and competitive on top of being sadistic and amoral. Unlike Tim Fair, Victor had no sympathy for the five-star villain and wanted more than anything to slam his smug face into the cement (Pyre wasn’t the only one that was vain and competitive). Victor found the man doing cartwheels down West Avenue, flames erupting from the ends of his limbs whenever they were in the air. He stumbled upright when he saw Victor and smiled so wide, Victor thought it must hurt.

Pyre had olive skin and crazed silver eyes. His hair was wild, and the fact that it was in a low ponytail did not change this. He had not gotten his suit, so he was still in his orange prison jumper, but the top half had been burned off. His exposed chest had a tattoo of a dragon smoking a cigar on it. Victor didn’t know why, but he hated this tattoo. He grimaced at the villain, unable to contain his disdain.

“Hey lover,” Pyre crooned, flames blossoming around his fists. “I got you a pet to play with.”

“You shouldn’t have,” Victor said flatly.

“Oh, but I did,” he cackled, falling into a fluid and complicated dance, fire growing out of his palms as he went. Victor sent jets of flames at him, not caring if it made contact. When it came to Pyre, there was no use holding back. He danced around Victor’s attacks and, fed up, Victor phased into flames to meet him face to face. Pyre grinned lavishly at him and bent out of his reach, nimble as ever. He pointed up. In the sky was a giant flaming bird. Victor gaped at its monstrous wings which were twice the size of a man and sent sparks flying in every direction as they flapped. The bird circled in the air before diving at Victor who rolled out of the way. Crouching, he punched the air— several blood red comets of fire rocketed at Pyre and he danced around these too.

Victor cursed as he narrowly dodged the bird again. Pyre giggled. “You gave me the idea, handsome. When I saw all those beautiful baby birdies you made for Tim Fair,” he teased as he jumped to dodge another jet of fire, “I got jealous.”

“You want fire? I can give you fire,” Victor fumed and the inferno on his head raged as he stooped to press his palm to the cement. Jets of bright red fire cracked through the pavement around them making Pyre tiptoe and stumble. The bird dived again, and this time, Victor wasn’t lucky.
He bent backwards, bringing up his hands to protect himself and the bird flew through them. Victor shrieked, the pain ripping through him like a wave. He was vaguely aware that Pyre was laughing somewhere. He shakily raised his arm over his head in a half arc as if he was pulling on an enormous cloak. A burning dome appeared around him, obscuring him from view, and he knew that a ring of red flames was trapping Pyre in one spot with him.

“If you let me see it, I’ll kiss it better for you!” Pyre cackled, but the bravado was a thin mask. Victor knew, and he was certain that Pyre knew, he was trapped. Screwing his eyes shut, Victor cursed, steeling himself to look at his hands. He cautiously opened his eyes to look and exhaled. He must have subconsciously coated them in his own flames right before the bird hit. They were red and hurt like hell, but they would be fine. He glared out of his protective globe at Pyre who was stalking its perimeter like a hungry cat. “Come out, my little piston, so I can rip your throat open!”

*Five is the magic number.* He took two deep breaths. *That’s two.* He raised his hands and the dome rose with them, flattening into a fiery blanket. *And that’s three.* Bloodthirsty glee glinted in Pyre’s eyes before it became horror. The blanket flew at him, wrapping him in a tight bundle. Pyre screamed and Victor didn’t let go. *That’s four.* Hands stretched in front of him, he ran to the blazing prison, and let it fall. Before Pyre could get his bearings, he snapped a pair of nano-cuffs on his wrists. *Five.* That was it.

Pyre smiled sweetly up at him. “My safe word is duck.” Victor frowned. But then he remembered… he turned, in what felt like slow motion, to see the flaming bird diving for his chest.

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Yuuri woke up violently, shouting and stumbling out of his bed. He didn’t know why. His alarm wasn’t due for another five minutes. He doesn’t remember dreaming. He scanned his room for some sort of threat but there was none. He felt a weird, lingering sense of panic though. Phichit knocked sharply on his door before opening it.

“What’s wrong?”

“Uh, nothing, I just woke up.”

“Bad dream?”

“No.”
“Are you…” he made lewd motions with his fist and Yuuri threw his pillow at him. Phichit cackled. “There’s no shame if you are,” he said and before Yuuri could retaliate, there was a flash and clicking sound. He blinked and rubbed his eyes. Phichit was holding his phone for half a second and shoving it back in his pocket in the other half. “My followers love your bedhead. Now, get up. You don’t want to be late for work,” and he shut the door.

Yuuri groaned because he was too tired for his “day-job” (even though it was technically the night shift). He worked as a nurse from late afternoon until the early hours of the morning at Spring Gate General. Sometimes. He needed to keep his skills sharp. He shuffled about his room getting ready.

“I said duck, didn’t I?”

Victor thought he spat something venomous at Pyre but he couldn’t actually tell because Pyre didn’t respond. Pyre always had some kind of retort. Maybe he had said it in Russian? He tried to talk, but it was too much effort. Too much effort? Was he hurt? No, he couldn’t be hurt because he couldn’t let Pyre get away… but Pyre was still here, taunting him, saying something absolutely infuriating. He felt cold. He never felt cold. Especially not in the daytime.

_Get him on a stretcher._

_How? He’s got Pyre attached to him…_

Pyre was attached to him? He blinked and tried to find the villain’s snide face. Everything was blurry. He needed to get it together. Get his wits. _Am I moving?_

_We need a doctor in here now! Hero down!_

_Is that Winter Torch?_

_What’s Pyre doing here? _
They mentioned a doctor. Was Pyre hurt too? He doubted it, Pyre didn’t need a doctor. Someone’s hands were working at his suit and it clicked. He needed the doctor.

“NO!” Suddenly everything was clear. He shot upright, pain spiking somewhere in his abdomen but he didn’t care. The nurse who had been touching him looked startled but Victor slapped his hands away. “No,” he said again. “I don’t need a doctor!”

“Afraid of needles, dear?” Pyre giggled and all Victor could do was growl menacingly.

“Sir, Mr. Torch, please, we can help you.”

“I said no!” Without meaning to, flames rolled off him and the nurses surrounding him jumped back, all the while, Pyre chortled gleefully as he watched.

Chapter End Notes

へー?!うそ!ほんまに?! (he~?! uso! hon ma ni?!): What?! No way! Seriously/Really?!
ほんま! (hon ma!): Seriously/Really!
(you probably figured this one out, but just in case...) tapping index and middle finger to thumb: no.

I only know Japanese so I did research for other languages. I’m sorry if some of these are inaccurate. Thanks for reading! <3 <3
Work was drudgery. He didn’t know where the other nurses were, so Yuuri was stuck doing clinic work alone. This job, he convinced himself, would keep his skills sharp. It was hard to think that was true when he was doing the same things over and over again—taking temperatures and tapping knees… He was capable of so much more—he had more knowledge and early experience than most of the doctors on staff but the fact remained that a stamp of approval from a yakuza boss couldn’t compete with a degree from a nursing or medical school. It didn’t matter how many bullets he’d pulled out of people in the past—or how many despicable lives he’d saved. Thankfully, he was almost done studying to be a nurse practitioner so he would soon be out of the woods of busy work. Clinic work was truly a hell of its own, no matter how much he smiled and comforted patients.

It left his brain with room to think and the things he thought about made him itch with anxiety. He never truly had a satisfactory discussion with Phichit about asking heroes for help with Fujiwara. It was an argument that hung like a slightly grey cloud in the sky: it wasn’t raining yet, but he knew a storm was on its way. He knew Phichit loved him—Yuuri had grown into the habit of carrying the fast-acting serum on him because the sacrifice Phichit made to get it meant more than the world to Yuuri. He just couldn’t do what his friend was suggesting, and he wasn’t completely sure about that decision either. The phial was in his pocket and it bumped against the business card Chris had given him. He had taken it out of his wallet almost every hour to look at it so he decided to just keep it closer. It was true that he needed more help but at what cost? It was better to work alone.

His anxiety was running wild, but at least it fueled his work ethic. He made quick work of the clinic; he jogged in and out of examination rooms as the time crawled by. Yuuri had just explained the importance of condoms for the sixth time that afternoon when Dr. Chester, who usually worked in the ER, leaned his head in.

“Knock-knock,” he said in a sing-song voice. For some reason he sounded nervous. Yuuri’s patient
looked offended, drawing her purse closer to her chest.

“‘Yes, Doctor?’”

“What’s your afternoon looking like?”

“Uh,” he gestured to the patient and Dr. Chester nodded.

“Got any time?”

“I’m the only nurse on this floor so… I don’t think I do…”

“Oh. Ok.” He stepped into the room and held his hand out to the patient. “Dr. Chester. How are you today? Great,” he rushed, not waiting for an answer as he shook her hand. She looked scandalized and Yuuri mouthed an apology behind his back to her. Dr. Chester took her chart from Yuuri and scanned it before taking a pen and paper from his coat to scribble something. “Dr. Dana in gynecology is excellent in these matters. I think you’ll find her very helpful. You can ask her more about that little number too,” he said tapping the slip of paper and handing it to her. “You’re good to go, have a nice day.” The woman shuffled huffily out of the room and Dr. Chester shut the door behind her. Yuuri crossed his arms and fixed him with a look.

“Pardon my English, but what the hell was that?”

“I know, I know, I hate when people commandeer patients—”

“That wasn’t commandeering! That was something else entirely! That was just,” his hands flew in the air as if a good enough word would fall in them, “rude! What’s going on with you?”

“It’s… nothing.” Dr. Chester swung his arms awkwardly. Yuuri raised his eyebrow. He wasn’t buying it. “We’re having a rough night in the ER, and we… I was wondering… if you would just pop down there and help out with one of the patients. If that’s ok with you. It’s not a big deal.”

All that over one patient? That shouldn’t be a problem. Things got backed up in the ER all the time. Yuuri would usually be happy to help out but he hated when other doctors and nurses bothered his
patients. He was in a mood… but he would still help.

“Yeah, sure. You can just… ask next time, you know,” Dr. Chester seemed strangely relieved and restless at the same time. “Who’s going to cover me here?”

“Don’t worry about that right now, let’s just go—I mean, we’ll just mosey on over there, ha ha.”

Yuuri frowned at him. “When we get down there, I’m going to check your temperature. You’re acting weird,” Dr. Chester laughed shiftily when they entered the elevator—ignoring the agitated looks of the patients in the waiting room— and when the doors opened again, Yuuri understood where all the nurses had gone.

It seemed like a good fraction of the hospital’s staff was down there and most of them were nervously talking amongst themselves. Doctors were leaning against the reception desk looking stressed and affronted but no one seemed to be really working. Even stranger, there was a curious odor of burnt fabric lingering in the air…

“What’s going on? Should we call diagnostics or…”

“Oh, it’s not so bad, just busy,” Dr. Chester replied in a slightly higher voice than usual. He snapped his fingers at two of the nurses standing by reception and flinched at the glares they gave him. “Sorry! Just stressed! That was rude… uh… would you two please head up to the clinic and take over for Mr. Katsuki here? He left quite a queue behind.” They gave him scathing looks before slinking over to the elevator. Yuuri noticed that the sleeve of one of the nurse’s scrubs had several burn holes, as if from a cigarette. The patient must be an unruly fire type. That sucked. Dr. Chester turned around in several circles as if looking for something. Yuuri put his hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Open,” Yuuri poked a thermometer into Dr. Chester’s mouth before he could register what was happening. “You are off the wall today.” The temperature was normal but Dr. Chester wasn’t.

“I know. I’m sorry. I just,” he scratched his head and shrugged. “I guess I’m just not blessed with the same gifts as others, you know? I hear patients love you Yuuri. Your name comes up a lot. I’m actually working on opening my own practice soon, so when you finally finish school to be a nurse practitioner call me, because I have a job for you.”

“Oh, thank you…?” Yuuri tried to keep a straight face but he was beginning to worry about Dr.
Chester who seemed a bit manic as he shuffled through papers on a medicine cart.

“If a patient doesn’t want to be treated, then they don’t want to be treated. It’s not our job to force them…”

“What, so we’re going to let him bleed out?”

Yuuri caught snatches of a conversation between two put-upon looking nurses by the water cooler. “A patient is refusing treatment?” He chimed in. “Is that what this is about?” Before the nurses could confirm or deny, Dr. Chester thrust a chart at Yuuri and clapped a hand on his shoulder.

“Happens all the time, right? Some patients require a more gentle touch. Do you think you can put on the charm for this one and patch him up for us?

“Uh.”

“Great, you’re the best,” and he pushed Yuuri behind a curtain.

“I said NO DOCTORS!” Before Yuuri could even look properly, he had to duck. A red ball of fire consumed the curtain behind him and flickered out. Yuuri gasped and rubbed his eyes. Someone was cackling. “TELL BOSS TO COME GET ME HIMSELF!”

Yuuri froze. He recognized that voice. With shaking hands he rifled through the papers Dr. Chester had thrust on him. They didn’t say much—no one could get close enough to actually get a conclusive report on what was wrong with…

“Winter Torch,” he breathed. The hero, propped up on a stretcher, was positively glowing with anger. The flames rolling off him and out of his eyes were a deep red. A chain of fire seemed to be linking his wrist to a wild, cackling, handcuffed man sitting beside him in a tattered prison jump suit. What the actual hell? Dr. Chester’s panic seemed to be contagious making Yuuri shake as he shuffled through the papers. Winter Torch was injured, he was brought in over an hour ago, and he was refusing treatment. Boss, a seasoned hero who was also a household name, had contacted the hospital, saying he was half way across the world and wouldn’t be able to come get Winter Torch, and that there was no one on their staff to treat him even if he did. Winter Torch had become “reactionary” when hospital staff approached him with treatment. Yuuri’s mind went numb.
“Discharge me. I’m seeing my own people,” Winter Torch sounded absolutely incensed, something he had never heard from the hero before. Yuuri’s mouth ran dry as he looked Winter Torch up and down. The hands of his suit had been burned off and the fabric on the side of his abdomen was frayed and damp looking… was it blood? He shook his head to clear it. He needed to do his job.

“We actually got a call from Boss saying that their doctor on staff retired. He mentioned old age? They haven’t filled her position yet, so in the meantime, he wants you to receive treatment here,” Yuuri said gathering his courage.

“No. Doctors,” he choked out. Yeah, he was hurting.

“Winny’s afraid of the doctor,” the man in the jump suit trilled, throwing his head back in vicious laughter. Yuuri ignored him.

“You’re in luck then,” Yuuri said, dropping the papers on the counter. “I’m not a doctor. I’m not even a full time nurse.” He walked to the edge of Winter’s bed and the hero visibly tensed up. The flames on his head crackled menacingly. “I understand why you’re apprehensive. As a patient, it seems like you don’t have a lot of control when you see a doctor. You don’t really know what they’re talking about or what they’re doing to you. But you can always tell them when you’re feeling uncomfortable and something tells me you would have no trouble getting someone to stop doing something you don’t like.” He smiled kindly at him. Winter Torch… no… Victor—it was Victor Nikiforov who was afraid of doctors—didn’t react, but there were no balls of fire flying at him, so Yuuri took that as a good sign. He got an idea. “How about we share the control?”

Victor narrowed his eyes (small windows of red sparks) at Yuuri who reached for an instrument behind Victor’s head. “We’ll start small so you can see that you can trust me. I’ll check your ears, and then you can check mine.”

“What?”

“It’s standard procedure. This,” he said raising the instrument for Victor to see, “Is like a little telescope we use to make sure your eardrums are ok,” and before Victor could flinch, Yuuri was checking his ears and he was done. “See? Your turn,” he cleaned it and put it in Victor’s hand. He was certain that Victor wouldn’t use it. The hero rolled it over in slightly shaking fingers, glaring at it. He was about to tell Victor that it was ok, that he didn’t have to, when the hero propped the instrument in his ear for a brief moment. Yuuri was shocked. Every brain cell and nerve in him worked overtime to keep him from screaming.

“G-good,” he stammered and took the instrument from him. He grabbed another. “This is basically
“And this,” jeered the man in the ripped jump suit as he waved both middle fingers “is for sticking up your ass.”

Yuuri snapped his head to look at him. He noticed the long and bright, flaming chain connecting his wrist to Victor’s and he pieced two and two together. Victor must have been fighting him—now that he looked hard enough, he recognized him as Pyre—and something must have happened to trigger a fight or flight response in Victor, causing the chain linking the two together. He seethed, eye twitching a bit before placing a firm hand on Pyre’s shoulder… a very firm hand. The five star villain winced, eyes growing wide at Yuuri in shock.

“I suggest,” he whispered softly, “that the next time you want to open your mouth to bother my patient, you think long and hard about whether or not it’s worth it.” He released him. Pyre hissed, his shoulder quivering where Yuuri’s hand left it. The rope of fire flickered and Pyre sniggered when Yuuri looked back at Victor.

“I know, right? You liked that too, didn’t you? Dr. Love is almost as hot-headed as you.” Pyre addressed Victor who only scowled at him. Yuuri cleared his throat and picked up the instrument—an otoscope—and gestured for Victor to lean closer.

“I need to see if you’re keeping your nose clean, Mr. Torch,” he joked, trying to keep the tone light, “and then you can check me.” Victor screwed his eyes closed and Yuuri checked him. He changed the hygiene piece on it and handed it to Victor who only shook his head. Yuuri shrugged and put it back. He took another otoscope and told Victor he would check his eyes. The hero gave him a funny look, as Yuuri flashed the instrument in front of two almond shaped, fiery pits. “All good here,” he handed it to Victor. Again, he was slow, but he eventually held it up to Yuuri’s face. He cleared his throat again as he pushed his glasses onto his head for Victor to get a better look.

His brain was overheating. He almost lost all conscious thought. Victor’s glittering, chiseled opal face—the face of a hero—was inches from his. And then Victor was done and putting the thing back in Yuuri’s hand. He put the otoscope back on the hook. “Next is your temperature. We want to make sure you don’t have a fever.” He took a reinforced thermometer from his pocket, specially designed for fire types like Victor, and put it in his mouth. It beeped and he examined it. “What’s your normal temperature?” Victor shrugged. The temperature matched that of a campfire. “Seems right,” he shrugged nonchalantly and tossed the hygiene cover to replace it with a new one. Victor really did chuckle that time. It sounded strained and choked. Yuuri needed a crash cart. For himself. Victor pushed the thermometer in his mouth and Yuuri laughed when he took it out before it beeped.

“How fucking sweet,” Pyre drawled. “Hey, doc, I’m hurt. Can you give me something to suck on too?”
Yuuri took a deep breath, not appreciating the second interruption. He clucked his tongue at Victor who looked curiously back. “Do you want me to sew his mouth shut?”

Victor winked. Yuuri’s left brain crashed. “I’ll just say I found him like that,” he rasped.

Pyre frowned at Yuuri who pulled a medical needle and thread from his scrubs. He reached for his face and Pyre actually looked scared. Good. Yuuri pressed up in a very special place under Pyre’s chin, and the villain was out cold, head lolling unnaturally backwards. Victor looked questioningly at him, though he didn’t look too concerned.

“He’s just taking a nap. I didn’t want to waste good thread on him,” he said pulling out his stethoscope. Victor was clearly trying not to laugh again—it seemed like it hurt to do so. “Let’s get your heart and lungs checked…” Yuuri moved the stethoscope over Victor’s chest and back, telling him when to breathe. His heart rate was a bit fast, but Yuuri supposed he must still be nervous… He finished, cleaned the ear piece and handed it to Victor who, again, took it apprehensively like a fawn. He put the chest piece against Yuuri’s heart. Yuuri focused all of his energy on examining a flower painted on the wall behind Victor’s head. Four petals. Purple. Winter Torch is listening to my heart. Yellow center. Dumb leaves. Victor looked up at him, and slowly took the earpieces out of his ears. He hadn’t even asked Yuuri to breathe yet (which was probably a good thing since Yuuri couldn’t).

“I’ve been… silly. I think you should look at the real problem now… if that’s ok…” he said weakly.

Yuuri let go of a breath he didn’t know he was holding. “Of course,” he said. “Whenever you’re ready.” He adjusted the tattered curtains to give Victor more privacy. I’ll just step out so you can change, and then—”

“No, that’s ok. Stay.” Victor tugged at the neck of his suit, and Yuuri thought time stopped. He blinked, and where there had been a shimmering black and gold battle suit was a torn black t-shirt and jeans. Yuuri stammered, absolutely befuddled at the flashy suit’s disappearance. Victor looked at him and struggled to push himself up straighter. Yuuri snapped out of it and rushed over to help him. “It’s nano-tech,” he explained, revealing a small golden snowflake pinned to the inside of his shirt.

“Oh,” was all Yuuri could say.

“Could you…” he lifted his elbows stiffly, and Yuuri realized it must be difficult for him to raise his arms. Yuuri rolled the hem of Victor’s torn and bloody shirt up over his abdomen.
“You don’t need to take it completely off,” he provided, “I just need to look at the wound…” The skin here was also like a glittering opal—otherworldly and certainly unnatural. But still beautiful. There was a gash over Victor’s left rib cage, almost under his arm, and it seemed so out of place—the red, human blood spilling over something that looked like a gem. But that wasn’t the only thing that was strange. Hadn’t Pyre burned Victor? Yuuri began cleaning and disinfecting the area while Victor screwed his eyes shut looking the other way. Yuuri wanted to laugh, because it was endearing, but made sure there was no humor in his face. The cut turned out to be surprisingly straight and clean—completely different from what a burn from someone like Pyre should be like. “This is interesting.”

“What?”

“Did Pyre use a weapon to do this, like a knife or sword?”

“No, it was one of his fire beasts.”

“That’s weird—fire doesn’t do things like this.”

“What’s wrong?” Victor stiffened and panic set in his voice.

“Nothing’s wrong,” Yuuri said quickly, “it’s just that fire burns, it doesn’t cut. And you’ve got a pretty clean laceration… Pyre must have developed the ability to make his flames become… less like plasma and more of a solid element. It’s… weird. But this cut’s actually much better than it could’ve been.” When Victor was cleaned up Yuuri cleared his throat to get his attention again. Victor opened his eyes but didn’t look at Yuuri.

“This next part is a little tricky.”

“What do you mean?”

“You need stitches,” he said slowly and Victor hissed, shifting uncomfortably. “But before I can do that, I need to be able to look at the skin around the cut.”

“You’re looking at it right now though,” Victor protested.
“No, I mean I need to look at your skin… it’s impossible to check for any other complications when your skin is like this—opaque and glittery. Do you think you could… power down? Just for a moment while I examine you and stitch you up.”

Victor took a few rattling breaths which concerned Yuuri. He took Victor’s hand and the hero flinched, still trying to steady his breathing.

“It’s just for a moment,” Yuuri whispered. Victor slipped his hand out of his and tried to sit up straighter.

“Just don’t look up,” he whispered, and Yuuri almost missed it, but he nodded.

“Of course. You can trust me.” He focused on the wound, pointedly looking away from Victor’s face. The multicolored skin faded into a fair hue that would, Yuuri thought, be luminescent if it weren’t pale and clammy from stress. Yuuri hadn’t realized that he had been sweating until Victor powered down—he was like a walking furnace and now that he was back to normal, the air around them cooled. Victor’s breathing was heavy but steady, and Yuuri made sure not to look up. If he was being honest, he felt guilty. Victor didn’t want him to know what he looked like, but Yuuri already knew. He could imagine Victor’s blue eyes screwed tight. Silver hair ruffled and falling over his distressed face. This wasn’t right, and Yuuri couldn’t change it. He made sure not to look.

The skin around the wound was a bit bruised, but there were no fatal signs. He took some thread and a fresh needle from a metal tray beside him. “There doesn’t seem to be any problems. I’m going to start the stitches now. It should be numb so you’ll only feel a soft tug, ok?”

“Do it,” he said through clenched teeth.

Yuuri rubbed Victor’s knee reassuringly. “I know this sucks, but it’s almost over.” He paused, not sure if he should say what he wanted but… what the hell. “I actually got hurt recently,” he began, thinking about the gem-dragon. Some manic energy that he couldn’t identify flooded him so he couldn’t care less if Victor recognized him as the thief he almost caught. “Whenever I was in pain, I thought about the names of the fish that my parents used in their restaurant. I listed them off in my head. Can you make your own list to distract yourself?” Victor nodded curtly. Yuuri readied his needle. “Here we go then,” he said and began piecing Victor back together.

“Argh!” Victor jumped, almost moving Yuuri’s needle. He paused until Victor settled back down.
“You ok?” Victor didn’t answer, so Yuuri moved quickly. “I can tell you’re not trying to distract yourself,” he chided. “That’s ok, we can just talk.”

“I hate that I’m going to have a scar. It just shows that I messed up,” Victor rasped and Yuuri frowned.

“That’s not true. Scars are… trophies. They’re evidence of something that couldn’t kill you.” Victor grunted but didn’t jump again.

“That’s morbid.”

“I’m a nurse, of course it’s morbid. And scars aren’t that bad. I’ve got plenty.”

“From what?”

“Uh, college sports…” Yuuri felt dumb saying it, but he had already blurted it out.

“What sport?”

He thought for a moment. “MMA.”

“Sounds… brutal.” Yuuri didn’t reply, because he already said way more than he thought was smart. He just nodded. “Scars aren’t bad… I just don’t want this one. I can’t explain it…”

Yuuri bit his lip and nodded again. He took one second to think before taking a phial out of his scrubs pocket. He opened it one handed and applied two drops to the half stitched wound—making Victor twitch violently—before stoppering it and dropping it back in his pocket.

“What was that? I thought I was supposed to be numb?”

“You are. If you weren’t that would’ve hurt much more. It’ll help you heal.” Victor sighed and for
the first time, his muscles relaxed.

“You’re the first doctor I’ve seen since I was a kid…”

“I’m not a doctor,” Yuuri chuckled. “And don’t worry about the stitches,” he said, finishing up the end of the thread. Victor was patched up. “There won’t be a scar.”

“Why is that?”

“Uh… stitches are my specialty,” he thought about the phial of fast acting healing serum in his pocket. “It’ll be like this whole ordeal never happened.”

“I doubt that I’ll forget what happened today. I kind of made an ass of myself in front of everyone.” Victor’s hands folded anxiously on his lap and Yuuri gawked at them.

“You didn’t tell me you were hurt here too! How was I supposed to see this under all that glitter,” he exclaimed raising Victor’s wrist to look at his scorched palms.

“It’s not that bad.”

Yuuri shook his head and scoffed, turning to gather some ointments and gauze. He treated Victor’s hands too. Victor was right—they weren’t that bad, but still. He was halfway satisfied after interrogating Victor about any other injuries he may not know about. Yuuri almost dreaded the next part, but no nurse worth their salt would skip important steps in treatment just because their patient was scared. When he was still working as a “doctor” for Fujiwara, one guy nearly shot him for this next part and Yuuri still did it anyways. Victor was still powered down so Yuuri smiled at Victor’s hands instead of looking him in the eye.

“You’re almost done. Next, I’m going to give you some juice.”

He could almost imagine Victor scrunching up his nose—he heard the apprehension in his voice. “Juice?”

“Yeah. It’s like… a capri sun pouch,” he said moving to wheel an IV closer to Victor’s bed, “except
“Гавно…” he whispered bleakly. “Do I have to?”

“Absolutely. More than half of our body is made up of water and the stress your body endured today burned through a lot of it. Refilling your tank is going to help you heal more effectively.” Victor began breathing hard again as Yuuri tied a rubber strap around Victor’s bicep. Several thick veins popped up which was a relief. “Mr. Torch, this will take five seconds tops, but before we start, I have to ask. Where did you get this shirt?”

“What?”

“Where’d you get it? The fabric is incredible.”

“I… I don’t remember, I think it was a department store in St. Petersburg.”

“Aw man, I don’t think I can travel anytime soon. Is the brand American?”

“Maybe Ralph-Lauren?”

“Was it expensive?”

“I don’t think so.”

“And the jeans?”

“Definitely pricey.”

“Can I buy a pair like them here?”

“Most like—FUCK!”
“All done.”

“I hate you, I hate you. I hate you so much,” he whimpered, but it was pointless, the needle was already in and taped down. Yuuri smiled, completely satisfied and told Victor it was ok for him to power back up. The air around them grew warm. Yuuri looked up. Before, he thought it was impossible for a burning rock to look soft, but now, he knew better. Victor’s timid, tired smile made all his twenty-five years feel worthwhile.

“Thank you,” he said.

“Of course.” He smiled back. “You want to give me stitches and stick me with a needle too, to call it even?” Victor laughed, sounding stronger already.

“I don’t think that’ll be necessary,” he said. “I know you’re proud of them, but I don’t want to give you anymore scars.”

“I, uh, appreciate that.” He looked at Pyre whose head was still lolling to the side, drool dripping down his chin. Yuuri nodded at him. “I’ll have someone call Ares Island so a squad can come pick him up. Because your body temperature is so high, you’re going to go through a lot of fluids. We’ll keep you overnight until you’ve recovered.”

Victor tilted his head at him, eyeing him curiously and Yuuri fidgeted. He shuffled Victor’s sparse papers off the counter. “As a rule, the hospital doesn’t bill heroes…” Victor kept staring.

“What’s your name?”

“Yuuri Katsuki. Sorry, I should’ve told you sooner.”

Victor’s eyes narrowed again, making Yuuri uncomfortable. “I think we’ve met somewhere before,” he murmured. His mouth was dry—the air Yuuri desperately needed was trapped in his throat. All he could do was raise his eyebrows questioningly. “Maybe through a mutual friend?”

Yuuri licked his lips and tried a smile. “I don’t think so. If that were true, I’m sure I would’ve remembered you. I do have one of those faces after all.”
Victor returned his smile as Yuuri slipped out of the curtains.

Chapter End Notes

Гавно (gav-no): shit (I'm sure I'm butchering everything. I'm so sorry)

LMAO I couldn't choose one AU so I chose all of them. I have a deep respect for nurses because of my big sis so thanks to all the nurses out there! I hope at least half this info is sorta accurate. I did a little research and got some of my info from what I know about my sis's experience. A nurse practitioner is (to make things recklessly simple) like a doctor with slightly less obligations and more vacation days. Please only use that definition for the purposes of this fic. I dont want NP's to crucify you bc of me. ′"
Yuuri needed to breathe. When he came from behind the curtains, he knew he needed to find some place to calm down, to collect his buzzing, fly away thoughts, but he was immediately trapped. Everyone turned to look at him. It was strange, like walking in on a surprise birthday party, but all the attendants had just heard terrible news. Dr. Chester ran up to him and the other staff members were close behind.

“You were in there forever, what happened?”

Yuuri swallowed and forced himself to act normal. “He’s got a laceration over his ribs under his left arm and some minor burns on his hands. I think we should keep him overnight while he gets some fluids in him. We also need to contact Ares Island so we can get a transport for Pyre.” Dr. Chester’s mouth fell open in an ‘o’ as he smacked his face. He looked like The Scream.

“How on earth…”
“You asked me to put on the charm, remember?” He was trying to be nonchalant. He gave Dr. Chester the papers and made to move away again, but the other doctors and nurses weren’t finished with him yet.

“How did you do it without getting third degree burns,” one nurse asked.

“I don’t know, I just talked to him…”

“We talked too, and he was a nightmare.”

“He was just scared, wasn’t he?” Yuuri was beginning to feel a bit dizzy. He tried to edge away from the crowd when another doctor chimed in.

“He’s got a serious phobia. My guess is past trauma. It’s crazy to think that someone like him is scared of something though!”

“He’s only human,” Yuuri mumbled.

“He’s lucky you were here, Yuuri, because usually when a patient refuses treatment and gets violent like that, we discharge them. It’s a liability otherwise.”

“This hospital will not be held responsible for letting this generation’s top hero suffer from untreated injuries,” Dr. Chester asserted. “There was no way we could take ‘no’ for an answer. Something had to be done.”

“Who’s going to watch him tonight?”

“And risk getting my head blown up? Nope, no thanks.”

“Nose goes,” one nurse chuckled, tapping their nose. The crowd began to thin out when the topic of Victor’s night care came up so he took his chance to leave. Someone called his name but he kept walking. He turned into a bathroom and locked himself in a stall.
Yuuri’s breath stampeded out of him. It raked his lungs raw. He dug his fingers into his scalp and the tears began to fall. A scream mixed in with the frantic breaths in his chest fought to escape him, but he bit his lip, not caring if it bled, to keep it trapped inside.

He was done. Victor must know. He knew he was Red Specter. That was the only explanation. That was why he seemed familiar to Victor. How was he going to continue helping his family while he’s in prison? He needed to call Phichit. Phichit would have to take over for him until he found a way to break out. Would he be sent to the same prison as his teacher, Minako? Or would they lock him away on Ares Island? He needed to let Phichit know... choked sobs rattled in his chest. No... he couldn’t talk to Phichit like this; not yet—he’d run to find Yuuri. He didn’t want Phichit to see him like this. Why had he talked so much? It’s like he didn’t even care about his family, like he didn’t care about Mari. He choked on his tears and his breathing was too fast for his body to keep up with —his shoulders shook and he rocked back and forth trying to steady himself.

Albacore, Amberjack, Bluefin, Freshwater Eel... he ripped his phone out of his pocket and hit call on the first number that popped up. It answered on the first ring.

“もしもし？Yuuri?”

“Mom,” he choked out.

“Yuuri! Honey, what’s wrong?”

“I made a mistake, mom.”

“Yuuri, it’s ok, baby, everyone makes mistakes. It’ll be ok.” Yuuri sniffled, still breathing hard, but the sound of his mother talking to him in his first language soothed his nerves. “Can you breathe?”

“No. It hurts.”

“Honey, where are you? Where’s Phichit?”

“At work.”
“Please breathe with me, Yuuri.” She guided him, and Yuuri tried to follow. Tried to empty his head. “I always said you needed to come back to Hasetsu,” she said. “I could make your favorite katsudon and you could relax in the onsen. Do you remember what the onsen looks like in spring, Yuuri?”

“Yeah,” he breathed. He could see it—gentle pink trees shedding fluttering petals into the water below. It was a pain to clean up during the busy season, but therapeutic to look at. Everything was so pink, so soft in spring. Even the steaming water looked like it was mixed with carnival sugar in the right light.

“That sounds much better Yuuri. Can you take another deep breath?” He did. “Yuuri, you’re not human if you’re not making mistakes. You need to focus on what you can do to make the best of your situation. Try not to focus on what’s making your situation worse.”

“Mhmm.” *Is that Yuuri? Give me the phone.* Yuuri could hear his sister’s voice in the background. His mom must be at the hospital with her.

“Yuuri.”

“Hey,” he greeted his sister. His voice was a mess.

“Yuuri, get it together, or so help me, I will fly to America to kick your ass.” Yuuri laughed and it sounded pathetic in his ears. “Listen, and don’t try to argue with me because, you’re not allowed to. You’re strong. I don’t care what mistake it is you think you made because it doesn’t matter. You *can* fix it and you *will*. So clean yourself up and get back out there.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I’m giving the phone back to mom. Don’t make me take it back from her.” Before he could say goodbye, his mother was back on the phone but scolding Mari for being harsh. His mom told him about the onsen, about how business was going. She talked about small, meaningless things like how the neighbors were doing and how some of the local shops had closed. It brought Yuuri completely out of his panic. He felt limp and tired but soaked with shame. He was no longer panicking but he was still crying, the shame of him having just had a panic attack overwhelming him. He knew it was irrational… that was just the way his brain worked.

“Mom, I’m sorry,” he whispered.
“Don’t apologize, honey. Mari, stop it, leave him alone.” His mother scolded his sister who had shouted to give the phone back to her.

“I’ve gotta go. I’m at work.”

“Are you going to be ok?”

“Yeah, don’t worry.”

“Don’t tell a mother not to worry,” she said, sounding stern, “but I believe you. Call me the instant you need to talk again. And make sure you call Phichit when you get a break.”

“Ok. Bye, mom.” He sat on the toilet, sniffling, trying to get his bearings. He ripped some tissue to clean his face.

Bang! He jumped as his stall door shuddered. Utterly bewildered, he hurried to unlock it. A teenage boy in a hoodie was standing in front of him, looking absolutely livid.

“If you’re going to cry like a baby on the job, then maybe you shouldn’t be a fucking doctor.”

“Eh? Uh… I’m not a doctor.” The teen looked him up and down with obvious and unnecessary dislike. His eyes rested on the ID badge pinned to his scrubs. Yuuri backed up, not sure what was happening.

“Yuuri? Is that your fucking name? Nobody using my name should be crying in the bathroom like some freaking toddler!”

“I’m sorry, can I help you?” Yuuri was alarmed by this stranger’s seemingly personal offense to Yuuri’s mere existence.

“I’m looking for the fucking doctors. Just my luck that when I actually find one, he’s bawling his eyes out in the bathroom. If this job is that stressful, then retire already!”
"Ok, I already told you I’m not a doctor. I’m a nurse, so I don’t know what to tell you," Yuuri snapped.

"Однохуйственно!"

"Excuse me?"

"Where’s the ER?!"

"You’re in it!"

The teen sucked his teeth and stormed off. Yuuri was so shocked and ticked at the teen that he didn’t even feel the shame that had washed over him earlier. He was just mad now. He washed his face in the sink, with more force than was necessary. His face was rubbed pink and he grumbled about teens and how the kid was lucky. He remembered the last time he saw someone talk like that—some grunt mouthed off to Fujiwara and now he wasn’t around to talk about it. Yuuri shook his head. He shouldn’t think like that; after all, he wasn’t a killer, especially not because of something so petty. Where had this kid even come from? He closed his eyes, the kid’s face swimming into his thoughts: green eyes, blonde, scowling, wearing a red and blue hoodie…

"Shit!" He tore out of the bathroom and bolted back into the ER. He grabbed the first nurse he saw by the elbow. She looked startled. “Did a blonde teenager in a hoodie just come through here?”

“Uh, yeah, he just left! He visited Winter Torch, but he didn’t take long.” Yuuri felt cold as he sprinted back to Victor’s stretcher. He ripped the curtains back. Victor looked up, the fire crackling in his eyes sparking in surprise.

“Are you ok?!"

“Uh, yes… why?” Victor looked confused.

“The Russian Punk,” Yuuri stammered, “he was just here!” Comprehension dawned on Victor’s face and he nodded.
“Oh, yes. He kept it short though.”

“I—I don’t know what to say, I’m so sorry. I just saw him in the bathroom and it didn’t occur to me—”

“Ah, don’t worry. He’s not a threat to me. He’s just a kid.”

“Mr. Torch,” addressing him that way felt so weird, but he couldn’t call him Mr. Nikiforov… that would be weirder and require far more explaining. “You need rest. You shouldn’t be having any stressful interactions—”

“Oh he’s stressful, alright, but I can handle it. He’s family after all,” Victor chuckled

Yuuri gaped. “Family?”

“Our little secret ok?” Victor winked. “He’s got your name, you know.”

“Yeah,” Yuuri crossed his arms and tried not to roll his eyes. “I’ve heard.” Victor looked at him questioningly.

“You two met, huh?”

“You could say that.” Victor laughed and pulled a phone from his pocket.

“Apparently, my uh… confrontation with Pyre is all over the news and my fans are a bit worried.”

“Oh,” was all Yuuri could say. He should’ve thought about that. Reporters must be swarming the hospital’s entrances right now. Of course, they weren’t allowed in without Victor’s consent which he clearly hadn’t given. The past half hour felt so intimate, like it was only happening to Yuuri, so he almost forgot that there were other people in the world that cared about what happened to Winter Torch.
“I think a simple Instagram post should put them at ease,” he said waving the phone.

“Yeah, I can take your picture if you want,” Yuuri reached for the phone, but Victor pulled it out of his reach. “What?”

“I want you to be in it with me! Everyone needs to know about the sweet doctor who saved my life!”

“I— I didn’t… it wasn’t exactly *life threatening*—I’m *not* a doctor,” Yuuri stammered making Victor smile wider.

“Come on! *Please?*! This is actually… kind of big for me. I’m no good with hospitals. That’s why I want a commemorative photo! And it’ll let my fans know that I’m going to be ok since I’m in such capable hands.”

*Another commemorative photo?* Yuuri gulped and tried not to convey how Victor’s words made his heart leap, and not in the good way. He thought he was imagining it before—thought his anxiety was feeding him nightmares, but could it be that Victor actually knew who he was? If he refused, that might raise questions. Besides… even if he was found out, taking a picture couldn’t harm or help him. He gave in.

“O… kay. Just one.” Yuuri thought Victor looked too happy. The flames on him were pink, like the first time they had met. He stood next to Victor’s stretcher to get in frame. Victor leaned closer to Yuuri who tried to smile. Victor winked at the camera.

“Say stitches!” Victor chimed which made Yuuri giggle as the camera clicked. “Yes! You look so cute!” Victor held the phone up for Yuuri to see making him blush. “What’s your Instagram? I’ll tag you.”

“I…uh… don’t have one.”

“What?! No way!” Yuuri shrugged apologetically. “Ah well,” he lamented. “I guess I’ll just tag the hospital.” Yuuri thought he was unnecessarily disappointed as he pouted and stuffed the phone back into his jeans pocket. He scrambled to push himself further up the stretcher and Yuuri helped him. He should transfer him to a room for the night if Victor was going to get any rest. Victor looked at him, but with less boyish excitement and more anxious worry. Interpreting Victor’s emotions was getting easier by the minute, even under all the glimmer and fire. He just wished he knew exactly what Victor was thinking so he could be certain that his identity was safe…
“Mr. Katsuki… do you mind being my nurse tonight? I don’t really want to talk to the other staff members… I know it’s selfish but…”

“No,” Yuuri said, “no, that’s fine, I don’t mind helping you. It looks like you’re about to burn through this bag already anyways.” He moved to replace the empty sack hanging over Victor with a new one. Yuuri supposed that he was still a bit scared, but he suspected that Victor was ashamed at how he had behaved. He had burned the scrubs on several nurses and doctors and caused a scene. Or maybe he heard the nurses bickering over who was going to watch him that night. He felt a pang of sympathy for Victor.

“Thank you,” he said sounding relieved. “And… another thing.”

“Yes?”

“Do you mind… not coming behind the curtains for the next hour?”

“Um… why?” Yuuri scrunched his eyebrows at Victor, concerned and confused.

“I just… need a moment alone. Please.”

“I’m sorry, but I can’t leave you alone for that long. Your body is burning through these fluids faster than a normal person’s body would. If I leave the IV in, it could push an air bubble into your veins. Trust me, you don’t want that.” Victor flinched at that explanation.

“Can you take the IV out then?”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He looked away. “I just need a moment. One hour.” Yuuri shook his head, completely befuddled and not wanting to delay Victor’s recovery for some mystery reason. But Yuuri thought Victor was beginning to look stressed again.
“Fine… I guess… I’ll leave you alone, and I’ll be back. Don’t do anything that’s going to stress you out. Don’t get out of bed without asking for help, don’t… don’t do anything, ok?”

Victor took a deep breath and nodded, relieved. “I’ll be here.” Yuuri unscrewed the IV tap from the needle and gave Victor a stern look—he laughed at that—and closed the curtains. Even from behind the curtains, Yuuri could tell the air around him had become cooler. Victor must have powered down. He wondered if it took a lot of energy for Victor to hide his appearance. If that was the case, then why didn’t he just wear a mask? He shrugged to himself as he sorted through a medicine cart, looking for a sleep aid. Victor would probably need it later that night. Dr. Chester jogged over to him.

“Yuuri, there you are! I know I keep steam-rolling you, but can I ask for another favor?” Dr. Chester wiped his brow—he was really having a night. Yuuri nodded. “Do you mind watching Winter tonight? I don’t think he’ll want to see anyone but you right now so I’m thinking that’s the only way. I know it’s unfair because this isn’t even your department—”

“Don’t worry about it. I already told him I’d help him.”

“God bless you, Yuuri Katsuki.” He clasped Yuuri’s hand in both of his and bowed. “Let me know if you need something or if I need to sign off on anything.”

“Yep,” Yuuri found what he was looking for and gave Dr. Chester a casual salute as the man jogged away.

Whether Victor knew who he was or not, he was first and foremost Yuuri’s patient. He would take care of him until he was better. If Victor slapped a pair of nano-cuffs on him as soon as he got better, then at least he would be able to say “hi” to Minako. He’d figure out the rest later.

*\*

The nurse was so cute that Victor almost forgot he was in the hospital with a needle the size of a pencil stuck in his arm. He ached all over and he felt like he got hit by a truck (that was clearly metaphorical because Pyre was far worse than a truck; Victor was glad to see the AI squad drag him off an hour ago). He kind of hated Yuuri though… but that was the irrational part of him speaking, the part that told him Yuuri was evil for sticking him with a needle. But he trusted Yuuri. He thought the IV would be the end of him but—as much as he hated to admit it—he was feeling stronger by the minute. Maybe it was actually the nurse that was making him feel stronger…the way he talked was calming, his touch was gentle, and Victor never felt safer. He was fairly certain they had met before, but he couldn’t quite remember where. He watched Yuuri out of the corner of his eye as he commented on the picture he took of them. It already had over three thousand likes.
Yuuri had moved him to a more comfortable room that had a real door and a bed. The nurse turned on him, folding his arms and eyeing Victor’s phone scornfully.

“You need to sleep,” he chided.

“I’m not sleepy yet,” Victor hummed, commenting with hearts under a compliment one of his fans made about the nurse.

“I don’t want to betray your trust, so I’ll be honest with you. You can either power down and go to sleep—I’ll take the IV out and wait outside—or I’ll give you something that’ll knock you out. Your choice.”

“You would drug me?” Victor looked up from his phone and smiled at Yuuri.

“This is a hospital, of course I’m going to drug you.”

Victor laughed. “Fine, I’ll sleep,” he conceded, stuffing his phone away. Yuuri had that satisfied look again as he turned to fiddle with the IV bag. Victor turned away—the less he knew about what was going on with that bag the better. Yuuri left the room and came back in with a tray of food and put it in front of Victor.

“Eat as much as you can, but try to finish the tea. It’ll help you relax,” he said. Yuuri folded his fingers together and stretched his arms over his head before heading for the door. Then, he remembered.

“Now I remember you!” Yuuri actually tripped and caught himself by slamming his hands on the door. Victor asked if he was ok and Yuuri only stammered. He, Victor mused, had to be far more graceful than this. After all, Chris talked about Yuuri all the time. That’s how he knew him. Last month, his friend Chris had taken it upon himself to plan Victor’s birthday party coming up. He had shown Victor a picture of Yuuri and the other dancers in his class saying he had invited them too. Victor had not committed their faces to memory because he knew his friend was secretly trying to set him up. He wasn’t in the mood for that kind of trickery…at the time.

Before, he wasn’t feeling up to the idea of a big party and had only agreed to let Chris plan it because resistance would have been worse. But now he had motivation. He really hoped Yuuri came… but even if he did, Yuuri wouldn’t know it was him. He would have to come as Victor, not
Winter Torch. He pouted, but immediately felt silly for it—he had just met the nurse, so why was it a big deal? He eyed Yuuri’s back as the nurse fiddled with something in his pocket.

“How do you know me?” Yuuri asked.

“I… I can’t tell you.”

“Why can’t you tell me?” Yuuri turned around then, worry creasing his features.

“It’s a secret,” and he felt embarrassed for not being able to contain his grin. Yuuri gave him a funny look.

“Why did you bring it up if you can’t tell me?”

“I wasn’t really thinking. If I told you how I know you… it might be obvious who I am.” He was being reckless but he never met anyone less dangerous than the nurse, Yuuri Katsuki who raised his eyebrows and crossed his arms with a grin.

“Do I know you, Mr. Torch? The real you?”

“Not as well as I’d like you to,” he said, and smiled when Yuuri blushed and turned to leave, muttering something about heroes and secrets. He made a mental note to tell Chris to be absolutely sure he invited Yuuri to his birthday party.

Even though Victor had agreed to sleep, Yuuri could tell he wasn’t truly sleeping. Sure, he was lying down with his eyes closed, but he was still powered up. The flames on Victor’s head were replaced with a dense eerie mist and the temperature around him dropped. Yuuri had half a mind to give Victor the sleep aid, but he only held off because, for whatever reason, the fluids had stopped disappearing as quickly as they had earlier. He suspected that Victor’s drop in body temperature was the cause. Since Victor wouldn’t burn through the fluids he needed, he would recover faster. Yuuri debated on which was more important—fluids or sleep—and decided on the former since he also didn’t want to betray Victor’s trust by knocking him out.
He stared blankly at the heart monitor, watching the green lines spike. Victor knew him somehow… but it didn’t seem like he knew him as Red Specter. Otherwise, he wouldn’t have said anything; it was better to have the element of surprise when confronting villains, right? Victor wouldn’t have been so coy if he suspected Yuuri. That was a relief but still baffling. How many famous super powers did he know in real life? First Chris and now Victor. A lot of people possessed some sort of special ability and used those abilities in their careers. Yuuri worked with a lot of psychic types who could smell diseases, see through skin, and read emotions the way others read minds. Lots of fire fighters had water abilities, teachers had more than two eyes, zoologists could speak to animals, and so on. Abilities were not uncommon. “Super powers” were—those that were adept enough to use their abilities for heroics or villainy.

They were rare because it was dangerous. That was really the only reason needed for the scarcity of super powers in the world. Villains and heroes alike ran the risk of harming themselves but they did it because they were good at what they did and because they had guts, plain as that. There were plenty of fire types in the world, but very few were as skilled at using their abilities as Pyre and Winter Torch which made them both super powers at opposite ends of the same spectrum.

Yuuri didn’t think he knew that many skilled people. He didn’t count his professors back at the Grand Prix, because everyone knew Boss, Baker, Iron Angel, and Radio Head. They were house hold names like Mario or Michael Jackson. Sure, Phichit might be skilled, though he didn’t have anyone to compare him to. Yuuri supposed he was fast… he wasn’t quite sure if that time travelling story was true, but if it was, that was definitely super power class action. Mari would definitely fall into the super power category if she weren’t ill. He didn’t need comparison to know that. Minako was another one, but she was in prison, most likely biding her time before a break out. He was sure there were some pretty skilled fighters under Fujiwara, but he wouldn’t necessarily call them super powers, otherwise, the world would be in much more trouble than it was. Then there was Chris who was apparently Dick Cartier, of all people. And now, Victor. Victor, who somehow knew Yuuri in real life… knew him in a way that if he talked about it, Victor’s identity would be obvious.

