stay awake with me awhile

by kevystel

Summary

The problem, should Viktor care to take the time to think about it, is that he’s no longer competing to win. He’s defending his title. It is a very different experience. It burns a hole in his palm, sometimes, on the mornings he lets himself sleep in.

Notes

maddie_mct's fic filled a hole in my heart with the headcanon i didn't know i needed. trigger warning for mild suicidal ideation near the end (just skip the texting part if you need), title from 1940 by the submarines. also partly inspired by this post in case it isn't clear, scenes are not in chronological order. i hope it doesn't get too confusing

- Inspired by Stab Me Where I Can See by aceklaviergavin
Even now, even after all this time, how far he’s come, Viktor still divides his life into chapters: pre-Yuuri and post-Yuuri. He is quite sure that’s not what is supposed to happen. He’s never telling Yuuri this. Yuuri worries enough.

It starts at — eighteen, he thinks, around the point when he’s winning everything there is to win and there are enough clues to tell him what he’s meant to be. He’s sitting on the floor of the locker room after practice, half-heartedly doing stretches to cool down, and little Yuri is braiding his hair. (‘What’s your name, sweetheart?’ ‘Yuri Plisetsky. You’ve asked me three times.’) In the background there is faint music from one of the older skaters’ phones. They’re standing in a tight, comfortable little group next to the wall of lockers, and their conversation stings. Viktor turns to look and is rewarded by Yuri jerking the end of the braid in irritation. Viktor has never been good at talking to the others at his home rink. He’s just barely eighteen and nobody likes competing to be Yakov’s second favourite. He thinks — no, he doesn’t think about it too hard. There’s no use obsessing over such things. He’s learned to keep his temper in check.

Instead, he asks over his shoulder: ‘Are you done?’

‘Almost,’ says Yuri, tongue dark in concentration. He fumbles for the ribbon Viktor’s holding out and ties off the braid with a flourish. ‘Here. Give me your phone and I’ll show you.’

Viktor risks another backward glance as he hands over his phone so that Yuri can snap a picture. One of the huddled older boys — Alexei? — smiles at him. Viktor turns away. The braid’s clumsy and not particularly pretty but Viktor would rather die than undo it. He heaves himself to his feet, tentatively nosing out his balance; nearby, Yuri crouches to retie his shoelaces. The music’s changed to something slicker, more slippery, an infectious rhythm that thrums up Viktor’s spine. He bends down to reach for his bag and doesn’t think.

Behind him, somebody laughs.

‘This is my favourite song.’

Viktor looks down (just in time to catch Yuri’s scowl in his peripheral vision) and one of the girls in the novice division smiles up at him. Her jacket’s zipped up only halfway, and the tips of her ears are reddening in the chill of the rink. She hands Yuri his forgotten water bottle and pushes her hair back. Blinks at Viktor, tranquil. Repeats herself: ‘This one. I like it — it’s for dancing, don’t you think?’

They must be waiting for their parents, the children. Viktor takes the metro home whenever he can manage it. He slings his bag over one shoulder, his head perfectly blank. ‘Mila, if you stand on my feet I’ll dance with you.’

‘Okay.’ She reaches up to take his hands.

Nearby, Yuri hoists himself up onto the bench with difficulty and braces himself on the heels of his hands. His feet dangle well above the ground. ‘Don’t look at me. I’m not touching you.’

Viktor likes taking the metro because sometimes people recognise him and ask for photos. It happens again today — his hair’s distinctive enough in the evening stream of commuters. Leaning against the wall of the cabin, the scarf warm around his neck, he watches two boys and an older lady watching
him from the opposite end of the train. The boys look like they could be junior skaters; they have the physique for it. He tucks one or two strands of hair behind his ear, like he’s seen Mila do. Shifts the dull weight of his bag on the floor where he’s set it between his feet; adjusts his jacket. Waits for them to approach him at last, in the press of bodies as the train slides to an opening at the station, the inevitable whisper of are you Viktor Nikiforov? He flashes his best smile at the woman’s phone camera. He feels like a fuse about to blow.

Hasetsu at sunset, and there’s a nice ring to it: the taste of the words in his mouth. Viktor rode his bicycle over a nail yesterday so he’s walking home with them, Yuuri and Yurio, his footsteps echoing faintly on the pavestones of the bridge. The sky’s harshly coloured above them, a flush of clouds that’s wild and different and a world away from his apartment in St. Petersburg. He looks up — to follow the flutter of seagulls. Black-tailed gulls, Yuuri says every time.

Eros. Agape. It’s hard to explain them to someone who doesn’t already know what they are. Viktor has always followed his instincts. He’s not cut out for teaching.

‘You’re so weak,’ he can hear Yurio scoffing behind him. ‘Cold? What cold? In Moscow, I would wear a T-shirt and shorts in this weather.’

Viktor stops walking. Yuuri seems to cringe inwardly whenever Yurio opens his mouth; he doesn’t realise this is just Yurio’s way of making conversation. Viktor turns. He’s warm and alive and this is the first time in a long time that he’s walked home without that friendly burn spreading through his muscles, the wearing down of his bones after hot hours of self-imposed practice — and it’s a little strange, a little empty, but he wouldn’t give it away for the world. He wonders if this is what Yakov feels like. Yuuri and Yurio catch up to him and Yuuri opens his mouth to protest but Viktor’s already pulling the scarf from his own neck, arranging it over Yuuri’s shoulders with careful fingertips.

Yuuri’s breath hitches. His cheeks are pink. Viktor wants, badly, to reach out and touch. ‘Won’t you be cold?’

Viktor allows himself to look at Yurio, who is rolling his eyes so hard that Viktor thinks it must be physically painful. ‘I’m Russian.’

‘Right,’ says Yuuri, mouth curling in that wry fashion Viktor rarely sees and wholeheartedly loves. ‘How could I forget?’

