Never Look Away

by gabapple, mamodewberry

Summary

Everything Viktor knows and loves is tangled up in the world of competitive skating- a world that, for him, is quickly coming to an end. Standing at the precipice of the inevitable, he must decide how his tale unfolds: should he retire into quiet obscurity? Allow himself to be eaten alive by the younger, more vicious competition?

…Or risk it all on a struggling, but passionate, skater halfway across the world, who may prove to be the inspiration, life, and love that Viktor’s been missing all this time?

AKA: a Yuri on Ice companion novel with 100% more Viktor PoV and backstory!
AKA v 2.0: The "almost-canon-but-not-quite" AU
AKA v 3.0: YOI with real world prejudice, past relationship abuse, and major depression/anxiety.
By reading this fic, we are going to assume that you:
1) Have watched the anime already
2) Are interested in speculative fiction that fills in the gaps that a 12-episode series will inevitably have
3) Are able to handle Real World Issues, as this fic takes place in our world where discrimination is an unfortunate reality

Okay, now that that’s over… Hello! You might remember us from the FREE! fic, *Wait For Me*, which was also a dual-perspective story focused on reading between the lines and taking things way too far. Never Look Away (or NLA) is completely outlined and will be updated as often as we're able, but since we both work 40+ hours a week, it averages to about once every 2-6 weeks. Most/all chapters will include a flashback at the beginning, followed by the present storyline as we go through the series in chronological order. Viktor chapters also often contain a bit of ongoing fairy tale, too, which is what he uses as a way to explain his own life's narrative. But don't get confused: there's not really any magic or princesses or wolves in the fic itself, even though they're mentioned a lot. At least... we think.

A brief FAQ:

**Why is this fic so long?**
NLA is the entire series with all of the blanks filled in, banquet to Barcelona and a bit beyond. But don't worry; we have an outline.

**Why 'Viktor' with a 'k'?**
Since the Viktor we write is nonbinary and a large part of his character arc deals with deliberately hiding the feminine part of himself due to the pressures of society, we went with the harder, more masculine ‘k’ instead of the softer, more open ‘c’ version of his name. It’s a mask, and a stylistic choice to reinforce the theme. If you hate that, it's really easy to install a browser extension to change all instances of 'Viktor' to 'Victor' (or any other name/word/etc)- we wrote a post about it to help you!

*You can read more FAQs here.*

Here’s a breakdown of the characters that we write/supervise:

- Gabapple: Viktor, Yurio, Phichit, Lilia, Makkachin, Minami, Celestino, Viktor’s family, Mila, Guang-Hong, Otabek, Seung Gil, Emil, Mickey, Axel, Loop, Lutz
- Mamodewberry: Yuuri, Yakov, Christophe, JJ, Mama Katsuki, Papa Katsuki, Mari, Minako, Yuko, Takeshi, Georgi, Leo, Sara

**Links:**
Find us on twitter: gabapple / mamodewberry
gogoichirin (Tumblr)*- Our joint account for all things Gabapple & Mamodewberry!
Official NLA Gallery (Twitter)*- All commissioned/gift art/promotional material for the fic!
Official NLA Playlist (YouTube)- All Recommended Listening songs from the chapters
Vitya Diaries*- The YA novel-style adventures of teenage Viktor

*may contain spoilers
Firebird

Chapter Summary

Viktor teaches his young junior the ropes of banquet etiquette, including all of the tips and tricks to avoid getting close to any rivals that will inevitably stab you in the back. But a seemingly boring night out turns on its head, leaving Viktor utterly and hopelessly bewitched by one Yuuri Katsuki, a figure skater desperate to reclaim his honor-- even while inebriated.

Chapter Notes

**In this chapter:** Please don't be put off by Viktor's bitterness in the beginning- he's just in a bad mood. If you can get to the part where he dances with Yuuri, I promise, everything changes... :)

**Chapter Illustrations:**

*Viktor and Yurio at the GPF banquet*, illustrated by Adashuko (commission)

**Recommended Listening:**

*Ochi Chyornye*, as performed by Fabio Hager Sexteto

*Little Sister*, by Rufus Wainwright

*Sway*, as performed by The Puppini Sisters

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ISU Grand Prix Skate Canada - Victoria, British Columbia

Viktor (18 years old)

“After the dramatic performance of *Pas De Deux - Intrada* from Tchaikovsky’s *The Nutcracker*, we weren’t sure what to expect, but Nikiforov’s left us speechless with yet another flawlessly executed program at such a high difficulty that he’s bound to be breaking records as well as hearts here tonight. His coach, Yakov Feltsman, tells us that Viktor’s sudden image change was for this season’s theme- *Rising from the Ashes* -though he was unable to elaborate further. Viktor himself had this to share about the program, referring to an old Russian folktale:

“When transformed into a firebird, the princess chose to pluck each of her beautiful feathers out for the world to enjoy- ultimately killing herself -instead of living under the talons of the falcon for eternity.”

“The eighteen-year-old skater has been a fan favorite for several years, but his updated style has impressed the judges and audience alike. Everyone is loving the more mature, princely visage, and—oh, it looks like the scores are in. Incredible! Incredible, he’s broken his personal best and a world record, setting a high bar for this year’s Grand Prix, even so early in the season! Turning to the kiss and cry, we see Viktor and his coach, and even they seem a little surprised, but just listen to the roar of the crowd!”
Down below, underneath the screams and the lights, Viktor turned his gaze from the numbers on the screen and to the barrier. It hadn’t been a challenging program by any means. If anything, it had been one of his easiest. No less full of emotion, sure, and he’d pulled it off without misstep, but the score was an artificial inflation.

That, or his previous had been underscored.

Whatever the case, it left him drained. He smiled his fake smile and waited for it to be over. Yakov’s heavy hand on his shoulder brought his attention back for a moment, and he met the old man’s concern with a smirk. “Yes?”

“You knew this was coming, Vitya.”

“Hm.” He stretched his arms out in front of him, shoulders rolling out of Yakov’s touch. The comfort wasn’t unwanted, just… unhelpful in the face of so many prying eyes. “I know.”

They sat in silence for a few moments longer while the spectators calmed down and the announcers switched gears, directing attention to the next challenger to go on. Viktor threaded his fingers through the raw ends of his bangs, edges angled and fine. “I’m just disappointed.”

“Yuri, I want you to pay very close attention.”

The boy glanced up at his would-be mentor, the one and only Viktor Nikiforov, with a look of deadpan ire. Was he in for another inspirational speech, or nonsense garbage? Not that they were much different coming from Viktor, but at least one was easier to listen to. Yuri grunted to show that he was listening and shoved his hands into the pockets of his slacks, dress shoes scuffing over the hotel carpet.

“Yakov has left you in my care, and as this is your first banquet with the seniors I feel that it is my responsibility to prepare you. Don’t be fooled; you might think that these people are your friends and colleagues,” he leaned in, voice lowering to a conspiratorial level, “but this is a battlefield.”

He groaned. So it was garbage. “Viktor.”

Viktor straightened up, gesturing at the wide and empty hallway ahead. They were arriving fashionably late by Viktor’s design, which meant that no one was there to save Yuri from the paranoid lecture.

“They are your rivals. Banquets exist for the sole purpose of digging out the weakness in our enemies…”

“Viktor.”

“I’m not kidding, Yuri. They’ll look for any excuse to tear to you apart in any way they can, any chance they get.”

The boy rolled his eyes hard enough to rock him back, dropping out of step and against the wall. “Tch. So why are we going if you hate everyone, again?”

Viktor took two steps further, hesitated, then turned on his heel. “I don’t hate any- everyone. I just
want you to be careful. And you’ll be fine as long as you are. There are just a few things to keep in mind at these functions. Besides, not going is almost as bad, especially when you’ve won.”

Yuri puffed a hank of bangs from his face, flat expression fixed in place. “Why?”

“Because the only thing people hate more than a sore loser is a sore winner. This is something you’ll need to get used to… they’ll love you and they’ll despise you, Yuri. Every time you walk into the room, they’ll look at you, want what you have, and hate you for it.” Viktor stepped back to adjust Yuri’s collar, then this tie, smoothing out his lapels. He was hands-on often enough, but the expression on his face wasn’t normally so distant.

Yuri grunted again, pushing the mothering hands away. “Yeah, yeah, okay. Did Yakov teach you this, or are you just naturally paranoid?”

“My teacher was years of experience.”

“Years and years and years of experience, got it.”

Viktor groaned, but started walking again. It might have been a cheap move, but it was worth it. Few things could get past the Living Legend’s defenses, and Yuri was one of them. Taking Viktor down a notch here and there was good for everyone, especially with how close he was to handing over his crown. There was only one person in Russia- in all of the skating world -qualified to take it, and Yuri wasn’t about to let anyone get in his way. He had a sure foothold, he’d asserted his position, and now it was just a waiting game.

In a way, the banquet was a soft announcement of the trade off. Whether Viktor retired this season or next, Yuri was coming. And with the Prince offering his official support, there was no better position for the Ice Tiger of Russia to take what was rightfully his.

With that in mind, Yuri walked with pride and dignity the rest of the way to the banquet hall, stepping in at Viktor’s side with calm indifference to the crowd. He recognized the other skaters immediately despite the formal wear; they looked tired under the smiles and grooming. Like Viktor did. Which made sense, since they’d been competing for the past three days and training for months prior. Not like the press, who had the soft look of office work on their bodies, or the sponsors, some of whom didn’t look like they worked at all. They weren’t athletes.

At least the coaches understood. There were several of them, too, scattered around and conversing with the soft network and money people. It made him miss Yakov, but the old man insisted that he was too old for this tuftá.

Viktor, too, had often said the same thing. He always made an appearance, but it was usually brief. Yuri imagined that it was a drop by for a drink, an acknowledgement that he’d defeated them all yet again, and then a parting princess wave, but he couldn’t be sure. In the three years he’d gotten close to the man, there was still so much that he’d kept to himself. It was always a check in with Yakov after the banquet, then early to bed in his own room. Who knew what secrets the elite adult skating world held?

“One drink,” said Viktor, dropping his voice as he navigated through the crowd. He’d been fielding introductions with coy smiles and charm while Yuri observed in silence, lost in thought, but he looked up at him then.

“Huh?”

“Limit yourself to one drink. Trust me.”
Yuri couldn’t help but bristle. It was one thing for Yakov to give that sort of advice, but Viktor wasn’t his coach. “I can hold—”

“Yes, I know.” Viktor came to a stop at the champagne table and selected a glass for each, offering one to Yuri with a small frown. “This is nothing to vodka and I’m certain it offends your pride. However,” he lifted the flute and sampled it. “This is more of… a sacrament. You drink to join the fold. But you can’t lose your head, no matter what.”

“Because they’re wolves, yeah?” The boy drained half of his glass, swallowed, and then burped, the pleasure of which only doubled at the look of disgust on Viktor’s face. Even more when the man’s mouth twitched into a half smile, torn between discipline and amusement.

Viktor wasn’t good at being the bad guy, and as much as he liked to pretend that he was just as tough and stuffy as Yakov was, he was every bit as rebellious as Yuri.

Heh.

“Yuri…” he whined.

“You know, we could get room service, Viktor. Real drinks. Watch tv.” A shrug. “We don’t have to stay.”

Viktor blinked down at him.

Yuri took another drink, smaller that time. “If you don’t want to be here, that is.”

“I don’t think the hotel will have anything good enough,” Viktor said after a moment, bringing the glass back to his lips. “Though, we are in home country… perhaps…”

The table behind them lurched, toppling glasses and scraping over the polished floor. Yuri whipped his head to find the cause, regretting it immediately for two reasons. The first being that, yes, he could hold his alcohol in usual circumstances, he’d had that champagne on an empty stomach a little too quickly. The second was that he recognized the man bent over the table, using it for support.

Yuuri Katsuki.

And he looked pissed.

Viktor chuckled, setting a hand on Yuri’s shoulder to pull him away from the table. “You see? One drink is all you need,” but he didn’t get further than that before the Japanese skater turned on them. “You, he said, jabbing a finger at the young blond. He dragged himself from the table, body swaying, and launched into a rant in Japanese that neither of the Russians could understand.

Not that it mattered. Yuri was pretty sure that he got the gist of it, and he was boiling.

“Yuri?” Viktor asked, abandoning his champagne to take both of his charge’s shoulders. “What’s going on?”

The Japanese man turned a glare Viktor’s way, but swept it right back to Yuri, and stuck out his tongue. That only made Yuri bristle more, rolling up his sleeves with a vengeance. “This is that Japanese pig that I found crying in the bathroom earlier… I think he wants to throw down!”

“Yuri! Don’t call him th- and you can’t throw down!”
“Yes!” The inebriated Asian cried in horribly mangled English. “Yes! Throw down—dance battle!”

A… dance battle?

Yuri stared at the rumpled suit of the broken man, stupid drunk and angry, making a scene. Meanwhile, Viktor held him protectively. Winners versus a loser. So the Japanese pig wanted a chance to reclaim some honor? Heh. Why not?

“Okay,” he said, and shrugged out of Viktor’s grip. “You’re just going to lose—again.”

“Shippai wo kurikaesu koto de, seikou ni itaru.”

“…Whatever you say, piggy.”

“Well.” Viktor picked up another glass of champagne. “I guess dance fighting is allowed. *This* should be interesting~!”

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“You look like you’re having fun…”

Viktor tensed, but only for the briefest of moments, forcing his body to relax. It was only Christophe, and while he was relatively harmless as far as his competitors went, he still wasn’t fond of letting his guard down around him. Chris had a way of sinking his teeth into any weak spots he found and never let it be forgotten.

To his credit, though, Viktor had been dancing like an idiot, trying to get the best photo angles for secret scrapbooking, and he was having fun. That was an unusual experience for him at banquets, so it wasn’t like Chris was wrong, exactly, just… Christophe. He shuddered, but let his smile come back, holding up the mobile. “Yuri’s made a friend.”

The dance off had only been going on for seven minutes, but Yuri was already looking tired. It didn’t help that he’d started off with such an intense routine, but Katsuki had workhorse endurance that was difficult to match. As much as he wanted his junior to win, it was already clear that he would, in fact, not.

“Japan’s skater, yeah?” Christophe watched as the pair did variations of jackhammers. “Quite agile, isn’t he?” He tapped his unshaven chin, and then smiled. “I’d like to see what he could do on my preferred dance floor.”

Viktor knew what that meant and he managed to repress another shudder, but only barely. He had a healthy amount of respect for the other man’s talents, but there was just something about the uninhibited sexuality of it that made him queasy. He cleared his throat. “I think we’ll leave after this, anyway, so be my guest.”

“Aw, but Viktor, so soon?”

Viktor patted his neck, rubbing at the warm spot where Chris’s breath tickled it. *Too close.* “I don’t want to have to break up any more fights for my comrade.”

“But we haven’t even had our chat yet.”

“HEY! Aren’t you watching, Viktor?!”
Right. Viktor, grateful for the distraction, shook his head and flipped back into video mode to record the battle. “Davai! Sorry, Chris. Another time?”

“I suppose. You know, you’re more than welcome to watch~”

Viktor sniffed, tilting his phone to catch the light for a clearer shot. Where Yuri had learned to break dance, he wasn’t sure, but it certainly wasn’t from Yakov. “He’s going to ruin his suit doing that, isn’t he? At least Katsuki’s is…” he didn’t want to say cheap, but he probably didn’t have to.

“Be a dear and have Yuri send him my way when he’s through with him, will you?” Christophe chuckled, patting the small of Viktor’s back as he pulled away. “Oh, don’t look so uptight, Viktor. It’s all in good fun. You know I’m faithful. A man can still browse the menu, can’t he?”

What shame had threatened to settle vanished and Viktor rolled his eyes, opening his mouth, then closing it again as he decided not to respond at all. That was usually best. Words were a double edged sword with him, and banquets were not the place to use them. Not when there was so much at stake. Yuri was already embarrassing himself enough for the both of them.

But that didn’t seem to satisfy him. “I just have an appreciation for beauty~”

“Chris.” It was a warning. Gentle. Or more of a plea. It came with a look that said ‘don’t turn that back on me,’ and Viktor threw in his best pout. It only earned him a laugh from the Swiss man, and he might have given him an even more disparaging look were it not for the blond that came staggering his way.

“Damn that-!” Yuri cursed between ragged breaths, switching to Russian for a colorful description of his competitor which he hissed between clenched teeth. “Did you see what he did?!?”

Viktor glanced down at the sweaty, heaving boy that pawed at him, and wondered how likely it was that the champagne was going to end up on his shoes. A strong constitution was one thing, but few were meant for mixing alcohol with intensive exercise. He took Yuri by the shoulders and stood him upright again. “More or less. Let’s get some water.”

“Screw that!” He tugged at Viktor’s arm, body sagging under exhaustion. “You have to avenge me!”

Avenge? The idea intrigued him, at least long enough to give him pause. But the Japanese skater had already moved on—with Christophe, no less. Viktor’s puzzled smile faded. “I think it’s too late for that.”

Yuri peered past him, grinding his teeth. “That damn pig! What’s he doing now?!?”

“Dancing. Come on, water.”

The pair made their way through the crowd of curious observers to the refreshment table, and Viktor got Yuri settled under a vent with a glass of water. They could only make out part of the entertainment from where they were, but that was fine with Viktor; Christophe had made more than enough awkward advances in the course of their friendship to last a lifetime without adding that on top of it. Instead, he scrolled through the photos in his phone, offering the occasional peek to his companion.

“Ugh.” Yuri crumpled the empty cup in his hand. “I can’t believe I let that pig beat me!”

“He just has more experience than you do.”
“It doesn’t matter! I’m better than he is!”

Viktor retrieved the mangled cup from Yuri’s hand and set it on the table, ending its suffering. “He had a lot more to prove. You said he was the Japanese skater, right? Yuuri Katsuki?”

“Yeah. The one I saw crying in the—”

“Right. Everyone has different ways of dealing with the stress of competition, yeah? And the stress of winning or losing. Some cry. Some go out for a big meal. Some like to sleep it off.”

Yuri slumped in his seat, jacket hanging off his shoulder. “And you?”

“Me? Hmm…” Viktor closed his eyes, considering. He should have known that Yuri would ask. Viktor laughed, casting a sideways glance back at the champagne left on the table. “There’s drinking often enough, but I’m always working on my next programs. Deciding theme, story, music, working through the steps…”

“Tch. You’re even more obsessed than I thought.”

“You should know by now, Yuri.” He ruffled his hair with the palm of his hand, stopping only when he got a warning growl. “Hehe.”

“Ugh this is stupid. C’mon, Viktor. Let’s get out of here.”

He checked his watch. It had already been much longer than Viktor normally spent at these sorts of events, even without all of the customary small talk. Yakov would have been relieved if anything; they had a flight to catch mid-morning, after all, and their coach hated travelling with grumpy students. The more sleep Yuri got, the better. “Fine, fine. We need to find out what happened to your tie, though.”

“What-? Dammit!”

Smirking, Viktor got up, stretched, and began the search with Yuri trudging after. “I’m sure it’s around here somewhere. We just have to retrace our steps.”

Yuri groaned. Viktor laughed.

“Viktoruuuu~!”

The Russian skaters turned their heads, as did many of the other banquet guests, to the desperate call of Yuuri Katsuki. The second round of dance battles had finished, and he was missing half of his clothing, but looked no less than utterly triumphant as he stumbled right up to Viktor and wrapped his arms around his waist. “Viktor!”

There were more than a few gasps, and a deep growl from Yuri, but Viktor himself was too stunned to do anything but freeze in place. He wasn’t in public venues with fans often enough that he was hugged without warning; but that wasn’t the only thing that startled him. There was something else about…

Yuuri rubbed his face and disheveled hair against the taller man’s suit jacket, uttering words that Viktor had to assume were Japanese, but were so slurred and mumbled that he couldn’t be sure. The only thing he could make out was the words ‘dance battle,’ again, which offered only little help. Then Yuuri leaned back, eyes sparkling, and made his heartfelt plea: “Be my coach, Viktor!”

It hit him at once, the moment the other man’s arms looped around his shoulders. Yuuri Katsuki
was the man in the event hall after the grand prix final earlier that day, the one who’d been watching them. He hadn’t recognized him with his glasses, but he was certainly the same. He’d asked him if he’d wanted a photo, and Yuuri had turned his back on them. It had just seemed odd at the time, but now…

Well, they’d been in the final heat together, competing for the podium. Viktor was familiar with Yuuri’s stats, his routine, his background as a skater, but he hadn’t seen him as a competitor outside of the rink. No wonder he’d turned away, especially after such a loss. Especially after Yuri had embarrassed him in the bathroom.

After what had happened, a photo opportunity had probably seemed like an insult.

No wonder Yuuri was drinking so heavily. He was alone, defeated, and had been patronized. But he still had something to prove. He’d shown up to the banquet despite all of that, showing that he stronger than his losses. He’d thrown down with the punk teenager who had bullied him, and begged the person who didn’t even recognize him to coach him. Make him stronger.

Viktor swallowed, heart aching all at once for this other man who, until that moment, had barely been on his radar. And why? Because he was a competitor? Because he wasn’t good enough? Ridiculous. True passion was so rare, so beautiful, seeing it in its raw, vulnerable form was enough to make him weak and take on all of the shame that was due to him.

*What sort of broken heart do you carry? What is the weight on your shoulders? What dreams do you keep secret?* He wanted to ask, but the words caught in his throat. Not that he could, anyway; people didn’t ask those sorts of things. Not of strangers.

But *oh,* how he ached to know!

He barely had a moment to think after that. There were others calling his name- Yuri, wanting to leave; Chris, assuring him that Yuuri was a great partner; someone in the crowd, asking if they knew each other, what was going on, was he going to be coaching someone? Was he retiring after all? But Viktor couldn’t answer, his own thoughts competing with the sound of his heart thumping louder and louder, drowning out everything else.

Then Yuuri took his hand, pulled him out to a clear space on the floor, and spun him out to face him. He’d gotten dressed again, at least mostly; slacks back, tie no longer on his head, all in those few moments of confusion. Chris must have helped him. Everything was moving too quickly. “Ne, ne, you dance, yes?”

Viktor came to a stop, blinking. It was a silly question. He was almost insulted. He’d been dancing most of his life, and winning competitions for nearly as long. Of course he could dance. Hmf. Though, there wasn’t any music, and banquets weren’t the place for dancing without it…

“KICK HIS ASS, VIKTOR!”

Well. It was difficult to argue with a request from his junior. Viktor rolled his shoulders and pulled himself into a starting pose for the tango, chin angled with the gaze of a wolf. *Predatory. Protect the throat.* He wouldn’t let anyone intimidate him.

Yuuri countered with one of his own; similar origin, different dance, compatible step sequence. They circled each other, moving closer, then outward, pivoting on heels to swing around and strike a different pose, switching up the sequence, then moving inward again. The trick was not repeating the same starting pose, ensuring that each was distinct and on point with equal or more flair than the other’s. Viktor had an immense library of moves and sequences to choose from, but it would
serve him as well as he could anticipate Yuuri’s moves—and, despite being smashed, the Japanese skater was keeping up disturbingly well.

So well, in fact, that it was difficult to not just watch him; the way he moved, with such finesse, such deliberate care in each step, full of feeling… It was too impossible to resist shifting stances, throwing complementary moves to Yuuri’s, matching his lead. Embarrassing, maybe, but when his hands found Viktor’s, there were no regrets whatsoever.

Quite the contrary, it was so easy to let Yuuri lead, that Viktor fell into it wholeheartedly; abandoning the game once and for all. The lack of music didn’t matter with the way that Yuuri held him, strong hands and arms in just the right places, letting him bend and sway with the rhythm that they created.

Yuuri knew what he was doing. He’d been trained. Ballet, at the very least. And he was good. God, he was good. Arm around his waist to hold his center, swinging him out in pirouette—something he’d only felt on the ice! The ice! His heart almost couldn’t take it. He could have sung, he could have cried!

Held. Led. Twirled. Lifted. Then dipped, down low, one hand between his shoulder blades, the other cupping his cheek, legs entwined for support. Viktor barely dared to breathe, gazing up at those warm, dark eyes that stared back at him, leaning oh so close…

Yuuri brushed his thumb over his lower lip, the pad of his finger barely dragging moisture through the caress.

Viktor shivered, heat spreading over his face and to his ears.

Oh.

Yuuri leaned closer still, his own lips curving into an incredible smile of starlight and— then he pulled back, letting go entirely. “I win!”

WHUMF.

Viktor stared from the floor, breathless, as the drunken Yuuri stumbled away. “What just…?”

“I thought you were supposed to be a champion,” Yuri muttered. “He dropped you on your ass.”

That wasn’t exactly what Viktor had been asking, but it would have to do. There was enough of a panic growing without Yuri’s opinions adding to it. What was that? He hadn’t felt anything like that in, well, years. That was supposed to be long since dead, and yet…

“So, Viktor~”

Viktor whipped his head to Chris, who crouched with a smirk. Of course Christophe would come to him while he was down. The heat in his cheeks flared and he felt the blush spread deeper, enough that he had to fight the childish urge to hide his face behind a hand. “Don’t look at me like that.”

He chuckled, voice a soft purr against his ear. “I’ve been trying to figure out your type for years. I know some dancers. I could introduce you…”

Type? Did he have a type? Viktor didn’t know. God, the last person he slept with—seven, eight years ago? -who was she? He couldn’t remember her name, he’d been so drunk at the time. He’d just been concerned with if the press had seen them leave together, if they’d gotten enough
photographs. Then it was get it up and get it over with. Pleasant enough, he thought. Maybe. He wasn’t sure. She hadn’t talked to the tabloids, that’s why he didn’t know her, and he owed her for that.

But yes, she had been a dancer; that much he could recall. Was that it? No. It couldn’t be. He was surrounded by dancers all the time. This was--

No. No, it was nothing.

Yuri pressed the flat of his heel against Viktor’s back. “Hey! Get off the floor already! I’m tired, let’s go!”

Oh. He was still sitting dumbfounded in his Armani on the floor, surrounded by the business men and women of the professional figure skating world. Right. Clearing his throat, he took Christophe’s offered arm and got to his feet, brushed himself off, and made adjustments while he regained his composure.

“Or is it that he’s Japanese?”

Viktor choked. “Chris!”

“Hmmm?” Chris asked, brows lifted.

“Shh! It’s not like that. We just-- just danced. That’s all.”

“It’s not like you to get so flustered.”

“Maybe I’ve had too much to drink.” A lie. Definite lie. But that left the possibility that it had not just been a dance… But no, Katsuki was drunk, and none of it had been intentional or real; it was just a game. Just a challenge. He had to stay objective. There was no point in getting worked up over nothing. He forced a smile. “Anyway, it’s getting late.”

“Viktor. You cannot lie to me.”

“And there he goes…” Yuri pushed against Viktor’s side and nodded at the Banquet Dance Champion, who had fallen face first not ten feet from them, and hadn’t gotten up. “That dumbass. At least he’s done embarrassing himself, yeah? C’mon Viktor.”

“Are you leaving your lover behind?”

“Chris, he’s not my…” Viktor hesitated, worrying his lower lip between the blond commentary, then sighed. “Where’s his coach?”

“I haven’t seen anyone fitting that description around.”

“He was here...” He scanned the crowd, searching for the wild plume of brunette curls, but no, the man he saw earlier did not appear to be anywhere. If he had, he might have stopped any of the dance battles from happening in the first place. It might have been better that way, for everyone’s sakes. What would happen to Yuri Katsuki’s reputation now? Defeated, then made an idiot of himself at the banquet after party?

Such an adorable idiot, though…

Yuri groaned. “He probably left him because he’s such a fat loser. Can we go now?”

“No. Well, yes. We’ll take him back to his room.”
“What?!”

“Chris, can you find out what room he’s in? Yuri, you handle the doors. I’ll carry him.”

“Sure, I’ll ask around~”

“Oh come on! It’s not our responsibility, Viktor. Just call his coach.”

Viktor sighed, sliding his arms under Yuuri’s knees and shoulders to heft him up into a bridal carry. It wasn’t the most efficient, but it was the least humiliating-- and the least likely to end up with vomit on his suit. “I agree that his coach should have stayed with him, but Yuri… despite how Yakov acts with us, our coaches are not our friends.”

As if the shock on his face weren’t enough, Yuri struggled to vocalize his grunt of disapproval and ended up with a squeak of dismay. “What?!”

“You don’t pay your friends, Yuri. We pay Yakov’s salary. He’s our coach. A very good one; better than most. But it’s still a business relationship… don’t forget that.”

Yuri folded his tie between his hands, mulling over that, and followed after him. “So do you have any friends, Viktor?”

“I have Makkachin!”

“Makkachin’s a dog.”

“Still counts,” he shrugged, shifting Yuuri’s weight to better cradle him as they made their way to the hallway. “And there’s you.”

“I’m a competitor next season.”

“Ah, true.”

They lapsed into awkward silence as they walked the hallway, avoiding the few people that had left the banquet early, and stayed that way in the elevator. The distant look was back on Viktor’s face, which Yuri took as a hint to stay quiet. He was more than willing that time, tired as he was, and irritated that he couldn’t quite get his hair to lay flat again. That dance battle had been such a waste of time, and why were they having to bring pig boy to his room?

At least the room was easy enough to find and get into, thanks to the help that Cristophe had provided. It was small, not quite as elaborate as the suites that Yakov had booked for their team, but still comfortable. Neat and orderly, like Yuuri had spent a lot of time there in the past few days, but knew how to keep things under control. That, or housekeeping had done their part.

Viktor crossed the room and laid Yuuri out on the bed, leaving just enough room for him to sit. “Yuri, see if there’s a spare blanket, will you?”

“He has plenty of blankets on the bed…”

“Do you want to undress him?”

“Fine, I’ll look.” Yuri made his way to the wardrobe and stretched up to get the spare blanket on the top shelf, though it seemed like such an unnecessarily kind gesture for an enemy. Yuuri was the jackass, why should they be nice to him? “Viktor…”

When he looked back, Viktor had gotten comfortable on the edge of the bed, leaning over the
unconscious man to brush back his bangs. Was he sick? Viktor tucked the hair back, then swept the pads of his fingers over Yuuri’s face, caressing along his cheek down his jaw…

It wasn’t the touch of a concerned Samaritan checking someone’s temperature, and it was too intimate for strangers. And the only times he’d seen that expression on Viktor’s face were while he was skating.

Stay Close to Me...

“Here,” Yuri muttered, holding out the blanket.

“Hm? Oh. Thanks.” Viktor hesitated a moment longer, cupping Yuuri’s cheek, then dragged himself way. “Let’s leave him with a bottle of water on the night stand… he’s probably going to have a terrible headache come morning, yeah?”

“The least he deserves…”

“Yuri.”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m looking.”

--

“Vitya, have you been here all night?”

It was dark and it had been quiet in the skating rink, now empty of the spectators and rivals. Viktor let his momentum carry him into a wide arc, blades gliding smoothly over the ice. It couldn’t have been later than six or so in the morning, given that the security guard hadn’t come back for another sweep yet. There was still time for a short nap before the flight, and he could sleep when he got home; there would be no training that afternoon.

He swung his free leg for a little more speed, then pulled out into an opposite arc, skating away from Yakov with both arms stretched above his head to arch his back. Okay, so he was a little stiff from skating the Grand Prix Final, the exhibition, and then skating all night, but so what? He didn’t need to answer Yakov’s nosey questions. He won the gold. That’s what mattered.

The old man leaned over the barrier. “Japanese boys?”

Toe tip, catch, waver, over correct, spin out- CRASH!

“Yaaakov!” Viktor rolled onto his opposite hip to rub where he’d hit the ice, biting down on his lip to keep the instinctual cursing buried where it belonged. “Owww.”

“Yuri told me you had fun last night.”

Viktor groaned, sliding down to lie on his back. So betrayed! “No. There was dancing, that’s all.”

“I just dance?”

“Yuri is a bit dramatic, you know.”

“He’s not the only one, Vitya…”

“Ha, ha.” Viktor picked himself up and went back into the lazy routine he’d been working for the past hour; nothing like the intense workout he’d forced himself through in the hours prior. Slow, easy, crossover arcs. “He’s the one that was fighting.”
“And you were the one giving a loving caress to an unconscious man’s face?”

Viktor caught himself that time, forcing his body to relax so his leg could come out of the step in a gradual turn, which prevented another fall but did nothing to stifle the heat in his face. There was really no explanation or excuse for what he’d done. He’d been so wrapped up in the wonder of possibility, and just how sweet that face of his had been in innocent slumber...

Yakov folded his arms. “Vitya…”

It was the warning tone Yakov used on the rare occasions when he was concerned for his students. That always made it more difficult to outright ignore, because it came not with anger, but with disappointment. Though reluctant, Viktor changed course to join his coach, and dropped his forehead against his shoulder with a heavy sigh.

Yakov patted his back, calloused hand warm through the sweater. “Vitya. I'm not meaning that you can't like the Japanese boy. It has been a while since you've shown interest is all.”

“No, Yakov,” he muttered, shaking his head and pressing closer. “It’s ridiculous.”

“I’m always prepared for what with you.”

“Hey!” Viktor pulled back to look up at him, frowning, only to be met with a gentle smile. Though rare, there were few things in life that cheered him as much. It eased the tension enough to let the weariness show, shoulders sagging. Sobering. “It was just a dance, Yakov. And I’m very tired.”

“It wouldn’t be difficult to get his number for you, Vitya.”

“No, Yakov… no.” He stepped around, taking the guards for his skates and donned them in a huff. “People don’t fall in love in one night.”

“If that’s your final word.”

“It is.”

“There’s always next year, Vitya.”

Was there? Competitive sports were a fickle thing. They weren’t something many could do for long, even when the resources lined up just right. Pride and drive only went so far without winning, and the media could be so cruel, not to mention the other contenders…

Viktor took one last look at Yakov over his shoulder, then sighed, too tired to argue. “Another year, another medal, yeah?”

“That’s what I like to hear.”
Chapter Summary

Twenty-one years ago, Lilia Baranovskaya introduced Yakov Felstman to a promising young student who would become his five-time consecutive champion. Though no longer a young boy, Viktor is no less entranced by the beauty and power of dance— or at least, a particular dancer who happens to be a competitor. He can't get Yuuri Katsuki off his mind, no matter what he tries.

Chapter Notes

In this chapter:
Gabapple: All the love to Mamodewberry for her tireless character supervision, dialog supplementation, collaboration, plotting, betaing, and reassurance!

Mamodewberry: It's going to be okay, Viktor. Yuuri will be with you shortly. Don't give up!!

Recommended listening:
On Love: Agape, you know the one!
Dark Eyes, as performed by Oksana Grigorieva

Saint Petersburg, Russia
Viktor (6 years old)

The boy didn’t look like much; just a twig with shaggy hair and wide, blue eyes that couldn’t stop wandering for even a moment despite Lilia’s grasp on his hand.

“His mother is touring with the Imperial Ballet,” she said, gaze significant. What she was asking for was an enormous— well, not a favor, exactly; she and Yakov had shared extraordinary students before as a matter of professional courtesy— but it was an unconventional request, and she could not risk losing his interest early on. The Imperial Ballet was her strongest card to play. “I have been working with him for the past two years, but he needs additional… coaching while his parents are away.”

By that, of course, she meant babysitting, which was the weakest card in her hand.

Lilia tightened her lips, eyes fixed on the man who stood across from them. He wasn’t a difficult man to read, even though his expression never moved much further from some degree of anger or despair. He was skeptical of her offering, and she could understand why. He tugged at her hand,
head whipping back and forth, jaw dropped.

The Sport Champions Club was a large facility, yes, and had plenty to take in, but the boy wouldn’t get to have any part in that world if he didn’t impress Yakov. So far, he wasn’t succeeding.

“He’s young.”

“Six, yes. In school during the daytime, then and in ballet for half of the week, and with you the rest of the time.” She couldn’t handle anything more. As gifted as the boy was, he had boundless energy and an abundance of personality that made him exhausting.

Yakov didn’t look convinced. The arrangement was strange for a number of reasons, but he had to know that she wouldn’t ask unless she thought it would be best. “He can’t even start working on programs for another eight years.”

“No, but he would be perfectly molded by then. Isn’t that right, Viktor?”

Viktor swiveled his head to her, blinking as he came back to the conversation. “Huh? Oh!” He then switched to Yakov, free hand coming to his chin as he looked him over, head to toe and back again. He squinted, mouth screwing up into a frown, and then after a long pause and a thoughtful hum, he nodded. “Yeah, he’s good. I’ll let him coach me.”

Both of the adults stared down at him, but only Lilia spoke.

“Viktor, that’s not how it works. Yakov must approve of you if he’s to take you on as a student, not the other way around.”

“Oh. Really?”

Lilia sighed, choosing that moment to give Yakov a glimpse of her long suffering. It was throwing him a bone that she didn’t want to do, but he deserved it if he was willing to take the child on.

“Yes. Now show Yakov some respect.”

Viktor put a mittened hand over his frown and mumbled. “I brought skates. Can I show you?”

It wasn’t the respect that had been requested, but Lilia caught the twitch of a smile on the corner of Yakov’s mouth. He liked the spark, even in the face of such of what he might call a ‘treacherous woman,’ she knew… Viktor had no fear, and she liked it, too.

“All right,” Yakov grunted. “Let’s see if you have anything to offer.”

Minutes later, the adults stood three inches apart on the other side of the barrier, watching the boy sort himself out on the ice. He held his arms out for balance, staring down at his feet, and scissored back and forth to gain each inch of territory.

“All right,” he called back at them. “I’ll get it, just—hold on!”

Lilia didn’t bother to reply, instead turning to Yakov, lowering her voice. “He’s a natural in ballet; exceptionally talented, but it will be four years before he can be admitted into the Vaganova Academy, and I’m already hearing complaints from him about being ‘supporting cast.’”

She slid her hand over the plastic support, brushing fingers over the man’s arm. Just a light, casual touch.

He didn’t turn away from the child; that was a good sign.
“His parents are willing to pay all coaching fees, and his relatives take him when they are travelling. *The Nutcracker* only runs for so long, you know, but they’re quite concerned about keeping Viktor occupied for the time being.”

Yakov leaned forward, eyes narrowed as he watched the boy work it out; first how to move backward, then forward, adjusting his body position to change direction, slowly testing different leg movements to get different effects. Viktor was curious, enthusiastic, and above all, graceful. As young as he was, he’d certainly been trained well.

“I’ve been holding him back,” Lilia explained, moving close enough to touch shoulders. “He’s eager to do everything, but I’ve forbidden him from doing anything *en pointe*. It will be difficult to stop him from doing your jumps later on, but if you just allow him to free skate, get him used to it, let him explore…”

“In other words, I will need to teach him the basics.” He didn’t sound entirely put out by that realization.

Viktor made two or three attempts to brake, but none of them actually worked, so he let himself come to a stop naturally, then turned around to face the pair. He’d had a warm up, so it was time to show off. Balance in check, he pulled one leg back and arched his back, stretching an arm over his head, point of the toe-- *écarté!* He slid the skate in front, arms trading positions-- *croisé devant!* --and found himself moving forward again. And sideways.

Huh!

He slowly unwound his supporting leg, spiraling out in an arc, pulling his arm down and out to the side, which added to the speed and balance. The blades cut through the ice with effortless precision, carrying him so smoothly, so quickly, it was almost like flying. Viktor breathed deep, smile spreading from one rosy cheek to the other.

“Good form.”

Moving into an *effacé*, Viktor pushed against the ice with his toe and spun in place—which worked! Worked well! Too well—“ACK!” --and barely managed to avoid falling flat on his face by pin-wheeling and rolling with a *WHUMF* onto the ice.

Lilia set her hand on Yakov’s arm when he tensed, her lips twisted into a smirk. “Watch.”

The boy sniffed, then pushed himself up onto his knees. “Hold on,” he said. How to get up? The skates had teeth on the end, so they were good for getting a grip on the ice. One toe here, a knee there, a hand over here… Viktor got up, shaky at first, but quickly had his bearings again. He wiped down his knees, tried the spin again- slower that time -then spread out both arms, and bowed. “Ta-da!”

Lilia might have rolled her eyes, but she was instead watching Yakov, who had the barest hint of a smile on his face. The change in expression was so subtle that only someone that knew him as well as she did would notice. She’d won him over. Viktor had charmed him, one way or the other. He was caving. “Shall I have his father come by your office later?”

The man sighed. “I suppose. There is much to work with.”
Viktor swore by that statement, but it hadn’t left his thoughts for more than a few moments since he’d left that hotel room. From Sochi to Saint Petersburg, and right to Yekaterinburg for Nationals two weeks later, it had occupied the back of his mind almost constantly. But was it the guilt of having offended him or the silly little crush that gnawed at him most? Maybe not knowing was the worst of all.

The late evening of December 25th found the skater alone in yet another hotel room, staring at meaningless art on the wall in exhaustion. It was his birthday, but as usual, they were away to compete because Russia didn’t care about Christmas like the secular world did. It was just like any other day. Same as Japan, which is why they had their Nationals at the same time.

Viktor rolled onto his side and dragged his phone closer, scrolling through the posted scores. Yuuri Katsuki wasn’t doing well in his event so far, with technical errors, missteps, failing his jumps; just like in the Grand Prix Final. It was the opposite of how his own short program had been, which was flawless, and that hardly seemed fair. But how was skating fair? How was effort, confidence, experience, or tenacity really fair?

Maybe if Yuuri was allowed to drink before the competition, he’d have no problem.

The thought made him laugh, anyway, though without humor. After all, even he wasn’t allowed to drink while on competition, and it was his birthday. No vodka, no mulled cider, no nothing. Not even wine. The last twelve birthdays had been the same, save only for one, and even that had been reduced to a painful memory.

At least Yakov and the others had taken him to dinner. Not that he’d felt like eating. He never did, especially not during a competition. But it had been nice. A small dinner with just his Russian team mates and coach. No press. Then Yakov barking at him to get to bed early. They’d do the same for Georgi tomorrow, assuming he wasn’t out with that ice dancer. One more day, one more day. You must be at your best!

But Viktor missed his bed, and he missed his dog. The superintendent at his apartment took good care of Makkachin when he was away, but he felt guilty all the same. And lonely. It was too quiet in hotel rooms, which was great for napping, but not so great for birthdays, and even worse for Christmas birthdays.

He eventually turned on the TV in the room and flipped through the channels until he found a performance of The Nutcracker, then crawled under the covers. His hair, still damp from his earlier shower, stuck to the pillowcase in curly swaths, but he didn’t care. He’d just shower again in the morning. Years of skating had taken their toll on his body already, and any time he could find an excuse for a hot shower was one he took at liberty. It was the only thing besides painkillers that really helped.

Oh, and alcohol. But he wasn’t drinking, anyway.

It wasn’t as if he’d eat cake, either. Or go out to celebrate; not during a competition. And the banquet…

…the banquet wouldn’t have Yuuri Katsuki, so what was the point of that?

Viktor huddled under covers, eyes scrunching shut while the Dance of the Sugarplum Fairies played softly in the background.
A couple more years, and it won’t be like this…

I won’t have competitions to go to…

I won’t have anyone at all…

--

Viktor had the results in his hands before he was finished getting ready. He sat on the bench in the locker room, scrolling through the details on his mobile. The Japanese skater had failed to make a comeback in his free skate, letting his junior surpass him and take the win. The playback wasn’t impressive for either of their performances; it wasn’t as though Minami were a threat like Yuri. Good, yes, but still so green and inexperienced. In a couple of years, it would make sense, but Yuuri had so much potential… didn’t he?

Or maybe he’d been dreaming.

He’d made so many mistakes in his performance, both in the short program and the free skate, in the Japanese Nationals and the Grand Prix Final. But he couldn’t have gotten there at all without being good, so what had happened? What made someone get so far only to crumble like that?

Yuuri had passion. Talent. Technical skill. He’d seen it. There was so much evidence of it, both in the video-- the moments where he had nailed parts of his program --and when they’d danced together, when he’d danced with Yuri, and even when he’d danced with Chris! There was potential. There was drive. But he’d just been missing that little something extra…

Be my coach, Viktoruuu~!

No. No. That wasn’t…

Or perhaps…? After all, Yuuri’s coach had allowed him to get completely smashed at the banquet and had left him on his own. Yakov, on the other hand, had always been supportive and surprisingly careful with his feelings. A coach made all the difference. At least in theory.

“Vitya, you’re not even dressed and you still have warm ups to do.”

Speaking of…

“All right, Yakov.”

He donned the princely attire, making the necessary adjustments in record time. Hair and makeup came next, leaving him with plenty of moments in track suit for the camera going through his steps. Yakov loved that part because the press loved it, which meant that the sponsors were so very happy. It was a performance from the instant he stepped out of the locker room, and he was careful to put on a good one.

Perhaps Yuuri couldn’t win gold at his Japanese Nationals, or even podium… but Viktor could win gold for them both this time. At least until he figured out what else could be done.

--

In the four weeks between Nationals and the European Championships, Viktor went back and forth between refining his program and piecing together the components for the next season. It always helped to get any early start, particularly when competition was as tough as it was. The longer he had to think, the better. Flawless skating was only one factor of a successful program, and each had
to be its own powerhouse while working in harmony with the rest.

Theme came first, which allowed him to work on the rest of the pieces with a central goal in mind. It also let him commission original music while he was busy finishing the rest of the season, and make allowances for composition changes. The process was organic. Mercurial. Labor-intensive. But that was why he was so successful. No one put the care and attention that he did into every single step, from start to finish.

At least, as far as he knew.

He supposed he wasn’t sure what everyone else’s processes were in the end, because he’d always spent so much time working on his own programs, alone, that he didn’t ask. But the magazines bragged about it being unique, so perhaps it was. Did the others design their own costumes? That was one of his favorite parts of gearing up for a new season, even though he didn’t do the sewing himself. He couldn’t imagine Yuri doing it, though. Actually, he didn’t know much about Yuri at all outside of training.

And what did Yuuri Katsuki like to do?

No, no... he had to focus. The theme for next season. It would be his sixth consecutive win if things continued the way they were going, and it would need to be; if he lost his winning streak, his rivals would really eat him alive like the wolves they were. But what to do? What would surprise them? His programs over the last several years all had recurring elements; bits and pieces that were entirely Viktor Nikiforov, yet all stood on their own. How could he accomplish it again?

What theme?

*Love.*

The word came to him unbidden, bubbling to the surface of his mind like crocodiles at the edge of the watering hole, dark and dangerous. He shied away, scratching the words out on the notepad, and adjusted the pillow behind him on the sofa. So many of his previous programs had focused on love. He was tired of love. Love escaped him at every turn. What did he know about love?

His gaze settled on the rows of books behind him, on history, art, and philosophy, most in Russian but a good few in French and in English, and then on the collection of fairytales; his favorite. Love was part of them all. What was beauty, after all, without it?

Makkachin nosed his hand, snuggling under the notepad for attention.

“Yes, I love you, too.” Viktor rubbed the poodle’s head, massaging the curls of fur at the top, working his way down to his ears.

It wasn’t as if someone could escape love, even if they tried. He had, and yet it had always found him, in some form or another.

Most of what he had in his life fit under *philia,* the comradery with Yakov that he didn’t dare say out loud felt more like family for risk of offending the man, and *philautia,* the love of self that he’d held close despite all that had happened over the years.

Then there was *agape.* He’d felt that to some degree as part of his every day wandering, but none so fiercely as felt for Yuri. In the two years he’d known him, Viktor had grown quite attached. They were so much alike. Driven, rebellious, so eager… but Yuri took the frustrations of the world and let that burn brightly with the fires of passion, like the firebird, while Viktor pulled it inward,
destroying himself until what was left was purified glass.

Both in pain, both using those destructive forces to create, but Yuri would go so much further if he could just be tempered. And god, it would be incredible. He would surpass every expectation, Viktor had no doubts, so long as he didn’t let that fire consume the goodness within him. That was the only difficulty. He loved him as much as he feared him, but even seeing his own demise did little to change how he felt.

He could see it clearly, the boy who would rise to power, supported by Viktor’s love, only to drive the dagger into his heart and take the crown. And Viktor, who knew it was coming, knew that it was only right, would let it happen. Would lay down and die, surrendering his kingdom to the new era of legend, because he loved Yuri so much.

Bloody, dramatic. It was a good start. Viktor took notes, and tapped the end of his pencil on his lips, considering the rest. It needed a pair. What went with sacrifice?

Ah, perhaps the opposite approach…


Easier than pragma, the long-standing love that he dreamed of, and stronger than simple ludus, eros would be the perfect opposition. Losing control, but in an entirely different way; the victim in both instances. He could even use the same piece of music with different arrangements for additional overlap- no one would be able to tell unless they were paying attention, but it would add another layer of cohesion. It would be beautiful. Interesting.

At least to him, it would.

Dichotomy of Love.

He wrote, then paused, underlining eros on the page.

Eros.

The banquet came first to mind. The dark eyes of Yuuri Katsuki, leaning in to touch his lips, not with his own, but with his thumb. How could such a simple thing have made such an impact? Even then, taking notes in his living room in Russia, weeks and thousands of miles away, the memory made him shiver.

Dead branches, shivering in the wind, with a single bud of green…

Viktor bit his lip. Eros. He could draw on his life left behind from years ago, or… no. He would work on that program later. After agape.

Only… it was far too easy to go back to eros time and time again. It was the way that he danced. How he drew him in so effortlessly despite all of his walls and precautions, dragging him to the dance floor and sweeping him off of his feet. Viktor never would have let himself be pulled into a contest like that at a banquet, not in front of the sponsors, and definitely not in front of the press. Not in Russia, where though he was lauded as a hero now, he had plenty of enemies, just lying in wait. Yet Yuuri had managed, those dark eyes wearing down years of armor, undressing him, taking him by the hand, by the thigh, leading him through those steps as if he were possessed. And he loved it. He loved every moment of it, terrified or not.

A simple pad of paper wasn’t enough to detangle the meaning. He worked through steps on his living room floor, at least until it was clear that there were enough camel spins that his furniture
(and Makkachin) would never forgive him, and then he took to the rink.

It was late enough that none of the others were scheduled for training with Yakov, so Viktor had plenty of space to himself at the Sports Champions Club, even with the other skaters there. He went through warmups, then through the dance steps that he’d used that night. Each starting position needed to be exaggerated to get the message across, but stable enough to maneuver through the different jumps. Not that he would stay with those, but the movements were enough to give him ideas. A tango on ice? One half of it, anyway; but how to be the most alluring possible?

Hah, and they’d said they’d wanted him to be less princely and more sexy… well, now they were going to get it. It just wasn’t his eros that they were going to see. But they didn’t need to know that.

He just needed to build layer upon layer of pleasure, recreate what that night had been- only a little more dramatic for the audience to get it across -while keeping it tasteful, unlike what Chris would do. There was no need to get the ice dirty. Less sensual touching, more sway of the hip, movement in the arms. It was about the feeling, not the act itself. Seducing the audience, the judges, having them feel what he felt that night, not showing them what he felt. Yes. Perfect. It would work.

“Working on your new program?”

Viktor pulled in from his spin, and broke into a smile. “What do you think, Yakov? It’s sexy, yeah?”

“Very.” The old man shook his head, then waved a hand to call him in.

Viktor pushed off of the ice and came in at an angle to sidle up to the barrier, breathless. “The theme is the Dichotomy of Love. I think if I focus on--”

“I called his coach.”