“Yuuri!”

“Huh?” Yuuri jumped and looked down at his hands. He was holding several latex gloves, but he couldn’t remember why he had them. He looked up to see an ER nurse snapping his fingers in front of him, trying to get his attention.

“Earth to Katsuki! You ok? Do you need to sit down?” Yuuri hastily stuffed the gloves back in their box and shook his head. “Your shift is almost up. What’s the plan for our hero?”

“I think we can discharge him this afternoon,” Yuuri said, slowly coming to his senses. “I’ll talk to him about having a new nurse in the morning. I don’t think he’s actually asleep.” He glanced through the window of Victor’s room at the hero who was most likely taking a light cat nap.
“All right. I don’t mind taking over for you. I’m a fire type too, so I can handle it.”

“Sounds good, but you shouldn’t have to worry. He was just nervous and disoriented before. I’m sure he’s sorry about earlier.”

“Good, because I’m not as nice as you. I will fight him.”

Yuuri laughed, not realizing how exhausted he actually was until the nurse had mentioned the end of his shift. He crept back into Victor’s room and shook his shoulder gently. He opened his eyes immediately, the same eerie mist pouring out of his eyes. Yuuri explained that his shift was ending soon, that Victor would have a new nurse but would be discharged soon. Victor listened and even shook the ER nurse’s hand, but Yuuri couldn’t help but notice that somewhere beneath the suave smile and deep opal facets, there was a bit of disappointment.

Chapter End Notes

もしもし (moshi moshi): hello

Однохуйственно (Odnohuystvenno): Literally: All the same cocks. When something doesn't matter because it's all the same to you.

Thanks for reading! Please get some sleep or Yuuri will stick you with a needle! <3
Two Hundred Thousand

Chapter Summary

Lots of daydreaming

Chapter Notes

Hello! I'm back. This one was difficult because it's kind of transitioning into the main action... and my work computer restarted itself while i was working on it. I had to re-type a good chunk of the chapter. But I did it!!! There's less action and more world building in this one. It's starting to get messy so I hope I can keep up with myself :')

Thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Yuuri got home in the wee hours of the next morning, he found Victor Nikiforov’s stat sheet taped to his bathroom mirror. Phichit had used lipstick to draw hearts on the mirror around the picture. He sighed, but his heart betrayed him, hammering when he looked at it. He took it down and folded it up to stuff in his bedside table. He reluctantly pulled his scrubs off and walked in his boxers to the washing machine—he was exhausted, but he was too paranoid to risk bringing diseases from the hospital to his apartment. Dumping the pockets’ contents into his hand, he threw the offending garments in, and chased it with some detergent. The detergent, Yuuri was embarrassed to admit, was the same shade of blue as Victor’s eyes. The past few hours had been the most nerve wracking and still the best he had ever spent at Spring Gate General.

Victor was more human than Yuuri had ever imagined. His heart ached for the hero’s fear of doctors—he wondered what happened to instill such a deep-seeded sense of panic in him. As much as Victor appeared on social media and on the news, it was just now occurring to Yuuri that he didn’t actually know that much about the hero, even after reading his stat sheet. He never would have guessed that The Russian Punk, a teenager that specialized in grand theft auto, was related to Victor. And how was he related to Victor? Were they cousins? Brothers? And did Yuuri know Victor in real life? Victor said he knew Yuuri, but Yuuri definitely would’ve remembered him. He wished Victor had just told him so Yuuri could know.

No. None of this mattered because, no matter who the real Victor was, he was still Winter Torch, a hero. It was Victor’s sworn duty to bring people like Red Specter, Yuuri, to justice, and Yuuri didn’t need justice right now. He wasn’t exactly sure what he needed, but Victor certainly wasn’t it. Yuuri didn’t realize he had drifted back into the bathroom until he was blinking warm water out of his eyes. He had started showering without realizing it. He groaned and rubbed fierce circles of shampoo into his head to clear his thoughts. He had been spacing out a lot lately.
He finished up and wrapped a towel around his waist before stepping out to brush his teeth.

“Are we out of Oreos?”

“Fuck!” Yuuri almost choked on his toothbrush, coughing up toothpaste everywhere, when Phichit suddenly appeared. He was still wearing his suit and his carnival mask was pushed up on his head. He sat casually on Yuuri’s bathroom counter. “Can you knock?!”

Phichit wrinkled his nose at him. “I knew you were decent.”

“How would you know that?” Yuuri spat in the sink and wiped the toothpaste off his chest.

“You always wrap up as soon as you step out of the shower. You’re like a robot when it comes to routine.”

“How do you…” Yuuri narrowed his eyes at Phichit in disbelief. “That’s not the point either! Knock so I don’t die of shock whenever you want to talk to me.”

“I like to keep you on your toes though.” He crossed his legs and turned to look at his own reflection. “Hey, where’s Victor?”

“Don’t know what you’re talking about,” Yuuri grumbled, grabbing another towel to dry his hair. There was a click and a flash of light and Yuuri glared at Phichit, putting as much venom as he could muster into the look which only made his friend laugh. “Stop putting me on Instagram.”

“But you’re so charismatic! If you want to be friends with more people than me and a phallic jewel thief, you need to put yourself out there.” Phichit beamed as he began working on the filter and tags. Yuuri turned to Phichit, in the mood to start unnecessary drama.

“I ate the rest of the Oreos.” Phichit looked up from his phone.

“What did you say?”
“I was hungry so I ate— 啊！” 有些锋利的东西在他的下背部弹了一下。Yuuri 看到 Phichit 拿着一块毛巾，他肯定是用其在快速的速度中打断了他的动作。

“There was more than half a pack left, Yuuri! You know those are my favorite!” Yuuri smirked at him making Phichit aim another hit. Yuuri jumped out of his reach and Phichit hopped off the counter ready to chase him when his phone pinged. He held up a finger and looked at it. Thinking he saw an opening, Yuuri lunged for the hand towel, but Phichit was a speedster after all, and evaded him easily as he scrolled through his phone.

“AAAAAHHHH!” Phichit screamed and dropped his phone and Yuuri jumped back. He scrambled to secure the towel around his waist and gave Phichit a startled look.

“What?!”

“Yuuri!”

“Yeah! What?!”

Phichit picked up the phone and shoved it in Yuuri’s face in a fraction of a second. Yuuri blinked and backed up to see it better. It was an Instagram picture of Yuuri beaming next to Winter Torch who was sitting up on his stretcher and winking. Yuuri didn’t usually like pictures of himself, but even he had to admit that this one was pretty flattering. He looked really happy, his smile genuine as if he had just heard the funniest joke, but he still couldn’t compare to an actual precious gem. You couldn’t even tell that Victor had been injured. He looked so vibrant and playful, and the pink flames on him were charming, complimenting his shimmering skin nicely. It had over four hundred thousand likes and it hadn’t even been a day since Victor was hospitalized. Yuuri grinned in spite of himself.

“What is this?!” Phichit shrilled, probably breaking the sound barrier.

“Oh, I… he came into the ER today and—”

“Why didn’t you tell me?! Why don’t you tell me anything anymore?!”
“You didn’t even give me a chance! You wanted to know about your stupid Oreos!”

“Ok. Number one: Oreos aren’t stupid. And b, YOU TOOK A SELFIE WITH WINTER TORCH AND DIDN’T IMMEDIATELY TELL ME ABOUT IT!”

“I—it was a busy night! He needed round the clock care!”

“Oh my god… AAHH!” Phichit ran circles around Yuuri, making his hair fly up. He stopped suddenly in front of Yuuri again, who was dizzy from trying to keep up. When his vision was focused again, he saw Phichit ferociously typing. Yuuri narrowed his eyes at him and tried to look at his phone. Phichit yanked it away and kept typing.

“What are you doing?”

“I told you… you need an Instagram. But it’s a good thing I’m prepared…”

“Excuse me? Prepared for what?”

“Winter Torch mentioned in the tags that his sweet doctor didn’t have Insta and he really wanted to tag you… we’ll just have to fix that now, won’t we?” Phichit cackled evilly as Yuuri’s eyes grew in horror.

“Phichit, no!” He grabbed pointlessly for the phone—with Phichit’s speed, it was like trying to snatch air.

“I have just enough pictures… and… done. I sent you the login info, but if you delete it, I’ll just set up another one.”

“Goddammit!” Yuuri tore out of the bathroom and went through the motions of downloading the app and opening up the profile Phichit had set up for him. He blanched when he saw that he already had over a hundred followers. His phone started vibrating like crazy with notifications so he turned them off. He swiped until he found Victor’s post. Scrolling down, he found Phichit’s comment revealing that he was the nurse in the picture’s best friend and that he would set up an account so Victor could tag him all he wanted. That had a shit ton of likes… There were mostly hearts and screams after that, even from Victor. Yuuri felt his face heat up. If he looked at it any longer, he thought he would explode, so he turned his phone off and shoved it under his pillow. Phichit
appeared next to him and threw an arm around his still damp shoulder before mussing up his hair.

“I’ll manage the account, so you don’t have to worry about it.”

“Get off me, you animal!” Yuuri pushed Phichit who only smiled triumphantly before returning to his phone.

“This is a god-tier account, Yuuri. I made sure to make you look like a celebrity.” Yuuri groaned and fell back on his bed. “When you’ve cooled down, take a look at it.” Yuuri could work ten night shifts in a row caring for Pyre, Victor, and a gem dragon at the same time and still never feel as tired as Phichit was making him feel at the moment. Yuuri’s phone rang and he picked it up without looking.

“What?” he answered wearily.

“That’s why you’re hired, Yuuri. I made sure to make you look like a celebrity.” Yuuri groaned and fell back on his bed. “When you’ve cooled down, take a look at it.” Yuuri could work ten night shifts in a row caring for Pyre, Victor, and a gem dragon at the same time and still never feel as tired as Phichit was making him feel at the moment. Yuuri’s phone rang and he picked it up without looking.

“What?” he answered wearily.

“Your secret boyfriend is Winter Torch?!”

“No, Mari, I—”

“Oh my god, way to go, Yuuri! You look so good in this picture! Is this afterglow I’m seeing?” Yuuri’s face was on fire.

“NO! What is wrong with you?!”

“Don’t doctors have some kind of code that prohibits them from sleeping with patients?”

“You—I’m not a doctor! You know I’m a nurse!”

“Oh, so does that mean it’s ok for you to sleep with Winter? That’s pretty convenient.”

“I did not sleep with him, Jesus! He needed stitches! Stop being so… ugh!” Yuuri was at a loss for words; Phichit was cackling again and Mari was laughing along too.
“I know he needed stitches, Yuuri. I can read, you know. This profile Phichit set up for you actually makes you look half way human. I’m impressed. Some people might even find you kind of attractive.”

“Ok bye.”

“Does he know you’re a jewel thief or is that like, a kink for him?”

“Goodbye.”

“Kiss your boyfriend for me!”

Yuuri hung up and threw his phone at Phichit who caught it without looking.

Rolling his eyes and groaning like a teenager, he got up and went to the bathroom, locking the door. He dried off and threw on some pajamas before reemerging. When he saw Phichit was still sprawled out on his bed, he pointed firmly at the door. Phichit rolled his eyes and made a show of snuggling further into Yuuri’s bed.

“This is what you get when you don’t tell your best friend about important milestones.”

“I’m not speaking to you.”

“It was bound to happen anyways. You needed an Instagram. You’ll thank me later.”

“I shan’t.” He sat on the floor at the foot of his bed to prove a point. The whole thing was absurd and stupidly embarrassing. He had no need for an Instagram account but, like always, Phichit was interfering. He hid his face in his hands when he thought about how Victor must’ve looked when he found the account. Did he smile? Or did he think it was silly? Would he have showed his friends? Who were Victor’s friends? Yuuri looked up as a chilling thought struck him. “You need to be careful, Phichit.”

“I’m not afraid of you, hot shot,” he said without hesitation.
“You should be,” Yuuri shot back, pouncing up to slap Phichit’s stomach. He yelped in surprise. “But that’s not what I meant. You’re an information broker with criminal ties. And I’m an international jewel thief. You wiped us off the grid when we dropped out so do you think it’s really wise to be so active on social media? What if someone recognizes us?”

“Don’t you worry your pretty little head about our criminal ties,” Phichit crowed, but Yuuri could tell there was a tinge of discomfort in his face. “I’ve only had this account for a year. I know what I’m doing. And besides, it’s been forever. Who do we know that knew us from The Grand Prix days and still wants to find us?”

“How about our old professors?”

“The least of our worries.”

“I’m just saying you need to be careful.

Phichit stood up then and straightened his tie. “I’m going to the store because a certain ungrateful someone ate the rest of my Oreos.”

“I didn’t eat your Oreos, you dork. I lied.” Yuuri waved a dismissive hand at him.

“Then where are they?!”

“I’ll tell you where they are tomorrow after lunch if you eat something healthy.”

“What?”

“Your eating habits are trash! Oreos are not breakfast food!”

“Yuuri. I’m trying so hard to be your best friend but—” his phone pinged again and, once again, he held up his finger as if Yuuri had been the one talking. He took a second or too longer this time and exhaled, shaking his head. Yuuri crossed his arms—he didn’t like that look.
“Is something wrong?”

“Honestly… I don’t know what to make of this.” He gave Yuuri his phone to read. It was an article from *The Daily Eagle*. Yuuri bit his lip as he scanned the picture of the bank he had robbed the night before. The office in the picture was absolutely wrecked; it must’ve been the one he fought Chris in. Even though Chris had returned some of the cabinets to their original position before Yuuri left, others were still strewn across the floor. The walls were marked up and there was some shattered glass. Yuuri scrolled to read the article. The headline stood out to him: *International Jewel Thief Suspected in Bank Robbery*. He furrowed his eyebrows at Phichit before reading.

*Last night, at approximately 10:35pm, Gate Trust Bank on Moreland Avenue was robbed. The bank was found in disarray this morning, when the incident was reported by the bank’s manager. Inventory reports reveal that nearly 100,000 dollars’ worth of precious gems were missing from Gate Trust’s vaults including a ruby valued at over 16,000 dollars stored elsewhere in the bank.*

*The evidence left behind suggests that international jewel thief, Dick Cartier was involved. Dick Cartier’s method of operation consists of a single kiss mark which was found inside the vaults. However, experts are leaning towards the possibility that more than one thief was present at the time of the crime.*

*Police explained that Dick Cartier is known for leaving one kiss, not two. For this reason, authorities were baffled to find a second kiss on a small, personal safe that had been forced open. It is believed that Dick Cartier is ferrokinetic, having the ability to manipulate metal. It is unlikely that a thief with ferrokinetic abilities would leave evidence when they are capable of a clean get-away. Authorities think that there was no reason for the safe, which bore Dick Cartier’s mark, to be forced open if there wasn’t a second thief present. Furthermore, the bank’s facilities exhibited signs of a struggle, suggesting that if Dick Cartier was present at Gate Trust last night, he was not alone.*

*It is difficult for authorities to discern much more as all surveillance was disabled and replaced with a digital loop at the time of the crime which isn’t typical of Dick Cartier’s method of operation. Some believe, again, that Scavenger was involved judging by the state of the bank, but this theory is not popular, as it is known that Scavenger favors a method of operation that leaves more damage than what police were met with this morning. Some authorities guessed that the newer jewel thief, Red Specter, may have made an appearance (or lack thereof). The disappearance of the 16,000 dollar ruby suggests this much, but authorities cannot be sure without sufficient evidence.*

Yuuri stopped reading. He looked at Phichit who merely shrugged. “It doesn’t really matter, does it?” he asked. “Sure, you left some evidence, but they don’t really know for sure if it was you or not.”
“Why would Chris do that—leave another kiss mark?” Yuuri wondered. It seemed unnecessarily foolhardy to him.

“Maybe he was trying to cover for you? It might’ve been pretty obvious that it was you who stole the ruby if he hadn’t. The article says police are guessing it’s you, but Chris’ kiss makes the evidence confusing. It leaves plenty of room for doubt where you’re concerned while still letting all fingers point back to Chris.” Phichit began to pace a bit, running his hands through his hair. “Maybe… this is his way of getting you to trust him.”

“Should I?”

“I don’t know. Do you trust the Chris you know in real life?”

“I… I don’t even know him.” Yuuri sat down on the bed and tossed the phone back to Phichit who caught it. His friend hissed skeptically and shook his head.

“I have a weird feeling about him. He singled you out to ask for a partnership, but why you? There are other thieves he could’ve asked. He might be trying to use you.”

“You think so?” Yuuri’s heart sank at the thought. He wasn’t sure he wanted to work with Chris, but he still liked him—he didn’t like the idea of Chris having ill will against him, the idea of being his enemy. As far he knew, he didn’t have any enemies… not really. He was sure that there was no one out there who had it out for specifically Yuuri… besides Fujiwara. He doubted Chris worked for Fujiwara, but what did he know?

“I’m not sure,” Phichit admitted, “but what’s the point in taking chances? There are too many grey areas to work with where he’s concerned. It’s best to steer clear of him.” Yuuri nodded, not sure if he was convinced but, since he didn’t have a counterargument, he let it rest. He climbed on to his bed and rolled on his back. So much had happened and his mind was just barely keeping up.

“I’m so tired.”

“Get some sleep then. I have another job for you if you want it.”

“Of course I do,” he yawned as he cocooned himself in the blankets.
“Figured. I’ll give you the details tomorrow.”

A few days after Victor was hospitalized, he returned to apologize and thank all the doctors and nurses who tried to help him. As much talk as the Spring Gate General staff made about the hero, they were instantly endeared, assuring him that he had nothing to worry about and all was forgiven. They fawned over him and shook his hand. As thanks, Victor made ice figurines appear in the palm of his hand for the nurses and doctors to have. He made puppies, unicorns, sphynxes and even dragons materialize upon request. Feeling festive, he even made it snow in the children’s ward. Yuuri was careful to avoid Victor during his gift giving visit. He couldn’t think straight when the hero was around, and even though he really wanted an ice figurine too—he heard that they didn’t melt—he couldn’t trust himself to not somehow reveal that he was Red Specter. Some of the nurses said that Victor was looking for him, asking around. Yuuri’s heart slammed in his chest when he heard this, torn between flattered and panicked. He managed to ghost about the halls as he worked, not staying in one place for too long or talking to any of the staff members in case someone tipped Victor off. At the end of his shift, a nurse cornered him in the locker room. It was Noor, the fire type who took over for him in the ER when his shift with Victor was over.

“Where have you been all night? Winter Torch was here looking for you!”

“I’ve been around…” Yuuri said, not wanting to meet his look.

“Sucks that you missed him. He left something for you though.” Yuuri turned to Noor who was holding out an intricately crafted rose of ice. Yuuri gazed with amazement and shock as he took it. It really was delicately made with leaves the same thickness as the real thing, thorns, and soft petals. If it weren’t completely translucent, he would swear it was real. He turned it over in his hands and lifted it up to the light to find that there was hair-thin writing on the underside of a petal.

Thank you, Yuuri. His face exploded with heat as for the rest of the day, he completely forgot everything else in the world.

Yuuri’s love struck amnesia didn’t last long. Within the next few days, he managed to steal well over two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of rubies. In a rare moment of self-reflection, he guessed that by now he had stolen enough to support a small nation for a year (though he wasn’t the best at math). It was a lot though. Too much for one person. He wondered why Fujiwara needed so much money, especially since Yuuri had been stealing for him since he was seventeen years old. Maybe Fujiwara
hated the fact that Yuuri’s parents defected so much that he would never let Yuuri leave this life. Even so, Yuuri stretched the limits of his mind to imagine what Fujiwara could be doing with it all. Shark fin soup, elk milk, foreign cars and silk made from… peacock feathers? The money was exorbitant so why shouldn’t Fujiwara’s tastes be the same?

That still didn’t sound right though, as much as Yuuri liked to imagine the demon picking out exotic fur mantles. He had seen Fujiwara before, seen his home. By crime boss standards, both were understated. The wealth Yuuri had made for him wasn’t funding his lifestyle, and Yuuri doubted that it went to charity. Yuuri figured only he and Phichit were weird like that. It was strange. Fujiwara could really make him do anything if he wanted to, but he chose money. Suddenly, what Phichit had been telling Yuuri about Fujiwara eventually asking him to do something that he simply couldn’t began to make his skin crawl. Yuuri couldn’t think of a way to refuse Fujiwara if he asked him to hurt someone, or even kill. He couldn’t do it without hurting his family either. As much as he tried to think of some kind of compromise, some way that he could obey Fujiwara without sacrificing his morals, he knew it was impossible. But he knew the time was coming. He just had a feeling. He had to speak to Fujiwara and soon.

Victor stretched out on the couch in the breakroom and tossed the article about Red Specter onto the coffee table. He sighed as he anxiously rubbed the spot where his stitches had been (Yuuri was right—it didn’t leave a scar, but it still made Victor squeamish to think about). The thief had done it again. And again, and again. He’d been pretty busy, Victor thought, and for some reason it was all he could think about. There was something about Red Specter that was dangerously endearing, even without having met him. He wanted to catch him, but mostly because he wanted to talk to him, figure him out. He jumped when he heard Yakov come into the breakroom to fix his afternoon cup of coffee. He snatched the article up and waved it at him.

“Now will you let me go after Red Specter?”

“Why should I?” Yakov asked, lazily stirring his cup. Victor looked at him in disbelief.

“He’s stolen two hundred thousand dollars’ worth of rubies in a matter of days! Some of that he stole from people in Spring Gate!”

“I still don’t see why you specifically need to go after him, Victor.” Victor frowned at him and crossed his arms defiantly as Yakov rounded the couch to turn the news on. “With villains like Pyre and Tim Fair running wild, I’d say you already have your hands full. I need you to focus your skills on the important things, and right now, Red Specter doesn’t fall into that category.”
“So we’re just going to let him go?”

“I never said that. Someone else will handle it. I’ll discuss logistics with Iron Angel and Baker. More than likely we’ll predict his next target, and then have a team wait for him to come for it.”

“Why send a team? I’m more than willing to go!” Victor felt like he was borderline begging which he didn’t like, but he couldn’t help it. This thief seemed different—there was something about him Victor wanted to figure out. “I just think you’re wasting your resources.”

“I see no reason to kill a fly with a nuclear bomb,” Yakov said easily as he shrugged.

The younger heroes had begun to trickle into the breakroom; it must’ve been near the end of the morning shift. Some trudged into the kitchenette while others simply flopped onto the floor. One hero in pink and yellow—the same one that chased who Victor now suspects was Red Specter into the woods—fell onto the couch, completely spent. Victor forgot their name. Brick? Birch?

“Hey, Robin,” Yakov said. Oh. Not even close.

“Yes, sir!” They jumped to their feet.

“I want you to lead a small team of two to three other heroes and bring in Red Specter. We’ll have to arrange a danger profile with stats, crimes, and a rating before you do anything. It’ll be tiresome since there’s no physical or photographic evidence of him but we’ll have it. I’ll have details for you later on in the week, so just be ready.”

“O-of course, sir!” Even though they looked thoroughly drained just a second ago, they now seemed to be brimming with pent up energy, bouncing on their toes and smiling eagerly. Victor grinned in spite of himself because even though he felt slighted for not being put on Red Specter’s case, he was glad the young hero was getting some experience. Recognizing his defeat, he slumped into the kitchenette for something to distract himself. Two heroes were playing rock-paper-scissors for the last bagel and he dodged them to open the fridge.

If he was being half way rational, he would forget about Red Specter. He would remember that at the end of the day, Red was a criminal and nothing else. Agni had said that the thief was a product of his circumstances, that he wasn’t perfect but still… what? Still human? Victor knew that, even Pyre was human. A despicable, vile, sadistic, evil human. But still. He wanted to know what kind of person Red was—what kind of person would steal millions of dollars’ worth of only rubies but also
save the lives of three people he didn’t know.

The three that Victor brought in that day from the sewers had recounted the entire ordeal to Yakov. They had been in hiding from someone named Kazuya, a doctor that Victor knew all too well. But he heard Kazuya had died a long time ago. There wasn’t even a record of him left, though that wasn’t very surprising considering Kazuya’s criminal ties. What didn’t make sense was why they were hiding in Spring Gate… Kazuya lived in Japan. Those three hadn’t said much else, but it was clear they had no clue who Red was; the thief just happened to appear in the sewers and ended up saving them. Victor didn’t know a single criminal or villain—not even Chris—who would’ve stayed to ensure the safety of those people. He knew some heroes who would’ve at least run for help instead of staying to fight it off alone. If Victor didn’t have the powers that he had… or if it was dawn or dusk instead of night or day, he was positive he would’ve run from the gem dragon. He shuddered to think about the alternative.

He mindlessly pulled an ice coffee out of the fridge and sipped it as he thought about who Red could be. He was trying to be patient until the next time Agni contacted him, but he didn’t like waiting. He wondered what the hold-up was. He hadn’t told Yakov about Agni yet… but he didn’t need to know. Not yet. He leaned against the counter behind him and took out his phone. Instagram popped up as soon as he unlocked it and he began, for the fourth time that day, to scroll through Yuuri Katsuki’s photos, trying to push Red Specter out of his mind.

Chapter End Notes

Yeah! Robin is nonbinary! I also have a feeling that there will be more errors, but I’ve been looking at this for way too long. Thanks again for reading!
Rookies

Chapter Summary

Yuuri squares up.

Chapter Notes

Translations in the end notes!

It's been a loooong time! Between work, golden week, and staff changes, it's been rough trying to update, but I'm back (sort of)! Summer is almost here, so maybe I'll be able to post more. Anyways, enjoy the chapter! Thanks for reading again!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Phichit was afraid that Victor would get bored waiting for another contact, but it couldn’t be helped. He was running out of time, but he still couldn’t risk Yuuri getting hurt. He needed to handle this situation as carefully as possible since he wouldn’t be around to clean up any messes that occurred. There were actually a few reasons why he hadn’t called Victor, besides the fact that constant contact was dangerous and could get him found out by Boss or another hero. For one thing, Yuuri had his nursing job, and another thing, if he immediately let Victor loose on Yuuri without careful planning and communication, things could go south very quickly. Yuuri was trained to steal and defend himself. Victor was trained to subdue people like Yuuri. The stronger villains that got into fights with Victor sometimes didn’t come out looking too pretty either.

He couldn’t let that deter him though. He had dragged his feet for long enough.

*\

Yuuri woke up to find a very large cup of coffee on the kitchen table. He moaned his appreciation as he took monster gulps of it and thought about how he owed Phichit his soul. He had been working three times as much as he was used to. For some reason, he felt spurred on by the Lam job, by the prospect of ending everything once and for all. But that meant that he wasn’t taking breaks between his civilian job and criminal job… Needless to say, he was exhausted. Last week was a ruby week and this week was a nurse week. He finished off the coffee and tried not to think about the rose of ice that waited for him in his locker at work. Thinking about Victor in any capacity was dangerous.

Yuuri did a few stretches and used his door frame to complete a couple sets of chin ups (he kept
running into other thieves so it was high time he got back in fighting shape) before hitting the showers and jumping into his scrubs. He locked the door to his apartment and turned around to a pair of large brown eyes. He jumped and his back slammed against his door.

“おはよう,” his neighbor, Minami trilled. The mingled sound of fear and relief Yuuri made was not human. “Well, it’s not really morning anymore, is it? I guess it’s your morning since you work nights! You’re always so busy! You work so hard! Hey, I was thinking of becoming a nurse too!”

“I, uh… that’s great… Minami,” Yuuri muttered, still coming down from being startled. This was a regular thing, the neighbor’s son greeting him outside of his apartment before work, but for some reason, he never got used to it. So many things were happening in his life that this little consistency always came as a surprise. It was unnerving really, because it made it difficult to be inconspicuous with a star-struck teenager ogling you every time you set foot outside your door. He guess he understood it. Maybe. Minami was an immigrant too, and probably was ecstatic to find that his neighbor came to Spring Gate around the same time he did and even spoke the same language as him. He tried to remember what he was like when he was nineteen and was forcibly reminded of the time Minako made him shove his hand in a bear carcass for a seven million dollar necklace it swallowed.

Nah. He and Minami were nothing alike. He had begun walking to the elevator, aware that he had a chatty shadow, but not able to bring himself to care. His thoughts strayed back to his mentor, Minako, who was now in prison. He wasn’t sure how long Minako planned to stay there because it wasn’t like any normal prison could hold her if she really wanted to break out. It was clear the authorities didn’t know that, otherwise they would’ve locked her up on Ares Island along with Pyre and the other dangerous, showy villains. Maybe she was relieved to finally stop stealing, even though she did it for herself, unlike Yuuri who did it for Fujiwara. He still couldn’t imagine getting put away the way she got put away. He didn’t care how many diamonds Minako stole. Something didn’t feel right about her being caught while she was saving an innocent life. When they put the nano-cuffs on her, she didn’t even fight it. Yuuri definitely would’ve fought… but then again, he had a reason to. Maybe Minako thought it was worth it?

“So… anything?”

“What?” Yuuri blinked down at Minami who looked shiftier than usual. He was also suddenly aware that they were in the parking garage. “Do you have anything planned?”

“Planned?” He said dimly.

“For your birthday! It’s coming up isn’t it?”
“Oh! Uh… I honestly haven’t thought about it,” Yuuri said truthfully. He had completely forgotten about his birthday. “I think my friend might be planning something at a bar or something… we usually go out drinking.” Minami nodded, his shoulders slumping. Minami was nineteen and couldn’t drink yet. Phichit always made a big deal out of his birthday, inviting a bunch of people Yuuri didn’t know and letting Yuuri get drunk. He wasn’t in the mood for that this year. He smiled at Minami who actually looked shocked.

“Minami, why don’t you come over for my birthday?” He asked, wondering if he would regret it as Minami’s face lit up like a lightbulb. “I’m not in the mood for a big party this year so we can hang out with my friend, Phichit, and play some videogames. That might not be your idea of fun but—”

“No! I—that—that sounds excellent! Can I really come?!”

“Uh, why not?” Yuuri shrugged, feeling embarrassed by how happy Minami was about that simple invitation. He looked pointedly away from Minami’s beaming face as he fiddled with his keys. When he mounted his motorcycle, the teen was still bouncing happily beside him. Yuuri smiled awkwardly at him and fastened his helmet on.

“I really wanted to surprise you with a present but I really want to get you something you like but then that wouldn’t be a surprise so I want to ask you what you like but then that still wouldn’t be a surprise even though I have a pretty good idea of what you like but can you please tell me what you like?” He rambled, giving Yuuri whiplash as he tried to keep up.

“Minami, you really don’t have to—”

“I want to—”

“Save your money, Minami. You’re in college,” Yuuri said firmly. He started the motorcycle, making Minami jump back as the bike purred to life.

“Ok! I’ll make you something then!”

“Minami…”

“You can’t change my mind, I already know what I’m going to make!” He started bouncing again and scampered off to the elevator before Yuuri could properly protest.
Speeding down the highway, he thought about what would be worse: a huge party filled with people he didn’t really know watching him get black-out drunk, or hanging out with Minami, who was like the energizer bunny hopped up on Red Bull.

The week came and went and he still hadn’t found an answer to that question. He was still thinking about it while he deftly slipped through the defenses of an underground bunker.

“Phi—uh—Agni,” he stammered into the comm link. He was trying to get used to calling Phichit by his work name while on the job. Just in case. “I invited our neighbor over for my birthday coming up.”

“Which neighbor? Not the angry dad?”

“No, the one across from us.”

“Shame. Angry dad is hot. That’s really sweet though. He really loves you. It’s kind of cute. You’re his Winter Torch.”

“Aagh.”

“Wait, how old is he? Can he drink?”

“He’s… nineteen.”

“Ah, Yuuri! He’s not legal! We can’t bring him with us!”

“It’s funny that you, a criminal info broker, is telling me, a criminal of the thief variety that something isn’t legal. And we don’t have to go out. We can stay in and—”

“That was your plan all along wasn’t it?”
“No,” he lied.

“Fine. It’s your birthday,” Phichit said and Yuuri could hear him pouting on the line. “You can do what you like. You just always seem so drained around him.”

“I—that’s not true… I like him.”

“Yep,” Phichit said. Yuuri pursed his lips as he made his way down a narrow passageway. “He’s got more energy than a cheetah on speed.”

“A cheetah on speed after having a breakfast of froot-loops and seven-up. Sweet kid though.”

“Very sweet. I almost feel guilty that I can’t match his energy.”

“Hey, stop. Something’s up.” Yuuri froze in place. Adrenaline made his hearing spike. He looked around, expecting something to jump out of the walls, but it seemed he was alone. He waited for Phichit. “You’ve got company,” he said.

“Another thief? Again?”

“No…”

Yuuri scrunched his eyebrows, confused. “What then?”

“Heroes.”

*\

Even though this is what Phichit had hoped for, watching it happen made his situation very real. Setting Yuuri up. Planning his next call with Victor. The future was catching up with him.
“Uh… do I know any of them?” Yuuri whispered. *Heroes.* He probably couldn’t handle more than one top hero, but if they were rookies, that was another story completely. It would be his first time fighting one, but the formidable heroes are usually the ones that showed up on TV. If Yuuri hadn’t heard of them before, it was likely that he had a chance.

“I can’t tell. But there’s four of them.”

“Really? Four?” If there were that many, Yuuri thought as he slinked carefully closer to the end of a hallway, then they couldn’t be that great. “It’s like they expected me to come.”

“Of course they did,” Phichit said. “You’re making bigger waves than usual and collectors are getting pretty pissed off. They had to respond somehow.”

“I don’t even have a danger profile yet.” Phichit responded to that with a noncommittal sound and Yuuri could imagine him shrugging with disinterest. Something tingled in his stomach and he thought he must be going crazy because it felt like excitement. After turning a narrow corner, the floor yielded to a stair case in a sharp descent to a short passageway with a low, earthy ceiling. A heavily armed door lay in front of him, and he knew the heroes must be waiting for him inside. He found that he already had a plan. He wasn’t even nervous, though his skin tingled and he felt hot. A smile grew on his face and he felt himself float out of his body a bit, as if he were watching himself from above.

*Stop it.* He scolded himself because he absolutely refused to use his power. He had subconsciously welcomed it, he realized when it became apparent how hazy he felt. He would be in control this time, like always. In and out.

And there was no need for the element of surprise, was there?

He kicked the metal door, leaving a foot-shaped dent in the center. He kicked three more times and the thing flew off its hinges. Someone shouted something but before even Yuuri could get a good look at who he was up against, he threw several smoke screens into the room. Activating the enhanced vision function in his mask, he tumbled forward, keeping low to the ground.

“Nobody move!” Somebody shouted. They sounded young. “He’ll come to us!” Well. They weren’t wrong. Yuuri saw the four take defensive stances in front of a huge mechanical looking block in the
ground which he knew the ruby was in. They closed in tight formation around it and Yuuri thought he was lucky. They were making it easy for him. His vision through the mask was red, but grew pink as a bright light flooded the room. The hero closest to him—he recognized them as the rookie that followed him in the woods that one time—was holding up glowing hands though they were still squinting and swiveling their head.

Yuuri didn’t hesitate. He grabbed their wrist and tossed them screaming through the door behind him. One of the heroes jumped and snatched wildly in front of them for Yuuri who merely stepped aside.

“What was that?! Spotlight, where are you?!” A hero with butterfly wings turned anxiously around. Another hero reached out to the space where Spotlight was and touched Yuuri making them leap.

“Who was that?!” Before they could stumble too far out of reach, Yuuri grabbed their arm and yanked them into the butterfly hero. He procured some rope from his utility belt and tied their wrists together before they started swinging at him. The last hero jumped at him from a corner and narrowly missed Yuuri. He was agile, Yuuri thought, but there was no way he could see through a smoke screen this thick without an ability. This hero must’ve jumped at the sounds Yuuri was making. Smart. He must have a slightly cooler head than the others, Yuuri pondered as he slid easily away from a punch the hero threw blindly at him. He moved to the metal box facing the heroes in front of him so none of them could sneak up on him from behind. There was a single keyhole in the face of the box and Yuuri slid a long metal tool into it to pick it.

The hero called Spotlight had sprinted back into the room, but Yuuri only glanced at them as he continued working on the lock. “88! Flap your wings!” They shouted. The butterfly hero turned around, dragging the other hero with her as she frantically flapped her wings. The smoke around them swirled and began to clear, but it was too late.

The box clanked and rattled as a panel retracted on the top. A smaller metal case rose from the opening and a handle snapped up for Yuuri to grab. Still tethered to the hero called 88, one of them let out an ear-splitting tiger roar which only made Yuuri hesitate because it startled him so much. The hero who jumped at him grabbed his shoulder and he ducked away to the door. It was almost clear enough to see, especially with Spotlight’s glowing hands and the hero kicked out a leg to trip Yuuri. He avoided falling easily by flipping one handed out the door before sprinting away up the stone stairs.

He whispered into his comm link. “Erase the footage for me, will ya?”

“That was fast,” Phichit said.
Yuuri had to extract the ruby from the metal case in the neighboring woods before going back home. He ditched the case in a hollow tree, stashed the ruby in his belt, and hopped on his bike. He was back home in a few hours with pizza, topped with all of Phichit’s favorite toppings (seven different types of cheese). He felt tired but satisfied as he dropped the pizza on the counter and slouched to his room to change into pajamas. Phichit must not be home, he thought, because his friend usually called out to him when he came through the door. He was surprised however to see Phichit eyeing the pizza in the kitchen. Yuuri smiled at him.

“That’s a thank you for the coffee this morning. And everything else really,” he said.

“Thank you? You don’t… you don’t need to thank me… coffee?”

“Yeah, the coffee you got me,” Yuuri was confused by the blank look on Phichit’s face. “I was completely beat when I got up but that really helped. You got me one last week too but I didn’t get the chance to actually thank you for it.”

“Uh… last week…” Phichit scratched his head and Yuuri gave him an amused look as he took plates out of a cabinet.

“You don’t remember doing that?”

“I mean I do at least a thousand things before breakfast, Yuuri. I’m bound to forget one of them. You’re welcome, I guess.” He took a slice and bit into it. Yuuri laughed and shrugged.

Okay then. Well, can I thank you for helping me and being the best friend a thief could have?” Yuuri lifted him up in a hug from behind. Phichit almost dropped his pizza in shock but laughed.

“Stop it!”

“But you’re the best!”

“Yes, but stop!”
Yuuri put him down and gave him a quizzical look. “You never turn down praise, even if you’re joking. Are you ok?”

“Of course.”

Yuuri’s eyebrows furrowed at that as Phichit piled more slices on his plate and zoomed to the couch. He fixed his own plate and plopped down on the couch next to Phichit. Phichit always told him what was going on with time…

After watching two movies on Netflix, Yuuri decided he couldn’t wait much longer. He turned to him, fiddling anxiously with the pillow in his lap.

“I know you’re not telling me everything,” he said, hesitant. Phichit didn’t look up as he scrolled through titles for something else to watch, but Yuuri thought he looked tense.

“What do you mean?”

“I can tell there’s something wrong. Can you… please tell me what’s going on?”

Phichit bit his lip and tapped the remote on his thigh at a nervous tempo. “There’s nothing wrong,” he said.

“I hope you know that’s not convincing.”

“Yeah…”

Yuuri looked down, embarrassed for reasons he couldn’t explain, and decided to turn back to the TV. He didn’t want to force Phichit to talk if he didn’t want to, especially since it was possible he was just imagining things. But his friend hadn’t chosen another movie to watch. He wasn’t even scrolling through titles. Just tapping the remote on his thigh. Yuuri glanced at him out of the corner of his eye but pretended not to notice. He got up to take their plates to the sink instead. When he got back, Phichit had set the remote on the coffee table and turned reluctantly to face him.
“I’m just worried,” he said. Yuuri should’ve been glad that Phichit had finally said something, but he wasn’t good at these things. He was afraid he would say the wrong thing to Phichit instead of comforting him.

“Uh… worried about what?”

“Just… everything,” he said with a huff. “I know I seemed confident about moving to Spring Gate despite the risks but you meeting those heroes today… it kind of freaked me out.”

Yuuri sighed, somewhat relieved. “You don’t have to worry about that. Those guys were no problem. It was the easiest encounter I had all month. Heroes, especially rookies, don’t fight to maim unlike other thieves. And you really helped me with that heads up.”

“That’s not…” he seemed to be struggling with his words which was rare for Phichit. He tilted his head back and screwed his eyes tight as if searching for answers somewhere deep, deep in his mind. “It’s not what happened today. It’s what will happen.”

“And what’s going to happen?”

“I don’t know. That’s the problem. I don’t know what’s going to happen to you next. And I definitely don’t know if I’ll be able to help you. You could get hurt or worse and all for something so stupid. For something that’s not even your fault. I’m doing the best I can to help you, but it just doesn’t seem like enough.” He opened his eyes and a thin tear streaked down his face. “I hate Fujiwara,” he whispered. Yuuri immediately pulled Phichit into a hug. Phichit laughed into Yuuri’s shirt but didn’t fight it this time.

“I can’t tell you not to worry about me because that wouldn’t be fair. I worry about you all the time. But I can tell you that I can take care of myself. And that I trust you. You can do anything and you always have my back. We make a good team so I think we’ll be ok.”

“Yeah.”

“Phichit, we’re having a moment here so can you please stop talking about how you want to suck my nips,” Yuuri teased and Phichit cackled. He sat up and hastily wiped his tears on the neck of his shirt.
“Ugh. I hate crying,” he grumbled as he rubbed his eyes until the lids were pink. Yuuri hummed at that and handed him some pizza napkins which Phichit thanked him for.

“If all else fails, and I find I’m in a classic damsel in distress situation, you can always zoom to where I’m at. You’re the fastest person I know.”

Phichit scoffed, but still seemed slightly pleased. “How many speedsters do you know?”

“I… uh.” Yuuri trailed off, because when he thought about it, there weren’t that many. Phichit cleared his throat and picked up the remote from the table to scroll through more titles. “You know, everyone talks about speedsters, because they’re obviously real, but… where are they?”

“What are you talking about?”

“I mean, have you met any other speedsters before? Like at the Grand Prix, or even in real life?”

“Of course.”

“I haven’t. And that’s a pretty amazing power, don’t you think? You’d think there’d be a famous super powered speedster out there by now, villain or super hero. But I never see them on the news or anything. Not even in civilian jobs. A speedster nurse would be something else…” Yuuri said dreamily, thinking about how many patients he could get through in a day if he had Phichit’s power. He shook his head and looked at his friend who was still looking at the TV. “Where are your speedy pals at?”

“I don’t know, Yuuri… out there.”

“False.”

“On an island all by themselves, then? I can call them, if you want them to fill you in on their shenanigans. I have them all on speed dial.”

“Really?”
“No.”

“That seems like a waste… to not have speedsters on speed dial.”

“I don’t know what to tell you. Maybe we keep missing each other, zooming past each other in opposite directions.”

“What about that speedster you met when you accidentally travelled back in time? What was his name?”

“Barry Allen.”

“Barry Allen… like DC’s Flash, Barry Allen? Wait…you don’t remember the guy’s name, do you?!”

“I was a kid when it happened!”

“You were twelve!”

“I had a lot going on!”

“You were twelve!”

“Yuuri, I already told you I can’t talk about the details of my time leap excursion. It’s dangerous stuff,” he said dismissively as he gave up and turned the TV off.

“I’m starting to think that story wasn’t even real,” Yuuri said and Phichit shrugged.

“What tipped you off?”
Yuuri pursed his lips. It was true that some powers were incredibly unique, like Victor’s. Most people had either water or fire abilities, ice or light, but Victor, for some reason, possessed an entire spectrum of power. But there were abilities that ought to be incredibly common. Speedster abilities seemed to fit into that category. He had read briefly about speedsters in his Grand Prix textbooks. People would talk about their speedster relatives in passing… but it seemed as if they didn’t quite… exist the way others did.

But that was silly. Phichit was right here in front of him. It was just that he had never met another speedster besides Phichit. Or maybe it was just that Phichit was the only speedster that mattered to him. Even though his friend was being shifty. He was still the best. He grinned and threw his pillow at Phichit’s head who only looked at him with befuddlement.

“Nerd,” he said as an answer.

Before turning in for the night, Phichit surprised Yuuri with over two million dollars. Yuuri gawked at it and tried to rake his memories for any rubies he forgot about.

“What’s this for?”

“A pound of flesh.”

“Excuse me?”

“Remember that sack of grossness you pulled out of that gem dragon? I sold it.”

Yuuri’s jaw dropped and Phichit laughed. “What?”

“You didn’t think I was gonna let you come out of that fight empty handed, did you? And don’t, worry—your buyer doesn’t know Agni’s Cat got those guts. Or Red Specter or… whatever you’re calling yourself. You won’t have anyone demanding gem dragon hearts in the future. I just told him it fell off the truck.”
“Oh my god.” Yuuri looked at the stacks in the brown paper bag with amazement. “You’re incredible.”

“Not really,” Phichit shrugged and scratched his head. Yuuri looked at him—he was refusing compliments again, but he didn’t want to pry. He smiled and bid his friend good night before retreating to his room. He set the bag of money aside and collapsed on to his bed. It was very possible that he was reading too much into Phichit’s behavior, but he was still concerned. Nothing good could come out of him staying up late thinking about it though. Pulling his phone out and snuggling deep into the covers, he bit his lip guiltily as he realized that for the first time in forever, he had forgotten to call his sister.

Chapter End Notes

おはよう(ohayoo): good morning!
The Thai might be obvious since it came from another chapter but just in case: We were meant to be together.

Yo yo yo. Heroes in the house. Hope you enjoyed it! Comment and tell me what you think!! <3
Chapter Summary

Phichit broods

Chapter Notes

It's been a while, huh? Sorry for the wait, but I've been pretty busy. I gotta write like 6 speeches for some students and I'm actually working on a much bigger project at the same time... It all started when I was drunk watching The Sorcerer's Stone with a friend. But I haven't forgotten HR! I hope you enjoy this!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Yuuri, how could you? I could’ve died and you never would’ve known.”

“I—what? Are you ok? Did something—”

“I’m joking.” Mari cut Yuuri off and he sucked his teeth. He had sprung of the bed in alarm but flopped back down. It was the night after he had realized he had forgotten to call, but he had only been talking to his sister for ten seconds and he was already regretting it.

“Why would you say something like that then?”

“To prove a point. You didn’t call me and I still lived to tell the tale. In fact, I’m better than ever, so you should actually forget about me more often.”

“What are you talking about?” Yuuri felt he had aged sixty years as he dragged his hand down his face.

“I’m serious. I’m being discharged in a week. I still have to go in for regular appointments but—”

“YOU’RE BEING DISCHARGED?!”
“Yes, I—”

“Oh my god, Mari, that’s amazing! Are you… are you…” He was struggling for words as shock, happiness, and disbelief flooded him. Mari had been ill for ages because of whatever ability one of Fujiwara’s men did to her. The last time she wasn’t hospitalized, Yuuri had just started school at the Grand Prix.

“I’m not exactly cured, if that’s what you’re wondering. But I can get by the way I am.”

“The way you are? What does that mean? Are you… in pain?”

“Well, yeah but some people live with pain every day. Our lives are still worth living even if they’re different.”

“Mari…” Yuuri didn’t like the sound of that. Couldn’t the doctor’s find out how to help her completely?

“Don’t take that tone with me. I don’t want to spend the rest of my days in a hospital bed. If I can take care of myself, which apparently my doctor thinks I can, then I’m getting out of here. Which means you no longer have a good excuse to not have a life. Speaking of, there are only two reasons why you would’ve forgotten to call me: you finally got a life or something bad happened. Which is it?”

“Uh,” he was thrown off by the sudden change in conversation, “I guess I’ve just been busy…” he took out the card Chris had given him and flipped it absentmindedly between his fingers.

“So you got a life then. Is that life’s name…Winter Torch?”

“As soon as you get out of the hospital, I’m putting you back in.”

“Rude. What have you been busy with?”
“Same old same old. Just more of it, I guess.”

“Hmmm.” Yuuri didn’t know what to make of the silence that followed. There was no point in telling her how difficult stealing was becoming because it would just give her more ammunition to bully him into stopping his criminal activities. “You know, Yuuri,” she began slowly, “I’m getting out of here in just one week. That means, if I really want to, I can come and smack you in a matter of minutes.”

“Sounds exhilarating.”

“Really. If you need me, just let me know. I’ll be there.”

“Thanks, sis.”

They talked a bit more about this and that. It had only been a few hours since Mari had gotten the news and their parents were already planning a welcome home party for her. Yuuri could practically taste his mother’s katsudon. Vicchan, a toy poodle his family got when he was still at the Grand Prix, was getting big and kept stealing pork buns from the kitchen. He told her about how he was concerned for Phichit and then vented about how Phichit suggested that he ask heroes for help with his Fujiwara situation. He shouldn’t have been surprised that Mari agreed—you can’t do everything yourself, dum-dum—but he still felt it was the height of betrayal for Mari to not take his sibling’s side. They said good bye to each other and Yuuri plugged his phone up for the night. He tossed Chris’ card on the nightstand—he still couldn’t figure out if he should trust him, but that was for another night to think about.

Sectioning off that day’s spoils, he thought about his sister finally being able to go home, finally being able to live her life again. He got in bed and found that his chest felt hollow. It took hours of restlessness for him to realize it wasn’t sadness that was filling him, but homesickness.