Yurio falls into step beside Viktor, now. The roar of the ocean beneath them is fading into rich dusk, and the street-lamps flicker on one by one, somehow, like a magic trick. There’s salt in the air and on the tip of his tongue. Viktor hopes his scarf smells nice. Yuuri’s got his hands tucked deep into the pockets of his soft, well-worn, well-loved hoodie, and his eyelashes are dark and very low on his cheek.

Yurio veers abruptly sideways and bumps his shoulder against Viktor’s, very deliberate. Viktor steps on Yurio’s foot. ‘Oops,’ he says, completely unrepentant.

Yurio flicks a murderous glance between him and Yuuri and mutters something in Russian that Viktor pretends not to understand.

‘You’re making me feel left out, guys,’ Yuuri calls behind them. He’s getting bolder by the day; there’s a hint of shaky amusement in his tone, and Viktor wants to keep it. Yuuri has known Viktor long enough to see Viktor ruin his relationships with his first two boyfriends. He’s too young to remember. At least, Viktor hopes so.
‘You deserve it.’

Viktor coughs into his fist. ‘How rude!’

They take a shortcut through the park to get back to Yu-topia. The shade of the trees turns Yuuri’s skin inky — Viktor feels like he’s been watching Yuuri forever, burning the image onto the insides of his eyelids. He can feel it arcing up his throat. He doesn’t want to lose this. He doesn’t want to go back to Russia. He thinks: this is dangerous, and too fast, too heavy, and is unsurprised to learn that he couldn’t possibly care less. At his side, slowing his stride to keep pace with Viktor, Yurio’s gaze is watchful and intent. Yuuri’s slightly ahead of them now and Viktor can hear Yuuri’s stomach impatiently growling. He doesn’t blame Yuuri. Viktor hasn’t eaten so well in years.

When Viktor pauses beside a park bench for the tenth time, Yuuri’s sigh is hardly audible. ‘Viktor — sorry, but could you walk faster?’

‘Hmm?’ replies Viktor, tired and delirious. ‘Are we in a rush, Yuuri?’

‘Well, you are Russian,’ Yuuri says. There’s a beat of precise silence; then only Yurio laughs. Viktor stares at them both for a long moment.

‘I’m revoking your rink privileges.’

‘No, don’t! I take it back!’

He gets better at covering up. At hiding what he’s thinking. It’s easy, anyway — there’s so much to sort through that it’s a whole lot less exhausting to push down the muted, incomprehensible thunder of whatever he’s feeling at the time, the blinding flood on the inside of his head. At this point, Viktor can’t be bothered any more. He is good at charming the press, after all. He is very, very good. It’s almost a source of pride for him now. Viktor takes pleasure in learning the full names of those reporters who harass him most often, because he’s a little bit spiteful.

Yakov is perhaps the only person Viktor does not care about. He decided this very early in his career; there’s no point faking it around Yakov. It isn’t worth the effort. Viktor has tried out the feel of the podiums in every country he can think of and his bones are tired. He has tea in Yakov and Lilia’s living room one night after Lilia catches him in a rare crying fit in the locker room. It is — something of a relief, come to think of it. It’s horribly embarrassing. Viktor doesn’t think about it, is what he’s getting at. He’ll be better when he’s older.

‘Concentrate on the music,’ Lilia tells him in the half-darkness of the quiet apartment, her mouth tight. Viktor suspects that she doesn’t like him all that much. He can tell that it drives Yakov mad, how well-behaved Viktor is around Lilia, which is exactly why Viktor does it. ‘The strength of your body means nothing, nothing, if you don’t use it well — what is the point of all those jumps? If you do not bring out the beauty in your skating you might as well not skate at all.’

‘Yes, Lilia Vasilyevna,’ says Viktor, abashed. He takes another sip of his tea. It tastes awful. Lilia put in far too much jam. He notices she isn’t wearing her wedding ring. He doesn’t ask.

At the Russian Nationals, he watches himself deliver two technically flawless programs like he’s doing it in his sleep. Lilia, if she were here, would be coldly unimpressed. Yakov’s lips are a thin line. Viktor, who has by this time managed to get his moods under impeccable and iron-fisted control, spends about half his free skate thinking what happened, what’s wrong with me today. He still wins.
Yurio curses and smacks the bed in frustration. ‘Let’s go down to the restaurant. The wifi’s better there.’ He scoops up Yuuri’s borrowed laptop and stalks out of Viktor’s bedroom without waiting to see if Viktor will follow.

Viktor does follow, at any rate — pads down the stairs after Yurio in contentment, the wooden floorboards cool beneath his feet. Yuuri’s already asleep, which is a pity. He’s noticed that Yurio is nicer to Yuuri when Viktor isn’t around. He settles himself on the floor, crossing his legs comfortably, beside the table where they had dinner barely an hour ago. The bowls and plates have been cleared away and the surface of the table wiped clean. He traces with his fingertip a dark ring-shaped stain which can’t quite be removed.

‘Finally,’ says Yurio when he manages to reconnect the Skype call. ‘Yeah, so I bought this — hello? Mila? Can you hear me? For fuck’s sake.’

Viktor waves at the screen. ‘Hi, Mila!’

‘Hello!’ Mila’s curled up in a broad chair, knees hugged to her chest. It’s mid-afternoon in Moscow, and Viktor recognises the room where he’s watched his rinkmates’ events on television sometimes. Mila’s dark-haired friend is moving about, somewhere in the background. Viktor doesn’t know her name. Mila looks at Yurio instead and asks, ‘How’s Viten’ka?’

‘He’s losing his shit over Katsuki Yuuri,’ Yurio snorts. ‘What an ass.’

‘You’re being ruder than usual,’ Viktor observes. ‘Do you have a crush on Yuuri? I mean, it’s understandable, he’s wonderful. Everyone should be in love with Yuuri —’

‘Viktor Alexandrovich,’ Yurio says, head in his hands. ‘Stop talking. Pack your bags and get on a plane back to Russia with me. Come on.’