“You…” Viktor wrapped his palms over the sides. Thoughts of eros froze, twisting cold and anxious.”You did?”

“You seemed ... distracted, Vitya. I needed to do something.”

The complaints of his distraction had been ongoing and in increasing number, from Yakov, from Yuri, even Georgi and Mila. “What did he say? What did you say?”

Yakov removed his hat to scratch his head, long fingers digging into his hair. Buying time. "Katsuki fired his coach, Celestino. And he's resigning."

The snake of anxiety twisted again, coiling into heavy rope in his chest that sunk and slithered down into the pit of his stomach. Resigned. Twenty-three and finished. He wouldn’t be at Worlds-well, Viktor assumed that already -but he wouldn’t be at any competition next year, either. There would be no Yuuri Katsuki at the Grand Prix next season. There would be no more banquets. No more dancing.

Was it his fault?

“Why?”

“You can speak with him yourself, you know... Through his coach, I have gotten his number, though a quitter would be beneath you.”
A quitter...

How many times had Viktor wanted to leave? Desperately, insistentaly, wished that that he had a way to retire without letting Yakov down. Or Russia. Or his fans. Hell, even his competitors had sworn repeatedly that he’d better not leave before they had the chance to beat him on the ice. He couldn’t quit until he’d been humiliated, but he couldn’t lose, either. What was he going to do if he left, anyway? Skating had been his entire life. Everyone he knew was connected to him through skating. Take that away, and what did he have?

No family, just Makkachin, who was getting old. Eleven or twelve years, and poodles didn’t live much longer than that. He had money, but very little else. Aches, anxiety, and an apartment full of knick knacks. What did Yuuri have? What would he do, now? Did he have a backup? People who supported him? Loved him?

“Vitya?”

Viktor shook his head, pulling himself back to the barrier from where he’d drifted. “If he’s left the ice, I’d better leave him at peace. I’ve already insulted him once, Yakov.”

“You have?”

“Before the banquet.” He bit his lip. “I didn’t recognize him; I thought he was just a fan. It was a mistake.”

“Would it ease you to apologize?”

And rub salt in the wound? “I think he’s already had his revenge, Yakov.”

The man set his fitted at on the barrier, brow furrowed. “Revenge?”

“Nevermind. Thank you for looking into it, but…” Viktor leaned back, holding on with just the tips of his fingers, skates cutting the ice beneath him as he seesawed in place. His gaze shifted to the windows, eyes resting on the canal beyond the railing. “Did the wolves just consume him, Yakov? From the inside out?”

There were a few more moments of hesitation before his coach answered, first with a shrug, then an uncertain nod. “I suppose that’s how it could be? Wolves. Demons. Yes.”

Viktor closed his eyes, jaw clenched tight, and steeled himself. So many others had fallen around him; been injured, hadn’t made the cut, retired, or just lost their drive. What was it that made the wolves come? How did one prevent it? How did one run from it?

Wolves on the outside, wolves on the inside, wolves all around…

He let go of the barrier and drifted backward, onto the ice, letting his body go lax. Those dark eyes of Yuuri Katsuki had been predatory, but in the end he’d just been prey to himself, torn apart and left for dead in the frozen wasteland of competition.

And it broke his heart.

He sucked in a breath, pulled himself up straight and into first position. No matter what happened, Viktor couldn’t let anyone see his weakness or vulnerability. He didn’t know how long he had left, but he couldn’t let himself die like that. Not unless it was for the sake of sacrifice.

For agape.
He would forget about *eros* and those cursed dark eyes from now on.
Crying Wolf

Chapter by gabapple

Chapter Summary

Winning gold at the European Championships and again at Worlds isn't enough to keep the wolves at bay, and Viktor finds himself slipping deeper and deeper into despair. Every waking moment is consumed by existential crisis and wandering thoughts of the boy who just walked away from skating forever.

... Or did he?

A viral video says otherwise, and that changes everything.

Chapter Notes

In this chapter:
Gabapple: OMG I AM SO EXCITED. This whole chapter was a wild ride to write. I was up until 4am a couple of nights writing, which is bad because I have to be up at 7am for work, but I couldn't help it. I also kept going back and forth between making this one or two chapters... but in the end decided one mega chapter was best because I REALLY want to get to Japan already!!! AHHHHHHHHHH.
Mamodewberry: I hope the bit with Viktor's parents murders you like it did me. Also, Chris is precious, please treasure him.
Gabapple: YES. I LOVE CHRIS. And omg thank you for liking the flashback. I loved writing it. ;A;
Mamodewberry: Viktor is almost free, but will soon be captive by something else.
DUNDUNDUN
Gabapple: AaaHHHHHHHH :D

Chapter Illustrations:
Viktor and Chris at the European Championships Banquet by Adashuko (commission)
Viktor and Hachiko at Worlds! by Edenerys (commission)

Bonus Story:
I wrote a one-shot about Makkachin and Vicchan over the weekend called Vicchan's Wish-- it's a tear-jerker, apparently --go read it!

Recommended listening:
Podmoskovnye vechera (Moscow Nights), as performed by Dmitri Hvorostovsky
Stammi Vicino, Non te ne Andare, by Kazuma Kudō (yes, this would be Stay Close to Me
Never Look Away, by Vienna Teng

****TITLE DROP PLZ LISTEN AT THE END OF THE CHAPTER****
“Papa!”

Firelight danced up the stone mantle, climbing the walls and tossing shadows across the room. A man, the aforementioned Papa, lowered the worn leather book from his line of sight and turned his head just enough to catch sight of the excited boy that stood before his leather armchair. “Vitechka?”

The boy pushed up onto his tip toes, dancing flats creasing at the point, and arched an arm over his head. “When is Mama home?”

Papa adjusted the bridge of his reading glasses, then returned to his book. “Quarter to nine, after you’re in bed.”

Dissatisfied, Viktor turned in place in a tight circle, keeping only on the very tips of his toes. “That isn’t fair. I haven’t seen her in weeks, same as you.”

The man turned the page, and grunted. “But you’ll have all day tomorrow while I’m at work.”

“I’ll be in school.” Viktor settled into fourth position and dropped his hand to his hip. “With skating after that. You pick me up from lessons.”

Papa finished the paragraph he was on before glancing up at the glare that waited for him, fixed intently over the little pout. *So much like his mother.* He leaned back in the chair, his own lips pursing. “Would you prefer to give up your extracurriculars? Come work with me at the bank?”

Viktor made a face.

Papa laughed. “I suppose not.” He shrugged. “Ah well. You’ll just have to wait.”

“Fine then,” Viktor huffed. “Come dance with me.”

“What, in front of the fireplace?”

“Yes! You can see what Ms. Baranovskaya has been teaching me.”

Papa slid his glasses into place and lifted his book again. “You show me every day, Vitechka.”

“I learn something new every day, Papa.”

“And I’m very tired.”

“You’re always tired.”
“I work very hard to support us.”

Viktor slumped out of proper posture and came to lean against the chair, flopping over the arm and into his father’s lap, peering up at him half on his arm, half on the book, and sighed. “Papa.”

The man tugged the book out from under him and set it on top of his son, one hand underneath to keep him from getting smooshed. “We’ll need to get you a haircut soon, I think. You’re starting to look wild.”

“Papa.”

“How are you not tired?”

“I’m just not.” He wiggled his arms. “Come dance with me.”

“Sometimes I think you may be a changeling, Vitechka, switched at birth. Now go on, get ready for bed and let me read my book in peace.”

He went, but he wasn’t happy or quiet about it, pirouetting through the main room and down the hall, then stomping up the stairs singing the song of Vinni Pukh at the top of his lungs.

Two and a half hours later, somewhere between refusal and sleep, Viktor shook himself awake. There were voices downstairs. A door closing- the front door. He pushed away from the warmth of his pillows and the wooly fur of his plush bear, and listened. It took a few tries before he parsed it without falling back to sleep, heavy head drooping, but then he was sure.

Mama was home.

Viktor snuck from his bed, taking bear and blanket to his bedroom door, cracking it open to listen more closely. Papa hung up her coat, asked how the trip back was. Mama said it was fine, but she was exhausted. He offered to take her suitcase, make her a drink. She teased him, laughing.

And then- Viktor’s favorite part -Papa asked her to dance.

He waited until Moscow Nights played over the speakers downstairs, operatic, soft and low, then slipped out of his room and made his way to the banister. There he could sit, curled against the balusters and watch. Mama wore her blue satin evening gown, but no shoes- she’d left those by the fireplace. Papa held her close, one hand at her back, the other holding her delicate hand to his mouth.

They danced, and she corrected his steps, pushing his arms this way and that, leading him like a lovesick puppy on a leash. And Papa smiled. Viktor never saw him smile like that any other time except when they were dancing together; his movement stiff, hers graceful, as a ballerina’s should. Even Ms. Baranovskaya would be pleased.

She took down her long, silver hair from its bun and and stood en pointe to kiss him in front of the fireplace.

“I’m so happy you’re home,” he whispered.

“Oh, Pryanichek, me too.”

Look for a husband for life, and marry only when you know them very well;
For marrying is easy, but being happy in marriage is most important;  
There is no grief where there is love and harmony.

Champagne always reminded Viktor of New York City. He couldn’t explain why; maybe it was the time he’d made it to Times Square for New Year’s Eve that once on a whim. Or had that been a dream? Either way, he was nowhere near New York now. In fact, he was a four hour plane ride from home. Sweden in late January was cold, but nothing like Russia. It was almost a nice retreat, really. He chased the thought down to the bottom of his third glass, and his fourth, but his fifth had him sighing at the aftertaste and sprawling headache that came with cheap alcohol.

Was the liquid gold or bronze? It all depended on how he tilted the delicate stem in the light and really, what was the use of that?

“I know you just won—again—you could at least pretend you mind it a little.”

Viktor closed his eyes and steeled himself. He wasn’t in the mood to deal with Christophe; not tonight. Yes, he’d won another gold medal, bringing him ever closer to a consecutive championship streak and world record. The European Championships had been easy. Too easy. All he’d had to do was think of Yuuri K and the rest had simply happened.

He fingered the rim of the glass and flitted his gaze at the man who took the seat next to him in the dark corner he’d chosen, tucked away from the mingling crowd. So far, most had left him alone.

Chris wasn’t satisfied with that, apparently. “It’s not like you to drink so at these engagements. Had I known better, I’d think you’d have placed second. Or dead last, like a certain…” he paused, as if tasting the name on his tongue. “Someone.”

Before the corner of his mouth twitched too much into something resembling a scowl, Viktor lifted his glass and nodded his greetings. “Good evening, Christophe.”

“Salut. And just how many have you had?”

Both of them turned to the glasses on the table, only a pair there now, but the wait staff had been eagerly removing finished flutes all evening. “Not enough.” He forced a smile. “Tell me, you’re not really so sad to be behind me, are you?”

“I’ve been told that I’m good at coming from behind… and I should say that I don’t mind the view. But it would be nice to be on top for once.” Chris chose then to take a sip of his own drink, smile smug while Viktor tried to stop himself from choking.

“It—on the podium, we stand side by side.”

“Equals, are we?”

Viktor tilted the glass by the rim, watching the bubbles rise. “Do you ever wonder what you’ll do when you retire?”

“Mmm. Every now and then.” It was natural for someone of their age in the competitive field, even if it wasn’t often discussed. Chris went on in the continued silence. “I’ve been fairly successful at
modeling here and there. Full time, perhaps. I’m also a fan of flowers. I wonder what sort of training I’d need to run a flower shop.”

“Ornamental horticulture,” Viktor answered, then nodded, righting his glass again. “I’m sure you could pick it up. And modeling would suit you just fine… you definitely have the body for it.”

“Why thank you~! Aren’t you the flattering drunk?”

“I’m not drunk.” Viktor eyed the champagne with distaste. He might have been, technically, but his mind hadn’t stopped going over the same racing thoughts again and again, so he clearly hadn’t had enough.

“So why this win in particular? Normally you prefer to be guarded.”

“It has nothing to do with winning.”

“The beauty, then?”

Viktor hesitated, torn between affection and annoyance for the other man, and settled on taking another long pull from the champagne glass in front of him.

The silence hung between them for several long moments before Chris spoke again. “Not a very lively crowd here tonight, is there? Shocking.”

A brief scan of the crowd proved that it had thinned in the wearing evening. The media had gotten the interviews and photos they’d needed, leaving behind only the barest staff for any surprise scandals; the sponsors had retired now that their bellies and egos had been filled; and many of the skaters had retreated to their rooms for rest or after parties. But handfuls remained in pockets, conversing as they were. Viktor turned back to his companion with a shrug.

“You hoping for a Japanese boy to stagger through that door?”

Viktor flinched before he could stop himself, biting down on his lower lip at the reaction with a sigh. Dammit. Caught. He turned away, unsuccessfully gnawing at his lack of composure.

“Viktor~?”

“He quit.”

The tone abruptly changed. “Wasn’t he Japan’s golden boy?”

Viktor shook his head, stopped, then slumped back in his chair. He couldn’t pretend. It was true. Was. “He lost in the Japanese nationals and fired his coach. Resigned.”

“And they call you dramatic.”

After draining the last of his champagne, Viktor tilted the flute at Chris. “I need another drink.”

Chris took it from him and set it on the table. “…what are you really drinking to?”

“You can only lose so many times before the wolves get to you… Eating your confidence, destroying your dreams. Only winners get to skate.” Viktor shook his head, rubbing palms over the tablecloth now that he had nothing to occupy his hands. “He should be at Worlds with us in March. He has the talent, the skill, the passion… but he won’t.”

“It’s not like you to care about the well-being of other skaters.”
“I do care!” Much more than Viktor wanted to admit. “You just have to be careful with whom you give your trust.”

“Like an intoxicated Japanese boy~?”

Viktor reached for Christophe’s glass, which still had some champagne remaining. “I didn’t say that I trusted him… I don’t even know him.”

Chris held onto the glass, fingers pinched around the stem so primly that Viktor had to pry to get them off. “Ah, because you were so cautionary around him, yes?”

But pry he did, lifting the flute away. “…He was a very good dancer.”

“So he is the reason you are like this,” Chris said with an adoring sigh. “He lost and your heart crumbled for him and then he literally swept you off your feet.”

Viktor finished the glass from the side without lip gloss.

“You know, we live in a wonderful world with things called telephones and the internet.”

Viktor slid the glass back to Chris, then rubbed his temples, going over the lines that he’d already spoken with Yakov. “He’s left the skating world. It would be cruel to pick at a fresh wound.”

“What’s cruel about asking for a second dance? It’s not as if you can’t pay the plane fee for a date.” A pause. “It could be good for you.”

Good for him. Viktor considered that, though his mind moved sluggishly through the idea. What would be good for him? Going to see Yuuri K? Good for him to hit on an ex-skater that he didn’t even know and ask for another dance? What was he expecting-- to get laid? That was probably what Chris meant. Another dance.

If he could have another dance- an actual dance -that would be something. But it was ridiculous. It would lead to nothing. How would Yuuri K even react to being called by him? Intimidated? Angry?

If it were him, and he’d quit, he’d have cut all ties.

What did it take to be strong enough to do that? As much as he didn’t want to admit it, he almost envied him.

Viktor looked at the empty glasses on the table again. “You know… when I try to see past the rink, it’s blank… There’s nothing. I’m snowblind.”

Chris frowned at him. “Matters of the heart are best conversed when sober.”

“Sorry.”

“I’ve just never seen you like this before. It’s worrisome.”

Viktor shook his head and leaned to prop his head up on the table, cheek in hand. “The wolves come for us all, eventually.”

“And you’re choosing not to fight. How cowardly.” Chris retrieved his vibrating cell phone, scrolling through the messages that waited for him. “May I escort you to your room, or are you wanting to drown yourself some more?”
“I’m not done drinking.”

“Well.” Chris pushed back from the table, tucking the phone away. “Bastien is calling me. I will come check in on you in an hour.”

Viktor just waved a hand. “Send my love.”

“I’ll do more than that~”

“Ugh.”

“Oh, and Viktor. The thing about snow is that it eventually melts away, you know. Spring will come, whether we want it to or not.”

When Chris returned an hour later with Yakov in tow, Viktor was one of the only patrons left, half asleep against the table. They collected him through a combination of the Swiss man’s strength and the coach’s stern words, dragging him from the chair and onto his feet.

“He didn’t come,” Viktor mumbled in Russian, dropping his head against Yakov’s shoulder. “Yakov, he didn’t come.”

“He wasn’t here, Vitya.”

With one arm each under the brooding drunk, the pair half-walked, half-carried him back to his room, sharing gratitude that the press was already out of sight. The last thing Viktor needed was some sort of scandal attached to his name, just when the rumors of his retirement had been dismissed. He was still going strong, and would continue on as planned.

It wasn’t the first time that Yakov had been forced to help his student through an inebriated stupor, and he was certain that it wouldn’t be the last. At least he was reasonably certain that Christophe could be trusted not to use the information against them. Once in the room, he sat Viktor on the edge of the bed and undid his tie while Chris held him upright, head drooping, and peeled off his suit jacket.

“Yakov,” Viktor whimpered. “Take it away. I don’t want this feeling anymore…”

The old man studied Viktor a moment before glancing back at Chris, hesitating. “Vitya…”

Viktor reached for him, burying his face against his chest. “Take my heart before the wolves get to it. Please.”

Helpless, Yakov handed the jacket to Chris, then slid his arms under Viktor’s to lay him down on the bed. He was fading fast, anyway, spouting nonsense like that. Chris laid the jacket over a chair and came back to help lift Viktor’s legs.

“I can hear them howling, Yakov…”

“Just sleep, Vitya. I’m here.”

--

After the European Championships, Viktor was careful to keep to himself. It was bad enough that his senior teammates knew about what had happened by evidence of his hangover, but if Yuri found out, he’d never hear the end of it. Thank god he hadn’t been there. Lying low was the only
way to keep Mila and Georgi quiet.

He settled back into his pre-Worlds routine, taking Makkachin out every morning for a jog along the river to the pier and back again, then to the facility for training. Viktor preferred to take his sessions first thing in the day for choreography, for an hour all to himself before the others got there.

If there was one thing he had learned in his years of experience, it was that he could only find new strength on his own. Each year meant stripping it all away, burning who he was, destroying the past, becoming stronger. Reborn anew. That was what he needed.

The arrangements for Agape and Eros came in from his standby composer, each in several different lengths and a handful of different styles as per usual. Viktor needed choices to work out the particulars, especially when he wasn’t sure which he’d use for the short program versus the free skate. The timing difference would weight the balance, which needed consideration.

And then there was the exhibition gala. If he won gold- no, when he won gold, he would need to be prepared to top it off with the pièces de ré-sis-tance. Which would be… what?

Phila. No, that was too close to agape. Pragma? Hah. He didn’t dare.

Philautia, then. Perhaps, though he felt it less and less with each passing day.

The motivation had slipped, the drive derailed. He nailed the jumps, worked out the steps, but it didn’t feel right. Nothing felt right anymore.

It was the dichotomy of love, wasn’t it? Perhaps, then, the exhibition, the end result, should be the absence of love all together. Different than Stay Close to Me; far different than a broken heart, but an empty sort of listless thing that would show them all just what had become of that Firebird Princess all those years ago…

It could work.

Or was that too much like Georgi?

He’d have to think about that. There were months yet to work out the melodrama and turn it into something beautiful. No matter what pain it took to get there. He could walk through hell again and again if he had to, and he would.

Relevé...

--

February passed quickly. Viktor kept busy, creating the idea books for each program for the new season, searching for inspiration everywhere he went. He tore up magazines, painted, poured over the music again and again, and skated the bits and pieces of routine that he’d put together, but he still felt listless.

So instead, his mind wandered to Japan. Not to those dark eyes- at least, not at first -but to Tokyo, which was easy enough to justify. The World Championships were taking place there, which gave him plenty of excuses to research.

What was near the hotel? What sorts of restaurants? What were the local customs? Yuuri K said that his family ran a Hot Springs; what did that mean, exactly? Were they like the spas in Switzerland? Oh, how interesting!
It might be worth a try. And sushi, too. Tokyo seemed so interesting. Exotic.

He picked up a handful of different Japanese language books; one for Russian to Japanese, one for English, and another specifically for tourists, and practiced with online programs. It wasn’t something that he normally worried about; most of the skaters knew English, so they used it professionally at competitions. But if he were to sneak away for a moment, just to see what it was like, it made sense to have a little bit of conversational Japanese under his belt so he wouldn’t get lost, didn’t it?

After all, his French wasn’t going to be of use!

Too many times, he’d look up from his book to find that he’d been designing costumes for the wrong person because his thoughts had wandered. Yuuri K was not supposed to be immortalized on paper, only in concept. Viktor turned the page and started again, eyes closed. Eros. What was *eros*? He laid down a thick stroke of black ink with the brush, heavy up top, twisting and curved as it coiled down below like the tail of a snake. *Eros* was a cobra? *Hmm.*

Snake. *Hebi.*

*Mednoj gory hozjajka.*

--

Usually by the time Yakov and any Juniors left for the World Junior Championships, he was giddy for the chance to practice without him looking over his shoulder. His ill-prepared state left him with little comfort, however, and he spent the time preparing for the upcoming trip. His short program was simple enough, and the piece for the exhibition gala was one he’d done thousands of times. But it was the last time he’d be performing to *Stammi Vicino, Non te ne Andare,* and it needed to be perfect.

No one knew just what it meant. *Stay Close to Me*…

There was always one that he hated to give up, one that tortured him to throw away. If he could, he’d end it all with that. Skate it one last time, retire, and…

...he still didn’t know.

--

Yuri won. Of course he did.

“Don’t forget your promise,” he said, side-eying Viktor upon his return.

Viktor pulled his earbuds out, smiling. “Hm? What was that?” Only to be round-house kicked in the shoulder, which left him quite impressed, but still standing. “Yuri~ I’m kidding!” At least it hadn’t really hurt.

Yuri peered up at him, both hands in his pockets, and slowly lowered his leg. “Good. And you’d better win in yours, too.”

“Of course I will.” He rubbed his arm where the slipper had connected. “I want you to have the biggest shoes possible to fill. You’re like a little goldfish.”

“Haaa? Tigers *eat* goldfish!”
It was too cute. Viktor ruffled his hair, which only made the boy angrier, and began a game of tag through the hallway until Yakov barked at them both to get their damned skates on for practice.

He’d miss this. How long did he have left with them?

--

The skating rink in Tokyo was just like the hundreds of others that Viktor had seen; the ice was the same anywhere you went. As predicted, he scored an absurd amount of points in his short program, setting him up for the win with his free skate. For the competition, he stayed close to Yakov, concentrated and obedient, and napped at every given opportunity. It kept him calm, helped to pass the time, and gave him just enough energy to do what he had to do with a smile on his face.

All too soon, it was time.

“Vitya.”

Viktor squeezed Yakov’s wrist and nodded, then pushed away to move to his starting position.

Was it the end? His very last competitive skate? Did Yuuri K know before his last performance? What was he doing now, at that moment? They were in Tokyo; it was being broadcast live, he’d checked. Was he watching?

He hoped so.

With all of his heart, he hoped so.

Please,

if there’s any magic in the world…

if God exists,

if Mama is watching,

if there’s anyone looking out for me,

Let my prayer be heard.

Don’t let this heart song go to waste;

I only have the strength for one last try,

Like a desperate cry in the winter storm.

--

Viktor skipped the banquet.

The interviews had been awkward enough.

“What are your plans?”

“What will you do next season?”

Even though he’d won with a flawless performance, perhaps his best yet, he still had no answers. He’d been trained to field the questions easily enough, but there were others that knew how to read
between the lines and dig for answers. And Chris, well, it was certain that he would be looking for him after *that* little lack of confirmation.

Not to mention the last time they’d seen each other.

He hoped that Yuri would listen to him. Only one drink at social functions, no matter how tempting. Just one. It wasn’t worth it to do anything more.

But instead of going back to his room, like he told Yakov he was going to do, Viktor explored the city. And Tokyo was *incredible*. Shibuya was the closest shopping district to the Yoyogi National Stadium and the hotel, which had more than enough to keep him busy. Perfect! It was like New York City, only much more confusing and at least ten times cleaner!

Tall as he was, navigating the crowds was easy enough since most of the people moved out of his way. He managed to use some of his new Japanese skills, though his pronunciation was terrible, but *sumimasen* came in handy right away. For everything else, the majority shop owners he spoke to knew enough English to help him, anyway. They made it work.

Best of all was the statue of the Akita, Hachikō, which he sought out for a selfie, putting his arm around and immediately posted to Instagram.

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[ Me and Makkachin’s cousin, Hachikō! ^_~v #shibuya #japan #dogsarebest ]
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The comments that came pouring in were positive, except for those of his fellow skaters, asking why he wasn’t at the banquet. Mobile back in his pocket, he hurried along back into the crowd. Right. More shopping, less social media. Hopefully Yakov had gone to bed already...

He returned to his his hotel room two hours later with shopping bags and brochures, exhausted but feeling a little better. There might not have been any dancing, but it still felt a little bit like Yuuri K was there, anyway.

--

The little spot of happiness lasted only as long as it took to get to business as usual in Saint Petersburg. Viktor stepped onto the scale for the routine weigh-in with Yakov and winced as the digital read beeped its final decision. Maybe Yakov wouldn’t notice?

The old man peered at the screen, then at the clipboard in his hand. “Go home, Vitya.”

“What?”

“I said go home.”

The others turned their attention to the pair now, curious as they gathered their things. Yakov made them weigh in on a regular basis to keep their health in check. It was normal. Sending someone home, however, was not.

Viktor stepped off of the scale. “It’s not like we’re competing right now, Yakov.”

“I don’t care. You know the rules. You drop below this weight,” he pointed at the clipboard. “You don’t go on the ice. No exceptions.”

“I just *won* Worlds…” Viktor pulled his sweater back on, all the same. It was an argument that he’d never won with Yakov before, and it wasn’t looking like he was about to start. “I’m fine.”
“No. Exceptions.” He underlined the new number on the chart, then stormed out of the room.

“Ha ha, even the prince can’t get away with everything.”

“Shut up, Yuri.” Mila took Viktor’s arm. “Look, just get protein shakes or something. That’s what I do.”

“He’ll let you come back in a couple of days.”

Viktor nodded at Georgi, Mila… even Yuri. Getting ‘grounded’ wasn’t usually the worst thing that could happen, unless you got there by doing something that jeopardized your health or safety. It always took a long time for Yakov to forgive for that.

So he went home, which was a lengthy walk across the city, and tried to remember the last time he really ate a full meal. He couldn’t remember. It was difficult to think about food during competitions, and even harder to eat. Besides, it wasn’t like he could really cook much of anything. Crepes, maybe. Cereal. Did cereal count as cooking? Were crepes just really thin pancakes?

He went through the building to get to his apartment and Makkachin greeted him at the door. Standing after he knelt to pet the poodle left him dizzy, and he leaned against the coat rack while he untied his scarf and unbuttoned his coat.

Maybe Yakov was right.

He searched through his cupboards and found various bottles of alcohol, dog food, canned sardines, and a package of crackers. None of it was appealing, but the crackers would have to do. He took them to the sofa and flopped down in misery, while Makkachin crawled on top of him, both for comfort and for food, wagging his tail.

“It’s not my fault,” Viktor said, and offered a cracker to Makkachin while he nibbled on one himself. “These are stale, anyway.”

Makkachin didn’t care. It was salty. He gobbled it up.

Viktor set the crackers aside and pulled out his phone. He had no appetite, only increasing exhaustion. There were hundreds of notifications to comb through, most of which he would just delete in bulk. Engaging with his fans used to be so entertaining, but it had become such a chore. At least he could get away with just posting photos most of the time these days. He leaned back and took one of Makkachin with cracker crumbs in his bearded muzzle, back legs outstretched on his own.

[ He stole it! :o #makkachin #snackies #dayoff ]

His phone buzzed immediately after posting, popping up with an IM from Chris.

Chris G.: Yohooo~ I found video pertaining to ur interests

Viktor groaned and glanced at the posted url. Not again… It was on youtube, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything.

v.nikiforov: this better not be porn
Chris G.: Mmmay be your kind of porn
v.nikiforov: what does that even mean
v.nikiforov: what is my kind of porn????
Chris G.: watch and see
v.nikiforov: is it puppies?
v.nikiforov: if this isn’t puppies falling asleep or something i’m going to block you

He clicked on the link and it loaded slowly. Half of the title of the video was in Japanese. Maybe it had to do with red pandas, then. Those were cute. But then he recognized his own name in English. What was…? The video started, and...

It wasn’t puppies at all.

It was the Japanese boy, Yuuri K. Yuuri Katsuki. On the ice.

Back from the dead.

And not only that…

He was skating. His program. Stay Close to Me. There was no music, but it was unmistakable. Viktor had done the routine so many times he could feel every movement as Yuuri made it, and every single one of them was perfect. Every step sequence, every turn, every jump, every expression of emotion poured out like it was him skating it, not Yuuri K, and yet it was, there, in front of him on that tiny screen.

Viktor swallowed, lips drawing into a tight line as his jaw tightened. If that dance had been something, this was everything. The warning wind before the hurricane, and it hit him then.

He watched it all the way through to the end, glanced down at the post date, realized he couldn’t read the description or the comments, then laid the phone on his chest to give himself a moment to breathe.

Makkachin cocked his head to one side, tongue slurping back into his mouth, and Viktor reached down to ruffle his ear, slow and deliberate.

“Makkachin,” he said. “Sometimes… “ He paused to steady his voice. “Sometimes, the princess has to play the fairy godmother, doesn’t she? Or… rescue the prince in order to rescue herself?”

The poodle tilted his head the other way. Viktor often asked him questions like this, but he never understood or knew how to respond. Not that he really needed to; just listening seemed to help.

After a few moments of deliberation, Viktor nodded. “If I were to ignore this, that would be the most ridiculous… I’ve been waiting for a sign, haven’t I?”

Makkachin leaned his head into Viktor’s hand, and licked his wrist. Heck if he knew.

“It doesn’t get any clearer than this. Even descending angels would be more subtle. This is it.” He sat up. “This is it.”

v.nikiforov: chris
Chris.G: :3c?
v.nikiforov: brb japan
Chris.G: thats some strong porn

--
The hours that followed were a whirlwind of madness from the instant Viktor’s feet touched the floor, scrambling from the couch. The next flight to Kyushu was in roughly sixteen hours. That left very little time to get everything in order; but he was good at getting ready to travel. There weren’t any direct flights out of Saint Petersburg, but that was fine; a seven hour layover in Paris would give him time to make any last arrangements that he’d forgotten about through the power of the internet. From there, it’d be a straight shot to Tokyo, and finally to Kumamoto airport.

After that, well, he could hire transport for himself and Makkachin and all of his things. Easy. Everything was available at his fingertips. Just punch in the numbers of the credit card, transfer funds, print out confirmations, maps, itineraries, and poof- plans made. Life ready to be changed.

Viktor made a checklist and crossed items off as he dashed around the apartment, gathering the obvious necessities. But what would he need? How long would they be there? If he was going to be a coach, it would at least be through the season. His usual suitcase wasn’t going to cut it.

Did he need to bring idea books? Art books? What about music? Costumes? No, Yuuri probably had his own… Or did he? He wasn’t sure. They could figure that out later. Right, there were things that could be shipped out afterward. So what was important now? What did he need?

Clothes. Definitely needed clothes. He hurried to his walk-in closet and rifled through. What should he wear? He would be there for months. What was the weather like in Kyushu? He had no idea. Maybe he needed a little of everything. The best of everything. He wanted to impress Yuuri K, that was for certain. Make a good impression. The clothes made the man, after all.

He hesitated, fingers brushing over the different styles of garments. There was such an eclectic mix, and no way of telling what Yuuri K would even like. More traditional, masculine? Softer? Elegant? Was Yuuri K the type to like dress slacks and suits or capris and turtlenecks? Oversized blouses and leggings?

His gaze dropped down to the shoe rack that covered the bottom half of the closet and bit his lip in despair. Another problem. Complicated. Very complicated. It was probably better to just be safe. Careful. Keep it simple. Worry about the rest later. He didn’t have time for another identity crisis. Not when he had a flight to catch.

Boxes and suitcases were gathered in the living room as they were filled with modest amounts of the essentials; books for inspiration, the most favored of salt and pepper shakers, a couple of throw pillows, the best of the best of his clothes, skating equipment, keepsakes of home, Makkachin’s toys and bed, bowls, food, spare leash, a few odds and ends, a plush animal or two, a handful of skating trophies and medals, and a few other important things. Just what he absolutely needed. Once it was all taped up and labeled with his information and the address of the Hot Springs, which he’d cleverly looked up and verified, he called a courier to have it delivered to the airport, and then spoke to his superintendent.

In a matter of hours, he was set to go with one small exception.

“Five minutes,” Viktor said to Makkachin. “And then we call Yakov.”

They waited by the once piece of carry-on luggage in the front room, quietly contemplating the strange, empty patches in their apartment. Makkachin rested his chin on Viktor’s knee, looking up at him with his tongue barely poking out. Then, when the time was up and the resolve was complete, he took out his phone and dialed.

“Yakov? Could you take me to the airport?”
There was silence on the other end of the line and then a quiet, “What?”

“I’m going to Japan. My flight leaves in just a handful of hours, but it’s international so I need to leave as soon as possible. I know this is sudden, and I could just call a taxi, but I’d prefer if you took me. Please.”

Another stretch of silence. “You will explain on the way.”

“I’ll try.”

Yakov was prompt as usual. It only took a few minutes for him to arrive, dressed for the weather with a scowl colder than the bitter wind. Viktor loaded the kennel into the back and climbed in afterward, pulling his bag into his lap.

Once the car was in motion, Viktor turned his gaze to the snowy road out the window and let out a breath. “I’m going to coach Yuuri Katsuki.”

“. . .Japanese Boy?”

“Yes.”

“But I thought you were forgetting about him.”

Viktor rubbed his palms over the leather suitcase, fingers tracing the thick brass buckles. “Things have changed. I’m taking the year off, but don’t worry; I’ve deposited your year’s fees already. The transfer should be complete in two days.”

“Eh? Year off? But…? ”

“I’m going to get him back to the Grand Prix Finals. I’m going to help him win.”

“. . .Why?”

Viktor shook his head. It sounded crazy. He knew it did. It was insane. Totally insane. But his heart hadn’t stopped pounding ever since he saw the video. He hadn’t stopped moving, even for a moment. Even then, he couldn’t stop fidgeting. The current wasn’t going to stop. He had to do this. There was no other option. No alternative. He swallowed another breath. “Because I believe he can do it.”

“I’m lost on where you are leaving your own competitive year and helping someone else.”

“Yakov, someone posted a video of him copying my routine just a couple of days ago. Stay Close to Me. He nailed it. Perfectly. Every piece of it. I know he can do it.”

“How is that possible?! He flopped his own routines!”

“Well his own coach wasn’t giving him the right attention, clearly. Maybe with a little more care... Yakov, you need to see the video. I’ve been watching it over and over... It’s like he’s calling to me.”

“Eh? You mean you don’t know for sure?!”

“Ha...” Viktor paled at the thought, glancing up at the roof of the car. “If he says no, I’ll come home.”

“Vitya... maybe you should reach out to him through email before you pack up?”
“It’s already done. I’m going. I have to see for myself.”

“I wish you would have given me a little more warning to process this.”

Viktor shrugged, turning to the kennel next to him. “We’ll be back before you know it, though, won’t we Makkachin?”

The poodle whined, tail thumping against the heavy plastic crate.

“Just think of it as a little vacation. I need to find inspiration somewhere, right?”

--

In the end, Yakov wasn’t pleased. At all. And that hurt, but there was nothing that could be done about it for the time being. Not yet. Nothing was ever gained without sacrifice, no journey started without passion. He hadn’t travelled by himself in… he couldn’t remember the last time; Yakov had always been with him. Yet here he was on his own. Was it the first time?

He’d flown hundreds of times before, but it was different to be by himself, to be in charge of his life… in an exciting—but-terrifying sort of way.

Once the plane reached cruising altitude, he settled against the window with the travel blanket he brought with him and watched the snowy mountains retreat beneath them, clouds swathing the peaks, and thought of the wolf. He’d run hard and endless through the terrain, covering any distance to reach Yuuri K, big paws breaking through the snow…

Not all wolves were bad...

“He’s the one.”

“Are you sure, my dear?”

“I know it’s him. I feel it in my very bones, Baba Yaga.”

The witch turned to the trembling princess, clutching the edge of the viewing pool. The boy didn’t look like much, perhaps; just a simple squire, but the dirt on his hands and the sweat on his brow spoke volumes of his hard work and dedication. Day after day, he toiled for the King and master, completing each quest given to him. He was unrefined, perhaps, but he had a good heart. And, more importantly, he’d gathered the feathers...

“Others have tried to call you before, princess.”

It was true. This boy wasn’t the first to find beauty in the faint glow of the feathers that had been lost so many years ago. But the way he cradled them, brushing fingers over the shaft to smooth the down until it was whole again, like it was precious; no one else had. He’d collected them all and kept them stowed under his pillow where he could see them often.

“It’s not the reward that he’s after. I’m not even sure that he knows about the firebird.”

“And you want to go to him? How can he save you if he doesn’t even know—“

“I know, I know. I’ll go to him in disguise. I’ll help him remember.”

The old woman slid an enormous, withered wing around the girl’s shoulders and tugged her close.
“And if you fail? Your soul might not be able to take it.”

“I’m not immortal; I can’t stay in this tower forever.”

“And I can’t protect you if you leave.”

“I have to take the risk.”
Chapter Summary

Yuuri’s life just got really, really complicated.

Chapter Notes

'Sup, all! It's me; Mamodewberry. Yuuri is finally here. He's an awkward turtle, please be gentle with him.

Gabapple has been doing an amazing job with the Viktor chapters :o! We've reached 100 kudos! Our first milestone! Thank you so much, everyone!

As a general note, I don't recall mentioning in previous chapters, we are trying to rehash the series as little as possible. We hope you know the series well enough that we don't need to reiterate in the fic itself. Some scenes are inevitable (aka The Kiss / The Proposal), but we don't want to bog it down with reused words when we can have new ones! Flashbacks will always be indicated and then separated with a line. If the scene gets too ?!?!? you don't know where in the episode(s) it is at, please comment and we'll work on labeling that as well.

Gabapple: YES THANK YOU SO MUCH. AHH. I am so excited that we finally get to see Yuuri! I died beta-ing this chapter. He kills me, that poor child... ohhhh Yuuri why... why oh why... oh why.... omg.... But at least Phichit helps balance out the awkward, amirite? Oh gosh these children....

OH OH oh and make sure to follow our twitters and tumblrs (@gabapple for me, @sharlynnshida/@mamodewberry) for ~*~fic updates and fanart~*~

Chapter Illustrations:
Yuuri and Phichit's video call by @Edenerys!

Recommended Listening

I'm Still here, by John Rzeznik
Smile Again, by Justin K. Knight
Paperman, by Christophe Beck

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ice Castle Ice Rink, Hasetsu, Japan
Yuuri (12 Years Old)
Out of breath laughter filled the air as Yuuri, Yuko, and Nishigori made their way to the locker room, hobbling on their skates on the dry ground.

Yuko pushed the on button to the television and joined the boys on the benches to remove their skates and throw on their street clothes for the lingering winter outside.

“Oh look; it’s highlights from the World Juniors Championship last night!”

Nishigori didn’t bother looking up, while Yuuri quickly finished unlacing his skates to watch.

A tall and lean teenager with the longest hair Yuuri had ever seen on a boy flashed on the screen. He recognized the music as *The Lilac Fairy* from *Sleeping Beauty*. Cameras panned out to show him achieving a triple salchow - flawless touch back onto the ice, perfect form. Faux diamonds and sequins glistening off the black mesh, skin-tight costume, half skirt twirling. The skating world had a variety of costumes for skaters to wear, and Yuuri was so used to seeing them lean so heavily on one way or the other, he was transfixed by the representation of both genders in clothing and physique of the boy.

“It’s Viktor Nikiforov!” Yuko swooned.

The cameras zoomed in on the skater’s face. Serene features. Eyes piercingly blue like the ice he skated on, that were soon covered by light-colored lashes as he rotated into an Ina Bauer, arms raised.

Yuuri hears clipped words from Yuko like “debut”, “breaking records”, and “sixteen”. He didn’t need to hear it to know - feel - just how amazing the boy on the television was.

Finally, the marathon his heart was running reached the finish line.

Yuuri face-flopped onto his bed after carefully stowing away his collection of Viktor Nikiforov posters.

The *real* Viktor Nikiforov was staying in his family’s banquet room down the hall.

Why? Because… because Yuko’s triplets had been recording him skating to Viktor’s last season’s program and uploaded it for the world to see and somehow that had inspired his idol? How was that even possible? Viktor was the one that inspired *him* all these years!

*He chose you!* Minako’s words echoed in his mind and the heart palpitations came rushing back and he fisted his sheets.

A knock at the door paused his internal suffering. “Yuuri?”

Head shooting up, Yuuri answered, “Come in.”

Mari stuck her head inside. “Hey, I was walking down the hall and I heard sniffles coming out of your Prince Charming’s room.”

“Like, crying?”
She shrugged and took a drag of her cigarette. “Dunno. Just thought I’d let you know. G’night.”

He frowned after her as she closed the door. The room had been unoccupied for a while, maybe it was really dusty. Yuuri was sure Japan had a lot of allergens that weren’t native to Russia. Curiosity had its way moments later and he rolled off his bed and opened the door, peering into the dim hallway. Mari was gone, but his mother padded down the hall with a tea tray in hand, not seeing him. Softly she knocked on the door and called out for Viktor. He assumed Viktor answered as she balanced the tray to slide the door open.

Oh good… Mom would take care of it. Whatever it was.

Sighing, he closed his bedroom door and retreated to his bed, foot grazing his phone. The movement didn’t wake the lock screen, and then he remembered that he’d turned it off. Bracing for the barrage of notifications, he pressed the power button.

Pings and vibrations erupted from Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Email, Skype, and IM.

One swipe of his finger and poof they were gone. It wasn’t worth seeing the world’s opinions and speculations of Russia’s Champion coaching Japan’s loser.

With apps cleared, his missed call notifications flashed along with two unread texts. These were at least safer to check.


Unread texts from: Minako and Phichit. Phichit - in all caps ‘CALL MEEEEEE ASAP~’

He’d already spoken with Minako, so he didn’t need to respond. He could call or visit Yuko later. Phichit, though…

Taking a breath, he opened the video chat app. Phichit's name with a photo of one of his ten hamsters in a skate as his icon was the first contact on the list.

[I’m here.]

Immediately a dial tone sounded at Phichit calling. The icon screen shifted to his friend from Thailand’s grinning face. “You're alive!”

Yuuri chuckled. “If I were dead, you'd be the first to know.”

“That's true. I was getting worried, though, you weren't answering any of your IMs or anything so...”

“Yeah I had my phone turned off.”

“For priiiiiivacy?”

“Part of it…”

“I liked your video. It was really good!”

People - friends - like Phichit (and Yuko), he didn't mind seeing the video. Willing to share, actually. Being roommates in Detroit for two years earned him that right. He felt the prickle of blush at the compliment. "Yeah?”

"It was just like Viktor's! Not sure how you made those jumps with the hamster chub, but you
looked really great. You could hardly tell. Really amazing.”

"I was pretty winded afterwards,” he admitted, scratching his neck.

“It's good that you're skating still. And I guess he liked it, too~?”

"I can't give up on it, completely.” He knew Viktor would come up eventually. Not like the whole world didn't know he left Russia by now. Still didn't help the surreality of it all. "Yeah. A little too much."

"Ooh? Too much?” That mischievous and curious glint in his eyes was always something to be wary of. “That could mean SO many things…”

"He wants to be my coach. Taking a break in his own career to get me to the GPF."

"Are you freaking out?"

Yuuri slumped forward, leaning his phone against the wood paneling of his desk. "How can I say no to someone I've admired for a large portion of my life? Packed up his life to coach me..."

"Is he amazing? In person, so close? Just like you've imagined?” Phichit waggled his eyebrows in ways Yuuri thought was impressive when it wasn't directed at him.

He knew this was coming, too. Yuuri didn't exactly try to hide. Being so close to him at school, of course Phichit caught glimpses of just how much Yuuri admired Viktor. It wasn't fair... Using it against him.

Viktor liked to be close. For some reason. He liked to touch him. For some reason. Wanted to sleep with him. For some reason.

"He's a little... Intense, I guess,” Yuuri admitted after prolonged silence. He was grateful his friend had quickly learned to be patient with with.

"Intense how?"

"Uh... he-” Yuuri clenched his fists in his lap, fidgeting. “Personal boundaries do not exist.”

Scandalized, Phichit covered his mouth, hiding a laugh as well. "Yuuri! What did he do? Wait, what did you do?"

"Jeez! Stop! It's not like that! My family runs a hot spring... so I got to see ... more of him for our first meeting."

"Me, an intellectual’ -- that's so you!"
He ran his hands down face. "Shut up… I wasn’t purposefully trying to look."

"Okay okay," he tried to sober, biting his lip. "But the real question is: did you like what you saw?"

Yuuri purposefully didn’t look at the screen, heat coming back to his face, and he was met with more laughter. "I'm hanging up!!"

"Yuuri, wait, no. I'm sorryyyyy. After all of the posters in our dorm and everything I can't help it..."

Sighing, he tried to rub away the blush on his cheeks. "I know. It's not your fault."

"As I’ve told you a million times before: It's so cute."

"Is it? I’m feeling kind of pathetic right now."

"Why? I think it's great! I mean, as long as he's not being a creeper… He's not, is he?"

Yuuri thought back to before they parted ways tonight. How he touched his face, fingers sliding along his jaw and holding his chin, proposing getting to know one another. Knocking on his door wanting to sleep with him... "H-huh? Oh, I don't... know. He's certainly... friendlier in person than I thought he'd be."

Thick brows furrowed. "Yuuri... I'm sincerely happy that your heart wish is coming true, but as your best friend in the whole wide world, I'm obligated to break him in half if he does anything... unsavory. He does have a reputation."

Yuuri decided it was best to not ask what his definition of unsavory was. "I'm sure I'm just freaking out... And you know I don't really believe in a lot of his reputation." The term ‘Playboy’ never fit well with Yuuri when the media threw it around. The scandals that did happen always seemed so forced and out of character from the man on screen and interviews, televised, or written. When one was famous, of course you’d gain attention of suitors, and Yuuri didn’t fault that lifestyle… just slapping playboy on him seemed like a stretch. Gossip, only. Publicity stunt wouldn’t be a far cry, either.

Huh, maybe he had offered sex as way of paying for the coaching fee. Clearly Yuuri wasn’t rich, so he was being kind? Being a creeper… but not really being a creeper?

Phichit drew him back from his thoughts. "Yeah, that's true. And I guess you're supposed to be naked in a bath house. So. Is he really going to coach you? Are you really going to come back?"

"Sounds like he's not leaving me a choice, he's already putting together a weight loss regimen for me. I'm competing again."

"Yay! That's great!"

"I didn't leave graciously. Firing Ciao Ciao... he wasn't too beaten up about it at the time. He still has you at least."

"Ciao Ciao is fine. Annoyed, but he'll get over it. I'll actually get to compete against you this time! Now I'm getting MY wish! I hope you're ready to lose."

“Even on the same team we'd still be competing for gold, Phichit."

"I wonder if you'll be too distracted to skate..."
"No faith in me, thanks."

"It's not your fault - he does have a nice butt. Riiiiight, Yuuri? That's what you've said before!"

Yuuri opened his mouth to clarify he saw full frontal Viktor, but figured that would be digging his grave further. "Yeah... That's true."

"What were the chances your idol would come coach you personally? Just think: now you don't have to kiss your posters anymore; the real thing is right there!"

His glasses pinched his face as he hid on the desk, voice a smooshed mutter. "We agreed you wouldn't bring that up!"

"Sorry, sorry." He actually did sound sorry. For once.

Adjusting his glasses, he sat up again. "And he's here to coach me. Students don't kiss coaches."

"Not usually, anyway." Yuuri didn't answer, so Phichit continued. “Not unless you want him to, because otherwise I will have to beat him up. You never know, Yuuri; he's supposed to be really romantic. Unless that's part of his reputation that isn't true?"

Once more, he fidgeted his hands in his lap. "It's not that I wouldn't want it... Just... Why would he with me?" Even as a coaching fee it wouldn't be worth it. That wouldn't be gaining Viktor Nikiforov anything.

"I dunno, because you're Yuuri and you're great? Maybe he thought your skate was super sexy."

No. He couldn’t think about this and set himself up. "Anyway... How are you?"

Clearing his throat, thankfully dropping the subject, Phichit answered, "I'm good! Just skating and managing your social media stuff... your page has been blowing up with comments, by the way. Ciao Ciao wants to know why you didn't skate like that under him. I told him you were under a lot of stress and he said it was an excuse. But you know him."

"Well, neither of you are wrong."

"Oh, Kanda had babies!"

It took a moment for Yuuri to realize what his friend was talking about: he’d changed the subject to his hamsters. Just as well, he wasn’t wanting to talk about him more, either. "Oh? Which one was she, again? The tan one with spots?"

"The brown patches, yes! Six pups! I'll show you!" The camera view showed the ceiling for a moment as Phichit rolled off the bed and walked over to a glass tank with white fluff bedding where the mama hamster was with her six pink and hairless babies. "I tried to tell you last night, but you went all Black Out on me."

Their dorm room was a hamster sanctuary. Before Phichit, Yuuri had never seen one in person. He quickly became fond of them, grateful for a furry friend while abroad. "You running out of room, yet?"

"I'll find them homes when they're old enough! Aren't they cute?"

"Yeah. Very!"

"Make sure to check your phone! I'm going to post photos every day."
"I will now that it’s on. I want to see their fur come in."

"I'll name one after you."

"Haha really?"

"Yeah! Viktor's biggest fan 5 ever."

"... That is the longest name ever"

"It can be Yuuri for short."

"Sounds right."

"So where is he staying? Is it near the hot springs?"

Damn, and here Yuuri thought Phichit would have given up by now. "Uh, he's... Staying here in the unused banquet room."

Phichit took a moment to process that and then his eyes widened. "...Wait what?"

"He showed up with so much luggage. I think he thought we were an inn."

"So, he didn't even call first? He really just showed up?"

"He-- Yeah. I guess he did..." Wow, he really did.

"He's gonna be living in your house?!"

"Mom didn't have the heart to correct him..."

"Living together!"

Yuuri shielded his face. "Stop....'"

"Oh! Did he bring his dog?!"

"Yeah, he jumped on me, actually."

"You have a dog again! A dog and your crush as a coach. This could be your year, Yuuri," Phichit said with a wink and finger gun.

"If I don't die of a heart attack, first."

"You better not! I need you to defend my honor if someone assaults me, too! My hamsters need someone to take care of them!"

"Oh yes, can't forget the hamsters."

"Yeah! So don't die. I don't care how sexy your coach is."

"It’s hard to make that kind of promise." Figuratively, he died from Viktor’s sexiness before, he supposed he could keep doing so.

"Well, you'd better. I'm your best friend, right?"

"Sure are."
"Okay, so promise, because I want to compete against you!"