*

Yuuri was in his own room, shouting every other sentence—probably talking to Mari. Phichit thought about how Yuuri was only ever animated with him or his sister. He was a bit shy around others, not quite willing to open up because he wasn’t sure how. Part of the problem was that Yuuri, Phichit thought, had let his situation consume his life. How do you open up to new, normal people when most of your life is a never ending Ocean’s Eleven movie?
Phichit didn’t know why he was special to Yuuri, but he was glad Yuuri became his friend. When he was a kid, most of his classmates at the Grand Prix weren’t impressed with “the showoff”. Others were just irritated—either by how fast he talked (he couldn’t help it at the time) or by how easy classes were for him because of his speed. They didn’t say it to his face but Phichit could tell he wasn’t welcome. Yuuri didn’t seem to care though. It’s not that Yuuri changed himself to accommodate Phichit. He moved at his own pace and whenever he caught up to Phichit, he was satisfied, happy to be by his side. He never made Phichit feel out of place. He made Phichit feel normal, which he guessed was ironic. He was always glad to have such a special gift, always happy to be special, but he still wanted to be like other kids who had friends. Yuuri gave that to him. That’s all Phichit needed.

Because, at a certain point, he was glad to be just normal, just a kid with a friend. He had always been one to push himself to become stronger, but that’s how he almost damaged his timeline beyond repair. He wasn’t completely to blame though, as he was only twelve.

When children find out they can walk, they want to know how far they can go. When they learn they can talk, they want to learn as much as possible. When some learn they can fly, they soar until they pierce the atmosphere which, of course, poses some medical concerns (sky patrollers monitor the skies for falling children affected by altitude sickness). People begin testing their limits at a young age and Phichit was no different. Attending a “normal” school for most of his life was more than boring. It made him anxious. He had so much pent up energy that he felt like a cheetah with an elephant on his back. When his parents enrolled him in the Grand Prix Academy, he was finally free. So he ran.

When he passed the world by, his heart beating in his chest, his skin tingling with excitement, he felt fulfilled knowing that when he stopped, a teacher would tell him to go again. It felt right to go fast. Everything was moving at the appropriate pace now. He could move freely now that the elephant was off his back. He challenged himself every day to go faster and faster. He played catch with himself. He raced the lights whenever he turned them on. He got faster at a rate that even he couldn’t keep up with—he had focused so much on increasing his speed that he hadn’t even begun to try controlling it. Control hadn’t really appealed to him at the time. He didn’t know any better. His teachers had taught him some basics, but nothing that really mattered since he was so advanced for his age.

One night, he ran. He ran until his heart ached, his lungs burned, and his thighs quaked with fatigue. Phichit learned that he found his best strength when he was his weakest, so he pushed past his body’s limits and, the next thing he knew, he had travelled thirty years into the future. It was disorienting, like stepping into your bedroom to find hundreds of small details changed. Details small enough to be almost imperceptible if the subtle shift hadn’t been so unnerving. Celebrities on billboards and posters looked older. Famous brand logos had either changed their design or vanished completely. Buildings were demolished and the newer ones were so tall that you couldn’t see the top.

The gravity of the situation could never be completely clear to a twelve year old boy who had just
skipped ahead in time the way normal people fast forward through movies. He had to admit that the importance of what happened still hadn’t sunk in, otherwise, he would’ve never told Yuuri about it. Sure, he fudged the details a bit by saying he went back instead of forward, but it was clear that he still hadn’t grown up quite as much as he’d like to have since that time.

When he was in the future, he enjoyed himself until his mistake forbade it. If it weren’t for the help from a much older speedster, his timeline, his life, would have been miserable upon his return. The speedster told Phichit how to get back to his own time and he stressed that control was key—something that Phichit had neglected ever since he learned to run. He talked to Phichit like an adult: no holds barred and with a sense of urgency that scared him at the time. You need to keep running. Keep running until you think you’re ready to come back here. You need to come back here.

At the young age of twelve, Phichit could’ve destroyed the lives of countless innocent people. He thought about this as he scrolled through the Instagram account he set up for Yuuri. It was exploding with notifications but he couldn’t be happy about it. The longer he looked at his friend’s pictures, the deeper the sadness inside him became. Yuuri was his best friend. He was like a brother to Phichit—like the other half of his brain. Phichit never thought he would feel so strongly about someone without those feelings being romantic but here he was. He couldn’t imagine living in a world without Yuuri. Just the thought was impossibly grey and pointless. Yuuri didn’t know how much he meant to Phichit, how much light he brought into his world, and Phichit hated himself for that. How had he not told Yuuri how important he was? He scrambled through words in his head but he couldn’t find the right ones. He couldn’t find the right ones to use when the time came to leave his best friend forever. There were no words.

The speedster was clear though. You need to come back here. He had to go back to the future. It didn’t matter that the first time he travelled in time, he almost ended everything that mattered to him. It didn’t matter that the idea of repeating his mistake kept him up at night. It didn’t matter that going back meant that it was very possible Yuuri wouldn’t even be alive when he returned. He wasn’t sure about time lapses when it came to time travel and jumping across timelines. He wasn’t sure about anything except the fact that he would never come up with a good enough reason to not go back. What he had to do would always objectively be far more important than his fears. The world needed his gift. The world needed him to not be afraid to use it. It was the kind of sacrifice that had to go unnoticed but would define the rest of his existence.

He wondered how the other speedsters had handled it—leaving their timelines indefinitely to hunt and stop an elusive supervillain. There couldn’t possibly be an appropriate farewell for this, especially since explaining why you were leaving was forbidden. Explaining things meant tampering with the timeline and potentially causing irreparable damage. And then there was the matter of knowing when to leave. Phichit felt that the time was coming. Spring Gate was crawling with action, but something else was coming to this city, bringing a dark finality with it.

He could be mistaken.
Who was to say that he wasn’t ready when he was fourteen and vibrated so quickly that he could see through the spaces between his hamster’s molecules? He could’ve been ready when he was eighteen and fooled an EKG into registering him as dead, when his heart was actually beating so fast it was registering as a flat line. Or maybe last month when he moved so quickly, he saw after images of the Eiffel Tower standing next to the Taj Mahal. But, for whatever reason, none of those times felt right. He could be wrong, but Phichit didn’t think so. After all, he was supposed to return when he had mastered control, not just his speed. Phichit was still struggling to understand what that meant.

Phichit told Yuuri that he didn’t know where the other speedsters were at, which was mostly true, but that wasn’t the most important question. He needed to figure out when they were too. They could be scattered throughout time, for all he knew. The older speedster never said they were together. He did however know that even though there weren’t that many of them, they were all hunting Ao, the fastest being alive. Even though he had never met Ao, he couldn’t help but envy him. There was no doubt that Ao knew what control was and he was abusing it. If Phichit could just figure out that last speedster secret, that last little nugget of knowledge, he could hurry back to his best friend.

But it was reckless to think that way because seconds in one time line could be months in another. There was no way to calculate the difference. He had to resign himself to the fact that the end was coming and he couldn’t cry about it. The best he could do was leave his friend in the care of heroes who would help Yuuri when he was gone. Phichit couldn’t leave him alone in his situation with Fujiwara so this was the best he could do for Yuuri who was stubborn and guarded to a fault.

He tried reasoning with Yuuri to no avail. He couldn’t even be honest with Victor about Yuuri’s situation because for one thing, it was possible that Victor wouldn’t believe him—the truth had to come from Yuuri. It was also possible that if Victor did believe Phichit and offered to help, Yuuri wouldn’t believe that Victor was on his side and would relentlessly avoid him, continuing down the same path he was on. This was the only way. Yuuri would never willingly do it so he had to be forced into it. He had to be forced to explain himself to Victor and the other heroes. Phichit sat up in bed and closed Instagram on his phone—that was enough wallowing. It was time to call Victor.

* 

“What’s your favorite color?”

No answer.

“Ok… um…Do you like skiing? I’ve always found it a bit scary…”

No answer.
“Are you a cat person or a dog person?”

Still no answer.

“Have you ever—”

“Usually,” Victor interjected, quite agitated with the little voice in his ear, “stakeouts are held in silence to avoid distraction.”

“You can’t have had too many fun stakeouts.”

Victor had half a mind to rip his comm link from his ear, but he knew that would be reckless as it was his only connection to headquarters while he was in the field. It was a shame, he thought, that it was now connected to someone so thoroughly irritating. He had to admit that Agni was only irritating in the threat he posed. If he could breach a secure communication link like the one provided to Victor by headquarters, then he posed a unique threat to heroes everywhere. And yet, Victor couldn’t help but act on the information Agni gave him. He had been waiting for it, after all. He was almost regretting it though, as he had been sitting outside a warehouse lot, in the heart of nowhere, for what seemed like ages.

“You said he’d be here, and I don’t see anybody,” Victor said. It was true that when he began surveillance earlier in the evening, the only people who had entered the warehouse were delivery workers, loading and unloading trucks of what looked like crates of flour. Now, there was no one here but Victor. “Are you sure this is the right one?”

“Haven’t been wrong yet… wait a second… are you waiting for Agni’s Cat to show up?”

“W-who?”

“Oh, I guess heroes and civilians know him as the Red Specter….”

“Yes! That’s the whole reason why I’m here!”
“Oh! He’s already been there!”

“What?!”

“I thought you knew!”

“Of course I didn’t know! Why didn’t you say anything?!”

“I thought it was obvious!”

“Why on Earth—you haven’t even told me what I should be looking for!” Victor dashed down from his perch on a cliff overlooking the lot of warehouses. How could Red Specter have slipped past him when he had been watching for hours? The only people that had been there were the workers and they—

“Oh…” He smacked his palm against his head. The workers weren’t actually workers… at least one of them wasn’t. How could he have been so stupid? He skirted around the buildings to his target, but at this point, he wasn’t expecting anything. Red Specter was surely long gone by now. He placed his hand on the warehouse’s metal door and took a deep breath. Ice spilled from his palm and spread like ink over the surface, creating a satisfying crackling sound as it went. He withdrew his hand and then kicked hard on the frozen part which shattered. He stepped over the shards and picked his way down an aisle of shelves lined with enormous crates. He jogged up and down aisle after aisle. Nothing. He decided to call it. Defeated and a bit embarrassed, he turned on his heel to leave, but stopped when he saw a figure standing in front of the light that poured in from the entrance that Victor had made.

“Hey!” Victor called, making the person jump and turn around. The person was wearing a uniform like the others who had unloaded and loaded the trucks earlier. Victor smirked. “Burning the midnight oil, are you?” The person bolted but Victor was faster. A wave of water rushed forward from his fingertips and tangled the person in a liquid globe, leaving only their head free. The globe rose in the air and brought the person closer to Victor.

“Lovely night for a heist, wouldn’t you say?” Victor said to the man struggling against his watery prison.

“Let me go!”
“Oh, sure thing. Just tell me what I want to know.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Well for starters, why don’t you tell me why you’re here?” The man did not reply but continued to flail pointlessly in the globe of water. Whenever the man seemed like he would punch his way through, the water expanded around him, like a kinetic ball of amorphous jelly. Victor tried not to roll his eyes. “There’s no use in trying to kick water. Answer me, and I’ll let you go. You were here to steal something, right?”

“I don’t have it!”

“What? What do you mean?”

“The Eye of Persephone—I don’t have it! I mean I did, but he took it!”


“I don’t know! I didn’t see his face. I bet it was Agni’s damned cat, I heard he likes rubies. I made the tradeoff well enough, and next thing I know, I was waking up on the floor and the ruby was gone. I could kill him!” He spat the last part, angry splotches of red bursting onto his face.

“I don’t think you want to add murder to your rap sheet.” Victor sighed. He gave the man a once over and decided that he wasn’t lying. He tapped his comm to address Agni. “Did you get all that?”

“Of course. If I’m being honest, I didn’t expect you to meet him tonight. If he doesn’t want to be seen, he won’t be seen. I only ever intended to show you what you’re up against on this first run.”

“It’s been informative,” Victor said ruefully, making his way through the entrance, the water prison gliding eerily behind him.

“There are a few things you should know about him, besides the garbage that’s in the newspapers I mean. First, he’s quite shy, which is why he never leaves evidence and doesn’t like to be seen. If you don’t have me on your side, you’ll never see him face to face.”
“I can think of a million reasons why a thief wouldn’t want to be seen besides them being shy.”

“Do you want my help or not, Winter?” Victor grunted and Agni continued.

“Second, a lot of people think he’s soft because he avoids fights and doesn’t hurt civvies.”

“Glad he’s got a moral compass…”

“Third,” Agni plowed on, “this is a severe mistake. You should not underestimate him. He may avoid the fight but, if he has to, he is more than capable of finishing it.” There was silence on the line before Victor broke it.

“Is that all?”

“Last, he’s incredibly stubborn… very thick. He makes it near impossible for anybody to help him….”

“Does that mean he works alone?”

“Of course not. And I’m going to make sure that he never does.”

“He’s lucky to have such a good friend,” Victor said and they talked for a while, discussing their next plan of action as Victor slowly made his way back to town. After Agni reassured Victor that he would get another opportunity soon, he switched the link off. He was incredibly frustrated with himself. He had wasted so much time thinking about Red Specter that now he could only feel guilty about his obsession—it was no way for a hero to think of a criminal. To make things worth, he came all the way to the rural outskirts of Spring Gate without telling Boss with nothing to show for it. It was stupid and incredibly reckless, especially since he was secretly communicating with this Agni person. He didn’t even know who Agni was. He didn’t know he could trust him.

And for some reason, none of that changed his mind about Red. He wanted to find him.
“Oi!”

“Huh? What?” Victor had forgotten about the thief floating helplessly behind him like a monstrous balloon.

“You said you were letting me go!”

“I am,” he deadpanned. “I’m letting you go to prison.”

* 

Yuuri was trying to get stronger. He really was. But it wasn’t the same without Minako holding him accountable for his chicken nuggets and pork cutlet bowls. He was keeping up with the other thieves, but the more he fought them, the more he realized just how weak he was compared to when he was younger. There was no use joining a gym either because the type of training he needed could only be found at the Grand Prix. Iron Angel was the combat instructor at the academy and she was ruthless. Though she didn’t know it, between her and Minako, his four years of cat burglar training were brutal and relentless.

At the time, he loathed it. But now he craved it. He wanted to be his best self again. His best self would not have been sore after his encounter with those young heroes. And his best self definitely wouldn’t have been exasperated with those same heroes bursting in on him whilst he carefully worked at the display case of a particularly heavy looking ruby bracelet.

He was in a museum this time, a more daring heist than what he was used to but what was the point in subtlety when he was already on the heroes’ radar?

“Hands up and back away from the case,” the young hero, Spotlight ordered. Yuuri didn’t even look and kept working on the display case. “I said hands up!” They seemed flustered. Yuuri had to hand it to them though—they were brave for someone so young. The one with wings, 88, flew at Yuuri who ducked left and kicked her in the stomach. She hurled backwards right as Yuuri got his hands on the case again. Spotlight growled with indignation. Yuuri was glad he had the foresight to switch the vision function on his mask because just then, the room was blinding, and he could tell that he would not be able to see at all without it.

Spotlight ran up to him but Yuuri grabbed their wrist and turned them around, pushing them away in one swift motion. He repeated that a few times on the others, not moving from the case and working
as quickly as possible. He was almost done when they all attacked at once. *Now they get serious,* Yuuri thought with some agitation. He backed away, dodging punches left and right. He threw Spotlight down the corridor and nearly tore a hamstring as he jumped to avoid the limber one—he never caught their name last time. The one who roared like a tiger last time flexed his hands making claws appear. Yuuri grimaced. He didn’t care for the mutant types. At least not when they were fighting him he didn’t.

They circled each other before Yuuri dived and rolled between his opponent’s legs, catching him off guard. He almost got knocked out by 88 who was hovering above him but he clenched her hand and threw her in the same direction Spotlight was now sprinting back up. He was starting to feel a bit disoriented. They weren’t nearly as strong as him, but there were still too many for him to handle alone. Tiger hero and Agile hero circled around him but he ignored them as he immediately set to work on the case again—he would let them come to him. And come they did.

He had just deactivated the magnetic lock on the case when they all closed in on him. Without looking up he swung his arm out like a knife and chopped Tiger hero in the neck making him choke. He tried to hoist the glass off the pedestal with one arm but the other three yanked him away. Using their grip as leverage, Yuuri flipped Spotlight, and with his now free hand jabbed 88 in the same spot he did Pyre, making her fall unconscious from the air. He turned to the case. Without warning, his cheek slammed against the glass. Agile hero had him pinned down. He tried to move.

Oh. This one was strong.

“Good job, Axle! Hold him there and I’ll cuff him,” he heard Spotlight call. He took a deep breath because he was starting to panic. His left arm was firmly pinned to his back and the other was stretched out in front of him. There was no use struggling. Axle was *strong*-strong. Like JJ strong. Yuuri couldn’t fight him.

*Think.* There had to be a way out of this. He had seconds. Seconds before he lost everything. Without meaning to, he roared with frustration.

“Hey! None of that!” Axle scolded, his grip getting impossibly tighter as he pushed Yuuri so hard into the glass he thought it might shatter as it slid forward a fraction of a centimeter on its pedestal.

*That could work.*

Yuuri threw caution to the wind. He dumped all his strength into kicking the pedestal forward. The glass plummeted beneath him and, without sufficient purchase, Yuuri and Axle dipped forward. In his shock, Axle’s grip slackened just enough for Yuuri to wrench himself free. Before it could fall,
Yuuri grabbed the ruby bracelet in a tight fist, the inside of the case balancing on the top of his clenched knuckles.

Pandemonium broke loose as Yuuri sprinted to the pedestal, dropped the glass back on it and made a beeline for a stair case. He narrowly missed several hands. He didn’t care where the stairs took him. If he could get out of their sights for one second, he was in the clear…

Chapter End Notes

How bout them heroes, eh?
When Phichit and Yuuri had first moved to Spring Gate, they had both felt a bit ill. As soon as they set foot in the airport, they felt weak and lightheaded. The feeling eventually faded, so they decided that it was most likely jet lag. But, whenever Yuuri got close to Lady Chance, the clock tower in the center of the city, he felt that same feeling again. Just standing next to it made Yuuri feel as if he were standing at the very peak of its winged turret, looking down at the swirl of motion and blotchy color several stories below. The clock was huge, dizzyingly tall with a haunting chime. From afar, the echoing bells reverberating from the golden face were lovely, like a sound from a dream, but up close, it was just overwhelming. *Bowong, bowong, bowong.* The din shook Yuuri’s bones and his vision blurred as he focused on Scavenger from the safety of Lady Chance’s shadow.

Today’s job was different. Instead of stealing a ruby from some protected place, he was stealing a ruby back from Scavenger who had already stolen it. He, Yuuri, was actually returning it to the rightful owner this time. Admittedly, it felt weird, but somehow still right. Scavenger had emerged from behind a tree in the adjacent park and was casually making his way to an alley at Yuuri’s 11 o’clock. He had already checked the streets and there was no one in that alley yet—Scavenger would be waiting. That suited Yuuri just fine. He used his grappling hook and nimbly scaled the neighboring government building to follow Scavenger from above. When he was standing directly above Scavenger, he crouched low, ready to jump down and take him out in one movement.

“I already told you I’m not doing that,” Scavenger growled. Yuuri froze, waited. Had he been made? “No,” Scavenger barked. There was a slight pause before he spoke again, and Yuuri realized he must be speaking to someone on a headpiece. “Because I don’t push bodies, that’s why. No.” Yuuri slipped his phone out and shot Phichit a quick message. In seconds, Phichit responded through his comm link.

“Intercepting call now,” he said and static pushed his voice out before it was replaced by a thin, wispy one.
“—a bit of garnish. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to—”

“I know,” Scavenger snapped.

“But you should think about it. Walters will be at Port 6 within the hour and you can discuss it with him. It doesn’t have to be trafficking—he’s in need of many different… talents. And he pays well.”

“Noted.” Scavenger must’ve cut the line, because there was nothing after that. His furry ears twitched angrily on top of his head. If Yuuri couldn’t still feel the exact spot in his gut where Scavenger kicked him, he would’ve thought it was cute. He wasted no time and dropped down onto Scavenger’s shoulders. The mutant let out choked howls and stumbled forward in surprise as Yuuri gripped his neck tightly in his arms. He had to measure his strength—he didn’t want to kill him. But it was difficult to know how much was enough. Scavenger almost threw him off before his steps became sluggish and he fell to his knees. Before he could fall on his face, Yuuri slid off of Scavenger’s shoulders and flipped the mutant onto his back. Yuuri searched his pockets and found what he was looking for—a breath taking ruby ring with diamond inlay. He stashed it away before scaling the government building again to sprint in the opposite direction.

He clicked the comm link on again. “Agni. Send the coordinates for Port 6 to my GPS.”

“Oh… you making a pit stop?”

“The guy Scavenger was talking to mentioned trafficking. It must be human trafficking, right?”

“That checks out, yeah.”

“I can’t hear something like that, and just let it happen.”

“I…” Phichit sighed hard. “I don’t know. Are you sure about this? If I’m being honest, I really think you should be taking it easy since you had that recent run in with those heroes again.” Yuuri leapt down from the building, landing neatly on his feet for a half second before resuming his sprint. His heart hammered away and a tingling sensation he usually associated with extreme heights crawled over his skin.

“I need those coordinates by the time I reach my motorcycle.”
“Sending them now,” Phichit said, a small relief. “You do realize that this is exactly how Metropolis got caught, right?”

Yuuri couldn’t think about that as he skidded to a stop in front of his motorcycle which he had hidden in an underground lot. There would never be a day when Minako’s arrest didn’t hollow out his chest. But, he couldn’t imagine a scenario in which his mentor would tell him to stop. “Everything worthwhile comes with a risk,” he said and he brought his motorcycle to life.

* 

“Rough night, puppy?” Victor taunted Scavenger who stood several meters across from him, panting and fur drenched in freezing water. “A little birdie told me that you would be meeting someone here for a… transaction? Did I get that right?” Scavenger only growled in response flicking his tail angrily back and forth as the pair began to make slow circles around each other.

Victor waved his hand. Water sprang from the earth like a whip and swiped Scavenger’s ankles, sweeping him off his feet and onto his butt. He tried to scramble away from Victor, but it was useless. The stream of water snaked back to Scavenger and froze around his ankle, shackling him to the spot. Scavenger barked and swiped his vicious claws at the ice to no avail.

“Now, now, play nice,” Victor said. “Do you have something that doesn’t belong to you?” He raised his hand and thin streams of water slithered in and out of Scavenger’s pockets. They only revealed so much useless junk, making Victor frown. “Nothing? That’s strange. I guess I’ll just take you back to —”

“Take me if you want to, Winter,” Scavenger barked, “but I know what you’re really after. You want Agni’s Cat.” It took a second before it clicked in Victor’s mind that Scavenger was talking about Red Specter. He shrugged.

“You’re all the same to me,” he said and Scavenger laughed.

“Don’t lie. Word travels, even between heroes. You’ve been looking for him. I can tell you where he is.”

“You want to make a deal?” Victor scoffed incredulously but something turned over in his stomach.
“I’m not gonna do much talking. You decide for yourself what you really care about.”

“It’s not that I don’t support this decision, because I really do,” Phichit’s nervous voice came through Yuuri’s comm link, “but I won’t be able to help you out when you get there. You’re blowing off a meetup for this, so I have to do damage control.”

“You mean the ring?” Yuuri had almost forgotten about the little piece of jewelry nestled in his utility belt. He sped down the interstate, following the directions on his GPS thinking wildly of what he would be faced with once he reached Port 6. How would he even be able to help? How many people did he have to take down? He had no idea what the layout of the port was. He would have to wing it. “I can leave it somewhere for you to pick up if that makes it easier.”

“Hmm… no that’s too risky. I’ll just… go get yelled at. It’s no big deal.”

“I’m sorry, Agni.”

“Don’t be. I’m sorry I can’t do more, but I’m about to walk into a meeting with an exotic animal smuggler now… I could be to a computer and back before anyone noticed, but computers aren’t as fast as I am…”

“Don’t worry about that, I can handle it. Go get your alien money,” Yuuri reassured him as he finally brought his motorcycle to a humming crawl a block away from the port. He parked it behind a dumpster at an abandoned gas station and began jogging in the direction of Port 6. “I’m going in.”

“Ok. Just remember, in and out. You’re there to acquire your target, not to engage. The rules of taking people and taking rubies can’t be too different, right?”

“My thinking exactly.” Yuuri let the line die as he approached the port. The lot was filled with rows and rows of freight trucks. It was almost 3am so the boarding docks were roped off and the offices were closed, blinds shut. There didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary in the small port, the metal freight containers wailing as the briny wind hit it. Yuuri crept carefully around the corners of trucks, listening hard. *Think. If I was hiding someone, where would it be?* He tried to think like the traffickers—where would be the optimal place for receiving possibly more than one struggling captive? He turned to look at the freight container his back was pressed against and dragged his hand
down his face. Of course. But how was he going to figure out which container the captives were hidden in?

A flicker of light caught his eye. He whipped his head around, expecting to find Spotlight and their friends. He tensed up, looking for the source, and there it was, a small spark that was gone as soon as it came, fizzling out under a freight truck. It was only a few meters away from Yuuri who inched closer. He heard voices.

“Smoking’s bad for you,” someone muttered.

“Does it look like I give a fuck, Graham?” Someone snapped back, and another spark fluttered to the ground—most likely from the end of a cigarette. The man Scavenger was speaking to mentioned that someone named Walters would be at the port. That must be the smoker. “Where the hell is my driver? He’s late. You said he’d be here.”

“I… yeah, I gave him the address.”

“Did you give him the coordinates?”

“Y-yeah, of course,” the stranger, Graham, complied, although thoroughly unconvincingly. Walters must’ve thought so too because he hissed and chucked his cigarette—Yuuri watched it skid across the lot and under the bellies of trucks. “I can call him.”

“Don’t bother. We’re not doing this tonight. Tell Xavier to get his ass out here and—”

“I’m here!” Yuuri said. He jogged away from the safety of his hiding place and directly up to the pair. His skin felt hot. Bits of a plan were buzzing in his head, trying to find each other’s ends so that they could piece themselves together. He tried to make his heart still as he studied their bewildered faces, Walters—freckled, bearded, and plaid. Graham—lanky, pinched, sandy. Yuuri’s mouth dried up. He would not remember these faces.

“You the driver?” Walters spat.

“Yeah, sorry,” Yuuri began, a bit tremulously, looking from one to the other.
“Sorry?” Walters repeated.

“Sorry… I didn’t have the coordinates.”

Graham blanched. “I swear I—”

“Shut up! I don’t have time for this. You—” he pointed at Yuuri. “What’s up with the mask? You robbing a gas station on the way?”

“Security,” Yuuri said simply.

“Take it off. You’ll stick out.”

“I—”

“Off.”

Yuuri looked rapidly from Graham to Walters, trying to find a way out of this. He should’ve waited, found an opportunity to take the truck while the two were gone. He couldn’t take his mask off. Before he even registered what he was doing, he reached out and snatched the baseball cap off of Graham’s head. He put it on.

“I don’t stick out,” he said flatly. Walters looked at him incredulously but Yuuri continued before he could talk again, “it’s dark out, so no one is going to notice my face anyway. They see the shape of the hat and keep driving, right?”


“And if they ID my face, I’ll look like a human trafficker. They can connect me back to you. They can’t ID a face they can’t see.” Walters lurched forward, and for a second, Yuuri thought the man would strangle him but he simply roared his outrage before pointing at a red freight truck beside them.
“Get in! And if this goes bad, I will find you, and I will skin you. Do you understand?”

“That won’t happen,” Yuuri said and he ambled up the steps and into the truck. What dumb luck that Graham hadn’t actually seen his driver’s face… that the driver hadn’t even showed up, that Graham was apparently a fucking idiot. When he shut the door, he was relieved to find the keys already in the ignition. The buzzing bits of plan began slowly pulling themselves together. He cranked the keys and the truck revved to life. He rolled the window down when he noticed Walters waving at him. Walters turned to Graham.

“You at least gave him the info?” Graham nodded. Walters turned back to Yuuri. “Alright, psychopath. You have the address. When you get there, Olivia will be waiting for you. Skip the pleasantries. Give her the code so she knows you’re with us. You have the code in your phone.”

Yuuri nodded.

“You show me your phone,” Walters said.

Yuuri took a deep breath. “It’s a slow phone. We’re already running late. It’ll take forever to load aga—”

“I said show me your phone.” Yuuri’s mouth felt dry again as he fished his phone out of his pockets. It took a lifetime to unlock. What was the code? It could be anything. Literally anything. He had seconds. He tried to think of what the man told Scavenger, any bit of hidden info he hadn’t paid attention to at the time. There was that one strange fragment. It made no sense: a bit of garnish. It could be a code. Or nothing. He had nothing. He unlocked his phone and typed it into his notes anyways before putting it in Walters’s outstretched hand.

Walters stared at it for what seemed like a second too long. “What the hell is this?”

“I told you, my phone is slow, so I just copied the code into my notes.”

“Where’s the rest of it?”

Yuuri swallowed. “That’s all Graham sent me.” Graham looked scandalized and he took out his own phone, throwing Yuuri into a panic. He snatched his phone back from Walters before he could back too far away. “Look, Scavenger told me about this job,” he blurted, reaching for a way out. “If you
want him to do this instead, I’ll call him up, but I’m not going to have Olivia blame me for the delivery being late. This is your fault,” he pointed at Walters.

“My fault? And how do you figure that?”

“You’re responsible for who you hire,” Yuuri rambled and put the truck in gear. “Graham messed up, but that’s on you. Now I’m going to get this delivery to Olivia before she makes a call to the boss.”

“The boss?”

“You don’t have that information either, huh?” Yuuri shook his head and began driving the truck forward. “I’ll call Graham when I’m at the halfway point.” Yuuri slammed the gas. He heard, as if through a veil of mud, Walters cursing him. His hands shook on the wheel as he drove towards the exit. He could barely see it, so he switched the flood lights on. The lights fell on a man running straight at him. Yuuri swerved dangerously and the man leapt aside. He didn’t stop to see who it was, but kept going…

Don’t look. Don’t look. If he stopped, he didn’t know what would happen. He might be being paranoid—that man could’ve been the Xavier that Walters mentioned… it didn’t necessarily have to be the real driver. It could even be someone completely unrelated to this situation. Just don’t look. It was just a jogger. Out for a midnight run…

Bang! Bang!

“Shit!” The sound of gunshots filled the air and Yuuri hammered down on the gas.

Even though it was night, Victor could feel heat boiling just beneath his skin. He was so furious, he thought that, if he tried, he would be able to produce a flame as easily as if it were day. That probably wasn’t the best idea though, considering he was barreling down the interstate in a police van. He had called in the kidnapping—but the closest transport was miles away. He had to ask the police for help. He still couldn’t believe it. He felt betrayed. Somehow, Red Specter didn’t seem like the type to be involved in human trafficking, But Victor guessed he had been stupid. Red was a villain, after all. Cold air rolled off of him in waves and the police officer driving the van glanced at Victor, trying to conceal a shiver. Victor was too angry to feel guilty. Everything was wrong. He
wanted to punch Red. Throw him in prison. Punish him for betraying what little faith Victor—admittedly—baselessly had in him. Heroes shouldn’t think like that. Trying to expel some of his frustration, he laughed, making the officer jump.

Not knowing what else to do, he dialed Agni’s number and transferred it to his comm link.

“I’m sorry, do you know what time it is?” Agni answered groggily.

“Your beauty sleep will have to wait. Where is he?” He heard it from Scavenger, but it somehow didn’t seem official without Agni confirming it.

“I wasn’t sleeping, but it’s been a long day. I’m sure you can appreciate that. What could you possibly want with him at this indecent hour?”

“I don’t have time for your games. I heard that he’s been up to more than just stealing rubies. Something far worse. Tell me where he is. I’m bringing him in right now. I don’t care if this is a bad time for you.” There was silence on the line and Victor wondered what Agni was thinking, whether he was trying to think up some lame excuse. He wouldn’t have it. There was no dismissing a crime like this.

“You’re way more hot-headed than the media lets on, aren’t you,” Agni commented. You should know that I actually don’t give out information without proper payment.”

“You—”

“But it doesn’t matter,” Agni interrupted, sounding irritated, “because I don’t know where he is. I suspect he’s closer than you think, though, so don’t worry. You’ll run into him soon enough, Winter Torch.” The line clicked out.

Just then, the explosive sounds of gunshots and horns ripped the night in two. The officer swerved the van in surprise. Victor swiveled in his seat to look at the opposite lane. Cars swiveled dangerously out of the way of a red freighter torpedoing down the interstate like a bat out of hell with a trail of cars on its bumper.

“What the…” when more shots fired, Victor turned to the officer. “Take the next exit.”
“くそ，くそ，くそ，くそ！ちくしょう！” It was barely three in the morning. Why on earth were there so many cars on the highway? He leaned into the horn “Out of the way!” he bellowed.

Bang! He ducked as more bullets soared through his already wrecked window. Shit. The plan that almost pieced together in his mind was in shambles. He didn’t want to go directly to the police, but he didn’t have a choice now. Scrunched low in his seat, he fumbled for his phone and put it in his lap.

“Hey, Siri! Where’s the nearest police station?!"

I’m sorry. I didn’t catch that.

“Siri!”

What can I do for you?

“How do I get to—shit!” A bullet grazed Yuuri’s cheek. He jerked the steering wheel, nearly crashing into a minivan going miles below the speed limit. “どけ!”

He battled traffic, bullets, and Siri before his navigation finally pinged on his screen. “Finally,” he breathed and made a break neck merge into the far right lane. Cars scattered like ants around him and he leaned into the horn again. He hoped the people in the freight container were ok… Gunshots flew at him from his left and right, making him crouch low in his seat. He fumbled blindly at the glove compartment for something, anything that he could use to get the shooters off of him. His hand closed around something that felt promising so he rolled down his left window and aimed at what he hoped was the car’s tires.

A cloud of red light exploded next to him and he was blind—screams rang out beside him, followed by a nasty sounding crash. He looked in horror at the thing in his hand “Why is there a fucking flare gun in here?!” The night suddenly felt cold despite the searing blood blotching his mask.

Bang! More shots flew over his head. Yuuri cranked his right window down and threw the gun with
all his strength at the car next to him. The car swerved and he dropped a lead foot on the gas.

But it was a freight truck. And freight trucks were slower than most cars, no matter how hard he put his foot on the gas. The car he threw the flare gun at was already back on his tail—he saw it getting ever closer in his side-view mirror. It was too much. He would never get out of this alive. He needed help. Yuuri clicked his comm link on.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he rattled off his and Phichit’s emergency code. He was surprised at how stiff he felt, as if there was ice instead of ligaments in his spine.

“But satisfaction brought it back,” Phichit replied. “For once, I think that someone actually might get to you before me.”

“Wha—aargh!” Another bullet whisked past his cheek.

“Hang in there, buddy,” he heard Phichit say through the pounding of blood in his ear. Yuuri thought the overwhelming amount of panic welling inside him was making him crazy, because just then, he saw an iceberg sprout like magic in his left lane. The car beside him collided with it. Yuuri almost crashed himself when he turned around to confirm what he saw.

“What the…” but then he understood why he felt cold. The shivers in his spine made sense now. “Thank God, it’s Winter Torch…” He adjusted his mirror. He could just make out the red and blue flashes of a police van in the distance. Then he looked at his masked reflection and cursed. “Oh God, it’s Winter Torch. No, no, no, no, no…” The bullets firing at him almost made him forget he was an international jewel thief. He suddenly felt intensely dumb. In his muddled panic, he almost missed his exit, but he wrenched the steering wheel to the right and barreled off of the highway. He felt the freighter tilt on its wheels—he hoped the captives were holding on tight to something.

*Turn left at the next light.*

Yuuri jumped. He forgot about Siri. He fumbled at the glove compartment again and yanked out what felt like a pen and paper. He uncapped the pen with his knees and started scribbling.

*Your destination is on the right.*
Victor jumped out of the van before it stopped and sprinted to the freighter parked haphazardly in the police station lot. The front had completely knocked several cruisers aside. Several officers had emerged from the station, surrounding the truck in a cautious circle, pointing guns and shouting things. Victor skidded to a stop at the door and wrenched it open. There was nobody in the driver seat. The upholstery was riddled with bullets and shattered glass. When Victor stepped up to get a better look, he noticed a scrappy note. The scrawl was almost impossible to make out.

_Walters, Graham, and Olivia wanted you to have this. Not really but…_

Victor turned the messy note over in his hands several times before pocketing it. He hopped down from the steps and jogged to the back of the freighter and knocked.

“If anyone’s in there, I need you to back up as far as you can okay?” He ordered through the metal. He heard some muffled scurrying. After a few seconds, he blasted the metal with ice before punching it to shards. About a dozen startled people, all young, stared fearfully at him, but didn’t move. “It’s ok,” Victor said, reaching a hand out, “you’re safe.” Recognition began to pour over their faces and they started to clamber out with Victor’s help. He lifted them down one by one in a sort of daze. His brain felt cloudy with confusion but his nerves were wound tight like circuits at their capacity. This situation was hauntingly familiar. It was unlikely that these captives were headed to Kazuya for experimentation, like Victor had when he was a child. That happened in Russia, not Spring Gate… but then again, the three from the sewer had said they were hiding from Kazuya. And he was abducted in Russia and taken to Japan. He didn’t understand how it was all connected, and just the thought of his tormentor from his past still being alive and being so close made him sick.

Was Red connected to all this? A police officer was talking to him but he didn’t register what was said. He took out the note again to read it. _Walters, Graham, and Olivia wanted you to have this._ That made it seem like Red Specter wasn’t involved. It could be the thief’s way of covering his own ass… but then again, he didn’t have to drive the truck to a police station of all places. And the cars chasing him were shooting _at_ him, not _for_ him. If he was on their side, they had a funny way of showing it.

“—for any evidence that the driver may have left behind.”

Victor blinked at the officer he had almost walked into. “Sorry?”

“We’re searching the truck, Winter Torch. Did you find anything?”
“Uh…” he slipped the note back into his pocket, “no, just a bunch of glass. But I might have missed something.”

Chapter End Notes

くそ(kuso): shit
ちくしょ(chiksho): oh shit
どけ(doke): out of the way/move it

i may have missed some. thanks for sticking with this!!!!!! <3
The private bungalow was airy and would’ve been relaxing if Phichit didn’t know there were several armed guards stationed at every door and window. It was secluded from civilization, in the heart of an Australian jungle to avoid any pesky onlookers. Even though it was far from the comforts of society, the hidden home was still luxurious, equipped with all modern amenities including an outdoor bar that Phichit was lounging at with Lam.

Lam Pok Chi had several places like this scattered around the world. This was the fourth meeting Phichit had with Lam and, usually, he wasn’t one to chase down clients, but the profit from this job alone had the potential to exceed what he and Yuuri made in the last year. Of course, he could just find out where the gems were and let Yuuri steal them. That way, they could sit back and wait until someone made them an offer they liked. The only problem was that he had zero leads. After months of exhausting all his resources, he had nothing. But somehow Lam knew where they were. Phichit needed Lam. And he hated that. He stirred his Old Fashioned moodily, at least content that Lam couldn’t see his expression under his mask.

“What the fuck?” Phichit looked up at him, startled, but tried to regain his composure. He couldn’t say that there was nothing wrong—telling a client that they were wrong wasn’t as effective as spinning everything to sound positive… He smiled and turned away to lift his mask. He downed the drink in one, pulled his mask back down, and set the glass on the bar before facing Lam again.

“I’m just upset that you still make cocktails better than me,” he said. Lam chuckled and nodded his sly, wizened head in appreciation. “I have been wondering something though. I’m just… not sure if you can help me with it.”
“There are many things you need help with these days, Bird,” Lam said. Phichit was a master at concealing his reactions, but Lam tested him at every turn—especially when he used that pet name. He kept the wince building up inside him deep down in his gut. “What is it this time?”

“I’m just curious…” Phichit baited, playing up the coy card. “I mean… there’s no denying that you have exquisite taste in gems. The Shield of Orion has a value that is literally out of this world and is elusive for that very reason. It makes sense that you want it. I guess I’ve just been thinking about… why specifically the shield, and not something else that is just as beautiful?”

Lam sipped his scotch thoughtfully before licking his lips and setting the glass down. “I’ve got a lovely place in Thailand. A bit like this, but bigger. It’s like a lodge with wooden features and a huge stone fireplace that opens up like a mouth on the wall. Very homey. Sometimes I like spending the winters there,” Lam said, sounding far off though he looked directly into Phichit’s pupils with a strange expression as if he could see Phichit’s optic nerves. “The Shield of Orion is made of a rare alloy with a ruby inlay. Except the inlay is made of just seven rubies about that big,” he held his hands in front of him to demonstrate. “There aren’t many people who have laid eyes on the Shield of Orion but those who have say it shines brightly like a flame, even in the dark. An eternal flame, like that of legends. Something like that is more than a worthy edition to my collection. Imagine something like that glittering from the rocks in my fireplace. Even in summer, the flames will live on. It would complete the look, don’t you think, Bird?”

Phichit was speechless. “I… I think it would do exactly that…” Lam barked a laugh and finished off his scotch.

“You think I’m shallow,” he said.

“I think you’re a man who knows what he wants.”

“You would be right to think so,” he said, as if he hadn’t heard Phichit reply. “I’m a collector. Collectors are shallow.”

“I just don’t understand style,” Phichit shrugged, “but I don’t think I was very clear before…”

“Oh?”

“I know you want that shield. But, I can tell that it’s more than that. Tell me why your heart is set on
“And why are you concerned about the heart of an old man?”

Phichit laughed good-naturedly. “You should’ve asked that after our third time meeting. I want to know because it’s my job to know. I make money by fulfilling my client’s wishes, by getting them exactly what their heart wants. That’s how I build trust. That’s why my clients are never done with me, they always come back to me. I get what I want, and they get what they want and then some.” Lam eyed him and smirked as he refilled his glass with more scotch. He took his time finishing the drink and even made Phichit another Old Fashioned. After a moment of Phichit convincing himself that he had lost Lam, the collector jerked his head at the sliding glass door, gesturing for him to go into the house. He picked up his glass and obeyed, Lam following him in flip-flops.

Lam plopped down on a fluffy white couch with his third glass of scotch and gestured for Phichit to sit on the couch across from him. Phichit downed the drink the way he had before and leaned forward to set it on the table but Lam snapped his fingers for a guard to take it. Phichit nodded his thanks and sat back, waiting.

“You’re a smart young man, Bird,” Lam said. Phichit hoped his eyes conveyed his thanks because he didn’t dare say anything at this point. Lam rubbed his head wearily and took more time to nurse his scotch. He looked at Phichit. X-rayed his optic nerves. “I assume you know someone by the name of Ikki Fujiwara.”

“A long time yakuza leader, yes, I’ve heard of him,” Phichit said, his throat running dry but his tone miraculously even.

“I hate him,” Lam said with a smile and a shrug. “It turns out that in my old age, I am both shallow and vindictive. I have my reasons for hating him, but I don’t think that’s what you need to know. Fujiwara wants the shield for himself. Now, usually, I don’t care what that man wants, but this time is different.”

“Why is it different? Why does he want the shield?”

“Because it’s not actually a shield, Bird. It just looks like one. It’s a battery, an alien power source that first came here in the sixties.”

“A battery?” Phichit’s heart sped up. He measured his breaths—he had to be sure not to give
anything away. “And I don’t suppose Fujiwara wants to mount this battery on his fireplace, does he?”

Lam chuckled, but the humor from earlier was gone from it. “No, he doesn’t. He and I are very different people. If Fujiwara is after the shield, then he’s trying to power something. Something big.”

“Just… how much energy does this battery produce?”

Lam set his glass down on the table in front of him and sighed. “Care to hazard a guess?”

“Stronger than triple-A batteries?”

“Strong enough to sustain the entire western seaboard for a century.”

Phichit moaned and rubbed his hands under his mask wearily. “And I’m guessing Fujiwara isn’t interested in the shield as a clean sustainable energy source.”

“I don’t know what the psychopath wants with the Shield of Orion, but I can say for sure he doesn’t give a damn about the environment. Nothing good can come of him finding it. But it would do me a great service to have something that he wants so badly decorating my winter vacation home.”

*

For the first time in a very long time, Phichit felt a more profound sense of empathy for the panic that Yuuri felt almost daily.

*

Yuuri and Phichit bought sushi and tequila for dinner this time. They sat on the floor, eating languidly as they watched a show on Netflix together, their favorite pastime as of late. When they grew tired of the comedy, they flipped to the evening news. It was pleasantly numbing—a story about a corrupt politician, a merman sighting, tips on flu prevention, and a couple of fluff pieces. A lot of the fluff involved Victor. Well, not Victor - Victor, but Winter Torch. Of course, some other heroes scattered the background, but Victor stood in the spotlight. Victor saves a crew of fishermen.
Victor stops a tree from destroying a home. Victor volunteers at an animal shelter. Victor, Victor, Victor. It was literally impossible for Yuuri to get him out of his head, to stop thinking about what Victor really looked like under all the snow, smoke and glimmer. Icy blue eyes and quicksilver hair…

Victor was everywhere.

Everywhere… and it wasn’t like this back in Japan. Even though Victor was a world renowned hero, Yuuri never saw him on the news as much as he did now that he lived in Spring Gate. It was strange. And he even met Victor… twice. The first time probably didn’t count… he was covered in sewage and ran away like a scared rat as soon as he made eye contact so. Yeah. But still, Victor kept creeping up, just like he did a few nights ago when Yuuri was rescuing the trafficking victims. It didn’t make sense. And when Yuuri stopped thinking about the color of Victor’s eyes, it was actually pretty scary. He was a thief and Victor was a hero. What if Victor started tracking him? Would he be able to fight Victor? And if he did, wouldn’t that just make it more difficult for him to stay undercover in Spring Gate?

“Phichit… I think we should move.”

“Yeah, just ten more minutes and then I’ll move…” Phichit mumbled drowsily as he munched on his dragon roll. “Good call on the sushi and tequila, by the way. Hits the spot.”

“Uh, that was you. You left a post-it on my door that said sushi and tequila night.”

“What?”

“You—that was just this morning, did you forget?”

“I… maybe you’re right. I think I do need to go to bed,” he wiped his hands on his t-shirt and straightened up a bit.

“That’s not what I meant, but you’re starting to worry me. You’re forgetting things pretty often now.”

“No I’m not! And what were you talking about if it wasn’t sleep?”
“I meant leave Spring Gate. I think we need to move to a new town.”

“What… what do you mean,” Phichit sat up and muted the TV. “Why would you want to leave? We just got here.”

“It’s… it’s too much. There are heroes everywhere here. Even Winter Torch came into the ER. There’s something wrong with Spring Gate and I just think—”

“Yuuri,” Phichit cut him off, “no.”

“No?”

“I mean… it doesn’t make sense for us to leave now. We’re making a lot of money. And like you said, everything worthwhile comes with a risk.”

“That’s completely different from—”

“You’re worried about heroes, right?” Phichit interjected, his frantic tone making Yuuri worry more. “Heroes sometimes set up camp in a city but then they move on, like nomads. We just have to stick it out. There’s nothing to worry about as long as you keep handling them the way you have been.”

“But that’s the thing. What if I can’t?”

“What do you mean?”

“Vi—I mean Winter Torch… he’s a world class hero and he’s been popping up everywhere. If I end up facing him, I’m done for. A dime-a-dozen thief like me doesn’t stand a chance.”

Phichit sighed. “You’re underestimating yourself, Yuuri. You’re assuming the worst and nothing’s happened yet.”
“But just the other day, Victor was literally on my tail! And...” Yuuri paused, remembering something, “you knew. You said somebody would actually get to me before you did, and it was Winter Torch. How did you know that?”

“It wasn’t hard, Yuuri,” Phichit said a bit more defensively than Yuuri thought was necessary. “Once the guns started firing, pretty much everyone knew that a hero would eventually show up. And I was keeping tabs on the radio to see who was in your area just in case, and Winter Torch just so happened to be going your way. He was probably after the same traffickers in the first place.”

“Ok,” Yuuri closed his eyes, trying to process all the information, “that’s still not enough to convince me... it’s just too much, Phichit.”

“Yuuri,” Phichit held his hands open as if waiting for a good enough rebuttal to fall into them. He eventually shoved them in his pockets and pulled out his phone. “Look at this. And scroll left.”

Yuuri took it. Each picture made his jaw drop further. Fire was the first thought that popped in his head. Miraculous, terrible fire. But he was wrong. They were rubies. Large. Radiant. They made his heart flutter. “What...”

“This is the Shield of Orion. Seven parts that make one whole. They were scattered all over the world until recently. Someone’s been pulling some strings so they’re closer than they’ve been since the sixties. Each is worth more than we’ve made in the past six months.”

“Someone...” Yuuri looked up at Phichit in shock, “you mean Lam. This is the Lam job.” Phichit nodded. “But this means—”

“Four of them are here in Spring Gate.”

“Here? Why?”

“It’s like you said. Something is wrong with Spring Gate. But it’s just right for us. It doesn’t matter what you steal, Yuuri. Diamonds, emeralds, or even tech. Nothing can touch this. This is our end. We have to stay for this.”

“I...” Yuuri shook his head in disbelief as he looked at the rubies again, at Orion. “Yeah. You’re right.”
“What am I supposed to be looking at?”

Spotlight shifted uncomfortably and cleared their throat before answering Yakov. “Red Specter’s danger profile, sir.”

“This is garbage,” Yakov spat and flicked the file at Spotlight who took it back with shaking hands. Victor shook his head wearily. “It can’t be that bad,” Victor said kindly and took the file away to look at. The information was good and thorough. It listed all the thefts that Red was involved with and was suspected to be involved with, his danger rating (two out of five, which Victor thought was fair) his MO, and timeline of activity. Victor didn’t see the problem. Until he got to the pictures. “What… what is this supposed to be?”

“I—I swear that’s all our cameras picked up… or any camera for that matter!” The pictures were blurred images of a room, but nothing more. Oh, there was one clear picture of a room thrown in…it wasn’t even clear that there was supposed to be a person in them either. Victor thought it looked like the image he got when the camera on his phone went off while he was carrying it. He turned the pictures to different angles and thought that maybe if he squinted, he could see the outline of a foot but… Yakov was right. The photos were garbage. He fought the urge to laugh—he was still mad at Red for getting caught up in that whole trafficking fiasco. He still wasn’t quite sure about Red’s innocence. He bit his lip and shuffled through the pictures which, un-ironically, included a sketch of a man in a black mask. He looked like a locked character in a videogame. Victor couldn’t do it. He burst out laughing.