The problem, should Viktor care to take the time to think about it, is that he’s no longer competing to win. He’s defending his title. It is a very different experience. It burns a hole in his palm, sometimes, on the mornings he lets himself sleep in.

He doesn’t take breaks very often; he’s competing and then he’s training, he’s staying in shape, choosing his music for the next season and choreographing new routines. To say that Yakov works him too hard would be a grave slight on Yakov, and Viktor wouldn’t stand for it. The truth is that he doesn’t know what he’d do with himself if he took the season off. The idea scares him. He’d rather be bored than lost.

Viktor knows quite well that he’s fairly intimidating. He plays up that side of himself for the public, when he needs to, since it’s sort of entertaining. He allows himself to believe that’s what maintains a reverent distance between himself and his fellow competitors. Sure, Viktor’s been in this game since he was seven — but so has Chris. So have most of them. It’s not much of an excuse. He’ll take what he can get. He’s friendly with the other skaters — of course he is — but, he thinks, not friends. Not — intimate. Not risky enough to let them see the unloveable parts of him, his selfishness, his lightning impulses, his temper.

Chris would probably disagree. Chris is one of the most good-natured people Viktor’s ever met.

‘You’re messing up too many jumps today,’ Viktor says. He sets one hand on his hip. ‘What are you thinking about?’

Yuuri’s back is to Viktor but Viktor can tell from the tips of his ears that he’s flushing. Yuuri’s
embarrassment is a fragile, futile thing; it trails after him everywhere, clinging to his heels. ‘Nothing!’

‘Yuuri.’

Yuuri turns his head to look fully at Viktor, and he is so soft and lovely and round that Viktor skates an excited little circle in place. It delights him to know that Yuuri isn’t perfect. It makes him love harder, like a well-kept secret. He waits for Yuuri to answer, heartbeat throbbing slow and patient.

‘I’m,’ says Yuuri. He glances at Viktor again, sidelong, the brown of his eyes dark and clear without his glasses. He’s as raw and exposed as he was in that video. It almost hurts to look at him. ‘I’m glad you stayed.’

Viktor knows Yuuri well enough to read between the lines to the anxiety festering there. It takes him by surprise, every time, how deeply Yuuri fears that Viktor will leave him. Unreasonable, surely. Blind. Surely it should be the other way around.

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Yuri Plisetsky enters the junior division on a high, managing to break the world record set by Katsuki Yuuri on only his second try. Viktor takes a vague interest in Yuri’s career, and in younger skaters in general; it’s nice to follow them over the years. See what path they’ll take. It’s been a long time since he competed in junior men’s singles, and he can barely remember the details, but he tries — scrutinises Yuri’s step sequences, gives him pointers because anyone can tell that Yuri’s the best of the lot.

‘Shut up,’ says Yuri when Viktor ventures to voice this. He grits his teeth and soars into another quadruple toe loop, mimicking Viktor’s motions perfectly. Viktor allows Yuri to practise quads when Yakov isn’t looking. ‘You set the standard and now we’re all fucked.’

‘Language, Yurochka,’ Viktor says mildly, just to see Yuri bristle. He snaps his fingers. ‘Again. The step sequence.’

‘Why?’

‘Because you’re not putting enough emotion into it. I don’t care so much about your jumps. You should stop worrying so much about getting everything right.’

‘Just because you make it look easy,’ Yuri mutters. He catches the beginnings of Viktor’s grin and cuts Viktor off at once. ‘Not that I look up to you! Would I ever? Look at yourself, tying your jacket around your waist like a loser —’

‘Just because I look good doing that, Yura —’ says Viktor peacefully.

Yuri sniffs. There’s little heat in it, but it prickles at the back of Viktor’s throat. ‘Idiot.’ He throws out his arms to begin the familiar choreography, the lines of his slight body aggressive. ‘I wouldn’t trust you to raise a child.’

‘Yes,’ Viktor agrees. He’s not going to get angry at an eleven-year-old. He skates backwards swiftly and lands two quad flips in quick succession, and the muscles of his thighs scream at him as he jumps and the movements send sharp, raw pain into the soles of his feet, which are already stinging and tender from the day’s punishing practice. But it’s calming.

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You: Happy birthday Mila!

Mila: vitya!!!!
Mila: omg i’m so touched that you remembered thank you!!!

Mila: ))))))))))))

You: )))))))

Mila: i haven’t seen you in a while :O

Mila: how are you?

You: Well it’s the end of the season and I’ve only thought about killing myself twice so that’s pretty good compared to last year!

Mila: vitya

You: Hmm?

Mila: should i come over

You: Wh at

You: Oh no no no

You: Don’t listen to me I was just being dramatic

Mila: vitya

You: Oh my god

Mila: vitya

You: This is terrible I’m so sorry

Mila: what can i do???

You: Nothing!

You: Shhh you’re like 14 you’re a BABY

Mila: i’m telling yakov

You: DON’T

‘Did you block Mila’s fucking number?’ Yuri demands. He waits for the crowd’s applause to subside after Georgi lands another jump combination, and then continues kicking the back of Viktor’s seat. ‘Hey! Turn around and look at me, idiot. Are you a grown-ass adult or not?’

Viktor massages the bridge of his nose. Georgi might still make the podium as long as he doesn’t mess up the second half of his free skate. Yuri, Viktor thinks, is well on his way to someday surpassing Viktor. He doesn’t mind. He doesn’t particularly care.

‘I know, I know. Is she angry?’

‘Like hell she’s angry. What’s wrong with you?’ Yuri sighs; the sound is shockingly harsh for such a
young voice. ‘Listen, I’ll keep Yakov off your back, just… don’t do anything dumber than usual, all right?’

Viktor discovers the shelves of trophies one evening while Yuuri’s out for his run. Their presence is no surprise to him, of course — he’s known Yuuri is brilliant since he first heard the name. Vaguely, just a fog of an impression in the back of his mind: Katsuki Yuuri, the pride of Japan. They match. The three of them, Viktor and Yuuri and Yurio, they match.