"I will compete against you."

"Okay, good! Well, I guess I better let you go to bed so you can be rested for training with your sexy coach in the morning. You better let me know how it goes. I want all of the deets."

"Details of what?"

"Just how things go. Keep me updated, how’s that?"

"If you’re wanting coaching secrets, you can forget it," Yuuri teased.

"True, true. Let me know on other things. Night, Yuuri!" The screen chimed and Phichit was gone.

He sure ran away fast…

Yuuri leaned back in his chair and noted the time on the clock. It was getting late. Pushing out from under his desk, he slipped into his pajamas and crawled into his bed, laying on his back.

"Coaching secrets…” he said to the darkness of his room, thoughts wandering back to dinner.

"Have you ever coached anyone before?” Yuuri asked while Viktor slurped a bowl of miso.

“Oh, I’ve assisted Yakov a few times. And I was trained at the academy. But this is the first time I'll be doing it as a full-time coach. But don't worry! I know what to do. It helps that you're not a green skater, either. I've been doing this for a long time, obviously... and you made it to the top six last season, you just need some refinement, really. The greatest challenge will be finding what motivates you as an individual skater - inspiring confidence for you, specifically. I don't think your coach-- sorry, I forget his name --knew how to handle that. So that's what I'm gonna focus on. Ooo what’s this dish?!” And then Viktor was distracted by Yuuri’s mother bringing him more food to try.

What benefits would teaching Yuuri give Viktor? It all felt one-sided. Even if he were in charge of uploading the video, he didn’t specifically ask for him to come. Well… that wasn’t entirely true.

Skating Viktor’s routines were something he always did when he wanted to reconnect. He was the reason he got to where he was, the good and the bad.

For now, Viktor was staying in his house and signs pointed to it being slim he’d be leaving soon. Maybe Yuuri didn’t have to know the whys right now. His idol was within reach, going to teach him directly under his wing, and that’s more than his dreams ever wanted. Who knew failing a goal could still give something similar in such a roundabout way? Could he make it to the final six again? Podium? Would Viktor coaching him make all the difference? Either way, if he didn’t make it, he’d at least get to say he skated on the same ice as Viktor Nikiforov as his student. As uncertain and embarrassed as it all left him, above all, the rushing of his heart actually felt happy and that was something he hadn’t had in months.

Chapter End Notes

Yuuri: Hey, Mom... Was Viktor okay when you went to check in on him?
Hiroko: It was his first night away from home, I was only giving him a little comfort.
Yuuri: He's away from home all the time?
Hiroko: ... This is different :) He's not going home for a while.

**ON THE NEXT GAY SKATE:**
Jumpy student / Lodging mistakes / a bargain made!
For many, it's the spring thaw that inspires change, but for Viktor, it's the icy claws of winter that drive him. He reaches Japan as intended, bringing with him the snowy winds of the North which take the sakura blossoms and the Katsuki family by surprise. Though, no one is more surprised than Yuuri, who clearly does not recall his former invitation. Yet, despite an extremely awkward start, living legend Viktor Nikiforov is not one to be denied, and training for the Grand Prix Final begins at dawn.

In this chapter:
Gabapple: Thanks for all of the comments and support so far, guys! And remember, if you have any questions or if we're unclear, please ask! We are happy to clarify. Potential trigger warning on the flashback, by the way- there is sadness and while it is not any canonical character that the misfortune happens to, it is a traumatic experience and you are more than welcome to skip to the second horizontal line break if death makes you uncomfortable.

tl;dr: your comments give us life! also the flashback is uber sad. thank you.

Mamodewberry: Don't give Yuuri anxiety :K
Thank you to those that have been with us since the beginning and those just joining us!

Chapter Illustrations:
Yakov and young Viktor by Fourcorneredgod (commission)

Recommended listening:
IiMuRoYa$.feat 4th-Mov. : N-tone, by Hiroyuki Sawano (Ao no Exorcist OST 2)
Love Theme from 'The Godfather,' as performed by Eklipse
L'Heure Avait Sonné, by Joyce Jonathan

Saint Petersburg, Russia
Viktor (7 years old)

Yakov permitted Viktor to come to his rink twice a week, trading off the afternoons with Lilia
when school let out for the day. Ballet one day, skating the next. Often enough, he came on weekends, too. Twice a week didn’t hold fast for long at all, but at least the boy’s parents paid the coaching and facility fees without complaint. The exercise and discipline made him more compliant at home and helped him pay attention in school. Moreover, it kept him busy, so everyone won.

And he wasn’t too much trouble for Yakov, either. True, he had a never-ending list of questions to ask, and a near-inexhaustible amount of energy, but he was good at entertaining himself most of the time. While Yakov worked with his much older, more seasoned students, Viktor observed from the sidelines and mimicked them as best he could. During shift switches, the boy asked his most pressing questions and took Yakov’s answers under serious consideration.

The other skaters might have minded the child’s ever-watchful gaze- particularly when he began offering critiques of their performances -were it not for his ability to take a spill remarkably well, which happened often and without tears. He tried everything, and as many times as it took, and did it with an “Owmmm,” and a laugh. He cheered for the bigger kids, they cheered for him, and in no time, they regarded him as sort of the team’s pet.

In December, just a little over a year after he’d started skating, seven year-old Viktor sat on the bench in front of Yakov’s office, attention drifting from the empty rink to the tall glass windows and the darkness outside. It had started to snow again, with heavy white flakes drifting down in slow, wafting curls of wind. He gnawed on a bagel, aware that it was past seven pm and that his uncle was once again late to pick him up.

His papa was never late, but Papa was in Moscow with Mama, touring with the Imperial Ballet company.

He wiggled his legs, first the left, then the right, working out the restless energy in the tired muscles. “I’m going to do a quadruple flip.”

“Oh?”

Viktor peered up at Yakov, who always waited with him. As much as he didn’t want to admit it, he was sure that the old man enjoyed the shop talk when the other skaters weren’t there. “Yeah. I just wish I didn’t have to wait. Why do bones gotta be so flexible when you’re young? How come it takes so long to grow up?”

“It’s for your protection.”

“Yeah. But I have medals to win.”

Yakov shook his head. “There is time for that.”

Viktor broke off a piece of the bagel from the other side and inspected it for any bite marks. Satisfied, he offered it with a smile. “You want some?”

“Thank you.”

They ate in silence for a while, watching the minute hand move on the clock over the doorway.

“I don’t think Sasha knows what you mean by keeping a tighter turn, by the way,” Viktor said, sighing. “He’s never gonna manage that second half…”

“Vitya…”
Viktor turned back to the snow drift. “Maybe my uncle forgot that I’m staying with them right now.”

“Maybe I should call and remind.”

The boy managed an awkward laugh. “Sorry, Coach.”

“Not your fault.” There were only so many things that a seven year-old could control, after all. Yakov pulled out his phone and dialed the number that Viktor’s parents had left for him. While the rings went through, he watched Viktor, whose eyes went from him, to the ground, then to the clock, and back to the window again before returning to him again.

The restlessness never stayed away from Viktor for long, with anxiety close at its heels.

Viktor closed his eyes at Yakov’s audible pause. He couldn’t hear his uncle’s voice, but the high pitch of the ring had stopped. What was the excuse this time?

“Your nephew is still at the ice rink.” A pause. “Did you forget?”

Coach was good at dealing with people; straight forward, fair, and just intimidating enough that no one wanted to cross him. That was good for dealing with his uncle, who didn’t understand the arts at all but did understand that Coach Feltsman could break him in half if he really wanted to. Not that he would; he was secretly way too nice to do anything like that, but Uncle didn’t need to know that.

Still, he hated that Coach had to deal with him.

“No, that’s fine. I can bring him this time.”

Viktor glanced back at Yakov, tilting his head. A ride home from Coach?

“I will bring him right away.”

Another pause. Yakov took out a pad and pen, and began writing.

“I know the address,” Viktor mumbled, but was ignored.

“Thank you. I will pack him in the car, now.” He hung up.

Viktor waited for an explanation, eyes large, pensive. He’d never needed to be driven home before. What did it mean?

“They sounded… upset. And concerned about getting you home.”

Viktor fidgeted on the bench, feet twisting opposite of his knees, opposite of his hands. “That’s, uhm. Weird.”

“Apologetic about forgetting you here. Let’s get going, da? Grab your coat.”

“O-okay.”

The drive was made in near silence; there were very few others on the road as they travelled across town, and neither of them seemed interested in the usual chatter. Viktor huddled in the passenger seat, small and scrawny underneath the seat belt, staring out the window at the flurries and the
foggy street lights.

“It’s pretty out,” he almost managed to say without his voice trembling.

Yakov held his hand.

They’d barely pulled up to the drive when the front door swung open, Aunt and Uncle hurrying out over the icy walk. Viktor cast a wary glance back at Yakov and took his hand back to unfasten his seat belt, venturing from the car with great reluctance. His relatives were never *that* excited to see him.

His aunt reached him first, stooping in the snow to wrap her arms around him, smothering his face with kisses. That alone would have alarmed him on a normal day, but with the onslaught of sobs that followed-- “Oh, Vitya! My poor, sweet nephew!”

“What?” Viktor squeaked.

“My dear baby sister and her husband,’’ the woman choked, “leaving behind this orphaned child!”

Snow drops prickled the warmth draining from the boy’s face as he stared up at his aunt, blinking in confusion. The opposite car door closed as Yakov climbed out, and his uncle went to him, thanking him for bringing their Vitya home.

“All of them killed. We’re still working out what will happen with… everything…”

*Everything…*

Viktor tried to swallow at the catch in his throat, but he couldn’t get his body to cooperate. His breath wasn’t coming the way it was supposed to, either; shallow, lungs squeezing too easily without any benefit. It burned in his chest and his eyes. He blinked again, wanting to rub his eyes, but his aunt had his arms locked in her embrace and she was crying for the both of them. For all of Russia. Still, he ached in a way that had his jaw clenched tight enough to break teeth.

“I don’t think he’ll be at practice for the next little while, as we figure out what needs to be done.”

“I… understand. Is there anything I can do?”

“Oh, I don’t know yet. It’s… still so sudden.”

Viktor craned his head toward the voices of the men, but all he could see was the rusted yellow frame of the car behind him. He shivered with the cold, wet lashes catching snowflakes that he let stay, vision blurring in a halo from the porch light.

“Of course, of course. Things are in transition.”

“Yes, exactly. We’ll be in touch…”

“Thank you.”

Footsteps in the snow. A shadow crossed his path, and Viktor looked up to his uncle, who took his aunt’s arm. She came away with him, and took her warmth with her.

“Come, let’s get you both out of the cold… Vitya, please thank Coach Feltsman for the ride, then
we’ll get some nice hot chocolate, da?”

Viktor couldn’t get any response out, but he managed to breathe; a puff of mist hanging helplessly before him while he could barely stand. It vanished, and the figures blurred. He sucked in another breath, but the pain only got worse.

Then Yakov was in front of him, crouched on the icy drive, one hand cupped on his shoulder. “Vitya.”

Viktor nodded. It was all he could do.

“You have my number. You may call if you want to talk, or if you want me to come get you to go skating.”

The boy’s lip quivered, but he clenched his jaw tighter, and nodded again. He wanted to thank him, as his uncle had instructed, but he didn’t trust his voice… and he knew that Yakov wasn’t good with crying students. He could be brave.

He could do anything for his coach.

____________________________

_Yakov-

_Made it to Japan safe & sound. They are feeding me well, you would be pleased (lots of protein and calories! !!!!). Japanese Boy is going to let me coach him. Hope all is well in Russia. Makkachin sends his love._

_Update soon-

_Viktor_

____________________________

With the email sent, Viktor turned off the light, found his way back to the blanket on the floor, and settled onto the futon. “Makkachin, here.” His hand slipped from the covers to the tatami mat beneath, fingernails scraping over the thatched surface to attract the poodle, who trotted over and flopped against him with a _whuuff._

It had been the longest forty-some-odd hours that he could remember. Aeroflot had almost lost Makkachin, which was bad enough, but the thrill of everything else had kept him from getting anything more than snatches of sleep for the twenty-six hours that it took to get from Saint Petersburg to his final destination. The lack of sleep, lack of fuel, and abundance of adrenaline combined with heavy jet lag left the Russian a touch on the _careless _side. But he was ready.

Everything from the past several months had been leading up to that afternoon at the gate. It was snowing as if he’d brought the cold winds with him from the mountains. He strode from the car with Makkachin at his side, leaving the people—whoever they were—to deal with the boxes and luggage, while he checked in. Sure, there was a language barrier, but just like in Tokyo, the friendly people at Yu-Topia were used to dealing with tourists and more than happy to take his credit card.
“While they’re bringing everything in, can you show me where the bath is?” Big smile. So charming. Viktor had it all worked out. They’d set up his room—that was part of premium service that he was more than happy to pay for—and he would get to relax and refresh with a traditional Japanese bath and soak in the hot springs first. THEN, he would get to retreat to his room for a quick nap (he was a champion napper— the best there was in Russia, perhaps the world), get dressed in his best, and prepare to meet Yuuri K. Yes. He would impress. He would dazzle. He would win those dark eyes over in an instant and the rest would be history.

Only it didn’t quite happen that way.

Oh, the bath house was nice and easy enough to figure out. The other patrons were helpful. He’d read about how to wash up properly ahead of time, how your towel was never supposed to touch the bath water, and he had long ago gotten over any shame of the naked body. That was nothing. But he hadn’t expected to feel quite so tired when the hot water smothered his skin, and he definitely hadn’t expected Yuuri K—no, it was just Yuuri now—to show up at the very moment he’d managed to get relaxed.

Not that it had deterred him, of course. Viktor was nothing if not a master of improvisation. So what if he was completely naked? Introductions were made, intentions stated, declarations claimed… And Yuuri had looked so surprised. Which pleased him on the one hand, because, well, he loved surprises as a general rule, but on the other…

He didn’t stay.

“Oh,” he’d said, or something like it, and then excused himself.

Gone.

Poof.

Like a gust of icy wind just passing through.

Viktor sank back into the bath, seeking comfort from its warm embrace. It hadn’t gone exactly to plan, but it hadn’t gone terribly, either. Right?

…right…

Another patron jostled him awake a while later and helped him out of the bath so he wouldn’t drown. It’d been too comfortable. Too warm. The robes were nice, too. Like wearing fluffy towels without having to worry about them falling open. Perfect.

The staff fed him, he talked a little bit about skating with Yuuri, and he fell asleep again. Not that he meant to! He was just too warm again. And that time, too full. Too comfortable.

He’d done his job. Delivered his message. The urgency had abated. He was where he needed to be, where destiny wanted him, where fate needed had called him. He was allowed to rest… and it was so lovely.

When he woke again, he was hungry. Actually hungry. He wanted to eat. Wanted. To. EAT. And they fed him again. Amazing. Incredible. Vkusno!

Yuuri… oh Yuuri. He had changed, some. Not quite the broken thing he’d seen at the Grand Prix Final, desperate to reclaim the shreds of wounded pride with every bit of bitter spite and moxy he had in him; that Yuuri was impressive to be sure… but the Yuuri that remained was softer, rebuilt, a Yuuri in hibernation with healing scars and seeds of confidence. Not like Viktor, who stayed out
all winter, lean, hungry, and untrusting.

…the soft look suited Yuuri. It would never do for skating; weight like that was dangerous on joints and bones, but it was so cute.

*The wolf traveled across the land, cold and weary, and finally found the boy meant to save the princess. The wolf, half-starved, mangy, approached with caution as not to be killed before his quest could begin. “Please,” he said. “Boy. Feed me. Let me sleep in your bed. I am cold. I am starving. I need shelter.”*

*The boy watched the wolf with wary eyes; wolves weren’t to be trusted, but there was something about this wolf that was different. Something about the way it bowed to him and asked so politely. The other townspeople would have thrown stones at him, or killed it straightway, but he...*

Viktor stared at the ceiling, scratching Makkachin’s side. The room he’d been put in wasn’t what he’d been expecting at all. No sofa, no bed, no private bath or even a vanity. A classic room, to be sure, but then Yuuri had said that all they’d had available was an unused banquet room. Were they really that busy, or had he brought too much with him?

The Yuuri that had helped bring his things into the room had been much like the one who had turned him down for a photo, not like the one who had danced with him. Sober Yuuri was polite, but didn’t seem to want to have much to do with him. In fact, the closer he got, the further the Japanese boy moved away.

A touch of Viktor’s hand on his or on his jaw made him tense. A little wink or a lower tone of voice, leaning in just so… and Yuuri had run away. It wasn’t like the banquet at all. There was no flirting, no dancing, no challenging smirks or turns of phrase or grasping arms with desperate pleas to coach him. Just confused stares and flushed cheeks. *Why me? Why are you here?*

So sweet. So awkward. So much better than he’d expected or remembered. A shy, unassuming young man… that same, tousled hair; those same, beautiful, dark eyes that bewitched him with the curious sparkle of intelligence… He wasn’t brazen, he wasn’t brash, he wasn’t forward, but it was still *Yuuri*. Still that same soul and heart lurking there, underneath all of that uncertainty. Was it his true self? Or was it a coat of armor? Viktor wanted to know. Desperately wanted to know. But finding out was going to be difficult.

“He doesn’t remember, Makkachin.”

Viktor spoke the truth in a whisper, aware that the walls were nothing like the reinforced plaster and concrete of his apartment in Saint Petersburg. In Hasetsu, they were literal paper, thin and fragile, carrying the sound of the oppressive quiet and retreating footsteps of the other patrons.

*What other patrons?*

Dragging his mobile back above his head, Viktor pulled up reviews for Yu-Topia again, searching for details. It was all positive; a small, family-run hot springs, one of the last of its kind in the area, with an on-site restaurant. The katsudon was its specialty. It had opening and closing hours, fees, reservations for the banquet halls, and… and nothing about overnight accommodations.

Nothing.
Viktor scanned further, though the dread had already set in deep into his stomach. There were inns all over the area, and they recommended coming to the hot springs. Some hot springs had inns, but not all hot springs had inns. It wasn’t a requirement. He’d made a mistake.

He’d just assumed…

And they’d put him in a banquet room. That was why he was on the floor, staring up at the ceiling. Spare futon, spare blanket, spare pillow. He’d come halfway across the world, unannounced, with mounds of luggage-- that now teetered around him in a cardboard canyon --flashing a credit card, demanding to be shown the bath. Then made Yuuri, the one he’d hoped to woo and befriend, put his things away where they didn’t even have room for him. In their place of business.

They’d fed him. Been so polite. Let him use a robe. And never once made him feel unwelcome even though--

Viktor rolled onto his side, burying his face into Makkachin’s fur with a full body shudder. He was so stupid. So stupid. What did he think would happen, that Yuuri would be thrilled to see him? That he’d welcome him with open arms? That they’d dance together right there in the dining room? Or in the hot springs? Hah!

And if he didn’t remember that night, which seemed to be the case, and this foreign idiot showed up out of nowhere demanding a room and to be waited on hand and foot, what did everything else look like? When he went to Yuuri’s room to ask to sleep with him, did he think--?

Oh god…

He curled tighter, arms circling around the dog as he choked on a breath. It had all gone wrong. He’d messed up. Left Russia, hurt Yakov, ruined his career, embarrassed himself, made things awkward for the Katsuki family, destroyed his chances with Yuuri K-- it was Yuuri K again --and all for nothing. All because he was so foolish to think that he could do something on his own, that he could possibly have managed to…

Viktor sobbed against Makkachin, and the dog licked his face, lapping up the salty tears. They were a delicacy. The floor was enough. He’d only wanted company. Someone to talk to. Confirmation that there was hope in the dark. But what did he expect when the world thought he was what he was and he barged into the Katsuki home like the world owed him a personal favor?

It was so wrong… so, so wrong, and such a mess.

How was he going to untangle it?

He peered through wet lashes at his cell phone, blurred outlines glowing faintly in the dark. Maybe it wasn’t too late to book a flight home. Pretend none of this had happened. There was time to finish his preparations for the season and, what, compete again?!

Viktor choked on another sob, body twisting to bury his face against the pillow. He had to muffle the sounds. He’d already done enough without-

Tap tap tap.

He froze, swallowing hard.

“Nikiforov-san?”

The owner. Yuuri’s mother. Mrs. Katsuki. Viktor sat up, pulling the blankets with him to cover
his black boxer-briefs, and reached for the discarded robe from earlier. “Just-” he coughed, and adjusted his voice, straightening out the tremor. He was good at hiding it after years of practice. “--a moment, please.” He’d probably woken her with his stupid crying… great.

It only took him a few seconds to don the robe and wipe the tears away, putting on a small, but professional smile as he tiptoed to the doorway. “Yes?”

There she was with a smile of her own, warm and concerned, and in her arms a tray. Tea. Snacks. What…? She nudged him aside with a bow of her head, using the tray as a buffer between them, and slid the door shut behind her with her foot.

“I thought you could use some tea.”

Viktor watched in stunned silence as she knelt in front of one of the boxes and set the tray on top, then poured two cups of tea. He barely had time to get the light on before she was finished, cup and saucer set out for him on the makeshift table. Makkachin sought her hand for pettings, which she obliged without hesitation- clearly a dog person, which instantly gained her even more points in his favor. Then she looked up at him again.

That smile. Warm. Unassuming. She was Yuuri’s mother, there was no doubt about that. So much of who he was came from her, but she had all of the confidence and grace that mothers naturally did; the unapologetic perfection that always put Viktor a little at odds. “Well? Come sit, before it gets cold. It’ll make you feel better.”

He blinked, swallowing again. There it was. Mothers always knew. Somehow. He crept closer, hesitant, but lowered himself to the floor with what grace of his own he could find. Kneeling Japanese-style would be murder on his knees that late at night on so little sleep, so he opted to sit criss-cross, feet tucked under, and took the cup of tea as she’d prepared it. Oh- chamomile! Something he was familiar with. “Thank you.”

“Of course, dear.” She didn’t miss a beat, simply sipping her own tea as soon as Viktor had his, with Makkachin settled in her lap. It was a comfortable scene already, and the tea was warm and mellow, with just a touch of honey. “Homesick?”

Viktor peeked over his cup, then down into the reddish haze. “I’ve lived in Saint Petersburg my entire life, but I travel all the time. Though, even then, I don’t usually leave the hotel…” He bit his lower lip, pulling in a breath with quiet resign, and sighed, glancing back at her again. “This isn’t a hotel, though, is it? Not an inn?”

Mrs. Katsuki’s smile didn’t even waver as she shook her head. “No.”

Well. At least she was amused by his insensitivity. Another sigh. He set the cup and saucer down and rubbed at the sides of his neck with his newly warmed fingers. “Katsuki-san, I… I’m so sorry. I can find a different place tomorrow, and pay you for your troubles tonight. I really didn’t mean to-”

The woman reached for the plate of rice crackers and held it out to him. “Here. Senbei.”

Viktor blinked, and took one.

“Go on. Eat.”

He nibbled on the edge of it. Faintly sweet, light and fluffy. He swallowed. “I just don’t understand why you didn’t kick me out…”

“It seemed important to you that you stay here. You came all this way to help my Yuuri… and he’s
been sad for so long. There’s only so much that we can do; if anyone can help him, it’s you.” Mrs.
Katsuki went back to her tea. “I don’t know how much you’re charging him, but I know he doesn’t
have much, and we don’t get much business here in Hasetsu anymore, either, so what can his
family do to support him?”

Viktor chewed on the edge of the cracker again, slowly working his way through it. He’d told
Yuuri that they would discuss the cost later. The Katsuki’s financial situation had only been sort of
an afterthought, he had to admit; it’d been a long time since he’d had to worry about that, himself.
But there had been a time…

No, in truth, he hadn’t wanted to charge Yuuri at all. It wasn’t that he didn’t know how; he’d been
trained at the Academy in all of the business end of things, and he’d been paying Yakov out of his
own accounts for long enough to know what a good coach’s time was worth. He had invoice
templates in his files, contracts, ISU registration paperwork to fill out that he’d already started on
in Paris, and plenty of other legalese stuff that was boring but necessary.

But the fact remained that you didn’t pay friends. You didn’t pay lovers. And you definitely didn’t
pay soulmates to be close to you.

Maybe with Yuuri, he could put it off until he knew what he was dealing with… until he knew
where he stood. Let Yuuri believe that he was just the airheaded foreign playboy that he seemed to
think he was, for now.

The princess, disguised as a wolf.

“I told him not to worry about it for now,” Viktor said, canting his head at an angle. The rest of
what she’d said was starting to sink in. He frowned. “I can pay for the room. Rent, I mean. If you’d
let me stay here.”

“Oh, no no no.” She waved a hand, dismissive. “Definitely not. Though…” She clapped her hands
together. “What if we made a deal? To help pay for coaching, you stay here, room and board, and
full access to the hot springs, as much as you like!”

“You’d… cook for me? Katsudon, too?”

“Katsudon, too! All the katsudon you can eat! You need some fattening up!”

Well, that was true. Viktor glanced down at himself, then back at her, shy smile creeping back onto
his lips. “And Makkachin can stay, too?”

“Of course! We need another dog around here, it’s been so lonely without Vicchan.”

Makkachin glanced up at them both, then huffed and went back to sleep. It was too late for this
much excitement, though he wagged his tail to show he was a good sport.

“Vicchan…” Viktor popped the rest of the cracker into his mouth. “Isn’t that what you called me
earlier?”

“Oh!” The woman blushed, laughed, and waved it off. “Yuuri named him after you, but he might
not want you to know that~”

Yuuri named his poodle after me? Viktor took his cup of tea and sipped it, considering while the
warmth of hope spread through him again. Coaching Yuuri in return for room and board didn’t
sound like business, especially when Yuuri’s mama was being so sweet and supportive. It made
him feel better about the whole thing, really. How could he possibly say no to that? He smiled at
her. “Okay. I’ll coach for room and board, but I have three more conditions.”

“Oh?”

“One: we shouldn’t tell Yuuri, because I don’t want him to think he has it easy. I want him to win.”

She laughed. “Okay. He’d be embarrassed, anyway.”

That made sense. Secrets kept. Easy enough!

“Two: Is it okay if I buy furniture?” Viktor hesitated. “I don’t… think I like sleeping on the floor.”

Another warm smile. “Feel free. Just keep it to this room.”

Relieved, Viktor continued, though the last one was what he was most concerned about. “And three: can I call you Mama Katsuki? It’ll be easier for me to remember.”

Despite having a dog in her lap and holding tea and saucer, the woman abandoned all three in an instant to stand and hug the man in a way that only a mother could, arms around his head. “Of course~! And I will call you Vicchan from now on~!”

Viktor, though smothered, only laughed. “Okay~ it’s a deal, then.”

--

The next morning, Viktor woke to his alarm at six am, stretched, and got dressed. He crept to take Makkachin out, fed and watered him, and greeted Mama and- hah -Papa Katsuki when they came out to prepare for the business of the day. They humored him with one part idle chatter, two parts dietary needs- mostly concerning Yuuri and what needed to happen for training.

“Don’t worry,” Mama Katsuki assured him. “We’ve done this before. Leave it to us!”

“That’s right. He’s diligent when he needs to be.”

All of which was good news to him; it would make it a lot easier if Yuuri was willing to work hard. But, given that he’d already shown quite a bit of potential on his own, Viktor wasn’t entirely surprised. Just pleased.

While waiting for Yuuri, he got the ice rink programed into his phone’s GPS, arranged to borrow Papa Katsuki’s bicycle, and made a preliminary schedule for the week. Dropping the necessary pounds would take time, which would leave him with quite to of time to himself. He’d need to find a way to occupy it productively and make the most of it-- for the both of them. Hmm.

Finally, Viktor resorted to getting Mari to wake Yuuri, which took several attempts despite being the first day of the rest of his life and the epic day of destiny.

“Is he waiting for me?! Did he give me a time to wake up? I don’t remember!”

Viktor listened from down the hall, smirking to himself until he heard the crash, thud, and scrambling of panicked piggy skater trying to get ready, then retreated back to the dining area to wait for him. Ahem.

Omelette. Miso. Rice. All wonderful. Warm, salty, full of flavor and caloric delight. Viktor took it all in and ate with appreciation, casting a casual glance at Yuuri’s more modest meal, which the sleepyhead ate without complaint. Adorable.
“Yuuri,” he said, picking up another chunk of rice “We have a lot to do today~”

“Sorry I overslept…”

It was impossible to stay mad with an apology. Viktor grinned at him. “That’s okay. Once we eat, we can get going with warm-ups and head to the rink.”

“What did you have in mind? For warm-ups…”

“A nice, healthy jog. Just an easy little run.”

Yuuri looked relieved, though no less raccoon-eyed as he went back to his breakfast. A night owl, indeed.

Viktor tucked away a few more mouthfuls of rice, then pursed his lips. “We’ll go over the rest of the regimen when we get to the rink. We have a lot to do if we’re going to get you in shape in time.” He sighed, and turned to the omelette, picking out a mushroom. “We’re four months behind where I’d be for the season already.”

Chopsticks clattered as Yuuri turned to stare at him. “B-but the season just ended?”

“Yeah, but what else are you supposed to do between Nationals and Regionals? Or that and Worlds? That’s months of prep time to waste.” Viktor shook his head, shoulders hunching to suppress a shudder. “But that’s okay. If anyone can pull this off, it’s Viktor Nikiforov! Right?”

“…you can, but we’re training me…”

Viktor frowned at that, switching to the bowl of miso, picking it up with both hands-- like he’d seen Mama Katsuki do earlier. “With my regimen. And you can already skate my Worlds-winning program, which says something.”

Yuuri tugged at the hem of his shirt, gaze fixed firmly at the table in front of him. “I guess so…”

“Yeah!” Viktor tilted the bowl back and drained the last of the broth, then set it down with a satisfying thump. “So hurry up! Let’s go let’s go!”

“Okay, okay…”

“Ready?!”

“Y-yeah!”

“GREAT!” Viktor jumped up, abandoning what little remained of his breakfast- so impressive! “Thanks for breakfast, Mama Katsuki! Makkachin! It’s time to go!”

The poodle barked, trotting to his side, tail waving.

Yuuri blinked, caught in a deer in headlights stare between his overly enthusiastic idol addressing his mother that way, and the reply from behind the bar: “Mind your coach, Yuuri! And don’t work him too hard on the first day, Vicchan!”

“Okaaay~!” Viktor called back, then turned back to Yuuri with a bright-eyed smile. “Yuuri! Training! Grand Prix Finals! Now!”

It had begun.
Chapter Summary

While Yuuri gets in shape, Viktor brushes up on the coaching materials from his Academy days and explores Hasetsu with Makkachin. Everything he learns convinces him that it was good for him to leave home for a fresh perspective, even though things with Yuuri aren't going as smoothly as he'd hoped. He can't seem to get his fellow skater to open up to him, no matter what he tries.

Chapter Notes

In this chapter:
Gabapple: We've got some heavy collaboration going on here... I could not have written this without my dear Mamodewberry's wonderful Yakov and Yuuri, so although I handled most of the prose for the chapter, she certainly did quite a bit of writing this week, herself. I am forever in love with them, and also forever in her debt for her careful betaing and encouragement. Like how she told me not to worry and to rest instead of trying to type while my hand was bleeding. lol "They can wait a day, geez..."
Clearly this chapter is Viktor PoV, but next week, look forward to Yuuri! It is going to be so cute. PLEASE SEE ADDITIONAL NOTES BELOW for a SPECIAL PREVIEW! :~~~

Mamodewberry: Just know that Yuuri is dying inside. Please cheer both these idiots on.

Gabapple: Poor Yuuri. Poor Viktor. Oh, and a special thanks to East Asian Studies major @yukitsukihana for help with additional research for this chapter (and others)--I always get my youkai and kami mixed up, ho ho. ;)

Recommended listening:

Quartet in D Major, K. 285: II. Adagio, as performed by James Galway
Empire State of Mind, as performed by Josh Vietti

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Saint Petersburg, Russia
Viktor (8 years old)

“Here, let me take your coat.”
Oh, it was such a dangerous game. First the invitation to dinner with the specific instructions to
dress nicely, then the hands-on attention? Yakov thanked Lilia, shrugging out of the heavy wool
with as much care as he could manage in the cramped entryway. Her home was immaculate, but its
architecture built for people like her; tall and thin as an awl. Not that he’d have her any other way,
of course. A little less sharp perhaps…

“You know your way to the dining room,” she said, turning around to hang the coat on the rack,
though he suspected it was more to give him a better view of the low cut of her dress. The carmine
fabric dipped all the way down to the small of her back, angle following the line of her spine. “Go
on ahead.”

As much as he wanted to linger, he knew better than to wait, and moved on through the house,
trusting the scent of the promised dinner to lead him. Chicken Kiev? Stuffed Eggplant? The table
was already dressed with settings on the good tablecloth, candles, wine glasses…

Yes. Lilia was certainly up to something.

She joined him only a moment later, just in time to allow him to pull out her seat for her, then
poured them both a glass of wine. Once the bottle was back on the table, she made a show of
putting her napkin in her lap as if she’d actually be eating, then smiled that oh-so-dangerous smile
at him.

Yakov knew better than to ask. It was better to wait and let her lead. He, too, put his napkin in his
lap and set upon the meal. That was how it usually went between them.

“Has Viktor Nikiforov returned to your classes?” she asked, voice almost sweet if it weren’t for the
subtext of malice dripping like poison in every word.

Fortunately, he knew enough to know that it wasn’t directed at him. For once. Yakov sighed,
cutting into the breading of the chicken. “No. He has not.” It had been three weeks since the
funeral, and there had been no sign of the boy since.

“Nor mine,” Lilia replied, and retrieved her wine glass, long fingernails tapping the stem. She took
a sip, savored it, then returned it to the table. “And it doesn’t seem as if he ever will.”

“He could need more time.”

A young boy losing both of his parents in a single night was traumatic. Both Yakov and Lilia had
attended the funeral by his request, and he’d been a wide-eyed, nervous wreck the entire time; a
trembling leaf among towering trees that had nothing to do with him.

“It’s not Vitya,” Lilia said with a roll of her eyes. “It’s his wretched aunt and uncle. I spoke with
them this afternoon.”

“…and what did they say?”

“The classes are too expensive. They don’t see why he needs one coach, let alone two, and that
he’s better off at home during this transitory period. Really.”

The murder lit in Lilia’s eyes was unmistakable; Yakov had seen it on more occasions than he ever
wanted to admit. He cut into the next piece of chicken carefully. “Ah, so they are like that,” he
said. “I commend them for thinking they have Vitya’s interests at heart.”

“I mentioned the Academy to them… but they said they wished for him to have a more
conventional education.”
“He would suffocate. I know this for certain.”

“Suffocate? He wouldn’t survive. I can always tell with my students, even when they’re young. If he’s put into the public system, they will destroy him.” Lilia shook her head, taking the wine glass again, and rolling the liquid just enough to bring out its bouquet. “His life will be difficult no matter what, but at least he would have support in the Academy. And he won’t get in unless we both tutor him, which won’t happen unless we convince his adoptive parents to allow it.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Clearly, we can’t save every little orphan, talented and special or not, and I’m not willing to beg. But…” She sighed. “We have to do something. Couples have two heads: the emotional and the practical. First, I will contact the members of the companies that I know who attended the funeral; friends of his mother, and let them know what’s going on. If they know that her son is being cut out of the system, I’m certain they’ll have words with the aunt. That ought to take care of the emotional component, crushing her with peer pressure and guilt.

“For the practical, we will write a proposal. If they pay the coaching fees to continue lessons, we can tutor him with the specific goal of admittance to the Academy. As it is Government-funded, it would take care of his expenses from then on, which would take care of the uncle’s financial concerns…”

Yakov nodded, grateful that he was not the one in charge or at the other end of Lilia’s plan. She was an intimidating woman, to be sure. “What do you need me to do?”

“Aside from agreeing to work him hard? I need you to find sponsors willing to take a chance on him. He isn’t ready to compete yet, but if he has names on paper ready to back him when he is, it will help him stand out from the competition. I can get sponsors on my end, but you must talk to yours. See if you can get him in front of anyone. Show him off.”

He smiled. That would be easy enough to do. Vitya was already quite good at showmanship. “Do you think they will accept?”

“They would be foolish not to.”

“Agreed. But they’ve already proven themselves fools.”

She laughed at that, setting her wine down again, this time to reach across the table for his hand. “You know,” she said, voice rolling in a low purr. “I almost wanted to take you back when I saw how you let Vitya cling to you like a frightened bear cub at the funeral.”

Yakov lowered his gaze to her fingers as they stroked his, attempting to gauge her mood, preparing to lay his other hand on hers. “Almost?”

“Well. I don’t think that I would make a very good mother. But,” she shrugged, sliding her fingers between his. “It was a pleasant thought to entertain for a little while.”

“If we can pull this off, you’d be a better mother to Vitya than his aunt.”

“Mm. There are other aspects that are much more appealing, anyway…”

“Others?” He took the chance, laying his hand over hers.

Lilia tucked her chin, gaze dark, eyes half-lidded. “I think that’s enough talk for now, Medvezhonok.”
It was a shame to let the food go to waste, but Lilia wouldn't put forth the effort if it were about dinner. She hadn't taken a single bite. Yakov hoped that she would know, one day, that she didn’t need to bribe him. For the moment, though, the point was moot. Her appetite was clearly for something else.

He swallowed. “Lili.”

The music began over the PA system, and Viktor pushed off of the ice, skates gliding effortlessly to pull him through the movements that he’d done so many times over the past few months. Skating to Stay Close to Me wasn’t something that he’d expected to do again, and certainly not for an audience, but there he was. So far from home, just in street clothes, surrounded by people he didn’t really know, but it felt right all the same.

He closed his eyes as he set up for the jump, warding off the wave of dizziness he felt coming on, and spun through the quadruple flip with a successful landing that carried the momentum through as if it were as natural as breathing. And oh, it felt so good. He smiled, letting his body relax as he went through the next step sequence, listening to the squealing of the woman in charge of the rink. Yuco. She was a fan and a friend of Yuuri’s. He liked her.

Already he could feel the inkling of something changing in the routine, too. Yuuri had skated the program so well despite the extra weight, and once he was in shape, he’d be able to do it even better. What if he…? What if they…?

It was too tempting not to entertain the idea, even though the others were watching. It would only take a few slight modifications to turn it into a pair skate, really. Synchronized movements for the most part, mirrored steps other places, and the occasional changes to add just that touch of romance… a real dance together. He could picture it. Magnificence incarnate…

He could almost hear another voice, even. A duet. Harmony. He’d have to speak with his composer. The request might surprise him, but it wouldn’t be too unusual, would it?

“Viktor teaching you himself... it's like a dream come true!”

Viktor was only barely paying attention to the words that reached him; it never did to let anything distract you on the ice. Normally, it was only Yakov’s voice that he let make it even filter through, and even then, he ignored him more often than not.

Hah… Yakov would have been so angry to know that he was skating at that moment, against orders. Not that he would stay underweight for long, not with the katsudon and promised meals from Mama Katsuki. He’d be back where he was supposed to be in no time. And he was skating just fine. Tired, sure, but from jet lag more than anything.

It wasn’t dangerous like it would have been for Yuuri.

Viktor looked to where the others were watching him, gathered at the barrier in a little cluster. “The little piggy can't enter the rink until he drops some body fat~!” he called, pulling into another camel spin. As a coach, he had the right to make the rules, just like Yakov, and Yuuri would have to respect that.

The others laughed while Yuuri’s shoulder slumped, but didn’t argue. They’d been over it before.
Apparently, it was nothing new.

But it wouldn’t be, would it? Minako had teased him about it the night before, too, and his parents had been eager to tell him all about how easy the weight came on and off.

In the world of competitive athletics, that was how it worked. Some areas were worse than others. Viktor had seen it all throughout his skating career; everyone wanted to be lighter, trimmer, fitter, more aesthetically appealing. They pushed their bodies to the limits. And in the Olympics, well…

…he didn’t like to think about what he’d seen athletes willing to do for that.

But at the Academy, it was even a running joke that spotting wasn’t so much to keep you from getting dizzy in dancing, but from the low blood sugar.

In retrospect, it wasn’t funny at all.

And every time his boyfriend had made a comment about his weight…

No. It was time to take a different approach. Yuuri was capable of taking the friendly banter, and maybe it was normal, but that didn’t make it okay. Rules were rules, but the emotional manipulation was a tactic Lilia used, not him.

Viktor finished the program, bowed for the ensuing cheers, then skated to the groupies. “Yuuri, could I speak to you for a moment? Privately?”

Yuuri froze against the barrier when the others scattered, abandoning their fellow to potential lecture. How far they’d go was unknown, but the nerves that shadowed Yuuri’s person made it moot. Viktor just needed to get it over with.

He sighed. “I hope you know that my requirements for your weight are strictly for safety, not for aesthetics. If we weren’t competing, it would be a different story. The speed and jumps required for a competitive program could easily injure you, and I’m not willing to take that risk.”

Yuuri stared at him, blinking.

Was he getting through, or just scaring him again?

Viktor put on his most professional, serious-business coach expression, no nonsense with brows raised and lips pinched in a tight pout. “I’ve seen far too many skaters tear ligaments and break bones on the ice, among other things…” Lots of other things. But he didn’t want to scare Yuuri too badly with the horror stories, so he continued with a shrug. “Personally, I think that piggies are very cute! But you need to be in peak condition and avoid as many risks as possible.”

More silence. Yuuri was still staring, but his expression had gone blank.

Viktor frowned. “The diet is temporary anyway. I don’t want you to lose your love of food; I think it’s very healthy.” He waited for a reaction- any reaction -but when there wasn’t, he forced a weak smile and drummed his fingers on the barrier. Right. Yuuri didn’t take compliments very well. Or maybe he was too close? He pushed back from the barrier, putting a few inches between them. “Anyway, I hope you don’t take it too hard.”

“Oh, no. I understand,” Yuuri said, suddenly alive again.

Maybe the physical proximity, then. Viktor folded his arms, letting momentum carry him back until he was a foot away. “Were it up to me, it wouldn’t matter… but I don’t want you to get hurt,
“Sumo wrestlers shouldn’t skate, after all.”

Huh? Was he making fun of himself, or…? Viktor shook his head. “I wouldn’t say that you’re a sumo wrestler, though from what I understand, they’re quite strong. Er, and you’re really strong, but it’s… They’re… really respectable athletes in their own fields…”

“I just meant by mass comparison! Too much weight, can’t move… uh…”

It was just like treading on thin ice. Viktor squinted at him, shifting his weight just enough to let the skates carry him back another inch, then another, subtle movements increasing the distance between them. Would that help or make it worse? He wasn’t sure. “Uhm.”

“So awkward.” Viktor hefted a sigh and gave in to the tick of rubbing the side of his neck. “Just don’t think that you need to be a prima ballerina to impress me, Yuuri. Okay?”

“I’ve never been at ballerina weight before,” Yuuri admitted with a sudden laugh. “I like food too much.”

It was the cutest thing Viktor had ever heard and he had no idea how to take it. He stared, blinking helplessly as Yuuri smiled, sheepish and embarrassed and perfect, fidgeting with the zipper on his jacket. How did someone like Yuuri Katsuki even exist? Yes, he was awkward, but he owned his insecurities… he was who he was, and everyone who knew him accepted and loved him just as he was.

It was incredible.

Viktor wanted to be more like him. He could learn, couldn’t he? Somehow. That kind of self-acceptance, Philautia, was something he’d managed to lose somewhere along the way. Yuuri probably didn’t even know that he had it. So amazing…

“So it’s good that you aren’t looking for me to impress, cause…”

Viktor came back to the present, blinking. “Yuuri. You’re already attractive. That’s not what’s going to impress me. I’m going to be looking at your diligence and work ethic. Your skating.”

On the other side of the barrier, Yuuri blushed, hands dropping to grip the plastic guard. “O-oh yeah. That is more important and why you came.”

Okay. Subtle flirting was fine, overt compliments not so much. Viktor took notes as he ran a hand through his hair, sighing a sigh of patient long-suffering. It was going to take some serious mental gymnastics to remember all of the nuances of dealing with Yuuri’s particular brand of anxiety, but it would be worth it if he could break through the barrier. “Yes, it is. Because you asked me to come.”

“I… did?”

Er. Viktor winced. Right. Yuuri didn’t seem to remember his drunken antics all too well. That, or he was too embarrassed to admit it. Given how things had gone so far, bringing it up seemed like the worst possible idea now. He still had photos on his phone, so it wasn’t as though there wasn’t proof, but Yuuri couldn’t even handle being called attractive to his face. The sordid tale of drunken begging was probably off the table. Instead, he arched a brow. “When you skated my program.”
“Oh. Well… skating has always helped me clear my mind and make me feel better. Maybe I was calling out. Not like I can refuse coaching from Viktor Nikiforov…”

“Right! And I heard you loud and clear.”

Maybe not the most divinely inspired story, but the boy in the story wasn’t exactly the brightest, either. He didn’t have to be; not at first. He had to be reminded of his birthright. Of his potential. He had to be woken to his destiny. The wolf would show him how. Viktor smirked, tapping a finger on his lips.

Actually…

“Speaking of, since you are a fan of mine, what if I offered a bit of special motivation?”

Yuuri went back to staring, expression somewhere between curiosity and fear, which made Viktor regret the naked hot springs introduction even more. He really didn’t need his student to fear him. BUT, that was over and done with. It couldn’t be helped.

“What kind of motivation?”

“I’ll be here at the rink every morning, bright and early, waiting for you to join me. And every morning you make it here on time, I’ll reward you with a private performance from one of my winning programs… and,” Viktor shrugged. “I guess I could show you some other things, too, if you wanted. Ones I abandoned. Cutting room floor. Exhibition gala pieces that never got used.”

More staring, but that time it came with an expression of disbelief and a definite sparkle in those lovely, lovely brown eyes.

Aaaah, perfect~

“I know it will take some time before we’ll be able to skate together, and it’s going to be a lot of work. But I’m your coach and you don’t have to do it alone. Makkachin and I like walks and jogging, too, so we can join you. I’d love to see Hasetsu in the afternoons when you’re done with your core training for the day. How does that sound?”

“Deal!”

“Okay!”

Psh. What was Yakov talking about? Coaching was easy!

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Coaching was easy. In theory. But there wasn’t much coaching to do.

Early mornings went as planned, with Yuuri properly motivated to make it to the rink on time for a performance of something from Viktor’s extensive resume. Most of them were old, things he hadn’t performed in years, but Yuuri seemed to like them, which pleased him. It was such an easy way to motivate him. Afterward, they’d go over the plans for the day, then break for individual study time: Yuuri would work out, core training, whatever he needed, and Viktor would brush up on the study materials from his senior days at the Academy. It’d been a while since he graduated, after all, and while he’d assisted Yakov a number of times with coaching, choreography, and a few other management duties, he’d never had to do it on his own. Not for other people.

It’d never really occurred to him to take it too seriously before. The training was mostly there for
those who hadn’t intended to join a ballet company upon graduation, which fit him, sure, but only because he was already a Worlds-level figure skating champion at the time. The material was straight forward enough and nothing new; he thought he could handle it. If worse came to worse, he’d ask Yakov for advice.

Not that Yakov had responded to any of his emails yet. He was probably just bad at it, though. Technology wasn’t his strongest suit.

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_Yakov-

_You should visit. I think you’d like Hasetsu. There are a lot of very nice you-aged people that you would get along well with. And guess what! They all like to drink, too. :)_

_Updates soon-

_Viktor_

That was sure to get a response.

Some days, Viktor and Yuuri met up to walk or jog together around the town. He tried not to let that happen too often, though, as it usually resulted in him badgering Yuuri for information, which never worked; it just made him feel like a pest. Yuuri didn’t want to talk about himself and he didn’t want to know anything about Viktor, so it was talking about skating or nothing. Business, business, business.

The days Viktor went without Yuuri, he and Makkachin wandered all throughout Hasetsu, getting as lost as possible until dinner. Magic, it seemed, was alive and well in the tiny town. There were so many stories, so many interesting people, and it filled Viktor with more energy than he remembered having in such a long, long time. They explored the forests and shrines, walked the coastline, chased the absurd number of cats that flocked near the fishing boats (that was mostly Makkachin), and sought out people he could speak to. English was often found, but the quality varied in large degree. As always, they somehow managed to make it work, but only by polite determination on both sides. And money. Money helped.

Little by little, he brought back trinkets to decorate his room, which he unpacked and set up as furniture arrived. The makeshift banquet hall/box canyon slowly transformed into a comfortable western-style hotel suite, with bed, sofa, desk, dresser, and various creature comforts. Within a couple of weeks, he was sleeping well, tucked under comforter and on top of a plush mattress topper. It didn’t matter that the sounds were different than home; the thread count of his sheets were absurdly high, his clothes had a place to stay unwrinkled, and there were pieces of Russia around him whenever he needed them.

Too many pieces in some cases.

It was a cloudy afternoon when Viktor brought the bag of broken salt and pepper shakers to Kouki-san across town, assuring Yuuri that he had business to attend to and would be fine without him for the day. He’d been to the shop several times before; Kouki-san had been kind and indulgent with his stories and tea while he worked, content to let Viktor watch. Kintsukuroi wasn’t as popular an
art form as it had once been, and the foreigner’s enthusiasm for it was refreshing.

Besides, the old man liked to talk.

“Can you repair these?” Viktor asked, laying the broken pieces of ceramic before him.

“Why if it isn’t Momotaro-kun!” The man glanced down at the faded blue owl and the cream-colored cat. “Are these heirlooms?”

“No…”

It was common knowledge in Hasetsu that Nikiforov was wealthy, but that was no reason to take advantage of the boy. But he didn’t want to turn down business or insult him, either. But why salt and pepper shakers? He stroked his beard. Was he lonely? Perhaps looking for another story…

Viktor fidgeted across from him. “Please? They were broken in the move from Russia.”

He picked at the pieces, sorting them out to see if there was enough to work with. Most were in large chunks, which was a good sign. “Do they have names?”

“No, but they’re lovers. The owl and the cat. They belong together. See,” Viktor pointed to a broken wing and an extended paw. “They’re supposed to be dancing.”

“Well, we wouldn’t want them to be like Orihime and Hikoboshi, would we?”

“Huh?”

Kouki-san waved it off. “That’s a festival at the end of the summer- Tanabata- see if Yuuri-kun will go with you. I have another job to finish before I can tend to your owl and cat, but tell me about them.”

“Okay!”

Viktor relayed the story of the owl and the pussycat while he watched the man worked, amazed as always at the care that went into taking the cracked pieces and mending them with glittering gold. The flaws or cracks weren’t hidden, they were immortalized as part of what made the object what it was. What made a person who they were. Like Yuuri. He made no excuses or apologies. Just picked himself up and kept skating, not pretending to be perfect and flawless like Viktor did.

The gold seams made the pieces stronger, too. At least, according to Kouki-san.

But then, Kouki-san also said that koi fish could become dragons if they climbed to the top of waterfalls. And that kitsune were foxes that shapeshifted and some were evil, but not all of them were. Further, tanuki were supposedly real animals, not made up. But Kouki-san had photos on his phone, so that seemed more likely to be real than the rest of them.

In the end, Kouki-san said that it would take a few days to repair the beloved salt and pepper shakers to his specifications, and asked Viktor to come back at the end of the week. “But don’t worry, I’ll take great care with them.”