“Every danger profile has to have an image attached!” Spotlight snapped, actually stamping their foot. “What was I supposed to do when not even the places he robbed had footage of him?!”

“It’s not your fault, kid,” Yakov sighed, to Victor’s surprise. “Don’t worry about it.”

“Yeah, his name is Red Specter for a reason. He’s like a ghost,” Victor chuckled as he shut the file and handed it back to Spotlight. “You actually did good work. I think Yakov would agree that we should give the news outlets the sketch instead of the pictures of the empty rooms… at least the
“Th-thank you,” Spotlight stammered. They performed a weird mix between a salute and wave before leaving the breakroom. Victor plopped down on the couch next to Yakov who grimaced.

“Any word from Yuri?”

“I talked to him a while ago.”

“What?!” Yakov sat up straighter.

“Yeah, and surprisingly, he came to me first. I made him a deal—he needs to cut off all his grand theft auto ties, apologize to Lilia, apologize to you, and you need to help him out.” Victor sped through the last part, but Yakov still sucked his teeth (bah!) and waved him off. Victor closed his eyes to make a half second prayer for patience. “This is huge, Yakov. He’s trying to make things right. We need to meet him where he’s at if we want to bring him home.”

“And what is it exactly that he needs help with this time?”

“Of course, there’s the matter of his criminal record,” Victor began and Yakov grunted, rising to his feet to make coffee. He always did that when he was trying to hold his tongue. Victor followed him. “I also promised him that I’d go to Russia with him to find Mila.”

“The idea of the century.”

“He’s upset. And I get that. He just needs someone to see that what he’s been up to hasn’t been one hundred percent teenage rebellion. His heart’s in the right place.”

“We’ll discuss this later,” and when Victor opened his mouth to protest, Yakov held up his hand. “If you press me to give you my answer right now, it will definitely be no so I suggest you wait. In the meantime, we need to talk about a very expensive problem.”

“And what’s that,” Victor sighed. The day was starting to weigh on him.
“Something just came into Spring Gate and it’s causing a stir in the underworld. Ideally, I would like for you to neutralize the source of commotion before all hell breaks loose, but until we get more information, you’re just going to have to deal with the fights as they come to you. My guess is that a gem is causing the unrest, which brings me to my next point. Red Specter. Your favorite.”

Victor busied himself with a loaf of bread. “I already agreed I wouldn’t go after him, so—”

“I want you to bring him in.”

“—I would appreciate a little more… wait. What?”

“Bring him in, Victor.”

Victor stared at Yakov. A slice of bread froze in his palm. Yakov rolled his eyes and sipped his coffee, completely unaware of the thought-bomb he had detonated in Victor’s head. He was thinking so much that all the words were slurring together into an incomprehensible buzzing sound in his ears.

“Spotlight?”

“They did a good job and put together a good team, but Red Specter is clearly more than they can handle. I want you to take him out before things get too messy in Spring Gate. I want to isolate as many easy variables as possible.”

“W-w-what about using a nuclear bomb to kill a fly,” Victor spluttered, brandishing his frozen bread. “I thought you said having me face Red was overkill!”

“It is overkill. But that’s what we need right now. Show the villains we mean business, no matter what the danger rating is and then they’ll think twice about causing any problems.”

“I…yeah…yeah. Ok, I can do that.”

“I would hope a five star hero would respond a bit more confidently to that seeing as how their
opponent is a two star thief, Victor,” Yakov scolded as he scrubbed his mug clean in the sink.

“Don’t worry. I’ll do it.”

“Good. And do it before word gets out about Orion.”

“Orion,” Victor asked. “What’s that?”

“I’m starting to think it’s the reason why we moved to this town,” Yakov yawned. He tossed the dishtowel on the back of a chair and left the kitchenette.

Chapter End Notes

Your comments on my last chapter were so sweet and I love yall so much for reading this mess!! Please take care!!!
Friendly Suggestions To Friends

Chapter Summary

What would we be without our best friends?

Chapter Notes

Translation at the end but it's the same as before.

Unrelated pro tip from not a pro: take some vitamins. My nutrient rich veins have sustained me this past week, helping me teach my students AND churn out three chapters. If you're not sure which ones you should take, take ALL of them (jk, please do some research or talk to a professional)

As always, thanks so much for reading and commenting!

Phichit had been so close to falling asleep, but the conversation he had with Yuuri was now keeping him wide awake. He was trying to desperately solve a puzzle with only two pieces. Money. A battery. What could Fujiwara possibly be building and why? He sank below the water in his tub and closed his eyes, willing his sluggish brain to work. Phichit didn’t know much about Yuuri’s days as Fujiwara’s “doctor.” Yuuri rarely talked about it and, honestly, Phichit couldn’t blame him. Just the thought was nightmare fuel. But he did mention one thing that confused him even now: there were a lot of people Yuuri’s age visiting Fujiwara… and then they were never seen again. It didn’t make sense. Fujiwara made money through extortion and arms deals. Human trafficking wasn’t exactly his MO, so what was with that? Maybe he was training them for some secret mission? He did take Yuuri on as a doctor for whatever reason. But it still didn’t explain why he needed so much money and such a strong energy source. The only explanation was that he was building something (obviously) but Phichit couldn’t for the life of him figure out what.

He wondered if Ao, the thief currently running laps across time and space, was somehow connected. Phichit rose above the bathwater and wiped his face. That was but another headache. Ao. His reason for lying to and abandoning his best friend for God knows how long. He still didn’t know how he was supposed to go back to the future. There were too many things on his mind, all of them shoving each other, wrestling for attention. It was probably the reason why he was supposedly forgetting things. The coffees… the notes. He needed to focus. He thought about the thing Yuuri used to say to him back in their Grand Prix days: one foot in front of the other. He needed to take it one step at a time and face his problems as they came to him instead of zooming into next year’s crisis. Phichit took a deep breath and stood up to get out of the tub.

First things first: Orion. He needed to get the battery out of Fujiwara’s hands. He had no idea how
Yuuri would react if he told him about Fujiwara’s connection to Orion, but he couldn’t chance it. Normally, he would tell Yuuri everything, but he was running out of time. Yuuri would steal all the pieces of Orion and get them to Lam… but then there was Victor. The hero’s charming smirk flashed in his head as he brushed his teeth. He still needed Victor in the picture, still needed Victor to pull Yuuri into his protective circle. Well, he thought as he spat into the sink, if parts of Orion end up with Victor, then that would be fine too. Victor was just as capable at keeping the gems safe as Yuuri or Lam. And, realistically, any gems Yuuri had on him would most likely be confiscated once Victor got to him anyway.

Phichit’s skin crawled at the thought of someone as evil as Fujiwara getting his hands on the shield of Orion. It was almost a lucky break that the shield was in pieces. Surely, Fujiwara wouldn’t be able to use the battery if he was missing a few pieces. Yuuri just had to get one, maybe two pieces. Or at least lead Victor to them. Then they would be in the clear. If for whatever reason the gems ended up with Lam anyway, he trusted Lam far more than he did Fujiwara. If push came to shove, they could steal Orion back from Lam in the future. But the goal was to keep them safe from Fujiwara.

Lam had already given Phichit the locations for each of the gems. He could have Yuuri go after them tomorrow. Right. Orion first. Everything else later. One foot in front of the other.

Victor could not deny that it was completely amoral to be friends with Chris. It was irresponsible, dishonest, and reckless. But he didn’t care. Victor and Chris had been close since before Victor was a hero. Before Chris decided that he couldn’t be one. Time showed them that nothing could change that. Victor tried to care, tried to polish his moral fiber at times, but found that he couldn’t, especially at times like this when Chris just happened to pop into his life at the perfect time. Victor was resting in his loft’s roof pool. He wasn’t really resting, as much as he was floating in a despondent little ball, allowing his turbulent thoughts to push and pull him with the water.

“You look sadder than usual,” Chris said, making Victor uncurl himself to see his friend standing at the edge of the pool in jeans and a black t-shirt. He smiled in spite of himself and beckoned for Chris to come in. Chris sighed. He sat and rolled up his pants legs to dip his feet in the water. “Should I even ask?”

“I’m getting older, Chris.”

“A tragedy we both suffer from, love. Is this about your birthday party? Because I’m not backing out on that one.”
“No…” Victor swam up beside Chris and rested his forearms on the edge of the pool. “Not exactly.”

“Then what is it?”

“I just feel like I’m wasting so much of my life away.”

Chris snorted and nudged Victor with his foot. “Is Winter Torch having a midlife crisis?”

“Hey! I am not middle age. I just…I just feel like I’m spending so much of my life as a hero that I’m missing out on being just…me. Like it’s too late for me to be me…”

“Victor…you’re always you. What are you talking about?”

“Ah,” Victor pushed off the wall into a graceful backstroke, “never mind. I’m just brooding.”

“I knew I should’ve brought a bottle of something up here,” Chris mumbled ruefully. “It’s been a while after all.”

“Yeah, it has. I see you’ve been busy,” Victor scolded.

“Put me in cuffs then, handsome. I’m right here,” Chris held out his wrists and Victor just rolled his eyes at him, opting to dive to the bottom of the pool instead. When he resurfaced, Chris folded his arms. “You know our meetings are few and far between, Victor, so I’d prefer if you tell me what’s really on your mind sooner rather than later.”

“Why not later?”

“Later is too late, love.”

Victor sighed, floated languidly. “How do you separate…what’s good by society’s standards from what’s good by your own standards?”
Chris wrinkled his nose in confusion. “Is this about us? I thought we,”

“No, Chris, this isn’t… this… aargh!” Victor slammed his fists on the water making two enormous spouts erupt in the air with his power. “It’s Red Specter! I’m supposed to bring him in and I’ve been dying to do that but Yakov has actually given me the ok on it but it doesn’t feel right! I just have a feeling about him, but what if I’m wrong? He was involved that night with all those trafficking victims, and I’m not sure if he was bad involved or good involved and this… this guy keeps hacking my comm link and telling me Red is human and I have no idea what that’s about and I really can’t figure this guy out but I just can’t afford to be wrong about things like this! This should be easier than it is and it’s,”

“Victor.”

“What?”

“Breathe.”

“I don’t have time to breathe, Chris!” Victor bellowed. Snow began to fall on him and him alone, but Chris didn’t take his eyes off him. “That’s the problem! I’m a hero and heroes have to be ready to make decisions and they have to be sure of those decisions, otherwise people can get hurt!”

“You’re putting a lot of pressure on yourself, Victor,” Chris murmured. He stood and took his shirt and pants off before slipping into the now freezing pool. He waded, shivering, up to his friend who stubbornly turned away. “You were a human before you were a hero. And humans need to breathe. Look at me,” he said, pulling Victor’s shoulder to make him face him. “Nothing is ever black and white. What makes you a great hero is your instincts. If they’re telling you something, you should listen.”

“Ok, but where does that leave me? Yakov told me to arrest Red Specter. That’s contrary to what my instincts are telling me about Red.”

“Figure it out,” Chris shrugged. “You’re Winter Torch, the world’s top hero, the man that keeps the world guessing. And if you ask me, this whole hero system needs a huge makeover if it’s making you feel like this.”

Victor pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes. “I’m just tired,” he groaned. The snow thinned into a soft mist before disappearing completely. Chris hummed and swam in lazy circles
around Victor who just floated and looked up at the stars.

“Red Specter, huh?” Chris mused. “We’ve always had similar taste in men.”

“Excuse me? I do not… I don’t know… wait. At the bank that one time. It’s true, Red Specter was there with you.” Chris gave him a coy shrug before doing a flip in the water. “What happened between you too? Did you two fight?”

“Ah, Victor, you know I’m a lover, not a fighter. But I think I may have come on too strong. That or, he’s just shy.”

“Where have I heard that one before,” Victor rolled his eyes, thinking about Agni. “Listen, don’t tell me anymore about it. I shouldn’t have asked. Tell me about something else.”

“How about Yuuri Katsuki?”

A small smile grew on Victor’s face. “What about him?”

“Cute, isn’t he?” Victor smiled in earnest now, but didn’t satisfy Chris with an answer. “You want me to invite him to your birthday party, don’t you?”

“Please and thank you.”

“Mmm… I bet you get this a lot but… you’re so beautiful,” Yuuri mumbled at his omelette in the frying pan. “Thick…” He woke up starving, which was becoming his normal now that all of his jobs were so active. He thought absently about his mother’s omelettes and wondered what she would think about the American style eggs he had come to love so much. Thinking about his mother’s food suddenly gave him a craving for miso soup which probably wouldn’t pair well with the cheese and broccoli in his omelette, but there was only one way to find out. Soon, he had assembled his breakfast, everything neatly arranged on a tray. “Ah, you look so good,” he said appreciatively.
“Thanks, dear.”

“Jesus!”

“Amen,” Phichit said with a nod. Yuuri clutched his shirt where his heart was, thanking the powers above that he wasn’t carrying his food. Phichit wasn’t in his room when Yuuri got up this morning, but here he was, red suit, bird mask, sitting legs crossed at the kitchen table, chin resting on his fist. Yuuri picked up a stray broccoli from his plate and chucked it at Phichit who only laughed when it hit his mask.

“Did you even use the door? Why do I never hear you when you come in?”

“Trade secret.”

“We have no secrets. Best friend code, remember?”

“Is there any left for me?” Phichit got up to eye Yuuri’s breakfast.

“No breakfast for sneaks,” he snatched the tray out of Phichit’s line of sight and twirled away only to find Phichit in front of him again. He didn’t know why he kept trying to pick petty fights with a speedster. He sighed and set the tray down. “Get a plate, nerd.”

“Ah, Yuuri,” Phichit crooned as he hugged Yuuri’s arm, “ выраженными в пикселях.” They split the food, which Yuuri was too prideful to admit was actually way too much for him anyway. When they were halfway through their meal, Yuuri remembered something and pulled a crumpled sticky note from his pocket. Phichit had written check it on it and stuck it haphazardly to Yuuri’s door. He held it up for Phichit to see.

“Check what?”

“Huh?”

“You put this on my door.”
“Lemme see that,” Phichit took the note and examined it for longer than what a two word note was worth.

Yuuri put his fork down and cleared his throat. “Phichit.”

“Hm,” he hummed without looking up from the note.

“I noticed you’ve been pretty… busy lately, so I think it might be a good idea for you to keep track of your day with… I don’t know… a journal.”


“Yeah. Just to keep your thoughts in order. To help you remember everything.”

Phichit put the note down and narrowed his eyes at Yuuri. “You can sugarcoat it all you want but I can tell you’re diagnosing me with early onset whatever, Yuuri. I don’t need a journal. I’m fine. I have a billion of these stupid notes in my room. This one must’ve escaped when I opened my door this morning.

“Mhmm,” Yuuri nodded, completely unconvinced. Phichit stuck his tongue out at Yuuri. “Just think about it though. It might help.”

“Well, as long we’re just making friendly suggestions to friends, I’ve got a friendly suggestion.”

“I bet you do.”

“Yuuri, it’s time.”

“Gotta be way more specific than that, bud.”

“You need to…” Phichit started but backtracked. Yuuri could practically see his thoughts rewinding.
“I think you should consider revisiting your powers.”

“Aagh,” Yuuri moaned.

“Hear me out, please. We’ve already established that Spring Gate is a bigger challenge than what we’re used to. It’s almost too much. But with your power, you could protect yourself.”

“It’s not protection if I can’t even use it correctly. It’s just… a grenade. I’ll hurt myself and everyone around me.”

“You’re power isn’t that dangerous, Yuuri. I think you’re just scared, which I understand, but you have to realize that you’re power is a part of you. If you can master it, it can be your greatest asset.”

“Phichit…”

“Think about it,” Phichit said, pointing a fork with egg on it at Yuuri. “It might help.”

“Touche,” Yuuri sighed and took his empty plate to the sink. “Do you have any work for me?” He desperately wanted to change the subject.

“As a matter of fact, I do. One of Orion’s rubies is being transported today. Once it’s in the facility it’s headed to, you might as well kiss it goodbye. Your best bet is to take the ruby straight from the truck.”

“While it’s in transit?”

“You could intercept the truck, but that would mean interacting with the driver. Or you could try breaking in while the truck is driving. Your call.”

“Alright…” Yuuri said as he began to nurse a cup of green tea. A plan was already forming in his head.
“The transport is later this afternoon. Do you think you can swing that?”

“Absolutely.”

It became very clear very quickly just how oblivious these guards were to the value of Orion. Otherwise, they would’ve sent a convoy. But it was just the armored truck, which Yuuri was thankful for. Even though he was having some bad luck with hero and thief run ins, he had to admit, he was having his fair share of good fortune as well. First, the idiot Graham, and now this. Of course, it wasn’t ideal that it was daytime. It was riskier to steal in broad daylight, but they were in the middle of nowhere, a stretch of highway surrounded by fields and trees. Yuuri had planned it all out with what little time he was given. With the scarce intel Phichit managed to unearth about the gem’s route, Yuuri managed to determine a good place for stashing his motorcycle for his getaway. Then, he managed to sneak into the facility where the armored truck was being kept, hid in the undercarriage, and waited for the opportune time to climb to the top of the truck.

He was now squatting on the roof of the moving truck, thankful that he could finally stretch his legs. He yawned as he moved onto phase two: carefully fixing the widow bomb — an adhesive device that dispensed a potent, metal-eating acid. He had been clinging for dear life to the underside of a truck for the past hour, after all. He inched back to give the acid some room, and when the hole was big enough, he slipped through and landed nimbly on his feet. He found himself mentally thanking Minako yet again for helping him develop his balance.

The container protecting the gem was next level, operating on an entirely digital system. He adjusted his comm link.

“Requesting data breach,”

“Sent,” Phichit said after a few seconds. The small blue screen on the container turned purple so Yuuri took out his phone to copy the codes Phichit sent him into the digital lock. After a bit of typing, the container split to reveal another container with an identical digital lock.

“Ugh. Requesting data breach,” he groaned again.

“Gotcha,” Phichit said, and they repeated the process two more times, containers appearing like
futuristic Russian dolls until, finally, Yuuri saw flames.

“Oh, she’s gorgeous, Yuuri purred and then his heart dropped. This… wasn’t good. “Agni!”

“What’s wrong?”

“How the hell am I supposed to get this thing out of here?!”

“What are you t—”

“This thing is huge!”

“I—”

“You didn’t tell me how big this was gonna be!” Yuuri hissed, “How am I supposed to climb out of the truck with this?” This was just one of seven Orion gems but it was still as big as a watermelon, like a fat orb of lava, hefty as it was luminescent. Everything Yuuri had stolen in the past was small enough to fit in his utility belt or at least easy enough to loop around his arm or in a belt loop. This would require both hands.

“C-can you… I don’t know… shove it in your suit, somehow?”

“No. I’m not Mr.s Doubtfire, Agni! And this thing doesn’t have a zipper! If I wait any longer, I’ll miss my drop off point and my motorcycle is—”

“Ok, ok, I get it. Oh! A baby carrier!”

“What?!” Yuuri was starting to feel hot.

“A baby carrier! The thing dads use to carry babies on their chest! You can sort of make one with your utility belt and—”
“My grappling hook!”

“Exactly!”

“Christ,” Yuuri spat as he scrambled to undo his utility belt and whip out his grappling hook. He set both on the ground and reached in the container to heft the ruby out. For his enhanced strength, it was nothing, but it was still wide, further confirming Yuuri’s fear of being unable to climb out of the truck with it. He rested the flat side to his stomach and reached down for the grappling hook. He hastily extended the cord from the gun and wrapped it around himself.

“Dropoff point approaching in two minutes.”

“Shit, I know, that’s not helping!” he snapped as he managed to tie a sloppy knot behind his back, the claws of the hook poking his hip. He snatched up the utility belt next and fumbled it across his shoulder. Then, the ruby fell from its restraints, sliding away from him. “Fuck!”

“What happened?”

“Quiet, I need to focus!” Yuuri chased the gem into a corner and scrambled it back up his body onto his chest and tried to retie his grappling hook. He cursed in several languages as he fumbled through shoddy knots. This isn’t working, he thought, as the gem slid down his front again. He caught it in his hands this time.

“You’ve got one minute, you need to do something.”

“I know!” His hands felt sweaty. He tried to work with the utility belt first this time. He fastened it and reached down for the grappling hook when a pair of matte black boots slammed down in front of him.

He was overcome with a familiar heat. He was only vaguely aware of the ruby slipping down his front and sliding far away from him. Slowly rising, he thought about what it felt like to fall in dreams and suddenly felt like he was plummeting as he locked eyes with Winter Torch.
This mission was very last minute. It was supposed to be boring. The armored truck was already halfway to its destination but Yakov got a call requesting last minute protection. Just as insurance. But there was a hole in the roof of the truck. And there was Red Specter. Standing. In front of an empty case. But there was a ruby behind Victor. Red was right there. He hadn’t expected this, Red wasn’t supposed to be here… how did he get here?! They were in the middle of nowhere! There wasn’t a vehicle in sight. And now they were just looking at each other. But Victor had to act, had to bring him in, just like Yakov told him to.

He couldn’t move… why couldn’t he move? He lifted his arm—ah, he was just in shock— so he could make a flame. He blinked and a head splitting pain blossomed on the entire left side of his face. Everything went black.
distinguish between the English and respected the culture of the language, but I think it might be confusing... or at least too jarring. idk yet.

If I forgot a translation, let me know and I'll edit the notes (super sorry in advance if this actually happens)

Thank you!!!!!
A bowl of adrenaline soup tipped over and surged through Yuuri’s veins. His grip on his motorcycle was so tight he thought his skin was melting into the rubber. He couldn’t breathe. His brain was on fire. He needed to get home. It took all of his will power not to run through red lights. Finally, he was back. He rushed up the stairs, and the adrenaline was still rushing through him, his heart beating itself to a hum. His vision too sharp but still swimming. It took too long for him to unlock his apartment door, and when he did, he couldn’t stay still.

That was Winter Torch. He was right there. That was Winter Torch.

He paced the apartment, trying to work off the extra energy, but he kept thinking about the one image that was like the nuclear fuel to his panicked imaginations: the hard, shimmering face and electric eyes of the world’s best hero, inches from his own, seconds from taking away everything that mattered to him. He thought about those terrible ten seconds— the moment Yuuri realized Victor was raising his hand. Raising his hand against him. A choked sound punched its way out of his throat and he was shocked to find that tears were falling down his cheeks.

He felt so trapped, as if he were on trial and Orion’s jewel was strapped to his chest. He could still feel the jewel’s weight on his skin. He could feel it on his fingers. The red glare was burned in his eyes and it all made him choke on any defense he could possibly make for himself.

The door opened and closed so quickly that it only made one sound and suddenly, Phichit was there.

“Hey, Yuuri, what happened? Why are you—hey, stop moving,” Phichit said, grabbing Yuuri’s elbow, but Yuuri jerked out of his grip and kept pacing. “Yuuri, talk to me.”
“He was there.”

“Who?”

“Phichit, I can’t do this, I can’t do this, I can’t do this—”

“Can’t do what?” The lights went out all at once, and Phichit was gently guiding him to the floor. They sat in the kitchen, facing each other in the dark. Yuuri rocked anxiously while Phichit rubbed his shoulders. “Talk to me. Who was there?”


“What?! He—but I didn’t… well what happened??”

“He came in the way I came in. Phichit, I messed up. I didn’t get the ruby. It was just too big and now it’s still on the truck. Now we can’t complete the shield! I screwed it up before we even started!”

“Hey, Yuuri, no! It’s gonna be ok, I promise!”

“How can you even say that?!” Yuuri dragged his hands through his hair in frustration. “The job is to get the ruby and bring it back to Lam. Not only did I not get it, I lost it in front of Winter Torch, the actual worst case scenario! There’s no coming back from that!”

“No, Yuuri, you don’t get it! This is still a win for us!”

“Phichit,” Yuuri groaned, “don’t try to pacify me.”

“I’m not! Listen, and I mean actually listen to me,” he snapped when Yuuri buried his face in his hands. “That ruby was on its way to one of the most heavily guarded facilities in the nation. Several layers of hi-tech security, a complex system of underground bunkers, weapon systems, the whole nine. Yes, the best case scenario was that you get the ruby from the truck. But, the actual worst case
scenario would be if you didn’t manage to get your hands on that ruby.”

“What are you talking about,” Yuuri grumbled, rubbing the tears off his cheeks.

“Yuuri, you have a danger profile now, which means whenever you commit a crime, anything you touch goes directly into the vault.”

“The what?”

“The vault. It’s like the evidence room at police stations for regular criminals. But, it’s a safety hazard to submit evidence from super powered crime scenes to regular police stations, so they go to the vault.”

“I’m still not seeing how that’s a win, Phichit.”

“Because I’d take on the vault’s security over that other hi-tech super dungeon any day. You can easily steal that ruby back. And you actually have time and intel this time. We were both going into this completely blind, Yuuri. But now, the odds are in our favor.”

“That… that still doesn’t make sense,” Yuuri shook his head. “If that other holding facility was so amazing, wouldn’t it make sense to just let the ruby go there instead of putting it in the vault?”

“Well… yeah it would make more sense from our perspective, but people tend to put their trust in heroes before they put it in tech. Heroes guard the vault, and tech guards the facility.”

“Yeah, ok, that’s exactly why this is a worst case scenario! Phichit! I can’t go up against a bunch of heroes! Are you insane?! ”

“But you did today, Yuuri! Not to mention, you got out of it without a scratch on you! And be honest with me Yuuri,” he pleaded as Yuuri suddenly stood up. “What would you rather do? Fight? Or hack and fight? And I should mention you would be hacking with next to no information. This facility is FBI-level off the grid. It pains me to say this, but there’s only so much I can do.”

“Phichit, this is too much.”
“No it’s not. It’s a lot, but it’s not too much. You are way more capable than you give yourself credit for. And you’re not doing this alone. Today was unexpected, but it didn’t set us back.”

Yuuri felt tired. His shoulders slumped and his body felt way too heavy so he sank back to the floor and rolled onto his back. Phichit stretched out next to him. At least he was tired now—the toxic adrenaline finally out of his system. He would take exhausted over dangerously wired any day. “Phichit, what am I gonna do?”

“For now? Rest. Maybe we can order some food to celebrate your first win against Winter Torch.”

Yuuri snorted. “Still, I ask, you call that a win?”

“Hell yeah. That was the Winter Torch. How did you do it? Wait!” He sat up so fast it made Yuuri dizzy. “Did you use your power?”

“No.”

“Oh…”

“I mean… I almost did. I wanted to. It was my first instinct,” he admitted, and Phichit leaned in eagerly, “but once I felt it bubbling up inside me I… panicked.”

“…and?”

“I… smashed his face into a wall.”

“You,” Phichit gasped and covered his mouth. “You smashed his face into a wall?”

“What was I supposed to do?!” Yuuri felt stung.

“I—I didn’t say anything! I’m just shocked! You… Yuuri, you smashed his face into a wall?”
“I’m sorry!”

“Why are you apologizing?!” Phichit asked and Yuuri sprang to his feet and started pacing.

“I don’t know! You made me feel bad!”

“I’m not judging you, Yuuri! You did what you had to do!”

“I did!”

“And it worked!”

“Yeah!”

“He would’ve arrested you if you hadn’t!”

“Yes! And he was going to do something too! I saw him move his hand!” Yuuri blurted as if revealing some damning evidence in a court case. Phichit nodded. “He was going to use his fire!” Phichit nodded again and a strange look crept on his face. “What?” Yuuri asked and laughter ripped out of Phichit like a wave. “What?!”

“I—I’m sorry, Yuuri, I’m sorry,” he cackled, trying hard to swallow his laughter.

“Oh my god,” Yuuri whispered feebly and grabbed his hair, “I smashed Winter Torch’s face into a wall.” And Phichit was overcome with a fresh fit of giggles. “Oh my god, what if I hurt him? He doesn’t have super strength! I need to get to the hospital just in case.”

“Woah there,” Phichit sped in front of Yuuri, still giggling. “What are you doing?”

“Victor isn’t good with doctors so I have to—”
“Yuuri, this isn’t his first fight. They don’t call him the world’s best hero just because he’s pretty. He’s tough as nails made of Pandora’s Iron. He’ll be alright. I’m sure you’re not the first person to smash his face into a wall. I bet this is just another Tuesday for him.”

“Oh my god…” again, Yuuri sank to the floor, feeling defeated.

“It’s alright, bud. I’m gonna order McDonald’s. How does that sound?”

Yuuri moaned. “So bad but so good.”

* *

“Tell me again. What happened?” Yakov drummed his fingers on his folded bicep and scowled at Victor. They were in his office and it felt like a cramped box.

“The helicopter dropped me off,” Victor said for the third time. “I noticed a hole on the top of the truck. I entered the truck through that hole. The suspect—”

“Red Specter.”

Victor closed his eyes and nodded. “Yes. He was bending over to pick something up. He—”

“Pick what up?”

“I don’t know, Boss,” Victor said, because in moments like this, Yakov wasn’t Yakov the adopted father. He was Boss, the seasoned hero, the law’s first gavel. His superior. “I didn’t see it.” Yakov narrowed his eyes.

“What do you mean, you didn’t see it?”

“I was focusing on the suspect’s face and the ruby that was strapped to his chest. The suspect—”
“Red Specter.”

“Correct,” Victor said,” and he stood up, making the ruby fall.”

“And. Then what happened, Winter Torch?”

Victor let out a ragged breath. “The sus— Red Specter, knocked me out and escaped.”

There was a long silence in which Yakov stared at Victor, arms crossed, fingers still drumming his bicep. Victor closed his eyes and waited.

“Quick reflexes on that one, don’t you think?” Victor didn’t say anything. “As soon as you entered the truck, he acted before you even had the chance to do anything. You had him cornered. In an armored truck. Where the only escape was up through a hole the size of a head. Nothing you could’ve done.”

Victor was still silent. Waiting.

“Winter Torch. I am waiting for you to tell me what disease came over your brain that prevented you from apprehending Red Specter today, but I’m starting to realize that I don’t want to hear it,” he hissed. “Get your head on straight. I never want to hear a report like this— a rookie’s screw up — from you about anything ever again. This is embarrassing! Incapacitated by a two star thief! Knocked out in less than a minute! I have heroes in the field who started last week who have done far better against far stronger adversaries! And the one credit that should be owed to you is actually just dumb luck, isn’t it?! The ruby that Red Specter tried to get away with was just too big for him to carry. You didn’t even stop him from taking it!”

“I never said I did, Boss.”

“No! You don’t say a word! You listen! I gave you a job. An easy one. I expect you to do it. What’s happening in this city right now is far more important than whatever errant distraction came across you today. You get your mind right and you do it quick before someone gets hurt,” Yakov stormed before stalking out of his own office and slamming the door.
Victor let go of a breath he had been holding since he entered Yakov’s office. He sank into the chair next to him and rubbed his jaw as it was still tender from his encounter with Red. He took just a second too long to think and he was out like a light. He forgot what it was like to feel like that in the field, like a deer in the headlights, trapped and wrong-footed. It was almost refreshing in the strangest, worst possible way. It was so bad. And what made it worse was that he had a feeling Red was just as caught off guard as he was. He remembered seeing Red, clutching the gigantic ruby to his stomach like a strange, luminous baby and then freezing like a child caught stealing cookies at night.

Victor laughed and once he started he couldn’t stop. What on Earth is wrong with you? He shouldn’t feel this way because it wasn’t funny… it shouldn’t be funny. They were both dumbstruck in the moment but only Red, the two star thief, was able to act. Victor wiped away a tear and stood up to leave. Maybe that said more about Red’s potential than it did about Victor’s lack of ability. Yakov was still right, though. He needed to get his head on straight.

No more getting distracted.

Chapter End Notes

Recently, I've been using Google docs to edit chapters since I travel a lot and I noticed that the last chapter didn't have any of my italics. I mean....... they're definitely not necessary, but italics are my crack so I was kind of upset to see that. Sorry if someone else also smokes the same crack as me and was disappointed to find no italics. I should've looked more closely at the preview. Oh well.
Some like it hot.

I'm using the romanization of languages in this chapter. I hope it's easier to understand. Translations are in the end notes. Btw, thank for all of your sweet comments!! <3

4:50A.M. Breakfast. 5:10A.M. Workout. 5:55A.M. Meeting with pigeon-horse smugglers in Minsk, Belarus.

It was a dull meeting. They all smelled like cheese. The pigeon horse kept staring at him. Phichit made a mental note to tell Yuuri later that the Minsk smugglers all smelled like cheese.

6:45A.M. Exchanges in Calcutta.

Phichit had several buyers to meet in Calcutta to exchange everything from diamonds to rabbit-gators. Each meeting was quick. He didn’t spend more than ten minutes at each one. He left Calcutta with roughly thirty-five thousand dollars.

7:30A.M. Meeting with Scavenger.

Scavenger was having a tough time. He was by no means Phichit’s favorite or even in his top ten, but this was just sad, he thought as he watched Scavenger’s slightly flattened ears and despondent claws drumming against his bicep. He had his ass kicked twice by Yuuri and then he got roughed up by Winter Torch. Phichit offered him a job far away from where Yuuri would be in the coming month. Something easy with little to no hero traffic. He made another mental note to tell Yuuri how funny big furry mutants look when they’re sad. He was starting to question his morals for feeling empathy for an arsonist/thief. Oh well.

7:50A.M. Head back to the apartment for second breakfast with Yuuri.
Yuuri made the best pancakes. Crispy edges and fluffy center. He wondered how he would feed himself when he had to start sprinting through time… He pushed the thought out of his mind and told Yuuri about the smelly smugglers and Scavenger. He laughed at Yuuri’s guilty expression: pouting face and cheek resting on his fist. *I just feel like I keep targeting him.* Phichit assured Yuuri that it wasn’t his fault that Scavenger was having shitty luck.

8:25 A.M. Debrief with Yuuri about second piece of Orion.

Yuuri seemed focused. He’s always focused, paying attention to the smallest details, but it’s different this time, like he’s planning his last heist. He asked about every eventuality, every possible outcome and alternative and made back up plans for his back up plans. It was also very likely that Yuuri was still rattled about his encounter with Winter Torch. He was being careful in more ways than one. But, in a way, Phichit guessed it was actually their last heist. He had promised that Yuuri could retire after getting the Shield of Orion for Lam and it seemed like Yuuri believed him. But Yuuri thought he was retiring because of the payout. He would actually be retiring because Phichit was working to make sure that Fujiwara could never touch Yuuri again. They already got one Orion piece to Victor. He said it before — one piece and they were in the clear...or two pieces. Two was better than one, right?

10:30 A.M. Call Victor.

Phichit hung up on the first ring.

Victor was in his apartment, stirring a cup of tea when his phone rang. But it stopped as soon as he reached for it. He eyed it, shrugged, and then turned to the couch when an origami crane gently nudged his cheek.

“Aah! Son of a—” He jumped and dropped his cup, but it didn’t shatter. The floating crane caught it on its back—a precarious save—and offered it up to Victor who hesitantly accepted. “Er... what... what do you want,” he asked, feeling stupid. The crane flitted up and nudged his cheek again so Victor set the cup down and opened his hands. The crane settled down in his opal palms. He had powered up on instinct without realizing it. Victor looked over his shoulder as if someone would jump out from behind the sofa with an origami gun. Nothing. The little crane wiggled in his palm. “Should I... open you?” The crane wiggled its wings hopefully so, with trembling fingers, Victor undid the folds. It was an official looking notice, not typed, but cut out like a delicate stencil. Victor held it up against the dark grey refrigerator for better contrast.
Dear Winter Torch,

I am writing to introduce myself, as I have recently joined History Maker as the Executive Assistant to this organization’s senior heroes: Boss, Iron Angel, and Baker. As this organization continues to grow, so does the amount of responsibility. Part of my job includes making communication between you and other heroes easier. Even though I work directly under and for the senior heroes of History Maker, I will still be able to provide certain services to you. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me or stop by my new office on the first floor. I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Cao Bin

P.S. The crane will fold itself back up when you put it down.

Sure enough, when he set the letter down on the kitchen counter, it folded itself neatly back up along its original creases before scampering off in the direction of his bedroom. Whoever this Cao Bin was, had an impressive ability. Victor wondered exactly what it was: animation or some kind of conjuring ability. Still, he didn’t think that letter was much of an introduction so much as it was a statement of existence. It didn’t matter, though. He guessed it was the thought that counted.

Suddenly, his phone started buzzing on the kitchen counter. He looked at the ID. Yakov.

“Hello,” he answered immediately.

“Suit up. I’ve got a lead that there’s an illegal arms deal happening in the Blue Mountains. I don’t want you to go in guns blazing. Do some recon and try to get names and places before you bring them in.”

“Roger.”
He liked the cafes here. He hesitated to say he was a tourist, but he was definitely 1000% a tourist.

3:45P.M. Head back to Spring Gate for Blue Mountain heist.

Yuuri had bought a big backpack and a fluffy coat. He was ready.

3:50P.M. Call Victor.

Victor truly admired the engineers who made his super suit. The Blue Mountains were freezing but the nanotech in his suit adapted to his environment, keeping him completely warm. If it were nighttime, he thought ruefully, the mountains wouldn’t be a problem at all. His fire on the other hand was tricky in these conditions. Too much and he could cause an avalanche, too little and his opponents could overwhelm him. He could do so much with his powers at night, but he would just have to make do. After all, he was by no means new to this.

He followed a hiking trail, then—following the intel Yakov had given him— he strayed off course, scaling rocky, snowy ledges. His muscles began to ache, and even in the snow, he felt hot. He tried to distract himself and thought about Makkachin’s fuzzy face. He also wondered how many people would be at this arms deal. That would be important for bringing them back down. Oh! Maybe he could call in a helicopter! He didn’t fancy climbing back down. It took what seemed like ages before he could tell he was close. The Blue Mountain was nothing but rock, snow and precarious plateaus. Victor stooped on one of the plateaus to catch his breath before standing up again.

He knew history tended to repeat itself, but he’d never seen it happen so fast. It was Red Specter. Again. And he was standing, again, as if caught by a scolding parent. The fire on Victor’s head crackled. Red took a cautious step back as Victor slowly raised his fiery fists.

“You know you never struck me as the hiking type, Red,” Victor teased, testing the thief out. His heart was pounding. “Great exercise though.”

Red shrugged but didn’t move. He seemed to be standing his ground. Or weighing his options. His hand moved, making Victor tense, but he was just adjusting his backpack. Victor noticed its size—
whatever Red had stolen must be inside. Another melon sized ruby? His eyes narrowed at Red who, Victor had just noticed, was wearing a large fluffy parka. Victor smirked and took another step forward. Red stepped back. Good. If he was looking in front of him, he wouldn’t notice what was behind him...

“Nice parka,” he said. “Where’d you get it,” he asked conversationally, eyeing a spot far behind Red and making it spark into small flames. The fire made the snow around it melt which suddenly made Victor aware of the bare rock beneath him where there had been snow just a minute ago. He would need to be careful. Without so much as batting an eye, he willed the flame to shrink and creep closer to Red. The thief rolled his head back as if exasperated by Victor’s question. Victor needed to keep him distracted. “I’m serious! Where?”

Red seemed to hesitate before lifting his index fingers above his head, raising and lowering them as if pointing. Victor glanced up, confused but there was nothing but more mountain. The fire was still creeping closer to Red like a tiny snake. Almost there.

“I’m sorry, what was that?” Red pointed again, tugged his parka, then pointed at the sky again. He had no idea what this was. If it was a power, it wasn’t working. Red Specter was far too smart for this to be a trick… the flame was almost to his ankles. A little at a time… he didn’t want to spook him into going on offense. Red shifted on his feet and tried a few steps closer. Shit. Victor stepped closer too, to show he wasn’t scared, which made Red stop, but he was further away from the flame now. Then, for no reason, it clicked. “Are you speaking sign language?”

Red nodded. For a second, Victor forgot about the flame. “Ah, I’m rusty, though! Could you do it again,” Victor pleaded, trying to sound genuinely interested. If he was being truthful, he was. He wondered if Red genuinely needed sign language or if he was just using it to protect his identity… but he still made the flame snake closer, silently melting the snow as it came. Red began to circle around him so Victor followed suit. They were dancing, and Victor guessed that the thief wasn’t going to make this easy. He could take Red down, but he would have to bring the mountain down with him. He smiled. “Just once more. For me?”

As he paced, Red pointed again, but this time slower, more deliberate. Victor pressed a finger to his lips, thinking. Up…sky… sun… “Oh, Walmart?” He asked, thinking of the yellow logo. Red shook his head, still slowly circling. “Thank goodness. That’s no place to shop for clothes. Well, let’s see,” he pondered loudly, trying to cover up the sound of hissing steam as he rushed the fiery snake closer to Red’s ankles. Sky… sun… not Walmart though… clouds… moon… stars… “Oh,” Victor snapped his fingers and the flame grew, “Macy’s!”

Red nodded.

“Still not that much better, is it?” In an instant, the fire snapped up, and circled around Red’s ankle
like a shackle making the thief jump. A chain of fire sprung from the Earth and connected to the shackle, tethering him to the spot. Victor smiled gleefully. The flames rolling off him glowed a bright white. “Careful, he said. “It’s hot,” and he stalked closer, confident now that Red was trapped. He looked it too—a deer in a snare, looking down at his ankle and back to Victor. It was useless though, unless he wanted to get burned.

Victor was close enough to touch Red—maybe even take the mask off—when, suddenly, the thief lurched sideways with a yelp. Victor stopped, stunned. There was no way he hadn’t burned himself. The flames were small but they were hot-hot. Red stumbled further away from Victor, tripped and fell hard on the rocks.

“I still don’t understand though,” he said as the flames on him spiked and fumed, all pretenses dropped, “why someone who has stolen millions of dollars’ worth of rubies would shop at Macy’s of all places.” Red scrambled backwards, sliding on his bottom as Victor got closer and closer. “What are you even spending the money on if you aren’t treating yourself?” He aimed another chain of fire at Red’s wrist but he threw himself out of the way and limped to his feet. Snow hissed and puffed into steam around them. Victor lifted a flaming hand, trying to decide how best to trap Red, when static buzzed in his ear.

“Victor, what’s your ETA?” It was Yakov. Victor’s shoulders slumped as he was wrenched back into reality.

Right.

He was on a job. But this was still his responsibility, he thought, eyeing Red Specter whose chest was heaving as he swiveled his head in every direction, clearly looking for a way out. What was he supposed to do? The arms deal was surely almost over. He would miss it if he risked continuing fighting. But this was Red Specter. Right here. Right now. And finally cornered.

“Victor? I asked what your ETA was. Are you there?”

“I—”

A flash of silver and black whisked past Victor’s eye. He didn’t even have the chance to blink and Red Specter had vanished. Victor’s heart pounded in relentless shock. His mind tried to make sense of what happened, replaying impossibly fast images at a slower rate. That damned grappling hook. He turned in circles.
“Victor?! Answer me!”

He looked up, searching the endless expanse of snow and rock.

“Victor!”

Red Specter was gone. Again.

“Victor, if you can hear me, I’m sending an extraction team, now so just—”

“Yakov, I’m fine,” Victor said. His voice sounded strange to him. He tried to ignore his confusion but he knew it was useless. Sooner or later, he would have to think about why, for the first time, he was feeling guilt and worry after hurting his opponent.

* 

The minute Yuuri got back to his apartment, he dropped the backpack and ripped everything off his body. His leg was on fire.

“Aagh!” A strangled cry finally escaped him as he dropped on the sofa. He was trying to keep it in the whole way back home. He groaned and screwed his eyes shut, not quite ready to look at his leg. Albacore, Amberjack, Bluefin… he tried to ground himself but he couldn’t make it past Bluefin before starting over again from Albacore, again and again. He cried out again and pounded his fist on the arm rest. The wood in it snapped. This was unbearable. He needed a doctor, immediately. The emergency room. Dr. Chester could help him. He fumbled out blindly for his suit where he remembered his phone being but couldn’t find it.

“Gaah, come on!” He shouted and opened his eyes to find it. Bleary eyed, he fumbled through the suit’s pockets when he noticed something. The pants leg where Victor burned him. For the most part, it was still intact. But his leg felt like the very bone had gone up in flames— the suit should’ve been more damaged than this! He looked down and found that his skin was only slightly red. “What the…” he touched it and gasped, tears swelling up in his eyes. Oh, it hurt all right. His breathing picked up as he tried not to panic. He couldn’t call Dr. Chester about this. This kind of injury couldn’t be easily explained away. But something was definitely wrong. He fell off the couch and crawled to his backpack. He thrust his hand in searching for something and yanked it out— the healing serum. Unstoppering it, he poured a few drops on the redness which instantly disappeared. But the pain didn’t.
“No, no, no.”

Phichit opened the door and walked in, almost tripping over Yuuri. “Er, Yuuri, what are you doing? Why are you in your underwear?”

Yuuri screamed in response. Phichit dropped to his knees next to him. “Yuuri?! What’s going on?!”

“Kono kuso ashi!” His mind was too gone to fumble through English at this point.

“W-what’s wrong with your leg?” Phichit followed suit in Japanese, “I don’t see anything!”

“It fucking hurts!”

“Well… where?!”

“It hurts!”

“Yeah! I see that! I just— can you at least tell me which one?!”

“Right!”

Phichit touched Yuuri’s leg and he howled. “Sorry!”

“Dammit!”

“Sorry! Yuuri! I don’t know what to do! There’s nothing wrong with it! Wait!” Phichit snapped his fingers and rushed somewhere and then back in a millisecond. He held something up and Yuuri shook his head frantically on the floor.
“I already used the serum!”

“What?! Yuuri, I don’t know what to do then! The serum heals all injuries, and if it didn’t work—” Yuuri cried out again. “How did this even happen? The last I spoke to you, you had just gotten the Orion piece!”

“Vi— Winter Torch!”

“W-what?! Again?!” Phichit muttered something and Yuuri’s eyes watered as he tried to suppress another scream. He just needed to fill his head with something else. Anything else. He thought wildly of pork cutlet bowls and willed his mind to stay there. On the eggs, pork, and rice. He imagined the biggest pork cutlet bowl possible, steamy, fresh, delicious. The smell of panko and mirin wafted invitingly and he could almost taste it. He saw chopped green onions on top of the crispy meat and silky yolk coating perfectly white rice. He thought of his mother serving it up, placing the enormous bowl in front of him. She was smiling. His mother made the best pork cutlet bowls. She rubbed Yuuri’s shoulder and told him to dig in. The bowl was way too big for just him. He asked to share it with her and she refused— it was for him. She made it especially for him. But he hadn’t earned it. He told her that and she shook her head saying he didn’t need to earn her love. She made this because she loved Yuuri. She wanted Yuuri to be happy. She kissed his cheek and rubbed his shoulder again. She just wanted Yuuri to be happy…

“—let this pass... Yuuri? Are you crying?” Phichit murmured, concern in his voice. He grabbed Yuuri’s hand. “Look, I think I should take you to someone. Not a hospital, of course, but there are people that we can see. I know a guy in the Alps who—”

“No, I’m fine,” he rasped. He pulled his mind firmly away from pork cutlet bowls and towards piano chords. “I’m going to bed.” he had barely finished the sentence when he felt cool sheets against his back and the give of his pillow beneath his head. He mouthed a thank you and balled up his fist, trying not to think about the pain.

“I’m right here,” Phichit told him. “I’ll sleep in here with you. And if it still hurts tomorrow, I’ll take you to the Alps.”

“To the prick.”

5:45 P.M. *Back home.*

Yuuri scared the piss out of him. He didn’t really know what was wrong but he guessed it was part of Winter Torch’s ability. The flames hurt, but they didn’t do actual damage unless he wanted them to. It was just a guess, but it seemed like something the hero would do. Smart really, but they would know for sure when Yuuri woke up.

12:10 A.M. *Yuuri wakes up.*

It took a little while for Yuuri to get to sleep. He closed his eyes as soon as he got in the bed, but Phichit could tell he was just waiting for the pain to ebb. Phichit had changed into PJs and laid down next to him, playing a game on his phone. Soon, Yuuri’s face seemed to relax, the lines between his eyebrows unfolding, and his mouth going slack with exhaustion.

At around midnight, he suddenly sat up in bed. Phichit put his phone down and tried to meet Yuuri’s eyes.

“How are you feeling, bud?” Yuuri jumped a little at the sound of Phichit’s voice. He gave him a strange look before groggily climbing out of bed.

“I’m naked,” he grumbled and pulled a drawer open. Phichit sighed with relief and fell back on the bed.

“How are you feeling, bud?” Yuuri jumped a little at the sound of Phichit’s voice. He gave him a strange look before groggily climbing out of bed. “I take it you feel better?”

“Your doing, not mine,” Phichit reassured him. Yuuri grunted and pulled on a t-shirt and shorts before flopping back into bed. “I take it you feel better?”

Yuuri grunted again and Phichit smiled. He must’ve been right then. He explained his theory to Yuuri, about Winter Torch’s power, and Yuuri nodded into his pillow. They laid in comfortable silence for a while, Phichit on his phone, and Yuuri resting his eyes. The best things about having a best friend, Phichit thought, were very small. They were easily forgotten. They happened with no words and in a small space, effortlessly comfortable, like putting on socks in winter. Circumstances aside, sharing the quiet of midnight with Yuuri while doing absolutely nothing, put Phichit at ease.
“I had a dream about you,” Yuuri mumbled, interrupting the silence, though everything was still quite cozy.

“Yeah? Have you finally discovered you have feelings for me, or what?”

“I had that dream ages ago,” Yuuri played along, “but no. This dream was different. You were running. Really fast. But it was weird because it was all slowed down so I could see everything you saw. It was like I was in your head. Super crazy. People were standing still while you just shot right past them again and again. It was cool… seeing them getting older. But kind of creepy.”

Phichit furrowed his eyebrows. “I never see things slowed down like that.”

“Well, you wouldn’t, would you?” Yuuri said. “I imagine seeing the world through my eyes would be agonizingly slow. But… I guess my dream brain decided that if I were to see the world the way you see it, and like, really understand it, I would need it slowed down to a pace that I could work with. And it slowed it waaay down.”

“So slow that…” Phichit hesitated, trying to follow Yuuri, “you saw people getting older?”