He has a quiet, glorious hour or so to explore the names and dates, to run his fingers over the surfaces of the medals and framed pictures. The dark gold of trophies and medals, more medals, gleams from the soft shadows. Viktor swipes a fingertip over the fading wood. The shelf is dusty — Toshiya’s too busy to clean the house very often — but Yuuri’s prizes remain lovingly polished.

Viktor bought a book on conversational Japanese at the airport after last year’s banquet, in a snap decision, and spent the long aching flight home teaching himself beginner’s phrases. He didn’t have the time to practise those until he met Hiroko and Toshiya and Mari. Now he’s picking up new words and improving his pronunciation faster than he thought he ever could. He was so very nearly convinced that he was too old to learn anything new. The embossed inscriptions are in English, though. He slides the photograph out of its frame and turns it over: Katsuki Yuuri, junior GPF gold medallist. Viktor was there. He was on his first or second gold medal in the senior division. He’s pretty sure of it.

Yuuri slips through the door and leaves his keys on the bookshelf next to Viktor’s. He takes one look at Viktor, seated in the dining area with Makkachin in his lap, and blinks twice.

‘Yuuri,’ Viktor says in a scolding tone, lengthening the syllables, ‘you have won the Grand Prix Final. Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘I-it’s not the same!’

Yelling at Yakov, when Yakov bursts into his apartment to talk him out of leaving, is cathartic. He’s not going to lie. He doesn’t — he doesn’t think about it too hard, because the things he says to Yakov are hurtful and awful and he’d rather not remember them. But it feels. It feels good, in a way that isn’t much of a feeling at all. To switch off the high-alert mode he’s been operating in, the brittle focus of his smiles, the drain on his energy. Twenty years. And — after that — Yakov still follows him to the airport for one last try, which is almost like forgiveness. The closest thing to love you can get.

He’s had similar unmentionable moments over the pounding years. He cuts off his hair himself, in a fit of pique — goes to the hairdresser the next morning to get it tidied up. The change makes him look handsome, though in a different way. A different person. A new set of selves to refine.

‘Vitya, what the fuck,’ Georgi says when Viktor drags himself to the rink for that day’s practice.

‘Looks good, yes?’ Viktor asks pleasantly. He doesn’t give Georgi a chance to respond. He straps on his skates and lets his mind go blank.

2015. The banquet. Viktor stares down at Katsuki Yuuri. His arms around Viktor’s waist, his face warm and alive and very close. Yuri, sweating and glowering, just out of the corner of Viktor’s eye. Yuuri is strong enough to dip Viktor. Viktor could probably lift Yuuri if they skated together. He hasn’t felt this present in a long while.
He looks into Katsuki Yuuri’s eyes. Swallows. Tastes the champagne hot and wild and swooping low in his throat. Thinks: *oh*, and then *oh no*, and *don’t*, and *do not fixate on this boy*.

Obviously, it doesn’t work.

Chapter End Notes

berry did some lovely doodles [here](#)!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

i’m running with the headcanon that (judging from yuuri’s facial expression) ep 7 was not their first kiss (and speaking of kisses, thank you to hellodeer & aubreyli for the bits about blowing a kiss & the camera kiss threat respectively!!!) again, most scenes are arranged non-chronologically

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He can’t keep himself from touching Yuuri, is the problem. It’s like an itch in his fingertips. A burn crying out to be soothed. He’s careful, always — watches Yuuri’s expression for the first hint of disquiet — but Yuuri goes red to the ears, lips parting slightly so his breath warms the hollow of Viktor’s palm. Every time. Startled but receptive. Flustered but not uncomfortable. Viktor has always been better at reading other people than himself. Sometimes Yuuri leans into the touch.

This is getting out of control.

‘Fucking katsudon,’ Viktor says in Russian, and lets his head fall forward to smack the tabletop. At his side, perched delicately atop a stool like some small leaf-creature, Yurio sniggers.

‘Don’t think about the banquet.’

‘I am thinking about it and there’s nothing you can do to stop me.’

‘Vit’ka, you moron,’ says Yurio, his tone dark with something deeper than frustration. Yurio, to Viktor, is still a child: limbs and words unformed. He’s not supposed to be in this position. But Viktor’s never been good at understanding boundaries. Age differences and the wary respect of the rink. The parts of yourself that should and shouldn’t be seen. It confuses him. And Yurio — well, Yurio booked a plane ticket on impulse and flew to Japan, by himself, without telling Yakov and possibly without telling his grandfather, and located Viktor through Instagram and willpower alone so Yurio probably doesn’t mind that much. ‘How much are you going to drink? I need you at the rink tomorrow morning if I’m going to skate a perfect routine, okay.’

‘Oh, you need me,’ Viktor exclaims, delighted. He knocks back another mouthful of sake. It’s not the strongest stuff but it’ll do. The room is beginning to feel hot. ‘Yurio! I’m touched.’

‘Don’t be such an ass.’ Yurio tosses a hurried glance over his shoulder to make sure nobody is bothered by the two foreigners talking in their native tongue. Thankfully the restaurant is stuffed with sweltering customers, mostly old men at this time in the evening, and Viktor can barely make out what Yurio’s saying over the noise. ‘When are you coming back? For real? I’m getting really sick of Yakov calling me, Vit’ka.’

‘Oh, you need me,’ Viktor exclaims, delighted. He knocks back another mouthful of sake. It’s not the strongest stuff but it’ll do. The room is beginning to feel hot. ‘Yurio! I’m touched.’

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Viktor feels a twinge of guilt at the same time as he hears his voice harden. ‘Tell him to stop causing you trouble.’ You are causing trouble, his mind supplies. He runs one hand through his hair. ‘I’m not going back. Not yet. Maybe never.’

‘Vitya.’ Yurio leans across the table and grabs his wrist. They both know Yurio’s only acting like this because he can count on Viktor to forget about it in the morning. ‘Be serious. Look, you and I,
we know you have no idea what you’re doing. But *he* doesn’t know that, does he? What’s he going to feel like when you let him down? When *he* lets you down? Huh? Forget about this. Let the guy eat his katsudon in peace. It’s not good for — I hate to see you like this, Vit’ka.’