“I know you will. I trust you.” Viktor was reluctant to leave them even still, but he meant it. But it was getting late, so he gathered his scarf and woke Makkachin up from where he’d curled up on the warm shop floor.
“Are you going to the Spring Matsuri?”

“The… what?”

“We’re having a neighborhood party.”

Oh. He’d heard Mama Katsuki talk about preparing food for it, but the term was something new. He grinned. “I should be.”

“The Katsukis are letting you borrow a yukata from their onsen, I’m guessing.”

He shrugged.

“You’ll want to get one of your own. Trust me. You’ll have a much better time, Momotaro-kun. Something nice and local.”

It wasn’t a bad idea. Viktor considered it. He didn’t know the first thing about proper yukata buying, but Yuuri would. And it would be a good excuse for them to do something together. Supporting local business, learning more about the culture, spending time with Yuuri… yes, it was a good plan. He grinned. “Yeah! I’ll do that. Thanks, Kouki-san.”

“Anytime. And watch out for the kappa.”

Viktor nodded. “I’ve got a cucumber in my bag.”

“Good.”

Foreigners were so fun.

Chapter End Notes

Viktor: I swore I would never wear a dress again and yet....
Yuuri: It's not a dress :v
Yuuri: Wait, what?
Viktor: ...Wait, what?
Yuuri: when did you... wear a dress?
Viktor: I never... uh
Viktor: Long story. Anyway. How do I put this thing on?
Viktor: It's cold in here. ^o^;;;

ON THE NEXT GAY SKATE:
Yukata shopping! / Sakura Festival! / Kappa sighting! / Yuuri suffers in silence!

Please look forward to it!
Yuuri frowned at the headline of the article in his latest issue of SKATING. Viktor didn’t get to where he was because he was lucky, he got there through hard work - training his body and mind, perseverance, and grace. If luck was the only thing that was required for an athlete, anybody could
strap on a pair of skates and hope for the best! Viktor’s junior days had several silvers and nobody snubbed on those.

Silver was still a win. Still recognition.

Yuuri grabbed the bottom corner of the page to turn it, only for a tear to follow. “Ah! Vicchan, no!”

The young poodle immediately released what was left of the top page in his mouth and whimpered, cowering.

He could never stay mad at him long. The magazine was important - got a subscription for his birthday! - but it wasn’t worth staying upset about. He pushed himself onto his knees from his stomach on his bed and patted his lap. “Come here, boy.”

Vicchan - Viktor - cautiously crawled forward, avoiding the magazine in front of him as much as possible.

Yuuri cradled the pup in one arm. “I’m sorry for yelling. Don’t bite things, okay?” he booped his wet nose.

Vicchan responded by licking his hand, tail wagging against his thigh, and curled up in his lap.

Leaning forward, Yuuri pulled the magazine closer with his other hand to finish reading.

It went on to reveal Viktor had sprained his ankle between the short program and free skate. When Yuuri had watched the World Championship televised, Viktor was in the Kiss and Cry looking upset. The camera cut away after his score was revealed and the voice over declared a medical team was seeing to Nikiforov. Once all the skaters finished their programs, the scores were tallied and announced the winners, then it went to commercial. When the broadcast returned, the three new champions stood on the podium, Viktor taking silver, leaning off his bad ankle.

His performance wavered just enough to lose the gold and it was because he’d gotten hurt. .9 points, in fact. One “loss” wasn’t enough to condemn his career. He’d heal and pick himself right back up. Even though silver was also impressive.

Things just happened. It wasn’t luck. An injury could have meant he practiced too much or too little. Lost concentration. Or maybe he hurt it before he got to the rink, like, tripped on a curb and still skated his best. Possibilities were endless.

Photos of Viktor and his fellow competitors spread over a collage across two pages. His hair was pulled back into a crown braid. Flawless form.

Stupid journalists.

With a sigh, he closed the magazine and set it to the side to flop down on his back, Vicchan curling onto his chest.

Tomorrow Yuuri would know if he would be the one to be selected to be privately coached. To work his way through the junior division, then to the senior division. To Viktor Nikiforov.

When Yuko suggested he get into ice skating competitively to skate against Viktor months ago, Yuuri knew he had a late start in the game. He’d skated most of his life, sure, but it had been for fun, nothing like the grueling training regimens he read about. He could only hope Viktor wouldn’t retire before he could catch up.
Hope.

That was better than any luck.

The first few days of training were harder than previous times Yuuri had to slim down after a long, neglectful off-season. Normally he’d taper himself into it, but Viktor was not lax in his instructions. It was fine; being soft wouldn’t do any good, and Yuuri was sure he gained more this time around after the depressive slump he’d wallowed in too long after the GPF. A coach was a coach.

Although, Viktor wasn’t actually a coach, well, certified at least. Viktor wasn’t *typically* a coach, he was the skater Yuuri had tried to catch up to for years. Soon they’d be skating on the ice as coach and student. It wasn’t how he’d dreamed to be on the ice with him. But after the crash and burn at the end of his last season, he’d lost hope. Then Viktor had come to *him* with this arrangement.

Was it just because he inspired him or did he feel sympathy towards him for climbing so high to the top and failing magnificently?

Yuuri’s stomach sunk thinking about Viktor watching his performance at the finals and what thoughts went through his mind. It was a cruel curiosity he didn’t want to find out.

Before he was allowed to be on the ice - join Viktor - he had to lose weight. That alone was perfect motivation, and even still, Viktor decided to bribe him further by throwing in the incentive of skating any of his past programs *just for him*. If he was on time. He wasn’t going to complain, but he couldn’t help but wonder why Viktor felt he needed to do that. Being on time was part of being a student, after all. As much as Yuuri wasn’t a morning person, he was willing to make the sacrifice.

Then Viktor had called him attractive. He even liked ‘piggies’, but was concerned for his safety above that. He wasn’t a professional coach, but he had enough people skills for making someone feel better. That’s all it was, no matter how much it made heat rush to his face.

Yuuri’s mornings started with three alarms to ensure he’d get out of bed, a very quick shower for more waking, throwing on of whatever tracksuit was clean, eat his meager by comparison breakfast, and then jog to Ice Castle where Viktor waited for him. Even with everything he did in the mornings to get here, Viktor was always the more chipper one.

That is until Yuuri watched him skate for the day, rewarding him for being on time.

With so many used and unused routines in Viktor’s personal roster, it’d be a long time before he ran out of programs to skate for him. It was decided he’d start from the beginning, that being a bigger treat for Yuuri as he was a later fan. Lack of quads and a certain flair he later obtained, the way Viktor glided across the ice, body so nimble, was something that was purely him.

No crowd, no commentators, often no music; only the two of them, the sound of skates scraping on the ice accompanying Yuuri’s awed silence.

The ice was painted gold by the sun, instead of moonlight like he’d gotten used to seeing.
Once Viktor drew out of his final pose, it was to business and Yuuri was sent on his way for his daily exercises with a smile on his face.

Aches and fatigue aside, Yuuri actually enjoyed working his body, finding new ways to improve and speed the process. Viktor provided a regimen with gaps in between for Yuuri to fill in what worked for him in the past. Bodies differed one from another. He usually started with cardio, jogging with or without Viktor. Then he’d alternate with core exercises, legs, and arms. By the end of the first week, he found himself at Minako’s studio, implementing ballet back into his daily training. It’d be maybe a month or so before he could lace up his skates, so ballet was best way to get him light on his feet and coordinated once again. It was a nice, homey feeling being back in the studio with her after five years.

There were moments Yuuri thought Minako was more excited for Viktor being his coach than he was. She knew how important Viktor was to him, but it was funny just how enthusiastic she was about it. Then the winking and nudging happened and he wondered if she and Phichit spoke to each other.

At sundown halfway through the second week, panting and wiping sweat from his face with a towel, Yuuri opened the front door where Viktor was there to greet him at the genkan, eyes already wide and hands clasped in pleading.

“Yuuri, Yuuri! Can you help me get a yukata for the spring festival this weekend?”

Chuckling while he toed off his running shoes, Yuuri looked at him. “You don’t have to have one.”

“Kouki-san said it’s better to have your own!”

“Well, I guess that’s true.” Kouki-san? Wasn’t he the potter down the road? What was he doing talking to him?

“If I’m going to be staying here, I should be trying to fit in, right? Honoring the culture and traditions, you know, that sort of thing.”

That did make sense; Viktor was doing his due diligence in learning about Japan so not to be the clueless foreigner for however long he’d be staying. “I can help. If you’re really wanting one.”

“Please? I can buy a suit no problem, but I don’t know the first thing about getting a yukata.”

“Honestly there’s some Japanese that don’t know. I’ll take you to a shop I know tomorrow after training? They tailor to travelers.”

Viktor frowned. “Is it authentic? I don’t want something fake.”

“Oh, no, they aren’t like that! You’d find something like that in the big cities, so I see why you’d think that. It’s a family operated shop, and they keep foreigners in mind since they are usually taller and broader.”

Putting a finger to his chin, he considered. “I see. Then yes, after your training tomorrow we will go into town.”

“Do I hear you two talking about the spring festival?”

The pair turned to Yuuri’s mother as she padded toward them, wiping her flour-laden hands on her apron.
The onsen logo on her chest reminded Yuuri that he usually helped his family sell mini katsudon at the festival to promote business. He wouldn’t be able to-

“Yuuri offered to help me pick out a yukata tomorrow, Mama Katsuki!”

“Isn’t that nice? Is he going to show you around the festival as well?”

Yuuri blinked. Not only could he still not get over that Viktor addressed his mother as such, but, “Eh? You mean I can?”

"Why not? You’ve been gone for five years and we managed without you. Go and take Vicchan to his first festival. You can tell everyone to visit our booth while you’re at it.”

“Ah, so I’m still working. I see.”

“Family business!” she shrugged. “Oh, and dinner is in an hour.” Her eavesdropping concluded, Mama Katsuki retreated back to the kitchen.

“Yuuri, do you have a yukata that I can look at?”

He opened his mouth to confirm, and then realized that meant Viktor coming into his room. His yukata was hanging in his closet, which was currently hiding a majority of his Viktor memorabilia, haphazardly. Plus he wasn’t ready for him to see his room. Adorned in his face or not. Would it be weird to show him in the hallway? Or the banquet room? “Uh. Sure. I’ll go grab it.” If he acted fast, maybe Viktor wouldn’t think much of it. Or follow him. Once in his room, he rummaged through his hung clothing for his yukata - hues of blue and white stripes running vertically.

Viktor did follow him and was waiting outside his door when he turned the knob.

“Your room?” Yuuri said, holding it out to him.

A curious look and a smile, Viktor led the way.

Yuuri hung the yukata on the sliding door and smoothed out the creases. “This is mine. Haven’t worn it in years, so I probably need to wash it...”

“Wow! The color is perfect for you. Tell me; what’s the difference between a yukata and a kimono?”

“Good question. Fabric and occasion, mostly.”

“Totally different?”

“Formal versus casual.”

“Business suit versus tuxedo!”

“That’s a good way to put it, yeah. When we go in tomorrow, they’ll want to know the length. You can get one to your knees or your ankles.”

“Which is better?”

“It’s a preference. Mine is ankle length because I like to be covered more. Some have both for the weather.”

Viktor gave the yukata a thoughtful look, then to Yuuri, then down at himself. A pause, and then
he was looking back up at Yuuri, hopeful. “Which do you think I would look best in?”

Pointedly, Yuuri tried to not look down at Viktor’s legs. What was the safest thing to say? If he said short, did that imply he was interested in his legs - which he was - but, Viktor didn’t need to know what. If he said long, would he be offended?

The silence prompted Viktor further. “I honestly don't know what is more flattering in this case…”

Flattering? Yuuri decided he could wave his bias through pretending to be fashionably aware. “Well... You're tall. And thin. Long style would look nice. And elegant.”

“I'll go with that,” Viktor said with a satisfied smile.

That was easy. “Oh, and they’ll have different patterns and colors to choose from. Start thinking about colors you like.”

“Not just pre-made? Wow, really custom!”

“They'll likely have some on display to try on, but they do like to make them to fit the customer.”

“You'll help me pick out something good, right?”

“If you want…” He valued his opinion?

“Please. I don't want to end up getting something silly for my yukata.”

“There are some pretty wild patterns. It's entirely up to you, this is your yukata. Something that you can wear to all the festivals while you're here.”

The statement seemed to have intimidated him. “....I'll leave it up to you to make sure that I don't embarrass myself, then.”

“Impossible!” Viktor Nikiforov could make the gaudiest frock look good.

“Are you saying that I will inevitably embarrass myself? ...I suppose you have a point, though. Even with a yukata, I'm still me… Yuuri you wound me.”

“N-no no!” Yuuri waved his hands. “I meant It's impossible to embarrass you. Me to embarrass you. Or you embarrass you.”

Viktor stepped closer, winking, “Are you sure? Because I think it just happened.”

“... pretty sure I'm embarrassing myself, so that's nothing new.”

“Aww, Yuuri, there is nothing to be embarrassed about,” he teased and patted his shoulder at arm’s length.

Yuuri hung his head. “I didn't mean to insult you.”

“It's fine. I appreciate your help. I won't know what is culturally appropriate or best to fit in, so your keen eye for detail will be invaluable.”

There; he’d confirmed he valued his opinion and Yuuri didn’t know if it was making him happy or intimidated. “I will do my best!”
Hasetsu was home to many small, family-owned and operated businesses, many of which Yuuri found Viktor made acquaintances with on his daily adventures while he exercised. In three days the town would join for the spring festival.

The greeting bell chimed as Yuuri and Viktor entered the *yukata* shop.

“*Yokoso!*” Mr. and Mrs. Higa said in unison with a bow.

“Good afternoon,” Yuuri returned.

“What can we do for you today, Yuuri-kun?” Mr. Higa asked.

“My coach would like to get a *yukata* for the festival.” Yuuri stepped aside, revealing Viktor who was being unusually shy.

“Ah, Nikiforov-san, right?” Mrs. Higa asked. “Come, I will measure you.”

Viktor gave Yuuri an uncertain look, and Yuuri offered an encouraging smile as they followed the Higas to a full body mirror.

From her hip, Mrs. Higa unfurled her measuring tape and indicated for Viktor to stand straighter and hold out his arms. “Hmm, about 186 centimeters. Will you hand me the 170 centimeter mock-up, dear?”

Mr. Higa did as he was asked, and came back with an off-white *yukata* with sleeves, neck, and bottom intentionally left un-stitched.

She tossed the large cloth over Viktor’s head, and fished him out of the opening, adjusting it as she needed at his shoulders and smoothed it out as best she could do his feet. “Would you like it to your ankles or knees, Nikiforov-san?”

“Oh. Ankles, please.”

“All right. Adding five centimeters to the hem should do it. And… three for the sleeves. Please pick your fabric. We should have available stock of most. The ones we have on display right now may be too small for you. You’re welcome to try them on, anyway.” Mrs. Higa pulled the mock up off his head.

Viktor turned to what looked like hundreds of bolts of fabric in rows, seemingly daunted by the choices. Yuuri hoped he’d given thought to some colors or they could be a while.

Yuuri urged him on, keeping close as Viktor searched the shelves, occasionally running his hands along the fabric. Eventually he stopped at a display of *jinbei* and *hakama*, eyeing them with interest.

“Did you want one of these instead?” Yuuri asked. “They are also festival appropriate.”

For a moment Viktor’s jaw tightened. “No! I’ve made my decision, Yuuri. I’m getting a *yukata*.” Pivoting, he continued his search for the perfect fabric.

Arrays of crane, bamboo, floral, fireworks, and geometric shapes.

They stopped at a pallet of cool colors, simple prints to plain, solid hues. Viktor’s hand lingered around the blues and purples.

“What do you think, Yuuri?”
Was he wanting to match with Yuuri’s blue? Would that be weird? The purple made Yuuri think of Viktor’s last program costume. It was the most vivid in his memory. “I think purple would be good.”

“Really?” Starting from the right, Viktor un-shelved several shades to hold up side by side. “Darker or lighter? This one has a subtle pattern in it. Oh, this one is higher quality cotton! And then this one is lighter and breathable.”

Yuuri wasn’t sure if he was supposed to answer just yet, and let Viktor throw out questions to the wind until he was holding four bolts out to him. A solid lavender, bright purple with white silhouetted bamboo, plum-colored with horizontal running diamonds, and a pretty shade that was almost blue with black, white, and red floral scattered throughout. All of them were good choices. Good colors and not loud patterns, high-end cottons. Not that price would be an object for Viktor. Attempting to take his duty seriously, Yuuri took one bolt at a time and held it up to him, visualizing what would look best as a full yukata.

It was hard to not be nervous under Viktor’s watchful gaze. He tried his best to keep his on the fabric and shoulder level. “I think I like… this one best!”

Taking the bolt from Yuuri’s hands, Viktor took a few steps over to the half mirror on the wall and held the plum and diamond fabric up to himself.

A silence followed and Yuuri wondered if he was expected to expound on why. If asked, he’d answer with something like ‘The dark purple goes well with your pale skin and eyes’ and hope that was enough. Surely telling your coach he would look hot wasn’t appropriate.

“I knew I could count on you, Yuuri. I’ll take this one.”

Relieved he didn’t have to say anything else, he walked with Viktor back to the front to the Higas.

“What a lovely choice,” Mrs Higa admired. “Very regal. We should have it ready for you the morning of the festival.”

Regal, yeah. Purple was a good fit for Viktor.

The following day was than warmer than most with spring underway, so it was natural for Viktor to drag Yuuri out on an adventure off the beaten trail. Or at least, how it happened seemed natural - little warning or long explanation as to why they had to go trudging through a forest right then, cancelling their training for the day (‘hiking was cardio!’), and not tomorrow or later on a Sunday when he had a day off.

Viktor had gotten a map, probably from one of the novelty tourist shops. Their town certainly had a history and a lot of ancient paths and artifacts, and making a penny from it was a business.

“Kappa!” Viktor had said, somewhere between serious and excited, and brandished a map with ‘ancient crossroads’. With all the posted signs next to creeks throughout town, it was no wonder Viktor was convinced they really were around.

The hike through the forested hills had taken most of the afternoon, but it had been pleasant, winding through the deer trails and rocks, and Makkachin enjoyed running off after every small creature he came across to bark at.

Eventually, they came to a little shrine, worn by nature and near indistinguishable by the
surrounding rocks if it weren’t for the markings carved into the mossy surface. Yuuri showed Viktor how to leave the appropriate offerings to the *kami* (“yes, the good spirits,” he reminded him)- a few coins, flowers, and a prayer -and then they started back as the sun started down toward the horizon.

The trail, this time, led parallel to a creek. “This is it,” Viktor said, keeping careful watch. “The *kappa* is nearby…”

They’d passed a few creeks, and Yuuri wondered why this one above the others.

It wasn’t until they were most of the way back through the clearing that Makkachin found what they’d been looking for all day, alerting them with a frenzied bark and frantic tail wag. Viktor hurried ahead and crouched at his side, peeking around the side of the curly-haired dog. There, on the other side of the water in a patch of sunlight, was a turtle sunning itself on a rock.

“It’s a turtle,” Yuuri observed.

Viktor peered at it, suspicious. “Are you sure?”

“Yeah. Pretty sure.”

Makkachin whined, pacing in place.

The turtle remained motionless, the filtered dapples of sun glinting off of its shell.

“I don’t know about that.” Viktor slid his bag to the ground and removed the cucumber. “I think we should leave this for it, just in case.”

“Wouldn’t want it to drag us into the river.”

“Exactly!”

They did, and while they waited for the turtle to take the offering (which didn’t happen until much later that evening, long after they’d left), they ate the snacks that Mama Katsuki had prepared for them earlier that day for the trip. Cucumber rolls. Perfect.

On the day of the festival while Yuuri did his morning run, Viktor went to the shop to pick up his *yukata* on his. When Yuuri returned, his help was enlisted in the final preparations for Yu-topia’s booth - building it on the street side and going to the store for more rice. Being let off the hook from food service and getting to spend the night with Viktor was a fair trade.

Before pulling on his *yukata*, Yuuri unrolled his measuring tape and wrapped it around his middle. Getting there. Maybe in another week or two he’d be approved for skating. He’d have to loosen his obi for tonight, though.

Satisfied, Yuuri slid on some shorts and began to assemble his *yukata*.

How was Viktor faring? He’d picked his *yukata* up this morning, but he hadn’t seen him since he left the house. What had he been up to all day?

Smoothing out a wrinkle from his sleeve, he reached for his phone as it vibrated.

It was from Viktor.
Dropping his phone back on the bed, Yuuri threw open his door and ran down the hall to the banquet hall, drawing the slider door. “Viktor!”

Viktor turned away from the full-body mirror he had been facing (when did he get that? Was that part of his town adventures today?) He held both sleeves up by the cuff like he knew he was being cute, face flushed in embarrassment. “Oh, that was quick. I… can’t remember how to put this on. They showed me how at the shop, but their efforts have gone to waste.”

Despite it folded on the wrong side, bunched at the waist and the obi in the incorrect place, Yuuri couldn’t deny how amazing he looked. “It takes doing a few times to get it is all. Here, I’ll help.”

Viktor went to untying the messy knot in his obi and unwrapped it from his middle and the tucked ends fell from their place, opening the *yukata*, revealing that Viktor wasn’t wearing anything but his underwear underneath.

He’d seen him in less, but somehow being partially dressed seemed more scandalizing. Did he know he could wear something light underneath?

Yuuri took the gray *obi* from his hands and laid it on Viktor’s bed.

“First you’ll want to make sure it’s laying right on your shoulders,” Yuuri began his instructions whilst moving to stand behind him. “Neck straight and propped - good.” Carefully he adjusted the seams on the shoulders so they were lined correctly then came around to his front and grabbed both ends. “You had right over left… that’s if you were being prepared for your funeral.”

“Oh!” Viktor exclaimed, sounding ashamed.

“Honest mistake. You’ll want to go left over right. Like this.” Yuuri stepped into him and tucked the right side into the left, flinching at the touch of bare skin on his fingers like it was fire. “H-here, hold that there for a second.”

Viktor brought his hand down to do as he was told and brushed Yuuri’s fingers before Yuuri could move. At least that startled them both.

“And then you’ll take the left over the right- hold this, too.” Yuuri reached for the obi and shook out the creases for longer than he should have, delaying the next step. “Then you’ll… have to tie your obi like-” he fished the *obi* around Viktor on one side, face momentarily close to his chest, “-while holding the *yukata* in place.” Crossed the *obi* and made it as many times as he needed until he was holding the appropriate amount left to make the tie, all the while catching Viktor muttering about swearing he’d never wear a dress again. Yuuri decided it best to pretend he didn’t hear him. “Then you’ll keep folding these in half until you can easily make a knot.”

“Is something wrong, Yuuri?”

He chanced a glance, and was met with a soft expression. “N-no. I just want to do this right for you.” He looked back down to his hands. “Then you’ll twist the knot to the back, keeping care of not bunching the *yukata*…”

“Thank you. You’re doing better than I could.”

“I’ve had a little more practice as all.” Was that a compliment? A little silly considering Yuuri’s worn one many times throughout his life, but appreciated the sentiment all the same. A few tugs at the *obi* line, batting of the creases at the sleeve, and Yuuri stepped away, face feeling instantly
cooler. “What do you think?”

Viktor turned to the mirror and admired himself, holding out his arms for the long sleeves to droop, turning to view his obi.

A Yukata was something Yuuri saw everyday, yet seeing it on Viktor now was like seeing one for the first time. The color complimented his skin better than he thought now seeing it complete. The garment was slimming on Viktor's figure and it suited him better than Yuuri ever imagined in the two days he’d thought about it. The interest in his culture had been touching since his arrival and here he was being so perfect.

Bringing himself back to reality, Yuuri spotted a pair of geta on the floor. “Did you try these on yet?”

Viktor pivoted around. “I did before I bought them, but I haven’t mastered walking in them yet.”

“You can wear your regular shoes if you-”

“No! I want the full experience. Just bear with me. Please?”

At sundown the streets were aligned with vendors of various food, games, and wares. Lanterns strung across all paths of the festival like a canopy of lights.

By the time they’d reached the festival entrance, Viktor’s clogging had lessened in his geta having gotten the hang of it, but still stood nearby Yuuri just in case. With all the people, there wasn’t much choice, anyway. Said people also didn't miss an opportunity to greet Viktor, excited for a foreigner to be attending the festivities.

The Katsukis called the pair of them over when they were within range of their booth.

“Don’t you two look nice tonight!” Yuuri’s mother said while dishing out some reserved katsudon for the impending rush. “Having fun, Vicchan?”

“Yes! So much to take in.”

“Why don’t you take a bowl and eat it while you walk around and draw us some customers,” suggested Mari.

“Oh, we haven’t exchanged for coupons yet,” Yuuri said, fumbling for his wallet.

“It’s on the house,” Mama Katsuki said, handing it towards Viktor.

Yuuri would have felt offended if he didn't know that was one of his off-limit foods. So he sighed it off and continued to walk with Viktor to wait in line for coupons.

Much to his family’s pleasure, those that stood around them were prompted to find the katsudon booth.

“Yuuri, would you like a bite before I eat it all?” Viktor asked, offering a slice of pork.

“You’re getting really good with handling those chopsticks. I better not. Once I have one bite, I’ll want to eat more.”

“I see…”
“I’m pretty weak to it. I’m so close… I can’t blow it, now.” They reached the teller and Yuuri handed the man fifteen hundred yen in exchange for the coupons. “Okay. Now we can buy whatever food you want and play games.”

Viktor frowned mid-chew, chopsticks still held in his mouth. “I’m not familiar with any of this… show me more?”

“All right. Just point at anything you want to try.”

When Yuuri said those words, he hadn’t expected Viktor to take him so literally. The man wanted to try **everything** and did a lot of pointing. As **everything** was new, Yuuri was learning very quickly how excitable his coach was.

It’d been years since Yuuri had tried goldfish scooping or yo-yo fishing, but he tried his best to demonstrate for Viktor who tried immediately after him. Soon they had a bag tied in string with goldfish and a red spotted water yo-yo that Yuuri helped Viktor tie to his **obi**. They both tried shooting for a prize, finding neither of them were a good shot. They proved decent bean bag tossers and won some sweets that they tucked into their **yukata** sleeves.

With the running from game booth to the next, the calories from the half-portion **katsudon** worn away, Viktor started wandering towards the new smells, pointing again.

“Mama Katsuki doesn’t make those at home. What are those?”

“That’s **ikayaki**. It’s pretty good if you like chewy fish.”

“I want to try it. That’s the point of this festival, right? We’ll need more coupons soon, won’t we? Don’t worry, Yuuri! I’ll get the next round.”

“If you want. How much do you plan on eating?”

“As much as I can! Let’s eat this ika-thing!”

Dodging fellow patrons, Yuuri weaved his way behind him.

Viktor took a bite into the squid and made a pleased face, licking his lips. “Eating it off a stick like this makes me feel like Makkachin. Grr, nom nom.”

“Haha, I guess so!” Yuuri watched him eat the skewer clean, telling himself that yes, it was odd to think when Viktor Nikiforov ate like that it was almost polite manners. The skewer barely landed in a trash bin before Yuuri was being hauled to the next booth over for what Viktor exclaimed, "**Blini!**". **Blini** were Russia’s equivalent to the sweet crepes, Viktor explained while the chef made a strawberry and cream crepe for them.

“ Aren’t you going to eat anything, Yuuri?” Viktor asked when they stepped away with the crepe booth.

Yuuri glanced at the crepe. It wouldn’t be **that** bad for him, but, “I was going to look for the **yakitori** booth. That’s probably the only thing that’s not against my diet right now.”

“I admire your discipline, Yuuri, but you’re allowed a cheat day.”

Yuuri hesitated. It all smelled so good… **yakisoba, taiyaki**…

“I won’t even tell your coach.” Viktor’s pout disappeared and he winked to him and offered his
“crepe.

“... Maybe a few bites of what you’re having.”

“That’s the spirit! What about that fat pancake over there? Let’s eat that next.”

*Okonomiyaki* was what he’d been referring to. Yeah, definitely only a bite or two. Yuuri was surprised Viktor had such a big appetite tonight.

With each new Japanese street food sampled, Viktor tried to name a Russian comparison. ‘These *dangos* are like *pelmini*!’ Maybe when Yuuri reached his weight goal, they could figure out how to make some together. Or... ask his mother to. Somewhere along the way, they found the beer and sake and Viktor was highly enthusiastic about partaking of the cultural liquor and ended up going back for thirds.

True to his word, Yuuri only took a couple of bites, leaving the rest for Viktor. With how his eating habits had been lately, it was plenty filling.

They reached the end of the vendor stalls having tried what they wanted, stomachs and curiosities satisfied. Viktor gave a yawn and ventured to a cluster of tables where families sat eating ice cream.

“Haaaanabi. Hanabiiii~” a little girl sang.

Viktor tipped his head, looking like he was working the word through his small catalog of Japanese words. It probably didn’t help he was slightly buzzed and tired.

“Fireworks. They’ll do a small display over the harbor,” Yuuri said, sliding on the bench beside him. At a respectable distance.

“Oh I see.” Another yawn.

“We can head back early if you want.”

Instantly he sat up to attention, shaking his head. “I’m staying until it’s over!”

Determined until the end. It had been a long evening and Viktor’s energy had run out. Still, it had been fun to spend hours together not running or at the rink where only one of them could skate. Dressed nice, treating each other, sharing food, sitting next to each other waiting for fireworks.

It was almost like date.

Yuuri shook his head. What good would thinking like that do?

A shrill sound pierced the night as the first firework shot up and blossomed.

The crowd had thickened, old and young laughing and awing, despite the fireworks not being nearly as impressive as the ones in the big cities. How did fireworks in Russia compare?

Before he could think about gathering the courage to ask, he felt a weight fall on his shoulder and he went completely still - Viktor had nodded off on him.

Up until then, Yuuri thought he had a good handle on the not freaking out at the physical contact or close proximity. That date feeling was also coming back.

Yuuri dipped his shoulder slightly. “H-hey, Viktor. You’re missing the fireworks.”
Viktor shifted enough to adjust the side of his face on Yuuri, making a sleepy murmur. Blue eyes opened and they looked up at Yuuri for a moment and then out towards the sky. “Pretty…”

Yuuri wasn’t sure which he was referring to, but for the sake of his heart, it had to be the fireworks.

Chapter End Notes

Viktor: Ahh, things are finally starting to look up...

Yuri: SURPRISE, BITCH. I bet you thought you'd seen the last of me.

Viktor: !!! YURI! MY LITTLE BROTHER. ♥ YURI AND YUURI! Two of my favorite people!!! In the same place!!!

Yuri: yeah except that you're stupid and I pretty much hate you right now

Viktor: omg we are basically the perfect little family.

Yuri: Wh-what?

Viktor: I'll be papa, Yuuri can be mama. You can be our son.

Yuri: Excuse u wh-

Viktor: We'll be like matryoshka dolls!

Yuri: I AM THE ICE TIGER OF RUSSIA. I AM GOING TO KICK YOUR ASS. AND YUURI'S ASS. AND YOU WILL COME HOME WITH ME AND BE WITH RUSSIA FAMILY AND BE MY COACH.

Viktor: I love you ;o;

**NEXT TIME ON GAY SKATE:**
Yuri/Yurio returns! / Fireworks on the beach! / Feelings are difficult to word! / Katsudon for everyone but Yuuri!

*Please look forward to it!*
Endless Night

Chapter by gabapple

Chapter Summary

Just when Yuuri reaches his goal weight to begin training, a challenger approaches—his rival from Russia, Yuri Plisetsky! The tiny Ice Tiger is determined to bring Viktor back home, but Viktor has other ideas. He can make good on his promise to both Yuuri and Yuri while staying right there in Hasetsu; it's just going to take a lot of work. Good thing he already had two short programs already choreographed specifically inspired by and for THEM...

Chapter Notes

In this chapter:
Gabapple: HELLO EVERYONE. I hope you're ready to die. Writing this chapter just about killed me for multiple reasons. I mean, maybe it was just me, but I had to take multiple breaks because I kept becoming emotionally compromised and keeling over. Maybe this is problematic. I'm not sure. But HEY, we made it to EPISODE THREE!!! It only took us 42k~ words... ha ha... ha...

Mamodewberry: What gabapple said... This chapter, man. It's all good things just... Painful things at first, but they will heal. ITLL BE OKAY, DON'T WORRY. if you guys aren't a little bit emotionally compromised, we haven't done our job!

Gabapple: please tell me you were at least a little injured or I will feel really lame. Also I have stressed out about this chapter for weeks and weeks because of the reveals, even though I have been assured by multiple people that it will be FINE. I know that Papakov will protect his Vitya at any cost and murder anyone who says anything mean but I'm still NERVOUS.

We also got more art commissioned... *_* This time for chapter 7. [1] [2] IT'S SO BEAUTIFUL. Thank you again, adashuko!!!

Recommended listening:
Nocturnes: No. 1 in B flat minor Op. 9 No. 1, by Frédéric Chopin
Counting Stars, as performed by the Gardiner Sisters
Now We Are Free, as performed by Andrea Valeri

*If you know what the title of this chapter is a reference to, please join us in additional weeping.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Winter gave way to spring, ice losing its hold on the waterways and bridges until the chill simply hung in the air and burrowed underground. Thaw settled in slowly, ice thinning in the Neva River in patches as the months wore on toward Russia’s short summer.

The phone calls and petition had worked; Viktor returned to practice as the snow drifts shrank away, though somehow smaller than either Yakov or Lilia quite remembered. Quieter, too. Listless. Of course he would be; he’d been trapped in that house for months with only his aunt, uncle, school, and tragedy to keep him occupied. They put him to work, and he was eager for it.

No, starving for it.

Lilia broke him down. Started from scratch. “We are learning about performance, Vitya. I want you to take what you’ve been through and use it. Show it in everything that you do. Let it inform every movement. Bring that to the surface and bleed for me.”

He didn’t argue; the stretches took his mind off of it all, the beauty of the amount of control he was learning felt right. There was something so comforting in the poise. The restraint. The silence.

And it translated so well to skating.

Yakov had his own training regimen for him, drills to hammer in the basics until they were absolutely second-nature. Viktor would do them until he could perform any as easy as breathing, time and time again. They were easy things, of course; swizzles, crossovers, skids, stops, pivots, and all manner of edge maneuvers and spins, but all things he would have to do thousands of times in his career.

And then there were jumps, slowly, but surely. Gently. He was young; every jump put an incredible amount of pressure on still developing bones and muscle. Not that Viktor ever listened, but Yakov did what he could to keep him in check and focused on the skills that he could master without jeopardizing his health for.

The boy worked hard, and he rarely complained, never cried—except once, when his uncle was again late to pick him up. Viktor had watched the hands move slowly over the giant clock face over the wall, his own hands wringing together in time with every tick. They’d been discussing his practice, as they’d gotten into the habit of doing, but the eight year-old had lost track of the conversation four or five times already.

“Vitya?”

He burst into tears, face flooding with color before he could hide it in his hands and smother the sound of sobs.

Yakov called the man, and with a few quick and pointed words, Viktor’s uncle was never late again.

It would only be until the boy got into the Academy, Yakov reminded himself. He would live in the dormitories then, away from the surrogate parents that didn't understand him. Within walking distance to the rink. By then, he'd be old enough to walk alone. Or, if not, it wouldn't be too much trouble to drive him. It was still only a few nights a week...
Over time, Viktor softened again. The quiet reservation never left, but the small smiles returned, though weak. When the other students were around, he mostly watched or worked on his drills; it was only when they left and he had the ice to himself that he experimented with what he'd seen.

"You're too young for that, Vitya," Yakov reminded him, barely glancing up from the clipboard in his hand. "Don't even think about it."

Viktor rolled his eyes, pulling back from the jump he'd started to set up, and instead tucked his knee in, dropping down for a tight sit-spin. He slid his free leg out, controlling the arc by how tightly he held his muscles, and lifted his adjacent arm, just enough to feel the balance shift—no, no; too early, losing control. He pulled it back in, let the momentum carry out, then swept back up to a stand. "How did you know?"

"I always know. And don't close your eyes when you do that spin, either; you'll just hurt yourself."

Viktor pursed his lips in a pout, considered it, then toed the ice to glide toward the barrier, pulling one leg up—like swan lake—lifting an arm high above his head. "Hey, Coach..."

"Hmm?"

"In a fairytale, when the king and queen are killed—murdered, I guess—and the princess goes to live with... someone else, you know, maybe to save her life or something because the kingdom is under attack..." The boy twisted into a spin and stopped in front of the barrier, peeking out around it. "That means that there's more to the story, right?"

Yakov paused, glancing up from his notes to the nervous, blue-eyed stare in front of him. "There is always more to a story, even when there is an end."

Viktor nodded, skates sliding back and forth while his tiny fingers kept him anchored in place. "Right. Uhm. So."

"Yes?" Yakov set the board on the folding chair beside him.

"Well, I was just thinking. That's just, you know, usually how it goes. In stories. The princess on her own because she has a lot to learn and, uh, if you start from the bottom, you don't have anywhere to go but up... and a princess has to know the worst of it to be the best, right?" With every word, Viktor's face turned a little more pink, gaze dropping to the ground.

Yakov listened quietly, nodding. "That's right... as far as I understand, anyway."

"So. I was wondering..."

Yakov waited.

"Coach, do you think... Can I...? Er, can I be a princess?"

The tremble in the little boy's voice nearly killed him. Was this why Lilia brought Vitya to him? She'd known, of course, she always did. But to discuss it... "You can be who you want to be on the ice, Vitya."

Viktor bit his lip and glanced back over his shoulder at the rink, hesitant.

"I found myself in dance," Yakov continued. "I was many things. You can find yourself on the ice."
The boy looked back at him. "Do you still dance?"

He chuckled. "These old bones can't handle it."

Viktor frowned and looked at the floor again, processing, then looked back. "So... we dance for you, then." A pause, then he smiled, bright and wide. A revelation. "We dance for you, Coach! On the ice!"

The old man only had a chance to blink at him before Viktor pushed back from the barrier, skating backward toward the center of the rink, head up, regal and proud.

"Watch me, Coach!"

The impromptu program that followed was without music and incorporated several pieces stolen from the other skaters in Yakov’s roster, but each were done with a grace and style that only Viktor knew how to do—like a young and elegant princess. Even the mistakes, such as they might have been, were beautiful. And, for the first time in months, Viktor looked happy.

Yakov watched in silence and awe. What was he to do with this boy, in Russia, of all places? Such a heavy responsibility, though he danced with a carefree lightness on the ice like a snowflake carried in the wind. He would need to protect him. Somehow.

A day will come and you will find yourself. And another might come and most of you will be taken away. Do your best to hold onto what is left. Cling to it in ways you are able. Even if for small moments.

---

Yakov-

Yuuri took me to a festival last night. It was like New Years in Spring! I ate too much and won goldfish (photos attached). I have named them Hansel and Gretel. I will feed them fish flakes every day as if they are bread crumbs so they can find their way home. Mama Katsuki (Yuuri’s mama) says that she will put them in the big aquarium when the quarantine period is over. For now, they live on the table by my bed.

(Don't worry, I won't let Makkachin eat them.)

Hope you are well.

Updates soon-

Viktor

There hadn't been a single reply. But perhaps the mention of the German fairy tale would spark some interest. Or at the very least, stir some sympathy. He missed his coach.

The boy would come around eventually. He had a good heart. He worked hard. He kept his
distance, but he hadn’t sent the wolf away or called the hunters, and that stood for a lot.

Every day, the boy shared his meals with the wolf. They talked. They even walked together around the little town.

Every day, the wolf tried to explain that they needed to leave the town. That the boy was meant for a great purpose. “We need to go to the tower to the West. Find the Firebird.”

“But the Firebird isn’t real, and if it was, it would kill me.”

The wolf held his tongue. It wasn’t time for the truth. He wasn’t supposed to know about the feathers hidden under the pillow, or who the boy really was in his heart. There was so much confidence to be learned. “No. I will be with you. We will go together.”

“I’m just a boy.”

Again, the wolf kept the truth silent, simply looked at him with that strange and steady gaze.

You’re not, you’re not just a boy. You are so much more. So much more than you’ll ever know. I believe in you. Please believe in me.

But the boy didn’t. Even though they grew closer, and the boy grew stronger, he still didn’t have the courage in himself. He still didn’t seem to know...

So every day, the wolf went out before the sun rose to dance as the princess, hoping that she wouldn’t forget who she was. There was no telling how long the boy would take to claim his worth, and she couldn’t afford to lose herself. If she became the wolf along the way... really became the wolf... she’d be even beyond Baba Yaga’s reach.

But the ritual kept her safe. Kept her sane. She had time.

Just... not much...

And she hadn’t been expecting the tiger to come prowling quite so soon.

It wasn’t like he’d really forgotten about Yuri. The Junior World Champion was in capable hands; if anyone could take care of him, it was Yakov. They had a plan for him. Yes, Viktor had promised to choreograph a program for his senior debut, but it was always Yakov who needed to be the steady hand between them. Viktor was just the secret weapon; the one Yakov called on for just that little extra push when needed.

“You’ll spoil him if you spend too much time with him, Vitya.”

“Aw, Yakov. Just because I want to squish his cute little chubby face.”

“He cannot know of your favoritism. It'll ruin him.”

It was true, though. From the moment Yakov had asked for his opinion on the audition tapes and application essay, Viktor had given his commendation with strong approval, and even become a private sponsor after the trial-basis had concluded. Just for the first year, of course, and he’d never, ever let Yuri know. It was unnecessary, anyway; now that he was Junior World Champion, he had plenty of sponsors of his own. He would probably never have financial trouble again... at least, so long as he could keep up the tempo.
The fact that Yuri was now in Japan, though, concerned him.

Leaving Saint Petersburg for Japan was a bold move. It was one thing for him to do; he’d told Yakov he was doing it, and he was an adult. But Yuri? He was only fifteen, and he did it without a word to anyone.

It was as if someone had taken all of the confidence that Yuuri should have had and dumped it into the angry little kitten, then dropped him into a bathtub.

Viktor sipped the Sapporo beer slowly, foregoing the usual dinner as Yuri grumbled at the table across from him. Yuuri had run off to help clean, leaving them alone. For the first time in memory, the air between them felt genuinely charged, and he didn’t like it.

Yuri was mad.

“What’s up with the stupid name, anyway? Adding o to the end of it… that doesn’t even make sense.”

Viktor shrugged. “I don’t know. It isn’t Russian, but it’s kind of cute, don’t you think?”

“No! And we’re not supposed to use nicknames, Viktor, or did you forget about that, too?”

He sighed, leaning back with a palm against the floor. It was a tactic that Yakov had adopted to keep things straight with the press and to encourage his students to see each other as rivals; no Russian diminutives between team mates, unnatural as it was. It set them apart from the rest of their world.

Of course, Yakov could call them whatever he felt like.

Viktor stuck out his tongue. “If you want me to be your coach, I get to call you Yurio. Coaches do what they want.”

Yuri- no, Yurio glared at him, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “Are you serious right now?!”

“Don’t I look serious?”

“No. You look stupid.”

Another sigh. Viktor scratched the top of his head and went back to his beer. “So how are things back home? Are you all busily preparing for next season?”

“Coach is pissed.”

“What? Why? Because you left without telling him? That’s really dangerous, you know… you’re going to give him a heart attack at this rate, and then I’ll never forgive you.”

The boy snorted. “No. Because his number one champion-and-favorite left him with nothing but second rate losers to try to scrape together podium-winning performances.”

Viktor stared at him, glass at his lips, blinking.

“What, you really didn’t think about that?” Yurio rolled his eyes. “Without you, do you think Russia’s really going to bring home gold? You left him stranded. It’s going to be up to me. So I hope this program you’re giving me is good.”
He set the glass down without drinking. “It is.”

“Good. And if you have any pride in Russia…”

“I’m not going to sabotage Yuuri.”

Yurio held up his hands. “It was just a suggestion. I doubt the piggy can pull it off, anyway.”

“You might be surprised. He has an impressive work ethic.”

“And I’m sure that’s really what you’re out here for, right?”

Viktor took his glass and drained it. “Yep.”

“Nothing to do with that banquet?”

Thunk. He set the glass down a little harder than he meant to, jaw set and gaze cold. “We’re not going to mention the banquet.”

“What? Are you kidding? Of course I’m going to mention the banquet! That fatass beat me in a dance-off; when I beat him in the Hot Springs on Ice, I’m going to rub it in his stupid piggy face! I’ll show Yuko the photos and everything!”

“No. You won’t.” Viktor grunted, then rolled over to lie on the floor, stretching out on the mat. “You’re not going to breathe a word about it. Not to him or anyone else here. You do, and I won’t ever forgive you.”

“What?!” Yuri dragged himself over the floor to peer at him, but Viktor didn’t even look over his shoulder, just stared straight ahead at the dead and empty television screen. “Why not? What’s the big deal?! Another beat of silence, and his tone dropped low, brows rising into his blond curtain of hair. “Wait... he doesn’t remember?”

Viktor folded his arms and rested his head on them, pulling the stretch through his back.

“Seriously? So you came all this way and--”

“That’s enough, Yurio…”

“That stupid piggy bastard… UGH. It’s no fun to rub it in his face if he doesn’t even REMEMBER!”

“You can probably stop yelling now.”

“That just pisses me off!”

“Everything pisses you off…”

They were interrupted by Mari, who came to clean up and give Viktor the perfect excuse to leave. Yuuri had, after all; anxiety, insecurity, and severe lack of self-confidence that had driven him to flee their company. Not that he blamed him. Yurio wasn’t an easy read for most, and he’d been hostile to Yuuri since the moment he’d set foot in Hasetsu. He’d go after him alone, and let Yurio sleep off his jet lag. Maybe he’d be better in the morning.

Besides, Viktor understood the anxiety at least, and working through it with exercise was a coping method that he’d used his entire life.
But what could be done when the coping method was the cause of the anxiety? Yuuri could do complicated routines on the ice in practice— he’d proven that with *Stay Close to Me* — but in competition, all bets were off.

Minako directed him to the rink, where he watched Yuuri skate alone and despondent. Like Viktor did every morning before Yuuri met him at the rink. Not that they’d be able to do that anymore; Yurio had seen enough of Viktor’s routines that he wouldn’t be impressed. Any private skates would just be seen as narcissistic showboating, and he didn’t need any more lip from his junior. He only had one week to get both of them in shape, anyway; there wouldn’t be any energy to spare for free skating.

"I hope Viktor will bring out a side of Yuuri-kun that we’ve never seen before..." Yuko was so sincere, so concerned for Yuuri. He had a support network here. It was strong and solid, but he didn’t rely on it.

Revealing a new side to Yuuri Katsuki was the entire point of the competition, but it wasn’t enough. Even if the audience, people Yuuri knew personally, told him what he didn’t know, that he could succeed, he had to believe it himself. He had to choose to fight.

That anxiety could become a strength. It just needed to be utilized effectively.

Yuuri needed to see it as a fundamental part of his person; a golden fissure that could make him stronger if he let it. Like the koi fish that fought against the currents, replacing each scale until it was golden armor, climbing that waterfall to become a shining dragon. Hm.

Yuuri the dragon...

He smiled, tapping his lip. One step at a time. Prince first. They would work on golden dragon later. "So," he said, gaze settled on the gliding form of Yuuri in the distance. "A magic spell to change the little piggy into a prince."

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Thanks. I know a lot more about Yuuri now."

He hated to lose. He practiced more than anyone. He worked hard. He felt alone in the world. They were so alike. He just needed the right kind of pressure to fight for what he needed. A little bit of fire. Heat and pressure; just like Kouki-san used for his metal work.

Perhaps Yurio had come at the right time after all.

Viktor walked home with Makkachin, weighing his options. Two programs, one week. Nine days, technically, from tomorrow. Agape for Yurio, Eros for Yuuri.

_Hah._ To think that they would be skating the very programs that they had inspired...

It wasn’t as if he’d be needing them, though neither of his students were up to par for the current composition level. That would be the first challenge; changing the routines that he’d created to match each skater’s personal skill level and ability, and _then_ they would work on style.

Assuming that they’d get that far, anyway. He could already hear the complaints from both of them on their designated assignment. Yurio would hate the choral arrangement and Yuuri would be intimidated by the high energy. Neither would be comfortable with the assigned theme, despite that he had chosen them specifically for them. That the compositions wouldn’t even exist were it not _for_ them.
Makkachin trotted ahead, checking back from time to time as Viktor walked slowly across the bridge. There was so much work to do, but at least the town was quiet and safe. It felt open, roads stretching out, buildings small and contained; not the massive labyrinth of Saint Petersburg. It was easier to think that way, with the ocean on one side, the sleeping city on the other.

If Yuuri were to succeed, he needed to gain confidence; tap into that inner-strength that he didn’t know he had, choose to bring it out and express it. Fight for what he wanted. Eros was primal. It was perfect for that. All Viktor needed to do was provide the proper motivation and encouragement. If Yuuri could break through his own barriers and embrace it, he would break through his plateau in no time, and everything would come easier.

For Yurio, his technical skills were already impressive… at least on par with his own at that age, if not better. But he lacked the emotional component. He was, in many ways, the opposing pair to Yuuri in that way. His confidence was getting in the way of his ability to feel the storytelling aspect. It had always been his problem. That overconfidence was his Achilles Heel. So for Yurio, his training would be focused on humility.

It was going to be a very, very long week.

--

And it was.

As he’d expected, neither Yuuri nor Yurio had been thrilled by the assignments-

“Switch them!”

“What?!”

“This piece isn’t me at all!”

–and Viktor had only barely managed to hold in his temper, instead offering a plastered smile and a cold, but honest critique of their current standing. If they didn’t like his assignments, that was fine, but they were going to skate them and that was that. Neither of them wanted to lose, and with the threat of losing Viktor as their coach, both had stepped into line. True, it had been harsher than was probably necessary, but there were only so many fake smiles that Viktor had in him per day, and it had already been a very long morning.

Besides, the anxiety levels were reaching an all-time high from Yuuri, and it came off of him in waves despite the actual danger being fairly low. Viktor knew it was unfair, but from the start, there was really no way for Yurio to win the Hot Springs on Ice competition; it was simply a set up.

Why Yurio even accepted the terms he couldn’t guess; had pride blinded him? Viktor didn’t know. There was no way that the audience would be surprised by the Junior World Champion putting out an incredible performance; it was the same problem that Viktor always ran into. Yurio surprising the people of Hasetsu, who had no idea who he was as a person, had no reason to know that agape was such a departure from his usual persona, was next to impossible.

Meanwhile, mild-mannered Yuuri skating to Eros for the people who had known him his entire life, now that would be a surprise. Who could expect that? The only way Yuuri could lose was if he quit or had a miraculous meltdown on the ice, and even then, that might still be more surprising than Yurio doing well.

And yet, Yurio had still accepted those terms. Surprise the audience more, win your chosen
reward. Was it wrong to take advantage of a fifteen year old? Maybe. But Viktor couldn’t keep Yurio in Hasetsu, and he wasn’t going back to Russia, either. Not until he had taken Yuuri to the Grand Prix Final for the win.

And he would get him there, no matter what it took.