“Yeah… well…” Yuuri scrunched up his eyes in concentration, “not like… progressively. Like, all at once. Like that theory that time isn’t real, and that everything that is happening, has happened, and will happen, is happening at the same time. But you get that,” Yuuri added in a teasing voice, “since you traveled through time before.”

“I…” Phichit was baffled, “I honestly never thought about that before. I just… ran.”

“You couldn’t really control where… or when you went that time?”

“No. I mean I can’t go to a place I haven’t seen before,” Phichit scratched his head feeling like he wasn’t explaining it well enough. “At least not on purpose. And especially if that place hasn’t… happened.”

Yuuri grinned and sat up. He was suddenly wide awake. “But you have seen that place before. It’s all happened before and is happening right now. At least according to the theory that time is a social construct.”
Phichit sat up too. A light was slowly turning on his head and it was driving him insane. His thoughts fired at the force and speed of light so he wasn’t used to slow realizations. But he needed this. “So... what you’re saying is that right now, in this room, I should be able to see what happened yesterday... and what will happen tomorrow. I should... I should see you waking up this morning, see you sitting here right now... see you leaving for breakfast tomorrow...”

Exactly. You should see infinite images of me all at once,” Yuuri nodded. “I don’t know why, but I assumed that you see everything sped up, but that doesn’t make sense. You can only see the present me at the speed... or time that I’m currently in. You would have to see things the way I do or else you’d go crazy! If your perception was sped up, I would be eons too slow for you... or you would see too many versions of me if your perception was slowed down. Which means, if you actually did slow down your visual perception...”

“I’d see future you...and...”

“You’d see yesterday’s Yuuri too.”

“In the same place.”

“At the same time,” Yuuri snapped his fingers. “I think when you traveled in time,” he put air quotes around, still clearly dubious about the story Phichit told him, “your body wasn’t the only thing moving at an extreme speed. It was your perception of the world around you. But that perception wasn’t extremely fast.”

“It was extremely slow,” Phichit muttered. He suddenly remembered how lightheaded he felt that day, how he felt as if he were losing control, his body running away without him. He moved so fast he felt like he was leaving himself behind... “So... you’re saying if I wanted to do that again, travel in time, I would need to adjust the speed of how I see things and then...what? Once I see the time I want to go to...”

Yuuri rubbed his chin thoughtfully and closed his eyes. “Time,” he said, “is a construct... used to describe light and space and change. Those things are all just molecules. And those molecules are moving and moving and moving...”

“So I just have to move!”
“At the speed of light! Or faster. And you have to move right down to the last molecule. You have to vibrate until you’re not just present, but ever present. And then—”

“Yeah,” Phichit whispered. A shiver trickled down his back. “And then I run into whatever time period I want.”

“You don’t even need to run. You can just walk into history. Or the future,” he proclaimed with a smirk, then shrugged, “theoretically.”

“Speed up my molecules.”

“And slow down your mind.”

“Then it’s back to the future…”

Yuuri grimaced. “That kid had a weird thing going on with his mom and I wasn’t with it.”

But Phichit wasn’t listening. Yuuri had figured it out, and all from a dream he had. All this time, Phichit assumed that he wasn’t going fast enough, but in reality, he needed to slow down. He had to focus on connecting with time. He suddenly felt very cold, all of his veins freezing over as if Winter Torch were knocking on the window. It was the realization that it was very, very possible that Winter Torch was actually knocking on the window but in a different time. The realization that if he just relaxed his mind and focused, he could see it happening. He could see something that no one else could… at least not at the time they were stuck in. They would have to wait for it to happen. But Phichit could experience it all. Right then. Right there. It was like his visual perception was at zero but he still needed to bump it down to a negative one to see things more clearly.

“I think there’s a reason why I had that dream though,” Yuuri said, making Phichit’s breath catch in his throat. He kept a straight face though.

“Yeah?” he said.

“Mmm. I think subconsciously, I was thinking about what you would’ve done if you were in the same situation as me today. If you were cornered by Winter Torch on that mountain.”
“Oh,” Phichit said. This isn’t where he thought the conversation would go, but he wasn’t complaining. And he was surprised that Yuuri thought of him that way. He couldn’t help but smile. “You think I’d speed up my molecules so I can go kick old Vicky’s butt in a retirement home? Smart. He’s an easier target as a senior citizen.”

Yuuri smirked again and shook his head. “No, but close. You would fight. The next time Victor corners me, I’ve decided...I’m not going down without a fight. I... I’ll try to avoid it at all costs, but if I have to fight, if he gets my back against a wall, I will. That’s the way it has to be if I’m going to continue protecting my family.”

“Well…”

“He almost had me today, Phichit. I don’t know why he hesitated. He had this weird look on his face, like he just remembered something… and I had the world’s smallest opening for an escape. I’ll never be lucky like that again.”

Phichit nodded. Yuuri was right. If Victor really wanted to, he could tear Yuuri down. But that was only if Yuuri let him. Yuuri yawned and flopped back into bed, pulling the sheets up to his chin. Phichit wondered just how strong Yuuri could get. He tried to imagine Yuuri at his peak, standing against Victor, arguably the best hero that ever was.

“Ah, by the way,” Yuuri mumbled, already falling asleep again, “thanks for doing the dishes. I’ll do them tomorrow.”

“Oh, yeah,” Phichit said, and suddenly, he understood. He turned over so Yuuri couldn’t see his face. “Don’t worry about it.”

One day of using a journal like Yuuri suggested, thirty minutes of just picking Yuuri’s brain, and he already figured out why he was forgetting so many things.

Those things just hadn’t happened yet.
WWPD= What Would Phichit Do lol. Can you tell I'm running out of ideas for titles?
kono kuso ashi: this damn leg

as always, thank you for reading, commenting, and kudoing!!!

yeah issa verb.
He's A Kid

Chapter Summary

A flashback

Chapter Notes

i’ve actually had this one written for months now
translations in the end notes

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Phichit chewed his lip to keep himself from breaking his downward dog position. He was certain he wasn’t doing it right because his leg kept shaking, just itching to move. He was not good at going slow, but he was almost certain Yuuri was right. He needed to work on slowing his mind down.

He imagined it should be like sitting still and noticing the dust motes floating in front of you. Yuuri told him that yoga might help him slow down and relax, but it was only riling him up. The less he moved his body, the more he noticed about the world around him. The faucet was leaky and the refrigerator vibrated as it hummed. There was something quite small living in the walls. He could hear it scuttling. Angry dad-neighbor was pacing next door. Or perhaps just making lunch. Definitely lunch. The scrape of a plate on a table. Silver knives clinking on the plate. The windows squeaked when the wind hit it. There was a whistle in the air. From the vents. And those vents breathed a bit too harshly and Phichit could hear the metal expand if he tore his attention away from the small scuttling thing for half a second...

Of course, Phichit thought with just an ounce of jealousy, Yuuri was great at this. They had pushed their sofa and table aside to make more space in the living room. Yuuri had not broken a single pose and was now doing an impressive wheel, eyes closed, face tranquil. Phichit didn’t want to move on until he could be still for at least thirty seconds in downward dog, but it was proving to be useless. He groaned and fell on his stomach. Even that didn’t faze Yuuri who kept his eyes closed. Figures.

At least one of his questions had been answered. The forgetfulness. Phichit had done all those things-- bought coffee, left those notes-- but in the future. And it wasn’t hard to guess why: he was leaving hints for himself, hints that it was time to leave. They were subtle enough to not disrupt the timeline and bold enough for him to take notice. At least he knew that he was very capable of travelling through time and that he was right about it being almost time for him to actually do it. He hadn’t told Yuuri about this… but it was Yuuri’s idea to work on slowing his mind down. He seemed excited about the idea of helping Phichit so he accepted. He just didn’t have the concentration power for this.
He rolled over onto his side and rested his cheek on his fist. Yuuri kicked into a graceful handstand then landed on his feet before sitting down, legs crossed in front of Phichit. He smiled.

“This isn’t working, is it?” He asked.

Phichit shook his head. “Nope.”

“Wanna get Subway?”

“Yup. I already know your order, I’ll just go,” Phichit said, and he grabbed his wallet, rushed out of the apartment, up the highway, and to the sub shop in the same breath.

“Victor, I know why you’ve been moody,” Yakov grumbled over his menu. They were at Waffle House, much to Victor’s distaste, but Yakov loved the All Star here. Yuri was supposed to be meeting them for lunch and an apology. Yesterday, Victor had caught over a dozen people at the arms deal in the Blue Mountains. Yakov was also pleased with the thorough intel Victor had gathered for him too. Another job done perfectly. Except for Red Specter. Who was cornered, injured, and at a huge disadvantage, but still managed to escape. Again. He hadn’t told Yakov, because how could he. Victor gave him a bright smile that didn’t reach his eyes.

“What do you mean, Yakov?”

“Don’t try to fool me, Victor, I’ve known you since you were a child. Something’s wrong.”

Victor simply raised an eyebrow and turned his menu over, looking for something that wasn’t swimming in oil.

“It’s about the avalanche, isn’t it? If you can even call it that. You did your job,” Yakov whispered as he glanced around them. “Considering your abilities and your environment, it couldn’t be helped. There were no damages or casualties so you should count that as a win.”
“I should’ve done something,” Victor said before he could stop himself. Of course, this wasn’t about the avalanche at all. It happened right after Red disappeared, no doubt a direct cause of Victor playing with fire. He was frustrated. He was frustrated that he felt frustrated because what he was feeling-- a relentless barrage of conflicting emotions-- was not appropriate for a hero of his caliber. He had let Red go again, and now he was worried that he may have gotten carried away and seriously injured him. He didn’t need to use excessive force with a two star thief, but he was almost positive his flames left a mark. It must’ve been written somewhere that a hero shouldn’t be brooding about whether or not he hurt his opponent, but, then again, was that even true? Wasn’t it more heroic to be worried about everyone’s wellbeing? Or was it specifically Red Specter that he was worried about? Why should he even be worried about Red? He snapped the menu aside with more force than was necessary and Yakov gave him a sympathetic look.

“You’re too hard on yourself, Vitya. I’m partly to blame for that.”

“Wow,” Victor said with a small smile, a real one this time. “Are you actually admitting some fault?”

Yakov shrugged and set his menu down too. “You’re a great hero. I think you know that. So… just relax and accept when you’ve done a good job.”

Three hours passed, bringing with it three cups of coffee, an All Star, whole wheat toast for Victor, a few extra glasses of artificial orange juice, and no Yuri. Yakov didn’t say anything about the matter, but paid the bill and whistled a low tune as he walked out of Waffle House with Victor.

Yuuri went to pole dancing classes twice a month when time permitted and, recently, time was doing no such thing. What with his irregular nurse shifts and night heists, he was either too busy or too tired for his secret(ish) hobby. But, he had some rare free time and he was actually feeling up to it for the first time in a long time. No bruises from mutants, no gem-dragon bites, no magical burns, no injuries whatsoever. He walked with a spring in his step then tripped when he saw Chris across from him in the parking lot.

“Kuso,” he hissed and immediately turned around, making a beeline back to his motorcycle. Nope, nope, nope. Not today. He had completely forgotten where he had known Dick Cartier from. He was almost to his motorcycle.

“Hey! Yuuri!”
Chris beamed and waved at Yuuri before jogging over to him. He was wearing a purple tank top and leggings, his duffle bag slung over his shoulder. It was still difficult for him to imagine Chris as the world class thief who hurled filing cabinets at him all those weeks ago. Yuuri continued to smile naturally.

“Long time no see! Where’ve you been, cutie?” *Definitely not robbing a bank, if that’s what you mean.*

“Ah, just busy with nurse shifts,” Yuuri said. Chris glanced at Yuuri’s motorcycle.

“Are you... are you coming in today?”

“Oh, er, I actually wanted to, which is why I’m here, but then I remembered that I forgot something.”

“You remembered that you forgot...?”

“Yep. At home. I forgot it. My... er... I actually have a doctor’s appointment today,” he rambled. He could feel his cheeks betraying him as they often did and Chris narrowed his eyes in an amused but befuddled sort of smile.

“Are you all right?”

“Yeah! I just... my head is all over the place these days. Sorry.”

“Are you sure you’re ok? You’re almost as pink as Winter Torch is when he looks at you.”

“What are you talking about?” Yuuri asked, and he winced at how high pitched he sounded. Chris laughed.

“That picture of you with him on Insta. The flames change color, you know. I’ve never seen pink until that picture. By the way, what was it like meeting him? Did you like him?”
“I didn’t meet him!” Yuuri blurted. Chris furrowed his eyebrows at that and before Yuuri could be questioned, he backtracked. “I mean, it wasn’t a real meeting. He was injured and needed help. I didn’t really get to know him. At least not the real him. I mean… he was nice.”

“That’s…uh… good,” Chris nodded, clearly trying to not seem perturbed. “Well, I’m sorry you have to miss another class. We miss you in there.” Yuuri hummed and nodded but let Chris continue. “Anyway, I actually have a question for you.”

“Oh-huh?”

“My best friend’s birthday is coming up in December. It’s actually on Christmas, so I understand if you already have plans, but I was wondering if you’d like to come?”

“Uh...me?”

Chris laughed again. “Yeah, you. He’s new in this country so he’s still meeting new people. His job kind of makes that difficult. I wanted to introduce him to some people who are actually interesting and attractive and not serial killers,” he grinned.

“Oh, uh, yeah, mhmm. Me,” he nodded, and immediately regretted it, though Chris didn’t seem to mind. Was being a secret jewel thief attractive? Chris was attractive so he guessed that was something… or was that his jewel thief brain just telling him that Chris was attractive?

“Do you think you can come?”

“Yeah, why not?” He hoped he would be done stealing the pieces of Orion by then. Because that would be an excellent “why not”.

“Great. I’ll text you the invite with the information,” he purred and pulled out his phone. Yuuri took his phone out when it chimed and smiled to let Chris know he got it. He probably needed a party to relax, maybe even relearn his socializing skills. Yuuri could even start fresh with Chris’ new friend—someone who was new to America and had no prior knowledge of how awkward Yuuri was. He actually felt at ease as he opened the attachment, but then he promptly swallowed his tongue. Chris looked alarmed at Yuuri’s choking and patted him firmly on the back.
“Are you ok?! Here,” he said, and procured his water bottle. Yuuri downed half of it and gave it back. “What happened?”

“Just swallowed wrong,” he wheezed.

“While breathing, love?”

“Gotta get...doctor,” Yuuri shoved his phone back into his pocket and climbed onto his motorcycle.”

“O-ok! Well, are we good on the birthday party?” Yuuri gave him a thumbs up and pulled his helmet on. Chris smiled, saluted him, and gave Yuuri space to pull out of the parking lot.

The image of little silver and blue champagne glasses along with the words *You Are Invited to Victor Nikiforov’s Birthday Celebration* made him run several red lights on his way back to his apartment.

*\*\*

It was rare that Victor’s meetings with Chris were so close together, but there he was, knocking silently on Victor’s window from the fire escape. Victor nodded at him from his desk and Chris used his power to unlatch the window from the outside. He climbed in and sat on Victor’s bed, crossed his legs.

“You know,” Chris said as he studied his nails, “I was starting to worry about Yuuri Katsuki since he hadn’t been showing up to our classes, but he hasn’t changed a bit. He’s coming by the way. To your party.”

Victor’s eyes widened at that and he swiveled away from Chris to hide his face. “Yeah?”

“Mhmm. He said he liked you too. He thinks you’re nice. Well, he thinks Winter Torch is nice, but for those in the know, that’s the same thing.”

Victor bit back his smile and pretended to organize his already immaculate desk. He had only met Yuuri Katsuki once, but he seemed so sweet that it made Victor’s heart melt a little. It was rare that anyone treated him, Victor, the way Yuuri had when Victor was Winter Torch. He always felt like
some freakish pet in a fishbowl with people gawking, pointing, and tiptoeing around him. But Yuuri treated him like a normal person, even when he was hurling fireballs at him. Yuuri acted like a normal person around him too, acted like himself. And Yuuri said he liked Victor! He wondered what kind of people Yuuri “liked” and if he truly fit the bill. And what kind of physical things did Yuuri like? Victor’s hair was a weird color, but he couldn’t help that. Yuuri’s hair looked so soft… he loved Yuuri’s eyes too. So beautiful. They were so brown they were red, like honey or a ruby in the dark…

“S’il vous plaît, Victor!” Chris exclaimed. Victor jumped then huffed a sigh.

“Po angliyski pozhaluysta,” Victor responded in Russian.

“If you’re happy can you please just say it before I die of heat stroke?!” Victor swivelled back around to find Chris actually sweating and tugging at his shirt. As Chris ran to the window to open it, Victor was suddenly aware that he had powered up… sort of. it was just his head that was in flames, but he guessed it must’ve been stifling.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, blushing as he got up to adjust the thermostat.

* *

“So… you’re gonna go, right?”

“Phichit!”

* *

It was Victor’s day off. The news from Chris was truly the cherry on top of a perfect day, which was so rare for him. As he went to bed early, he wondered, with a smile, what he had done to deserve something so perfect.

He soon realized that he had spoken too soon.

Not again he thought as he jolted awake. He was hyperventilating, breaths whisking out of a hollow
chest. It was an old nightmare, but it never failed to freeze the blood in his veins. Him, Winter Torch, feeling cold. What a thought. But that was the core of his dream-- a coldness so severe that it burned and a darkness in a space so small that it closed around him as if he were in a pair of enormous, cupped hands, waiting to be crushed. The familiar sensation of feeling trapped crept up on him and he looked wildly for the door.

“Makka!” He screamed, “here girl!” After a few seconds, Victor heard the comforting tinkling of Makkachin’s collar, the soft padding and scratching of her paws on the hardwood. She climbed up next to Victor and snuggled close to him, licking his chin. Victor pulled her closer to him, humming at the feeling of her soft warm fur. He felt better already, and soon fell into a mercifully dreamless sleep.

Yuuri didn’t have any plans; now that the Lam deal was being finalized, Phichit advised him to save his energy for securing the rest of Orion. Going back to his pole dancing classes was obviously a bust. He was still reeling over the invite to Victor Nikiforov’s (WINTER TORCH’S) birthday party. He and Phichit had shrieked about it for almost an hour--incurring the wrath of angry dad neighbor--as the realization of how Victor knew Yuuri hit them. Chris must’ve mentioned Yuuri to Victor in the past. And Chris was Victor’s best friend or, to put in terms that made Yuuri shiver, Winter Torch, the world’s top hero, was best friends with Dick Cartier, the world’s top jewel thief.

As incredible as it was, he needed to lay low. And he needed a distraction from what Phichit was getting himself into tonight. He was meeting Lam. It was very possible that Yuuri was simply finding things to worry about, but he didn’t like what was happening.

Lam owned a cottage in the Glory Woods. He was rarely ever there. It was an escape for him or—like now—a place for meetings. Lam was usually somewhere in Southern Asia or occasionally in Australia like before, but he had insisted on meeting Phichit in person to finalize their agreement. This made Yuuri uncomfortable. Until now, Lam had been content with Phichit speeding over to wherever he was in the world. Lam’s change of heart seemed innocent on the surface when Phichit had explained that it was simply a gesture of good will, but Yuuri still couldn’t shake the feeling that there was another reason Lam would come to America.

Even so, Yuuri had reluctantly agreed to let Phichit meet Lam alone after his friend had laughed at him for “being such a momma bear.”

“Honestly, it’s like you don’t know me at all,” Phichit chided. He was adjusting his matte black tie in Yuuri’s bathroom mirror, pointedly ignoring his friend’s annoyed reflection behind him. “I’ve done this a million times, and trust me, I know what I’m doing.”
“I still can’t believe that you don’t think it’s weird that he would do this,” Yuuri said, although he knew he had already lost this battle.

“Of course it’s weird. Everyone in the underworld is weird. But it’s the harmless kind of weird as long as you trust me.”

“I think you’re clever and strong but I already told you I don’t like this,” he huffed, turning out of the bathroom as Phichit snickered to himself. After a while, he stepped out of the bathroom and threw a towel at Yuuri’s back. Yuuri swiveled around, determined to look stern. He was surprised to see that Phichit looked stern too.

“I’m serious, Yuuri.”

“What?”

“You need to trust me. Don’t come after me. No matter what. I’ve got this.”

“Yeah, I know.”

Phichit sighed. “That’s not good enough, bud.”

“What do you want from me then?”

“Promise me you won’t come after me.”

“Why? Do you know something I don’t? Spit it out.”

“I can’t be sure… but I just have a feeling about this guy. I want to be careful.”

“What kind of feeling,” Yuuri asked, knitting his brows together.
“I told you, I don’t know. I just know I need to be as careful as possible. I don’t want to give Lam any reason to do something… off the wall.”

“Like what?” Yuuri exclaimed, startled.

“Look, Yuuri, I don’t have time for this, so please just promise me!” Yuuri frowned at him, and crossed stubborn arms over his chest. Phichit stamped an impatient foot. “I never give you crap about handling things on your own! Yuuri, you need to trust me!”

“Fine!” He threw his hands up. “I promise I won’t follow you. You better be home on time.”

Phichit looked relieved. “One o’clock sharp, dear. Why don’t you pick out something to wear to victor’s birthday party while I’m gone?” He winked and Yuuri rolled his eyes.

The meeting with Lam Pok Chi was in the evening, and Phichit left five minutes before the start time. Yuuri knew that it was important to be early, but not so early that Phichit offended the client with shady implications. Yuuri felt restless and looked for something to do. His phone came to his rescue with his daily reminder to call Mari. He flopped down on his bed and dialed the number.

“What’s your boyfriend’s name” was her greeting.

“Takao.”

“You…w—what… that’s not funny, Yuuri!”

“It is to me!”

“You wish Takao was your boyfriend.”

“Yeah, so do you.”
She heaved a dramatic sigh, “Yuuri, I know you’re busy being a sticky fingered thief, but you’re wasting your time. Call me back when you’re not single.” Dial tone.

Yuuri blinked at his cell phone and, pouting, tossed it onto his bed before getting up to stretch. Guess he wasn’t calling his sister ever again.

Taking jobs was out. Phichit was definitely right about Victor’s fire because, as far as Yuuri could tell, there wasn’t any damage, but he still figured he should relax. Since he had nothing else to do, he fell into his old Grand Prix past time: playing the piano whilst reciting parts of the body. Flipping through his song book for something good, he decided to start with the muscles this time.

He played the opening keys of “Mad World” and took a deep breath.

Occipitofrontalis.

He pushed thoughts about Victor’s birthday party out of his mind. It was far too ridiculous. Far too risky. He would apologize to Chris later. What he needed to focus on was Orion. That was what was important. When he tried to focus on Orion, he was surprised at how easy it was. His mind was filled with the fiery hue of the gems, filled with the check that Lam would soon be writing him. Figuratively. He only accepted cash. Despite the shady circumstances, Yuuri was excited about the Shield of Orion. Just the thought of the gourd size ruby glittering in his closet set off a little flame in his chest. Even though it wasn’t for him. His excitement stemmed from definitely more than just the ruby itself. Phichit had told him that he could retire early. His family would be free. He could finally pay off Fujiwara and get on with his life. He would actually have to think about himself for once. Yuuri couldn’t help but smile, but he sucked in a rattling breath to beat back the optimism.

Temporoparietalis.

Things were rarely so perfect. Lam was just another job, just another dent in the ditch he was trying to bury his past in. He would do it, and if it liberated his family, then so be it. If Fujiwara decided it wasn’t enough… well… then so be it. That’s the way things were right now. He would do whatever it takes to save his family. He was the only one who could do it.

Orbicularis oculi.

It didn’t matter how long it would take to save his family. After all, dreams were something that people with a future had. He thought he had a future when he was younger. He wanted to be a brain
surgeon in America. He had started studying medicine when he was barely done being a toddler, and he continued out of necessity. He still remembered the day Ikki Fujiwara made him, Yuuri, his official doctor. A twelve year old boy.

*Levator labii superior.*

Yuuri was home from The Grand Prix Academy for the summer holidays. A few days into Golden Week, two men had burst into his parents’ house. They were struggling to drag a tall, burly man between them. Yuuri, who had been feeding Vicchan, heard the ruckus and peeked from the dining room to see the two men lay their friend on a kitchen counter. The burly man’s face was deathly pale and his front was shining with blood. One of the men carrying the dying man started barking orders which his companion and Yuuri’s parents obeyed. Sickened but intrigued, Yuuri inched closer. The man had been shot. The entry wound was close to his heart. He didn’t have much time left.

*Orbicularis oris.*

“Kazuya, does the boss know about this,” Yuuri’s dad asked.

“He’s on his way now,” growled the man who had been giving orders, Kazuya. Yuuri thought he must be the doctor. “Why he wasn’t wearing a vest, I will never know. Absolutely incompetent…”

“Watch it,” the other man snapped. He was also pale, but Yuuri thought it was his natural complexion. Bald, lanky, with bloodshot eyes, Yuuri decided to avoid this man as he crept closer.

“I told you to proceed with caution—to remember you’re still perfectly capable of dying.” The doctor had quickly sterilized himself and was now pulling silver tools out of a cooler. “But I guess you don’t need the extra protection now that you’re occupying most of Chiba prefecture, huh? It’s ok to waste all of my hard work, all of my priceless research?!”

“I said watch it!”

The burly man on the table moaned pitifully between them. “You said he was shot once,” the doctor mumbled, “but there are two wounds.”

*Deltoideus.*
Just then, the kitchen’s backdoor opened. A draft of cool air uncharacteristic of summer blew into the room as everyone looked at the newcomer. The kitchen was suddenly far too small, and Yuuri could not find a way out. He was rooted to the spot as he looked the new arrival in the face. His skin was pulled taught over his bones like he was barely alive, but he still looked as if he could crush a skull like a chunk of butter. He had a pinched, angry expression that couldn’t even be improved by a smile—his strong wing-like eyebrows made sure of that—and for some reason, he was dressed in an immaculate suit.

Everyone present, even Kazuya with his finger in the dying man’s chest, bowed. This must be Ikki Fujiwara, Yuuri thought, because even at that age, he knew the name of the devil. Fujiwara sniffed and glided over to the man on the table. He placed a hand on the man’s head.

“Ao…” he murmured and looked up at the other man who bowed a little again. “Who did this to him, Kubo?” The man named Kubo swallowed.

“We think it was someone from a small gang in Fukuoda.”

Fujiwara raised an eyebrow at that, a frightful wing taking flight. “We?” He was answered by Kubo’s small nod towards Ao bleeding out on the table. Fujiwara looked at Kazuya. “Will he die?”

“Kubo should’ve called me sooner,” the doctor snapped as he tried desperately to fish one of the bullets out of Ao’s chest. “He might not make it.”

“Hmm.”

*Trapezius.*

Fujiwara reached in his coat. There was a sharp *bang* and a brief moment when everyone breathed the same breath.

And the doctor was dead.

He fell like overripe fruit to the ground. Yuuri’s mother dug her fingers into her son’s shoulders trying to force him out of the kitchen but he couldn’t move. He wanted to cry but his body had
forgotten how. His heart was working on an escape, hammering against his ribs. He couldn’t stop shaking. He couldn’t stop looking at Kazuya’s eyes peering blankly at him from the floor.

“Boss,” Kubo rasped, “that was the only doctor for miles…that was our doctor... all that research...

Fujiwara turned on him, wings high on his forehead, eyes as dead as the body at his feet. “I work with people who can give me what I want. And that,” he said, pointing at the doctor’s body, “was not the answer I wanted.”

“What… what should I do with Ao, sir?”

“Are you a doctor?”

“No, sir.”

“So what makes you think you can do anything about Ao?”

“I…” Kubo’s response seemed to have abandoned him.

“We are in luck though. It just so happens that we are in the home of someone who has been studying medicine since they were in elementary school.” Yuuri’s mother all but threw him behind her. Fujiwara turned and smiled at her. It was the foulest thing Yuuri had ever seen. It made him nauseous, made him wonder how it was possible that a creature like Fujiwara could occur organically in nature. “Hiroko, your family has never failed to serve me.”.

_Pectoralis major._

“Boss, he’s a kid. He’ll fuck it up and then Ao will _really_ be done for.”

“No, he _won’t_,” Yuuri’s father hissed. Yuuri turned to him, horror-struck, never wanting to vomit more than he did in that moment. “You do not know my son, so you don’t speak for him.”
Yuuri’s mother, thin lipped and so obviously refusing to cry stepped aside, exposing her son. Fujiwara glided to Yuuri, his expression blank with irrefutable authority as he met his eyes. Yuuri wanted to run. His body, again, had forgotten how…

“I’ll ask this question again…maybe you’ll tell me something different,” he murmured. Yuuri tried not to think about the doctor bleeding onto his kitchen floor. He wished he had stayed in the dining room.

“Will he die?”

Latissimus dorsi.

“Of course not.” Yuuri heard himself whisper. His body snapped back into reality, leaving his mind in a completely different realm. He moved about the kitchen, sterilizing himself, readying the dead doctor’s tools, examining the two wounds. He was still shaking, He could barely breathe, but he was on autopilot. He extracted the bullets as easily as if he were uncapping a tube of toothpaste. After he had Ao stitched up, he didn’t know what to do with his body. The surgery was over. Wildly, he thought about opening the man back up to buy time, but it was pointless. He had finished what he was told to do. Surely, logically, he would now die.

Fujiwara checked Ao's pulse, placing two fingers on his neck. Yuuri’s mother grabbed her son’s arm and pulled him by her side.

Triceps brachii.

“A man of his word is one of the world’s lost wonders,” Fujiwara said, his old eyes boring into Yuuri’s youthful, frightened ones.

“You keep following through on your word like that and you just might impress me some day. Kubo,” he ordered as he turned away, “clean this up. Make sure none of this happened. I’m taking a trip to Fukuoda. Don’t call me unless you want someone to clean you up off the floor too.” With one final piercing stare at Yuuri, he swept out of the kitchen, easing the door shut.

Yuuri did not speak for months afterwards.

Although no one had explicitly said that Yuuri would be Fujiwara’s go-to doctor, it was painfully
understood. No one asked for clarification, and rightfully so; three weeks after Yuuri had saved Ao's life, another man had stumbled into his parents’ kitchen, blood drenching his thigh. No one asked questions. They just knew, and Yuuri wasted no time in setting to work, his mind leaving his body to operate on auto-pilot again. He had the man patched up in good enough time for him to finish his homework before bed.

Yuuri did not dream of being a doctor anymore. There was no longer any passion in that endeavor so much as there was a permanent and feverish desire to continue doing what he was told. He was good at it. It was a useful thing to be. That was enough. It was enough to just be useful, he thought as his phone rang.

He stopped the song abruptly and stared at his phone. It was a blocked number, which could mean Phichit; he often secured his phone lines when he was at work. It was too early for Phichit though… whatever Phichit wanted to tell him, he would want to tell Yuuri in person, because his friend was a dramatic mess. Confused but wary, he switched the voice modulating function on before answering the call.

“What?” Yuuri knew his voice was a low gravelly whisper on the other side.

“Help me."

Phichit’ voice sounded as if it came from miles away as every cell in Yuuri’s body turned to ice.

Chapter End Notes

sorry about this one guys

kuso: shit
S'il vous plaît: please (french)
Po angiyski pozhaluysta: in english, please (russian)

The reason why I wanted to write this fic is because i kept thinking of so many different cute and fluffy moments between victor and yuuri and the rest of the gang as heroes, but, at the time, I didn't realize how much angsty crap i had to write to actually get there. this is waaaaay more than i originally imagined, but I promise, i'm getting there. sloooooooooowly but surely. this is my fault for trying to write a plot. I might make this part 1 of a series because this is already super duper long........and it's definitely a mess as promised lol

but anyways, thanks for reeeeeeadiiiiiing
"What?"

"You have to come… I need you."

Yuuri’s heart sank. He knew something was wrong. He knew it. "Where are you?"

"The Glory Woods. I’m sending you the location. There’s too many and—"

“And what?” Yuuri’s mouth ran dry. “What? Dammit!” The line disconnected, but Yuuri was up and snatching his stealth suit and trench coat on before his phone could drop back on to his bed. He was out of the apartment lobby in less than a minute. He mounted his motorcycle and, making sure no one was watching, he pulled his mask over his head. A million terrible thoughts spun in his head as he checked the location Phichit sent him. He told Phichit something was weird.

Anything could have happened by now, Yuuri thought. How long had Phichit been in distress? What was he about to say before the line died? Why did the line die? He sped along the freeway and made it to Glory Woods, a thick, ancient forest just outside of Spring Gate. He parked his motorcycle under cover of the trees. No one would camp in these woods—the trees were growing too close together and there was no telling what kind of wild animals were living in them at this point. It was left well alone which suited Lam.

Lam. Phichit had trusted him enough to meet him in person all those times, but not enough to let
Yuuri came along. He said that there was something weird about Lam, but he wasn’t exactly sure what… Yuuri jogged through the thick trees, checking his phone every few feet.

It was dark. There were no stars. He hated that about Spring Gate; Hasetsu nights were filled with stars, so even in the darkest times there was always a bit of light to look for. It was also a little too quiet for Yuuri’s liking. If there was an emergency, why wasn’t there more commotion?

He picked up the pace, closing in on the GPS location, until he finally saw a dull yellow light glowing through the branches. He stashed his phone away and climbed a tree for cover and a better vantage point. There was a small cottage—it had to be Lam’s—and the curtains were drawn, casting a warm, balmy light. Two suited men stood at the front door, and Yuuri could tell that the other sides of the cottage were protected too. There was no way to enter without creating a commotion. Unless…

No. He wouldn’t use his power here. He couldn’t afford to lose control when he didn’t know if Phichit was ok. He needed all of his wits about him. He wouldn’t have the element of surprise, so he’d use brute force instead.

So be it.

He leapt from the tree and sprinted to the front door. The guard to his right had barely turned his head to look at him before Yuuri punched him out cold. He turned and kicked the other man in the ribs; the gun the man was carrying flew into the air. Yuuri ignored it and kicked the door down. His eyes roamed the room feverishly for Phichit. People were getting out of their seats around him, some simply craning their necks to get a better look at him. Something was… off.

“What are you doing?”

Yuuri whipped his head to the left to see Phichit, dressed in his trademark red suit and glittering mask rise slowly from his chair to face him. The guards from outside had rushed in behind him and grabbed his arms on both sides, but Yuuri was too shocked to shake them off.

“You—no… you told me you were in trouble…” Yuuri spluttered.

“What?”
“You called me!”

Phichit stiffened and looked behind him. Yuuri followed his line of sight to a high backed chair placed in front of the sitting room’s fireplace. A tall, angular man sat there. He had wavy grey hair that fell to his shoulders, and severe eyes, a smirk on his face that seemed permanent. He alone had not moved from his seat when Yuuri burst through the door. This must be Lam.

“I think there’s been a misunderstanding,” Phichit said. He was frantically trying to pick up the pieces that Yuuri had smashed. He turned to Yuuri. “You must have been confused. Why don’t you apologize to our client so we can continue our negotiations?” Yuuri’s blood ran cold. He could imagine the rare, cold flat expression on Phichit’s face.

“I… I don’t understand…”

“No need, Bird.” Lam whispered at last. Yuuri snapped his attention back to the man in the chair. “Erden. Timur. Release our guest, please.” The two men holding Yuuri reluctantly let him go. Yuuri had forgotten they were there.

“What about Tao and Feng?”

“Are they dead?”

“No, but-”

“So what about them? Leave them. They’ll come around eventually.” His cold eyes raked over Yuuri, making Yuuri feel as if he had been caught in the rain. He chuckled, an icy dead rasp.

“Mr. Chi,” Phicit began. He was at a loss for words, clearly trying not to look back at Yuuri. “I sincerely apologize for this interruption. If we could continue the negotiations-”

“No, Bird. There is no need to apologize. After all, this is a joyous occasion. I never thought I’d see you again, Yuuri Katsuki.”

Yuuri’s heart collapsed. His ears rang as if they were bleeding and, again, he felt he would never
breathe again. He suddenly felt naked. How did he know? Did Yuuri know Lam? No… it was impossible.

“I’m sorry?” He heard Phichit snap.

“Don’t try to deny it. I have eyes you know. And they see what most can’t.” He looked Yuuri up and down again. “You’ve grown… you’ve always taken after your mother…” he began to laugh again. “But this makes sense! No one knew what happened to the Katsukis’ son after their daughter was attacked… and your cat burglar, Bird… they’ve been the same person all this time! This changes things!”

“What do you mean?” Phichit tried to keep his tone pleasant, but even in Yuuri's panicking state, he knew his friend better. He was ticked. “My operative’s name doesn’t matter because he will still be able to secure the pieces of Orion, just like we discussed. I see no change.”

“Of course you see the change, you’re just not willing to acknowledge it. Yuuri doesn’t steal for himself, he steals for Fujiwara. That’s why Katsuki is allowed to be out of the game without paying for his freedom with his own! or with his family’s blood… his son has been paying for his protection.”

“And?”

“And that means you should’ve told me who your operative was from the beginning, Bird. We could’ve saved precious time.”

Phichit was past exasperated. He folded his arms and waited for Lam to finish. The man steepled his fingers and looked Yuuri square in the eye; it was disconcerting that Lam could find the core of his soul even from behind the pitch black mask.

“You don’t want money, do you Mr. Katsuki? Now that I know who you are, I can offer you exactly what you want.”

“I should remind you that all negotiations regarding payment are to be performed with me, not my operative,” Phichit hissed.

“And I should remind you that I don’t care to waste my money. It would certainly be wasted on him
since he doesn’t want it. He wants his family’s safety and I can give him that.”

“How’s that?” Yuuri finally spoke up. Phichit whipped his head around him and Yuuri could see his eyes widen in warning under the mask. Lam grinned.

“I was just telling Bird how much I despise that spawn of Satan, Fujiwara. It doesn’t help that his territory is stretching a touch too close to home. It would be difficult, but I could get rid of him. Do this job for me, and I’ll have Fujiwara killed. With him out of the picture, your family will be free.”

“I… that’s…”

“That’s my final offer. Take it or leave it. Like I said, I don’t give my money to people who don’t want it, especially not so much of it.”

“That is not the agreement we made!” Phichit shouted.

“We never made an official agreement did we… still negotiating. This is the only payment that makes sense for a man like this. I really wish I had known,” he laughed. “If I know who a man is, I can give him what he wants. Isn't that right Bird?” Yuuri knew Phichit wasn't at a loss for words when he shook his head, but just very aware that the words he wanted to say really shouldn't be said.

“I can’t ask you to do that…” Yuuri said. Lam raised an eyebrow at him.

“I’m not doing you any favors, believe me. This will be an even trade.”

“No, I mean I can’t ask you to kill someone.”

“Don’t be a child. The only fitting punishment for pure evil is death.”

“Even so, it’s not my decision to make. I won’t kill him.”

“Why don’t you tell dear Mari that?” Lam scoffed. “I heard she’s made a fair recovery, but for how long?” Yuuri ignored him, flexing his fists. “What do you want then? To have him turned into the
authorities? A man like Fujiwara *is* the final authority.”

“No… not exactly. That would be too easy for him.” Yuuri was speaking without thinking now, the words just coming to him because they made sense to be there. “I’m not sure how or when but I’m going to take him down. Without killing him. When that time comes, you’re going to help me. And then I’ll get the Shield of Orion for you.”

“That is far more difficult, time consuming and simply unnecessary than killing Fujiwara. And what’s worse, you want me to do this *before* I’ve received my end of the deal? I think not.”

“That’s the only way that’s fair!”

“And how have you figured that one out, son?”

Yuuri bristled and clenched his fists again. “How do I know you’ll follow through on your end of the deal once you’ve gotten what you want from me?”

Lam grimaced and rose. He seemed almost immaterial and even that quality seemed sinister as he rounded behind his chair to languidly rest his forearms on the high back. “I could never stand the stench of a man in debt. I *always* keep my promises, Yuuri Katsuki. If you don’t want him killed, fine. I’ll handle it. But you will get Orion *first.*”

“So that’s it? We have your *word*?” Phichit sneered, running an agitated hand through his dark hair. This negotiation was past saving.

“It’s all we’re worth.” As much as Lam seemed to dislike Ikki Fujiwara, Yuuri thought they were quite similar, and he hated him for it. “Take it or leave it.”

* Yuuri drove Phicit home on the back of his motorcycle. He could’ve run, but Phichit said he needed the time to think. They didn’t talk on the way back. Yuuri's mind was numb. He could only think of the names of bones as he sped along the freeway and waited at stoplights. The night air was brutal on his exposed cheeks, the mask off and tucked away into his trench coat to avoid suspicion.
When they got back to their apartment, Phichit didn’t say anything at first. He slowly toed his shoes off and shed his clothes. Yuuri did the same, still feeling too numb to speak. When they were both in soft pajamas and nursing cups of black tea, Phichit cleared his throat.

“Curiosity killed the cat,” he murmured.

Yuuri’s mouth ran dry and his cheeks flared. He met Phichit’s gaze and though it wasn’t hostile or even accusatory, he didn’t like what he saw there.

“But satisfaction brought it back…” Yuuri finished weakly.

“Did you forget?”

Yes. “I... I thought you had panicked... I mean I panicked when I heard you... I mean I thought it was you.”

“That’s exactly why we came up with that distress signal, Yuuri. For moments like this.”

“I was worried,” Yuuri choked out, trying not to let the tears win.

Phichit sighed. “I know. And honestly, I’m not mad because the more I think about it the more I’m sure I would’ve done the same thing. You were freaked about the whole thing since the beginning and then I made you swear not to follow me.” He ran his hand through his hair and began to pace the kitchen. “At first it didn’t make sense to me how you got that call but I think I know now. It was always strange to me that Lam didn’t have mutants or elemental types in his gang. People like Fujiwara have loads of mutants in their inner circle. I knew they couldn’t all be normal because, what are the odds of that in a criminal group that large? But it seems like Lam's group is made up of the psychic types like you, Yuuri. Lam must have some sort of x-ray vision, and one of his guys must’ve been able to read my mind to find out who my operative was. Voice mimicking, in theory, is also a psychic ability... I should’ve known. When we first met, he spoke in Thai. He had no reason to do that since he wasn’t Thai. I just assumed that he was polylingual and didn’t want me snooping on him. But he did it on purpose! He knew I was Thai because he could see through my mask! Or he had someone read my mind! It’s so obvious now! I thought I had all the important stuff figured out but he was always ahead of me. And how does he know you? He acts like he knows you — like you two have met before. He completely changed the deal, just like that! This was not part of the plan. And you’re having a panic attack...” Phichit set his mug in the sink. “Oh no, Yuuri, breathe.”
Yuuri felt hollow inside. He had messed up. He made a stupid childish decision and now all of Phichit's hard work was down the drain. Not only that, Lam, someone who had just proved to be as frightening as Fujiwara, knew who he was. What was stopping Lam from manipulating him? From manipulating Phichit? Or harming his family? He did this. He did this. Because he had been naïve. He'd been stupid. Ragged breaths ripped in and out of him. His vision swam. It was over. He messed up and it was over. He doomed everyone…

“Yuuri, not like that. Slowly. With me.” Phichit took the mug from him and set it down. He held his hands and counted breaths with his friend until he stopped shaking. “Yuuri, I promise it’s ok. This isn’t a problem, it’s just… a change of plans. Yeah… this is actually better… this could work!” He seemed to be saying it to himself.

“Phichit… no,” Yuuri said weakly.

“No, I'm serious! I know I said that this job would be endgame, but this is the real endgame. We have an ally on the inside who’s going to help us take Fujiwara down once and for all. He never struck me as a killer, but, hey. Beggars can't be choosers. If we keep paying Fujiwara, it’ll never end. There is no goal with the route we’ve chosen, but this…” he beamed, almost manic, “this is where it can finally end. It has to.”

“What’s stopping Lam from going back on his word?”

“His ego. He said it himself! He doesn’t like being in debt to other people. If you get what he wants, he won’t rest until he’s returned the favor. It’s the thing that makes him scary. All big guys like that have a thing. Fujiwara's thing is you never expect or see his gun until he’s putting it away. Lam's thing is that if he says he’s going to do something, he’s going to do it which is bad luck for some, but excellent for us! We have an ally!”

“Phichit… how can you be so sure about this? I still can’t believe you agreed to a deal like that. You don’t even get a profit out of it.” Yuuri whispered, trying not to lose control of his breathing again.

“I'm… I’m doing this to help you, remember? This was all just a good puzzle for me from the beginning, and now Lam's made it more interesting for me. This will work.” He said it with finality and began to wash their mugs even though Yuuri hadn’t finished his tea.
Yall. this is so long. This is only the first half of the story. The more angsty story building half. The second half will be much fluffier with more content (sorta) from the show. I don't even know what exactly possessed me to write something like this but it's definitely suuuuper indulgent. I love heroes and love to spin everything to have a hero twist *cough cough emarvel cough cough COUGH*

I just hope the movie and second season comes out soon so I can get some more inspiration. Anyways. Thank you so much for sticking with this for sooooooo long. If you like this story, please feel free to share it on all your things! <3 <3 <3
So Much To Be Happy For

Chapter Summary

Yuuri and Phichit have a throwback thursday.

Chapter Notes

Translations in the end notes

Depending on how fast you are, this chapter might look familiar. I actually posted this earlier in the week, but one of my other chapters got screwed up somehow. It was over 4k words so if I lost it, I would have to change the story a lot. I took this chapter down just in case I couldn't fix the file. All is well now and to make up for deleting this chapter, I'm posting another one too. I hope you enjoy both of them!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Yuuri had been in a mood ever since his encounter with Lam. He felt guilt, restlessness, and a sense of lingering despair festering inside him. It didn’t help that Phichit hadn’t given him a new job for a week after that meeting. He knew where all the Orion pieces were, but a weight rolled in his stomach whenever he thought about them. He just couldn’t bring himself to get them. He even took time off of his nursing job. Yuuri only came out of his room for meals and he could tell he was being reclusive. He tried to act normal so Phichit wouldn’t worry. One morning, while he fixed a cup of tea and Phichit made eggs, he forced himself to make human conversation.

“What do you have planned for the day?” His voice sounded strange and scratchy after not having used it in a while. Phichit jumped a little as he turned to look at Yuuri. Yuuri guessed Phichit had gotten used to giving him space in his silent phase and was surprised to hear him talking.

“Hm? Me? Oh, nothing much,” he cracked an egg with what Yuuri thought was excessive force. “I’m meeting with some dude from France at nine because he wants a turtle-deer. At 12, I’ve got an appointment with that group of thieves from Sweden—I can never pronounce the name—and then I’m gonna kick Lam’s ass later at 2:30. I’ll grab a late lunch at 4. Probably from a convenience store. At 4:45, I’ve got a joint meeting with two alien creature smugglers all the way in Singapore. And that’s it. It’s gonna be a lazy day.”

Yuuri blinked and put his tea down. “What is it you’re doing at 2:30?”
“Kicking Lam’s ass.”

“Huh.”

“Mmmhmm.” He shoveled the eggs onto two plates and shoved one of them at Yuuri who politely refused. Phichit shrugged, dumped it onto his plate and began to eat standing up.

“So uh, you know you can’t kick Lam’s ass right?”

“I may not have the same fighting capabilities as you, Yuuri, but I think I can take him.”

Yuuri laughed for the first time in forever which made Phichit relax a bit. “I don’t mean you can’t physically kick his ass, I mean you logically shouldn’t.”

“And what logic says that?” Phichit reluctantly grinned.

“The logic that says that kicking a client’s ass is a quick way to incur said client’s wrath.”

Phichit tilted his head as if considering that information. “That’s not a convincing enough reason.”

“Why do you want to kick his ass anyways? I thought you were looking forward to getting Orion.”

“I wouldn’t so much say I’m looking forward to it as much as I just recognize that it’s of the utmost importance that we get it. And I’m gonna beat his ass because he’s a head-case. He’s driving me insane. He thinks he’s shopping at the fucking Dollar Tree. I know I said I don’t care about my cut, but we need at least a little bit of payment. You might need transportation, or you might get injured, or literally anything else could happen. These are basic service fees that he’s refusing to pay just because he knows who you are.”

“I’m really sorry about that, Phichit,” Yuuri rubbed his neck.

“Oh, Yuuri it’s not your fault. Like I said, I don’t blame you and he’s a total head-case. The only way out of this is to murder him to make myself feel better.”
“Murder is a huge step up from kicking his ass.”

“I thought the murder was implied.”

Yuuri chuckled and put his mug in the dishwasher. “If it’s too much of a problem, then I don’t care about the service fees. I have plenty saved up in case of emergencies.”

“But that’s not the point, Yuuri,” he said, spraying some eggs onto his front. “If I don’t charge him anything, word will get out and negotiations with other clients will be absolutely impossible. People like Scavenger will definitely try to take advantage and get stupid discounts and I swear, if anybody so much as says the word ‘cheap’ to me, I will eviscerate them.”

“… What about ‘affordable’?”

Phichit slammed his fork down. “I will eviscerate them, Yuuri.”

“Taihen, na…”

“Ne!”

They both laughed through the rest of their breakfast and then Yuuri returned to his room. Before Phichit had to leave for the day, he knocked on Yuuri’s bedroom door.

“Come in,” Yuuri called from his bed.

“You’re not fooling me,” Phichit said as he entered. He was eyeing Yuuri with a matter of fact expression and adjusting his cuffs. He was wearing a black suit today with a red tie to match the carnival mask he was famous for. Yuuri put down the book he was reading and sat up in bed.

“What are you talking about?”
“You’re still acting moody because of what happened at Lam’s.” Yuuri winced at how straight forward he was.

“No, I’m fine really.”

“You should try lying to someone who doesn’t know you. I’m sure they’d believe you.” Before Yuuri could open his mouth to retort, Phichit held up a hand to silence him. “I’m not going to tell you to get over it or anything stupid like that, but you’re going out with me tonight. You need to forget about everything. Orion, Fujiwara, Lam. We can get drinks at Mike’s Pub. It is your birthday, after all,” he beamed.

Yuuri groaned and flopped onto his back. “Ugh, how did I forget? Phichit I don’t want to drink.”