*This is the best thing that’s ever happened to me,* Viktor thinks. He waves at the bartender and gestures for a refill. ‘What do you want, then?’

‘Same thing everyone else wants,’ Yurio snaps. ‘Come back to skating.’

Viktor nearly breaks his glass. He lowers it gently to the table instead, fingers tight. He wishes he hadn’t known Yurio quite so long. ‘I’ll skate when I want to.’ He flicks a look from under his eyelids at Yurio, coiled small and implacable in his ridiculous tiger-print hoodie. ‘Go home, solnyshko. You’re too young to drink.’

They only start preparing Yuuri’s exhibition program halfway through the months of training. Yuuri changes his mind twice, bites his lip in the way that makes Viktor’s heart ache, can’t bring himself to even think about the gala after the Grand Prix Final. It’s Viktor who walks up behind him as Yuuri is playing video games after practice, sticks his earbuds into Yuuri’s ears and says, ‘Listen to this.’

Yuuri curls up unconsciously against the table as he listens, resting his chin on Viktor’s shoulder. His mouth is soft, his eyes half-lidded. ‘It’s beautiful.’ He frowns, touching the pad of his thumb to his lips; it’s amazing how many little gestures Yuuri lets slip through when he’s warm and comfortable. ‘But I don’t think anybody’s ever done that before. Is it allowed?’

‘Please,’ says Viktor, indulging in a rare moment of frankness. ‘I’m Viktor Nikiforov. I can get away with anything.’

The duet becomes their grounding point. Yuuri skates bits and pieces of it, midway through practice, when the stress of perfecting his competition programs begins to take its toll. Soon they know each other’s parts by heart. It *fits.* It comforts Yuuri, he can tell. And this, what they have — it’s not obsession, not any more, and hasn’t been for a long while, ever since they met properly for the first time. Viktor is winding his way towards truth. He thinks it’s something deeper and calmer, a secret, that he can look at Yuuri and want to get back on the ice. With Yuuri. For Yuuri. Anything to keep this.

The days slip by and Yuuri thrums with them, like the vibration of a violin string. Closer and closer to the first of their assigned events. Time runs slow in Hasetsu, but this feels like the start of a new season entirely, tingling and alive. His years have been blurring together since he was Yuuri’s age. Yuuri sighs as he unstraps his skates after practice — a low, shuddering, unthinking sound — and Viktor’s throat catches on that. He tucks his hands into the front of Yuuri’s hoodie and coaxes Yuuri up against the wall of lockers, nudging him quiet, breathing him. Yuuri makes a small lost noise into Viktor’s mouth like *please,* arching up to wrap his legs around Viktor’s waist. He hides his face in Viktor’s shoulder.

On the way back (Viktor having forsaken his bicycle for the chance to walk home holding hands with Yuuri), Yuuri clears his throat. His thumb taps the inside of Viktor’s wrist twice. The trouble with Yuuri is that he thinks nobody cares about him and so his words can never hurt anyone. It’s more than a little frustrating, but Viktor is fond of learning the insides of him. He waits, patient, and sees the courage climb up Yuuri’s throat.

Yuuri says at last (freshly kissed, freshly loved, going home to cuddle in the hot spring and fall asleep with his nose tucked into Viktor’s neck), ‘Are you my boyfriend now?’
Are you fucking kidding me, thinks Viktor. What he actually says is: ‘Sure, if you want me to be.’

‘Viktor.’ Yuuri’s voice is sharp. His fingertips stroke the inside of Viktor’s palm. ‘Enough. What do you want to be? To me?’

‘Anything,’ Viktor says, ‘anything.’

Barcelona, after the short programs — the routine is familiar in a way that sticks in Viktor’s chest. Kiss-and-cry, drowsiness heavy on his eyelids, the flutter of flowers and plushies following him on the ice. He’s still caught up in the memory of the home crowd chanting his name at Rostelecom. At least nobody pays much attention to Viktor here in Spain, no more than usual. Yuuri doesn’t need that right now.

‘Yakov’s given up on you,’ Yurio says out of the corner of his mouth, as they spoon servings of paella onto their pre-warmed plates at the hotel buffet. ‘He thinks you’re staying as Yuuri’s coach forever.’

‘Good,’ replies Viktor, swallowing his unease. He slides one of the lined-up mugs onto a saucer for coffee and hands Yurio an empty glass, pointing him towards the orange juice dispenser. ‘It’s working out so far — though the GPF results will be the final test of that, hmm?’

Yurio snorts. ‘We’ll see. If Otabek doesn’t beat the pig’s score, I will.’

‘Shut up, Yurochka,’ Viktor says, voice light and pleasant, bright smile. This is why the paparazzi don’t bother him much. Yuuri’s nostrils flare but he quietens immediately, and stalks off towards Yakov and Lilia’s table without a backward glance.

Viktor hasn’t spoken to Yakov properly since he left for Japan. Beijing and Rostelecom don’t count. He never used to pay attention to the other skaters’ programs, and it’s a shock to his system now; he was always warming up in the corridor, fighting to remember the patterns of the music, feeding on Yakov’s silent pride. He feels sick. Yurio, on the other hand, keeps in contact with Viktor like he can’t tear his eyes away from the trainwreck. He calls Viktor once or twice after leaving Japan, muttering complaints into Viktor’s ear.

‘I can’t wait for him to retire,’ growls Yurio. Viktor tugs the robe closer around his shoulders. There’s an indistinct murmur of voices in the background, and he can hear the whistle of wind over the line. He wonders if Yurio’s walking home from the rink.

‘Yes, me too,’ Viktor agrees, just to see the reaction he gets. He glances over his shoulder to make sure Yuuri isn’t anywhere within earshot.

There’s a split second’s pause. Then Yurio snarls: ‘What the fuck is wrong with you?’ and Viktor has to cover the phone to muffle his laughter.