Perhaps all it would take was a touch of Yuuri’s lip, leaning close, with gaze dark and focused. Yuuri was petrified, frozen in place like prey on the ice under the paws of the beast that hunted him. Viktor smiled, brushing his thumb over his lip. Just as the wolf couldn’t mention the princess directly, Viktor could only hint at the banquet, but hint he would. Drunken Yuuri had been in control that night, but there had been eros. He was capable of performing, even if it was just an act. That’s all that was needed for the ice, anyway. That’s all Viktor ever did.

“No one knows your true eros, Yuuri,” he purred. “It may be an alluring side of you that you yourself are unaware of.” That was for sure. He tilted his head, ever so slightly, showing just a touch of innocence, the faintest bit of sweet charm and a more tender smile. “Can you show me what it is soon?”

His plea went unanswered as Yurio interrupted, but it was just as well; Yuuri looked like he was about to faint anyway. Viktor sent him off to think about Eros. Really consider it. Perhaps even remember it.

Then it was training.

Fortunately, Yurio was already in competition shape and ready to go, so it was relatively easy to get right into breaking down the program into segments and working through each sequences. He’d been right about the technical difficulty, though Yurio insisted on keeping the level as high as possible—“I’ll reach it!”

“You’ll burn yourself out that way.”

“I’ve watched your routines, Viktor. You just got made yourself stronger every time.”

Viktor considered that, and shrugged. It was true enough. “I guess so! Fine. But don’t forget to tell Yakov that I warned you.”

“You can tell him yourself when you come back as my coach.”

Day in, day out. Up early for breakfast with both of them because Yurio refused to let Yuuri have any ‘unfair advantages,’ and didn’t want to miss out on any time with Viktor, then to the rink for practice. He went over Agape with Yurio over and over again, hundreds of times, alternating with Yuuri for basics and the overall structure of Eros.

It only took two days before he was utterly exhausted. Fortunately, by the end of two days, he was able to mostly stand there and bark at both of them instead of having to demonstrate as much.

And then there was the temple.

The Vaganova Academy hadn’t taught him anything about the art of zen, but Yuuri’s neighbors had offered plenty of advice to that end.

“If your students are misbehaving, you can send them to the temple. They can clear their minds, really embrace the calm of inner-peace, find their center!”

“Oh, and don’t forget about the waterfall!”
Viktor had been particularly keen on that idea, but would save it for later. The temple seemed particularly apt for Yurio, who continued to let his anger and frustration overshadow all semblance of agape, time and time again. Besides, it let Viktor sneak in a well-deserved nap while they were otherwise occupied.

Yuuri, meanwhile, had managed to get back into skating practice well enough, but had not regained any confidence. Skating in front of his idol and young rival, Viktor decided, probably wasn’t helping.

Bonding, then, would be best.

--

Yurio still wasn’t willing to do the onsen, but after a brief chat with Mama Katsuki, Viktor had a better idea. After dinner and digestion on the fourth day, he tromped around to collect them. “All right, team building exercise! Let’s go, let’s go!”

“What?!” Yurio glared over his handheld. “I’m not going out again. We already practiced. I ran five miles today.”

“I don’t care~” Viktor sang right back at him, then trotted down the hallway to knock on Yuuri’s door.

A little while later, the three of them were standing around a small bonfire on the beach, watching as Viktor fumbled with the box of Secret Bonding Magic.

“You open it like this,” said Yuuri, reaching to help.

“I’m the coach! I get to do it.”

“Okay, okay…”

“This is so stupid.”

“Quiet, Yurio.”

“That’s STILL not my name.”

“Your coach- that would be me -says it is.” Viktor finally got the box open, and distributed the sparklers, three for each, then set the box aside. “Okay. Are you ready?”

“This is the team building exercise? Sparklers?” Yurio rolled his eyes. “Viktor…”

Yuuri arranged his set for maximum burn, then looked to Viktor with a small smile.

Now there was a student who knew how to team build. Viktor grinned back. “Just do it, Yurio. Okay, on the count of three. One…”

“Two,” Yuuri added.

“Ugh, three.”

The sparklers went in, lay dormant for a stretch of two or three impossibly long seconds, then burst into brilliant color.

“Ack! What do we do now?!”
“You run, Yurio! Run!”

Yuuri was already doing exactly what he wanted, waving his arms, leaping and bounding across the beach to throw the trails of color into the night sky. Viktor followed, then broke off into his own toward the rolling waves, ribbons of light chasing after. He came to a stop when the ocean was within reach, then turned back, watching the other two as they raced and spun around each other like idiots, laughing and yelling.

*Good.*

He jogged back to join them, up until his sparklers burnt out. Then he retreated to the box, giving three more to his students, and then sank to sit on the sand, catch his breath, and watch. It was late, he was so tired, and they had *so much energy* still. He didn’t get it. But it didn’t matter.

They were laughing.

Yuuri. Yurio.

Wild and free under starlight, woven between glittering color, both dancing for no other reason than for the joy of it. It was beautiful. It was perfect.

It was family. *Philia.*

Viktor pulled a leg up to his chest, arms loosely draped around it, and rested his chin on his knee. The salty cold of the ocean air was home, the fading warmth of the sand was life anew. Yurio was the little brother he never had, but wanted to keep close. Who he missed, even if he was such a pain. Yuuri was…

*Oh, Yuuri…*

If everyone could see *that* Yuuri… even a glimpse of the Yuuri that danced then, under the starlight, there would be no boundaries on earth. Viktor tightened his hold, enchanted a hundred times over. Forget the banquet. The Yuuri that danced sober, free and happy, was the most beautiful and powerful force in all the world. *That* Yuuri shook him to his very core, left him utterly weak and helpless.

He would move mountains for that Yuuri. Cross oceans. Well, he already had, but he’d do it again. A hundred times. A thousand times. He’d marry him in a heartbeat. Kiss him every morning, noon, and night. Tell him he loved him in every language, every day. He’d-

“Viktor, I need more!”

Viktor blinked, torn from the reverie and went back to the box, fishing out more sparklers for Yurio, and then for Yuuri. Yurio took off running immediately, but Yuuri lingered behind, watching him.

“Everything okay?”

“Hm? Yeah.” He smiled, head tilting to prove it. As if it proved anything. “Just tired.”

“It *is* getting pretty late for you.”

Viktor shrugged. “It’s fine. This is important.”

Yuuri hesitated, but then left for another round of tag, or chase, or… whatever it was they were
doing, leaving Viktor to his thoughts.

*It is getting pretty late for you.* Yuuri paid attention to things like that? Did he care, then? Just the thought of it gave him chest flutters. Soft, warm, fuzzy chest flutters.

*Yuuri...*

He sighed.

In what world would he get to keep them both? He and Yuuri dancing together in front of the fireplace while Yurio complained about coursework at the table… He could be their adopted son. Not that Yurio would ever allow that; he was far too prideful. But still…

...it was a nice thought, impossible as it was.

When in the business of fantasizing inevitable heartbreak, there was no point in thinking small.

--

Things were a little easier after that. There was less fighting on Yurio’s side and less hesitance from Yuuri. They talked to each other without Viktor needing to instigate it. He could leave them to do drills or split the rink to refine their routine without worrying that there would be territorial disputes.

Viktor allowed himself frequent breaks to recharge while his students went over the routines, looking busy as he prowled the perimeter of the barrier, just as Yakov always did. Perhaps that’s why he did it. Observing, tapping the clipboard, checking his phone while his energy gradually returned. It was a lot of work to stay keep up with the tough love for Yurio, and even harder to instil confidence in Yuuri without dropping a love confession in his lap.

Did Yakov have problems like this? Maybe not with love, since Lilia was her own piece of work, but with everything else. Maybe he could ask for advice. Not that he was answering his emails, but...

Yakov--

Yuri is here! I’m assuming you know this, but I wanted to assure you that he is safe and sound and doing well. We’ve decided to call him ‘Yurio’ because the Japanese are finding it confusing to call him Yuri when there is a Yuuri here already. Really, they could call him ‘Yuri-kun’ and Japanese Yuuri ‘Yuuri-san’ but I guess that’s too formal, and Yuuri already took the -kun before Yuri got here, so ‘Yurio’ it is!

I’ve included some photos of Yurio working on his new SP. Look familiar? :)

I’ll send him home soon.

--Viktor

PS. You’re getting these emails, right?
Viktor leaned over the barrier. “Hey, Yurio!”

The blond looked his way, mid-spin, and glared. “What?”

“Have you talked to Yakov lately?”

“Like twenty minutes ago. Why?”

Frown... “Does he answer your emails?”

“Yeah. Not that I email him much, because he calls me like a nag.” Yurio threw himself into the next step sequence, crossovers with digging toe pick, shredding flecks of ice in his wake. He pivoted out. “What, is he ignoring you?”

“Well... Was that something he should admit? Viktor bit his lip. The hesitance was just long enough that Yurio didn’t need confirmation. “You saw what he said about you in that interview, right? He’s really pissed, like I said.”

“Interview?”

“Yeah. Tch, you’ll have to look it up later.” Yurio laughed, shaking his head, and pulled himself back to the starting position. “Who knows? Maybe you won’t be the favorite anymore. Yakov says he’s got some big plans for Georgi...”

Viktor set his clipboard aside and stepped to the edge of the barrier, reaching down to yank off the guards from his skates. “You need some work on that salchow. And your agape? No where near where it needs to be.”

“Did I strike a nerve~?”

“Come on, from the top. Your senior debut and the mother country depends on it.”

After he’d sent Yurio and Yuuri off to the waterfall, Viktor went back to Yutopia to change and look up the interview. Was Yakov really as mad as Yurio said?

“That man only thinks of himself!” He’d screamed, grasping the reporter’s microphone. “He'll never be anyone’s coach!”

Oh.

Viktor sank down to the foot of the bed, blinking at the screen in his hand. He’d seen Yakov mad plenty of times before; the man had a temper on most days. But that hurt. Selfish? Was he? Maybe. Incapable? No...

But he’d hurt Yakov. That much was clear. Hurt him enough to lash out like that, to the wolves, giving words that he couldn’t take back. Words that Viktor would now have to deal with every time he dealt with the press.

They would be looking for how he handled Yuuri. They were already going to be watching him closely; how he interacted with someone supposedly inferior, someone not of his own country. A traitor to Russia. And now he’d upset Yakov so much that he’d painted Viktor as a selfish fool, and let it slip that there was more to the story than a leave for inspiration. Perhaps he had also made it look like he couldn’t control his own skaters. That hadn’t been his intent.
He wasn’t sure what was worse.

Viktor thought he could handle the wolves on his own; he was used to them coming after his throat. They’d already tried to destroy him on numerous occasions, and nearly succeeded. But what did that mean for Yuuri? What did it mean for Yakov?

Yuuri needed all the help he could get. He needed someone on top of the figure skating world to lift him up, someone invincible to support him. Viktor Nikiforov, the image that he’d built over the years, was the perfect platform, but only if that image stayed in tact. Only if Viktor remained strong and infallible. No more weakness. No more crying at night, or fear in the face of the unknown. He’d have to borrow a leaf from Yurio’s book. He’d have to adopt the stripes of the tiger.

And Yakov…

He’d hurt Yakov enough. More than enough. Yakov was right; he was selfish. All he’d ever done was take and take and take. It was time to stand on his own, to leave the poor man alone. They all had a job to do, and he could make amends later. But until he could apologize properly, the least he could do was stop badgering him, let him work. Let the wound heal.

Viktor let Mama Katsuki know that he’d be out for a while, and left the onsen to find dinner on his own. Ramen was good; carb heavy, salty. They had a good selection of liquor, too. It wasn’t quite like the bar that Yakov had taken him to when he was sixteen as a rite of passage, but it would do. Dinner first, then drinking. All night.

He got ice cold vodka, ordered gyoza, pickled ginger, and rice to eat between sips, and raised a private toast.

To Yakov, my coach, my friend, my mentor, my papa.

I hope I can make you proud.

I hope you can forgive me.

Chapter End Notes

Chris: Salut! Is the operation going well?
Viktor: yeah great. So listen, remember when I told you that the spark was gone?
Chris: Hence going to Japan in the first place...
Viktor: Right, so what if I told you that I've been teaching Yuuri a short program on the theme of Eros and it mighta sorta jumpstarted the spark and now I can't sleep or eat or think about anything else?
Chris: I'd say, "You're welcome."
Viktor: ...okay but I almost aTACKED HIM OVER DINNER
Chris: Well that's unexpected! But you didn't. Shame.
Viktor: CHRIS
Chris: Following your heart means following your heart.
Viktor: things were so much easier when I was broken...

WHEN GAY SKATE RETURNS:
Yurio is still really angry! / Yuuri gets to dig through boxes of second-hand clothes! /
The ~*~EROS~*~ of the Pork Cutlet Bowl is finally revealed! / Viktor suffers immensely!

*Please look forward to it!*
Chapter Summary

As the Hot Springs on Ice challenge approaches, Viktor finds himself steeped in regret for his then-convenient-and-amusing students' assignments. On the one hand, he's teaching a routine based on unconditional love to the angry teenager who currently thinks he's a backstabbing traitor... and on the other, he's teaching his unrequited crush a routine based on sexual love, who is learning the moves JUST FINE but still can't seem to let him get close without freaking out.

Life is suffering.

Chapter Notes

In this chapter:
Gabapple: I wrote some crazy stuff in this chapter. It's also really long and dense, like fruitcake, which is exhausting. I definitely prefer dialog-driven scenes... But fun fact: the ending of this includes some sections from the VERY FIRST ORIGINAL opening draft of this fic, back before episode 10 aired. Neat. It's amazing how much has changed since then. Also, now that this chapter is done, we are OFFICIALLY done with episode 3 and moving on to episode 4! Wow~ go us. We're 1/4th of the way done with season 1...

Mamodewberry: Quick note: This chapter is amazing. So much Viktor inner workings. And a scene that is so very amazing. Be strong, Viktor.

Gabapple: I'm going to hide under my desk now.

Bonus Side Story!
Vitva and the Crumbs of Love- I wrote a short story about 15 year-old Viktor for Valentine's Day, so make sure to go read it if you haven't already! It's all about wild-haired, starry-eyed, overly-enthusiastic Viktor trying to save Valentine's Day from all of the pessimism and heartache of the world. I did an illustration for it and posted it on my tumblr, which may be the best part? Gosh I love drawing him with crazy hair.

New art!
Yakov and little Viktor from Chapter 3, illustrated by Fourcorneredgod (commission).
Viktor with Hachiko from chapter 3, Yuuri and Phichit from chapter 4, illustrated by Edenerys (commission).
- I'll move these to the appropriate chapter at the next update. :)

Recommended Listening:
Trust, by Christina Perri
On Love: Eros, by Kazuma Kudō
Libertango, by Bond
There's also a great recording of *Peter and the Wolf* with David Bowie as the narrator!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Saint Petersburg, Russia**

**Viktor (10 years old)**

Viktor listened to the rain as it drummed against the thick glass windows of the Mariinsky Theatre, eyes closed, breathing in the scent of damp that managed to creep in. The building was old- more than a hundred and fifty years -and had been host to all of the greats in Saint Petersburg, including his mother. Had she used this same room to change with her company?

He glanced around the nearly empty study, where duffel bags and costume racks from their own small band had been strewn about in a harried frenzy. Probably not. They’d been professionals. They probably used the proper dressing rooms down by the stage. In an exhibition like this, hopeful students used the rooms that were available.

They would be going on in just under an hour. They’d already warmed up, they were actively staying limber, most were in their costumes, and they just needed the final approval from Lilia. She was checking on the girls in the other room.

Viktor set his left leg down, then lifted his right, toe pointed, stretching it up as high as it would go with his back pressed up against the window in the box seat. There was just enough resistance left to give a nice burn, which he liked, and he smiled, letting his head thump against the glass.

“Don’t you look comfy?”

Laughing, Viktor cracked one eye open to look at the other boy, clad head to toe in brown leotard with a rug of fur over his shoulders. Kimka had the role of the titular villain in their production of *Peter and the Wolf*. “It’s nice. You can see the canal from here.”

“You can see the canals from everywhere, Vitya.”

“I guess.” Viktor shifted onto his hip, rotating his leg out to bring it down half mast, slowly stretched it back, then set it down again with a sigh. “Are you nervous?”

“Not as long as you can remember not to pull my tail so hard this time.” Kimka fiddled with his paw hands, gloves that made it look like he had scary claws and extra mangy fur to his elbows. “Do you think you can handle that, Peter?”

It had happened during one of their dress rehearsals; Peter was supposed to capture the wolf by the tail with a rope, which Viktor certainly did… but Kimka’s tail had come clean off, which wasn’t part of the story at all. He shrugged. “They fixed it, right?”

Both boys looked as Kimka turned around, wolf tail in place at the base of his spine. It was, in fact, in tact- this time with a belt under the rest of his costume. “Yeah.” He frowned. “But I swear, if you rip it off again… I’ll just eat you instead of the duck.”

Viktor frowned back at him. “But the wolf’s already eaten the duck by then. So you’d have to eat us both.”

“What?”
“The wolf ate the duck before Peter caught him. So you can’t eat me instead of the duck, because if I rip your tail off, it won’t have happened until you’ve already eaten her. So you have to eat us both.”

Kimka stared at him for several seconds, then shook his head. “Okay. Fine. If you rip my tail off in front of everyone on stage, I’ll eat you, too.”

“That makes a lot more sense.”

“Or maybe I’ll just kill you and let you rot in the forest.”

Viktor pushed his lips into a pout. “That’s just a waste.”

“I’m the one that has to be carted off to the zoo when you win.”

“Sorry, I didn’t write the story. Take it up with Prokofiev.” Viktor grinned. Several of Prokofiev’s symphonies had been turned into ballets and performed right there in that very theater, but *Peter and the Wolf*? That he wasn’t sure of, and that got him excited, especially since he’d had a hand in choreographing his own parts.

They all had, really. That was the point in the production. But nonetheless! They were making history, right there, that day, in front of scouts for Vaganova Academy and others. It was their chance.

No wonder Kimka didn’t want his tail ripped off. And he was brooding to show it.

Viktor canted his head, pushing up from the window seat to a stand. He only came to the other boy’s chest, but he had more than enough confidence to make up for it. “Don’t worry. I won’t rip your tail off. I’ll be careful.”

“Yeah, you’d better be.”

Lilia came in then like a whirlwind, true to form despite her decrepit age and made her rounds, first checking over Kimka. “Good, good, Iakim. Let me just fix your ears... there, you’re ready. Now, Viktor.”

She magicked a handful of bobby pins and tucked them into Viktor’s hair here and there, pinning his hat firmly into place. “This should have already been done...”

“Are you really going to keep switching between Viktor and Vitya?”

“I’ll call you whatever I feel like calling you, Vi—“ the woman hesitated, then pushed down on the top of the hat. “Your makeup looks fine, though they did the mascara a little heavy.”

Viktor shrugged. “I asked them to.”

“Don’t change my orders. You may be Peter, but I’m still in charge.” Lilia sighed, moving down to one knee to check the rest of his costume. “Are your aunt and uncle here?”

“Yeah. They didn’t want to miss an opportunity to come to the Mariinsky for free.” He rolled his eyes for her, just as he always did when talking about his adoptive parents. It wasn’t that *he* hated them, but Lilia seemed to like the show.

She snorted. It was about as close as a laugh as she ever got. “And Coach Feltsman?”

Another roll of his eyes, though this was directed at *her.* “Don’t you mean Medvezhonok? Of
course he’s here!"

Lilia whirled him around by the shoulders and smacked his rear with her clipboard, which sent him off running back for the window, laughing. “Honestly, Vitya…” she groaned, and got back to her feet. “Come along, boys. Quickly now. That’s enough chitchat. Don’t forget that they’ll be watching you closely. This is a big day for you both!”

Kimka watched as she left, arms folded, then huffed. “So is being an orphan a prerequisite for being teacher’s pet or what?”

A rumble of thunder rolled in the distance, quiet and barely able to break past the sound of the spring rain.

“…What?”

“Never mind. Let’s go before she gets mad again.”

Yurio’s agape was coming along well. The last twenty-four hours had proved to be transformative for them all: the students were teaching each other in the teacher’s absence, bonded enough that they were willing to keep it from him; Yurio was finally serene as he switched between the sequences meant for juxtaposition; and Yuuri was willing to try the higher level techniques without the preceding finger tap tells. Good.

They’d come so far in the past week, and though it had been difficult to keep three people going on his personal regimen, he was pleased with the results.

_Imagine what I could do with them in a full season…_

Viktor shook his head, addled with the lingering hangover. It wasn’t bad; Yakov had taught him better than that, but he was tired. He worked with Yurio first to get a critique of high level items down on paper, which turned into a fun little lecture (Viktor loved those~!), then set to work with Yuuri.

The nerves of the Japanese skater came and went like the ocean breezes, whipped back and forth on the tide. Skating calmed him, but it also made him nervous. So, too, did praise. There was no real rhyme or reason to it. Pressure made him stronger, but it made him buckle. There had to be a balance somewhere. Viktor just had to find it.

But, for the most part, they just worked on the routines, no emotional component at all. There wasn’t time to pick apart Yuuri’s psyche and put him back together in time for the competition. Patience, he just had to have patience.

_Relevé…_

Yuuri’s strength was the storytelling aspect. The feeling. Viktor would leave that to him and focus on the technical. So he drilled him. Together they skated Eros, over and over and over again, side by side, stopping only when Yuuri fell too far behind—which, fortunately, wasn’t often.

“Again,” Viktor barked, pulling the same tone his Academy teachers had used. He didn’t know what kind of a hand Minako-sensei used when instructing, but the way Yuuri moved when he
ordered, he assumed that she’d been classically trained, too.

And of course, as it was with all things focused practice, the better Yuuri got. As suspected, muscle memory took over where anxious memory had struggled before, and the overall performance improved. Even without story, the choreography was meant to be sensual, and it was beginning to show. It would have been difficult not to. Yuuri was not a particularly stiff performer once he warmed up, and though he continued to flub his jumps, the transitions gradually evened out.

Figure skating was a matter of physics; the human body moved in predictable ways depending on the level of flexibility and strength a given person had. A good routine maximized each step sequence to push the body in ways that produced the most effect with the least amount of work, which made the overall program easier. The more physical and mental energy conserved in broad strokes, the more attention could be paid to higher technical difficulties, scoring more points. It also left a lot less to human error, relying on the way things just worked instead of forcing it to. Trusting your body, the ice, the music, to do its part.

Eros was no exception. It made good use of Yuuri’s dance training, drawing out what Viktor had suspected. Yes, he’d been trained in several forms of dance. He wasn’t sure when or where—Minako-sensei, again?—but a bracket turn brought out the swing of his hip, a spread eagle had his back arching back just so for better posture. Viktor watched for the clumsy sections and made suggestions, streamlining, pushing the program to suit Yuuri’s strengths. He had a lot of endurance and far more lower body strength than he had, himself; that meant putting emphasis on the leg work and altering the composition to favor some easy points by technicality. Anything they could do to make it easier and relieve mental pressure was top priority.

If only it didn’t have to kill him in the process.

That was the problem with Eros. It had seemed like such a good idea at the time... force Yuuri to skate the program that was made because of him. What a punishment. Sure, it had made him uncomfortable at first, but having done the routine a hundred times in the last week, Yuuri was almost over it. That was good. That was how it was supposed to work. Over-preparedness was the way to stave off nerves, but that left Viktor to watch an ever-increasing amount of eros with every performance.

It meant skating Eros side by side, going through the motions of something that he had created because of that night at the banquet, caressing the ice in tandem with each seductive segment, together. And Yuuri didn’t seem to notice. He was focused. He was ready and willing to fight. He was determined to win.

He had no idea that the eros in Eros was Yuuri’s Eros that had ensnared Viktor in the first place. That it was that eros that had ruined him, bewitched him with those dark eyes and made him feel like there was hope for that dance of fire again.

Assigning Eros had been convenient. It had been funny. It had been a punishment.

But it was Viktor who suffered.

He drank a lot that week.

Even though it was a small venue and there was no medal on the line, both of Viktor’s students
anxiously went through their paces in the small, cement waiting box. They were taking it seriously, which was a good thing. Every performance deserved an athlete’s best. Each rival deserved worthy competition. Viktor smirked to himself, quiet and calm in the back of the room while they worked to stay warm and limber, keeping the nerves at bay.

He was so proud of them. Both of them. Though it wasn’t the time to say it; not while they needed to believe that there was risk involved. Viktor held his tongue, just like the wolf, and quietly observed. They were fighting for their careers and for the chance to keep their chosen mentor.

It shouldn’t have pleased him so much to feel wanted like that. Needed, even. Viktor tried to push it from his thoughts, but it stayed. Fought over by two that already had his love and approval? Unusual…

Yurio went first, huffing as he was pushed through the curtain by Yuko-san. The costume he’d chosen from Viktor’s collection was perfect for *Agape*: stunning in its bold white, grey, and iridescent swaths of lycra; vulnerable in its bead-strewn mesh over torso and slender arms. It matched that feeling of unconditional love well in an aesthetic sense, though he was certain that Yurio had chosen it as a symbol of rising power. It was, after all, what Viktor had worn when he’d broken his streak of solid silver and become a gold champion in the junior division.

But did Yurio know what the costume really meant? Very few did. It was a glittering, heavenly body falling from the sky; *The Wishing Star*. Pure, innocent, hopeful. He’d skated across the ice in those days like a burning, fading, desperate, and fragile thing, praying for the chance to break through. Back then, he hadn’t understood so many things about the world. He’d been naïve, even more than Yurio, despite being roughly the same age.

Watching him skate really was like watching his former life on ice. Differences, yes; Yurio had so much more aggression, but hadn’t Viktor burned behind so many of his own fake smiles, even then? And Yurio had every right and reason to be angry with the world. Maybe it wasn’t unconditional love that he skated, but it was raw emotion behind each and every movement. Frustration, humility, anguish, determination. It was written all over his face.

All of that in just one week…

Viktor shook his head, unable to hold back a grin any longer. His brother, his comrade, would be a strong contender in the grand prix. There was no doubt. Yakov would be able to do so much with him. Russia’s reputation was secure; it had nothing to fear.

*The Wishing Star* was reborn as *Agape*; self-sacrificing, uncalculated. He hoped it would serve his brother well. It had given Viktor his dream, perhaps it would do the same for Yurio.

“Yurio!” he cried, mouth split in an even broader smile. “That was the best performance I’ve seen from you so far! Go on, greet the audience!”

It took him a few seconds, but Yurio let the anger roll off and pushed a smile, straightening up to put on a smile of gratitude. Such showmanship! Perfect!

He’d have hugged that angry little star right then and there if he thought he could get away with it, but somehow… perhaps not. Viktor just laughed, opting to reward Yurio by not assaulting him right off of the ice, and instead turned his attention to Yuuri… who…

*Of course.*

The anxiety was so thick Viktor could feel it coming off of Yuuri in waves. That was fine. Every
athlete had to deal with it; he didn’t know a single one that didn’t. He put on a small smile and went to him, close, but not touching. “Yuuri. It’s your turn.”

Yuuri startled from the silent panic with a strangled gasp, turning a wide-eyed stare on Viktor, covering his mouth. Viktor stayed still, quiet, waiting for him to continue, but tucked his chin. Dog language for non-confrontational. Yuuri was a dog person. Maybe that would get through.

“U-uhm!” Yuuri dropped his hands, jaw setting. “I’m… I’m going to become a super tasty pork cutlet bowl, so please watch me!” He closed the gap between them, arms wrapping around Viktor’s back. Deliberate, physical contact.

Viktor could feel him trembling.

“Promise!” Yuuri tightened his grip.

As much as he wanted to return the gesture, pulling him closer, to hold him, Viktor kept his arms firmly at his side. It wasn’t the first time that Yuuri had thrown himself at him like this with a desperate plea, though the time before, he’d been drunk. The time before had been the banquet.

Was this the closest Yuuri had willingly gotten to him since then?

“Of course,” Viktor said, voice quiet, barely turning his head to look at him. “I love pork cutlet bowls.”

He did. Figurative, literal. Yuuri believed that he was fighting for his life all over again, and once again, was begging Viktor for help. It nearly broke his heart. Did it take fight or flight to bring Yuuri to him? Had he really frightened Yuuri that badly?

Viktor didn’t like either idea, and he hated how Yuuri shuddered against him like that. He risked setting a hand on his back, just light pressure, and forced the small smile back into place. “Go on, Yuuri. I’m waiting.” Tone firm, but gentle. He was his coach, after all.

Yuuri shed his track suit and guards and stepped onto the ice; a dark contrast to Yurio’s performance of moments ago. Viktor watched while he folded the jacket over his arm, trying to hold back a chuckle. More lycra and mesh in solid blocks of color, but with rhinestone accents. Had he really been so predictable as a teenager? Not that there were that many options to choose from in terms of fabrics, but he’d definitely had a certain style then, and those costumes had cost him so many points in competition. It wouldn’t be an issue these days, but then it had been a revolution.

What was now Eros had then been battle armor; a stone and crystal guardian for the Heart of the Mountain. Yuuri needed battle armor for the upcoming season, that was no question. But had Yuuri chosen the costume because he’d been number one in the junior division for Worlds that season? Or had he somehow sensed that in the season, Viktor had also begun his own journey in eros?

It didn’t matter. He looked incredible. And from the very start, something was… different.

Viktor whistled without even thinking about it, and winced afterward. Right; he was supposed to be an impartial judge in the not-really-a-competition.

Yuuri’s steps were still too heavy; his concentration a mess along the inside edge, but the emotion had come together. Somewhere in there, overnight, Yuuri had found his eros- or at least a semblance of it -and he was not only using that emotion to move his body, but he was changing the story.
Just like the rest of the audience, Viktor couldn’t tear his eyes away, even after he nearly fell flat on that jump. The recovery went well enough, all things considered, and he got right back into it. *Good.*

High steps, still spirited even so far into the program, showing off that *incredible* workhorse strength, went a long way to prove his prowess. In tandem, his body swayed, arms undulating, curving one way, then snapping away the moment he had the audience nearly lost in his thrall. Yuuri kept everyone on their toes, focused, heated from the haze and whiplash.

Or maybe that was just him.

Viktor watched him in practice all week, and he’d seen some of his recorded performances online, but nothing compared to seeing it in person. Especially not now that he’d already added so much to his repertoire. Seductive was putting it mildly. Criminally so. *Pleasure followed by pleasure. One just drowns in it.* Those had been his instructions, and Yuuri had *owned* it.

Yuuri’s performance, like Yurio’s, lacked a great deal of refinement; but that could be worked on in the coming weeks. Whatever it was that Yuuri put on display for the audience in the name of *Eros,* though, was all *Yuuri.* And that couldn’t be taught.

He almost didn’t realize that it was over when the crowd erupted into cheers around him. Had he been holding his breath? Viktor chuckled, helpless, and shook it off. It was clear who the winner of the competition was; just as he’d expected. “Yuuri!”

The smile that crossed Yuuri’s face at the call brought back all of those chest flutters again, and Viktor was unable to resist greeting him with a hug- though he made sure to keep it not too tight, not too close; cautious and cradling. It was so indulgent. “That was the tastiest pork cutlet bowl I’ve ever seen! Wonderful!”

Where was Yurio? He’d been behind him; was he hearing this? It wouldn’t be fair to…

“Th-thank you.”

Viktor slid his hand down to take Yuuri’s, other hand taking hold of his opposite arm. Best not let it get too sappy. “But can I say something?”

“S-sure.”

The lecture that followed was not exactly well-received, but worked like a charm. Status quo had been restored.

“Nikiforov-san, how soon until you have the results?”

Viktor turned his attention to the anxiously awaiting journalists, letting a smug smirk slip across his lopsided smile. “Just as soon as I have both of my contestants. Where’s Yurio?”

“Oh, uh.” Takeshi tugged Viktor aside by the arm, turning their backs to the cameras. “Yuko’s taking him back to Yu-topia to get his stuff… I guess he’s taking the first flight back to Russia.”

Viktor flinched. *Oh.* It’d taken Yurio a while, but he was a smart kid; there was no way he could keep the setup a secret forever. He wasn’t even trying, really. Shoulders sagging, he worked up a smile. “I see.”

“Should… we go after him?” Yuuri looked torn, and understandably so. Did he need to console his rival so soon after victory? What would that do? Would it change anything?
Viktor shook his head. “No. Let him go.” They’d let him lick his wounds in peace, give him space. He was to blame for Yurio’s anger, and he deserved to be walked out on. It was only fair. Besides, it wasn’t as if he could keep Yurio in Hasetsu.

He had to let Yurio go. Now. It was the easiest out for them both. A clean cut. Viktor could respect that. He sucked in a breath and the smile came a little easier. “Let’s get you on that podium, Yuuri.”

That evening, when the interviews and photoshoots had concluded, congratulations exchanged, and hosting duties tied up, Viktor and Yuuri settled in at Yu-topia for Yuuri’s promised reward: a private dinner of katsudon for student and coach. Viktor knelt at one side of the table with Yuuri on the other, sipping Sapporo while they waited.

“Are you excited?” Viktor asked, leaning back on one hand, glass in the other.

“Hm? Oh, yes, yes,” was the insistent reply, though Yuuri seemed distracted.

It was an odd arrangement. Even though they’d eaten dinner alone plenty of times, it had never been quite so formal. The door behind them was shut for privacy as if this weren’t just Yuuri’s family business. What was it like? A business meeting? A date? The last time he’d been on a date had been several years ago and just for coffee, but it was less awkward than whatever was going on now.

Should he compliment him? Or was that too much? Viktor took another sip, then let his gaze wander around the little room. What was Yuuri thinking about? What was preoccupying his mind?

Mama Katsuki slid the door open with Mari close behind, two big bowls of piping hot katsudon and all the accoutrements on a tray.

“By confirmation of your coach, here is your reward, Yuuri. Enjoy!” Mama Katsuki winked at her son.

“Thanks, Mom. It looks delicious. Just for tonight, then I’ll have to swear it off again.”

She laughed, and set the first bowl in front of Viktor. “Here’s yours, Vicchan.”

“Thank you, Mama Katsuki.” Viktor half-bowed his thanks with one of his most charming smiles, then glanced to Yuuri to watch him receive his prize.

The change in Yuuri was immediate as soon as the ceramic touched the table top; alert, focused, dark eyes blazing with a fire that Viktor couldn’t actually remember seeing before. Maybe when he’d promised to skate to *Eros*? Or perhaps when he’d challenged him at the banquet… but no, this was different. This was a predator’s glint, not someone fighting for their honor or their territory.

Yuuri licked his lips, but kept his hands at bay. He was restraining himself, self-disciplined as always. Waiting. For what?

*Oh. For me.*

Viktor waved as mother and daughter retreated from the room, sliding the door closed once more, then reached for his pair of chopsticks. Just like in practice, Yuuri mirrored his movements, taking up his own, but the intensity was far beyond the programs. He cleared his throat. “*Itadakimasu*…”
"Itadakimasu!"

Though Yuuri was quick to follow his movements, he held himself back even still. Viktor had expected him to dive right in, but he was watching the wafting steam instead, chopsticks only hovering. Why?

Viktor pawed through the rice to let the egg seep through, dragging caramelized onions around for the flavors to mingle. He picked up a piece of pork, brought it up to his lips, then hesitated. Yuuri was doing the same thing: watching him, tender pork cutlet pinched between polished wood suspended above the bowl. The breading had crumbled along the edge where it had been cut, exposing fresh and tender meat that hadn’t yet lost and of its natural juices. Viktor shook his head, then took a bite, tearing the piece in half so he could defer to his beer for the moment. Why was Yuuri staring at him like that?

Chopsticks down, he chewed slowly, and went for the glass while Yuuri finally took his first bite… and gave the softest, most sincere little moan he’d ever heard in his life. It was almost obscene. At least, enough that Viktor nearly choked on his beer.

“Ahhh!” Yuuri cried once he’d swallowed, eyes closed and smile spread wide across his face. “I’ve missed this~!”

It was so cute. Too cute. Viktor blinked hard, cleared his throat, and went back to his own meal. “You’ve earned it.”

“Mmmm-hmm~” he crooned, and carefully put a little patch of egg and rice together to eat next. Each bite came with happy sighs and disarmingly sweet smiles, cheeks flushed with the rosy color of life and utter contentment. “So gooood~!”

Viktor couldn’t look away, though he tried. He really did. He concentrated on his beer, fingers wrapped around the glass tight as a lifeline, and simply stared. Yuuri seemed oblivious in his little world of pork cutlet ecstasy, and that was just as well; it wasn’t like Viktor knew how explain why he was utterly transfixed on the whole thing.

Or, rather, he knew how to explain it. It was simple. Embarrassing, but simple. From the adorable innocence to the coating of oil on Yuuri’s lips, everything about the dinner was becoming absolute torture. His passion for the food, the fact that his desire had been so simple- to eat with his idol and coach! -and so pure, and that Yuuri hadn’t been kidding when pork cutlet bowls really were eros to him… He could relate. He could. Not in a foodie way, but in other ways. And all of that gave him the exceptionally terrifying compulsion to leap across the table and tackle Yuuri to the floor.

It wasn’t something that Viktor had to deal with often. Or ever, really. At least hadn’t for some time.

But there it was; the burning in his core, tension in his jaw, the heat in his face. Physical reactions to something he’d never seen as particularly erotic before, and yet…

And Yuuri ate so slowly… savoring every single bite, carefully preparing the next to make sure that the proportions were right, taking the time to lick his lips between each swallow.

It was going to kill him.

Viktor Nikiforov was going to die.

Why had he thought it would be a good idea to agree to this? Why hadn’t he insisted that everyone
eat together? At least then he would have a distraction, something else to keep his focus on besides those cute sounds and those cute cheeks and the way that Yuuri looked like he couldn’t get enough.

He bit his lip. He could feel his own heart racing, mind reeling. Why now? Why this?

Viktor tore his gaze away and looked down at his own bowl of food, which seemed so ordinary in comparison. Normally, he loved pork cutlet bowls; Mama Katsuki was an excellent cook, but he couldn’t even fathom the idea of eating any. His whole body was too tense to eat. Just like at competition. He wouldn’t be able to keep it down, even if he managed to find appeal enough to try. No, he couldn’t eat. Definitely not.

He went for more beer, and stole another glance at Yuuri, who had moved on to scraping the bits of egg-soaked rice from the bottom of his bowl. Oh god. He was nearly done. Finally, it would be over.

….or would it?

Viktor grimaced, shoulders hunched as he silently slid his own tray across the table to his student. The internal screaming didn’t match his actions, but Viktor was powerless. Helpless. It was all he could do to keep himself kneeling still and relatively calm.

“B-but… you hardly touched it?”

So concerned. So sweet. If someone could have ended Viktor’s pain right then and there, he would have begged for death. Instead, he chuckled, gaze drifting away to feign disinterest. “It’s fine. You’ve earned it.” A pause. “Besides. You look so happy.”

“Mm. It’s my favorite. I… I wanted to eat with you.”

Viktor’s gaze flicked back, settling on that little pout. He’d thought about kissing him several times before, but never the way his thoughts were supplying now. He was a wolf. A hungry, slavering beast. What had happened? He shook his head again, strained smile fixed into place. “I ate enough, don’t worry.”

“If you’re sure…”

It was too tempting for Yuuri not to give in, wasn’t it? Viktor found himself wanting to watch him crumble, to fall apart. Give in. “Quite sure,” he said, and bit his lower lip.

“Okay…” Yuuri pushed his own tray aside and took Viktor’s, taking the discarded chopsticks to continue where he left off.

Yes. Viktor was going to die a slow and painful, torturous death, and then go to hell for corrupting Yuuri Katsuki. There was no question about the fate in store for him. Encouraging him to eat another bowl when he had worked so hard on his diet…

He went back to his glass and took a slow and deliberate sip, all the while watching. His thighs were starting to hurt from his muscles being so tense, kneeling with body so wound up, but at least that took a little bit of the edge off. “So. Enjoying your victory meal?”

Yuuri nodded, bringing a hand up to cover his mouth while he chewed- a brief and welcome reprieve from the display of that mouth that Viktor desperately wanted to capture with his own.

“I’m guessing that you worked with Minako-sensei for the changes to your program.”
Yuuri swallowed. “Oh, was it obvious?”

“I’m just very observant. It was a good move. Very smart on your part.”

“Oh, good!” Yuuri sighed in relief, then went back to his food. “I thought I was getting scolded.”

Viktor shook his head. The shop talk helped. Losing feeling in his legs helped. Ow. “No, no, not at all. You should always utilize your resources when you can, especially when it makes you more comfortable with your routine. It added another dimension, made it yours. I was very impressed.”

Yuuri smiled, shuffling in place.

Too cute.

Viktor continued, toying with the mostly-empty glass on the table, eyes fixed on Yuuri. He wasn’t even trying to pretend anymore. “That’s part of what I was trying to teach you both. What *eros* and *agape* mean to me is completely different than what it is for you and Yurio. You needed to not only find your own meaning, but how to express it, in your way.”

“I felt like something was missing, yeah…” Yuuri let his voice trail off, then looked back at him, blinking. “Did you… want another bite?”

“Uh…” A bite of what? Viktor blinked, startled at the thoughts that sprung to mind. So much for shop talk. So much for distraction. So much for the fire calming down. He swallowed.

Yuuri picked out the remaining piece of pork and offered it to him, head tilting to one side. Suddenly, the breaded cutlet was the forefront of Viktor’s attention, too. He shifted, pushing up from the floor to lean over the table and take the strip of pork from the chopsticks ever so gently with his teeth. Eyes half lidded, he pulled back, using his tongue to pull it in. He chewed, swallowed, then licked his lips all with far more *eros* than was necessary, then sat back with a little sigh of his own.

It was tasty…

“Thank you,” Viktor said, and took up his glass for a mock toast in gratitude.

Yuuri’s wide-eyed stare went from Viktor to the now empty bowl. “Uhm. You’re welcome.” A pause. “I can’t believe I ate both bowls…”

Viktor drained the last of his beer. He couldn’t believe it, either.

“Do we have practice tomorrow?”

“Bright and early.”

“Okay… coach.”

Viktor smirked at him, pretending to get more from the empty glass so that he wouldn’t have to watch any longer. “Go on ahead… I’ll see you in the morning, Yuuri.”

Yuuri got up, nodding, still wearing that blush and awkward little smile. “Thanks again, by the way… for staying.”

He shrugged. “Like I said; I love pork cutlet bowls.” Then a smile.
Yuuri smiled back, then left… which was good, because Viktor wasn’t sure how else he would have gotten out of there without time to cool off, first.

v.nikiforov: let me know when you get home, please
THE.yuri: viktor
THE.yuri: bite me
v.nikiforov: ilu too <3

It’d been hours since the competition, since dinner, and since he’d gotten confirmation that Yurio didn’t really hate him after all. He was just angry, and justly so. A reply- any reply -was better than radio silence.

Viktor’s fingers curled at the sheet again, nails brushing over threads in the near silence of the night. Dawn lurked a mere four hours away, but sleep still couldn't find him. There was so much to do. So many decisions to make, so much ground to cover. Yuuri was still worlds away from where he needed to be, and he'd only just begun to open up. Viktor needed the sleep. Yuuri deserved and needed him to be at his absolute best.

He sighed, nudging Makkachin to move over again as he rolled onto his other side, gazing over at the dark screen of his cell phone. He wanted Yakov’s advice. Or to talk to someone about what had happened earlier. Chris, maybe? No. No, that would have been the worst idea. It was all too complicated, too sudden.

Shivering, Viktor flattened his palm out over the futon, the flash of light from the costume catching in his memory. The way Yuuri moved, almost serpentine, dragging him along in time with the music... Viktor knew he should have expected it; he'd seen it before. He knew that was one of Yuuri's greatest strengths. But seeing it in person under the lights of competition, with pressure and an audience?

…and with the proper motivation?

To keep eating pork cutlet bowls. With you.

It was him. He was the motivation. The fire. The reason Yuuri moved that way when he skated, grasping Eros by the throat and making it his own, seducing Viktor all over again He’d been such a fool.

Don’t leave. Don’t let go. Don’t give up on me.

The roll of his neck, shoulders following; the arch of his back and the curve of his hip… Everything about Yuuri, from that plea to watch him before the match, to the way he completely enthralled the audience had him captured. Bewitched.

It was almost like…

He sighed, breath warm over parted lips. How many times recently had he been close to him? Taken his arm, touched his shoulder, brushed fingers over the small of his back… Just small, innocent touches, but it was contact that he didn’t share with many people. For all of the playboy imagery that he flaunted for the public, there were few that he truly felt comfortable with being close to. Yet, with Yuuri, he’d clung to. Grasped. Traced the nape of his neck with his palm, comb in his other hand.
And Yuuri had hugged him. Just like he had at the banquet.

*Please.*

And what he meant was: *stay with me.*

*Of course I’ll stay. I’ll do anything.*

It was no good. No good at all.

Dragging fingers through his hair, the man forced his body to stretch out and then relax against the mattress. He could play the part of the lover and the Casanova just fine; flirting and tossing a seductive glance here and there, but what was he to do with *this?* This real, raw feeling that whispered like the rolling bubbles of the hot springs, hazy mists clouding his head and dragging him under.

*Yuuri…*

No; he had to resist. He was Yuuri’s coach. There was still so much to do, so much for him to learn, and no time to lose. If he didn’t have that distance, that drive to keep Viktor there, he might not continue to improve. If he knew the truth, he might not try as hard.

Viktor would not be the cause of his failure.

No matter how much it hurt.

It was all too easy to remember how his hands felt against his sides; the long-cool touches of fingers grasping his leg as they danced together that night. There were still times, however brief, that he could almost recapture the fleeting moments in practice, positioning Yuuri’s form here, drawing his arm there… but nothing was the same.

He could imagine, caught between sleep and waking dreams, the Yuuri that danced on the beach pulling him up from the sand by the hand, leading him into another dance. A different dance.

Not even sliding his own hand down his thigh could match that eager embrace, though it sent a certain thrill of pleasure through him. Viktor shivered, toes curling and retreating under the blanket, and he hesitated again. The bare skin was his, but hands in his fantasy weren’t…

He pulled them away to drag them down his face, then through his hair.

Yuuri wasn’t his.

Could he be? Should he even entertain the thought? Maybe if he talked to him… After all, how could he ask Yuuri to fight for what he wanted when he wasn’t willing to do the same?

“He won’t fall for you,” the tiger said, hissing. “He’s just going to betray you, just like the last one.”

“It doesn’t matter. I’m not giving up on him. He deserves a chance to prove that he’s more than what you and everyone else thinks.”

“Just come back to the tower already. Baba Yaga misses you.”

“I can’t.”
“Fine. Whatever. I tried.”

Chapter End Notes

Viktor: Makkachin, if you wanted to, say, get someone to be your boyfriend, what would you do?
Makkachin: :O
Viktor: So you're saying I should just... ask him?
Makkachin: O:
Viktor: I dunno. This sounds way too easy... Yuuri is a very complicated thing. I should probably go the most round about way to approach the subject.
Makkachin: :
Viktor: Don't give me that look. What do you know about love? :
Makkachin: :<<<
Viktor: MAKKACHIN!!! Nooo don't be sad, I'm sorry ;A;

WHEN GAY SKATE STRIKES AGAIN:
Viktor gets SALTY! / Feelings can't be explained in words?! / A figure skater thinks he's a detective!

Please look forward to it!
Chapter Summary

Although Viktor is determined to confront Yuuri about his feelings, it's far too easy to find excuses to put it off. After all, love can't be rushed, right? And Viktor will have a greater chance of success if he makes sure that that Yuuri is actually into him, first... which means lots of "subtle" investigation.

Chapter Notes

We're back from a week hiatus! We both needed a break and Mamodewberry had a funeral to go to, which coincidentally brought her through town so I got to see her for the first time in a few years. We got sushi and talked about the fic a lot, which was good. ;A; Ahhh~ It was so nice to see her. But now we're back!!!

In this chapter:
Gabapple: This is kind of a shortish chapter compared to what I have been posting, and was hard to write since there's some rehash, but I hope it's fun to read. I liked writing salty Viktor... even though I'm kind of worried that people will think that I agree with his opinions. So here's my statement: Viktor's opinions do not necessarily reflect my own, especially in regards to other characters. Also, his opinions won't necessarily stay the same throughout the story so don't hate him for feeling one way right now. :V

Mamodewberry: Yeah! We are back. Sorry for the delay even after the break. Life just happens that way. Please enjoy this chapter of young Viktor and his struggles, a lovely fairy tale piece, and Viktor and his detective work on how to figure out Yuuri :O

Gabapple: lol he's as good a detective as Pinkie Pie, if you'll forgive the horse reference. :) And NEXT WEEK we get to see some really great introspective on YUURI which I cannot wait for. FINALLY prying open that egghead skull that the unreliable narrator refused to do... thank you, Mamodewberry, for forcing it out of him... I can't wait. Guys it is... so good... I have been waiting for chapter 11 for fOREVER because-- well I can't say but -- AH. <3 YUURIIIII <333

Anyway, here we go!

Chapter Illustrations:
The Wolf and the Boy (Wolf!Viktor and Peasant!Yuuri), illustrated by princessharumi (commission)

Bonus Side Story!
Cured Poison- Mamodewberry wrote a drabble about post-Barcelona GPF Christophe and his boyfriend, Bastien. It's so cute and heartbreaking and killed me, please go read
it. Her interpretation of Chris really made me fall in love with the character, and I love what she's done with the Mystery Man that has become Baz. This whole scene about Chris dealing with his defeat in Barcelona is so beautiful and good and I just... ugh, go read and comment and love, please. <3

**Recommended Listening:**

*String Quintet Op.11 (13), No.5 In E Major G. 275 - 2. Menuetto,* by Luigi Boccherini
*I Wouldn't Dare,* by Vanessa Paradis
*Will,* by Junichi Suwabe (Atobe Keigo)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Saint Petersburg, Russia**

**Viktor (10 years old)**

Life with his aunt and uncle wasn’t bad, it just wasn’t for him. Viktor looked around the room that had been his for the past three years; a large stretch of hard wood with slanted ceilings and a skylight for a window that looked out on the patch of woods behind the little house. The attic had been a perfect little hideaway; lots of room for stretches and dancing, plenty of privacy and space away from his surrogate family, and he could pretend all he wanted that he was a princess locked away in a tower.

But it was lonely. And it wasn’t as if he were Cinderella or anything. His cousins had grown up long ago and moved on to college or to have families of their own. His aunt didn’t even have chores for him to do.

No, it was school and coursework, ballet and skating, then wandering the parks and the forest, or playing at the edge of the lake. Reading, drawing, singing, and waiting for the hours to tick by for it to be practice time again, and days to burn so he could leave and start life over again.

The time had finally come.

What little belongings he had- books, mostly, and some clothes -had been packed into two cardboard boxes and a suitcase. These were against the wall in the only stretch of shadow left in the room. The rest was bathed in late summer sunlight, and Viktor stretched out to soak it up one last time. The dorm would be small, he knew, and he’d be sharing it with some other boy. He’d never had to have a roommate before. What would that be like? He couldn’t wait to find out.

Maybe he’d miss the faded blue paint on the walls, or the grouse calling out in the early spring mornings; the deer in the autumn bramble, or the distant wolf howls in winter. His aunt and uncle never danced together. Never. They sat close together on the couch to watch television, which was fine enough; quiet and comfortable. But he needed more. And the Academy had it.