“Yeah but you need it! And this isn’t a debate. It’s your birthday and you’re going. You might have had a choice in the matter a week ago, but you’re still sulking so tough shit, bud.”

Yuuri glared at him and rolled over like a log, but didn’t answer.

“That’s the spirit. Be ready at six.”

※

Six o’clock came in the blink of an eye, and Phichit returned to the apartment even faster than that. He groaned when he found Yuuri lounging on the sofa, still in sweats, eating Oreos, and engrossed in a bad Netflix sitcom.

“Why am I not surprised,” he scolded as he snatched the Oreos out of Yuuri’s hands.

“Hey!” He frowned at Phichit and tried, in vain, to take the snacks back. “It’s my birthday, so I should be able to choose what we do.”

“You’re not allowed to choose indulging depressing urges! And these are my Oreos, you jack-a-
“That insult doesn’t even make sense!”

“You don’t make sense!” Phichit picked up a sofa pillow and smacked Yuuri with it.”

“Hey!”

“Get up!”

“Fine!” Yuuri pouted and stormed to his room. He ripped clothes out of his closet, not caring if they matched and yanked them on, grumbling about Phichit. He grabbed his keys, wallet, and phone before reemerging. Phichit had changed too, and he was wearing a purple sweater, black jeans and a matching reversed baseball cap. Phichit looked him up and down and sucked his teeth.

“You look terrible,” he said.”

“Good.”

“Let’s go then,” and he opened the door. At the same time, Ms. Kenjirou from across the hall, opened her door, holding a garbage bag. She nodded at them and they nodded politely back.


“Oh, that’s right! It’s your birthday today, isn’t it? Happy birthday, dear!”

“Thank you,” Yuuri nodded his appreciation and pretended not to notice Phichit frowning out of the corner of his eye. “I actually invited Minami over to play videogames inside with us,” he gave Phichit a smug look and his friend threw his hands up in defeat.

“Ah, soo nan da… actually, I haven’t seen Minami in a while.” The look on her face was strange, as if she were trying her best to smile even though she had just bit a lemon. “It’s been more than two
“Really?” Yuuri asked. When he thought about it, he hadn’t seen the teen since he had invited him over for his birthday which was a little over a month ago. He usually saw Minami whenever he left his apartment at night. Granted, he hadn’t left for any jobs (legal or otherwise), in forever. “Has he at least called?”

“No…” Ms. Kenjirou said with a quaky voice. “I know he’s a man now but…”

“It’s ok,” Yuuri said, feeling pity for the woman who, in that moment reminded him of his own mother. “You must be worried. But I’m sure he’s with some friends and lost track of time.”

“Do you think so? He’s never actually mentioned any friends besides you,” she said, hitting Yuuri over the head with guilt. “You have to be right though… he can take care of himself, right?”

“Of course he can,” Phichit said softly. It seemed he forgot how agitated he was with Yuuri. “I’m sure he didn’t mean to hurt you. He’s just busy growing up, is all.”

She smiled at them. “You two are so sweet. I hope he spends more of his time with you both.”

Yuuri thought that Minami could do better than a shady info broker and a cat burglar, but didn’t mention this.

“I’ll take this down for you,” Phichit said, taking the trash from Ms. Kenjirou’s hands. Before she could say thank you, he was gone and back again, the trash nowhere to be seen.

“Ah—I—oh, that was so fast! Thank you! You’ve got quite the ability!” She patted Phichit’s cheek and he beamed. “Oh, that reminds me, Minami made something for your birthday, Yuuri. Do you mind waiting here?”

“S-sure…” Yuuri mumbled at his feet. He had told Minami not to get him anything, mostly because any kind of attention always made him uncomfortable. But he felt bad for Minami’s mother so he didn’t want to upset her. She grinned and flitted back into her apartment. Yuuri looked at Phichit and sighed.
“What are you thinking,” Phichit asked.

“I… don’t know. This isn’t like him, but he’s still a teenager after all. It might be possible he got caught up.”

“Might? That’s exactly what happened. He’s nineteen, Yuuri. I’m sure he’s fine.”

“Yeah,” Yuuri nodded. It did no good to think about the people he saved from Walters, Graham, and Olivia. “You’re right.”

Ms. Kenjirou came back out holding a small tray of blue cake-pops. Together, they all spelled out “Happy Birthday” in shaky, navy writing. “I think they’re chocolate. He’s really got a knack for baking,” she said and handed them to a flustered Yuuri.

“This is… I um…”

“He loves chocolate,” Phichit saved him. “Especially chocolate cake. When Minami gets back home, we’ll be sure to thank him in person. And if he comes by tonight, we’ll let you know,” he reassured her, patting her shoulder. They left her looking much more pleased than when they first saw her, which was a relief. Yuuri, with some guilt, pushed Minami out of his mind for the rest of the night, because he felt that if he worried about one more thing, he would snap.

He was at least grateful that Phichit had, in some way, honored Yuuri’s wishes and had not invited anyone to the bar. It was just the two of them sharing drinks and laughs. Mike’s Pub was a cozy place with warm wood surfaces and myriad pictures on the walls of past patrons and employees. There was a flatscreen TV high on the wall, volume turned down low on a news story covering a suspected fairy sighting. The lights were soft, the air was a bit greasy, and the sounds of laughter and clinking billiard balls filled the room. It was a nice night for it, a welcome change. Yuuri was actually enjoying himself, was thankful for the distraction from everything. Phichit had ordered poutine to share between them as a joke—a throwback to Victor’s strange FBI (?) profile. Yuuri was stuffing his face with a sopping fry when Phichit ordered himself another Old Fashioned. He sipped it then grinned at Yuuri.

“Happy Birthday, Yuuri.”

“Thanks, Phichit,” he said. “Sixty-eight years young and counting.”
Phichit cackled and punched his shoulder. “Sixty-eight year olds wish they could be you.”

“Boy, I hope to be sixty-eight one day. Mmmm, just think of the retirement checks.” Yuuri hummed with a wry smile and threw back another shot.

“I’d like to see the person that thinks they can stop you,” Phichit said and Yuuri laughed again. Despite the slightly morbid turn the conversation took (entirely his fault), he was still feeling good and he took the momentary silence that followed as an opportunity to munch on more fries. But Phichit was silent for a tick too long, staring into the amber puddle at the bottom of his glass. Yuuri slid the bowl of poutine toward Phichit as a timid offering, but Phichit waved his hand at it.

“Everything all right?”

“Hmm? Ah, yeah.”

Yuuri swallowed his fries, and narrowed his eyes at Phichit. “Is there something on your mind, then?”

“I…” Phichit said, drumming his fingers on the counter. “I have a present for you. For your birthday.”

Yuuri threw his head back and groaned. “Phichit, we agreed not to buy each other presents, remember?” It was a long time ago when they made that promise to each other. They were still fresh out of the Grand Prix and barely getting their legs in the underworld. It didn’t feel right to throw money at each other when they had so much of it and got it by illegitimate means.

“Well I didn’t buy anything so it should be fine, right?”

Yuuri pursed his lips but conceded. “I guess,” but, for some reason, Phichit still didn’t seem at ease. He took one of Yuuri’s tequila shots and grinned at him.

“You remember our first job, right?”

“Of course,” Yuuri snorted. “It was a disaster. Why?”
“It wasn’t a disaster! We still could’ve gotten that ruby if we wanted to.”

“Phichit,” Yuuri whispered, glancing around to make sure they weren’t being overheard. The bartender’s back was to them, her many arms performing many tasks, the couple a few seats down from them were leaning in close to each other, and no one else seemed to be paying any attention to them. “The building fell down on me. Do you remember that?”

“Regardless, that job was a roaring success,” Phichit insisted with a look. Yuuri smiled in spite of himself and decided to nibble on a fry. Just the thought of that first job made the burn scar on his lower back prickle, but he guessed that Phichit was right. He had absolutely no regrets about what happened that night. Phichit leaned in closer and lowered his voice more. “Neither of us knew that the Chelsea family’s enemies would be burning down their home the exact same night as our heist. And Yuuri… you could’ve ran. You could’ve taken that ruby and booked it out of there.”

A terrible scream was reborn in Yuuri’s memories just then. Mrs. Chelsea’s scream from all those years ago, ripping the night in two, making Yuuri drop the ruby that was in his hands. Something was wrong, and suddenly, the thought of picking the ruby back up felt dirty. He rushed back to the main floor and was met by flames and smoke. The memory of ash stinging his nose almost made Yuuri forget he was in the pub. He could just make out shadows of people running, flailing. Without thinking, he reached out to one of those shadows—young Silas Chelsea—and threw him over his shoulders, carrying him out of the mansion and away from the flames. He kept running back into the house, carrying the Chelsea family in his arms, fighting against the veil of smoke that suffocated him. Anna Chelsea, a toddler at the time, was last. The fire was as dense as a wall. He was due to meet Phichit ages ago and, back then, they hadn’t gotten comm links. Yuuri couldn’t see through the flames, though he had the floor plan memorized. It felt impossible. Holes were burned into the hardwood, turning the surface into lace and making Yuuri trip and stumble. He choked on the fumes and forced himself to keep moving, to reach Anna’s crib. He couldn’t hear her crying, and he remembered hoping against hope that he wasn’t too late. He fell over some rubble and a flaming wooden beam came crashing down on him, trapping him on the ground. He felt too weak to push it off. His chest was so congested with smoke he couldn’t scream.

He remembered thinking about his mother’s face. His father. Mari in the hospital. The Nishigoris. Phichit. Fujiwara. Kazuya’s dead eyes staring up at him from his kitchen floor. Wheezing, he closed his eyes, and the last thing he remembered thinking was that he was amazed he had gotten this far, that he had lived so long.

Yuuri cleared his throat and tried on a smile. “Do you think the Chelsea family expected to be carried out of a burning building by a guy in a ski mask?”

“Of course not,” Phichit gave him a small smirk. “Pandora’s Iron has its faults but it’s definitely
better than what you were working with back then.”

“It still wouldn’t have saved me from that fire. So… thank you, Phichit,” Yuuri said. Yuuri was slipping in and out of consciousness when the beam was suddenly gone. It was Phichit. He had sped over to the Chelsea house when Yuuri never met him. He ended up saving Yuuri and Anna Chelsea. The entire family was safe and sound, Yuuri and Phichit were far out of dodge, and the ruby was never mentioned again. Yuuri didn’t even care. He was just shocked that he had made it out alive, and was overcome with gratitude for his friend.

“You’re my best friend,” Phichit said. Yuuri thought his eyes looked wet so he studied a chunky glob of cheese on their poutine. “I would do anything for you.”

“No, you’re my best friend. And I don’t know what I’d do without you.” Yuuri grumbled. Phichit laughed and Yuuri figured it was safe to look at him again. “What does this have to do with the present you got me?”

“Well,” Phichit said and reached into his pocket. He pulled out a small plastic case. It looked like something you’d keep playing cards in. Inside was something that looked black and dead. Yuuri eyed it with confusion. “Happy birthday. Again,” Phichit said awkwardly and slid the case across the bar to Yuuri. He picked it up and dumped the thing in his hands.

It was a brittle, ash covered chunk of wood, and even this small piece reeked of smoke and gas. A small lump formed in Yuuri’s throat. “Is this…”

“I went back to the Chelsea house to pick up a kind of… souvenir. They had to move to another house since everything was destroyed… I don’t know;” he added hastily, “it’s kind of dumb, but I think about that night a lot. I just… I don’t know.”

“Phichit…” Yuuri whispered and he knew it was too quiet for his friend to actually hear him. He gingerly placed the piece of wood back in its case.

“It’s not much, I know. It might be kind of weird. I just wanted you to have a reminder of how I see you. Because you sometimes forget what kind of person you are.” Yuuri looked at him, but didn’t want to chance opening his mouth. Phichit nodded his understanding. “You’re a good person, Yuuri. A really good person. You’re selfless and heroic and nothing can change that about you. Not people, or time or circumstances. You’ll always be you.”
It took a few seconds for Yuuri to collect all the feelings running wild in his head, tinkering with his tear ducts and yanking at the strings in his chest. When he felt it was safe to speak again without crying he pulled Phichit into a hug. “I keep wondering what I did to deserve someone like you. Every other day, I worry about whether I’m going to live to see another day, whether it would be a bad thing if I didn’t and then you remind me that there’s so much to be happy for,” he said thickly into Phichit’s shoulder. When he heard a giant sniff near his ear, he burst into tears, Phichit doing the same immediately after. The bartender jumped in surprise, but neither of them cared.

They bawled, a complete mess, and laughed when the bartender awkwardly offered them some napkins and free refills. Yuuri teased Phichit for making him cry on his birthday and they laughed some more, staying out well past midnight.

Chapter End Notes

All of these phrases are in Japanese because I'm lazy :)
Taihen na: (literally: that's awful/terrible) in this context: you've got your work cut out for you, don't you?
Ne: in this context it's kind of like "right?" or "i know right?"
shimatta: "shoot" or "whoops" or "shit"
soo nan da: "is that so?"

I think that covers all of them. Sorry again for the deleted chapter. I really thought the abyss had claimed my chapter. Apparently, it got saved as an mht file but it was cleverly disguised as a docx still??????? anyway, happy reading!!! I hope you're all doing well!! <3 <3 <3
Yuuri was trying to stretch out his break for as long as possible. The ER had been backed up all night because of a small scale breakout at the local super prison. He was treating civilians and—with a twinge of guilt—some very familiar heroes. He helped 88 with a sprained ankle and Spotlight with a busted lower lip. It felt so odd to speak to them normally, to help them and receive their earnest thanks. He actually felt bad and wanted to make up for it somehow, but he couldn’t figure out how to do that without giving himself away. Instead, he took off for the café as soon as his break rolled around to scarf down some salad. He was only half focusing on a news story about a werewolf when Noor, an ER nurse jogged up to him. Yuuri tried to be invisible even though Noor was standing directly in front of him.

“We need you down there,” he panted pointing a thumb over his shoulder. Yuuri screwed his eyes shut and groaned.

“I just got here.”

“I know, but we’re all the way backed up. And we have some heroes in for checkups.”

“Heroes?!”

“Sometimes local heroes get physicals in the ER because it’s easier to avoid prying eyes. There’s a back entrance and stuff. Travelling heroes don’t do that though because they have their own doctors.”
“Jesus,” Yuuri breathed, closing his eyes again.

“Can you give us one hour?”

“Fine…” Yuuri got up to follow him, not bothering to take his Tupperware with him. Noor caught him up on the next batch of patients as they made their way back down. He handed Yuuri the file for the next patient. Yuuri nodded at him and opened the curtain.

“Senpai?!”

“Minami?!”

“Oh my gosh!” Minami squealed. Yuuri stuttered and blinked, thrown off by the sudden clash of his worlds.

“What are you—what’s wrong? Why are you here?”

“I—nothing’s wrong,” he said rather unconvincingly but as Yuuri looked at his chart, he had to agree. Nothing was actually wrong with Minami. He hadn’t even come in himself, but was transported by an ambulance after being found passed out by a lake.

“You… you were unconscious? What happened?”

“Oh, nothing, I wasn’t unconscious,” he blurted and Yuuri held the chart up to him with an incredulous look. Minami pouted. “Ok, I mean I was but only because I was um… sleeping.”

“Sleeping?”

“Yeah.”

“By a lake?”
“Mhmm.”

“For five days?” Minami’s eyes widened at that before darting away. “I talked to your mother a while back. She was worried about you.”

“When did you… oh no! I forgot about your birthday, Yuuri! I’m so sorry!”

“Don’t worry about that,” Yuuri said quickly, “I just want to know what happened.”

“I was just… hanging out with some friends. From college. I was staying over at a friend’s place, and we all went out and things… just got out of control a little bit.”

“Were you drinking?”

“No… I was just… tired.”

“Which is why you fell asleep by the lake.”

“Yes.”

Yuuri eyed him, making sure to put as much obvious disbelief on his face as possible before setting the file down. “Minami, I can’t force you to do anything, but if something happened, you can tell me. Or literally anybody you trust so that we can help you.”

“I trust you!”

“Yeah?”

Minami opened his mouth as if to say something but closed it and decided to stare at his lap instead. Yuuri studied him. His clothes were past ruffled, with grass stains and some tears in places. His dyed hair was ruffled and dirty and for all his talk of sleep, he had the pinched look of someone who hadn’t slept or eaten in days. He could point all of this out, but if Minami wasn’t going to talk, it might be worse to try to force it out of him. Yuuri sighed and reached out to rub his shoulder.
“I’m going to check a few things and then the doctor will come in. It’s Dr. Chester. He’s very nice and very patient. We’re a little backed up tonight, so it might take a while, but don’t worry. We’ll take care of you.”

Minami nodded so Yuuri got to work. After he had recorded all the necessary info in the chart, Yuuri smiled at Minami and pulled his curtain closed. He was no doctor, but he knew enough—there was nothing physically wrong with Minami. That was a relief but it still didn’t soothe the nagging feeling that something was very off. He caught Noor by the sleeve as he was passing.

“Can we get some security on this patient,” he whispered nodding his head in the direction of Minami’s concealed stretcher. “Something’s not right so I want to be sure he doesn’t leave before Dr. Chester gets to him.”

“Yikes, ok.” Noor left and Yuuri tried to push Minami out of his mind when he pulled out his next patient file. There was no use getting distracted on a night this busy. He pulled the curtain on his next patient. His heart stopped. He never expected this part of his past to resurface so boldly and he thought he might fall over. But because it seemed like his patient didn’t recognize him, he smiled, and shook his hand, hoping against hope, that the subject of his identity would not come up.

Fifteen years ago, when Yuuri and Phichit were still quite young, they had been enrolled in the Grand Prix Academy, an international institute for children with abilities. Students attending the Grand Prix are taught to identify and control their abilities by gifted adults and heroes alike. They are admitted to the academy at age ten, and “graduate” twice before their final graduation at around age twenty-one, at which point students may begin training to become heroes. This was exceedingly rare; most students chose “normal” professions. The curriculum and training for hero work was so rigorous and even painful, that the idea of becoming a hero, a profession that wasn’t really a profession, was not popular.

Baker, a seasoned hero who had the remarkable and entertaining ability to turn any object he touched into cake, had been both Yuuri and Phichit’s teacher at the Grand Prix for seven years before they both left the academy—Yuuri to protect his family from the Yakuza’s wrath and Phichit to satisfy an itch for something more challenging by helping Yuuri (though Baker was not aware of their reasons).

They had both been jealously talented, incurring praise and recognition from the academy’s staff. For their age, they both exhibited fantastic potential but that wasn’t the only thing that impressed those around them. Yuuri had more practical medical knowledge at age ten than most practicing doctors
and there wasn’t a virtual database in existence that stood a chance against young Phichit’s quick and shrewd thinking. Of course, Yuuri had a bit of a hiccup in his fourth year with another student, but he had returned, brilliant and determined as ever to learn. It therefore shocked and baffled the staff to learn that both young prodigies had not only dropped out, but had also vanished from seemingly every record they had access to.

The academy could no longer contact Yuuri’s or Phichit’s families, and any record of their existence—medical, dental, video, or otherwise, had mysteriously vanished. No one from the academy had heard from the two young geniuses in years. After Victor had become the only hero of his class, it seemed as if Yuuri and Phichit would be some of the world’s only next heroes until they vanished, which troubled the academy. It was looking like the two never existed in the first place.

That is why, Baker, dressed in nothing but spangled boxers and a hospital gown, was shocked to find that the nurse that greeted him was none other than Yuuri Katsuki, his beloved former student. He was so shocked, in fact, that he nearly swallowed his thermometer when he realized why the young nurse’s face looked so familiar. Yuuri was quick to pluck the head of the thermometer out of Baker’s mouth before it could disappear and frantically asked his patient if he was ok. Baker ignored these questions.

“Yuuri,” he spluttered, still trying to catch his breath. “Don’t you remember me? Surely, you at least recognize me from the news?!” Yuuri slowly looked away, looking a bit uncomfortable, but Baker remembered that his student had always been a tad shy and took Yuuri’s silence as a sign of bashfulness instead of secrecy. Yuuri met his eyes again after a beat and gave a small nod.

“Of course I remember you.”

“Well, it’s good to see you! You gave all of us at the Grand Prix a fright when you and your buddy Phichit dropped off the face of the Earth!” His admonishing tone was terribly diluted by his pleased smile and boisterous laugh. “What happened?”

“Take a deep breath,” Yuuri said quietly, placing his stethoscope against Baker’s chest. Baker blinked, but obeyed and waited until Yuuri had made a quick note on his clipboard before speaking again.

“Yuuri,” he said furrowing a scolding eyebrow at his pupil, “Tell me what happened! You know we were all worried, and now it turns out you’ve been on the other side of the world, in America all this time! I think you owe me an explanation, young man.”

“I haven’t been in America the whole time,” Yuuri chuckled quietly, clicking his pen.
“Then where?”

“Japan…” and even Baker could tell at this point that his student sounded a bit hesitant, “I went home, you see.”

“Nonsense! We tried contacting your parents to no avail.”

“We moved. Family problems. We ran into a bit of trouble, but we’re taking care of it at this point.”

“I see. And am I to assume that Phichit also dropped off the face of the Earth because of family problems?” Baker fixed him with a familiar look and Yuuri grinned again.

“Best friends are like family, aren’t they?”

“You’re being rather cagey… but no matter. I am at least grateful to see you alive and well. I trust that Phichit is in equally fair health.”

“Yes, professor. Open your mouth and stick out your tongue please.” Yuuri seemed, Baker thought, relieved that he had not been questioned further. Baker’s paternal feelings stirred restlessly at this. What was Yuuri hiding?

“You know I am no fool, Yuuri,” Baker said when Yuuri removed the tongue compressor from his mouth, “I won’t ask any more questions because I’ve never been much of an interrogator. That’s more Boss’ territory. Something must’ve happened, and I am alarmed to even think that you felt as if it was your duty to endure it alone. You can always come to me or anyone else from the Grand Prix for help. We’re your family too, you know.”

“Thank you, professor.” He pointed to the metal tray beside him with an assortment of medical tools on it. “Please turn the paper cup into a cake.”

“Any requests?”
“I’m allergic to strawberry…” He grinned and made another quick note on his clipboard as Baker turned the flowery cup into a magnificent slice of chocolate gateau, complete with sugar roses, at the touch of a finger.

“As a super hero, I must admit that even I struggle with asking for help. But it’s important for everyone to know that they are not alone in their endeavors.” Baker watched Yuuri as he said this, but his student merely nodded, busying himself with Baker’s ears and lumbar functions. He did not expect Yuuri to reply because as the exam persisted, the nurse only spoke to give soft commands or ask questions. After ten minutes, Yuuri assured Baker that he was in excellent health and left to allow him to dress. He reappeared shortly after to tell him that the doctor would see him soon. If Baker hadn’t been waiting for another opportunity to offer his support, he would’ve missed the small “um” that came from behind him. He turned around, face carefully impassive.

“Professor…” Yuuri said. “I admire you.”

“And there’s much to admire about you too, Yuuri.” He smiled, but for whatever reason, Yuuri seemed to not have heard this compliment. Something dark flitted across his student’s face, something quite sad indeed, but it vanished as quickly as it had come leaving a curiously blank expression in its place.

“I’m sure that you would do anything to save someone important to you. But I don’t think you’d risk other lives to do it. You would find a way… I think that’s what makes you a great hero,” and he whisked past Baker, leaving his former teacher uneasy.

* 

Yuuri was so livid that he wasn’t even tired when he got home, well past midnight. His skin was on fire and he wanted to punch something as he opened the door to their apartment. Phichit was there. Phichit. His friend. His friend who kept deadly secrets form him. He clenched his jaw so tightly he heard his teeth crunch and went to the kitchen. Phichit was still wearing his suit, mask strewn across the counter, and sluggishly munching on Oreos. Yuuri did not look at him as he walked in and opened a cabinet to stare at the plates.

“Hey,” Phichit said.

Yuuri ignored him and his skin grew hotter. The cabinet handle felt very breakable in his hands.
“Something wrong?” Phichit asked. Yuuri closed his eyes and tried to calm himself down. Tried to forget about his encounter with Baker. Tried to remember Phichit staying up with him and his burning leg. Remember Phichit selling his soul for speedster serum. Remember the wood from the Chelsea fire.

“Yuuri, what’s going on?”

“When I agreed to move here with you, you told me it wouldn’t be risky, that we wouldn’t run into anyone too troublesome.” Yuuri blurted, as he slammed the cabinet. Phichit blinked in confusion as Yuuri turned on him.

“What are you—”

“I saw Baker in the ER today. For a checkup.”

Phichit opened his mouth but didn’t say anything. He looked at the cookie in his hand and bit his lip.

“Did you know that only local heroes get checkups in the ER? Local. As in, they live here.” Phichit still didn’t look up. “What? Nothing?” Yuuri asked cruelly.

Eventually, Phichit shrugged as if he weren’t fazed by the knowledge that Yuuri had met their former teacher at his day job. But his shoulders looked stiff and his face was hard. He ate the oreo, and crossed his arms over his chest before speaking again.

“It was bound to happen eventually, Yuuri. All the greats like Baker have been working internationally so no one knew where they were based at. But recently, they’ve been appearing more frequently in the West, so it’s my guess that they’re finally building a headquarters. Your run in with Ciao-Ciao pretty much confirms it. If they were still just going wherever they felt they were needed, they wouldn’t be getting checkups at a local doctor, would they? It seems like they’re settling down.”

“That’s exactly my point. There’s no way they would just be passing through if they’re getting fucking general health care at their local hospital. And somehow, I find it very hard to believe that you are just now realizing this,” Yuuri stormed.

“You’re right,” he said hesitantly. “I didn’t know for sure, but I guessed that they would be here. But you have to understand that Baker, Boss, and the rest of them wouldn’t just settle down in any
random spot in the world. Spring Gate is infected. There are more super powered gangsters, smugglers, thieves, and even aliens than there are baristas,” he rambled nervously. At Yuuri’s blank expression he added, “Do you know how many Starbucks there are in a city? The numbers will baffle you.”

“And, pray tell, what does that have to do with us moving here?”

“I’ve told you before, haven’t I? Where there are thieves and smugglers, there are things to be thieved and smuggled. We don’t want to be too far from the action.” Before Yuuri could open his mouth to retort, Phichit continued. “There’s no profit without a bit of risk. And I think we are both more than capable of dealing with risk. Besides, we can’t get the kind of rewards that Spring Gate offers in Hasetsu or anywhere else.”

“Oh really? There isn’t any place else in the world that has rubies?” Yuuri scoffed.

“Of course there is, but—”

“Then why the hell did we have to come here of all places?!” he yelled, and Phichit opened his mouth once before blinking, but seemed unable to find the words that would carry him through this conversation.

“I.”

“I followed you here! I uprooted my life because I trusted you, and you knew all this time that the world’s top heroes were all living here! They could’ve seen me any time at any place without me realizing it—recognized me as Red Specter! You didn’t even warn me! Why didn’t you even think to warn me?!”

“Because… because I knew you wouldn’t want to come if I told you.”

Yuuri clenched his hands in the air as if to strangle it. “You think?!”

“Ok, can I ask you something,” Phichit tried to regain some ground in the argument. “You were the one who said that those four rookies you ran into in the bunker and the museum weren’t a problem so why is it suddenly a problem now? And why are you ok with Winter Torch living here and not Baker and the rest of them? He’s just as risky and you had no complaints when you ran into him
“twice.”

“He lives here too?!”

“What did you think?! Of course he does! Sure, it’s not like he broadcasts it and he does international work all the time but anyone could’ve—”

“I didn’t trust anyone with helping me, Phichit, I trusted you. And you decided to leave out the fact that all the world’s top heroes are now living in this city! It is one thing to have a few chance encounters with someone like Winter Torch, but it’s another thing entirely to knowingly set up camp next to the enemy!

“The enemy? Really?” Phichit gave him a mingled look of exasperation and frustration which got Yuuri shouting again.

“If they can throw me in prison for good, then yes they are my enemy! I just walked into an examination room, blind to the fact that the patient waiting for me was someone who, given the time, could easily connect me to Red Specter! Just a little information, Phichit! Just a little time is all it takes for someone like Baker to find me out!”

“But this is the place that we need to be, Yuuri. I said I would help you, and I am.”

“How is this helping? I’m more likely to be offed here than anywhere else! You agreed to help me handle Fujiwara. Do you want me to get caught?”

Phichit took a deep breath. “I want to help you. I agreed to help you protect your family. And you. And I’m going to make sure I do that, no matter what the cost is.”

“How can I believe that after you lied to me?! After you kept something so incredibly important to yourself?!”

“Yuuri,” Phichit began, thinking that now was the time to let his friend know… to tell his friend the beginning of his goodbye. “I… I can’t always…” he trailed off hopelessly, words shriveling up in his throat. He knew what he wanted to say—that he couldn’t always be there to help Yuuri. That Yuuri wouldn’t always be there to help him, because they would soon need to part ways. Not because Phichit didn’t care about him, but because staying would be negligent. Staying would bring
destruction. He needed to go where all the other speedsters were and hunt the thief, Ao. But he couldn’t say that. He couldn’t tell his friend the truth because that—tampering with the timeline—would be far worse than lying, than destroying his friendship.

“What? You can’t always what?” Yuuri said bitterly, crossing his arms.

Phichit was losing his bravery. “I…” but there were no words left.

“You can’t always be trustworthy? Yeah, I see that now,” Yuuri fumed before storming out of the kitchen.

Phichit was alone, and biting his lip so that he didn’t cry, he put the Oreos back in the cupboard. He knew what he did was right, there was no doubt about it, but what saddened him was that Yuuri wasn’t wrong, and he feared that he had sacrificed his friendship for a plan that may cause more harm than it was worth. He didn’t know Victor. How could he be sure that he would take care of Yuuri and his family once he was gone? Just because he was a hero, Phichit should trust him? But, what other choice did he have? What other choice was there that would help him time travel, protect his friend, and preserve their friendship? For a while now, he was preparing to not have the same friendship with Yuuri if he ever made it back to him in time… but he never thought to prepare himself for the change in his friendship that would come before he even left.

Yuuri paced his room, running angry fingers through his hair and looked for something to take his frustration out on. Everything in here was too breakable. He just had to live with his thoughts—with the idea of his best friend, his only friend in this country lying to him about something that could get not only him arrested but his family killed. How could Phichit have been so stupid?! It wasn’t even stupid—it was negligent. No. Negligence implied lack of thought, but Phichit purposely left Yuuri out of the loop. He said it himself: he thought Yuuri would refuse to come to Spring Gate if he, Yuuri, knew about all the heroes living here. He purposely disregarded Yuuri’s opinion and for what? There was absolutely nothing that was worth this risk.

Except, perhaps, Orion. And now that Yuuri was already on this job, roped into this quest with Lam who had some kind of secret leverage over Yuuri, he couldn’t leave. Lam had offered to kill Fujiwara just to get his hands on Orion. What would Lam do to Yuuri, to his family, if Yuuri left the city and didn’t get Orion? He was trapped. Just the thought of the enormous gem in his closet made a lump rise in his throat. He had nowhere to go—stuck in Spring Gate. And stuck with Phichit who he
just learned he couldn’t trust.

Maybe Yuuri had been stupid. He hadn’t paid attention to the news as much as he should’ve. He should’ve pieced two and two together when he kept running into Winter Torch. He figured Winter Torch was, like Phichit said, temporarily setting up camp in Spring Gate since it was such a busy city. He thought that this would pass. But he should’ve known. Maybe he had known and didn’t want to think about it. He had wanted to stay here… he had wanted to believe in his best friend.

And now, he had no one here that he could talk to. He had done this to himself—volunteer to trap himself in a world where he would be completely alone, dependent, and in constant danger. He couldn’t tell his family because they would worry and there would be nothing they could do about it all the way in Japan. He couldn’t tell Minako because visiting her in jail would be incriminating. She had even forbade him from contacting her for that very reason.

He had no one.

He ripped the watch off his wrist and threw it against a wall. The glass on it made a crunching noise before falling to the ground. He started stripping off his scrubs and tossing them across the room too. When he threw the pants, his wallet tumbled out letting his cards escape. He sucked his teeth and bent down to pick them up when a soft glint caught his eye.

It was Chris’s card with the kiss mark still, remarkably intact.

There was still someone.

Chapter End Notes

idk why, but I love Noor so much. he's just a placeholder but he's my son. Thanks for reading!!!! <3
Early December in Spring Gate was harsh. Cold air fell like a curtain so thick that it even blocked out the stars. Chris was surprised it wasn’t snowing yet, but he figured it was only a matter of time. He smiled at the thought—he loved snow. Snow meant holidays and Victor’s birthday: all excuses to be with his best friend. Normally, he would enjoy the brisk weather much more than he was, but he was slightly uneasy by his company.

If he was being honest, he didn’t expect Red Specter to call him. Especially not months after he had first given Red Specter his card. But, here they were, walking side by side at a leisurely pace down a rural dirt road. He hadn’t said a word, not even when Chris had first greeted him. It was his first time interacting this closely to another jewel thief, so he guessed there were all types. He glanced down at Red Specter, who was still looking straight ahead (difficult to tell with the mask) and matching Chris’ pace. Chris cleared his throat.

“Where we’re going, love, the people know you as Agni’s Cat, but that doesn’t quite sit right with me.” He didn’t get a response so he continued. “I mean, it’s not like you belong to Agni, right?” Red Specter turned his head to him for a brief moment which encouraged Chris to keep going. “A close friend of mine calls you Red, which I think is short and to the point. Do you mind if I call you Red?”

Chris didn’t know much sign language but he recognized “OK” and grinned at that. “Fabulous,” and they kept walking. More silence followed making Chris a bit restless so he piped up again. “Do you know why I steal, Red?”

He could’ve imagined it, but he thought he heard a soft questioning hum. “Because I’m addicted,” he said. “Every time I get my hands on something beautiful, something precious, my heart feels like its experiencing the first day of spring. Mon amie …it’s like I’ve found everything I will ever need,
everything I need to keep breathing,” he sighed and looked at the black sky. “And then it’s mine and that feeling fades. My insides are dull and wrapped in clover once more. I’m left searching for spring again and again.”

Red looked at the sky too and Chris wondered what he was thinking. He wondered what Red felt when he stole rubies. What was he feeling when he first decided that rubies were his only love? “I should get some points for acknowledging that I have a problem, don’t you think? Though… I don’t plan on fixing that problem,” he chuckled. They had finally arrived. It was an old lumber yard, a tall building of metal slats with the iron doors lifted to reveal the interior. Ancient blocks of lumber, now covered in moss, were stacked in rows and lined the walls like steps. There were two people sitting on these, talking softly together. Chris stopped a few paces away from the entrance, just out of earshot and turned to Red.

“Like I told you on the phone, this meeting is just for evaluating an opportunity. We don’t have to do anything with these guys if we’re not feeling up to it. So let’s just listen, get a feel for them, and we’ll tell them about our decision tomorrow.” He turned when he heard a barking laugh coming from inside then turned back to Red. “If I am being honest, I have never worked with them before, but I’ve been interested for a while now. I just didn’t want to go in alone.” When Red tilted his head in a hesitant way, Chris threw his hands up defensively, “I know, I know,” he said. “You made it very clear on the phone what your intentions are. You don’t have to commit to this partnership until you’re ready. I’m just letting you know what’s happening here.” He asked Red if he was ready and they headed in together.

“Evening gentlemen,” Chris purred at the men sitting on the wood, and they gave both him and Red nasty looks.

“I wasn’t aware that this was an open invitation,” one man spat. He was thin, with a long nose and long red hair braided down his back.

“And I wasn’t aware that Dick Cartier and Agni’s Cat were working together,” the other man grumbled, not taking his eye off Red. He was shorter and stockier than his friend, with curly hair and a scar on the bridge of his nose. “But I suppose it’s Red Specter now, isn’t it? That’s what the paper says.”

“Our paths just happened to cross,” Chris said smoothly, “but it seems that we’ll all be working together if this goes well.”

“And that’s a big if,” someone hissed and Chris turned to find three more men walk in, their buyers, if their suits were any indication. “Thank you all for joining us tonight,” the man in the middle said and they gestured for Chris and Red to take a seat. They did and the buyers sat on the lumber across from them.
“Tonight,” one of the men began, “is your lucky night. The job we’re offering you is without a doubt, more lucrative than anything you’re accustomed to.”

“And it takes four people to get it done? I doubt it,” the red haired man grunted.

“Ant,” the buyer whispered, “I beg you to let me finish. We did not contact just any run-of-the-mill thieves. We reached out to you three because you're professionals, the best in your particular skill sets. And when Dick Cartier told me that he would be bringing Red Specter along, the prince of rubies himself, it only sweetened the deal. I think, once you've heard the details, you'll be glad to have the extra assistance.”

“I’m listening,” Ant said with a fake and impatient smile.

“Oh, boy,” Chris said under his breath and fought the urge to smack a hand over his face.

“This is no ordinary job,” the buyer resumed. “Even though you will technically be stealing one item, it is in pieces, scattered across the city. Each piece is heavily protected and it would be more efficient to work as a team.”

“A team of two, I believe is sufficient for that,” Ant snapped, crossing his arms. “Tick and I are more than capable of doing this job. I see no need to split the profits.”

“Again, if you’d listen, you’d discover that you will each receive three million dollars upon completing this job. You would each be paid handsomely, so there is no reason to fret over splitting profits.” Ant scoffed.

“Ant,” Tick, the shorter thief, whispered and put his hand on Ant’s arm, “just wait…”

“For what? They haven’t given us a good reason why they’re throwing so many bodies at this.”

“Well, if you’d listen to the details—”
“I’ve heard the details.”

The buyer exchanged some looks with his companions before turning back to Ant. He held his hands up and smiled. “Fine,” he said. “How about a team of three instead?”

“What?!” There were three sickening seconds when Chris saw the barrel of a gun and a sharp bang shocked his senses. He closed his eyes willing the breath to return to his body. When he opened them, Ant’s body was lying lifeless on the ground.

Suddenly, Red rose and walked calmly toward the way they came in. Was he leaving?

“I don’t think so,” the buyer who shot Ant said, and he raised his gun at Red’s back. Chris flinched violently as the gun went off again. No! He shouted—he thought he shouted, but everyone was still looking at Red… he couldn’t take his eyes off Red.

Who was still standing.

He hadn’t even flinched. And the bullet was hanging like a fly in the air, inches from his shoulder blade. How is he doing that? The buyer looked at his gun as if it had spat flowers. The bullet… Jesus, when did I do that?! Chris thought frantically as he realized he could feel the bullet in his mind, as plainly as if he were holding it between his own fingers. He must’ve stopped it out of instinct. He felt warm… almost giddy from the adrenaline that flowed through him as Red slowly turned around.

Red plucked the bullet from the air and walked back to the buyer who had turned several shades more pale. He stopped inches in front of him, and took the buyer’s hand in his. Placing the bullet in the buyer’s hand, Red leaned in, whispered something.

And then he left.

* *

For several reasons, Chris stayed for the remainder of the meeting. It didn’t amount to much since Ant was dead, Tick was distraught, and Red was gone. When Chris left and was safely (though quite shaken) at home, he got a call from Red.
“The job they’re offering is the retrieval of Orion,” Red said in that low rasp. It was clearly a digital modification. “The job is worth way more than they’re offering, but I don’t advise you to go after it.”

“And why might that be,” Chris asked. It had only been a few hours and Red Specter kept surprising him. He was beginning to understand how Victor was feeling.

“Because Orion is mine and I don’t think fighting me for it is in the spirit of partnership.”

Chris took a moment to consider that. Orion must be made of rubies then. He wondered just how much Red was getting for it and whether it was worth it to haggle. But then, he realized something, “Partnership? Does that mean this is official?”

“I scratch your back, you scratch mine. And you showed me tonight that you’ve got mine covered. Let me know if you have any jobs you want to do, and I’ll help you out. No charge.”

“That’s quite generous of you.”

“Just know that my life is worth the monetary equivalent of whatever job you want to do next.”

“So I guess it’s go big or go home, huh?”

“Exactly. I look forward to working with you, DC.”

Phichit had just woken up to prepare some breakfast. His head hurt because he had been crying and worrying before falling asleep. It had been four days since he had last spoken to Yuuri, since their fight, and he still couldn’t think of anything to say to him. Selfishly, he wanted Yuuri to just forgive him, to push this aside so that they could be friends for however long he had left in this timeline. He needed that. He needed his friendship to be easy again because everything else was just so damn hard. He put on a pot of coffee when the front door opened.
"Yuuri? Where've you been?" Phichit asked on instinct and regretted it when the blank, cold look on Yuuri's face stung him. Yuuri didn't say anything and walked to his bedroom. His chest felt hollow but he didn't have any tears left to cry. Instead, he wrapped his toast in a napkin and poured himself what little coffee was in the pot into a mug. He gathered up his meager breakfast and retreated to his room. When he looked at his work phone, he saw that he had a missed call from Scavenger. He sucked his teeth but set his food on the desk to pick up the phone anyway. At least it would be a distraction.

"Agni," Scavenger barked after two rings.

"Top of the morning to you, Spot," he chimed relishing the agitated growl he got from that. "I'm sorry I missed your call. Is there something I can help you with?"

"Your cat," he said, and Phichit's stomach flipped. The whole reason he decided to call back was to not think about Yuuri. "You put him onto that Detroit job."

"Detroit job? I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't give me that! Xiao's bank in Detroit. It only just happened but the whole underworld is talking about it. Your cat and Dick Cartier hit it last night." Phichit felt like he had been doused in cold water. He had no idea what to say. Last night? Yuuri was in Detroit just a few hours ago and with Dick Cartier of all people?! He thought they had agreed that it was too risky to trust Chris. Why didn't he, Phichit, know about this? Was Yuuri really that angry with him? He laughed to reassure Scavenger, though he felt genuine fear rise in him.

"Contrary to common belief, Red Specter can do as he pleases. Just because I give him jobs to do doesn't mean he isn't perfectly capable of finding jobs on his own or through other channels. Isn't that right, Scavenger? I'm not the only one you go to for information, am I?"

"I don't know what you're implying, but I guess something was different about this time. Your cat... Red Specter isn't usually the flashy type is he?"

"Flashy?"

"He and Dick Cartier raised so much hell last night that I'm surprised they weren't caught. Or that I wasn't there to witness it," he snarled, but the last part still sounded like a sly laugh. "I might be able to get along with Little Red after all."
"Were there..." Phichit lowered the phone and closed his eyes before putting it back to his ear. "Were there any bodies?"

"No."

"Oh."

"Well..."

"What?!"

"It depends on what you count as a body. Nobody was killed, but there were plenty of injuries and Xioa's bank was sucked dry. It pays to be ferrokinetic. I'm assuming it's still too early for you to have known all this, otherwise this wouldn't exactly be news to you, would it. I only know because one of my buddies saw the whole thing happen. I never knew Red had it in him. Dick Cartier wasn't a surprise, but Red... man. It's a pity though."

"What's a pity?"

"All that and he still won't break the four star rating."

"What? But you said there were injuries. Intentionally harming civilians..." Phichit's mouth opened in a soft 'o' as he suddenly understood. "Xiao. He was dirty."

"Looks like it. When those two attacked the bank, they uncovered a lot of damning evidence revealing his connection to the mafia. Xiao was foul. Red will be lucky to scrape a three star rating after this since it'll look too much like villain on villain violence, or even vigilantism considering Red's past."

Phichit heaved a small sigh of relief. "You wear your four like a badge of honor."

"It's one of many badges, Agni. But it isn't worth anything if I can't put it to use."
"I'm not following."

"You haven't been giving me any jobs. And with all this competition in Spring Gate and now in neighboring cities like Detroit, I'm starting to think that this town isn't big enough for me. If you can't give me work, let me know so I can get out of dodge."

"I...I think that might actually be best for you, Scavenger. As you know, I work internationally, so I can help you where ever you go, but I think Spring Gate is too small for you."

"What?! Say that again."

Phichit, blinked and pulled the phone away for a second to look at it with confusion. "I... I said that Spring Gate is too small for you."

"No, you're saying that I'm too weak for the competition!"

"Scavenger," Phichit said, completely baffled, "you called me. You were the one who suggested getting out of dodge!"

"That was an ultimatum! Agni, I don't tolerate radio silence well. You have a simple job that I pay you well for and that's to find places for me to hit. I expect you to do that, because I'm not going anywhere."

"Of course."

"Nothing will change that! Not Red Specter, not Dick, not Winter Torch, not you. I'll never leave Spring Gate," he declared, in what Phichit thought was a rather desperate tone. And then he hung up.

Phichit puffed out a sigh as the weight of yet another unwelcome task settled on his shoulders. Even though Scavenger avoided hurting civilians, he was no priest. He got his four star rating by intentionally endangering the lives of law enforcement, or to put it more bluntly, throwing a molotov cocktail at a squad of officers who had him surrounded outside of a museum. He didn't like to think about what Scavenger might do if he got too restless. He never worried about him before, but it
wasn't worth taking the risk. He sucked his teeth because he really didn't need this at the moment.

He needed to talk to Yuuri. He scarfed down his toast and drained his cup before zooming to Yuuri's room. His fist hesitated on the door. He wasn't sure how this was going to go, but he figured things couldn't get worse than they already were. He might as well satisfy his curiosity. He knocked.

Yuuri opened the door but didn't step aside to let Phichit in. He was clearly unwelcome.

"I'm trying to sleep," he said plainly.

"Long night?"

"What do you want?"

"Yuuri," he said taking a deep breath, "I heard you made a hit on Xiao's bank. With Dick Cartier."

"Yeah."

"Well... I thought... Yuuri, do you even know if you can trust Chris? I thought you weren't going to call him."

"Turns out trust isn't really that important to me."

Phichit looked down at his socks to avoid Yuuri's eyes while he tried to reclaim his courage. "I understand that you're mad at me and I'm not here to talk about that specifically. I just don't want your anger to keep you from seeing Chris clearly. Sure, civilian Chris may be trustworthy, but Dick Cartier is a wild card. Be clear on what he wants from you so that you don't end up hurt."

"He doesn't want anything from me," Yuuri said, and closed the door.

Chapter End Notes
mon amie: my friend

lol i just realized that i may have been misleading in my last notes. so uuuuuuhhhhh it's definitely gonna get better... but it's also gonna get worse. i'd say we have (to avoid spoiling too much I won't be SUPER specific) at least more than 3 more chapters before it gets "better". i wish i didn't have to make it worse but i g o t t a. and don't worry there's gonna be some nice moments worked into these next 3ish and beyond chapters.

it'll be worth it, I promise. at least it'll be worth it to me<3
Sprinting across rooftops away from Winter Torch in broad daylight was a feeling unlike anything Yuuri had ever experienced. The biting wind did nothing for how hot he felt. Every nerve in him was an electric circuit. His heart beat a burning rhythm that echoed in his stomach. He couldn’t feel Orion’s weight on his back. The tell-tale hiss of fire told him that Winter Torch was close. He didn’t dare look behind him. People shrieked in surprise every time he jumped to another building. He just needed to be out of Victor’s sights for five seconds, and he could blend into the crowd. He kept sprinting, gearing up for the next jump. It was further this time. He steadied his breathing, eyes locking onto the roof in front of him.

He was about to jump when a wall of white fire blocked his path, sprouted from the very spot that he wanted to jump to. He stumbled to a stop. Ah, come on! If he landed there, he would surely be burned. He eyed the menacing flames before him, panicked as he watched them flicker on the window panes beneath them. Think, Yuuri!

Sweat rolled down his neck and he turned. Winter Torch was smiling at him. Just a few feet away.

“I must say, your endurance is unparalleled,” he said smoothly as he walked towards Yuuri. “But, why don’t we give it a rest?”

Yuuri’s heart thrummed in his chest as he turned his back on Victor. Not this time, he thought. He sprinted headlong for the flames on the other side. He jumped. Screwing his eyes shut, he braced himself for the agony that the flames would surely bring.
But there was nothing, and he landed cleanly on a glass window. He didn’t have time to sort through his relief or confusion so he shattered the window with his fist for an escape. He tumbled down in a shower of glass.

Shocked screams and gasps erupted around him. A cacophony of trumpets and drums came to a clumsy stop. He got to his feet and almost fell over—that fall was higher than he anticipated. Panicked murmuring filled the air and Yuuri stumbled backwards into something soft. He turned on his heel and was nose to nose with a smiling alligator. He yelped and jumped back at the same time the alligator did. Now that he was looking properly, he realized he had busted through the roof of a college pep rally. He turned around, taking in all the terrified painted faces.

*It’s Red Specter!*

*Didn’t you hear what happened in Detroit?*

*It’s him!*

Just then, something else fell through the roof like a shimmering, white comet. Winter Torch. Screams turned into excited shouts of recognition. He stood and looked around. His attention fell on Yuuri and when their eyes met, the gym fell silent.

Victor was several yards away in a wide open space which was to his advantage. But, they were in a packed gym which was to Yuuri’s advantage. If he used his power. Which he wouldn’t. He could probably take Victor in a fight if he got close enough. But, he couldn’t do that here. Not with so many people in the way. Someone could get hurt.

Yuuri swore he could hear Victor’s heart beating.

He turned and ran. Students in band uniforms stumbled out of his way as he pushed through the doors. He only had a few seconds head start and he didn’t waste them. He emptied out all of his smoke screens and set them off.
Victor burst through the exit door not seconds after Red Specter had and was met with a dense wall of smoke.

“No!” he shouted. He waved his arms in front of him to no avail. He opened his hand and a lantern sized flame appeared in his palm. It didn’t take long to realize that no amount of light would pierce this veil. Red could be long gone at this point. Or standing so close that an eyelash wouldn’t fit between them, hiding in the smoke and taunting him. He turned around, holding the flame in front of him as if the black mask would reveal itself, a true specter in this cloud. He could be here. He could be watching.

But common sense told Victor that Red wouldn’t do that. The man that refused to take advantage of a perfect hostage situation would not hide in shadows to attack Victor. He would make his escape. He would be hoping to never encounter Victor again.