He changes his mind quickly enough that he’s learned not to trust too many of his own decisions. He wants to dance at a gala again — to feel the cheers drifting towards him from the soft, intimate shadows of the audience. To fool around on the ice, capture the hot surprises of the music they always play at these things. He and Chris have always had fun together at galas after their competitions. He wants to challenge Yurio to a jump battle. He wants to see Yuuri and Minami bowing to each other on the ice, because Minami idolises Yuuri and Yuuri doesn’t even know. He doesn’t have long before his body wears out too much to let him land quad flips in competition.

**Phichit:** YUURI MOVED TO RUSSIA I CAN’T BELIEVE
Phichit: i was gonna invite u guys to visit me in bangkok but this is better omg
Phichit: btw our boy yuuri gets cold v easily so u should lend him ur coat ;)))
You: )))))))))))))
Phichit: )))))))))))))))))
You: I put off retirement for him so I feel like that’s the least he can do
Phichit: !!!!!
You: Don’t tell him I said that
Phichit: ya ofc
Phichit: what kind of friend do u take me for
You: Looking out for Yuuri yes
Phichit: no i’m ur friend too
You: Oh
Phichit: HAHAHA
Phichit: viktor……why is he like this
Phichit: i was skyping him before the flight right
You: Yes
Phichit: and he’s like “i think sometimes people look at me & viktor on the street and go ‘what’s that
ten doing with that two’”
Phichit: like what kind of BULL
You: I’m the two
Phichit: fffff
Phichit: can i screenshot this for him
You: Yes!
Phichit: ❤❤❤❤❤❤

In fairness, he’s stopped thinking Yuuri is too good for him. Away in Hasetsu, away from the rush of competing, the warm nighttime glow of the inn soothes some hollowness inside him and he can think clearly again. Maybe that’s the solution: Yuuri and Yuuri’s family have no prior knowledge of Viktor, so he can recreate the person he wants to be. Maybe not. It is a relief to discover that this, maybe, isn’t true. The trouble with Yuuri — this is something that they mightn’t ever change — is that Yuuri thinks the world of Viktor and so very little of himself. Someone has to do something
about it. Viktor and Minako rarely handle Yuuri’s practice time together, but when they do, Minako keeps giving Viktor significant glances: you know how he is. Viktor swears he’ll kiss Yuuri on camera if Yuuri attempts to put himself down in interviews. Open-mouthed, with tongue. He’s going to have to upgrade that threat. He’s beginning to think Yuuri might not actually mind all that much. They’ve made enough progress since Viktor flew to Japan.

This is how it happens.

‘Like this,’ says Yuuri, leaning against Viktor’s shoulder, the remains of their dinner wilting on the table before them. His hands over Viktor’s hands. Fingers clever on the buttons of his 3DS. ‘No, no, wrong one — you can skip this cutscene, it’s pointless — don’t walk into a wall, please, you’re going to kill yourself. Viktor —’ and his mouth furls into that helpless half-smile, because they both know the other isn’t serious, and he’s teasing and he looks so trusting, so at ease, ‘— you’re so bad at this.’

‘I am,’ Viktor agrees at once. ‘Terrible. You’ll have to continue teaching me, Yuuri.’

Yuuri laughs. Soft. ‘You’re impossible.’ He tilts his face upwards. In a few nights they’ll be flying off to Beijing. The rumble of the ocean in the distance, blue and cold, is faintly audible from Viktor’s bedroom some nights. It lulls him to sleep whenever he can hear it. Viktor puts the pad of his thumb against Yuuri’s mouth. Like a dream. Brushes over the curve of Yuuri’s bottom lip. Yuuri’s breath hitchs, his eyes flutter shut. He lets his mouth fall open — lets Viktor’s thumb slip into his mouth. His breath is warm and sweet and so close. A certainty. A promise.

Viktor leans in and kisses him. There’s no one else around. Makkachin is asleep on the floor beside them, and Yuuri shifts, drawing Viktor into his lap. Their mouths fit together. It feels right. Yuuri, warm and uneven and real, gasps and winds the fingers of his right hand into Viktor’s hair.

Yuuri inhales. His cheeks are hot; he blinks at Viktor, once, twice. The 3DS has somehow ended up on the floor. Yuuri hauls himself to his feet, a little slower, a little clumsier than usual. His limbs look like they’re moving in honey. ‘It’s late. I need to go to bed.’

‘Okay,’ Viktor says — or doesn’t say, he’s not sure. He sits up. Sets his palm on Makkachin’s fur, where the breathing is deep and steady.

He goes to bed as well, an hour later, maybe two. Scooping Makkachin into his arms, burying his face in the familiar spicy scent he’s lived with all his life. He feels a bit like he did on that first night when Yuuri refused to sleep with him, except worse. He’s getting better at parsing the confusion of things. It’s less overwhelming. He pulls the blanket over his head, pulls Makkachin close to him and sleeps.

Midway into the night. Perhaps earlier than it feels. The curtains blurring dark and soft at the window. There’s a knock on the door.

Yuuri comes in without waiting for a response. This is what he’s like when he’s excited. He pads over to Viktor’s bed, silent in the dull shadows. Viktor twists awake.

‘Viktor,’ Yuuri says, soft and a little desperate, ‘Viktor,’ and then he’s climbing onto the bed and leaning down and pressing his mouth to Viktor’s and not letting go.

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Things Yuuri likes about St. Petersburg: pirozhki. The kissing bridge they pass on their way to the rink. Russian pop songs. Making breakfast in the chill of the early morning, wearing Viktor’s old Team Russia jacket, and shivering when Viktor comes up behind him to put his lips at the nape of
Yuuri’s neck where Yuuri’s hair is getting long. Yurio.