“Vitya, are you ready?”

Viktor rolled his head to look at the man framed in the doorway. His uncle looked nothing like either of his parents had, but so familiar with his worried smile buried deep under thick, badger-striped beard. “Yeah.”
“Off the floor, then. Come on.”

--

“That’s all you have?”

Viktor frowned at the slippers in his hands. “They’re the ones on the list.”

“You’ll wear through them in a week. I came with four pair to start.” Gavriil Ipati was the boy assigned as his roommate, and had already been settled into the room for two days by the time Viktor moved in. He was from Moscow and they’d come by train. Business class. “Those might’ve worked for your private tutoring, but everyone knows that we dance from dawn until dusk here.”

“I’m light on my feet.” Viktor shrugged. “I’ll make it work.” He’d have to. His aunt and uncle said that they’d send money when requested, but he didn’t want to have to ask so soon. The school would take care of most of his expenses, but did that cover things like dancing shoes?

The brunette shook his head. “What you mean is that you didn’t think ahead. Here, let me see them.”

Viktor handed them over.

“We wear the same size. Not surprising, since we’re the same age… same height…” He gave them back. “I’ll sell you a pair of mine, then, with only a slight markup as a convenience fee.”

“Convenience fee?” Viktor tilted his head. “What are you even talking about?”

“I’m a businessman. That’s how the rich stay rich. We don’t let an opportunity to trim the margins slip by, and we don’t do anything for free.” He smiled. It was genuine, despite the sales pitch, which felt wrong. “What say you, Vitya?”

Letting his slippers fall by the wayside, Viktor rubbed the side of his neck and canted his head to the other side. “I don’t have any money, Gavrik… I’m ten.”

“Oh, is that right?” The boy looked Viktor over from head to toe as if he were sizing him up in the butcher shop window, then pursed his lips and hummed. “I misjudged you, Vitya. How unfortunate. Here,” Gavrik retrieved a billfold from his trouser pocket, and withdrew two crisp bank notes, and waved it in front of him.

Viktor, startled, stretched out and plucked the offering from the waiting hand. “What? Why?”

“There. Now you have finances, even though you’re ten years old.”

“It’s still not enough to buy slippers.”

Gavrik rolled his eyes. “As if I would let you use my money to buy something from me. No, you’ll need to take that and turn it into more. Figure it out. If you’re worth something, you’ll manage.”

“Oh.”

“Impress me. Or disappoint me. Your choice.”

--

Although his father had been a banker, Viktor hadn’t inherited any financial skills whatsoever, himself. He held onto the money for weeks, tucked away in his journal that he kept in the bottom
of his personal trunk. What to do with it? He only left campus for skating, he got his food from the on-site cafeteria, and all of the supplies were provided by the school. How was he supposed to turn the notes into anything?

Gavrik didn’t ask about it, but he offered significant glances from time to time, coupled with that same smile that kept Viktor feeling uneasy.

Otherwise, Vaganova Academy was everything Lilia had promised and more. Never had he been surrounded by so many passionate people. Everyone who was there had been vetted, and everyone knew that they had to work hard if they wanted to stay. It was the real deal. It was like the competitive skating world that Coach dealt with; only those who won got to keep moving forward. If you failed too many seasons, or didn’t place high enough, or couldn’t afford the fees— at least in skating—that was it.

He learned quickly that while he had been gifted in Lilia’s classes, everyone at the Academy was, too. Gifted and exceptional wasn’t enough. Perfect wasn’t enough. The instructors were never satisfied. Peers were never impressed. It was everyone for themselves, and competition, even from the beginning, was fierce, with each student vying for attention.

Viktor fell somewhere among the ‘average’ in the run-of-the-mill Academy student. That was to say, a genius anywhere else, but at Vaganova…

He needed something to stand out. Some way to rise above without having to fight like some of the more aggressive boys. Viktor was smart, but not like some of the more mathematically-inclined students, and though he had experience, there were others that had far more. He wasn’t the strongest, the tallest, the thinnest, or even the least notable. Some had parents that were genuinely famous, not to mention alive. Others came from extremely wealthy families. Bankers and ballerinas, as it turned out, didn’t make very much for yearly salary.

Not that money mattered. Nor any of those things, really. But if he wanted to keep dancing, and thus skating, he had to do something.

Which was part of why he took the money with him to practice one afternoon and waited for Yakov to finish closing up his office that evening, hanging around at the rows of benches for a chance to talk.

“Hey, Coach?”

“Vitya. It’s late. Why haven’t you left yet?”

“I wanted to talk to you.”

“Of course. Are your classes going okay?”

“Yeah, yeah they’re fine…” Viktor sucked in a breath, steeling himself. “Look, I need to ask you a favor.”

“What… kind of favor?”

“I need you to buy something for me…” He dug into the pocket of his coat and pulled out a folded paper, which he offered to him. “I did some research. Uh. That should be enough money.”

The old man hesitated, taking a moment to look around. They were alone. He took the paper, unfolded it to find the bills and a very short list. “Aren’t you a bit young for this?”
Viktor rocked back and forth on his heels. “I’ll be eleven in a month…”

“Two months.”

“One and a half.”

“Hmmm.”

Viktor winced. “I can’t do it myself. I’ll, uh, bring tea cookies next practice?”

Sighing, Yakov folded the paper again, tucking it away into his own coat. “Fine. I’ll have it for you by the end of the week. Ah- Vitya!” he pinwheeled as Viktor hugged him, then took off.

“Thank you, Coach!”

“No running!”

“Sorry!”

--

At the end of the week, Yakov made good on his promise. Once everyone had cleared out for the day, he passed a brown paper parcel to the boy’s eager hands.

“ Aren’t you going to wait, open it at your dorm?” he asked.

“No… I can’t risk Gavrik seeing the package in the trash…” Viktor tore it apart, eyes bright and smile wide. Within seconds, he’d freed the package, and then the precious cargo inside: a brand-new tube of mascara. Kiko. Waterproof. Volumizing. Shaping. After tucking the trash under his arm, he twisted the cap off and pulled out the brush, which popped, and gave a little sigh. Then he closed it again.

“I can’t give you any advice…” Yakov mumbled.

“That’s okay. I’ll figure it out. I just have to get up early.” Viktor slipped it into the inside pocket of his coat. It fit perfectly. Secret, secure. No one would know. Makeup had gotten him through every ballet performance so far, and every day at the Academy was its own performance in a way. With darker, fuller lashes, he would have more confidence, and confidence was everything. It was the perfect weapon. Liquid courage. War paint.

He was beaming. “Thanks, Coach.”

“Anytime, Vitya…”

“ Stay away!” The boy screamed, hurling a stone from just beyond the gate “Get away from him!”

The rock landed harmlessly several feet from wolf and tiger, but both were startled by the sudden intrusion. The tiger growled, hackles raised. He hated when his private conversations were interrupted, especially by weakling humans.

The boy scrambled over the fence, dragging a branch with him- heavy, full of brambles -which he hauled into the air. “I said get away from him!”
“You’d better just go,” whispered the wolf to the tiger. The tiger had been the companion of the princess for many years, but it did no good to have them fighting… and besides, the boy had such a light in his eyes now. He was so passionate. So…

“I’m not just going to let this cub tell me what to do!” The tiger snarled, lashing his tail.

But the boy kept coming, swinging the branch, only this time he was yelling for the rest of the town. “Tiger! Tiger! Everyone there’s a tiger!”

The tiger cowered at that. A boy was one thing, but an entire village? Hunters? He looked back at the wolf with a glare, taking one rake of the branch to his face before bolting to the woods. The tiger would be long gone before anyone came to the boy’s aid.

The boy dropped the branch to the ground and threw his arms around the wolf’s neck, burying his face deep in his fur. “I was so worried he was going to hurt you.”

“You saved me,” said the wolf, heart full.

--

Viktor looked at his watch. Yuuri was late. Extremely late.

He tapped the ice with his skate, tired and anxious. Every second that he had to wait was another drain on his courage. Talking to someone about feelings sounded easy in theory, but in practice… well, not so much. Especially when that someone was Yuuri, who couldn’t even be asked a simple question, like if they’d had a past lover, without causing an existential crisis. Viktor had a feeling that it might not go so well.

They were compatible, though, weren’t they? Common interests, a bit odd, passionate, dog lovers, athletes, same favorite food… and they both loved Hasetsu. That was important. Plus neither of them liked to lose. And the fact that Yuuri had chosen that costume for Eros, out of all of them, said something. Meant something. They were the same. To some degree, they were different.

But it didn’t matter if Yuuri never showed up to practice and Viktor lost his nerve. What had he done the last time? The… only time he’d been in a relationship before? Approached and flirted, sent a card, established communication, then straight up asked him to be his boyfriend.

Would that work? It had worked then, but on Yuuri, he wasn’t sure. It was direct. It didn’t leave any room for confusion, either, which was important. Right. That’s what he would do, then. Direct. To the point.

Maybe.

But what if Yuuri said no? Could he handle the rejection? Would he be able to stay and coach? Would he have to leave, even after all of that bravado with Yurio?

What if Yuuri was horrified at the idea? He’d been so afraid of him, recoiled at every touch. Had he come to hate him after what happened in Sochi? Perhaps it was too soon, and they were only just now repairing the cracks in a tentative alliance between rivals for Yuuri’s benefit?

Or what if it crossed some kind of cultural line that he wasn’t aware of? After all, coach and student… and he was Yuuri’s idol, wasn’t he? Did that make it better or worse?

He checked his watch again.
He’d give him five… no, ten more minutes. He’d waited long enough that he needed to put his coat on.

*Tap tap tap.*

And in the meantime…

Viktor bit his lower lip. Maybe it wouldn’t hurt to arm himself against the upcoming battle. If not with Yuuri, then with himself. It was a risk, but with how anxious he felt, it was probably worth it.

Sighing, he unzipped his coat and dug into his inner pocket, finding the tube of mascara that he kept for emergencies, as well as the tiny compact mirror, and set to work. Just a little a little extra confidence could go a long way…

He’d just finished the last sweep when the double doors of the front entrance crashed open, followed by frantic, pounding footsteps. Viktor calmly closed the mascara and compact, and tucked them away. No evidence.

Yuuri gasped, throwing himself in through the doors. “Sorry I overslept!” He gasped.

Now prepared, it was easy to turn a magnanimous smile as he looked over his shoulder at the boy. “Good morning, Yuuri! Only Aeroflot has kept me waiting as long as you have.”

*Hee.*

They spent the entire day working on routines instead of discussing anything about romance at all. Something about Yuuri literally being on his hands and knees to beg for forgiveness struck Viktor as being an inappropriate time to bring up feelings and his desire to kiss him. He didn’t want Yuuri getting the wrong idea.

A relationship wasn’t a negotiation or a business deal. It wasn’t an exchange of goods and services or a power play. It was mutual respect and want. Which would never be if Yuuri didn’t even see him as potential dating material for one reason or another, above or below him. Did he? Maybe he needed more information first.

Yes, of course! That was the solution. Gathering intel on Yuuri. He couldn’t ask directly, of course, but he could run several experiments, ask probing, sideways questions, and extrapolate from between the lines based on reaction. Then, at the end, he would know. And then he would confront him, at least if he thought there was a chance. It was a solid enough plan, and it was the perfect way to put off asking him right away. And if Viktor Nikiforov was good at anything, it was being over prepared.

He started with more innocent touches. A little brush of fingers on his shoulders, a bump against his arm as he walked past, but neither of them got much of reaction. That was a good sign. Of course, Yuuri had gotten used to him being clumsy in the narrower hallways of the onsen, so maybe that was all it was. Hm.

Then there were the glances over dinner, half-lidded gazes over his drink, a tilt of his head here or there for maximum flirting without being too overt, but Yuuri didn’t seem to notice that, either. He mostly kept his eyes on the table or his meager meal of broccoli, tiredly chatting about skating and what came next. Was Yuuri just not interested?
Now that he thought of it, he spent most of the evenings not looking at him. Was Yuuri disgusted by his presence, or did he need to look away to survive? Viktor pursed his lips, a little offended. Either way, his student wasn’t paying him much attention. And he was even wearing mascara!

When they went to the baths, it seemed only reasonable to up the ante and begin the next experiment. The Japanese were so used to the naked body in the onsen, it shouldn’t have been a big deal to do some stretches next to the side of the bath, so why not? It was natural, and the flat, smooth stones were perfect for his sore muscles and joints. Really, it was heaven. Such a relief.

As someone who had studied art history at length in school, Viktor was not shy when it came to nudity. Students at the Academy quickly learned that the sooner you got used to the naked body, the sooner you could appreciate the beauty of it, and the sooner the awkward giggles of classmates would stop. Besides, no one could be shy after getting a full Brazilian wax as many times as he had.

Casual spread out and stretch, muscles warm and limber, all while the shop talk continued on. Nothing out of the ordinary, except that Yuuri, again, refused to look at him. Overtly. As in turned his back to him, hands cupped at the side of his head like blinders.

For someone who worked at a hot springs he was certainly shy. Except that Viktor knew it was just him that received that treatment. And it wasn’t just the stretches. It was whenever he was naked. This was just worse than ever before.

So, Viktor naked was definitely different for Yuuri. That meant something. But what?

More information needed.

He got to his feet and crossed to the side where Yuuri was moping, head down. The talk of changing his composition had not inspired confidence. But very little did.

“Yuuri, do you know why I decided to become your coach?”

“Huh?”

Viktor crouched at the water’s edge and reached for him, both hands grasping Yuuri’s to pull his attention to his face. It worked, maybe a little too well. Yuuri stared, frozen, eyes wide and mouth agape. Viktor continued. “I was drawn to you because of the music... the way you skate like your body is creating music.” It was all true. Even the memory of the infamous viral video brought the echoes of Stay Close to Me without any effort at all, Yuuri’s body movements drawing out the melody just as Viktor had intended when he’d originally choreographed the piece. He brushed his thumb over his hand, sliding smooth fingerpad over Yuuri’s slick and heated skin. “I want to create a high-difficulty program to maximize that.”

Yuuri gulped, throat tightening, face blazing red from the heat. Was it just the onsen? Was this too intense? There was only one way to find out.

Viktor tucked his chin, gaze dark, best wolf eyed gaze in place. “Only I can do that. That’s the gut feeling I had…”

There was that terrified prey stare again. Yuuri was going to faint at this rate.

He tightened his grip and pulled him up onto his feet, abandoning the predatory for a broad smile. “And the short program validated it! Perhaps you should produce your next free program.”

Once Yuuri had stumbled into place, he was easy for Viktor to manipulate, like a stiff little doll.
He pushed limbs here and there until he was in fourth position. Beautiful. Then he took his ankle, guiding it up, up, into a graceful arch, higher…

Meanwhile, Yuuri stuttered. “Huh? But my coach has always chosen my music- ow ow ow!”

Rotating at the joint of his hip for more height… just how flexible was Yuuri Katsuki? “Isn't it more fun to do it yourself?”

“That hurts!” Yuuri whimpered, “but my previous coach…”

“Who was your coach again?”

Yes. Who was the man who took Yuuri to the banquet in Sochi, got him to drink, and then left him to fend for himself? Who was the coach that let Yuuri embarrass himself, black-out drunk, in front of his peers and the press?

Celestino Cialdini.

Viktor knew the man. Knew of his fame and connections, and had once idolized him in his prime. But a rich legacy in skating and coaching was no excuse for abandoning someone who depended on you. It didn’t matter how many medals you had won or how fabulous your hair was. A good coach never let that kind of thing happen to their student. Yakov never would, anyway.

Yuuri called him from the changing room. “Oh, it's been a while... uh, sorry.”

Why was he apologizing? Viktor snatched Yuuri’s wrist and, subsequently, the phone. “Ciao, ciao, Celestino!” he said with a forced smile. There was no point in letting on how he felt about the man just yet, not until he had the information he needed. “I'm his coach, Viktor!”

There was a moment’s pause before the voice on the other end continued, dry and humorless. “You're playing at being a coach in Japan? Cut it out already.”

Deep breath. Viktor steeled himself, smile fixed into place. “Hey, why didn't you let Yuuri choose his program music?”

“Huh?” What followed was some diplomatic excuse about how he usually picked, but didn’t always, because his skaters trusted him or something, blah blah… but the important part, Viktor noted, was about Yuuri himself. "Yuuri never had confidence in himself. I told him time and again to trust himself more, but..." As if Viktor didn’t already know that.

He pulled away, letting Yuuri take over the conversation again. "Okay, thanks."

"U-um, Celestino…” Yuuri stammered, gearing himself up for someone who didn’t deserve any sort of affirmation. “I'm going to redeem myself at the next Grand Prix Final!” There was nodding, to which Viktor rolled his eyes, before he hung up and slumped on the bench in relief. "I'm so glad... I couldn't bring myself to contact him for so long..."

*Cripes.*

Viktor leaned over the bench, expression flat. If Ciao Ciao didn’t like the music, it could have been for any number of reasons. One of which being that he’d been a terrible coach. There was only one way to know for sure. "Yuuri... Could I hear this music he mentioned?"

“Uh…”
Nervous again. He needed to work on that confidence, especially when it involved people who weren’t even worth his time. “Why didn’t you tell me? I’m your coach, aren’t I?”

“Right, sorry…”

More apologies… Sigh. They’d need to work on that, too.

--

The music was, unfortunately, lackluster. So perhaps Ciao Ciao had been right about one thing. There was potential, but it was missing so much. If they’d had time, Viktor would have sent it to his own composers to have it redone, but it was far too late in the season for that. Salvageable, yes, but with their time constraints…?

Especially since it needed to be something that Yuuri felt, not Viktor. He couldn’t simply take it over for him, write the stories and reference the thematic components that would play into it. Suggesting le motifs would do them no good; it needed to be Yuuri’s piece. Was Yuuri capable of doing all of that on top of choreographing his own program? There was still so much to do. As much as he wanted it to be all Yuuri, they needed to consider other options.

Yet, Yuuri insisted on trying to have it rewritten.

That was fine. If the conservatory student could handle it and produce some usable material in time, why not? But otherwise, they needed another piece as soon as possible.

In the meantime, more Eros, smoothing out the rough edges, the transitions, and fixing the jumps. The percentages of success were still too low for comfort, and they were only in practice. So it was drills and workouts, day in and day out… and more subtle weedling out of information.

A statement, just casual, thrown into conversation to see if Yuuri would refute it. He refused to answer it as a question earlier, so… “Just try to remember something, like when a girlfriend loved you.”

“Haaaah?!”

Viktor blinked. It wasn’t the blushing, stammering response he’d expected, but a bitter, frustrated snap. He was… mad.

And then a second later, the apologies came out again. A fountain of them, jumbling together in a mass of nonsense. “S-SORRY!”

“Oh, right,” Viktor said, shrugging. It had been a line crossed. There was nothing to apologize for. “You’ve never had a girlfriend.” Would he get the confirmation once and for all?

But instead of another outburst, Yuuri lowered his eyes in shame. Hurt.

The naked truth was a cruel thing to lay bare for anyone, whether heart of stone or glass. Viktor hated that look. Hated knowing he’d gone too far. And not for the first time with Yuuri, either, remembering how he’d trembled before performing Eros …

It was almost too much for him to bear.

That was the end of practice.
That was really the end of it all.

Viktor wore a cautious smile the rest of the day, keeping distance but making peace offerings where he could. Yuuri would have none of it. No outings, no bath, and not even a single reaction when asked if he could sleep in his room. Not like the screaming ‘no’ of the first night.

Yuuri wouldn’t look at him. Barely uttered a word.

If he thought it was bad before, it was a thousand times worse now.

He didn’t even show up for practice in the morning.

*No skating for Yuuri Katsuki?*

Viktor had hurt him. That meant, more than anything, that Yuuri cared. That Viktor mattered to him. It wasn’t the way he wanted to come to that conclusion, but those were the facts. The rest of the data was confusing at best.

He tapped his skate on the ice, considering.

All that could be done was to apologize and level with him. No more games. If Yuuri rejected him, then he would simply have to carry on, true to his word, and be his coach only. Professional. Business only. It was a risk he was willing to take for both of their sakes. He couldn’t do that to Yuuri again.

Viktor took out the tube of mascara and rolled it in his hands. War paint. He bit his lip. Yuuri wouldn’t have any of that… nothing to safeguard him against the anxiety or onslaught of confusion or hurt that Viktor had caused or would stir up. He slid it back into his coat. He would go without, vulnerable, bare. It was only fair.

He would make it easy. A statement. An offer. All Yuuri would have to do is say yes. No justifications needed. No explanations.

And it would be enough.

Viktor smiled as he walked back to the hotsprings, nervous, but hopeful.

*“You are Viktor Nikiforov,”* Yakov had always said before competitions. *“You take what you want.”*

He could do this.

Chapter End Notes

Phichit: hey remember that time in college
Phichit: when I did that really stupid thing
Phichit: but then you did that other stupid thing
Phichit: and then you just never stopped doing stupid things? :3c
Phichit: is that pretty much what’s going on right now?
Yuuri: ... Which stupid thing are we talking about?
Phichit: the one with the video camera and the back flip on the ice
Phichit: and I couldn't decide if I wanted to land it one foot or two
Yuuri: right, I figured that was your stupid thing, but what was mine?
Yuuri: Never stopped doing stupid things :v ...
Phichit: Candace.
Yuuri: Oh...
Phichit: yeeeeeeeeeaaah

**On the Revenge of Gay Skate!!!:**
An introvert is pressured! / Hearts are broken! / Hamsters make a cameo! / Yuuri's hidden talents REVEALED!

*Please look forward to it!*
Heart of a Child

Chapter by mamodewberry

Chapter Summary

Yuuri shows Viktor the song he'd presented to Celestino, but he is also underwhelmed. In attempt to make up for the cowardice of his past self, Yuuri asks his classmate to redo the music and does lots of thinking.

Chapter Notes

In this Chapter: This chapter contains a moment a lot of you have been waiting for - The Beach Scene. This also contains a few additional favorites of mine: Yuuri jumping into bed with Viktor to have him listen to the song and THE HEAD BOOP (tbh I forgot this happened in my section of writing until I was double-checking the episode for dialogue!) There's also several things in here Gabapple has been looking forward to and I weep every time she gets super excited about it ;o; I took a lot of liberties in this chapter because Yuuri is such an unreliable narrator and we are never told what he went to school for or his relationship with the girl that made him the demo. Just as Gabapple has made up Viktor's school, I have as well, though a keyboard in Yuuri's room in Hasetsu was enough telling for me! And music stuff is just my jam/kink so you all can like shame me and stuff.

Gabapple: This flashback is something that we decided needed to be in the fic very early on and I have been DYING to get to it ever since. I mean months of waiting for this. On that note, it seems crazy to me that we've been working on this fic (research/outline/character studies) since October. Insane. But YES. This chapter killed me. I've read through it several times now, and it has clenched my heart every single time. But then, music is something that is extremely important in both of our lives. Mamodewberry herself plays the piano... My dad was legit in a rock band and I sing and have always been in a capella groups through school. At one point, Mamodewberry and I were in a group TOGETHER with some other friends and we did the BUFFY MUSICAL and that was awesome. 8) Ah, the good old days. ... but in regards to the chapter, there is a little bit of overlap from last chapter, but it's Yuuri PoV, and so, so needed... and there will be some overlap in chapter 12 when we go back to Viktor and get HIS take on things... in all its heart-breaking glory... as we head into the beautiful, incredible, amazing Summer Chapters.

Recommended listening:

1. Heart of a Child, by Jon Schmidt
2. Minuet in G Major, BWV Anh. 114, by Johann Sebastian Bach
3. Yuri on ICE, by Taro Umebayashi

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Good job today, Katsuki-kun,” said Coach Ito, throwing a towel Yuuri’s way.

Yuuri caught it, fumbling to open it flat to wipe his face while opening his water bottle. “Thanks, Coach.”

“We’ll work on landings tomorrow. Go easy on your foot tonight.”

He nodded and grabbed for his glasses in his sports duffle, then sat on the bench to remove his skates.

Learning more jumps was great for his building repertoire, but he still couldn’t cleanly land on most of them. Wobbly free leg, tumbling over, or turning into half rotations. He knew it would be difficult, and he knew he could get himself to do it. After all, he did prove his potential to Ito in order to be coached by him in the first place.

Once dressed, he bowed and exited the rink through the sliding doors where Yuko and Nishigori waited for him. They didn’t have to - he was capable of walking home on his own - but these days he was too busy skating with his coach to be with them, so he appreciated it.

“Your face is still really red,” Yuko giggled.

Yuuri patted at his face, self-consciously. “I worked really hard today.”

“I can tell! You’ll make it to the pre-qualifiers for sure.”

Yuuri smiled at that, pleased, and the three of them fell into step towards the bridge into town.

“Why are you limping?” Nishigori asked. “Did you fall?”

Several times, but he didn’t need to know that! “I’m… not much. My foot hurts a little. That’s all.”

“Uh huh. Sure.”

“Anyway,” Yuko cut through their conversation like the peacemaker she was, “I was thinking; what if you wrote a letter to Viktor, Yuuri?”

He had thought about it. Several times. He knew how to get the address for his fanmail, even found the site for it, just… “What would I say?”

“That you’re going to meet him in the senior division one day and beat him!”

“Huh? B-but that sounds like I’m threatening him?!?”

“Well, if you’re going to compete, that’s essentially what you’re doing, anyway. Threatening to take the gold!”

“N-no… that’s not--”

“Eh, I doubt he reads letters from his fans. Famous people don’t have time for that. Or care.”

Yuuri’s heart dropped at that. Nishigori probably was right. Viktor had thousands of fans all over
the world… why would Yuuri’s letter be special enough to be worth reading?

“Shut up, Takeshi!” Yuko punched his arm. “You hurt Yuuri’s feelings.”

“Ow! I’m trying to spare his feelings now. I’m doing him a favor.”

Since he’d started down the path of professional skating, Yuuri had cut back on his portions. If he was going to be a true athlete, he had to exercise discipline alongside his body. Which meant he couldn’t binge eat while thinking about his conversation with his friends after skating practice.

“How was practice today, Sweetie?”

Yuuri looked up at his mother, then down at his plate. Of course she noticed he was playing and savoring the last bite of his yakiniku. “It was fine. I learned a new jump today.”

“That’s wonderful! Was it difficult?”

“I can’t make a clean landing, yet.”

“You’ll get there.”

He smiled and reached for his glass of barley tea when his mother continued.

“Is that what’s bothering you?”

Before looking back to her, he glanced at the other table ends at his father, who was reading the paper, and Mari, who was texting. “I…” He closed his mouth, and tried again. “Yuko-chan thinks I should write a letter to Viktor. Nishigori doesn’t think he’d read it.”

“Why do you even bother hanging out with that kid?” Mari asked, breaking from her phone.

Because he was always around Yuko, was the main reason. He was a bully, but at least Yuko could usually temper him and was nice when not picking on him.

“Do you want to write to Viktor?” his mother asked.

“What if he doesn’t read it?”

“What if he does and answers?”

Yuuri looked down, catching his glasses from falling down his nose. What if he did respond? The thought made his chest tighten.

“Just write your future husband a letter.”

His face then tingled and turned as bright as a tomato. “Mari!”

“She’s right, Yuuri,” his mother winked. “Tell him your feelings.”

“I-I-I can’t do that!” He had even less chance of a love letter reaching Viktor. Yuuri was younger than him, in another country, and he wasn’t confident he was the type of boy Viktor would like... Too many variables at play and Mari’s snickering wasn’t easing his mind.

Mrs. Katsuki laid her chopsticks down and brought a hand up to rest her cheek on. “Well, what
would you tell him?"

Definitely not that he was in love with him, because he wasn’t. His feelings were idolization. Posters on his wall and collecting magazines were a sign of being a fan. Was that a type of love? Kissing the cheek of his favorite Viktor poster was for congratulating him on his latest medals. That’s all that was. Yeah. “I’d tell him how I’m skating because of him,” Yuuri finally said, swirling his chicken in the remains of the yakiniku sauce.

It took a week for Yuuri to summon up the nerve to sit down at his desk with paper and pen. He’d gone between mulling over what to write and dropping the suggestion all together. It made him excited, but nervous.

Vicchan trotted over to his chair and stood on hind legs to paw at Yuuri’s knee. Before he could scratch skin, he hoisted the poodle onto his lap and stared at the blank page in front of him.

His gaze travelled above his desk to a poster of Viktor in casual clothes, wrapping a scarf around his poodle, Makkachin. That kind smile did make Viktor seem like a person that would try to read letters from fans. Or talk to him if they were to ever meet in person.

“What if he can’t read Japanese?” Yuuri asked his mother. “My English isn’t very good.”

“He’s at that fancy academy in Russia, right?” Mari piped in. “I bet someone there could translate for him. Since he’s got fans all over, he’d have ways to read multiple languages.”

With a sigh, he switched on his desk light and reached for a pen.

Dear Viktor,

My name is Yuuri Katsuki. I’m thirteen years old and live in a little coast town in Japan. I’ve been skating and doing ballet since I was little. As of two months ago, I’m being coached by Saito Ito to be a figure skater for Japan. I haven’t been your fan for very long, but because of you I decided I wanted to be a skater, too.

I know I’m starting late and it’s more difficult learning techniques this old, but my coach says I have a good foundation in ballet and basic skating. The pressure from the blade is hard on my feet from landing. I struggle keeping my balance consistent. Is there some advice you can give me?

I’ve been trying to find backlogs of interviews so I wouldn’t need to ask, but, do you ever get nervous? Were you really nervous when you first started?

I’m hoping if I train really hard the rest of this year that I’ll be able to debut in the junior division next season, and get a good record that I can eventually move onto the senior division. I really look up to you, Viktor - My friend and I try to copy your skating routines! When I get into the senior division, I want to make it to the Grand Prix so that I can skate with you. I hope I can make it that far.

I look forward to seeing your programs this coming season! Ganbatte kudasai!

Yuuri Katsuki
“Oh, I see. So this is how it sounds like.” Viktor had a tired, feigned smile on his face, his voice did little to hide he wasn’t impressed. “You should think of other possibilities.”

Celestino’s reaction wasn’t much better. He’d asked if Yuuri thought he could win with that music, casual, but enough disbelief was there it smashed what confidence he had gained once the completed demo was in his hands. Yuuri had rolled over and lost the chance to use original music, giving in to what he usually did.

The piece really was underwhelming. Just like he was. A reflection of his career as a skater - a dime a dozen.

And yet… it had resonated with him and he’d loved it.

Having music composed just for him was something he always wanted because that’s what Viktor had done. He now had another chance and he wanted to make it work.

By the light of his desk lamp, Yuuri changed positions, restless in his chair as he pondered the notes of his program.

That was also something he’d wanted, but always let his coaches do it for him. Viktor encouraging him to do so was a curse and a blessing.

Eventually he slumped forward, finger habitually clicking on the Instagram app icon. Phichit’s photos were always the first on his timeline. Judging by the tagged location, he was back in Thailand skating at his home rink. He wondered how Celestino felt about that.

Exiting the app, he dialed Phichit’s number on phone chat while he sat upright.

Phichit answered in his carefree smile, joking that he felt lucky to get a phone call again so soon. If two months was considered soon.

“Hey, Phichit-kun, do you remember how I had a music demo made?”

“Oh, yeah! By your conservatory classmate? You asked her to compose it, right?”

“Yeah. It got shelved in the end…”

Alondra was older than Yuuri and had been working towards her Master’s of Arts. Some of their classes had overlapped during his extended five-year Bachelor’s of Art program, and they’d become friends and mutual lovers of similar types of music, extending over The Classics. She’d become a fan of figure skating once she learned that her fellow classmate was an actively competing athlete, and their discussions evolved into analyzing the song choices of Yuuri and his rivals. She was easy to talk to and Yuuri was always grateful for that.

So grateful, he’d asked her to compose a song for him to skate to.
She’d raised a brow at him. "But, you’re learning to compose music too, Yuuri. Why don’t you write your own music? That is why you chose the major you did, right?"

He’d chosen Liberal Arts because that was all he’d ever been interested in in his life. Music - dancing and skating to it, its components and history. Plus, he’d needed to attend school to keep his scholarship and to be coached under Celestino in the states. The major allowed him to study modern dance as well.

Composing a song for his own programs had been a dream - still was - just as skating on the same ice with Viktor, but it wasn’t a requirement for the latter. Just a nice side Someday Goal. Naturally, he had to compose pieces for his classes, but he’d been detached from them as they were ‘just class assignments.’ He didn’t consider himself a very good musician. Someone who admired music and the impact it had on his life, rather than create and practice it. And that was fine with him.

“You’ve been doing this a lot longer than I have. I trust you,” he’d told her.

She hadn’t betrayed that trust. The fault was all on his own self-worth. He’d listened to the piece all night through his headphones when she’d given it to and couldn’t stop crying. It was so raw and cut him straight through.

After Celestino’s hesitancy towards it, he couldn’t help feeling relieved. He wasn’t ready for the world to see him so bare and fragile. It was then he realized that’s why he couldn’t compose for himself. Looking at himself from someone else’s eyes seemed a lot safer, even if in the end he backed down.

“Things got awkward with her after that,” Yuuri continued. Alondra wasn’t offended that he didn’t use it then. He had a feeling she probably knew, so she told him to keep it. As gracious as she was, he didn’t have the heart to talk to her. Then again, skating season started and he was in and out of school, had become incredibly recluse after the Grand Prix Final failure, skipped out on the actual graduation ceremony, and headed home for Hasetsu.

“Oh I see…” Phichit hummed. “I’ll put out some feelers to see where she is. I’m sure she’s not mad or anything.”

The assurance helped. Yuuri nodded and said his thanks.

“How are things going with Viktor, by the way?”

“Fine as they can be. Being worked harder than Ciao Ciao ever did.”

“His personal training regimen is crazy, so I’m not surprised. Not that I’d know that since you told me at least a hundred times when we were rooming.”

“Guilty…”

“Well, you seem less frazzled. He’s not freaking you out anymore?”

“I … wouldn’t say that.”

“Yeah?”

He decided to omit their time in the onsen the other night. The uninvited touching still happened, but Yuuri admitted, inwardly, he’d grown kind of used to it. What he hadn’t gotten used to was: “He really cares about my dating experience. For some reason.” And each time he asked, his stomach twisted.
“Any idea why?”

“Maybe he thinks I’d skate better. Less distractions?”

“Do you really think that’s why?” Phichit did that eyebrow thing again that always made him wary.

“Why else would he?”

The eyebrows ceased their teasing and he sighed. “Oh nothing. Still keep me updated on things. And I’ll get in contact with Alondra. Talk later!”

Getting in contact with Alondra wasn’t as instant as Yuuri had hoped, which lead to Viktor being impatient.

“You still haven’t decided on a piece of music?”

Yuuri understood the time constraint, but he just had to contact her about redoing it, hoping the email Phichit found was sufficient. Had to try.

“Why can’t you trust your own decisions?” Viktor asked while Yuuri panted over the barrier at practice.

He was trying to trust himself, and himself was waiting.

“Just try to remember something, like when a girlfriend loved you.”

What did that have to do with anything? And why did he care so much about him having a girlfriend or not? If his lack of dating experience was such a problem, he just had to say so!

“Haaa?!” It took half a second to realize he’d snapped at Viktor. As annoyed as he was, he knew better. “S-s-sorry! Right now, it’s just that I - am super stressed with getting the music and working on my program and -

“Oh right. You’ve never had a girlfriend,” Viktor stated, dismissing the apology altogether.

No. He hadn’t, ever. And he hated how it made him feel guilty and embarrassed and that Viktor kept bringing it up. Hated how he reacted to him.

Yuuri spent the rest of the evening avoiding his coach.

By morning the guilt was killing him. He’d missed out on meeting Viktor at the rink before, but that had been an accident. Now he was deliberately not leaving the comfort of his room.

So when Viktor burst in with a practiced, patient smile declaring they should go to the ocean, Yuuri agreed, all the while panicking and preparing for the biggest lecture of his life.

They dressed for the damp morning air and headed to the beach. They sat in the sand at a respectable distance apart with Makkachin separating them. A lecture didn’t come, but the black-tailed gulls flying and crying above prompted Viktor to talk about St. Petersburg and that was the first time Yuuri could recall he’d talked about his home, other than food, since coming to Hasetsu.

“I never thought I’d leave that city,” Viktor carried on nostalgically, “so I never used to notice the
seagulls’ cries. Do you ever have times like that?”

Yuuri listened to his tale. He nodded, thinking he understood what he meant. “There was a girl in Detroit who was really pushy and kept talking to me. One time, a rink mate got into an accident. I was pretty torn up with worry…” He held his arms tighter around his drawn up legs. The sterile smell, the squeaky shoes of the nurses in the hallways, Phichit bleeding… “I was in that hospital waiting room with that girl. When she hugged me to comfort me, I shoved her away without thinking about it.”

“Wow, why?” Viktor asked, a soft and curious.

“I didn’t want her to think I was feeling unsettled. I felt like she was intruding on my feelings or something, and I hated it. But then I realized that Minako-Sensei, Nishigori, Yuko-chan, and my family never treated me like a weakling. They all had faith that I’d keep growing as a person, and they never stepped over the line.”

“Yuuri, you’re not weak. No one else thinks that either.”

He continued to look out towards the sea and rippling tide, digesting Viktor’s claim. If Viktor did think he was weak, would he bother coaching him? No… Would his lack of dating experience be considered a weakness, and is that why it bothered him when asked?

“What do you want me to be to you?” Viktor asked, voicing break through his thoughts as it usually did. “A father figure?”

He mulled that over for a few moments. “No.”

“A brother, then? A friend?”

Yuuri thought harder at that. No, that wasn’t quite right.

“Then, your boyfriend, I guess. I can try my best.”

Instantly Yuuri was to his feet. “No, no, no, no, no!” Where did that come from so suddenly? Several frantic wavings of his hands later, he pulled a fist to his chest, a flush in his cheeks. “I want you to stay who you are, Viktor! I’ve always looked up to you.” As Viktor looked up at him, Yuuri looked down and away, “I ignored you because I didn’t want you to see my shortcomings. I’ll make it up to you with my skating!”

Standing, Viktor extended a hand, which struck Yuuri odd, considering the physical contact they’ve had. Yet, he seemed… “Okay, I won’t let you off easy, then. That’s my way of showing my love.”

Yuuri took his hand, feeling the tension between them part like the clouds in the sky above them.

Their hands fell to their sides and into their own pockets.

Makkachin whimpered and Viktor used that as an excuse to walk along the shoreline. Yuuri had no complaints and kept in step with him, a comfortable silence passing between them.

Silence and Viktor weren’t common. At least when they were together. Between questions of Japan and its culture and coaching instructions and advice, quiet was unheard of.

Yuuri wondered if what he said had been weird. For his own selfish wishes, Yuuri wanted to know the real Viktor, separate from what the media painted and his own fabrications from his youth.
Maybe Viktor hadn’t expected to hear that.

And the more Yuuri got to know Viktor, the more comfortable he’d be able to be around him.

Yuuri stilled in the sand.

Did Viktor want the same thing? Was that the reason behind the touching and close proximity and questions? If they were to be coach and student, being close and comfortable was natural, wasn’t it?

“Yuuri?”

“Oh. It’s nothing,” Yuuri answered, a small smile, and pat Makkachin’s head who butted his leg in concern.

He shouldn’t be afraid to open up more, for every time he did, Viktor met him halfway. For both of them, he needed to try.

Later that evening, Yuuri’s email pinged with a new message. It was from Alondra!

_Hey, Yuuri!

Long time no chat! I wasn’t that hard to find, you know. Maybe you should actually get a Facebook ;) Anyway, I’d be glad to redo the music for you. I know how much you liked the first one, so I’ll keep it as close to the original as I can. Adding an extra umph to it! If you have any suggestions, please feel free to email me back. It is yours, after all. Any input like “make this part cooler” is fine.

Alondra

Alondra,

Thanks for getting back to me and accepting my request. I trust your judgement. I promise I’ll use the music no matter what this time. Thank you for your time and patience. Every part is “cool”, I can’t pick it apart like that.

Yuuri

It was difficult to wait until morning practice to tell Viktor the news, but Yuuri had no choice considering Viktor went to bed at a decent hour. When he met up with him at the rink, he received it positively and agreed to wait. In the meantime, Yuuri requested Viktor to teach him all the jumps he knew.

It was a known fact Yuuri’s technical skills were lacking, so he needed to learn all that he could, and who better than the one he considered the master of them?

Triple axel, toe-loops, salchows. Once he mastered those, he could move onto quads. Okay, maybe that was getting ahead of himself for now. He needed more for his program, regardless.
Hearing from Alondra and Viktor agreeing to the song redo filled him with gusto, he couldn’t stop practicing until he was satisfied.

“Viktor, please let me do that one more time!” Yuuri panted, wiping sweat from his chin.

His coach was doubled over the rink barrier, worn and tired. “Wow, hasn’t it been tens of thousands of times already?”

“Just thirteen.” He’d be willing to stop at fifteen. Twenty if Viktor would allow it.

Lifting his skate, Viktor brushed ice particles from his blades. “I’ve thought this for a while, but you’ve got pretty good stamina.”

“Well, I have that at least.” He just needed to combine it with his skills!

Viktor was still bent forward, tending to cleaning his blades, top of his head bared. He was taller than Yuuri, so he hadn’t seen this view before…

In the back of his mind, he could hear Viktor saying something about hunger, injuries, and youth… and before Yuuri knew it, he’d reached out with a finger to touch the top of his idol’s silver hairline.

And then immediately pulled back, flustered. What had possessed him to do that? “S-sorry! I couldn’t help it!”

Rubbing at the poke, Viktor asked, “Is it getting that thin?”

“No, no, no! It’s very thick and shiny!”

The words didn’t help and Viktor slid to his knees and then onto his side. “I’m hurt… I can’t recover from this.”

“I’m sorry!” Yuuri then too dropped to his knees and bowed, repeatedly. “Please get up!” It had been spontaneous, no amount of apologizing could take it back. Was Viktor truly offended or was he also reacting on impulse?

"Yuuri..." Viktor finally whined a few moments later, turning a pout up at him - the first playful expression he’d seen in days. "You're so mean to me."

It was surprising how much Yuuri’d missed it.

A week later, Yuuri’s laptop pinged with an email notification. His attentions tore from his free skate program notes to read the message.

Yuuri,

Sorry if this took too long and you’ve been waiting in agony. I’ve gone through a few versions from the original demo and I believe this to be the superior version. The melody is relatively the same, just more upbeat and generally more. Since you didn’t give me any input whatsoever, I took the liberty of adding violin to it. I hope that doesn’t upset you since you loved the piano on its own.

I’m really happy for you that Viktor gets to be your coach. He always seemed important to you. I
did the piece this way thinking about how he’s inspired you. If I stepped over a line, call me out on it.

Again, thanks for coming to me to help make this better. And hey, if you medal gold with this, keep me in mind for composing your future programs ;)

Best of luck!

Alondra

Yuuri took out his headphones from his drawer and plugged them into the jack and downloaded the attachment. Double clicked and hit play.

Running scales, quick, with single treble notes. Chords building. Steady percussion and then, there it was, the violin, quietly peeking its way into the melody like it was trying to catch it, and then it was leading it. Crescendo. Then there an abrupt halt into piano on its own. It was there it resembled the original piece with its melancholy and isolation and he realized this piece had been the same tempo as the previous all along and the running scales were actually sextuplets! After the bridge, the sextuplets picked up again, heavy eighth notes in the treble, the violin returned to support the piano along, ride cymbal chiming. Strong crescendo, and then the percussion fled, violin string echoing its final note, leaving the piano into a beautiful ritardando.

His chest felt heavy.

He hit play again. Turned it up louder. Closed his eyes to feel it this time - absorb - rather than break it down. He should have done that in the first place, but he was too excited, had to make sure it was perfect.

The lone piano parts illustrated his humble beginnings just as before, but he felt more bright-eyed and ready to face the world. And then the violin - Viktor - appearing to guide him in his journey. A guide and mentor then falling behind to let him go on his own. Then returning when the piano couldn’t do it alone just yet, and staying with it until the very end.

This song wasn’t about Yuuri and how hard he tried and how hard he fell. This was how he was rising. With Viktor’s help.

Unhooking his laptop, he hoisted it off his desk and sprinted down the hall to Viktor’s room, sliding the door open. “Viktor!”

The lights were off and Viktor was peacefully curled up on his side. Yuuri ran towards the bed and leapt up only to step on Makkachin, who yelped at the pain and being woken up.

“Ah, sorry! The music for the free program is here.” Yuuri reached over to switch on a lamp while Viktor lethargically and shirtless sat up without a word. Settling in front of Viktor’s spread legs, Yuuri carefully edged forward to insert his earbuds into Viktor’s ears and the song was ready to start.

For a moment he thought Viktor fallen back asleep, but then his eyes opened, a wide, pleased smile across his face, nodding his approval.

Did Viktor hear and feel what he had?
A Poem by Viktor Nikiforov (in haiku):

Once upon a time  
There was a champion Grand  
Then he fell in love

But the boy was shy  
So he had to be clever  
And make it easy

He would just ask him:  
"What do you want me to be?"  
What a fool-proof plan!

Not father, nor bro  
Lover then! I'll do my best!  
Only: No no no!

In the end, it failed  
And now my heart is broken  
And the tears won't stop

When Gay Skate Lives Again:
There's a lot of crying? / Yuri on ICE!!! / MAGICAL FIREFLIES!!!! / Cheer up, Viktor!

*Please look forward to it!*
Hopeless

Chapter by gabapple

Chapter Summary

After Yuuri's rejection, Viktor finds himself once more at a loss for motivation. He came to Hasetsu to bring his fellow skater to the Grand Prix Final and get the gold, but how can he continue to face him day after day with a broken heart?

Chapter Notes

In this chapter:
Gabapple: This chapter is way too long and it was exhausting but so much fun to write. I probably got a little too indulgent in places, but oh well.¯\_(ツ)_/¯ I'm excited to see how everyone reacts to... well, there's a LOT in this chapter to react to (I think). My fingers are crossed that I did a good. There were lots and lots of moving pieces. I even made Mamodewberry write a mini scene (in addition to all of the usual Yuuri and Chris dialog, etc), which is FUN... there'll be more of that shifting-in-chapter PoV stuff later on. Ahh I'm so glad this chapter is done... It has been plaguing me for weeks.

Mamodewberry: Like Gabapple said, there IS a lot in this chapter. Important Things. Things that have been hinted at here and there. More things coming to light. Things that have made us sob in our RP sessions. It's a pretty heavy chapter overall, but it does end on the hopeful side!

Gabapple: Please enjoy the ~*~ special flashbacks ~*~ that do not take place in the usual flashback timeline. Gosh I'm scared of finally revealing SECRETS but I guess we can't keep them secret forever! What would be the point?!! :);;

New Art!

Viktor and Yurio from Chapter 1, illustrated by Adashuko (commission)
Wolf!Viktor and Peasant!Yuuri from chapter 10, illustrated by princessharumi (commission)

Recommended Listening:
Hopeless Romantic, by Meghan Trainor
Hedgehog’s Dilemma, by Shiro Sagisu
Somewhere Only We Know, by Keane

See the end of the chapter for more notes
“Vitya, we need to talk.”

Viktor hesitated in the doorway of the room he shared with Gavrik, one hand holding the door, the other pulling the satin ribbon out of his hair. They’d been roommates for almost two years, and if he’d learned anything, it was that talking meant trouble. “Okay?”

The other boy tucked his feet under his legs, getting comfortable on his own bed- the one next to the window. “Go on, shut the door. This is a private conversation.”

Wary, but obedient, Viktor shut the door and crossed to his own bed, perching on the edge. “Am I in trouble, or is it you this time?”

“No one’s in trouble, per se; I just need to talk to you about next year’s room assignments.”

It wasn’t surprising. Viktor knew that it was only a matter of time before Gavrik tried to find a more advantageous roommate. After all, Viktor still wasn’t rich or famous. He excelled in ballet, sure, but he had no talent for piano, and very little patience for the more tedious subjects. Like Art History, which was fun when he got to analyze the meaning of a painting, but not so much when he had to memorize the artist’s name, the year it was painted, who commissioned it, what movement it was from, and the medium it was done in. Who cared? He wanted to know why it was painted and how the artist came to those decisions! But essay portions only counted for part of his scores. Alas.

He rubbed his neck. “Are you thinking of requesting a different room next year?”

“Considering, yes.” Gavrik rolled his wrist until his watch faced him. “I hope you understand that I just need to think about how things might affect me as we get older.”

“Right.” Viktor sighed. “But is it because I’m poor or because I’m dumb?”


“I…” Viktor was only able to get the one word out before the confusion set in. That didn’t make any sense. Gay? He shook his head. “I’m not gay.”

“Yes. Yes you are.”

“I’m twelve.”

“And gay.”

“Is that… is that even a thing?” Not that he was, but wasn’t that something that happened when a person was older? Viktor squinted across the room.

“Yes, it’s a ‘thing,’ and yes, you are. You poor, poor thing.”

“I’m sorry I don’t have any money! I can’t compete yet, I’m not old enough!”

Gavrik turned away to dig under his pillow. “That’s not what I meant. Now look, you dress like a girl.”
“It’s- it’s an acceptable style for ballerinas!”

“You wear makeup.”

“We all do!”

“For performances, but you wear it every day. ” Gavrik slid a little leather-bound book out and held it up. “Besides, I was reading your diary, and you actually wrote, in purple glitter pen, that you were waiting for your prince charming to come and sweep you off your feet.”

The heat was instant, flooding Viktor’s cheeks as his jaw dropped. “You- you read my journal?!” It came out as a squeak. “Gavrik!”

“You even have girly handwriting. And look at this page I’ve marked, where you describe your potential mate; you’ve drawn little hearts all over it. And I think that’s supposed to be a unicorn.”

“IT’S SYMBOLIC!”

“No, it’s gay. ‘Someone who is sweet, and who can dance- of course -and appreciate the little details, and like art. Bonus points if they’re super cuuuuuute, extra bonus points-’”

Viktor could have cut Gavrik’s fake-Viktor voice off by lunging to attack. Or throwing something. Instead, he took up his own pillow to bury his face, and screamed. “Stop! Don’t read it!”

Gavrik set the journal down and frowned. “So you see.”

Viktor burned behind the pillow. Nowhere in the journal had he specified that it had to be a boy, though he guessed Gavrik wouldn’t understand that a prince could be anyone. Just like a princess could be. Slowly, he dragged the pillow down to peek over at his roommate, who watched him with the stillness and patience of an owl in a tree. He dropped back into the fluffy hiding place.

“Vitya. You’re not crying, are you?”

“No.” He wasn’t. Just mortified.

Gavrik moved on. “Anyway, with the evidence, it might be best. Though you’re trustworthy and hard-working, and obviously not a threat, so those are points in your favor…”

Not a threat? Viktor raised his head again. “What?”

“Well, you know.”

Setting his elbows on top of the pillow, chin in his hands, Viktor pursed his lips, face cooling. “No, really. What was that?”

“I meant territory-wise, Vitya. I know you’re talented.”

“Hmm.” The narrow-eyed gaze turned into batting lashes, and Viktor put on a little smirk. “Maybe I’m just hoping that someone will come along and give me lots of money. A sugar daddy.”