* * *

Every muscle in Yuuri’s body ached as he shouldered the door to his apartment open. He was starting to get used to this, being in pain. The backpack containing Orion slid off his shoulder and he limped to the kitchen. Too tired to reach for a glass, he turned the faucet on and bent his head underneath the stream. He sighed when the cool water splashed his face. He didn’t bother to dry his face but turned the faucet off and slid his back down the kitchen sink until he was sitting on the floor. The dishes were dirty, so he decided he should take a quick power nap before tackling them. The day was still young after all— he could see slats of cool, winter light splashing against the blue sofa in the living room. Just ten minutes…and then he’d get some more work done.

Yuuri.

Someone was calling him but he was too busy washing his ruby plates. They were so beautiful when they were clean and sparkly. Who had decided to put food on them in the first place? That’s not what these plates were for. They were for admiring, for getting lost in a deep hue. Lam understood that, but he was so annoying. He wanted to take the plates away from Yuuri. They were his. He got them fair and square. Who cares if they were family? Lam could get his own ruby plates…

Yuuri!

Lam didn’t like Yuuri saying that to him. He was angry, yelling at Yuuri, and he wouldn’t stop. His mother frowned at Yuuri. Did she think he was being selfish? Well… it couldn’t hurt to give him just
Yuuri! Wake up!

“What?!” Yuuri jumped when he found a shadow hanging over him. He rubbed his eyes. It was dark.

“You fell asleep here.”

The shadow was Phichit. He groaned when he remembered the dishes. He had wanted to do some chores, maybe even take a break. But he had wasted time sleeping. “How long was I out,” he asked groggily, hoping that he could still fit something in.

“Judging by your chic choice in clothing,” Phichit said, plucking at the stealth suit’s sleeve, “I’m guessing since early this afternoon.”

“What?”

“Yuuri,” Phichit sighed and the worry etching his features were even clear to see in the dark. He pulled out his phone and typed something in before handing it to Yuuri.

It was an aerial video of him running across rooftops like he had just seen death himself with Victor close behind. He couldn’t focus on what the reporter was saying. Seeing the chase from this perspective was strange and made his muscles ache at the memory.

“Why would you do this job in the daytime?” Phichit asked, “Why didn’t you wait until night? There would’ve been better cover and less witnesses.”

Now that Yuuri was starting to wake up, he remembered that he was ticked with Phichit, that he didn’t want to talk to him. He was still sorting out how he felt about Phichit lying to him. If he was being honest, there wasn’t much to sort out because it was mostly anger that he felt. At this point, he was just looking for reasons to not be angry and those were hard to come by, especially since the more he thought about it, the more questions he had for Phichit.
He couldn’t even ask those questions because something told him that he wouldn’t get a straight answer. He wouldn’t get the truth. And that made getting over his anger laughable. He stood up and stretched before taking his stealth suit’s gloves off to start the dishes. He heard Phichit suck his teeth quietly behind him but he ignored that too.

“I get it. You’re angry at me. But I’ve been here for you since the beginning and we’ve always done this a certain way. We’ve never taken unnecessary risks like this before. I’m just trying to understand why you’re doing this now.”

“You told me weeks ago that this piece would be transported to that technological hell-hole too, so I wanted to get it before that happened.”

“Ok, but there are better ways! You jumped the gun! It wasn’t due to be transported for another couple of days!”

“But I still got it.”

“Y-yeah but, Yuuri, did you really want to be all over the news?”

“Just because I didn’t do things your way doesn’t mean it wasn’t the right way,” Yuuri grumbled as he thrust a plate in the dishwasher.

“I never said that, and you know that, Yuuri. I just want you to consider your safety. Winter Torch was after you, right? In the day he uses flames. He can do a lot more damage to you during the day than he would during the night with his water and ice powers. You remember last time,” he said darkly and Yuuri felt the ghost of a burn on his leg. “You could get seriously hurt if you keep taking chances like this.”

“If we’re talking about tactical advantage,” Yuuri dropped his sponge as he remembered the flames from earlier. They were tall, and Yuuri was sure he would be crying out in agony as soon as he touched them. But he didn’t feel a thing. It was like the flames weren’t there at all. Maybe Victor only wanted to scare Yuuri into not jumping and didn’t actually want to hurt him? It made sense. Victor didn’t have a reason for trying to fry him with the same flames he used on villains like Pyre. He smiled. “I think I’ll be stealing during the day from now on.”

“W-what?! Yuuri, why would you say that?!” Phichit blustered.
“If I steal during the day, Victor has to hold back because he doesn’t want to hurt me. Fighting someone who is constantly holding back is an advantage for me. I just have to get close to him for hand to hand. But if I risk going at night, he doesn’t have to hold back. Water and ice doesn’t need to do damage to be effective. He could trap me in less than a second.”

“Yuuri, that’s insane! We could figure out a way for you to—”

“No, I want to do this my way. I want to get this job over with so I can leave Spring Gate.” He shut the dishwasher and limped out of the kitchen.

“Ok, but—”

“I’m going out.”

“Yuuri, you’ll get hurt. Victor will hurt you. Maybe not on purpose but…” Phichit reached for Yuuri’s shoulder and he pulled away.

“I don’t care, Phichit. I’ve been burned before. It’s not a big deal.”

This particular piece of Orion was being kept in the basement of a museum. It was too easy to take, but he called Chris, just in case, since he was still sore from that afternoon. He told Phichit that he would start stealing during the day, but this was an exception. He couldn’t steal from such a public place during the day because the likelihood of someone getting hurt was higher with all the museum patrons present. He and Chris were lucky though, because Winter Torch didn’t show up. There didn’t even seem to be any security officers on duty, so they were done within the hour. They had no troubles getting out of the museum either. Apparently, something was drawing the heroes’ attention elsewhere, which suited Yuuri just fine. When they both left through the back entrance, to Yuuri’s surprise, Chris kissed Yuuri’s hand and winked before turning to leave.

Yuuri rolled his eyes and thought about how if he had known Dick Cartier sooner, he would’v
He decided not to take his motorcycle home because, judging by the explosions in the air, traffic was not going to be merciful. *Tis the season,* he thought as a particularly loud boom shook the buildings around him. Villains tended to lose their minds during the holidays. When the city got like this, officers often did random vehicle checks too… Yuuri didn’t want to have to explain to a police officer why his book bag weighed thirty pounds. He would have to hoof it.

“*How are you holding up, Victor?*”

“If I don’t think about it, I’m doing excellent,” Victor told Yakov through his comm link with as much optimistic bite as possible as he sprinted uptown. He had been fighting since the morning. The alien tiger that was running loose in a cafe. The enormous yet that disappeared as quickly as it had appeared. Red Specter. Ms. Million. An alien-banshee like creature. And that was just during daylight hours.

To start off the night’s revelry, a giant spider was tormenting civilians uptown. Then hell broke loose all at once: serial bomber Bombard, markswoman Ginny Clay, the acrobatic thief Fanfare, and a vicious rabbit-gator all decided to make an appearance at the same time.

It would’ve been easier if there was at least *one* more five star hero at History Maker. Hell, even a four star could’ve handled the tiger or the rabbit-gator. But unfortunately, Victor was stuck on a wild helicopter goose chase because Spotlight and 88, the only two at the agency who had five star aspirations, weren’t quite ready for jobs like this yet.

The night’s events pushed Victor’s hand though. After all, he couldn’t be in more than one place at once. He sent 88 and half a police unit to track down the rabbit-gator which was somehow multiplying. Spotlight and the other half after Fanfare, and two police units to corner Ginny Clay, just until he could get around to each incident. He technically shouldn’t have left three star heroes alone with four star jobs, but he had no other choice. He made quick work of each task, moving his way from the spider (who he jokingly referred to as Aragog to Yakov’s confusion) all the way to Fanfare within two hours.

As expected, 88 and Spotlight dealt with both situations admirably. All rabbit-gators were in custody and Spotlight was holding his own against Fanfare when Victor arrived to help. Spotlight tried to
convince Victor to let them keep fighting. Victor truly wanted to give them their moment to shine, but there was no time. He still had Ginny Clay to deal with and she was alone with all those officers on the other side of town.

It was rough because Victor was exhausted—his power dwindling inside him—but he managed to finish the fight with Fanfare by putting icy weights around his nimble ankles. He made a note of that for the next time he met Red Specter. He briefly thanked the officers and reassured a pouting Spotlight before signaling to the helicopter.

The ladder dropped and, with leaden feet and heaving lungs, he started climbing. *Keep pushing,* he told himself. He needed to last the night. His arms wailed in protest as he hoisted himself up, and he thought longingly for Makkachin. Over the din of the helicopter rotor, Victor could just make out Spotlight’s shouting voice. *What now?* He looked down, trying to find Spotlight in the crowd of officers. When he did, he saw a pair of bright yellow eyes. His breath caught in his throat.

*The yeti.*

It screeched like a monstrous ape. Victor lost his grip on the ladder and fell hard on his back. His eyes watered in pain but he forced himself to his feet. The yeti had bright red fur and was taller than the street lamp it was standing next to. It snorted, puffs of white air spilling from its saucer sized nostrils.

“*Everyone get back!*” Spotlight ordered. Victor struck his hands out, sending frozen shards at the beast’s chest. They stuck and the yeti howled in pain before turning away behind a building.

“*Not so fast, Curious George!*” Victor muttered as he ran after it, but when he rounded the building, the Yeti was gone. Completely gone. His heart pounded and he tried to clear his head. There was no way a giant bright red monster could disappear down a completely open street. He swiveled his head but only saw upturned cars, scattering people, and officers shouting orders and signaling to their partners. Human chaos.

He didn’t have time for this. There was still Ginny Clay. He tried to ignore the aching in his back as he made his way back to the ladder and climbed up.

He arrived in ten minutes, and he could hear Ginny’s mad cackling even from up in the helicopter. But, perhaps that was just a memory manifesting as reality when he saw her atop the hood of a burning police car. There was a pool of discarded weapons around her and she was firing relentlessly at the officers surrounding her. Victor thought with a grimace that Pyre, her younger brother, would be proud. Victor noticed the one-sided barrage and realized the officers were holding out and not
engaging, just like Victor had requested. It was time to give them a break.

From the helicopter, he lifted his hands upwards as if raising a window, and a wall of ice appeared on the ground between Ginny and the officers. The officers peeked out from behind their shields and car doors to see why the firing had stopped, and cheered when they saw Victor jumping down from the helicopter. Ginny only laughed harder.

“How’s your brother doing,” Victor taunted.

“How are your stitches doing?” She shot back, “You didn’t rip them after having fun with everyone else today, did you?”

“You know, I’m tired after all that fun, so let’s cut the small talk.”

Victor stomped his foot and Ginny shot her rifle. They were both quick—Ginny gripped by a giant fist made of ice, and raised into the air away from the rifle, and a bullet barely missing Victor’s left eye. He gasped in pain as his back screamed from the effort of dodging Ginny’s shot. But it was over. He slumped against the nearest police car and nodded at Ginny who was shrieking obscenities, struggling against the icy fist.

“She’s all yours,” he said to the nearest officer, and she patted him on the shoulder before closing in on Ginny with three more partners. Moving his fingers, he carefully allowed the fist to open, so the officers could safely apprehend Ginny.

Apparently, she wanted to go down swinging. She kicked and tried to pull away. Her manic screaming concerned Victor and he stood up to go help the two officers trying to restrain her. Another officer patted his back.

“It’s fine,” he said. “We can handle this much. I heard you had a rough day, so why don’t you take a break?”

Victor looked at Ginny throwing her wild mane that was so like her brother’s, and then back at the officer. He smiled. “I appreciate that, but…”

“The paramedics are almost here. If you’re hurt, you can—”
He caught one glimpse of motion. He heard one gasp. He pushed the officer talking to him down at the same time he heard the gun fire.

Gritting his teeth, he destroyed the gun Ginny had stolen with ice. Then he raised clawed hands in front of him and twisted. Jagged ice encased her hands and feet, rendering them useless. She screamed and fell over. He kept his arms in the air, panting, still watching Ginny. He watched the officers drag her into the back of an armored truck. They closed it. He watched more officers crowd around the one Ginny had overpowered. The truck pulled off.

Now it was over. His hands fell limp at his sides. He took a step back and his knee buckled. He braced himself on a police car and chuckled to himself as he bent over. That was hell, he thought to himself as he eyed a strange pattern on the concrete. He had never worked so long. He had never been so busy. But he did it. Strategized that himself.

The pattern on the concrete was growing. He let Red Specter go, but that was the only loss for the day… besides the red yeti. He could catch a yeti. It was red. Hard to miss. Like the red pattern growing on the concrete. Drops of blackish red, like scattered rubies.

He could catch Red too, no problem.

He sucked in a shallow breath and whimpered when he felt it stab at his side. The drops on the concrete grew. He touched his side gingerly and looked at his stained gloves. Oh. Not again.

He was bleeding. Wasn’t it in the same place as last time? Crap. He would need stitches again. But not here. Victor looked up when he heard sirens. The officers were talking amongst themselves, crowding around 88 and Spotlight who had just arrived. They weren’t even paying attention to him. Lucky. He shuffled away, not quite clear on where he wanted to go. Anywhere was fine. Then he’d call Yakov. He limped past a few buildings, and turned down an alleyway. Was anyone paying attention to him? He hoped not. Victor eased himself onto the ground. He would just sit here and rest. And then call Yakov. He would close his eyes. For just a second. It had been such a long day…

* *

Yuuri kept jogging across rooftops, sticking to the shadows and taking advantage of the chaos of the night. People were scrambling to take cover inside buildings or else running in the streets in search of their loved ones. Evacuation during hero related crises were usually taken very seriously in Spring Gate and often resulted in the streets resembling a ghost town. The holiday season was an entirely
different monster though. It was always chaos. He jumped down into a dark alley, figuring he should change into some civilian clothes now that there were so many people around. Just as he reached the shadows, he tripped over something and he threw his hands out against the brick wall to catch himself.

*What the…?*

He looked down to see what tripped him. Someone was laying down, back slumped against a dumpster. Yuuri’s heart caught in his throat as he took a cautious step closer. Did someone get hurt and miss the paramedics? He couldn’t see the person’s face in this lighting at all… he stooped and reached for their knee to give them a gentle shake.

Two flashes of white light pierced the darkness—two burning eyes. Yuuri gasped and leapt back. Before he could escape, ice crusted over his right shoulder and cemented his foot to the ground.

“Aaargh!” His fingers scrambled at his shoulder, at the cold that was so intense that it was hot, and the ice started to chip. He batted frantically at it until it was all gone and yanked his foot free too. He heard Victor hiss something, and then Yuuri was drenched from head to toe. He shook his hands to get rid of some of the excess and took a step back, but… he couldn’t leave.

Something was wrong.

It shouldn’t have been that easy to break that ice… even the rose Victor had given him was still intact, months after it was made.

Victor was hurt again.

*Just my luck.* Victor thought bitterly as Red Specter swam in and out of his vision. He aimed more ice at Red’s hand this time but Red dodged. He sucked his teeth and tried to steady his vision. Tried to regain his strength. It was pointless. He couldn’t move.

He wondered what Red would do now that he, Victor, was completely immobilized. His heart beat so fast he felt nauseous. He didn’t want this to happen, but he couldn’t stop it. He watched Red get down on his knees and take something out of his belt. He didn’t want to look but he kept his eyes
trained on Red’s every movement, watched him put something on his head.

It was a light, and now it looked like a small star was fixed to the head of a shadow. Victor shivered as his breathing started ripping out of him. Red reached for him and Victor slapped his hand away. *This is not happening. Why is he doing this?* Victor screwed his eyes shut and when he opened them again Red was holding his hands up as if in surrender. He had to do something to make Red go away. He felt as weak as roadkill. His power felt so small inside him. But he still pulled at it, willing it to materialize.

He felt the ground underneath them frost over and delicate snowflakes floated in front of Red’s face.

“*Tchyo za ga’lima?!!*” Victor swore. That was all he had left in him. A few tufts of snow, and he was completely spent. It was disgraceful. He could no longer control his breathing, each inhale ripping his side in two.

Red gingerly took Victor’s hand in both of his and squeezed.

He leaned in and pressed his forehead to Victor’s.

*What?* It was just a second. He could’ve imagined it. That timid touch. That second when they were close. And now Red was looking at him again with Victor’s hand in his as if waiting for something. Red pulled out a phone with one hand, still keeping Victor’s hand in the other, and typed something before showing him.

*Who did this?*

Victor blinked at the bright screen, not sure he understood. “Ginny Clay,” he choked out and Red nodded. He put the phone back in his pocket and began pulling at the frayed pieces of Victor’s suit, exposing the wound. Then, he took things out of his utility belt. Victor hadn’t realized that he had calmed down until he started panicking again.

Red took his gloves off. His hands were soft and snowy, a hint of olive, and seeing the natural hue instead of the black fabric seemed sinister and foreboding. Red poured something that stung Victor’s nose on his hands, rubbed them together and procured latex gloves. He snapped them on. He pulled out a thick roll of what looked like gauze and held it up to his mouth before tapping it on Victor’s. Victor didn’t understand and tried to look away again. Red tapped the gauze under Victor’s chin and when Victor opened his mouth to tell Red to stop, Red pushed the roll firmly between his teeth.
Victor screamed, but it sounded like a strangled gargle behind the gauze. With one more firm hand squeeze, Red started to move more quickly.

He doused Victor’s side in something that felt almost as bad as Pyre’s flames and Victor choked out another strangled scream. A spasm rolled up his back. He needed someone to come get him. Yakov. Anybody. He needed help. He blinked, tears gushing down his face and looked up at the dark sky, which was closing in on him, a small space becoming so tight and compact around him. Closing in, building pressure, making a bomb…getting colder…

He gasped in vain for air. The gauze was choking him. Red put a hand on his forehead and leaned in again. Very close. He could see grey threaded into the black… so it was Pandora’s iron after all. Red was so close that Victor felt warm. That was strange. He should feel cold since he was shot, but he felt as if he were taking a bath. His vision was tainted with the faintest pink—blood?—and Red leaned even closer, his cheek next to Victor’s ear.

“Relax.”

And he did. The soft whisper ran through him, pulling strings and carrying out the simple command. His breathing slowed instantly from frantic gusts to calm whispers. His muscles fell flat in him, and the warmth in him stirred. He would be disturbed at how fast his body calmed down—he knew it was logical to be disturbed—but he physically couldn’t be. Even though he was very aware of the pain tearing his abdomen in two, he felt… calm.

And Red set back to work. Victor trained his eyes on the sky, not wanting to see Red’s hands and, thankfully, it didn’t feel so close anymore. The pain, prodding, and tugging made him feel nauseous. A terrible pull made him whimper against the gauze, and then he heard a tiny clink. The smell of iron floated in the air around them and he groaned—the thought of all the blood made him woozy.

It was almost unbearable and as the searing sensation of stitches came next, Victor was glad he had the gauze to bear down on. Otherwise, he didn’t think he would make it.

The spot Red was fixing felt like a white hot brand when it seemed to finally be over. Red removed the gauze from Victor’s mouth then took his comm link. Victor was too far gone to protest. Then it was back in his ear, static running before he heard Yakov as if from the depth of the sea.

“Victor? You were supposed to check in when you finished up with Ginny Clay. What’s your ETA?”
Through his bleary pink vision, Victor saw Red busying himself putting his light and tools away.

“Victor?”

It was unclear to Victor what he should do as a hero in that moment. Winter Torch, the symbol of justice and perfection should tell Yakov about Red immediately. But he didn’t feel like a hero. Winter Torch was so far out of reach and this person, Red Specter, was right here next to him, making him feel like… just… Victor. Normal, tired, wounded Victor. Yakov said something again, but Victor was confused—where was Red going?—and he was too tired to keep his eyes open, let alone move his lips.

Chapter End Notes

`Tchyo za ga’lima?: (Russian) "What the fuck?" or "Really?!"
I know a good bit of Japanese, but I know jack squat diddly about other languages.
Sorry if I'm ever not accurate.

It might be a while until I post again. I like to have a certain number of chapters queued up before I post and right now, I'm on thin ice because of work and other junk. Don't worry though! If I disappear, just know it's definitely not for forever. Thank you again for being awesome! <3
Phichit put his phone on the coffee table and stretched out on the sofa. He had just found a suitable job for Scavenger in Spring Gate. Hopefully, he thought as he turned Netflix on, that would keep him satisfied for a while. It would at least keep him from lashing out at the public.

“Not all heroes wear capes,” Phichit muttered to himself, making himself comfortable. But then again, he supposed he was making more work for the actual heroes. Just then, the door opened, and Phichit turned to see Yuuri drift in, and shrug off his heist backpack. It made a large clack sound when it hit the floor so Yuuri must’ve gotten another Orion piece. At least it wasn’t daytime. Yuuri floated into the kitchen with a far off expression on his face. He turned the faucet on and stared at the wall.

“Uh… Yuuri?” Phichit hedged, not wanting to set off a bomb. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah,” Yuuri murmured, which surprised Phichit who fully expected to either be ignored or snapped at. He got up and went to the kitchen to lean on the counter next to him.

“Did something happen?”

“Yeah.”
“Ok… what was it?” Yuuri looked over his shoulder at him, the faucet still running. He looked
flushed and his eyes were unfocused like he had a fever. Phichit was starting to worry.

“I used my power.”

A chill ran down Phichit’s neck and he fought the urge to smile and grab Yuuri. He took a second to
train his voice into an even tone in his mind. “I see. What for?”

Yuuri seemed to realize something and he turned off the faucet. He opened the cabinets and pulled
out a metal mixing bowl. Then, he bent down to grab rubbing alcohol from under the sink. Phichit
shook his head, trying to make sense of it. “Yuuri,” he asked, “what’s happening?” Yuuri didn’t
respond but poured half the bottle of alcohol into the bowl then pulled a pair of bloody gloves out of
his utility belt and threw those in too. Phichit’s eyes widened at them.

“Yuuri, what the hell?! What happened?!”

“I used my power on Victor,” he said.

“Ok! Uh… What the hell? Did you leave any evidence? Do we need to call someone?”

“Phichit,” Yuuri laughed softly and pulled a lighter from one of the drawers. He set the gloves
ablaze. “I used my power to help him, not hurt him.”

Phichit exhaled and threw his hands in his hair in relief. “Why didn’t you just say that…? Why did
Victor need help?”

“Ginny Clay shot him. He was bleeding out in an alley when I found him.”

“Ay, Victor! I swear no one has cheated death more than that man,” he shook his head
sympathetically. He leaned in to get a better look at Yuuri’s face now that he knew what was
happening. Back at the Grand Prix, Yuuri got hazy and weak after using his power. Phichit thought
sourly that this explained why Yuuri was even talking to him. Yuuri was too mentally weak to hold a
grudge right now. “How did it feel,” he asked, figuring he shouldn’t be choosy at this point. “Are
you alright?”

“It was great. And yeah.”
“And Victor? How is he?”

“Probably fine…”

“Was this the first time since…” he trailed off, not wanting to mention Corentin Thomas, the student at the Grand Prix who Yuuri accidentally hurt all those years ago.

“Yeah,” Yuuri confirmed dreamily, picking up on what Phichit meant but seemingly unaffected.

“Wow,” Phichit whistled. “I can’t imagine going that long without using something that’s just so… me.”

“It’s not like I haven’t thought about it. That time in the armored truck… and then again a few nights ago with Chris...I was really close to using my power those times too.” Phichit raised his eyebrows at that, as this was news to him, but he didn’t want to seem too excited. “Both times, everyone’s attention was on me, so it was perfect. I could feel my power reacting...I could’ve used it. I was about to… but I couldn’t.”

Phichit remembered the eerie sensation of Yuuri’s power. You always felt it before Yuuri actually used it. Once you had your attention on him, his power was activated, and you felt warm, kind of dumb, and you were completely unable to look away, whether he decided to actually use it or not. Phichit had only managed to convince Yuuri to use his powers a few times back at the Grand Prix, but it had been years since they had talked about this, years since Yuuri had actually admitted to thinking about his ability.

“Why was this time different?” Phichit asked and watched Yuuri stare at the flames in the bowl. He seemed to be lost in them, his eyes getting foggier. Phichit gently shook Yuuri’s shoulder and he jumped, like he had forgotten Phichit was there. “Yuuri? Why was this time different?”

“Victor needed help,” he said, as if it were obvious.

“Yeah, but I’m still confused. Why did you need to use your power to help him?”

“He was panicking,” Yuuri explained as he leaned on the counter. “He wouldn’t sit still for me even
after I held his hand, so I told him to relax.”

Phichit pursed his lips on a smile that was fighting so hard to betray his face. “You held his hand?”

Yuuri straightened up and reached to pull another big bowl out of the cabinets. He poured the rest of the alcohol in this one and dumped several bloody medical tools into them. He procured some baking soda and dumped the whole box on the flames to put them out.

“I have to go,” he said, and Phichit realized that Yuuri was finally coming to. He, Phichit, was back to being ignored. His heart fell as he followed Yuuri out of the kitchen.

“Where are you going? It’s like two in the morning and you already got two Orion pieces.”

“The hospital.”

And Phichit understood. After getting stitches in a dark alley from a villain, Victor would definitely be taken to a hospital to be examined and he would only let Yuuri touch him, so… Phichit sighed and zoomed in front of Yuuri who gave him a cold look. Yep. Definitely back to normal. *Wait, is this normal for me now?*

“Yuuri, I know you’re still angry with me. And maybe… we can’t be friends like we used to be,” he said, trying to keep his voice strong though his chest ached at the words. “But, I think we should still work together. From a business standpoint, you know?”

Yuuri narrowed his eyes at that and crossed his arms, waiting for Phichit to explain, so he did. “You may not care about cameras anymore, so you don’t need me to wipe them, but you’ll need help with security systems just like the armored truck or Stint’s mansion. I can also provide surveillance—I can tell you who’s in a building and where. You shouldn’t have to go into a dangerous situation blind just because I… I did something to lose your trust. If you’re willing, we could still work together, Yuuri.”

Yuuri seemed to consider it as he looked at Phichit. “If it’s just business, then it’s fine” he said, and turned to go to his room. It hurt, but at least it was something, Phichit thought. And then he remembered.

“Yuuri, one more thing!” and Yuuri turned around at his door.
“I got Lam to agree to service fees! I had to appeal to his ego as a filthy rich socialite. I guess he didn’t want other people in his circle to think he didn’t have money to spare. Peer pressure is a good thing sometimes, don’t you think?”

Yuuri’s cold expression twitched. “And you did that without even murdering him,” he said before closing his bedroom door.

Phichit grinned and plopped back onto the couch. It was very possible that Yuuri was closer to forgiving him than he thought.

*  

As Yuuri suspected, he got called in to treat Victor. It was Boss’ request, as Victor was unconscious, a hand towel covering his face to protect his identity while he was powered down. If he was being honest, he desperately wanted to lie down and sleep off this lingering feeling of weakness. He felt as if he would topple over at any second, but Victor was the priority. He knew his stitch work was fine, but he wanted to be absolutely sure that nothing else was wrong with Victor. Also, he had a feeling that Boss wouldn’t take too kindly to Yuuri fainting in the examination room. Yuuri glanced over his shoulder at Boss as he set up Victor’s IV.

Boss was intimidating. He was short, balding, and had a permanent scowl on his face like a grumpy old man, but something about him still made Yuuri very nervous. It was like Boss knew exactly who Yuuri was but wasn’t going to mention it until it suited him. This was the aura of a retired pro, Yuuri thought. This man had the power to subdue an enemy just by being in the same room as them. He didn’t even need to use his power. He just needed to get a good look at his target and that person would be finished. Yuuri thought avoiding eye contact would be suspicious so he made sure to be friendly and professional as he discussed Victor’s condition with him.

“How can you be so sure that he’ll be ok,” Boss demanded. Yuuri worked hard not to gulp as he finished up with the IV.

“The stitches are actually very neat and clean,” he explained as he walked around the bed to stand in front of Boss. “Also, after running some tests, I can tell that there’s nothing left behind in the wound that we would need to retrieve. Everything else looks good, including his vitals.”

“You misunderstand,” Yakov said as he placed a hand on the railing of Victor’s bed. “I want to know how you, a nurse, can be trusted with this job. There are certain procedures I’m sure only a
doctor knows how to do, like those tests you mentioned. I think that while he’s still unconscious, we should let a professional take a look.”

“I’ve… I’ve treated Winter Torch before,” Yuuri said quietly, feeling his face grow hot and something stirring in his stomach.

“And those were just stitches, which you are perfectly capable of doing. But this time, he was shot, and if there’s any shrapnel or broken bone left in his wound, he could die. I’d rather let a professional check over your work.”

“I am a professional,” Yuuri blurted, and then he realized that the feeling stirring in his stomach was anger. “I’m a professional nurse. We save lives every day. And… I guess that’s still not convincing enough to you, but I’ve been doing this for a very long time,” he stormed and before he could stop it, the anger he had since he was a child began speaking for him. “I was fourteen when I pulled a bullet out of a yakuza member’s heart with a gun pointed to my head. Other doctors were doing their science homework when they were fourteen. Not knowing what to do was never an option for me! I still save lives as if my own is at stake because that’s just what I do. That’s what I’ll always do.”

Yuuri matched Boss’ heavy stare as his heart pounded in his chest. He had no idea how that all came out of his mouth. It was stupid and reckless. He couldn’t take it back. He didn’t want to either. When it came to this, to snatching someone back from death, he knew exactly what he was doing. He wouldn’t let anyone take that away from him. Not even Boss, whose gaze felt like a physical weight pushing him against a wall. His pride may have landed him in a tough spot though.

“So,” Boss finally said, “what you’re saying is, you’ve got this under control.”

“Always.”

“Good,” he grunted. Victor stirred and mumbled under his hand towel. Yuuri and Boss’ attention both snapped to him as he reached feebly for the towel covering his face. Yuuri hurried to his side to hold his hand.

“Winter Torch,” he said. “It’s me, Nurse Katsuki. You’re in the hospital right now, but you’re going to be alright. Boss is here too.”

“Yuuri…” Victor whispered making Yuuri’s heart flutter. This time, he made a point not to look at Boss. There were also a few things he needed to know, he thought as he swallowed nervously. He
couldn’t have a repeat of Corentin Thomas.

“Winter Torch… how do you feel?”

“Like death.”

Yuuri smiled sympathetically. “I’m so sorry. You'll probably have a fever after this, but I’ll take good care of you. How’s your hearing?” Corentin, along with Yuuri’s other classmates from that year reported hearing bells after Yuuri lost control.

“…’s fine.”

“Do you mind if I check your vision?” Some saw pink for weeks, but the last Yuuri heard, Corentin still does. Victor groaned.

“Sorry, but…no, Yuuri.”

He tried not to seem too disappointed in front of Boss. “That’s ok,” he said. “We can do that later when you have more strength to power up. For now, can you tell me what color the hand towel on your face is?”

“’s white,” he mumbled. Relieved, Yuuri smiled and rubbed his hand.

“Good. I’ll run all my tests later, but for now, try to get some rest, ok? You can push the call button if you need me.”

He tried to walk away but Victor was still holding his hand. He looked at their clasped hands and then to Victor’s face under the hand towel.

“Yuuri… am I ok?” His voice sounded small and Yuuri wished he could hold him.

“Without a shadow of doubt,” he said firmly.
“Wow…” he sighed and let Yuuri’s hand go. Yuuri was stuck gazing at Victor and wondering how he could make it all better in that one moment so that Victor didn’t have to worry, when Boss cleared his throat. He jumped and looked at him.

“Will you give us a moment? Dr. Katsuki?” Yuuri blushed.

“I’m not a doctor,” he mumbled and shuffled out of the room.

When Yuuri left, Boss gently removed the hand towel from Victor’s face. Victor thought he looked tired.

“This is my fault,” he said in that gravelly voice. Victor would laugh if he had the strength to, but everything hurt. “I’m stretching you too thin.”

“Who else is there,” Victor rasped. “’s my job, Yakov.”

“We should have more heroes at the agency by now. But instead you’re doing all the heavy lifting. You could’ve been killed today.”

“I’ll be alright,” Victor said. Even though Yakov was so imposing to others, Victor knew what kind of heart he had. He didn’t want Yakov to worry.

“Who did this to you, Victor?”

“Surprise, surprise,” he coughed, “Ginny Clay.”

“No,” he said. “Who patched you up in that alley? Tell me.”

Victor hesitated, thinking about the pain that paralyzed him and the forced calm that saved him.
About a star on the head of a shadow. He thought about warm hands squeezing his and a soft touch on his forehead.

A chilling whisper in his ear. Relax.

“Red Specter,” he said.

Yakov didn’t say anything but Victor could tell he was grinding his teeth. Yakov leaned back in his chair and stared at the TV for a while. Victor closed his eyes—whatever Yakov felt about that, he would know in due time. Maybe he, Victor, would be sure of how he felt by then too. He was definitely curious about Red’s power. Obviously, he had the ability to control people but, based on his past crimes, it didn’t seem like he used it much. It didn’t seem too far-fetched to say that he refrained from using it out of compassion. After all, he had just saved Victor’s life. He groaned at the thought and tried to clear his head. He could hear what Yakov was watching: a news story about a saltwater kelpie that seemed to be drowning. Yakov watched in silence before turning the TV off which made Victor open his eyes again. Yakov was leaning forward, hands folded in obvious thought.

“How much do you know about Yuuri Katsuki?”

“What?”

“Your kind-hearted nurse, Yuuri Katsuki. What do you know?”

Victor rolled his eyes. “Nothing,” he huffed, and even that made his side ache. “Why?”

“I don’t like him.”

“Why not?!” Victor felt indignant.

“Something’s not right about him. I’ll be sure to ask Lilia to do a full investigation into him later. I want to know what he’s hiding.”

“You’re paranoid.”
Yakov shook his head and stared at the door behind him as if Yuuri were listening on the other side. He huffed and turned to lean closer to Victor. “Normal people aren’t as aggressive as he is, Victor. With a power like mine, people naturally shrink away from me. It’s a primal fear. They can subconsciously sense that I can take their power away from them so they avoid me. But he wanted to let me know he wasn’t afraid of me. He made a point of challenging me. For what?”

“Tsk. You just don’t like being beat.”

“Did he tell you he used to work for the yakuza?”

Victor froze. “What?”

“Mmhm. Straight from the horse’s mouth. Like I said. Something’s not right, and I’m going to follow my gut on this one. I don’t want just anyone treating you.”

“Yakov, you softie. I’m sure there’s—”

“In the mean-time,” he interrupted Victor and sat back in his chair, “hit the call button so Hitman Katsuki can refresh your pain meds. Your hurt face is pitiful.”

*

Victor felt stronger the next day. It seemed that he was healing quickly because of his powers so, after running some tests, Yuuri assured him that he would make a full recovery in just a few days. He was being discharged that night though, because Victor insisted on it, despite Yuuri’s vehement protests. The city needed him, after all.

For some reason— he knew why—he felt embarrassed talking to Yuuri and ended up rambling. He asked about the rose he gave to a nurse for Yuuri and Yuuri assured him that he received it and thanked him for it which made Victor feel even more embarrassed. It didn’t help that several other nurses were crowded around Yuuri to see Victor off. He wanted to talk to Yuuri, alone, maybe even ask about the yakuza, but he could feel Yakov’s eyes boring into the back of his head. It was time to go. As Yuuri waved at him from the reception desk, Victor hesitated.
“Yuuri… your friend made an Instagram for you, right?”

“I—uh—yes,” he stammered, an adorable blush coloring his cheeks. A nurse, Noor if Victor remembered correctly, folded his arms and gave Yuuri a look as he bit his lip. “I don’t use it though…”

“Why not?”

“It’s… it’s embarrassing.”

“I don’t think so! I think it’s charming. You’re very photogenic.”

“You hear that, Yuuri?” Another nurse piped up and nudged Yuuri’s side. “Photogenic, he said.”

Yakov grunted and straightened his tie. “Let’s go, Winter Torch.”

“Just a second,” Victor said, waving a hand at him as he turned back to Yuuri. “I’d really like to talk to you more so… maybe you could give it a try?”

“You want to—I mean—to me?” Noor not so subtly elbowed Yuuri in the ribs as two other nurses tried to hide their giggling. “I… ok.”

Victor grinned and gave Yuuri’s hands a quick squeeze. Then, before he could convince himself not to, he kissed Yuuri’s left hand. “Thanks, doc.” Yuuri’s mouth opened a little in surprise, his beautiful brown eyes going wide for just a second. Yes!

He winked at Yuuri, too happy to care about the other nurses’ excited jeering and whistles, before jogging to catch up with Yakov.

“I’m not a doctor! And no running while you’re recovering!” Yuuri reprimanded and Victor chuckled. Yuuri bounced back quicker than Victor thought he would.
When Victor put the key in his apartment door, he heard Makkachin bark and run for the door. He smiled at the sweet sound and waited.

“It’s safe, I’ve got her!” Axle called from inside. He was pup-sitting for Victor since he had been so preoccupied with the city. Axle was rarely busy as he was only a three star hero and had no interest in climbing the ladder like Spotlight or 88. At least he didn’t have to worry about getting shot.

Victor opened the door and cooed at his sweet pup who wiggled and barked in Axle’s muscled arms. He didn’t want Makkachin to accidentally rip his stitches, but he really wanted to play with her. It seemed like forever since he last saw her. He put his keys up and scratched her ears.

“You’re such a good baby!” He praised her and she barked. “Thank you so much for taking care of her while I was out, Axle.”

Axle grinned, and even though his face was heavily scarred—a gem dragon fight gone sour—he was like literal sunshine. “It was no problem at all! She’s the best!”

“Yes she is!” Victor nuzzled his nose into her head and she licked his chin.

“She’s been fed and walked, and I went ahead and gave her a bath because she found a really nice, icy mud puddle this morning. I also watered your plants and started a pot of soup for you.”

“Ahh, Axle, why are you so amazing?”

“It’s nothing!” He let Makkachin go and she sat down on Victor’s feet to rest her curly head on his stomach. “Oh yeah! Yuri came by to check on you.”

Victor gasped and stopped ruffling Makkachin’s ears. “What?! When?!”

“This afternoon!” He beamed, “As an honorary member of your family, I decided to let him in, but as a hero, I handcuffed him to your bathroom sink. He’s asleep now.”
“W—what?”

“Here’s the key,” he said and handed it to Victor. “Let me know if you want to arrange a police transport for him. See you later, Victor! Get well soon!”

Victor gawked at the key and back at Axle who was bundling up and out the door before Victor could gather his thoughts.

“Yuri!” he called and Makkachin barked, scampering off for the bathroom. Victor followed and found Yuri curled up on the bathroom floor with his wrist cuffed to a pipe. “Gav-no!” he breathed. “Yuri! Wake up!”

The teen stirred and Makkachin licked his cheek. His green eyes flew open. “Where is that gear-headed shit for brains freak? I’ll kill him,” he snarled.

“Any other hero would’ve immediately called the cops on you, so you should thank him,” Victor said and dropped the key next to Yuri who snatched it up. “You’re lucky History Maker is the kind of organization it is.”

“Victor,” Yuri said as he freed himself and sat up. “You’re clearly alive, so let’s not waste time talking about your condition.”

“How thoughtful,” Victor rolled his eyes and eased himself down to sit on the edge of the tub.

“I’m serious, Victor. I just heard something pretty bad. The guys I worked for are spread out all over town, which is why it’s taken this long to get back to you. You told me to sever ties with them, but it’s not that simple. There’s a hierarchy system. Each boss is in a different place and I have to go to each one in person to tell them I want out or else it won’t do me any good. And of course, there are the fights…”

“Fights? You’ve been fighting with these guys?”

“What do you think?! You can’t just quit a gang like this. It’s not some after school program! But that’s why it’s been taking so long. Anyways, the latest boss, was a bitch in Detroit, that giant, Olivia.”
“Olivia?” Victor got chills as he remembered the note Red Specter left him: *Walters, Graham, and Olivia wanted you to have this. Not really but… “Are you sure that was her name?”*

“I know who I worked for, Victor, just listen! She didn’t really care about me leaving, which was fine, so I stuck around because I was tired after going all the way to Detroit. But while I was there, I heard a really familiar name come up. Kazuya.”

Victor closed his eyes and shook his head, warding off nightmares. “Jesus, no…”

“I don’t know a lot of concrete details, but I’m guessing that this gang doesn’t just steal luxury cars. They provide transportation for trafficking too. From what I could gather, there’s going to be a big transport on Monday night.”

“Monday? That’s in two days!”

“You have the home court advantage though. They’re taking people *out* of Spring Gate so maybe someone can set a trap for when they come.”

“Someone?” Victor stood up and Makkachin snuffed in surprise. “By someone, you mean me, right?”

“No, old man, I don’t. With what little information I could get, I’m pretty sure this job falls somewhere between three and four stars. I don’t even know what they’re packing so it could easily turn into a five.”

“Yura, *please*, have you met me?” Victor marched out of the bathroom for his phone. He needed to start a plan with Yakov. “I’m *the* five star hero. These guys are nothing.”

“You’re *the* wounded five star hero with a bullet hole in his stomach!” Yuri had rushed out of the bathroom after him to stand in front of him. “Look, the only reason why I told you and not anyone else is because you’re the only person I could go to. You saw what happens when other heroes see me,” he said holding up the handcuff key. “You need to tell someone about this. You can’t do this alone.”
“I’ve been doing this alone since I was twenty-one,” Victor said as he pulled up routes from Detroit to Spring Gate. “Olivia’s got nothing.”

“Are you kidding me?! Were you even listening?”

“Of course. You mentioned Olivia and the possibility of more weapons, etcetera…”

“And what I said about Olivia?”

“Yes, Yuri, I heard. Even though she’s clearly evil, mentioning her weight was highly unnecessary.”

“Her weight?! No, Victor, not a giant woman, a woman giant! Olivia is a giantess! She’s more than twenty fucking feet tall!”

“For the love of— aargh!” Victor threw his phone onto the couch in frustration. His job was never easy.

“Do you get it now?! I’m sure you could handle this on your own, normally, but this isn’t a job for a wounded hero to take solo. You need someone with four star skills to take the lead on this one.”

“You’re not talking about yourself, are you,” Victor looked at him cautiously. Yuri’s power, sonic boom, was a wild cannon—he didn’t have the type of control over it that this job, or any job, required. Yuri narrowed his eyes and looked as if he were swallowing something bitter.

“No,” he spat.

“Then who?!”

“I don’t know, Victor! Figure it out! You’re the hero aren’t you?! Stop asking me for answers!”

“Watch Makka for me,” he said grabbing his phone and heading for the door. “I’m going to talk to Yakov.”
“I’ll drive.”

“Makka—”

“She can come too! Jesus! You’re not driving when you’re practically dying. You’re like a walking doughnut hole!” Yuri growled and gathered up Makkachin’s leash.

They got in Victor’s car and Yuri sped to History Maker, making the trip in five minutes when it usually took Victor fifteen. He parked and let Victor out. Victor wanted to run, but he could hear Yuuri’s reprimanding voice in his head. He allowed himself to walk briskly to the elevator which seemed to take a lifetime to arrive. When he was finally on the right floor, he wasn’t surprised to find Yakov working late in his office. He looked up at Victor in shock, his reading glasses sliding down his nose.

“Vitya! What’s wrong?”

“Yakov, we need to talk.” And he told Yakov everything. About Yuri, Olivia, and Kazuya, and even the note Red Specter had left in the truck before. Yakov frowned at that bit of information and looked ready to scold Victor but he pressed on, telling Yakov that they needed a capable team of heroes for this fight. Yakov steepled his fingers on his desk and was silent.

“Well?” Victor asked. “What’s the plan? I was thinking that if we tell Spotlight and 88 about this, they would be able to convince Axle and Felix to come. I can supervise and provide backup, so that covers our plan of attack. Yuri thinks they’re making a pickup but it’s very possible that they’ll still have some victims in tow. We need to figure out safety measures for them during the confrontation.”

“Victor,” Yakov said.”

“What?”

“What route are they taking to Spring Gate?”

“I don’t know yet but—”
“What are the license plate numbers and details on the vehicles they’re using?”

“I don’t know, Yakov but—”

“What does Olivia look like?”

“Over twenty feet tall.”

“And? What else? There are plenty of giants in Michigan. Do you have any other intel?”

“Yuri can fill me in on that.”

“What about her drivers? Do you know how many there are, what they look like, or what their abilities are? Do you know what time on Monday night they’re leaving?”

“I told you there isn’t much to go on,” Victor snapped, getting impatient. “But this is still doable. We have to do this.”

“No, Victor, it would’ve been doable if you weren’t injured. You, a five star hero, are perfectly capable of working on little to no intel. But the others are not. If we did this, we would be asking Spotlight and 88—because let’s face it, Axle and Felix won’t agree to it because it’s too dangerous for them—to take point on a potentially five star operation. They could get seriously injured or worse. You won’t be able to stop that as you’ve just escaped death yourself.”

“So we sit and do nothing?!”

“Don’t act like that, I get enough of it from Yuri. We can act once we have more information on this, but it likely won’t be on Monday. We just don’t have the resources, especially since there’ve been so many villains running around. Setting things on fire, blowing things up, shooting at cops, stitching up unconscious heroes,” he snarled as he rose from his chair to round his desk. He stood in front of Victor and crossed his arms on his chest. “Not to mention hell’s creatures wreaking havoc at every opportunity. Yetis, mutant tigers, and giant spiders...We’ve got our hands full with several immediate dangers and the only thing we can do is take this one step at a time.”
“Yakov,” Victor said, feeling sick. “we just can’t do that. Kazuya…”

“I won’t tell you that we can’t save everyone, Victor, because if anyone can, it’s you. It’s just not the right time. Rest up. Recover. And don’t do anything reckless.”

“Yakov…” Victor’s chest felt empty.

“I’m sorry, Vitya. I really am.”

* 

Victor’s head spun as the elevator descended to the first floor. Yuri was waiting for him out front but he couldn’t find the strength to go back to the car. These days, horrible, fragmented memories of Kazuya kept creeping back to him. It used to just be the nightmares. But now, it seemed Kazuya was still alive. Still experimenting on people. Now that Victor had the power to get revenge and stop Kazuya himself, to make sure he never hurt anyone again, he couldn’t.

There was no one at History Maker who could help him. He took out his phone and dialed Chris who picked up on the first ring.

“Is this a booty call?”

“No, but it’s an emergency. Where are you right now?”

“A holding cell in a German airport. Why?”

“Chris! What?! What happened?”

“I flew out after a job and I guess they thought my passport wasn’t all that convincing. I can’t be certain but I’m sure it’s some similar bureaucratic nonsense. I’ll be out soon though. I don’t think they know I’m ferrokinetic, otherwise they wouldn’t have put me in a normal prison. I was actually able to snag my phone because of that little oversight. Anyway, what’s the emergency, love?”
“I… nothing. I’ll figure it out.”

“Are you sure? I was planning on playing nice for a while but I don’t mind breaking out.”

“No, don’t do that,” Victor said firmly. He didn’t want Chris to add airport jailbreak to his long list of crimes. “I’ve got this.”

“If it’s professional help you’re looking for,” Chris purred, and Victor slumped over to the reception desk to cradle his head in his hand. The neat haired receptionist gave him a sympathetic look. “You should talk to an information broker. They can connect you to someone. Like maybe a vigilante. For the right price of course.”

“Oh my god, that’s it. Thank you, Chris!”

“Love you,” Chris blew a kiss into the phone and hung up. Victor got back on the elevator for the basement level, some vestiges of hope stirring inside of him. It should’ve been obvious. His two main problems were lack of manpower and lack of information. He could get both from an info broker. This was the first time that he actually felt lucky enough to be in contact with one. He got out, and paced in the empty parking lot as he dialed Agni’s number. They had not spoken in ages. The line died three times. Come on, pick up, pick up! Finally, it connected.

“The injured should rest, Winter Torch. Don’t you think?” Agni’s snarky voice sounded through the phone.

“Listen, Agni, this is an emergency. I need your help with something.”

A strong wind nearly knocked Victor over and when he looked up, a man in a red suit was standing before him. He was wearing a carnival mask with a bright red and gold bird of paradise painted on its black surface. He tucked a cell phone into his pants pocket. Victor noticed that the line on his own phone died.

“What’s the emergency, Victor?”

Chapter End Notes
Gav-no (Russian): Shit!

I don't think there are others, but let me know if I goofed. Also, the last part was not a goof. Phichit does say Victor's name at the end. Hope you guys liked it!!
A Slice of Swiss Cheese

Chapter Summary

Victor needs a keikaku*
*keikaku means plan.

Chapter Notes

*rushes in weeks late, hair a mess, stacks of unorganized docs spilling out of my arms, and a piece of toast in my mouth* I'M HERE! I'M LATE BUT I'M HERE! I SWEAR I haven't forgotten about this fic. It's just been super busy. As always, thank you for sticking with me this far. And a very special thanks to a close friend of mine who read this nonsense and gave me some good advice!! You're an amazing writer and I really appreciate you helping me! <3 <3 <3

Now, without further ado, the train wreck.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“W-what?!” Victor felt as if he had missed a step going down the stairs. “Who — how do you know my name?!”

The man scoffed and adjusted his cuff link. “Please. Victor, you said there was an emergency, right? Let’s not waste time.”

“You’re Agni…” Victor looked him up and down, taking in the suit, the mask, the calm composure. Agni was a speedster too, and for some reason, this troubled him—a bizarre chill prickled the back of his neck. “How long have you known who I am? And why is my identity important to you?”

“Long enough,” Agni said, “I’m trusting you with something incredibly important, and I tend to want to get to know the people I put my faith in. But believe me, I don’t take your identity lightly”

The icy air rolling off Victor crackled — by instinct, he powered up just as Agni rushed in. “After all this time, you still haven’t given me good reason to trust you. What is Red Specter to you?”

“That’s not why you called me, Victor. If you want to know you can trust me, give me that chance. Tell me what’s wrong.” When Victor didn’t answer, he continued. “Let me try to help.”
It was too much at once and, again, Victor had to make a choice. Red Specter spiked his curiosity by stealing millions of dollars’ worth of rubies, all undetected. He held Victor’s attention by showing a kind of compassion and self-sacrifice that he, Victor, didn’t even find in some heroes. Red saved three people from a gem-dragon, over a dozen from traffickers, and then Victor himself. However he felt about Red, whatever competitiveness and frustration Red awoke in Victor, Victor couldn’t deny that Red was special. He didn’t just want to catch Red, he needed to talk to him. He needed to understand him.