‘Vit’ka, get over here,’ snaps Yurio from the other side of the rink, and Viktor spins out of Yuuri’s orbit and skates across the ice for another round of running through Yurio’s short program side by side. He likes doing this more than anything. He’s forgetful, of course, but it only takes a few not-too-gentle reminders from Yurio before he can recall the choreography. In the videos Yuuri and Mila take sometimes, Viktor’s motions are broader, more fluid — experience is all that Yurio’s lacking. Occasionally he spots Lilia watching them narrowly from the rinkside, her arms folded.

After the day’s practice, Mila skates over to them with a list of new favourite restaurants they haven’t tried yet, and she and Yuuri spend fifteen minutes arguing over the conflicting reviews they pull up on their phones. Her hair’s swept back into a careless ponytail; they’re all growing their hair out, she tells Yuuri, who smiles warm and amused. And then Yuuri intervenes in the dinner argument, makes the decision for everyone and marches them away to the restaurant.

Mila and Yurio have learned to go to Yuuri whenever they want something from Viktor, and to Viktor when they need to coax some favour out of Yuuri, like creating an Instagram account or breakdancing lessons (this second scenario is less common, since Yuuri is generally harder to persuade than Viktor). They’ve dodged the press successfully for weeks. Yurio and Viktor’s combined skill with paparazzi works to their advantage, in the end, because Viktor keeps introducing himself with ‘Hi, I’m Japan’s top skater Katsuki Yuuri’s fiancé!’ and Yuuri turns bright red and jumps in with ‘He’s five-time world champion Viktor Nikiforov! And I am his fiancé!’ Yurio has taken to standing just over Viktor’s shoulder in the background and staring directly into the camera, furiously and unblinking, till the cameraman gets uncomfortable.

Georgi has a new girlfriend and doesn’t care.

‘Yakov and Lilia?’ Viktor ventures to ask, finally, while they navigate the puddles on the pavement. There’s a peculiarly distinct smell of wet stone after rain, and the cold air clings to Viktor’s nostrils; Yuuri’s ears are red. Yuuri and Viktor are walking ahead, their scarves tangled together so inextricably that Yuuri just gave up and draped them around both their necks, like some two-headed one-hearted creature.

‘They’re eating somewhere else. By themselves.’ Viktor doesn’t have to turn around to know Mila is wagging her eyebrows.

Behind them, Yurio kicks at a stray twig on the ground. ‘You two are disgusting.’

‘Let him go, Mila,’ says Yuuri mildly as Mila puts Yurio in a headlock. The sky’s fading to dusk, soggy and grey and damp, but Viktor has never felt so bright.

Seated in the dim booth, Yurio leans over and reaches into Yuuri’s discarded coat as soon as Yuuri gets up to go to the bathroom. Yuuri’s spent the past few minutes imperiously permitting Viktor to braid his hair. Viktor, if he tries to remember, can recall himself being described as an unnaturally poised sixteen-year-old. Clearly this is one area in which Yurio won’t be following in his footsteps.

‘See, my logic is —’ Yurio explains as Viktor watches him, chin propped in his hand, ‘— if he’s on social media he’ll see all the embarrassing stuff you post about him, and that’ll stop you from annoying me daily with your Instagram posts.’

Mila brightens. ‘You’re getting Yuuri an Instagram account? It’s about time!’

‘First I’m taking his phone.’
‘You don’t know his passcode!’

Yuri Plisetsky, breaker of world records, GPF gold medallist, raises his head to give Mila a contemptuous look. ‘Yes I do. It’s Vitya’s birthday. You’re all pathetic.’

Viktor still does not know how he feels about doing exactly what Yakov has been pressuring him to do since day one. He’s been circling around Yakov, blissfully ignoring instructions as usual, and trying not to look for a hint of I-told-you-so in Yakov’s eyes. Trying not to imagine things that aren’t there. If Viktor were anything like Yurio, he’d veer fiercely away from any course of action with a passing resemblance to giving up. But Viktor is not Yurio. He doesn’t set new records and win competitions purely out of spite. Secretly, he craves the day Yakov will tell him he’s a good coach. He doesn’t allow himself to hope that it will happen.

‘Speaking of birthdays,’ says Mila when Yuuri returns (the phone innocently replaced in Yuuri’s coat pocket), ‘Lilia’s birthday is coming up soon. I mean, I’m not sure... Am I right, Yura?’

Yurio grunts. He shoves another forkful into his mouth and flicks his hair out of his eyes to fix Viktor with a stare. ‘Get her something.’

‘Would she accept a gift from me, though?’

Yurio yawns.

‘Lilia doesn’t hate you. She just thinks you do a lot of stupid things, think in stupid ways and make stupid decisions.’

‘O-okay,’ says Viktor, as Yuuri makes a fist in front of his mouth and turns his laugh into a cough. ‘Right.’

Heading back to the hotel after the Cup of China, his silver medal tucked securely away underneath his jacket, Yuuri’s eyelids are heavy enough to drag them both down. He moves like he’s underwater. He dozes off on Viktor’s shoulder in the taxi, their hands tangled together. He leans up — in the lift, standing side by side and watching the floor numbers slip by — and brushes his lips against Viktor’s, drowsy. Not thinking. Not calculating.

‘Yuuri,’ Viktor says, quiet.

Yuuri says: ‘Come to my room after you shower?’

They don’t do anything except lie curled together in the single bed (which is far too small for two people), of course. They’re both too tired. But Viktor puts his face against Yuuri’s hair — still damp from the shower — nose brushing Yuuri’s temple, kiss on the crown of Yuuri’s head. Yuuri breathes: in, out. The rise and fall of his chest muffled amidst the bedclothes. Viktor is unlearning twenty years of the urge to manipulate.

‘Yuuri,’ he says into the darkness of the hotel room, before Yuuri drifts off to sleep for good. ‘I’m sorry I made you cry.’

Yuuri answers with a soft, unintelligible noise, a whisper of air just beneath Viktor’s ear. His arm is draped across Viktor’s waist. Viktor’s fingers are buried in his hair. Yuuri mumbles at the best of times, and Viktor has to lean in to hear him.

‘What was that?’
‘Tell me something honest.’