The reaction, as expected, was priceless: Gavrik’s face colored- a rare treat -and his brows furrowed in abject horror. After a few second’s pause, he shuddered. “Okay, that was extremely gay. I gave you money that one time… Never again!”

“Oh come on~”
“Vitya, no! Don’t you make those eyes at me! Ugh!”

Laughing, Viktor shoved the pillow aside and hopped off of the bed. “Don’t worry. You’re not my type. Or whatever.”

“What! And why is that?”

Viktor put one hand on his hip and held out the other. “Because you read my journal.”

“Fine. But you left it out in the open.” Gavrik handed it back, then flopped over backward with a sigh.

“I thought I could trust you.”

“Sorry.” He waved a hand. “You’re still gay, though.”

“And you’re still a jerk.” The pages were intact, thankfully. Nothing torn or missing, not even the little pressed flowers or scraps of paper he’d put in for safekeeping.

“I guess it’s settled, then.”

Viktor retreated to his own bed, then looked back at him. “What is?”

“I’m not sure. But something has.”

“...okay.”

“Also, your poetry is really bad.”

“You weren’t supposed to read it!”

“Love is like blue roses~”

“Gavrik...”

“I guess that’s true, though. I’m pretty sure blue roses don’t exist. Like love.”

“That really is symbolic. Blue roses have to be carefully cultivated from white roses and/or magic. Love is the same way.”

“White roses and magic?”

“Stop picking on me or I’ll flirt with you again.”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry!”

“Cripes...”

Later, as Viktor wrote in his journal while Gavrik slept, he considered the accusation. Was it really gay if it was the princess in him that swooned and sighed over the princes? It didn’t seem like that should count.

Gavrik was dumb, anyway.
The alarm went off again, quiet trills on the night stand once, twice, then off with a clumsy hand that disappeared back under the covers once peace had been restored. Makkachin lifted his head, sniffed, then turned to the sliding door. Viktor had hit snooze three times already that morning. Once every few days was a normal occurrence, but it was becoming habit. That worried him.

It wasn’t as though he couldn’t just slip out of the room; he’d gotten good at pushing his nose up against the door and sliding it open on his own. That had let him explore and visit the rest of the family. As much as he loved his own Person best, there were plenty of other People that needed to be taken care of in the house, and all of them were very nice. If he needed to go outside, or if his belly started to ache with hunger, he was sure that the others would help him out. Mama and Papa Katsuki got up early, too. So there were options.

But what was Viktor’s problem?

Makkachin stretched out lengthwise against him over the covers, back legs behind, forelegs in front, and yawned with a loud whine as he nuzzled the blanket where a bit of silver hair poked over the rim. It was time to get up. They had things to do. People to visit. Food to eat.

Viktor stirred, but curled up tighter, pulling the blankets with him.

Makkachin cocked his head to one side. It was something he’d seen Yuuri do plenty of times when he’d tried to wake him up, but Viktor hadn’t done it in several years. At least, not without the smell of alcohol on him. He sniffed again. Nope. None.

Army crawling closer, up and onto Viktor’s pillow, the poodle stuck his nose under the blanket to find Viktor’s face, bumping his forehead, his eyelids, his nose.

“Makka… stop it…”

Aha! So he was awake! Wagging his tail with a thump thump against the bed, Makkachin crawled in further, slithering under the blanket head first over Viktor’s face, then chest, stomach, and legs.

“Makkachin! Get off me!”

Once fully immersed, he turned around, careful to step on Viktor only three or four times- the maximum allowed before he’d really get scolded -then squirmed up until he was at face level again.

“Brff.”

Viktor frowned at him, blinked once or twice, then rolled onto his side to drape his arms around the dog.

Success.

“I know I need to get up.”

Makkachin panted at him, letting the doggy breath wash over him like smelling salts.

“And I will. Soon.”

“I can’t… face him, day after day…”

The choke in Viktor’s voice was all-too familiar. Makkachin licked his face from cheek to eyebrow, then over the bridge of his nose, and onto his forehead, and would have continued if Viktor hadn’t pushed his face away.

“Makka…”

The pain cut fresh and harsh, emotions from Viktor washing over him like crashing waves. It hurt. He hated it. His poor Viktor. Poor, poor Viktor. There’d been so many times just like this, when the hurt would come, and all they could do was wait for it to ease up. At least enough to get moving. Makkachin buried his muzzle against Viktor’s neck, pressing close with a huff.

It never lasted too long. Sometimes just a few minutes, occasionally a few hours. Makkachin was trained to handle it. Stay close, press tight, keep him company until it was better, then get him outside. Back to routine. Routine was important. Routine was essential to keep Viktor happy. Then it would be fine. It was always fine after that.

Maybe later he could drag Viktor to the beach again. That would make him happy, too. They’d bring Yuuri. Less talking and more running, though.

Talking never seemed to make People happy.

--

“Then, your boyfriend, I guess. I can try my best.”

Viktor watched the trail of Yuuri’s skates, cutting thin lines into the ice as he moved. The marks were a mix of confident, broad strokes and wavering curves. When Yuuri set up for a jump, he hesitated. The evidence would stay etched until Yuko’s staff cleaned the ice that evening, resurfacing it for a new day.

“Again,” he said, voice tired but carried by all the authority he could muster. Viktor was Yuuri’s coach now, nothing more. “Come on, Yuuri.”

Yuuri fell in line right away, as expected; quick, obedient, with a sharp “Ah, yes!” in reply.

Maybe it was all the Japanese skater really wanted. A tough coach. Someone to keep him in line. Someone that would drag the potential out of him by the whiskers if he had to.

Viktor studied the parallel of limbs to ice, the speed and angles as Yuuri worked through the practice drills that had been set for him. He could do that. Be his coach. That was why he’d come to Hasetsu. That was why he would stay.

At least until the season was over.

Yuuri would have his first choice of coaches, then. He could have anyone he wanted. He probably could already, now that Viktor Nikiforov’s name had been tied to him. But once they’d gone through the Grand Prix, Japanese Nationals, the Four Continents, Worlds… there would be no one who didn’t want Yuuri Katsuki.

How did it fit into the narrative?

“No, no, no, no!”
Viktor shuddered at the memory of that recoil. It had just been nerves, he was relatively sure; Yuuri reacting badly to something so sudden and intimate. He should have known better than to bring it up like that. How could he have expected Yuuri to react any differently?

He couldn’t be mad. He didn’t have reason or right to be.

But it still hurt.

--

The wolf wondered if the boy saved him because he’d seen something… if he knew to look past all the teeth and fur, to see who he really was. It was true that they hadn’t spent very long together, but the boy was perceptive. Only…

No. The boy was simply kind-hearted.

He didn’t want the wolf to be hurt because they were friends. And they were friends because the wolf hadn’t eaten the townspeople or their sheep. “A wolf,” he said, “isn’t bad just for being a wolf.”

Which, of course, was appreciated. It was still nice to have a friend outside of the tower. Still wonderful to see the world for the first time in years. And every day, the boy grew a little stronger, a little braver.

“You know,” he said, whittling a branch into a stake by the hearth. “Maybe you’re right about the firebird.”

The wolf looked up at him, quiet, pensive.

“If that tiger came out here, that means there’s something going on. I have proof that the firebird is real. Look.” He laid the stick over his lap and dug through his tunic until he came out with a leather cord- and on the end of it, a contour feather, glowing bright and gold, with scarlet stripes. “You see this? This is a real firebird feather.”

The wolf nodded. He recognized it right away; one of the feathers that he had plucked from his own plumage, ripping it from his chest, his wings, his back, anywhere he could reach. The feathers had dotted the landscape; tiny pricks of light in the cold night that the princess had been taken away. When she’d almost succeeded in destroying herself.

“I have a whole sack full of these.”

“So what is your plan?” asked the wolf, finally speaking again. “Shall we go to the west? Find the tower?”

Restore your birthright?

“Yes. Find the firebird and kill it.”

The wolf blinked at him. It was a common threat by many with the sword, but no one had succeeded yet- obviously. The princess had ways of dealing with those who sought to destroy her. “And then what?” he asked.

“Save the princess.”

More silence.
“I heard that the firebird kidnapped her... and is keeping her somewhere. That tower must be where.”

The wolf let his ears relax, dropping his head to rest on his paws. The firebird was the princess, but it wasn’t as if the boy would know that. Stupid fool... if he killed the firebird, he would kill her, too. And the wolf.

The boy picked up his knife again, scraping wood off of the rough end of the stick. “We’ll leave first thing in the morning. I know where I can get provisions and weapons. I have a little bit of savings. You’ll be with me, right? Like you said?”

“Of course,” said the wolf.

I’ll walk with you right into my very death.

—

“Yurio! It’s been a while.”

“Yeah. Three weeks.”

“How are things in Saint Petersburg? Good?”

“Fine.”

“Good, good... and Yakov. Is he well?”

“Also fine.”

“...Just fine?”

“Still mad.”

“Ah.”

“...did you want something, Viktor? Or are you just bored?”

“I just wanted to see how you were doing. How is the rest of your program coming along? Yakov’s good, you know.”

“I know.”

“So is it?”

“Yeah. He hired a choreographer.”

“Oh. He must really believe in you if he’s gone to that sort of trouble. Do you like him?”

“Her.”

“Sorry. Her.”

“She’s okay. She sort of reminds me of you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. It’s Yakov’s ex wife, Lilia Baranovskaya. She said you used to be one of her students.”
“...I’m sure she’s said a lot of things about me.”

“Yeah.”

“Well. As long as you stick to strictly business with her, you should be fine. Don’t let her push you around. She’s very talented, but I wouldn’t trust her with a--”

“We’re living in her house.”

“What?”

“Yakov and I. She had us move in.”

“Ah. I see.”

“Yakov didn’t want you to know.”

“Well. I’m glad your program is coming along.”

“Yeah. The world keeps turning, with or without you.”

“Take care, Yurio. Good luck.”

“I don’t need luck.”

“I meant with her. She’s like a basket of cobras.”

“Heh. Better than a pig.”

“I’ll check in again later.”

“...Viktor?”

--

The days wore on, fragile pink petals disappearing behind thick, green canopies of treeline all around Hasetsu. With it came the heat and the rain, washing away any last lingering traces of winter and its hold on spring. Summer brought thunderstorms that tossed the waves in choppy peaks that rushed the shore. It wasn’t as mild as the spring rain, and the heat of the afternoons pawed at Viktor whether they were on the ice or not.

These days, they weren’t. Not in the heat of the day, anyway. Hasetsu’s Ice Castle had regained some of its former glory, offering respite to students on break, and travellers hoping to get a peek at the famous Russian coach. That was fine with Viktor; he’d let them have it. He preferred to book mornings and late evenings, anyway. Especially since he could send Yuuri by himself to practice some nights, or leave him to it in the afternoons when there weren’t any other paying guests.

Excuses to get away were plentiful and needed. Afternoon naps were a godsend. He was tired again, inside and out; food unappealing, even with Mama Katsuki’s prodding. Smaller portions were fine. Lighter dishes. “I need to understand Yuuri,” he’d said, but it was just an excuse.

He lay in bed and in the dark, stripped down to his briefs on top of the covers. It was too hot for anything more. The rain had been relentless, tapping out a constant thrum of percussion that was more like a hazy hum in the back of his head than actual weather. Makkachin stayed at the foot of the bed, sprawled out and panting. He only inched closer when the thunder rolled overhead. Saint Petersburg was never so hot. It made everything so miserable.
Most days, he could fall asleep without a problem; napping had always been something that he’d been very good at. But other days, lying there was all he could manage. Time alone to think, to recharge, to simply exist. He didn’t need to be at Yuuri’s side for every waking moment; there was no reason to be so clingy. People hated that.

They always had.

He’d always been too rash, too bold, too forward, too exuberant. It wore others out. It annoyed them.

“I want you to stay who you are, Viktor!”

That’s what he’d said. But did he mean it? Did he know who Viktor was?

Did Viktor?

He rolled onto his side, sheets tugging at his bare back as he pulled away, and stretched an arm out over the edge of the bed. Tendons flexed under soft, pale skin as he bent his wrist this way and that, watching the shadows move with every curve.

Stay who you are.

There had been a time when he would have given anything to hear those words. Ten years ago? Just about. No, a little longer than that; before a disagreement became a string of arguments. Before things turned so sour. Before he’d destroyed himself, over and over again, to become what everyone else wanted him to be. Before he’d gotten so lost in the storm.

“Niko-- look, I’m… I’m just Viktor. Can’t that be enough for you? I love you; why does anything else matter?”

It was never enough. It had never been enough. It was all just a fantasy and nothing more.

With a sword, I would cut those throats that sing of love.

I would enclose in ice the hands that write those verses of fiery passion.

Love was such an elusive and fickle creature. Fleeting at best, and entirely destructive at every other turn. Or, maybe that was a little too harsh. It wasn’t love that had killed his parents. The Nishigoris seemed happy enough. And of course, Mama and Papa Katsuki…

But not for Yakov. Nor himself. How many had he turned away in the past several years without even any consideration? After Christophe, he couldn’t bear it.

“I have loved to the point of madness; That which is called madness, That which to me, Is the only sensible way to love.” He’d said that, in French, setting a wine bottle down in front of him. A banquet, just like any other, years ago. Chris had grown; taller than him at twenty, with those puppy eyes and pouting lips that he’d put into that smile meant just for him. The smile that reminded him that there were no wolves here.

J’ai aimé jusqu’à atteindre la folie. Ce que certains appellent la folie, mais ce qui pour moi, est la
It had caught him off guard. Dramatic, romantic, eloquent. Viktor had shaken his head, instantly disarmed from his usual cold facade to a puzzled curiosity. "Tu es charmante." You are charming. "Just what are you up to?"

"I had to calm the beating of my heart around you from the very moment I met you... You are no longer spoken for, so I'm letting my heart do as it pleases."

No longer... Viktor’s gaze flicked from the wine bottle- which Chris had to have brought in on his own, they never served good wine at those sort of things -to the Swiss man’s face, smile freezing in place. Body stilling. A chill settled over him, soaking right through to his bones, heavy and haunting.

"Tes yeux, j'en rêve jour et nuit..." I dream about your eyes day and night.

The words filtered through without Viktor even needing to think; he’d spent too many years laboring over French in the Academy to lose traction in such a conversation, much as he wished he could. Each syllable tightened the vice in his chest, until he finally cut through the reverie. “Chris. Can I speak with you? Outside?”

“Certainly.”

There had been so much confidence in those eyes and in his step. Had he any idea what was to come when he followed Viktor out of the banquet hall and into the rotunda, seeking out respite in an alcove? No. He hadn’t. He’d set the two wine glasses between them on the tiny coffee table across from the sofa, proudly turned the wine bottle out to display the label- yes, a very good year - and lounged in the seat next to him.

Why? Why had he done it? Why had he forced his hand, asking him to inflict so much pain? That young man, so handsome in his pressed suit, so bright-eyed and hopeful, so sure of himself. And Viktor knew he had to break his heart. It couldn’t wait. Not when Chris was such a dear friend. A close confidante.

“To be clear,” he’d begun, deciding to give them both a half step of warning before the final blow. “You are hitting on me.”

That smile, so fearless before, wavered. “Am I not?”

Viktor closed his eyes- just a moment, a brief attempt to steel himself -then reached for his hand. One of Christophe’s between both of his own. Then he leveled his weary gaze, and sighed. “Chris. I’m beyond flattered. But... I can’t.”

The shift in mood was abrupt; atmosphere apprehensive as Chris considered what he’d said. Others before had tried to argue with him; insisted that they knew better, that they would be good matches. But Chris knew Viktor too well for that. They’d always been frank with each other.

“Is it the difference in age...?”

“No. Nothing like that.”

“A relationship while skating... and long distance at that...”

Viktor reclaimed one of his hands to run it through his hair, jaw tightening with the tension. Chris was justifying the rejection, trying to make it easy on him. He was always trying to make it easy on
him. “Chris. You deserve someone that can give you everything in a relationship, and I can’t.” He let that settle in, watching the hurt mix with confusion. “That spark… what I used to feel? It’s gone. Nearly four years, and I can’t seem to get it back.”

Christophe paled as the realization dawned. “Oh. Oh. Viktor…”

The concern bit at him the way pity often did, but Viktor pushed it away. Chris didn’t mean it to be insulting. If anyone knew how Viktor felt about that, it was Chris.

“That doesn’t make you… unloveable…”

Viktor gave a weak laugh. As nice as it was to hear, it only stirred the agony that lived in him like a malignant spirit. “Thank you. But you deserve more… and I don’t want to give you the impression that there’s any chance. Don’t wait for me.”

“No, I understand. Truly.” It came with earnest sincerity, despite the regret. “One rejection is all I need.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You needn’t be.”

They’d shared the wine in honor of friendship. That is, up until Chris, uninhibited, wept on Viktor’s shoulder for all the heartache. He’d held him, there on the sofa, in the hotel hallway off of the rotunda, and let him cry. He wouldn’t let it change his mind, and Chris had never asked him to.

Once the tears were shed and his coach had come to collect him, Chris never brought it up again. Simply been his friend, as he’d always been. His only friend.

He’d never held it against him, for which he was grateful. Avoiding him at every future competition and banquet would have been horrible.

All from a lack of spark…

_This story that has no meaning_

_Will vanish this night along with the stars_

The rain shifted in the wind, lulling, then picking up tempo before another brush of thunder crashed over the symphony of sound. Viktor lifted his blurry focus to the bedside table, where the ceramic owl and cat had taken the place of the fishbowl. The web of gold in each of the figures glimmered in what little ambient light there was. Tiny paw fit neatly in the outstretched wing, and both animals held tight. He understood why it had taken Kouki-san so long to do the repairs; despite the extra material, each piece of ceramic fit so snugly together that they still matched.

They could still dance together.

Viktor pushed up to sit and wiped the tears from his eyes. He still felt drained, but a little cooler and a lot calmer. Dinner would be ready soon, anyway, and he’d need to be composed to face the Katsuki family. They’d noticed that something was wrong, of course they had, but his adamant refusal to give any ins had kept them and their curiosity at bay.
Makkachin crawled to him and dropped his head in his lap, which drew Viktor’s hand for ear petting. He then got up and got dressed. A bath would be good. Too warm, maybe, but with the fresh breeze from the rain it might be nice. Different.

He’d just finished getting ready when there was a knock at the door.

“Viktor. You awake yet?” Mari often checked on him before dinner to make sure; probably because Mama Katsuki didn’t want to seem too much like a mother hen.

He answered it with a tired smile. “Yeah. Is it dinner already?”

“Just about.” She poked her head in, and Viktor moved to let her come inside. “I also wanted to ask when I could dust again.”

Viktor had done a good job at keeping things neat and tidy, but the dusting was something he was fine delegating elsewhere. “Anytime is fine.”

“Okay. I’ll take care of it tonight.” Then she paused. “Hey, what’s with those?”

“Hm?” Viktor looked back at the owl and cat. “Oh, they’re salt and pepper shakers that were damaged in the move. I had Kouki-san repair them.”

“Sure…”

“It’s supposed to represent owning your past self and all of the decisions and things you did, even the hard ones. Turning a flaw or weakness into a strength. A thing of beauty.”

“Yeah.” Mari frowned at him. “I know what kintsugi is. I just don’t get why you went through the trouble with those.”

“Oh.” Viktor frowned, too. “I have a collection of them back at home… these just happen to be my favorite ones.”

“Okay, but why salt and pepper shakers?”

To that, Viktor shrugged. “I always really liked that they came in pairs.”

--

_I want you to stay who you are, Viktor!_

Whenever Viktor was faced with a problem with no obvious solution- and even sometimes when it did -he put it through the Viktor Nikiforov Process. This was similar to the Vaganova Method in that he attacked it from a spectrum of sides to fully understand it. Though, of course, the Viktor Nikiforov Process was less about blending dance styles with classic studies, and more about the contrast between external/internal perspective and uncertain context vs the highly saturated, but the basic principles were the same. He broke things down into segments, made lists, and immersed himself in the significance of whatever the problem was.

Often times, it was overkill. But Viktor had too much time on his hands, and no one he felt completely comfortable going to for his problems. He used to pester Yakov for things that at least made it to Third Tier Problematic, but he didn’t even have that option anymore. At least putting it down on paper was similar to voicing his woes, and the silence that followed was far more neutral than that of the judgmental listener.
The main problem: how to survive in Hasetsu?

No. Too defeatist. How to thrive in Hasetsu… despite the heartbreak?

It wasn’t Yuuri’s fault that he didn’t feel the same. No one could be forced to fall in love; that wouldn’t be fair, it wouldn’t be right, and it wouldn’t be real. He couldn’t blame him for that. Viktor would handle the rejection as Chris had- a few tears, and then nothing but class. He’d come to Hasetsu to be a coach and he would be Yuuri’s coach. He would get him to the Grand Prix Finals and beyond.

He should have realized it long ago, really. The hidden eros in Yuuri that only came out when inebriated. The pork cutlet bowl that served as his inspiration. The aversion to advances and touches. Yuuri wasn’t just shy; he really was just like Viktor. No spark. Or at least, very little.

From what he’d learned, Yuuri had always been a loner. Always been different. And that was fine. As Chris had said, a lack of spark didn’t make one unlovable. Not at all. It put things into a perspective that he understood all too well. There was nothing that could be done about a missing spark. He’d tried. It wasn’t something you could force. It wasn’t something you should.

“Perhaps your spark is just sleeping,” Chris had said over his second glass of wine that night. “Like the princess.”

How he’d known, how Chris had always known, Viktor had no idea. But while that had turned out to be true for him, it wouldn’t be fair to wait for Yuuri in hopes that it would. It didn’t matter. Perhaps they’d never be more than student and coach, or friends, and that was okay.

Viktor still wanted to hold onto him.

Unconditional love- philia and agape - had always been stronger and more reliable than the romantic eros, anyway.

If I could only see you, eternity would arise from hope

Stay close to me, do not leave

I am afraid to lose you

To thrive in Hasetsu, to fulfil Yuuri’s wish, to be himself, Viktor would need to know what that meant. What was Viktor Nikiforov to Yuuri Katsuki? No- that line of thinking was what had driven him for the past ten years, trying to fit the baseline expectation and then rise above it while playing it safe. That wasn’t him. That had never been him. He’d hidden away for so long, torn himself apart, rebuilt, become stronger, refining, perfecting, until even he didn’t recognize what was left.

Philautia had been lost somewhere along the way, and him along with it. An identity was important. How could someone hope to convey meaning and heart to an audience without knowing who they were, or at least where they stood, to start? His routines were polished. Flawless. Absurd and untouchable. And he’d done everything he could to cultivate an appearance that matched. The world was his stage. Everything was an act.

Was it any wonder why Yuuri was so afraid, then? Intimidated by this cold and calculating wolf that had lists and plans for everything, that never let his temper flare, never let anything go but
deliberate smiles and off-handed comments that put himself in a meeker light when it obviously didn’t fit the rest of the narrative? Who could trust someone so manipulative?

He woke earlier than he had been to take advantage of the cooler mornings and dressed in light, loose clothing- simple v-neck tee, jeans. Something a little more Viktor and a little less Coach. He packed his track suit in his bag, along with a pad of paper and his phone, then took Makkachin out for a walk.

It was still dark, sky only just beginning to lighten in the distance with paler blues and soft violets. The world was quiet, with only the sound of the wind and the ocean tasting the air. Dew clung to the grass and stone. The past six or seven months had been nothing short of madness. One day, he’d been wandering the broad concrete labyrinth of Saint Petersburg amid flurries in a thick woolen coat, and then here he was, exploring the lush fern-hedged forest just minutes from the hot springs.

He needed another program. A skate of his own. Something personal and distinctly his. It wouldn’t be performed since he wasn’t competing, and had very little interest in leaving his duties to make an appearance at showy galas for the season, so it could be as indulgent as he pleased. Just something, anything, to keep his mind occupied while he sorted everything else out…

Viktor just needed some inspiration. Something different than he’d done before. Or maybe just like he had back before, when he’d just started competing. Raw, hopeful. They were ideas, anyway. Who knew if anything would come of it?

He settled on a set of wooden steps nestled against the mossy roots of the neighboring trees, and took out the pad of paper while Makkachin wandered off to explore. Japanese forests were so different than Russian ones, with everything clinging to the humidity from the ocean and the recent rains. The rising sun steadily cut through the mists, filtering golden pillars of light through the foliage above. He wrote, looking up from time to time as the greens of the forest came alive and the shadows retreated, deepening the undergrowth.

Viktor Nikiforov.


Carding a hand through his hair, he looked on. Makkachin sniffed the air, tail half-mast and waving in the way that it did when he was confused. What was he looking at?

Floating in the bush were a handful of lights; small, flickering, fading bits of gold like embers dancing in the breeze. Fireflies? Viktor had never seen them in person before, but there they were. Like the tanuki that Kouki-san had told him about, fireflies really did exist. Scraps of magic in the real world.

“Don’t be stupid… magic doesn’t exist, Mishka.”

“It does. I believe in it.”

“And when you find out that it isn’t real? When you can’t skate and no one remembers who you are? What then?”

Viktor took out his phone and snapped a photo, though there were only a small handful of fireflies at that time of morning, so it wasn’t the greatest. They barely showed up at all. Still, it was proof. Maybe not magic in the traditional sense, but little magic was good enough for him. The world was
too harsh and cruel without it.

Looking for things to enjoy was important. Finding the beauty in life to temper the hurt and soothe the soul. That was why he skated what he did. That had always been his purpose. It wasn’t the gold, it wasn’t the money, or the fame. It was simply the beauty of it. Creating it, sharing it, supporting it.

How easy it was to forget something so fundamental in the face of the lonely dark?

--

As the days wore on, things got easier. Little by little, the heat didn’t bother him so much. Viktor’s afternoon naps continued, but they were restful or productive respites to work on his own projects. Training with Yuuri became fun again. Even he seemed to have loosened up; joking, playing around a little. He even touched him, willingly. Just a little head poke, but it was physical touch initiated by Yuuri. The relief swept through Viktor like the ocean breezes on the increasingly heated afternoons.

Yuuri didn’t hate him. Proof. Of course he didn’t. Viktor had known that. But the reassurance was so valuable, so needed. They could be friends. They could play. Viktor could work with this.

Even though he fell for him every day all over again, his well of hope and motivation refilled right along side the ache until they were all comfortable companions. Yuuri was so determined, so passionate. Never before had he seen someone work himself so hard. It wasn’t as if Viktor’s regimen were easy, either; but Yuuri didn’t complain, only asked to be drilled again and again. He wanted to be stronger. Wanted to get up that waterfall.

Wanted to be a golden dragon.

And Viktor wanted to see him do it more than anything else in the world.

Then came the music. The song that Yuuri had been so set on, so determined to get right… and he’d been right to insist. From the moment Viktor first heard it that night, half asleep with Yuuri on his bed, bright-eyed and trembling with excitement, he knew. He could feel it. See it. The music was Yuuri Katsuki and Yuuri was the melody.

He got a copy of the file and swept his own notes away. The music became his constant companion. Like any program, he needed to become intimately familiar with it, inside and out, so Viktor listened, again and again, over and over. There was the trill of excitement in the beginning; the dream and the desire to chase it. Viktor got details from Yuko and Mama Katsuki for the outside perspective, and asked Yuuri for his thoughts. What was it like to start out? When did you know what you wanted to do?

Yuuri stood in starting position of his program, hands at his side, and then bringing them up to his chin, overlapping them in a plea, arms raising, and then slow stretch outward. “I was like… a bird. Unfurling its wings, testing and wondering if I could fly. If it was time to fly. And then the first toe loop and landing, that’s realizing I could - my first competition.” He landed the toe loop and stopped. “I realized what I wanted to do before I’d even started my journey. Like a bird that knows it can fly.”

Then the skating. Learning the basics, the jumps, stops and starts, turns, how to be graceful. The rise and fall of the music felt like approaching each challenge head on, up and over the hurdles time
and time again, gradually increasing difficulty and level. The marching beat, steady and sure, was the dedication he’d shown, the discipline over mind and body as far as he was able, unending and relentless practice and performance driven by a singular goal.

Then the bridge…

Viktor scribbled furious notes, laying out his own impressions and feelings, trying to put himself in Yuuri’s skates. He remembered what it had been like, to be young and frantic, driven wild by that fierce need to accomplish what he’d set out to do. But while he had taken the support offered and pulled comfort from it, Yuuri had decided to face it on his own. The anxiety? Something else? He couldn’t be sure.

But he, like Viktor, was never satisfied. Looking back on Yuuri’s career, the statistics and transfers, the shift in scores, it was clear that he’d had a difficult time, but Yuuri had never given in. Even after Nationals, when he’d fired Celestino, it had only been a short time before Yuuri had begun to skate again.

Yet he still had no confidence. He never felt like he was enough.

If only he could believe in himself… if he could see what Viktor saw… he would know that he was unstoppable. That, despite all of his fears of shortcomings and flaws, his dance on the ice was what set Viktor’s heart on fire. No one else had done that. No one else had even come close.

It wasn’t too late.

Watching him then, working through the moves they’d chosen, trying out the steps, gliding across the ice like he was meant to be there, like he was born for it, Viktor wondered if he knew… if he had any idea just how beautiful he was and how much potential he had. Had anyone told him? Could anyone? Would he ever believe them, or was it something that Yuuri had to learn for himself?

He supposed time would tell. They were going to make it happen. They were going to turn his career and his life- both of their lives -around.

Together, they were going to make history.

--

“Yuuri!” Viktor tapped on his door with impatience, bouncing from foot to foot on his toes. “Yuuuuuri!”

It was late- past midnight -and Viktor was still awake. Yuuri answered his door, head tilting to one side. “Viktor?”

“Okay good! Yuuri! Come with me!” He reached out for his hand and dragged him away from the room and halfway down the hall before Yuuri could get another word out. “It’s fine, it’s fine, it won’t take long, just come with me! I need to show you something!”

They put on shoes and went outside, scuffling through the gravel in the dark through the hot spring’s gate and to the road, Makkachin at their heels. Viktor had a flashlight, a jacket, and his street clothes, but the most impressive asset was his wide, open-mouthed smile as he hurried them both along. “Tonight is the night!”

“The night for what?!”
“You’ll see!”

Into the forest they went, up the stairs, then off the path and through the woods, Viktor leading the way over a narrow deer trail. “We’re almost there!”

“Viktor?”

He said nothing, only kept moving until they reached the little thicket that he’d scouted out earlier. Once they broke past the curtain of bamboo, the fireflies were everywhere—tiny, glittering fairies that illuminated the trees around them.

Viktor let go of his hand and looked back at him, bright-eyed, breathless. “Do you see, Yuuri? Magic.”

Yuuri took them in, gaze sweeping over scene, then smiled, nodding. “Do you not have fireflies in Russia?”

“It’s too cold.”

“Even in the summer?”

He nodded. “We’re too high in latitude; you have to be closer to the equator. Somewhere hot and humid. I’ve always wanted to see them…” Viktor scanned the ground and found a patch of dried moss against the trunk of a tree, crouched, and sat. “The internet says tonight is the best night for it.” Then he drew his knees up to his chest and hugged his arms around them to watch. “So pretty.”

Yuuri caught one in his hands while listening, light shining through the small cracks in his fingers, then let it go.

“You look like you belong with them.”

“Belong?” Yuuri asked, arching a brow. “I used to catch them and put them in jars. I’m sure they hate me.”

“Hmm.” Viktor dropped his chin on his knees. “They don’t live very long anyway. I don’t think they hold it against you.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s true. I haven’t been home for so long. I’m sure they’d have forgotten about me even if their lifespan wasn’t so short. These ones have no idea.”

“I doubt you did it to be cruel.”

“Nah. I poked holes for them. Set them in front of the onsen entrance. Mom thought it was pretty.”

Viktor gave a soft smile behind his arm, looking up at him. The fireflies played over his hair and glasses, danced around his arms and shoulders. “Yeah, I’m sure they forgive you. At least, if you’re sorry.”

“I felt bad in the mornings.”

“We’re just looking at them now. No jars.” Viktor moved his cheek to his shoulder, getting comfortable. “They do forgive you.”

“Hmm.” Yuuri lifted a hand, palm up, out into a cluster of the little bugs. They danced around him, over him, using him as their stage.
“See?”

With a little laugh, Yuuri shook his head and moved his hand through the air like he was conducting music—a slow, languid sonata. The fireflies moved with him, changing their dances to match the tempo.

“Are they doing a waltz now?” asked Viktor, though the lights had become a blur before him. Like the sparklers. Hundreds or thousands of tiny sparklers dancing the tango by Yuuri’s command. “Or is it…”

“Hm?”

“They love you… The way your eyes are lit up…”

“You’re mumbling. Maybe we should head back.”

Viktor let his eyes close, and Makkachin pressed against his side, tired of chasing the glowing pests. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Come on, Viktor.”

...

“You drag me out here and then you fall asleep on me?”

Viktor slowly nodded, eyes closed. Yuuri wasn’t entirely sure if he heard him.

He crouched and gave him a few shakes. It took several tries, but eventually Viktor got to his feet, yawning. By the time they reached the steps up to the main road, Viktor was stumbling over anything that crossed their path.

They couldn’t go on like this. Viktor was out way past his bedtime, why had he thought this was a good idea?

Yuuri steadied him from tripping one more time and crouched in front of him. “Come on. I’ll carry you.”

Viktor seemed a little more alert at that. Considered, then nodded with a conceding smile. “If you really think you can…”

“I think I can manage. You’ll hurt yourself if you keep this up.”

Getting to Yuuri’s level, Viktor wrapped his arms around his neck and together they situated his legs around Yuuri’s middle as he stood. “You’re so strong…” Yuuri felt him rub his face against his neck.

“All that exercise has to go somewhere. And… you’re kind of light.”

“Aw, you’re just saying that.”

“Sorry, but I’m not. I’ve bench pressed more than you.”

“Really, really strong Yuuri…”

He felt the weight of him droop and Yuuri quickly shifted him up on his back, gripping his legs tighter. What had he been thinking offering to carry him? It’s not like he wasn’t physically able,
but it was weird to offer. At the rate Viktor had been going, there was no way he could have made it home. And Yuuri wasn’t going to leave him there. Makkachin couldn’t drag him, he was sure. It was the only option!

“It’s magic… spellbound…” Viktor murmured with more nuzzling with his cheek.

The contact to his bare skin caused Yuuri to flush. This really was ridiculous. The further along the walked, the less Viktor spoke or moved. By the time the returned to the onsen, he was out cold.

Makkachin whimpered, maybe worried what Yuuri was going to do with his person.

“Yeah, I’m taking him to bed,” he whispered to him, following the poodle to the room.

With one hand he pulled the covers of the bed down, whilst supporting Viktor with the other. Carefully he eased Viktor onto the bed and adjusted his limbs into a comfortable position.

“We’re back at the house,” Viktor said, eyes barely open.

“I carried you.” He wasn’t sure why he bother telling him that.

“Oh yeah… you were really strong. So beautiful.”

Blush pricked at Yuuri’s cheeks.

“So much… magic…” Viktor trailed and shifted onto his side, Makkachin crawling to his opposite. Soft breathing soon followed.

“Yeah. Magic.” That was the only explanation.

--

The summer wore on and the Grand Prix announcements were due any day. Soon, they’d know exactly where they were going to be travelling and who they’d be up against in the various competitive heats. It would help Viktor plan for Yuuri’s peak in the season, gradually increasing the difficulty until the finals. There was no point in pushing him too hard if he didn’t have to, not when there were so many other things that still needed to be refined. It was much better to focus on the performance aspect of the program and leave the difficulty until later, when the rest had been smoothed out.

They went over various composition strategies, each trying the different moves out to see how it felt, with and without the music. It wasn’t one of Viktor’s programs, that was for certain. The difficulty, though technically lower in terms of level moves, had far more points stacked in favor with Yuuri’s strengths. It would be an exhausting program, but…

“With your stamina, I think you can pull it off.” Viktor smiled, leaning in as Yuuri’s confidence wavered, turning to a frown. “You’d rather not?”

The gentle tease did its job. “I’ll do it!”

“Okay.” Chuckling, Viktor pulled away and stretched as he moved back down the outer rim. He wanted to try the jump composition before forcing Yuuri into it, even though they’d been over it a hundred times already. Though, the latest suggested change had brought a thought. “Oh right. Yuuri, did you change the musical theme?”

“Oh, um…”
Apparently. Viktor turned back to him, smile easy, calm. “What is it?”

“The theme is,” Yuuri hesitated, already flushed. “on my love.”

*On my love.*

Viktor watched him for several long seconds, considering the implications, though it was likely that there were none there at all. It meant whatever it meant to Yuuri and that was enough. Love meant so many things. It wasn’t supposed to be simple or easy. It didn’t have to make sense. Yuuri didn’t have to answer to anyone.

His smile widened and he nodded his approval. “That’s the best theme. Perfect.”

The instant relief on Yuuri’s face was nothing short of darling.

He would learn to trust himself. Learn to be confident. Learn that he was worth so much more than he ever gave himself credit for.

Viktor took off his skate guards and stepped onto the ice. “Okay, let’s finish this!”

“Yeah!”

Chapter End Notes

Viktor: Fifi Séverine! I finally got ahold of you, have you been avoiding my calls?
Fifi: I’m very busy, Nikiforov.
Viktor: I know it’s been a while, but I have a huge favor to ask...
Fifi: Don’t you always?
Viktor: Well. Yes. But this is important.
Fifi: It’s always important. What is it?
Viktor: Could you come to Japan and take some measurements? We need a costume made and-
Fifi: I already know your measurements, my dear. I’ve only made you every single outfit for the past... how many seasons?
Viktor: It’s not for me.
Fifi: ...
Viktor: It’s for Yuuri Katsuki.
Fifi: So you abandon me, don’t even let me design anything for your beautiful figure, and now you want me to come to JAPAN to design for someone ELSE?
Viktor: Yes. Please.
Fifi: ...I might be able to squeeze you in. If you let me make something for you, too.
Viktor: :>
Fifi: If you’re making that stupid puppy face, you realize I can’t see it over the phone.
Viktor: Invoice me for the flights?
Fifi: Well of course. I’m not going to Japan any other way. It’s not even sakura season.

**GAY SKATE COMIN’ RIGHT ATCHA:**
Pedicures! / Pillow fights! / Dancing! / FLUFFY WHIPLASH!!!

*Please look forward to it!*
what i'm looking for in a lover:
sweet~ and who can dance (of course!), and they have to appreciate the little details, and like art~~ bonus points if they're super cuteeeee, extra bonus points if they're a super hottie++, must love animals (especially dogs!!!!), be willing to accept and give flowers (?? depending??), should be romantic~~ and passionate about their dreams!!!! that is important!!! <3
Safe Place

Chapter by mamodewberry

Chapter Summary

Since their heart-to-heart, Yuuri has noticed a change in Viktor.

Chapter Notes

I hope you're all ready for a really long chapter and that the wait has been worth it. Speaking of wait, I'm heading out of the country until the 12th. It should be a Viktor chapter next week, but may be a delay since I'm not at home, but I should have down time. IDK, we'll see what Gabapple does.

This is a chapter I'm dubbing The Soft Chapter. Seriously, they are so cute and soft like warm mashed potatoes. This also marks the end of episode four if you're following along! Sigh. These two. They'll get there. I promise. Lots of little hints of hope sprinkled around. Ah. Yuuri... he's opening up, guys. Please be proud of my baby.

Gabapple: aaaahhhHHHHhhhhHHhhHH THE SUMMER CHAPTERS: PART 2. 💕💕💕 It really IS soft. I love it. Yuuri is such a good. He is trying his best. I really loved his perspective in this... and there are so many good moments... ;A; my heart... it melted repeatedly... and Viktor's, too. He is melted. A lot. You'll have to read it and see why. Huu...

New Art!

Official Poster (fairy tale version), illustrated by Gabapple
Viktor and Yuuri from chapter 9, illustrated by princessharumi (commission)
Yuuri from chapter 11, illustrated by Kyyhky (commission)
Yuuri and Yurio from chapter 8, illustrated by Edenerys (commission)

If you draw fanart, tweet as us so we can include it in the moment!

Recommended Listening

1. My Safe Place, by Akira Kosemura
2. Yuujin A, by Masaru Yokoyama
3. Swan Lake Waltz, by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chinese Taipei, ISU Junior Grand Prix
Yuuri (14 Years Old)
“And done.”

Yuuri opened his eyes to see someone else looking back in the mirror. Clean, even-toned skin, darker lashes, and lips.

“Is this what you were thinking?”

He had no idea. Coach Ito had waved him inside the dressing room and asked the closest makeup artist to work their magic. Quietly, he waited as brushes and pencils dressed his face, closing his eyes and angling his head when asked. Gently, he touched his cheek. It was still him behind the new layer. “Yeah. I think so.”

“Great. Off you go.”

With one last look at himself, Yuuri hopped out of the swivel chair, giving way for the next skater. Exiting the dressing room, Yuuri held his head a little higher.

He felt pretty. Like Viktor.

Ito called him across the hallway and then led him out to the rink sidelines to await his turn.

When he’d arrived at the rink earlier, he had felt his insides cease up as they usually did in the face of nerves. As they walked the breezeway, it threatened to come back. Now seeing the skating rink up-close, getting a visual for the space, the crowd, and his fellow skaters, he loosened. Until he looked out to the rink.

A boy from China was skating to Beethoven. So quick and light on his feet. Landing every jump.

Steadying his breath, he unzipped his jersey. From inside his breast pocket, Yuuri took a peek of the autographed glam shot of Viktor he’d received.

_Getting nervous just means that you really care about what you’re doing. It matters to you._

Remembering those words from Viktor’s response and better fitted skates would carry Yuuri to where his idol waited.

The PA system announced the young Chinese skater’s score, which meant--

“From Japan, introducing, Yuuri Katsuki!”

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**Beep! Beep! Beep!**

Three beeps for the third time that morning, and Yuuri hit snooze on his phone alarm. Again. He was thirty minutes behind schedule and no closer to feeling the desire to get out of bed. If he got up now, skipped breakfast, and ran, he could get to the rink right on time...

But going...

Body heavy and trembling. Mind racing.

He let out a shaky breath and brought his phone up to his eyes, debating if a phone call or text
would be the more professional way.

A text would be easier.

[Can I have the day off?] he typed.

Yuuri stared at the unsent text for several minutes, wondering if he should elaborate or word it different so it sounded less… pathetic. Swallowing, he hit Send and hoped that would be enough.

His phone vibrated a few moments later with Viktor’s response: [Are you sick?]

[Sort of]

[Are you okay? do you need something? medicine??? Soup?]

Another swallow. No, none of those things would help, much to the dismay of Ito and Celestino. Now Yuuri had inconvenienced Viktor by making him wait so long this morning. He wouldn’t blame him if he was mad--

[Do you just need a break? You’ve been working very hard.]

Did he know? [Sometimes I just… need a day off.]

[That’s fine. Rest is part of work. I’ll finish up here and come back. Do you want to do something else later? Maybe go to the beach?]

The beach was one of the places he liked to go when he needed time to himself. But with Viktor? Before he could stop himself from reconsidering and hiding at Minako’s studio instead, [Yeah. That might be nice.]

[Ok! You rest and I’ll be by later!]

It wasn’t until the screen went dark that the tension in Yuuri’s hand released and he dropped the device on his chest. Now that he dealt with the source of his guilt, Yuuri rolled onto his side to attempt more sleep.

The sun eventually filtered its way through curtains, awakening him. The world felt less grim, but the low desire to leave the security of his bed was ever present. Reaching for his phone, it revealed he had slept another two hours.

No messages from Viktor. Was he still at the rink by himself? Or was he waiting for Yuuri to text him when he was up?

Yeah. That sounded like something he’d do.

Just. Not yet.

Sitting up in bed, Yuuri began to scroll through his RSS feed. So-and-so releasing a new album, new podcast episode, alumni newsletter, reminders to check Phichit’s Instagram for new posts, diet recipes.

It wasn’t long before a knock came at his door. “Yuuuuri?”

There went the theory of waiting on him. “Viktor?”

“Can I come in? I brought you some miso. Your mother said you haven’t eaten breakfast.”
Letting his phone drop to his bed, he leaned over the floor to grab the nearest shirt and slipped it on. He couldn’t turn him away, and it bothered him that he felt that way. After months of not granting entrance… maybe he felt guilty for standing him up this morning. After a breath, Yuuri called him inside.

The door slowly opened and Viktor entered with a tray and two bowls of miso. Glancing around, Viktor put the tray on his desk.

Yuuri prayed he wouldn’t comment on the small framed photo of him there. He didn’t, even though the way he seemed to linger over there for a moment was suspicious. Carefully, Viktor brought a bowl to Yuuri and sat on the edge of the bed.

With food in his hands, it was then that Yuuri’s stomach reminded him how hungry he was. He looked into the swirling miso and tofu as Viktor grabbed his own bowl.

“Did you get your morning skate in?”

Viktor nodded as he pulled his lips from the bowl. “Yep! It was very productive.”

“Good.”

Viktor tilted his head slightly at him and drank once more from the small bowl. “It’s okay to take a break, though. Once in awhile.”

“I’ll be there tomorrow, I promise!”

“It's fine, it's fine,” Viktor waved his hand. “Believe it or not, I take breaks sometimes, too.”

“... Really?” The interviews never made a show of them.

“No one ever believes me when I tell them that,” Viktor said with a long suffering sigh. “I’m taking the whole season off. Living in a hot springs resort, even!”

“I guess that’s true... But in season, usually?”

“Sometimes.”

“Just days you're too tired?”

“I actually had a lot of those when I first started competing. I tried not to miss practice anyway, but some days I just couldn't. There've been times where I took whole weeks off. Yakov wasn't really happy about that most of the time but…”

“Wow. I had no idea. I thought you were invincible.”

Viktor nearly choked on his miso. He coughed to cover. “Sometimes I just really wanted to be alone. The invincibility?” He waved a hand. “A facade.”

Yuuri knew all too well what it was like to want to be alone. It was hard talking to other people. Viktor was so popular and charismatic, though. He’d choose to be alone? “I just know how hard Russians are usually pushed. You’ve always been at the top.”

“Everyone has their limits, and I’ve seen too many people burn out. You can't be the best if you work yourself to death.” He looked away for a moment, considering. “Like one of my teachers used to say, 'The dead cannot dance.'”
Thinking of his previous coaches, Yuuri nodded. “I guess that's true. I wonder if I work hard enough, sometimes.”

“I can't vouch for your previous years, but you're keeping up with my schedule, and I've been told it's a little overkill, too.” He frowned. “I think you're doing just fine. We're on track.”

Viktor was complimenting him again… he couldn't help the small smile. “Can't prove that today.”

“I didn't do any skating for your program ... I took today off, too.”

“... What did you skate?”

“Oh, you know. Just something I've been playing with.”

“Is that what you do before I get there, usually?”

“Yes. Unless I have something specific I want to work on for you, yeah. It's a good warm up.”

“Fun or... A future program?”

Viktor shrugged. “I don't know yet. I usually make several programs a year that I don't end up using... sometimes it's just fun to experiment.”

“That explains all the unused programs you were showing me before Yurio came.”

Suddenly Viktor turned bashful and rubbed at his neck. “Yeah. Anyway, I like to keep busy…”

Did he not like admitting he made programs for the fun of it and not competition? Yuuri finished off his soup as he wondered.

Viktor followed suit in the silence and clinked his empty bowl back on the tray. “I told Makkachin we were going to the beach, by the way. He was very excited…”

Right. He did say he'd consider it. “According to my phone, it says the temperature should be nice. I'll come if the offer is still there.”

“I think Makkachin would prefer that!”

As Yuuri packed he and Viktor a bag for the day, it became very clear that Viktor had never done beach activities before. Yuuri wondered if, when they sat in the sand a month ago, that the first time Viktor had been to the beach at all?

Viktor watched him place sunscreen, swim trunks, towels, umbrella, and various beach toys inside a duffle bag with fascination. Didn’t ask questions, just watched and followed after once Yuuri slipped his shoes on.

Once there, they changed into their swim trunks in the public restroom.

Being further into summer, the weather had warmed and brought more tourists along with it. The extra people excited Makkachin, tail wagging as he waited to be set free. Viktor reined him in while they set up their umbrella and towels.

“I’m ... just going to sit and watch. If that’s okay.” He’d planned on watching from the beginning. The fresh air and change of scenery was what he was after. Dressing in his swimsuit was simply to
look the part.

Viktor looked mildly disappointed, but nodded in understanding. “We’ll have fun for you!”

Waving Viktor and Makkachin off, Yuuri brought his knees up to his chest. He felt better than he did this morning.

Dog and owner wandered along the dry shore like they didn’t dare get into the water just yet. Until Makkachin started barking at something. Viktor knelt into the moist sand after shooing the poodle away and grabbed whatever it was. From afar, Yuuri could hear his laugh. Soon Viktor was coming towards him.

“Yuuri, Yuuri! Look~ Ow! It bit me!”

It was a crab. “No, it probably pinched you!” Yuuri prepared to stand to help.

Viktor pried the claw off his index finger. “Look how tiny it is! And with such a strong will to live. It wants to be king of this beach.”

“Are you okay?” Didn’t look like he was bleeding or that it had broken skin.

“You sit right here with Yuuri, little king.” He let the creature walk off his hand and onto the sand.

Makkachin gave a low growl then turned on his heels when the crab snapped a claw at his muzzle, and soon he was joining his master.

The crab paid Yuuri no mind as it scurried right on by.

Yuuri watched them kneel in the dry sand and dig and sift through the grains. And then Viktor was bringing back shells of all sizes and setting them next to his towel, informing Yuuri to guard them. For his nook shelf he’d set up in his room, he imagined.

Once a nice pile had been accumulated, Viktor dug into the duffle for the frisbee Yuuri had put in there. He examined the disc and gave it a toss. Disappointed that it didn’t do what it was designed for, he adjust his throwing angle with more success. Delighted, he called for Makkachin and took off to the beach once more.

It took a few throws for Makkachin to care about the frisbee, unsure about the new toy.

Yuuri’s eyes didn’t leave the pair as they learned how to be at the beach. So carefree. Having fun.

He smiled, resting his chin on his knees.

Viktor did always look happy when he tried something new, no matter how mundane or silly. Like a child. A child in an adult body.

The frisbee flew off course and into the water and Makkachin couldn’t resist going after it.

Viktor yelped at the cold water. Unfortunately for Viktor, fortunately for Yuuri’s amusement, Makkachin decided to pounce on him, crashing them both into the surf. Coughing and sputtering, Viktor flailed to stand up, but Makkachin’s excitement wouldn’t allow it - jumping over him, on him, around him, splashing water. Until a larger wave rolled by big enough to spook him and he ran to the dry land, sand clinging to his wet fur with each step.

Each step that was coming closer to /Yuuri/. 
Whether it was to include him, or just be cruel, Makkachin galloped towards him and landed in his lap, sharing saltwater and sand covered fur.

“You are not a lap dog,” Yuuri whined.

In response, Makkachin licked his face with so much force, Yuuri fell onto his back, completely at the mercy of the poodle’s affections.

“Makka, let Yuuri up.”

Yuuri supposed he deserved the half-hearted plea since he had been laughing at him moments ago.

Eventually, Makkachin let up. Only to shake his fur out on both of them, spraying water and sand particles.