But this wasn’t the time for that. People were in danger of suffering the same fate Victor did when he was a child. Abducted and cruelly experimented on, far away from home and with little hope. Now, he had the chance to stop that. He had to take it. He sighed and shook his head in defeat. “I need information,” he admitted.

“You came to the right person then. What do you need to know?”

“There’s a giantess named Olivia who works out of Detroit. I have reason to believe she works in human trafficking and she’s making a move in Spring Gate. I need more intel, but I have nothing to work on.” He explained how History Maker was stretched thin, and how he was the only hero qualified for the job. Agni nodded as he talked and took out his phone halfway through. Victor eyed him, irritated that Agni was dividing his attention.

“Keep going,” Agni said, glancing up when Victor stopped. “I’m listening but I’m taking notes.”

“I need to know their plans so I can stop them. I can usually work without a lot of details but…”

“You’re recovering,” Agni finished for him.

“Yeah.”

“Getting details should be easy enough.” Victor’s heart leapt at that piece of good news. “It sounds like you need someone to go into the field with you too. Are you thinking vigilante or mercenary?”

“Uuh— vigilante.” Victor tried to sound more confident than he actually felt, but he didn’t expect Agni to be so direct about it. It sounded wrong being discussed out loud.
“What’s your price range?”

“My price range? Vigilantes need payment too?”

“Of course. Unfortunately, none of this is free, Victor. Some vigilantes demand money. They need to make a living somehow. But others might want… something else.”

“Like what?”

“Something that you as a five star hero probably can’t afford to do,” he sighed, tucking his phone in his jacket pocket. “Some kind of favor. They’ll want to name it at any time, and that time might be inconvenient for you.”

“Well, I can’t do that!” Victor threw up his hands in exasperation and started pacing.

“Then, I think you need to do what Yakov said and sit this one out until you’ve recovered.” Victor froze and glared at Agni in shock. “Sorry,” he said. “Habit.”

“How much do you know?!” Victor demanded. It was unthinkable. Unacceptable, even. He knew what an info broker was, but for some reason, the cavalier knowledge of Yakov’s identity was crossing a line.

“A lot,” Agni said and Victor’s mouth twitched in anger. It definitely wasn’t a good enough answer. “It’s my job to know, but like I said, I don’t take your identity lightly. So, let’s just focus on the task at hand.”

“If you lay a fingernail—”

“Let’s focus, Victor—”

“You shouldn’t underestimate me just because I came to you for help,” he snapped. “You say you don’t take our identities lightly, but somehow I’m finding that hard to believe!”
“What would you have me do then?” Agni held his arms out as if welcoming anything that might come from Victor.

“The damage is done. And there’s still no acceptable reason for you to know who Boss really is!” Victor fought valiantly against the urge to freeze Agni’s hands off. Victor was starting to regret calling him. Agni shrugged.

“There isn’t, is there? My apologies,” he said calmly as the ground beneath them became glossed over with ice. Agni did not seem daunted. “Again, I urge you to focus. That is if you still want my help.”

“What else is there?! If I’m not mistaken, you just insisted that I stand back and let this happen.” Victor countered, “by the time I recover, people could get hurt or worse! That’s not an option. And now you’re standing in front of me, ever so casually flaunting an inexplicable knowledge of some of the most invulnerable identities, knowledge that can bring real harm to—”

“Winter Torch,” Agni interrupted in a soft voice. “You have my word that neither your identity nor Boss’ identity will fall into the wrong hands. I’m not using this knowledge as leverage. I would never do that.”

Victor rolled his eyes and bit his cheek. “Is there any reason why I should still be here then? Even after you’ve told me that I can’t expect help from anybody?”

“I’m saying you can’t expect free help, Winter. I can’t ask anyone from the underworld to do a job without proper payment. It just doesn’t work that way.”

“What about you?” He turned on Agni who seemed shocked, even from under the mask.

“What do you mean me?”

“You can help,” he asserted, desperate to get the ball rolling, despite his misgivings about Agni. He couldn’t help but think of Agni as a snake, but at least it seemed this snake wasn’t biting the people Victor cared about. At least not yet. And if he did, he would handle this singing bird when he made a full recovery, simple as that. Victor was grasping at straws, but it couldn’t be too much of a stretch if he thought about it. Agni worked closely with plenty of people in the underworld. He was clever, sly, and resourceful. He had a heart… a shaded one, but a heart nonetheless. His care for Red was proof of that. He also had a very useful ability. He would just keep an eye on Agni the whole time. It
could work. It had to work.

“Winter…” Agni bounced nervously on his heel. “I’m sorry, but I don’t feel comfortable doing that. It’s not about the money either. I just… I’m not a hero.”

“What do you think being a hero is, Agni? You just have to be willing to put others before yourself. You can do that.”

Agni shook his head. “I’m not trained to do what you need me to do. I do think that there’s a possibility that these guys will have some victims in tow, and if that’s the case, they’ll be out of luck. Between your injuries, my inexperience, and the bad guys, they’ll be trapped in the crossfire.”

“But you’re a speedster!” Victor pointed at him in accusation.

“Yeah, I’m fast, but that’s it! The Flash makes you think that carrying someone out of a burning building at top speed is easy, but that takes strength that I’ve never had. Dude’s jacked. He’s lumberjack strong and DC never talks about it. If I run at top speed with a normal sized human who doesn’t have super strength, they might get spinal injuries… or I might drop them… I’ve tried it before out of absolute necessity and it was a close call I don’t care to repeat.”

Victor winced at the thought of someone falling on concrete at the speed of light. “Fine.” He was beginning to feel lost. For years, he believed he was the only one Kazuya experimented on. He couldn’t imagine anyone else having the same nightmare of being thrown into a cryogenic prison—a small dark cube—and then being left for days until Kazuya decided to test him. And then reliving that cycle again, and again, and again. But it was possible that there were others. He had to stop it, but everyone, Yuri, Yakov, and now Agni, was telling him to just wait. To wait until the time was right to save Kazuya’s victims. To let them suffer. He thought about the last time he felt cold, with the darkness closing in on him.

And then the image of a star on the head of a shadow gave him an idea.

“Red Specter.”

“This again…” Agni put weary hands on his hips and Victor frantically shook his head.

“No, I mean, is Red Specter trained for something like this?”
Agni was silent for the first time since he had arrived. Victor could hear tires roving over ice on the street above them. “Agni, he could do this, couldn’t he?”

“I don’t… I don’t think he should get involved.”

“What do you mean?! This is serious and if he’s the only option—”

“Winter, I told you already! No one in the underworld is going to do a job for free. That includes Red Specter.”

“So when should I expect the invoice for these stitches?” He lifted his sweater to flash the scar at Agni who looked away.

“That’s different…”

“So the delivery for Olivia that he intercepted over a month ago! Who did he do that for and how much did he get paid? Maybe I can match the price.”

“Victor, it’s not that simple!” Agni ran his hand down his face, seemingly forgetting about the mask covering it. “The Red Specter I know… the man that… if everything works out, you will soon meet, would gladly do this for you.”

“So what’s the problem?” Victor asked, frustrated that Agni was trying to keep his last chance from him.

“The problem…” he seemed to struggle with his words, a strange thing, considering how colorful and confident he usually was, “is that he doesn’t have the luxury of being that person right now. He can’t be the hero you want him to be. If he takes this job, and you don’t give him anything in return, it will cause a lot of trouble for him.”

“What do you mean?”
“If word gets out in the underworld that he did a high stakes four star job for free, potential buyers won’t want to pay him as much anymore. They’ll want discounts or they’ll demand free services. They’ll corner him and he’ll be out of work faster than you can blink.”

“So this is about money…” Victor sucked his teeth and turned on his heel, lost in thought. It was getting harder and harder to maintain his faith in everyone around him.

“It’s about safety too. There are people far more violent than he is who would take advantage of him if they thought he was doing dangerous jobs for free. They would think he’s weak, as if he got bullied into doing it, and try to attack him while he’s working.” He seemed to consider something, hands on hips as he eyed a spot on the ground before he continued. “And... it’s not necessarily Red Specter who needs the money, Victor. Thinking about the patterns you’ve observed in his behavior, I’m pretty sure you’ll come to a pretty accurate conclusion about his current situation… I just can’t be the one to tell you out right.”

“Ok, just…” Victor was getting anxious with the lack of action. The only important thing was stopping Olivia. Everything else was second. “Just tell him I can pay. I mean I don’t have money, but if it’s a favor he wants, I’ll give it to him. If he can do this job, I don’t care about anything else. I want him.”

“Winter…”

“What else is there?”

“What about your reputation?”

“I’d rather owe Red a favor than someone else.”

“You don’t even know what the favor is yet,” Agni crossed his arms and his eyes looked amused behind the mask.

“I’ll do it,” he said firmly.

For a moment, Victor thought Agni would refuse him. He thought he would zip away in a red blur leaving him alone without an answer. But then he spoke.
“Get some rest,” he said. “I’ll be in contact.”

And then came the red blur.

Understandably, Yuuri slept until noon. It had been a long couple of days for him. He shuffled into the kitchen for breakfast, bleary eyed and shivering against the morning chill, at the same time Phichit returned for lunch. Yuuri wasn’t a morning person, which gave Phichit more time to process his meeting with Victor from the night before. He sat at the kitchen table with his sub sandwich and thought about what Victor was suggesting. It was obviously dangerous and risky, something that Yuuri wasn’t in the mood for these days. What made it worse was that he would have to work directly with Victor, the hero he was trying so desperately to avoid… and, in Phichit’s opinion, to be like. But he would never tell Yuuri that to his face.

He didn’t know if he should tell Yuuri about what happened. Yuuri plopped down in the chair across from him and sipped his coffee in silence. Phichit frowned. Usually, Yuuri at least gave him a bland smile in the mornings, but Yuuri simply stared into his mug, steam fogging his blue glasses. Phichit took a despondent bite of his shrimp sub as he realized that trying to think for Yuuri was what got him into this situation in the first place. To an extent, it couldn’t be helped. There were some secrets he had to keep, even from his best friend. But this wasn’t one of them.

“I think you’ll be happy to know that Victor is thoroughly stressed out right now.”

“What?” Yuuri croaked. “Why would that make me happy?”

“You were worried about your power still affecting him, but obviously it’s not if he’s not relaxed anymore.”

“Ok...,” Yuuri seemed confused as he sipped more coffee. “How do you know that?”

Phichit put his sub down, telling himself there was no good or artful way to say this. “He contacted me last night.”
“What…” he put his mug down and stared incredulously at Phichit. “How on earth does he know who you are? Or even how to contact you?”

“I… I actually contacted him first. A while ago,” he said carefully and watched Yuuri’s eyes widen.

“About what,” he whispered.

“I was fishing for information about Lam,” he said, and it wasn’t entirely a lie, but it definitely wasn’t the truth. It would have to do though. “He was difficult to come by and I was looking for someone to drop hints, even if by accident. People in the underworld are more tight-lipped because they expect the worst so I had to branch out.”

He wasn’t sure if Yuuri believed him or not, but he wasn’t storming out, so it was something. “What did he want?” he asked.

“He needs help with a pretty big job.”

“He can’t do anything above a two star, I told him that,” he sucked his teeth and sipped his coffee.

“He’s desperate. I don’t know what his connection is to this case, but there’s this woman named Olivia—”

“She worked with Walters and Graham.”

“Yeah, and she’s planning on taking people out of Spring Gate. She’s selling them to this evil doctor named Kazuya.” A look of pained shock, replaced the drowsy suspicion on Yuuri’s face. “Do you know this doctor?”

“No. He’s dead.”

“What do you mean?” Phichit felt cold.

“He’s dead. Fujiwara shot him in my kitchen when I was twelve.”
“Ok… well,” Phichit’s heart jerked at the thought. Was Yuuri home when it happened? Did he see the doctor’s body? He wondered if, even now, Yuuri could hear the gun fire in his head… Phichit knew that he would if it were him. “I don’t know if there’s another Dr. Kazuya or if… your Dr. Kazuya somehow came back to life, but someone is asking for these bodies and Olivia is planning on delivering them. Victor seems really passionate about this. He would take care of it on his own, but he needs someone to do the heavy lifting for this mission.”

“Who did you recommend?” Yuuri got up to get his toast and he munched on it standing up.

“Nobody, actually… he can’t afford mercenary or vigilante help.”

“Why’d he come to you then?” He asked with something like a smile.

“I honestly don’t think he knows what he’s getting himself into. He just wants to help these people. Boss turned him down, which makes sense, but he can’t let this one go.”

“He’s going to rush into it himself,” Yuuri groaned. “He’s gonna end up getting killed.

“Yuuri… he actually asked for you specifically.” Phichit studied Yuuri’s reaction, but surprisingly, there was almost no change in his face. He seemed calm, washing down a bite of toast with coffee.

“Why?”

“Well… I told him that he can’t get free help from the underworld so then he asked me.” Yuuri raised his eyebrows but didn’t say anything. “I had to turn him down because if I messed up and hurt someone, I wouldn’t be able to forgive myself. And then, he asked about you.”

Yuuri seemed to be thinking as he put more bread in the toaster. “What did you say?”

“I told him you can’t work for free either,” Phichit immediately assured him. “I didn’t answer for you, but I told him that everything comes with a price. He said he’ll owe you a favor. He doesn’t care what it is. He said he wants you.”
“Ok.”

“I know you have to think about it. The job is Monday, so you have a little time to decide.”

“I’ll do it.”

“What?”

“Tell him I’ll help. What else does he need?”

“Er…” the speed of Yuuri’s answer gave him mental whiplash. He looked at Yuuri who still seemed perfectly calm, but Phichit knew him well enough to finally recognize the fire burning just beneath the surface. Phichit wondered if it was Kazuya’s rebirth or Victor’s pleas that ignited the flame. Either way, he knew it wouldn’t be easily extinguished. “He needs information. Times, places, license plates…”

“And you can get that, right?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Good. You should probably give him my answer otherwise he’ll worry.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

Yuuri finished his breakfast and washed his dishes. On his way out of the kitchen, he hesitated, then turned around, adjusting his glasses nervously.

“Phichit…”

Feeling, weirdly put on the spot, Phichit tried his best to not give into his discomfort by staring down at his shrimp sub. “Yes?”
“Thank you for telling me.”

“I… of course.”

Victor was trying really hard to rest. He was stretched out on his couch under a blanket with Makkachin sitting on the floor near his head. The TV was turned on to some old, Russian drama that he wasn’t really paying attention to. He was scrolling through Instagram, but he wasn’t paying attention to that either. He couldn’t sit still for long without thinking about Kazuya or Red Specter. Makkachin was usually an effective distraction, but he wasn’t allowed to play with her or cuddle her until his stitches healed properly. Even though it hadn’t even been twenty-four hours, he felt anxious waiting for Agni’s call. What would he do if Agni told him that Red Specter was out? He didn’t have many options left. He might be able to call that Canadian hero, but Victor didn’t have his info… he barely remembered the guy’s name. Asking Yakov for it would be an obvious giveaway. Hell, the guy’s mere presence in Spring Gate would set off too many red flags.

If he wanted to, he could take this job on his own. He could be careful… He would only get injured if he didn’t use his head, but if he really listened to his body and paid attention to his surroundings, he could pull it off. He had to. If Red refused to help, there was no other way. He sat up straight and winced at the stabbing pain in his side. He stood and gingerly lifted his arm above his head to stretch, gauging his mobility. The pain was searing so he stopped and took a deep breath.

“Ok, so no lifting. I can work with that.” He opened his palm and conjured a bright purple flame. He flicked his hand, sending it dancing around the room, to Makkachin’s delight. He closed his fist and the flame vanished. He felt fine, which was a good sign. “I could do even more at night…” Makkachin gave him a wounded look as if lamenting the absence of the fire. Victor smiled at her and bent to scratch her fluffy ears which he immediately regretted. He clutched his side and sank to the couch, trying to hold in the pained groan.

“Are you trying to kill yourself, old man? Sit your wrinkly ass down!” Yuri appeared carrying a tray with two bowls of Axle’s pumpkin bisque. He set it on the coffee table and shooed Makkachin away. “You can’t help anyone if you have the anatomy of a slice of swiss cheese.”

“Your love language is so difficult to understand, Yura,” Victor teased but still settled into the couch. His phone pinged and he snatched it up, his heart pounding.
It was just Instagram. He screwed his eyes shut and groaned in frustration. Waiting was worse agony than a bullet wound. He opened up the app and saw that, as usual, his most recent post was exploding. After the Aragog fight, he took a selfie with the helicopter pilot and posted it with the caption “No rest for the wicked.” He scrolled through thousands of hearts and screams, knowing he should feel grateful for the appreciation, but still too anxious at the moment to feel anything besides dreadful anticipation.

He scrolled and scrolled and, somehow, one comment stood out to him among all the emojis and excitements.

**y-katsuki:** Ok, but you’d better be resting.

Victor’s heart skipped into his throat and his cheeks burned. He eyed the handle to be absolutely sure but there was no mistaking it: **y-katsuki.** It was Yuuri!

“Ew,” Yuri said. “Why do you look like that?”

“Like what?” Victor muttered and began typing back.

**winter-torch-official:** I’m trying, but it’s hard! :(

Before he even had the time to feel nervous or giddy, his phone pinged again and he yelped.

“You look gross,” Yuri said in disgust through a mouthful of soup. Victor ignored him and read Yuuri’s new comment.

**y-katsuki:** I know you’re lying.

Victor bit his lip to spare Yuri the excited scream that wanted to burst out of him.

**winter-torch-official:** Yuuri, you wound me! The city never sleeps, so neither do I! ;)
y-katsuki: City, please do me a solid and let my patient sleep.

Victor closed his eyes and rested the phone over his heart. He needed a minute. He couldn’t die just yet. He had to respond.

winter-torch-official: No crime for a month, doctor’s orders! (ﾉ∀｀*)ﾉ

y-katsuki: not a doctor

winter-torch-official: you’re my hero though <3

y-katsuki: and you’re everyone else’s. you deserve a good night’s rest more than anyone.

Everyone had been telling Victor the same thing. That he was a great hero. That he deserved a break. But still, for some reason, reading it from Yuuri made him emotional and tears began to sting his eyes. He didn’t even know how to reply to that. He put his phone down and reached for the soup Yuri heated for him. He didn’t want to think about why that simple comment was so overwhelming. He’d heard it before, so his reaction made no sense to him. Yuri gave him a suspicious look but seemed to decide against talking. Halfway through their late lunch, Victor’s phone rang. He snatched it up again. It was a blocked number. Yuri nodded at Victor’s phone.

“Is that what you’ve been waiting for?”

Victor pursed his lips. “Maybe… maybe not.” He answered and braced himself before speaking.

“Hello?”

“He’s in.”

Something fluttered in Victor’s stomach and he had to catch his breath. “Yeah?”
“We’ll come up with a plan and contact you with the details tomorrow afternoon. He does have some conditions, but I’m sure at this point, that won’t change your mind.”

“Uh, what are the conditions?” Victor was feeling nervous again. What would Red demand? Help with a heist? Access to the ruby he let slip on their first encounter? Wouldn’t that be considered payment and not a condition?

“The conditions actually benefit you. You see, since you’re recovering, the plan we’re coming up with will minimize the amount of physical involvement on your part. One of his conditions is that you stick to this plan. He’s not willing to compromise on that.”

“O-ok…” Victor said, thinking it was odd coming from a thief. But then again, Red was the one who saved his life, stitched Victor up when he was hanging on by a thread. The more human Red became in Victor’s mind, the more ill-footed he felt when he thought about the thief.

“His second condition is that you don’t interfere.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning, if he’s fighting someone, don’t try to tag in. You might get hurt.”

“I’m not so delicate that—”

“Unfortunately, these conditions are non-negotiable,” Agni cut him off leaving Victor’s pride wounded. “You’ll fulfill a minor support role, and nothing more. The next condition is that you don’t wear your hero suit.”

“What?! How am I supposed to protect my identity?”

“Wear a mask. But don’t power up. You’ll give yourself away.”

“And why’s that a bad thing?”
“Rebelling against organization protocol. Winter Torch and Red Specter team up to take down human traffickers. How’s that headline?”

Victor thought ruefully about Yakov’s reaction once he, Victor, inevitably had to confess to this little rendezvous. He couldn’t imagine the shade of purple Yakov would turn if he had to read about Victor’s disobedience in the news. “Point taken.”

“Final condition. Stick to ice. If you use water, snow, and ice in the same mission, it’ll be easy to identify you, even if you’re wearing a mask. But plenty of people have ice powers, so that’s a safer bet.”

“Alright. Is that it?”

“For now. Like I said, I’ll contact you. Rest up.”

Chapter End Notes

Despite everything I’ve said.... I’m sure this is riddled with errors. I went back in at the last minute to add in some details and got too impatient to go back and read it thoroughly before posting. Roast me IF YOU MUST.

Also, I'll write some action. Eventually. When the time's right. Lol, thank you again for reading! It's getting cold and holidayish so please take care of yourselves and check in with the people you love/care about!
To Heroes and Villains

Chapter Summary

All according to keikaku
*keikaku means plan

Chapter Notes

Translations in the end notes

I hope everyone is having a great Thanksgiving and Native American Heritage Day! I wish I could be home right now. I've been gone so long that I forgot Thanksgiving was even a thing... in any case, thank you for reading and I hope this is a good way to end your meal <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Victor’s phone rang again at 3:30am on Sunday. He jolted awake and snatched his phone from the dresser.

“Hello?” His voice was gruff with sleep. It was dark and chilly in his room, even with the window closed and Makkachin sleeping next to him.

“Good morning, Mr. Torch,” Agni said with the energy of someone calling at a much later hour. “I hope I’m not interrupting your sleep.”

“What’s going on?” Victor wasn’t in the mood but he tried to be reasonably pleasant with Agni who was doing him a massive favor.

“I’m just tying up some loose ends before tomorrow’s fun. I’d like to reach an official agreement on our payment arrangements... have you given it any thought since we first talked?”

Victor sighed and sat up in bed to turn his reading lights on. “I thought we agreed that I’d... you know. Owe him a favor.”

“Yes, we did say that, but I’m afraid these things are a bit more nuanced than writing a simple I.O.U.
You need to tell me exactly what you’re offering and how you plan on fulfilling that promise.”

“Of course,” Victor sighed again. He was uncomfortable with this whole situation but he couldn’t think of a suitable alternative. He wanted to figure out what kind of person Red was and this—recruiting Red as a vigilante to do Victor’s job—was a precarious method. It was not one he preferred and not even the intent of this mission, but at this, point it was unavoidable. He needed to stop those traffickers and Red was his last chance in doing so. He just hoped that he wouldn’t regret ignoring Yuri and Yakov by just doing this job himself. “What does he want?”

“One thing in particular, but he’ll never ask for it,” Agni said almost absently. “You’ll have to offer him the next best thing.”

“Which is?”

“What do you think?”

“Does he want that huge ruby?”

“Most likely…”

“You don’t know for sure? He’s not naming his price?” Victor asked incredulously.

“He normally does, but you don’t have much room for owing underworld workers favors. You can’t pay him his normal price either, so he wants you to make him an offer. You’ll have to be creative and maybe a bit… bold when thinking of an offer. If he likes it, he’ll take it.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

Agni laughed softly, “I don’t think you need to worry about that, Winter Torch. He’s easy.”

“Nothing about this is easy,” Victor groaned and smoothed Makkachin’s head when she stirred awake.
“Alright, how about this? I think that ruby is a good offer. Anybody with eyes can see that he’s been collecting them, so I’m willing to bet he won’t turn that down.”

“Ok…” Victor said, and even though he was expecting it, his heart sank at the prospect of taking that ruby out of the vault. Of stealing and keeping secrets from everyone at History Maker. He thought with a pang of guilt and shame about Spotlight and 88 who were fighting tooth and nail to become the kind of hero that they thought Victor was. Even Axle, Felix, and the other rookie heroes didn’t deserve the kind of example Victor was setting right now. He was letting everyone down…

“You’ll need a backup offer too, just in case you can’t follow through on the ruby. It’s also possible that Red will refuse your first offer.”

“I thought you said he was easy?”

“He can also be… unpredictable at times,” he hesitated. “Better safe than sorry.”

“Fine… if I can’t get him the ruby myself… I’ll tell him how to get in to the vault. He can get it.”

“Interesting…” Agni seemed to be thinking as he hummed to himself. Victor leaned his head against the wall and covered his face with his hand, feeling defeated before morning even began. “Is there something wrong, Victor?”

The question sent needles of anxiety through his heart. It didn’t help that he still didn’t feel comfortable with Agni knowing his real name. “Besides the prospect of several people losing their lives if I don’t compromise my morals?”

“Yes. Besides that,” Agni said, direct as ever. “You sound like…” he paused with an agitated sigh as if Victor had somehow tested the last of his patience. “Look, I know what a person who fixes bullet wounds with band-aids sounds like. You need to ask for help with the real problem, or it’s just going to keep hurting you, Victor.”

“I don’t know what you’re—”

“Food for thought,” Agni cut him off and left Victor feeling personally attacked. Agni caught him off guard, and he wondered where this strangely earnest advice was coming from. Was it from his experience with Red, or some completely unrelated friend? Agni didn’t give Victor the chance to
ponder this as he plowed on. “If that’s your final offer, I’ll let Red know, and I’ll get back to you. Talk to you soon.”

When Agni hung up, Victor found that he couldn’t get back to sleep. He sat leaning against his backboard and thinking about what his “bullet wound” was… besides the actual bullet wound that landed him in the position of relying on vigilante help in the first place. But Red technically wasn’t a vigilante… at least not yet he wasn’t. In any case, he couldn’t see a problem worse than allowing those people to be taken by Olivia. It was a nightmare. A very preventable nightmare. He just needed a little help this time around.

Truth be told, if Victor wasn’t a hero and much, much wealthier, he would’ve given Red anything he wanted for helping Victor with this problem. He would empty all his bank accounts into Red’s gloved hands. Under the anxiety Victor felt about going behind Yakov’s back and completely crapping on his own code of honor, he felt overwhelming gratitude towards Red. Yuri had shown a light on Victor’s powerlessness, Yakov had illuminated their lack of resources, and Agni told him he had nothing of value to offer any potential help. He felt useless and powerless. He was grabbing at straws when he asked about Red but he still pulled back a golden one. A golden, stealthy, butt-kicking straw who was apparently good with a needle. All Red Specter wanted was the ruby, which was to be expected. In exchange for God knows how many lives… that was nothing. At least Victor more or less knew what he was getting with Red. If he stopped over analyzing the thief and just looked at all the clues, he could see that, yes, Red Specter was easy. He was a good person who happened to steal rubies. It was starting to become clear that it wasn’t for personal gain. That part was a mystery, but that’s all Victor needed to know to trust Red with this.

That’s all he needed to stop worrying about the choice he made, and start worrying about the ungodly level Yakov’s blood pressure will reach once he finds that the vault has been robbed.

* *

Victor couldn’t decide if the weekend had been short or long. His pressing anxiety and anticipation made it feel as if it lasted a lifetime. Sitting in a two hour car ride to Detroit with Yuri made it feel more fleeting than a blink. In Victor’s mind, Agni was many things. Ostentatious, slippery, grating… definitely a bit untrustworthy. However, at the moment, he couldn’t help but admire Agni’s efficiency. To gather all the necessary information and devise a comprehensive strategy in such little time took resourcefulness, dedication and a shrewd sense of thinking. He wondered how Agni did it, but on the very top of his list of things to obsess over was Red Specter.

He was meeting Red Specter in Detroit—all a part of the plan. He wondered how Red would get there, what Red was thinking right now, how Red would fight, what Red was feeling. Victor had never felt so distracted and nervous before a mission. Sure, he had decided to trust Red, but that
didn’t stop a voracious curiosity from clawing at the lining of his stomach. He tried to distract himself and turned the music up.

*Fear in the dark,*

*All these thoughts have never stopped,*

*Meet my friend the lonesome,*

*It’s killing time!*

Of course Yuri’s playlist would be nothing but awful, teenage music about death. He sighed and Yuri seemed to take it as a sign of satisfaction rather than disappointment.

“Since when do you like Des Rocs?” He asked, raising a blonde eyebrow.

“Since now, apparently,” Victor smiled tightly. Makkachin yipped in the back seat and licked Victor’s neck. Again, he had to remind himself to feel grateful. After all, Yuri was the one who told Victor about all this. And now, he was nice enough to drive Victor to Detroit after just coming back. He gave his adopted brother a genuine smile this time. “Thank you, Yuri. For all of this.”

“Uh-huh,” Yuri grunted as he blew a chewing gum bubble and merged into the right lane without looking. “If Yakov asks, you drove yourself to Detroit, ok? I’m trying to make him like me again so this won’t help.”

Victor rolled his eyes. “Roger that.” Yuri started banging his head to the music, singing along: *Oh, let me live, oh let me live, oh let me dieee!* Makkachin howled in the back which made Yuri burst out in laughter.

“She’s the only acceptable dog,” he told Victor sternly. “Oh, I almost forgot,” and he ducked down under the steering wheel, nearly giving Victor a heart attack as the car swerved. He reemerged with a bright blue mask. It looked like some sort of East Asian carving of a demon’s face. Yuri handed it to Victor. “Got you a mask. It’s the Blue Spirit. I thought it was appropriate.”

“The what?”

“You’ve never seen Avatar?”
Victor narrowed his eyes at Yuri. “Is this… is this from a cartoon?!”

Yuri scoffed. “Does it matter?! You’re literally a Mattel action figure!”

“I’m trying to save lives, Yuri, and you want me to do a cosplay?! What would Red Specter think if he saw this?!”

“Who gives a shit what Venom thinks?!”

“He is nothing like Venom! Where is that even coming from? And I care what he thinks because I don’t want the one person who agreed to help me to think I’m an idiot!”

“The one person?” Yuri looked disgusted. “Really?”

“I already thanked you!”

“And who the hell thinks you’re an idiot? You’re Winter Torch! You could dress up as the Queen of Hearts and play bagpipes in the streets and still, literally no one would think you’re an idiot.” Yuri blew a particularly spiteful bubble before speeding into an exit. “Instead of plot armor, you’ve got five star armor.”

“Yolki-palki…delat' iz mukhi slona.” Victor shook his head.

“I am not exaggerating,” Yuri snapped.

“Yuri, you think I’m an idiot. You call me an idiot at least once every time you see me.”

“Of course I do. I’m your fucking brother, idiot.”

“Glad to see you’ve fulfilled your quota.”
“We’re almost there,” he said as he maneuvered through icy roads. “Are you going to use this mask or not?”

“Well, seeing as how you’ve given me so many viable options, it’s hard to come to a decision, Yura,” he gave him a sour look.

“You’re breaking up a trafficking ring, not winning a fucking popularity contest. We can agree on that much, right?” Yuri backed into an alley between two dilapidated buildings, a few blocks from the abandoned school he was meeting Red at. The place where Olivia was waiting for her delivery. Victor threw his head back on the seat rest and pinched his eyes shut.

“I still don’t understand why this, mask…”

“Because it’s fucking poetic! Now put it on!” Yuri snarled at him making Makkachin bark excitedly. Victor groaned and shoved the mask into his sweatshirt’s front pocket. He pulled up his hood.

“I’ll do it when I get close. I’m not walking around looking like this,” Victor said. Yuri sucked his teeth and chewed his gum as if he was trying to liquefy it. “Thanks again for the ride,” he said as he opened his door.

“If you die, I’m keeping Makka,” Yuri said.

“Of course. Make sure Potya doesn’t bully her. Are you sure you’ll make it back safely?”

“What do I fucking look like to you?”

“Like an annoying but adorable little likho.” Victor smiled.

“You—”

He shut the car door and started walking, satisfied he got the last word in. It was midnight cold, and even with Victor’s under-armor, sweatshirt, and sweats, Victor was freezing. He needed to stay loose
though. Even if he wasn’t going to be doing a lot of acrobatics tonight—Agni and Red’s plan really was thorough—he still needed to be able to move freely. He kept his head down but still took careful note of his surroundings. Outdated and abandoned brick apartments lined an empty street with very few cars. Snow covered every surface because it was allowed to. This wasn’t the kind of street that someone would care to maintain, to insure easy access to. It was practically a ghost town.

He wondered if Red was waiting for him and decided to pick up the pace, just in case. Eventually, the school came into view. It was very much like the apartment buildings with dark broken windows and a crumbling brick face. It was much bigger though, even with the caved in roof of the gym. The gaping hole explained how Olivia got in to wait for her transport. It made him think about who else was in these seemingly lifeless buildings. He shivered as he slipped into a nearby alley to take his mask out and put it on. There could be more people here than what met the eye… and they could be very close.

Someone touched his shoulder.

Ice shot from his fingertips as he spun around. In front of him was Red Specter, bent at a strange angle, several ice picks wedged into the brick behind him. Victor sighed in relief and dropped his hand.

“You can’t sneak up on me like that,” he smiled even though Red wouldn’t be able to see it. “Sorry.”

Was he out of his mind?! And was Yuuri crazy for agreeing to do this? His heart thundered in his chest as he looked at the ice plunged into the very solid wall behind him. He had agreed to help so quickly, but that shot could’ve been Yuuri’s life! Hell, this whole mission could be the end of him! He looked nervously at Victor—he almost didn’t believe it was him in that weird mask—and started feeling doubt for the first time. Sure, his plan was as meticulous as it could be within the time constraints and it minimized Victor’s involvement. But still, several things could go wrong, including Victor exacerbating his injury.

“Are you ready for a very humanizing story?” Victor chuckled uncomfortably when Red continued to stare at him. “I have a little brother. He’s the one who got this mask… I didn’t really have a choice in the matter.”
Red pointed at Victor’s stomach and then made an ok sign with his hand. He had forgotten that Red used sign… but it occurred to him that he didn’t need to as he remembered the night Red whispered in his ear. He was probably doing it to protect his identity then. He did it again and Victor shrugged to tell him he didn’t know what Red was referring to. Red’s shoulders slumped as if impatient and he walked up to Victor. Before Victor could register what was happening, Red was lifting Victor’s sweatshirt up by the hem.

“W-woah, what do you think you’re doing?!” Red ignored him and gently tugged his under armor up too, exposing his stomach to the chilly air. Victor stammered out confused protests as he tried to push Red’s hands away without disturbing his wound, which Red was bending down to look at. “Oh, are you… checking it? You should just say so. It’s fine,” he said, feeling his ears grow hot as Red gingerly patted the skin around the bandages. They were clean and properly secured. Red seemed satisfied and pulled the under armor back over it. “I can do that,” Victor said quickly. There had to be a better way of communicating with Red than this. Red gestured to Victor then the school where Olivia was and started walking. It was about to begin.

It was a small comfort that Victor was healing well, but a comfort nonetheless. All Yuuri had to do was stick to his plan, and everything would be fine. Everyone would get out of this in one piece and he’d get an Orion ruby out of it. It was a massive sacrifice on Victor’s part to give it up. He wondered what Victor would have to do to get it, how much trouble he’d get in… it almost didn’t seem fair. Now that Yuuri had calmed down, and was actually walking into the school with Victor (it wasn’t so much walking as it was slipping through a broken window), he realized that this job was a no-brainer.

Sure, fighting a giant would be challenging, but definitely not impossible. He’d subdued a gem dragon before. He had enhanced strength. He wasn’t putting much on the line. Victor on the other hand was burning his values on an altar built for Yuuri, who was just a man. Phichit was right. Victor had a much deeper connection to this job than he was letting on…

They walked soundlessly down the dusty halls towards the gym. Their intel was fuzzy about Olivia’s exact location, but there was no other place big enough for her to wait. It was also facing the parking lot so her drivers could easily pull in. There was already a freight truck parked in front next to an old school bus. They guessed that the victims would be unloaded from their individual vans and loaded into the truck once they arrived. It was the only thing that made sense. They crouched below the eye level of the gym doors as they approached.

Yuuri got a good glimpse of Olivia before he ducked down. She really was giant. Even with her head bowed, her strawberry blonde locks brushed against the rafters as she slowly paced the snowy gym floor. Yuuri thought if she weren’t pure evil, she would actually be quite attractive, with large dark eyes and round features. She was wearing all black—an enormous trench coat, scarf, gloves,
and skinny jeans. He wondered if she was trying to be covert and thought that ship sailed when she
was born. He noted the jeans, thankful that she hadn’t worn anything thicker… If she had, he would
have to be much more creative and… acrobatic for his plan to work. He gestured with two fingers at
the door to let Victor know he was going in.

As soon as the door creaked open, Olivia whipped her massive head around in surprise. She swore
and Yuuri bolted left, directing her attention away from the door where Victor was supposed to
sneak in. It worked a little too well. Olivia charged him, aiming kicks like a wrecking ball that he
barely dodged.

“Well, well…” she crooned in a smooth voice, “I wonder who let the cat out of the bag this time.”
Yuuri glanced around her massive ankle which was level with his knees to see that Victor had
successfully slipped behind the bleachers.

Right. Time for offense. He charged forward to get her to stumble back, give him a clearer shot of her
legs. He leaped and clung to her right shin, pulled out a syringe, and shoved it into her skin. She
yelped and plucked him off, but it was too late. The tranquilizer was already in her system. One
down, three more to go, he thought with triumph as she threw him across the gym into a wall like a
golf ball.

He choked as the wind was knocked out of him. He would definitely feel that in the morning, but
what else was new? He slid down the bleachers and scrambled around Olivia who was snarling at
him.

“Who do you work for?” she snapped. “Is it Lam?! Or are you Fujiwara’s little ninja?!” Yuuri
tripped in mid sprint. Surely he heard wrong… but he had to have heard correctly, because this was
Kazuya he was dealing with. Kazuya was Fujiwara’s doctor before Yuuri. He didn’t know what
kind of atrocities Fujiwara had Kazuya commit because Yuuri never had to do anything more than
save a life he couldn’t care less about. It was now abundantly clear that Kazuya was trusted with
something more, something sinister. It was also clear that he was alive.

“I told Fujiwara there was an issue last time! We’re making up for it now!”

Making up for it? Yuuri felt something jerk in his stomach and his blood ran hot. But this time, he
was quicker to realize that he was getting angry. That anger alone fueled the nearly ten foot jump he
made up Olivia’s thigh to plunge the second syringe through her jeans.
Victor wondered who trained Red Specter and at what point did they lose control of him. He watched in awe as Red darted and ducked around Olivia’s boulder sized kicks and punches. He was still dumbstruck by the spectacular leap he made. This time, Olivia wasn’t quick enough to grab him. He dismounted like a graceful wild cat and landed neatly on his feet. Red tossed the syringe over his shoulder and cracked his neck before running at Olivia again. Victor had never sat on the sidelines to watch a four star fight. He wondered if this is what he looked like to other people. Then he realized that Red was grossly underrated. Sure, he was rough around the edges. But still. There was no way he was just a two star thief, not with that sheer power, he thought as he winced at a punch that nearly took Red out.

Red didn’t dodge it this time. He blocked it. Both of his feet firmly planted and both of his hands holding one of hers at bay like a ram butting heads with a bull. Red roared at the effort before suddenly diving under and behind Olivia who stumbled forward at the lack of purchase. She whipped around, hand striking out like a viper and Red jumped, landing on her arm. Victor didn’t see the syringe go in but it must have because Red was throwing this one behind him too. But he wasn’t lucky again. Olivia plucked him off and pelted him against another wall. He almost wanted to look away but Red was sitting up, clutching the back of his head. Olivia lifted her foot. Red wasn’t looking.

Now.

Victor closed his eyes in concentration and imagined a wall of ice in front of Red. When he opened them, it was there, a three foot thick shield between Red and her boot tip. She whipped her head around to the bleachers, large eyes flashing dangerously.

“Shadows are for snakes and vermin. Come out, come out, you little insect.” Victor stayed perfectly still. Olivia crept forward but wobbled violently. The tranquilizer was starting to work. She meandered closer but Victor stayed put. He saw Red crawl from behind the wall and amble clumsily to his feet. She spun around and aimed another kick at him, but Victor blocked this with another solid wall. She howled and hopped back in pain, falling on her butt. She crab walked away from Red and, to Victor’s horror, reached behind her to snatch the bleachers he was hiding behind into the air. She hurled this at Red who tumbled out of the way as Olivia got back to her feet. Victor quickly tried to side step behind the neighboring bleachers, but it was too late. Olivia had seen him. She leered.

“Hello, bug.” She reached for him and Victor braced for impact but it never came. He blinked, and Red was in front of him, holding Olivia’s hand at bay again. Victor closed his eyes. He willed five ice pillars to sprout from the ground and push Olivia’s fingers back. He opened his eyes and saw them—each pillar pushing on a finger and surrounding Red in a loose cage. But the fifth one was weak, and cracking under her thumb. He sucked his teeth—he was good at using his power with just his mind but it was a thousand times easier to use his body. He couldn’t risk hurting himself though. He held out his fist and gripped hard, hoping that would do the trick. The thumb pillar hardened.
Olivia gave up on closing her fist around Red and reached for Victor with her other hand. He took a deep breath and an icy spike impaled her palm, inches from his face.

“Aaaagh!” Her wailing was deafening. Melon sized droplets of blood splattered down on them. Victor stepped aside and Red lunged forward, plunging the last syringe into her calf. She shrieked and swung her arm at Red who danced around it, with a little less grace than before. All that was left was to defend while they waited for the tranquilizer to take her out. Just one dose was designed to take down a komodolope, an antler-headed Godzilla like creature that was just as vicious but not nearly as tall as the real thing. Giant blood was much stronger, Victor thought as he slipped behind more bleachers away from Olivia. It pained him to hide during a fight, but it was part of the plan. It was going well so far, so he didn’t want to mess things up.

He was surprised Olivia was lasting this long, and Victor was starting to think she would never stop lashing out when she suddenly fell to her knees. She tumbled forward like fresh lumber and before she could bash her head into the gym floor, Red rushed forward to catch her. He disappeared in a cascade of strawberry blonde waves, giving Olivia the eerie appearance of having a floating head. Red slowly rested her forehead on the ground, and crawled out from under her hair. Lustrous strands spilled over his shoulders as he stood up and stretched.

“Go team,” Victor said, feeling a wave of relief as he walked up to Red. Phase one of the plan was complete, and now they just needed to wait for phase two. Let Olivia’s drivers come to her and take them all out in one place. It was safer and more realistic than trying to take out each individual van while they were in transit. Red gestured to ask if Victor’s wound was ok again. Victor snorted once and taunted “I don’t know. Maybe you should check it for me.”

Red reached for his sweatshirt again and Victor suppressed what would have been an embarrassing squeak. “Ok,” he put Red’s wrists firmly at his sides, “that was definitely just a joke! Jeez, you’re almost as bad as Yuuri!” Red stared at him (maybe?? Where did he even find a mask that dark?) and Victor took it as a sign of confusion. He shrugged. “I guess you don’t follow me on Instagram then.” He took a seat on the bleachers and patted the space next to him. Red hesitated but plopped down, stretching out with a little groan. Victor gave him a sympathetic look that he’d never see.

“While you’re so worried about me, you should worry about yourself. Is your head ok?” Red waved a dismissive hand which Victor had to accept—he wasn’t a doctor. He couldn’t do anything if Red was hurt except apologize. He huffed and gingerly leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees and cradle his chin. He watched Olivia’s gigantic lifeless body on the floor as there was nothing else to do. They had a little under twenty minutes before the drivers arrived.

The silence was prickly.

How many times had Victor thought about a moment like this—an opportunity to pick this man’s
brain? Dozens of questions queued up at the tip of his tongue, shoving each other and trying their best to push past his lips. They had the time. Victor glanced at Red out of the corner of his eye. He was sitting with his head lolling on the seat behind him and his arms hanging limp at his sides: a picture of exhaustion. Victor chuckled under his breath but Red didn’t even turn to look at him.

★

Ow.

★

“Red…” Victor sat up and turned to him. “I… didn’t know when I would be able to do this, if at all until this happened, but… thank you. For saving my life that night. There aren’t many people in your position who would do that.” Red’s head tilted up a little in Victor’s direction. Victor swallowed and kept going. “And thank you for this too. It means…” The world? Everything? Surely, nothing so broad. It meant the start of the end of a nightmare he’d had since he was a kid. It meant hope in a corner of his heart that had always been hopeless, neglected, and abused. It meant healing and retribution. It meant that the hole in his chest that he felt in Yakov’s office last Friday was being filled with purpose. It meant that the strength he wished he had, the strength that was stolen from him, was being given back to him piece by piece. It meant… “it means more than I can even tell you. Thank you.”

Red nodded. He rested his head back on the bleachers. Yes, this was right. The first thing that Victor said to Red should be thank you, not some blustery question that Red wouldn’t even be able to answer. And what’s more, no matter the circumstances, Victor was a hero. He may have bent the rules, but he still had one job, one responsibility. “I’m really grateful to you, Red Specter. I wish,” he shook his head, searching for the words, “I wish I could give you so much more than just that ruby, but I can’t. I lost that privilege as soon as I decided to be a hero. Unfortunately… I can only be who I am. I’m not someone who can repay you with the world. I’m someone who keeps his promises as a protector. After tonight… you’ll be Red Specter, underestimated international jewel thief, and I’ll be Winter Torch, the hero who brings him to justice. I’m not sure who you are under the mask… someone kind and maybe a little… selfish, but I’m starting to realize that you’re someone who has to be Red Specter. And I’m the same. I have to be Winter Torch. I just hope that doesn’t make you think that I don’t appreciate you.”

Red was sitting up now, his attention trained to Victor. Victor didn’t know what to expect, what kind of response he needed and if he’d get it. He really did appreciate Red. He wished he could just be normal and a little bad, just so that he could show him how much he meant to him. What does he mean to me? The thought flickered in his head and one electric pulse shocked his heart before it vanished. The question made no sense. He would forget about it. He held out his hand. “To heroes and villains?” he offered quietly.
Victor imagined a soft, thoughtful face behind this dark mask. The shadow’s head tilted, hesitated, and Victor could see someone just as young and lost as he was in the gesture. Slowly, Red Specter slipped his glove off, as if giving himself time to change his mind. Victor watched the movement, a starless sky revealing a soft olive tone that he was starting to think he had only dreamed about. Red took Victor’s hand in his and shook it once.

“To who we have to be,” he whispered.

The three white vans arrived earlier than they had anticipated. When Victor and Red heard the tires crunch over the snow and gravel they walked out of the gym to greet them. Victor froze their tires, effectively stopping two of them, but the third one accelerated when the driver saw them. He was going to run them over and Victor couldn’t imagine an ice formation that would stop him without also harming the victims in the back. But Red raced forward, planted his feet, and stretched his hands out. Victor winced at the crunching sound that followed. He had instinctively closed one of his eyes, but it was clear that all the damage done was inflicted on the van. He whistled when he saw Red’s hand prints after he let the van go. He really wasn’t used to watching a hero work from the sidelines, especially not someone so strong.

Not a hero. For some reason, he heard the thought in Yuuri’s voice as if he were saying “not a doctor.” He grinned to himself when the drivers began tumbling out of their vans, guns trained on them. They anticipated this. Victor closed his eyes and when he opened them again, the guns were jammed up with grapefruit sized ice cubes at the ends of their barrels. It wasn’t graceful or anything like he imagined, but it did the job. They cursed as they threw their useless weapons down and charged at Red. For someone who was obviously concussed, he moved quite easily, almost on instinct as he nearly guillotined one man with his leg and dislocated another man’s arm.

Four more of their friends piled out of the back of the vans, and Victor destroyed their guns too. It was frustrating to work without his body, but at least it was good practice. He imagined icy spires lifting them by the backs of their shirts into the air and it happened. The structural integrity was good too, he thought with approval as they screamed from over thirty feet in the air. He turned back to Red, expecting him to need help, but he was sitting on top of the three unconscious men, hunched over, as if tuckered out. Victor laughed and offered his hand to help him up. Red took it and stood.

“Heroes, villains, whatever,” he grinned. “Say what you want, but we make a pretty good team,” Victor said brightly. Red huffed a breathy exhale as he stepped closer to Victor. He reached for Victor’s waist. How many times was he going to check Victor’s wound? It wasn’t like Victor hadn’t been shot or even injured before, he thought agitatedly. But Red didn’t lift his sweatshirt. His hand lingered on Victor’s waist and he raised Victor’s other hand and laced their fingers together. Victor’s
breath stopped short in his chest. Red moved in close. The only thing he could think of was how
cold the world was and how close, how warm, the space between him and Red felt as the thief
pulled him into a dance.

Red Specter moved him back. Then forward. Then they swayed. Victor wondered what on Earth
could be directing them if it wasn’t music. The shouts of four traffickers suspended in mid-air. The
complaints of hidden crows. Red’s rough breathing. Victor’s heartbeat. He wondered if Red could
hear it. His ears were burning with it. Any words that Victor may have had left his brain as Red
Specter spun him in one swift movement, and when Victor turned back around…

He was gone.

Victor tripped back, shocked at Red’s sudden disappearance, the absence of his hands... Even as he
looked at the stretch of lost buildings and bare trees, he knew he wouldn’t find the shadow he was
looking for.

“Hey, Blue Spirit!” Victor jumped, half expecting Olivia’s incensed face. Agni was standing next to
the school bus. Even in the dark, Victor could see he was wearing the bird mask and red suit. He
dangled a key for Victor to see and jerked a thumb at the bus. “Yip, yip!”

Chapter End Notes

Yolki-palki…delat’ iz mukhi slona (Russian): Oh my god... you're making a mountain
out of a molehill/ you’re exaggerating.

likho (Russian): one eyed goblin from Russia that causes bad luck.

I'm not an expert on Russian language or literature so I apologize if this doesn't really fit.
But you know... 's all fun n games. Thank you for reading! <3 <3

End Notes
I should also mention that this is my first time using this site. I have 0 idea what I am doing so I hope this piece isn't a total eyesore or gives your pc/phone a conniption. Thanks for reading yall! See you soon (?????)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!