Viktor blinks. He’s never been asked this before.

‘Like what?’

Yuuri yawns and snuggles closer. ‘Anything.’

Viktor thinks. Swallows. When he gets on the ice, the cheers from the audience get so loud that he can hardly hear the music. He has to skate his program purely from memory, sometimes, when that happens — how is he supposed to feel the music when he can’t make out its rhythms? ‘Skating makes me feel sick,’ he says.

Yuuri winces. ‘Okay.’

‘I mean —’ He falters, which is unlike him. ‘— not always. Not all the time. It’s good — sometimes, with you. After you. It’s better.’

He can feel Yuuri pressing his lips together. ‘Okay.’

Viktor turns his head a little, searching out the fragrance of hotel shampoo in Yuuri’s hair. Yuuri reaches out and intertwines their fingers. Yuuri’s grip is unsurprisingly strong. Viktor lets his hand slip down and encircles Yuuri’s wrist, cooling the pulse where it flutters low and nervous. Yuuri rests his palm against Viktor’s chest, over his heartbeat. Steady.

‘In the carpark. Why?’

‘It’s a symptom. It’s called splitting. I looked it up once.’

‘Why?’

‘To keep you with me.’

‘Viktor,’ Yuuri says. Viktor really, really wants Yuuri to start calling him Vitya. He’ll save that request for a later time. ‘You can… you can be yourself, you know. You have to be. I won’t accept anything else. I’ll try to understand. I won’t mind, I promise.’

Famous last words.

Other skaters are beginning to resent their complete domination of the podium. the season everyone else collectively stopped giving a fuck, Phichit texts Viktor just before bedtime. viktor nikiforov is BACK and he BROUGHT COMPANY!!! Viktor sends back a series of aggressive smiley faces, promises Phichit more dog photos and selfies, and switches off his phone. There are about a dozen different Instagram videos of the moment Yuuri yanked Viktor up to the top of the podium by his medal for a kiss, before Yurio came soaring in to tackle them to the ice in what wasn’t so much a hug as an attack. Yuuri sits crosslegged on the foot of their bed, towel crisp around his neck, scrolling through his feed with a small frown. Viktor hands Yuuri one of the two mugs of tea he’s made, sets his own mug down on the bedside table and gets underneath the covers.

‘Minako says the Russian fans yelled “ganba!” and you blew a kiss to them.’ Viktor slides one arm around Yuuri’s waist from behind and tucks his chin on Yuuri’s shoulder, blowing at the wisps of dark hair that aren’t quite a ponytail. ‘What have I done, Yuuri? What have I created?’

‘I wish Minako wouldn’t talk so much about me,’ says Yuuri, blushing. ‘She’s older than my
mother, you know.’

Viktor chokes on his tea. ‘Minako’s in her fifties? How?’

‘I know, right?’ Yuuri says with feeling. He reaches behind him to caress the side of Viktor’s face absent-mindedly with his left hand. ‘Tell me something you’re embarrassed about.’

‘Oh,’ Viktor breathes. He shifts so that Yuuri can feel Viktor’s eyelashes brushing his cheek as Viktor blinks. ‘Is that what you want?’

‘Mm-hmm.’

Viktor thinks. Swallows. Taps his fingers against the inside of Yuuri’s forearm. It’s dizzying to be so unconditionally trusted. He’s getting used to it.

‘I looked at the banquet photos every night for… for a long time after the 2015 GPF,’ he confesses.

‘Vitya!’ Yuuri drops his phone, catches it just in time, and turns around in horror. ‘That’s embarrassing! I mean, for me. I’m embarrassed. Oh, no. Not the banquet—’

‘Don’t be. You were beautiful,’ says Viktor, a bit stunned. Yuuri folds his hand into Viktor’s and holds it tightly.

(2017. Public practice just before the Japanese Nationals. Yuuri doesn’t look up from skating figures, calming himself with the repetitive movements, but at the appropriate point in Minami’s run-through, he lifts one hand and snaps his fingers in time with Minami. Minami nearly passes out. Viktor smiles.)

And — now, here, this moment, in the tense little breathing space between Rostelecom and the Grand Prix Final in Barcelona. Hasetsu. 2016. Viktor wakes up to the sound of the ocean. His room’s heavy with night, and the absence of Yuuri’s even breathing beside him nags like a hole in the gut. He lies awake for a while, staring at the ceiling, and then he’s sliding out of bed and slipping into his clothes before he can stop himself.

Viktor doesn’t bother to search the house. He knows where Yuuri’s gone. He takes care to be quiet, though, on his way through the corridor and down the stairs, pulling on his jacket over the black practice shirt he took blindly from the wardrobe. Laces up his shoes. He doesn’t run to Hasetsu Ice Castle — he’s not that dependent — but his footsteps echo around him on the rough pavestones, tired, and the curtain of this late hour hangs over him and the street-lamps at his side. He could walk this route in his sleep.

The lights are on. The rink is open. Yuuri, dressed half in Viktor’s clothes and half in his own, is tracing out slow comforting figures with his eyelashes low in concentration. Viktor leans against the barrier and watches.

It’s not a cure. It’s like — a thread pulling taut, that’s all. It feels a little less empty. That’s all.

Yuuri doesn’t look up for a long time, and only then does he notice Viktor. He slides to a stop, blinking rapidly.

‘Yuuri,’ Viktor calls across the ice. ‘Should I come skate with you?’

There’s a pause. ‘No,’ Yuuri answers at last. He brushes his hair out of his eyes. ‘It’s fine.’ He
resumes his figures. Viktor settles down on one of the benches and waits.

But it’s Yuuri who comes to him, in the end — takes his glasses out of his pocket and hands them to Viktor for safekeeping, then lies down wordlessly on the bench beside Viktor, settling his head in Viktor’s lap. Nearly dawn. Viktor puts his arm over Yuuri. Fingers cradling the back of Yuuri’s head. He watches the pale light glint off the surface of the ice and waits for the morning to come.

Chapter End Notes

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