“Mama Katsuki wouldn’t like it if we went home like this,” Viktor observed, shaking his arms in vain.

“Definitely not. We can use the showers up there to clean off. Are you ready to leave?”

Viktor looked out to the ocean for a moment, scanning the area, before he answered. “I think so. It’s getting hotter. Right, Makkachin?”

Makkachin only gave another fullbody shake.

Yuuri offered Viktor a dry towel to wipe his face off with as he took down the umbrella and packed up, placing the shells in the outside pocket of the duffle. Shouldering the bag and tucking the umbrella under his arms, Yuuri lead the way to the showers with Makkachin trotting circles around them.

“So. Do I need to take my trunks off here? Is this like the hot springs?” Viktor toyed with the band of his shorts.

“H-huh? Uh, no. You, uh, just rinse off here, really.” Not all places were acceptable to be in the nude!

“Ah I see.” He winked. “Okay. So how do you work this thing?”

Setting the beach gear down to the side out of range, and removing his glasses, Yuuri joined Viktor under a dual shower head. A knob was below their knees on the pole, and Yuuri crouched to turn in. One way activated one head, the other activated both. “There.”

“Baths and showers outdoors! Japan is amazing.”

Makkachin seemed to share the same sentiment as he barked and walked around their legs, nipping at the water from above.

“I guess… So, just rinse off the best you can.” Yuuri then busied himself with moving the water along his skin. He tucked his chin in to get what had gotten in his hair.

He then felt a poke at his scalp.

Parting his damp hair, Yuuri looked up to see Viktor grinning… victoriously?

Was this about when he’d poked him at practice? Getting back at him. Had that really bothered him? No, that’s not what that smile was.
It was a game.

Yuuri reached over and touched the top of his coach’s silver head - a quick jab, like a dare to grab his finger before he pulled away.

Also being of the competitive sort, Viktor wouldn’t lose, and reached over with both hands to ruffle Yuuri’s hair.

Yuuri returned it, a chuckle in his throat.

Back and forth and simultaneously, they grabbed the other’s hair, gently tugging strands even after the sand had washed away. Playing and laughing together under a curtain of water with no boundaries between coach and student.

With how light he felt now, it was hard to believe he had been miserable that morning. He didn’t know this was what he needed, then, and he was grateful for Viktor’s suggestion to go to the beach.

As Viktor tried his hand at turning the water off, Yuuri supervised and thanked him in his heart. I didn’t know I needed this.

The night of the Grand Prix Final assignments came, and gathered the Katsukis and Nishigoris with Minako at Yu-Topia. It was past the triplets and Viktor’s bedtimes, yet they stayed up for the announcement.

First, the Cup of China in Beijing where Yuuri would be skating against Phichit. Then, the Rostelecom Cup in Moscow where Yuuri would be skating against Yurio for the first time in an official competition.

It’d also be the first time Viktor wouldn’t be part of the Grand Prix lineup. At previous cup series, Yuuri had avoided talking to him, feeling unworthy to do so until he met him in the finals. Viktor was now his coach and taking him to the finals.

Previously, Yuuri worried his loss would make his fellow competitors find him inferior, but after a reminder from Yuko, he also felt an unease he’d be hated for taking Viktor away from the skating world. All of Viktor’s rivals that wouldn’t have a chance to skate against him for reasons that had nothing to do with their skill levels. All the fans that looked forward to him performing will only see him on the side lines.

On top of the guilt, Yuuri has to redeem himself in the eyes of his own country by participating in the block championships in Kyushu against Minami Kenjiro, the boy that he lost to at last year’s nationals.

Two more months until Okayama. Three until Beijing. There was a lot to be done.

Though Viktor assured Yuuri that the day he took off was fine and necessary to recover, Yuuri couldn’t help feeling he was running short on time. The assignments… it was getting closer. He had to get better fast. Be prepared.

After knowing where he’d be placed, Yuuri took to the ice harder than ever. Drills and warmups. Run-throughs of his short and free programs, front and back. Not good enough, again!
But even with all that renewed motivation, his body could only take so much. With each passing
day, he could feel the aches in his feet and legs, but he had to keep going. Couldn’t afford to stop.
It was fine, just working harder than previous seasons.

Yuuri glided to the edge of the rink and stepped onto the dry ground and made his way to the
bench. Sitting took maneuvering. Bending to untie the laces, and then lifting his leg to pull it off,
he realized the effort that took and put his foot back down, frowning.

It didn’t take long for Viktor to notice his struggle. “Did you overdo it?” he asked with a knowing
wink.

Yuuri didn’t look up and muttered. “Maybe.”

“Let’s take a look.” Viktor knelt and examined the the blades and boots still on Yuuri’s feet.
“When was the last we sharpened your blades? Your boots fit well? Good and tight; supportive?”

“I don’t remember when the last time I sharpened them.” Yuuri wondered if Viktor remembered
writing to him, or the advice about his boots. Didn’t seem like it. “They feel fine. Got them re-
laced not that long ago, too.”

“The wear seems fine... we'll need to get these blades sharpened in the next little while, but at least
it's not your boots that are the problem! Wouldn't want you to break an ankle or anything. Okay,
now your feet…”

Gripping the edge of the bench, Yuuri braced himself for the oncoming pain as Viktor carefully
pulled the boot off his foot. There was some relief in the release from the confines of the skate. His
foot was placed on Viktor’s knee while he examined the boots further. Not seeing anything
obvious, he turned to his foot, white socks splotched in blood! He hadn’t realized he’d broken
skin! “Wait, no, Viktor don't touch!” he waved his hands, trying to dismiss him. “You'll get my
blood on you…”

The sock was pulled off. Viktor raised a brow. “It's fine, fine. Wait here, let me go get some
things.” With assistance, he placed Yuuri’s foot on the ground and padded to his own duffle bag
and dragged it over. He withdrew a water bottle and towel, then sat in front of Yuuri, removing his
other skate and sock. “We'll clean you up first.” Pouring water into the towel, he began to dab at
the fresh and dried blood. “You might not realize this, but it's really difficult to skate without feet.”

Embarrassed that this was even happening, he looked to the side. “I know…”

“They're an important asset. You need to take good care of them.”

“I'm usually... okay.”

“You've just been working really hard. I get it. I've hurt my feet plenty of times before.” Viktor
steadied his foot on his knee as he rummaged through his bag and pulled out a canister. Removing
the cap, he dipped his finger into what was inside. Salve? “But if you're not careful, your coach
will suspend you from skating, and no one wants that.”

“If I'm suspended, I can't skate. Is it... really that bad?”

“Not yet, but you really should take it a little easier. We still have time to afford a slower pace.
Yakov has suspended me more than a few times for injuries. I’ve hated it every time.”

The salve touched the top of his foot, the contact cooled and tingled. As Viktor worked his fingers
around, it warmed and burned. His legs tensed. “I-I'll try to be more careful…”
Viktor slowed his hands. “If you were to twist or break your ankle now, we'd be in trouble.”

“I’ve thankfully not done that... Sprained my wrist in a fall once.”

“That's not too bad. I skated a few competitions with a broken wrist, but that was still really dangerous.” Humming, he continued to massage, bringing his other hand into it. “Worse, though, was when I got hurt at Worlds and skated anyway without telling Yakov. He was so mad!” He smiled at the memory.

“Yeah. I watched it on TV. The feed cut away a little, but the magazine coverage told more.” If Viktor hadn’t been injured, he totally would have taken gold!

“It took weeks to heal after that. I was so bored. But that's what I got for doing jumps on an injury.”

“I’m glad you were able come back stronger than ever.”

“Ehehe. I was determined not to let anything get in my way.”

“As most skaters are.”

The smile faded. “Don't break your ankle or I'll be really upset.”

“... I'll slow down…”

“Thank you.” More rubbing of his foot and up into his ankle, then back down into his heel, arch, and toes. “Let me know if I'm putting too much pressure.”

“Maybe a little, but..” Hiss. “That just means it's working.”

“That's true.” A few more rubs and then he grabbed his other foot to begin the same treatment. “I learned this trick at the ballet academy. Dancing from dawn until dusk, wearing out our slippers like the twelve dancing princesses... Sore feet all the time.”

“Dancing so long... I danced a lot by choice, but thinking about Minako-sensei's hour classes is kind of silly.”

“We usually had other classes in between, so we weren't always on our feet.” Viktor sighed, grining once more, and looked up at him. “You'd think I'd have better endurance after all of that, huh? I'm not so young anymore.”

“Sometimes, no matter how hard you train, it can't change what you are capable of?”

“Well, I don't know about that... but I guess that's probably true with some things. There's probably things I could do to improve it. Endurance is your concern now, not mine. I'm not the one competing!”

“Right, right.”

Their conversation trailed as Viktor finished massaging his second foot. Then he dabbed into the canister one last time and spread the dollop throughout both feet.

“How do your feet feel?”

“Tingly…”

He laughed at that. “Good. Secret Swiss ingredients; guaranteed to help.” Viktor sat back on his
heels. “I think you're probably good now. Though, I don't want you walking around. Your feet need rest.”

Swiss ingredients? Yuuri wondered if Christophe had given it to him. “Yeah... the tingling is kind of crawling up my shins.”

Another laugh. “Okay. You wait here, I'll go lock up.”

“Huh? We can wait around a bit?”

“You're not skating anymore tonight, and I'm not gonna let you walk home.”

“So we are sitting?”

“So I'm gonna lock up and then I'll carry you back.” Viktor stood with a hand on his hip. “I just gave you the secret ballerina foot massage. No way I'm letting you undo all of that work. Besides, you carried me the other day.”

“That wasn't nearly as far...”

“Yuuri, are you arguing with your coach~?”

“No! I'm just... concerned.”

His arms moved from his sides to cross in front of his chest. “Well, now it's a challenge, so I have to do it to prove myself.”

“That not what I meant!”

“Yuuri, it'll be fine. Wait here. Drink some water.”

Taking the water bottle he’d placed next to him, Yuuri frowned as he watched him walk away to turn off lights and make sure windows were closed and secured. Then to the restrooms to presumably wash his hands from the salve. Why couldn’t they just sit and wait the numbness out? He didn’t want to make Viktor carry him!

Viktor returned shortly and set to packing away both their bags. “Okay! Ready to go? Hmm, think we can compact these for easier carrying?”

Nodding, Yuuri told him to put his bag in his own and that he’d shoulder the bag while being carried. If that was really what Viktor was determined to do.

Once more, Viktor got in front of Yuuri, and then immediately turned around. “Come on, let's go.”

With a surrendering sigh, Yuuri leaned forward and situated himself on Viktor’s back, making sure his arms were tucked in enough so not to lose their gear along the way.

When Viktor stood, he made his own adjustments and then took a few steps, then asked Yuuri to turn off the light. He did so without a word.

The sun had gone down, and with it, the heat of the day.

Yuuri was sure they made a sight to anyone that would see them like this.

Still. As much as it embarrassed Yuuri to be carried and babied by his coach... he was also happy that Viktor cared so much. Yes, it was to ensure his skater would still be able to make the finals,
but he was thorough and gentle. His other coaches would have never done this.

Pressing a cheek to his back, Yuuri hid a soft smile.

The longer he stayed there, the quicker he felt the warmth between them and it was comforting. The tingling up his legs and fatigue of the rest of his body, the gait of Viktor’s walk lulling him to relaxation… he closed his eyes and sighed.

Soon he was stirred awake by the sound of his mother’s voice.

“Is he okay, Vicchan?”


Blinking the sleep away, “Mm. Yeah. Food sounds good!”

“Ohay, I’m setting you down on the floor, now.”

Yuuri complied and slid off his back onto a cushion at the table. He stretched his legs under the table, careful to not put pressure on his feet. “Was I too heavy?” The house wasn’t that far, he couldn’t believe he fell asleep.

“Nope! Though I think I need to do some arm work, wow…” Viktor rolled his now free arms and shoulders. “You’re a lot stronger than I am.”

Little smile. “You’re just light.”

“Uh huh. Sure. Don’t go trying to make me feel better, Yuuri,” he teased.

There was little point in arguing when Yuuri felt positive in his statement. “Sorry I was out of it on the way here. I was-”-comfortable? Warm? A bit blissed out? All those sounded weird. “-tired.”

“A massage can do that sometimes. It was fine. I was, uh, enjoying the quiet scenery. Oh, when you’re ready to walk, I’ll get your slippers. Still best to be careful with your pampered feet.”

“I will.”

Soon his mother was bringing in their dinner from the kitchen, the rest of the family already have eaten due to their delay with the massage. A plate of yakisoba for Viktor, and a bowl of broccoli, bean sprouts, and small bites of chicken for Yuuri.

The pair ate in a comfortable silence, content to be in company of one another.

Suppressing a yawn, Yuuri entered Ice Castle for morning practice. Rather than being on the ice like he usually was, Viktor had has back turned, leaning on the barrier. As Yuuri got closer, he could see earbud wires. Ah, so he was listening to music. Side by side, he noted he was listening to his free skate piece. Before Viktor pocketed his phone with an apology for not hearing him come in, Yuuri read the play count in the triple digits.

“I had some thoughts on your program. These are suggestions, but I find them a good fit for your style.”

They were working on his program together. If the great Viktor Nikiforov was going to offer
Viktor removed his guards, used the remote to start the music over and did a breeze through the forms until the part he needed, “At this part - you know, where the percussion picks up -” small jump, “Only you’d do a full triple here. And then, at the bridge, I want you to skate like you’re the most beautiful person in the world… Really elongating your form - ina bauer and spread eagle. Show them your training- all of the years of ballet and discipline. They need to know how hard you’ve worked… and you'll make it look effortless… think of all that Minako-sensei has taught you. Let them appreciate you. Let the audience look at you and see just how breathtaking you are.” Stopping himself and the music, he turned to Yuuri. “Not sure about it?”

He shook out of his stupor. “I've just... never done anything like that before.” So graceful and fluid. Attention grabbing. So Viktor.

“Would you like to give it a try for me? It feels good with the music.”

They were a team. He would try it whether he knew he could do it or not. Shedding his guards, he joined Viktor on the ice and tested his momentum. Viktor moved to the side as the music started, then fast forwarded it to the bridge.

“Show them why ballet dancers make the best skaters!!”

Yuuri held his arms out and glided across the ice, like the flight of the bird he had described to Viktor. Pivot, inside-edge spread eagle, then front leg bent, back leg straight. Stop. Not quite there. “Let me try that again. Start a bar before the bridge.”

“Yes, excellent! Really feel it. Show me.”

The music started once more, then fast forwarded to what was needed. Yuuri took position before the triple axel, and the following moves and then right into the spread eagle. He then dipped into a lunge while in motion and then lifted his form into an ina bauer. Stop. Yes, much better. He’ll have to work on that.

Viktor applauded, eyes slightly shimmering. “That was beautiful. You look absolutely regal. Perfect, perfect!”

“Y-yeah?” he looked away. If he felt this bashful with Viktor, what would it be like with a full audience!? “Oh, I’ll add this to my notes.” Yuuri then skated to the sidelines for his notebook with his program outline to jot down the shorthand names. Adding question marks for smoother transitions.

“Yuri, you haven't named the piece. What will it be?” Viktor asked, not having followed him.

From the original piece, its purpose was to embody his skating career, but it had unintentionally bled into Yuuri’s very life and soul.

*Let them appreciate you. Let the audience look at you.*

Yuuri took the sharpie marker and brought it to the blank disc.

“Yeah, perfect.”

Yuri on ICE.
With the additions and name of his free skate program, it was time to decide a costume. Or, as Viktor preferred, design one. Normally Yuuri would look at a catalog of some rough ideas pre-made by official ISU designers and Yuuri would sit with his coaches to decide. He wasn’t artistic, so it never bothered him that that was the way.

Viktor a lways designed his costumes to some degree and had a personal designer to make it a reality. With Yuuri as his student, he insisted to help with the makings of Yuuri’s first custom costume.

Which meant following Viktor’s methods.

They gathered every magazine they could find at the onsen and gathered on the banquet room floor one night, both already in their pajamas. Scissors, construction paper, glue, and glitter. It was like a sleepover.

Viktor called it an Idea Book. Every year, he’d pick a theme and he’d cut out inspiration from anything he found and placed it neatly into a blank, hardbound book. He’d then do rough sketches taking bits from clothes or objects to create something new.

With a theme like On My Love, Yuuri felt overwhelmed before they even started.

“Just start with something you know you like already. Colors, cuts of tops, and so on,” Viktor said, thumbing through one of Mari’s clothing catalogs.

Yuuri paged through a skating magazine he knew didn’t have anything too relevant in.

“Hey Yuuri… Viktor said, finishing cutting out a piece. “You know how the first night I came and asked if I could sleep with you?”

“Yeah? What about it...?” Odd to bring that up, now?

“Sorry that I made things really awkward. It came out all wrong, and I didn't even realize until later. Everything was so sudden and I just, well, I meant I just wanted to sit up and talk, like we are doing now, maybe sleep on your floor. I didn't mean actually sleep with you. I probably came off as such a creep.” Pointedly, Viktor wasn’t looking at him as he spoke, gluing cutouts.

Oh. Sounded like they both had misunderstood. “It was really sudden for me, too.”

“I bet.”

“I didn't really know how to react.”

“Having someone show up, naked, making the announcement that, 'Hi, I'm moving in because I didn't realize this wasn't an inn and I'm going to be your coach whether you like it or not'. Out of nowhere.”

“True but… You being here is... Really great.” A pretty set of filigree caught his eye, so he cut them out. “So unexpected.”

“Well, in my defense, you asked me to come.”

“What?” Oh, he’d brought that up before, asking with the video. “Right.”

“How could I resist?”

It still didn’t make it any less awkward or keep the blush at bay. “It wasn't my-- I mean, I didn't
post the video.”

“Right, I heard, but I’m glad they did.”

“In my heart I ... Yeah I guess I asked you, to.”

“I had the flight booked within fifteen minutes after seeing it. Yakov said I was crazy.”

“When I was little, I-- n-nevermind.” Yuuri grabbed the glue and busied himself with placing it on a page. And then, “Wait, what did you say?”

“No, what were you going to say?”

“Um, you first. Mine’s embarrassing anyway.”

“I saw the video and... booked the first flight to Kumamoto I could get.”

“Really?... Just because of a video I made? You really came all the way here for me.”

Viktor stared back at him, mildly offended. “I thought that was obvious by now.”

“It is, I just-” try not to think about it because I don’t know why you’d answer my call.

“I’m just glad you didn’t kick me out on the first day. That would have been a bigger mess.”

“I wouldn’t have been able to.”

“Your family is very polite. It took me hours to figure out that it wasn’t an inn, and by then you’d all decided to let me stay. Russia isn't like that at all.” The smile he held wasn’t nostalgic like Yuuri would think.

“Not hospitable?”

“More... blunt. Imagine Yurio: ‘What do you think this is, an inn? Go find your own bed to sleep in, because you're not staying here! You're welcome to come back when we're open again tomorrow’. Shove all of my boxes into the street and I’d have said, ‘Well that's fair,’ and shrug because fools sleep in the street, but your mama brought me tea instead.”

That was actually a really good impression of him! “Well if Yurio is like Russia, you're not like Russia at all.”

“I am soft for a Russian. An unfortunate truth, but…” he shook his head, dismissing talking of his home. Like usual. “I have told you mine, now you tell me yours.”

Turn the page. Good shade of purple. ”When I was younger I skated and danced a lot. It helped me think. And feel better about things. Then I was introduced to you on TV.”

Viktor smiled at that as he cut out something Yuuri couldn’t define from his position.

“You inspired me.”

The scissors ceased their movement.

His chest tightened. “It sounds like such a fanboy thing to say.” Had he said too much? He chanced looking up at Viktor again and was greeted with a soft smile. It prompted him further. “I often tried to copy your programs.”
“That means a lot to me, actually. And... I really appreciate you telling me.”

“H-huh? I'm sure you inspire a lot of people.” And Yuuri had told him before in a letter. He really didn’t remember...

“I guess, but I don't get to talk to a lot of them in person, or see what they do with the inspiration. And you've really made something of yourself!”

The weight in his chest was replaced with something else. Pleased? But then he continued his story, and the shadows returned. “And then when I... placed last at the GPF and lost at nationals I couldn't... do it anymore, so I quit and went back to school in the states to finish up the year.”

“Oh, so that's what you were up to.”

“Yeah. And I wasn't in a good place for a while.”

Viktor nodded solemnly. “I’d thought you'd quit forever.”

“Well, I kind of did. I fired my coach. Went back to the states. Was feeling pretty miserable having let so many people, including myself, down. Gained weight. Didn't really leave my dorm unless I had to.”

Putting the materials aside, Viktor adjusted to pull his knee up to rest his cheek on. “Sounds like you were miserable.”

It was Yuuri’s turn to nod and slide magazines out of the way. “Then one day I picked up my skates. Went to the ice rink near me. I hadn't been on the ice for a month.”

“Wow! I haven't done that except when injured. And even then…”

“Yeah, not recommended. So I went in the lobby where they were rebroadcasting footage. And I saw you on the TV again. Skating what you did last season.”

“Stay Close to Me, or something else?”

“Yeah, that. So I got on the ice and just started skating. Simple things at first, then gradually I was copying you like I did when I was a kid. It, of course, wasn't very good, but after that, I went everyday and practiced. Doing what I loved.”

“It's a very special program.”

“The video you saw was after I came home to Japan. It feels special. Important.”

“So you went back to Japan and skated it for Yuko-chan, I'm guessing, and she recorded it? Rather, I bet the triplets did, those little goblins.”

“Y-yeah. She’s a good friend and I was wanting to show her something that had helped me through the last few months. Fortunately/unfortunately it didn't remain private…”

“Well, like I said before, I'd lost my inspiration, too. I was winning competitions but it all felt like the end.”

“The end?”

Viktor took a long pause, and then a breath. “I just wasn't sure where to go from there, but when I saw that video... it was like a lightning strike.”
Yuuri could have sworn his heart stopped. “You were… inspired by me?”

“I knew I had to coach you right away. Get you back to the GPF so you could achieve your dreams.”

Yuuri drew his legs to himself. Impossible! How could he inspire his idol?

“Anyone who can skate Stay Close to Me like that...” he scratched his neck.

“Have others tried?”

“I don't know. Probably. I don't want them to.”

“You can't cross the world to coach everyone, right?” Yuuri said, feeling smug with that declaration.

“No! I'd probably go bankrupt. Besides... I like that we're the only ones that skate it. That I know of.”

“I'm... Glad you weren't mad at me for skating it.”

“No. In fact, you are the only one in the world officially authorized to skate it. Viktor Nikiforov stamp of approval.”

Yuuri had to hide a goofy smile.

“You could even do it for your exhibition skate if you wanted. Since you already know it.”

“Oh. I hadn't thought about that...” Yuuri had never made it far enough in the Grand Prix to use gala pieces, so he tended to keep them in reserve until he could use them. But using an old program of Viktor's...

“You're definitely going to win, so you'll need it.”

“Getting a late start, so, having something on hand will definitely help.”

“It'd be nice to see it again... I was really sad to let it go.”

“Really?”

“I don't know about you, but I hate it when the season ends. It's always exciting to start new programs, but having to throw the old ones away is really depressing. It was fun to skate them for you when I first got here.”

“You don't have to throw them away completely. You spend so much time making them a part of yourself....”

“True, but I can't perform them after the season is over. Anyway, your free skate program is fantastic! Whatever you decide for your exhibition skate, you have a really solid base.”

“Thank you. That means a lot. If you weren’t here... I wouldn’t be skating again for one, but, I really think I can get to the final six with my line up.”

“That’s the spirit! So what do you say to getting back to figuring out your costume? Oh, and we’ll consider makeup as well. And hair style.”
“Right. Sorry. We got really distracted by all that.”

“No, no, this was good. I know more about you already.”

It did feel good to open up more. A little easier every time.

They each returned to their idea books, opening their materials, cutting, tearing, and gluing. Yuuri cut out a few different styles of suits. And a mesh leotard. Turning a few more pages and he stopped at what he thought was a familiar face.

No, it couldn’t be her. Reading the credits, it wasn’t, but.

Since their heart to heart on the beach, Viktor hadn’t pried about relationships, much to Yuuri’s relief, but he hadn’t been entirely upfront about one thing. Their conversation had ended on such a high note… was it worth it to bring up something Yuuri was ashamed of? If anything, it’d tie up a loose end curiosity for his coach. Get it over with. Leave it on the table.

“Um. Viktor?”

He looked up from sprinkling glitter on a butterfly.

“I… had a date once. But I stood her up.”

“Yuuri! That's not very nice.”

The mock scandalized tone helped. “No... it's really not. I felt awful. She’d asked out a few times and I kept turning her down. Then there was one time I didn't answer her for several days, I felt guilty for saying no for so long, I actually considered. Days of me agonizing over it. Eventually I said yes. Then I ... didn't show up.”

“She should have known better than to bully you.”

“We were friends. It shouldn't have been a big deal. I was fine being friends, but a date meant she wanted more from me than I could give, right?”

“Curious; is this the same girl you pushed?”

“Yeah, it was. And she was known around campus. I wasn’t ever looking for a date. But after not showing up and then pushing her away when she clearly was trying to help me… she spread rumors about me that weren’t true.”

Viktor frowned sympathetically. “Bad ones?”

Sort of. It was simpler to nod and leave it at that.

“I'm sorry, Yuuri.”

“It’s okay. Thankfully I had Phichit for all of that.” Viktor didn’t press, and Yuuri was grateful he hadn’t. It was hard to explain. “Anyway, I think I got a good start on this idea book. What do you think?”

For the next week, Viktor sat with Yuuri and his idea book and helped on mockup sketches to send to his designer, who would then come in person for measurements and her professional input. Viktor commended him for his preliminary inspiration and design, having a good handle on his
method.

Another week later, and the designer - Fifi - had booked a flight to arrive at the airport that weekend. Out of courtesy to her (even though he was paying her, anyway), Viktor suggested they meet her at the in the city so she wouldn’t need to take the train to them, and he and Yuuri could spend a day off together afterwards.

Yuuri didn’t have any objections.

When they arrived, Viktor received a call from Fifi, giving them directions to the hotel she reserved for she and her assistants. Naturally, it was the ritziest place around.

"She likes to be addressed as Fifi. She's a very busy woman, so we'll need to be on our toes. Answer her questions without hesitation- she hates indecision. But she'll love you. Just try not to think about the fact that she's too expensive for you to afford with her portfolio and you'll be fine.”

As far as costumes went, Yuuri didn't like making decisions as there were a lot of choices. But with making his own costume for once... Maybe she wouldn't like him.

He'd be thinking about the price no matter what. Although, having a Viktor Nikiforov-Grade costume of his very own was like a dream.

Entering the hoity-toity hotel, with Yuuri’s assistance in talking to the front desk, they located her room on the ninth floor with the executive suites. They knocked on the door and were greeted by a man and woman all in black attire.

Scanning them over, they pulled them inside where another woman, also all in black, complete with beret and lipstick. He could only assume she was Fifi, hazel eyes giving them a once over. Their complexion and makeup definitely set them apart as foreigners.

“Fifi, bonjour !” Viktor outspread his arms as he approached.

Muttering something in French, she allowed the hug and kissed both cheeks and patted him down. “Zut alors! Nikiforov! You've filled out! You have color! Where is my fragile little willow branch? Are you now a tree?”

Viktor rubbed the back of his neck, shyly. “I must confess, Japan has been good to me... but please don't be upset, Fifi!”

“Your waist is still trim... it is salvageable. But I'll have to take your measurements again.” She then put her hand on her hips and glanced at Yuuri then spoke to Viktor in French.

Though Viktor looked nervous, he didn’t ignore what she said. “Uh, this is Yuuri Katsuki, the student I mentioned. We have an idea book for you to look at. Yuuri? This is Fifi Séverine.”

Fifi moved away from Viktor to fully evaluate him, but only with her eyes, scanning from head to toe with a little nod. "What is it that you say? Konnichiwa ?"

“Yes, that’s right,” Yuuri nodded and gave her a half bow.

"Let's take a look at you, then. My assistants will get your measurements while I go through your book. I imagine it's in the same style as all of Nikiforov's, non?"

"Of course," Viktor offered.
She sighed, rolling her eyes. "*Parfait.*"

The assistants grabbed a hand each and pulled him to a corner of the room and didn’t bother asking Yuuri to undress for them. Asking for him to move his arms also seemed like something they didn’t do. Lots of calling out in French - numbers, maybe? - and ‘Oui!’ . Looking around his shoulder, Viktor and Fifi were also conversing. Yuuri had never felt more like an outsider in his own country.

Fifi closed Yuuri’s idea book and waved at her assistants who were already rolling up their measuring tapes. “Good, now take Nikiforov’s. He’s gone and ruined my records!”

“*Oui*, Fifi!”

Viktor sticking out his tongue was probably missed as the assistants pounced on him.

Taking Yuuri’s arm, Fifi lead him to have a seat on the sofa with her with his idea book in her lap and slid it over so it was on both of them. “Tell me what you like in particular.”

Flipping through the pages, he pointed at the colors schemes of a rich purple. His favorite filigrees, maybe a combination of them. Suggesting some parts be sheer for contrast and breathability.

She nodded and took notes on her tablet. “What about shimmer? Nikiforov usually requests excessive amounts!”

“Maybe not excessive for me. Uh, what about where the filigree is at? Very light on the rest.”

Taking her stylus, she started to sketch out some possibilities, holding it out to him: “What about this? Sheer here? There?”

“Yuuri is very elegant! Showing off his back would be a nice touch!”

“Viktor, hush! This is Yuuri’s costume. By the way, is he being nice to you?”

Nodding helped cool the burn in Yuuri’s cheeks. “Yes, very. He's been a very good coach so far.”

“Good. I wouldn't want to have to cut off his ear or anything.”

That sounded like such a mother thing to say, Yuuri wondered just how close they were and smiled.

Fifi sketched a few more designs and showed them to Yuuri. He pointed to his top three. She took a few photos with her phone to have a full visual while she worked on finalizing a preliminary design, which will be done in plenty of time, she assured him. She also handed him her very fancy business card.

“Bill me,” Viktor said.

“Oh, that's good,” she said, clapping her tablet cover over and stood to start shoving them out the door. “Thank you for bringing me to Japan. I'll be in touch, don't call me, let me work, have a nice day, good to meet you Yuuri, goodbye~”

“I-it was nice meeting you, too!” Straight to business and only business...

“*Au Revoir,* Fifi! Thank you so much for meeting with us so quick--”

“Oh, and before I forget, Nikiforov; Raphael sends his love and wants to know when you're going
to finish that coffee date.”
Viktor didn’t look really happy about whoever Raphael was.
And then the door was closed on their faces.
“She seemed… nice.”
“Yuuri…” Viktor bumped his shoulder. “Well, she is. Just straight to the point. Now, shall we find some late lunch?”

They found their late lunch at a quaint restaurant that caught Viktor’s interest, then spent the day exploring the city until Viktor asked for a coffee break. Was it related to Fifi's comment on the coffee date? He didn't want to ask. A quick search on his smart phone revealed a coffee shop just a block away that was attached to a large bookstore. Upon arrival, coffee was immediately forgotten.

They entered the bookstore instead, book-loving patrons filling the aisles and lounging in the reading areas.

Viktor’s eyes widened with interest. “So many books!”

Well, they were in a bookstore. Did Russia not have places like this? “Was there something in particular you wanted to look for?”

Reaching for the nearest book, Viktor examined the cover and spine, frowning like he’d made a grave error. “I can’t read any of these…”

“I’m sure there’s an English section.”

“Actually, what about a children’s section? I’d like to practice my Japanese.”

Touched, Yuuri followed the overhanging plaques to the children’s section with Viktor excitedly trailing behind. They found an alcove where younger readers and a few mothers were looking through the shelves. Yuuri decided to wait for the area to be clearer before going in.

“I love books about fairytales and fables,” Viktor offered.

“I thought so.”

Surprised, Viktor gave a sideways glance. “How did you know?”

“Your programs…”

“Oh. I guess that makes sense. They are where I draw a lot of my inspiration. I'm always looking for more stories. I’ve recently been adding dragons and kitsune.”

“To your stories?”

“Mmmh… I'll probably choreograph something with it next season.”

“I’m sure it'll be incredible!” Oh good, so he was planning on coming back!

“We'll see.”
The room cleared some, thus Yuuri deemed it safe to go inside. He showed Viktor illustrated books with dragons and kitsune specifically on the cover. Tanukis and kappas. Kamis. Soon he had a small pile in his arms and together they found a table to sit at and look through them.

Starting from the top, Viktor paged through them, stopping occasionally to spot any kanji that looked familiar and admire the illustrations. “Oo this wolf looks like he belongs in Peter and the Wolf.”

“You?” Yuuri leaned over to look at the wolf. Though he was pretty sure it was a big, black fox. Fairytales… He bit his lip. “My first short program was by Tchaikovsky.”

Viktor looked up from the book, interested. “Mine, too! Wait, you probably knew that.”

Yuuri nodded, cause of course he knew. Being such a fan, it was his duty to.

And since they were in different divisions at the time, of course Viktor wouldn’t know and asked, “Which piece did you do?”

“Piano Concerto No 1, B-Flat Minor. It was rumored to have been written for his preferred pianist.”

“Good choice. Excellent piece.”

Yuuri blushed. “I guess you can see I was trying to imitate you.”

“Tchaikovsky is just good in general, but I'm honored.”

“I couldn't feel good about doing any movements in Nutcracker, though.”

“...Oh?”

“It felt like I'd be invading.”

Viktor gave a soft little smile at that, though not quite understanding. “I'd love it if you did something from The Nutcracker someday.”

“Really? That wouldn't be weird?”

“No, everyone should enjoy it. My... mama was in The Nutcracker.”

That was why Yuuri didn’t feel right skating to The Nutcracker. Tchaikovsky was a hero of Russia, and many skaters used his works. Viktor specifically loved to use the ballet movements, Nutcracker especially. In Yuuri’s early fan days, when he searched for any info on his idol that he could, he found that his mother was a renowned ballerina with the Russian Imperial Ballet. And the Nutcracker was the last ballet she’d participated in before she died, with Viktor’s father, in a car accident.

Viktor blushed. “Oh. You probably knew that already, too.”

“Sorry... I don't mean to be a stalker or anything it's just... info that's out there.”

“Right. No, that's okay. I've just had so many interviews I never know what anyone already knows or not. I don't want to repeat myself.”

“I don’t mind. You can tell me if you want.”
Shaking his head, he picked out the next book. “I’ll just... wait and see if you have any questions.”

He was trying to avoid talking about it. Yuuri knew so little about Viktor’s past, and he didn’t want to let this opportunity go. The smile he had while talking about his mother… “Did you get to see her perform?”

Completely surprised, like he wasn’t expecting him to actually ask or care, Viktor hesitated. “Oh. Um, a few times. Usually the dress rehearsals. Practices. Some real performances. She... danced at home all the time.”

“I bet it was nice seeing her dance not on the stage. Casual.”

“Yeah. And she’d drag Papa into it.”

“Was he a dancer, too?” Not much was recorded about his father.

“No, not really. He was a banker, but she taught him some things. Waltz, mostly, though she’d lead. I loved watching them. They were so sappy and silly.” He sighed softly at the memory.

“Sounds like like a fairytale,” Yuuri smiled, picturing a beautiful couple dancing in the moonlight with a young Viktor hiding behind the curtains to watch.

“It does, doesn’t it?”

The frown and trailing tone didn’t go unnoticed to Yuuri. “In a good way!” he assured.

“I was just thinking it’d be nice to have that some day.”

“To dance at home?”

“Yes... with someone, I guess.” Viktor shook his head, face flushing, and closed the book.

“Anyway, are there books on poodles?” He stood, the chair screeching under him.

Oh no, he was avoiding talking, again. Did he make him mad? “Uh, yeah! Let me look.” Yuuri also stood and Viktor followed after, avoiding eye contact.

It took some searching, but Yuuri did find the pet section with two books specifically focusing on poodles and a dog book with several pages on the breed and those similar. Being in Japanese, it wasn’t entirely helpful, but Viktor wished to look at the photos, anyway. Yuuri walked over to the English section and picked out the one book that looked useful.

Viktor was short on answers after that. Preferring silence and looking through the selection of books Yuuri had helped him pick out. When it got close to the closing time, Viktor gathered the books and purchased them all.

Once they arrived at the platform, Viktor let his two bags of book rest on the ground at his feet and rolled his shoulders.

Their walk to the station had been a quiet one and Yuuri was unsure what to say that would recover from the mood that he had created. He noted to himself not bring up Viktor’s parents again. Or had it been the dancing?

The analog clock above flashed with a bell tone, and a voiceover on the PA informed them the next train would be arriving in ten minutes. Chirping cicadas were then replaced by the tinny
sound of Swan Lake Waltz.

How appropriate. All that talk of Tchaikovsky at the bookstore and--

Yuuri questioned why he had become so impulsive lately. Clearly it was his fault Viktor was upset, but was this really his solution?

He took a step towards Viktor and bowed at the waist, extending his hand in invitation. As nervous as he was, it was more important to try.

Silver brows furrowed, studying him for a moment, hand to face, and then his hand was taking his like he couldn’t refuse even if he wanted to. His hands were clammy, and Yuuri wasn’t sure if it was the day’s heat or from something else.

Since Yuuri was the one to initiate, he hoped it was okay that he was leading, even if he was shorter.

Viktor said nothing, following without a word, falling into step under the old flickering lights of the empty station. Viennese style waltz at the quicker measures and then transitioning into the Slow waltz in others. Open position, closed position. Step; one, two, three.

Their steps were effortless with the music, having both danced to it in the learning stages of their training. Yuuri watched Viktor off and on, catching his eyes looking far off in disbelief.

At the end of the song, the train signaled its approached.

Quickly they offered each other a bow in thanks for the dance, faces flushed, out of breath, gathered the books and got inside the train bound for Hasetsu.

Like the station, the car was also empty.

They sat next to each other.

It surprised Yuuri how glad he was that Viktor chose to sit close to him. Knees touching without shying away. The dance bridged that gap between them?

“You're so good,” Viktor finally said, softly, not quite looking at him.

“You're really good, too.”

“Guess that's what happens when two professionally trained dancers dance together, huh?”

“Yeah... Hard habits to break

“That was really fun. Thank you, Yuuri.”

“You're welcome.” Yuuri chance clasped his hands in his lap. “You just... Seemed so sad earlier.”

“I guess I miss them sometimes - my parents - and I get lonesome thinking about it too much. I don't get to dance much anymore.”

“Dancing like that usually takes two.”

He nodded, and then gave a small laugh. “Makkachin doesn't like it.”

Trying to think of Viktor getting Makkachin on his hind legs for a dance didn’t seem like the best
of ideas. “I'm sure Minako-sensei wouldn't mind if we--you-- danced in her studio from time to
time.”

“Could be a good break.”

“I’ll see if I can get her schedule so we aren't disturbing her classes. I was there a lot when I was
losing weight.”

Viktor hummed and tapped his foot in place.

The rhythm, Yuuri recognized, as triple time - the waltz.

During the ride back, while he sat next to Viktor, growing sleepy and leaning on one another for
pillows, Yuuri reflected on their day. Viktor had told him he wasn’t weak. And since then, he’d
tried to see that himself. Then there were days like today he felt he wasn’t as weak as he originally
thought and that maybe Viktor wasn’t as strong as he thought all along.

Chapter End Notes

Viktor: Chris! Did you know that in Japan there's a festival ALL ABOUT lovers being
kept apart by ridiculous circumstances?! They're so in love and yet-- and yet!!!

Christophe: So it's celebrating you and Yuuri?

Viktor: Wh- no! It's called Tanabata and it's celebrating Orihime and Hikoboshi. Do I
look like a weaver girl to you?!

Christophe: There was a time-- kidding

Viktor: ... ... ... why do I even bother with you? :V

Christophe: You love me and you know it. I wish you happiness. Please tell me you
are taking Yuuri to this festival.

Viktor: It's more like he's taking me. They have the best food at these things!

Christophe: Oh! What a turn of events :3c You talking about food... that's new

Viktor: H-Hey!

**ON THE NEXT THRILLING GAY SKATE:**
Viktor gets wet!* / Phones are called! / Flowers are crowned! / Hotel rooms are
booked! / "Seduce me, Yuuri~"

*He goes to the waterfall.

*Please look forward to it*!
Summer wears on and on and it's getting to Viktor. But is it the heat, the cicadas' constant chirping, or perhaps being so close to the love of his life without being able to do anything about it that's driving him mad? With the Japanese qualifiers still a month away, Yuuri's coach takes some steps to deal with his frustrations.

Chapter Notes

Gabapple: OKAY, FIRST THINGS FIRST- this comes up a lot, so to set the record straight, YES! This fic is named Never Look Away after the Vienna Teng song. We first added it to our fic playlist on November 25th, 2016 and decided to make it our title two weeks later on December 9th. :) Mamodewberry was the one to propose it, both for the list and as a title, and neither of us could stop putting it on repeat because, beside the obvious reference to episode 6, it fit so much of what we were going for, ESPECIALLY when it came to the fairy tale narrative I was working on for Viktor. It was just meant to be! <3

Now... In this chapter:
Gabapple: lol I wanted to beat Mamodewberry's record while she was in the UK and now I am filled with regret. I was also going to hide under my desk again, but I was so tired after writing all of this that I don't even care anymore. Plus one of my test readers called me a smut slut so I'm just 🔢(urtles)🔢 There are also too many things I like here to highlight. Cameos. Suffering. Makkachin. Etc. Regardless, thus ends the summer chapters.

Mamodewberry: Okay, I didn't mean to make the word count a CHALLENGE! There just happened to be a lot of material and a lot of RP we had done that needed cleaning up, so... WORDS! I doubt I'll be able to push 10k again because Yuuri. But I am back from my travels and I'll get to responding to last chapter comments soon! Anyway, this chapter is such a good, despite a big mood change from Soft Chapter. Viktor and yuuri still aren't on the same wavelength... They'll get there!

Poster Giveaway!!!
So a couple of weeks ago, I designed an official NLA fairy tale poster, which you can see here. We're just about to 10,000 hits, so to celebrate, we're gonna send posters to 10 random readers who include "#datsparktho" somewhere in their comment within the first 48 hours. Yes, we'll even ship internationally! Winners will be contacted directly by me to get your address, so make sure you're logged in- PLUS, you can pick a bonus print of your choice from this selection to come along with it! They'll be printed on nice, 11" x 17" 60# glossy paper, full-bleed. :)

Recommended Listening:
Call of the Champions, as performed by L'Orchestra Cinematique
Saint Petersburg, Russia
Viktor (13 years old)

The boy sat at the edge of the bed, gaze transfixed on the alarm clock between the two beds. It was early morning, no later than half past five, but Viktor had been awake for an hour already and he could hardly stand to wait much longer. Soon, Yakov would be getting up, and soon, he would be getting ready for the last day of Russian Nationals. That meant focusing on the skaters allowed to compete. The ones who were old enough. IE, not Viktor.

Not yet.

Until now.

He worried his lower lip, small fingers gripping the blanket of the bed he’d gotten a couple of hours of passable sleep in. It hadn’t been the first time that he and Yakov had shared a room; not by far. Even though he had yet to compete, his coach had been taking him to Nationals and other local events since he was seven years old. That way, he could learn the ropes and get used to the scene while also serving as a distraction from days like the one he faced then: his birthday.

Thirteen years old.

The ISU dictated that children be thirteen on July 1st of the preceding season in order to compete, so now, as of that morning, he would finally reach that mark. July 1st would come, and he would be thirteen. Finally, after his years of training, he would be allowed to compete. Just six days, seven months. That was it. His time had come.

“Coach?” he ventured, voice little more than a squeak.

Yakov slept on. His alarm wouldn’t go off for another agonizing twenty minutes or so.


Still nothing.

The boy sighed through his teeth and crawled back onto the full-sized bed that had been assigned to him. It was so much larger than the one he had in the dorm. And softer, too. He could so easily get swallowed up and lost in a bed like this, with the mattress so squishy and the comforter so full of down.

Viktor bunched up the blankets and pillows until he had a small mountain, then pressed against it, continuing his vigil in the guise of a snow leopard. Appropriate, since all of the blankets were white and soft like fresh powder. He peered and waited…
...and waited…

...and waited.

“Vitya, it’s time to get up.”

Viktor sprung backward from the nest, tumbling over once in a somersault, and came to a flop on his stomach. Had it been his dorm room, he’d have fallen to the floor. Thankfully, the hotel’s grandiose saved him. Panting, he lifted his head. “Coach!”

Yakov didn’t even react, simply went back to getting ready. “Good morning… and happy birthday.”

“Yeah! Speaking of which, I’m thirteen!”

“You are.”

Viktor crawled off the bed and hopped to a stand, beaming. “You know what that means?”

“No. What?” There was the smallest hint of a smile at the corner of the old man’s mouth, meant to tease more than anything.

“It drove Viktor mad. “I get to compete!”

“Eventually.”

“Soon!”

“Relatively.”

All of this was true, but Viktor could barely contain his excitement, bouncing on his toes. “Coach! Coach! Can we start working on my programs?! I have some ideas!”

“It’s half a year away, Vitya.”

“But I need to get started so my debut is PERFECT!”

Yakov set his shirt down and glanced back at him, one brow arching.

Viktor stared back, smile bright, eyes brighter.

“You have time, Vitya. Get ready, let’s get breakfast.”

Viktor asked every five minutes after that, until Yakov finally told him to wait until they got home from Nationals.

“Fine,” he’d said with a look of long-suffering. “You may start putting together your program. Normally, I would have you wait until this season is over, but since you seem insistent on driving me insane otherwise, I will make an exception. But please let me finish this competition first.”

Viktor didn’t need to be told twice. “I’ll bring in my idea books next practice session!”

“Your what?”

“You’ll see, Coach!”
It was a Friday when Viktor brought them in; two large, hardback books that he had filled with collages of magazine clippings and drawings, costume sketches and poetry. He requested to put them in Yakov’s office until after practice, lest someone steal them, and told Yakov that they could discuss it after practice.

Not that he could focus during practice. It didn’t take long before it was clear that Viktor was too excited about the whole prospect to be much of use at all. As soon as the other students had cleared out, Yakov called him in and set him down to go over the programs.

“Oh. You might want to sit down for this, Coach,” said Viktor as he strolled into the office. “Wait til you see what I’ve got here.”

Yakov sat on the other side of the desk, impassive and weary, and said nothing as the boy hefted up the giant, glitter-filled books and spread them out on the surface between them.

“So here’s what I’m thinking for my programs. For the short program, I wanna do a story based on Little Red Riding Hood. So here are some costume ideas, you can see them here…” He paged through the heavy slabs, thick with glue and glossy photos. “And I want to get something composed that’s similar to Peter and the Wolf but more like, you know, less Prokofiev and more Tchaikovsky. A real ballet sort of thing.” Viktor paused for a breath. “And I want a cape.”

“Vitya.”

Viktor flipped several more pages to one with drawings of wolves. “I don’t know how I can get these guys in there, but it would be really cool. It’s probably just going to have to come out in the skating, though, right? With really fast skating and jumps away from them. Since this is single skating. So it’s just me.”

“Vitya.”

“Unless you think it’d be cooler if I was a wolf instead of Little Red Riding Hood… but I think I’d be better at running away than being a predator. Ha, I mean, I bet I could pull it off, but, let’s be honest, I could put my hair up in a french braid and it’d be really cute… Oh, I can have a basket, too, right?”

“Props are not allowed. Neither are capes. And while your idea is fine, your budget is…”

Viktor frowned at that, squinting as he thought back to the contents of his wallet and the little piggy bank back in the dorm. “Uhm.”

“That’s what I thought. Do you know how much a musician charges for custom compositions? Or orchestrating them?”

“Uh… no, but once I win it won’t matter, right?”

“Let me show you something.”

Viktor rubbed the side of his neck while he watched the man push back from his desk to dig into his filing cabinet, withdrawing a manilla folder, and from it, several sheets of paper. On these were itemized lines and numbers. Expenses. Yakov turned them around for Viktor to see, and ran a thick finger down the line as he explained.

“This is the average annual budget for one of my figure skaters,” he said, pointing to one number
at the bottom. “And this,” he pointed at another, much smaller number. “Is how much the winnings for the Grand Prix are.”

Viktor frowned at the comparison, then went over the list again. After coaching fees, supplies, travel, room and board, registration fees, costume creation for each program, equipment, music and licensing fees, facility fees, agents… “But… wait, so am I going to need to start begging on the street or something?”

“No. Of course not. Once you are a champion, you will have sponsors. Sponsors ease the burden of expenses and pay for use of your name for their advertising. That is where the financial security comes from.”

The boy swallowed, gaze drifting from his coach to the wretched budget, and finally to his grandiose plans that lay open and bare and ridiculous. “But what if I don’t win? I don’t want to be a ballerina for real. I could get hurt and get kicked out of school and skating and then I’d starve and end up on the street.”

Yakov sighed. “Where is your confidence, Vitya?”

“It’s with my big ideas! I’m too broke! Gavrik was right, cripes!”

“…you will be fine. Every skater has a humble beginning. And besides, you could probably go back to your aunt and uncle if worse came to worse.”

At that, Viktor paused, considering. “Oh. Right.” Then he frowned again. “But I don’t wanna do that, either!”

“Vitya, I’m coaching you, aren’t I?”

“…yeah.” Viktor forced himself to face the man, pouting. “You are.”

“And I believe in you.”

It was too hard not to smile at that, and Viktor didn’t want to try. “Okay! I’m gonna win! I’m gonna win for sure!”

“You will.”

“Yeah! I will! I’m gonna do it for coach! But what do I do about being poor?! Is there free music?!”

“I have a library of royalty-free music that you’re permitted to use, yes.”

“Okay! Let’s look at the free music! Gonna do the best free free skate! And the best short-changed short program! EVER!”

“There are lots of choices.”

“Good, because this might be kind of tough! Holy cripes. I’m gonna have to make all-new books.”

Yakov resisted the urge to shake his head, only smiled. “You have some time to work on it. Do you have a favorite classical composer?”

The answer was immediate: “Tchaikovsky!”

Of course he was. Ballerinas. “Let’s see what we have.”
Later, in the dorm room, Viktor sat on his bed with a new book out, sketching ideas while *The Nutcracker* played. It was a risky move, considering something from that, but the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea. Besides, it wasn’t like he could avoid it forever. The Nutcracker was one of the most famous ballets in the world; it was Tchaikovsky. It was one of Russia’s treasures. And, even though he sometimes struggled to get through it, Viktor loved it with all his heart.

That was part of the problem. Which piece? He’d have to listen to them all and narrow it down. So far, he’d gotten it down to seven, which was… not very impressive, all things considered. But at least he was getting ideas. That eased some of the sting of having to put his original idea books on the shelf. Who knew if he’d ever get to use them? Alas.

Gavrik came in and took his customary pose on his own bed to do homework, only giving a nod in greeting. He knew what Viktor was up to; he’d had to hear it a hundred times already. Even though he’d threatened to move out and get another roommate, he hadn’t. It had gotten too comfortable. They might have even been friends.

Viktor was fine with that; Gavrik liked The Nutcracker, and he’d stopped teasing him quite so much in the past few months. Ballet was kicking both of them in the butt, so there wasn’t time to be grouchy. Just time to be tired.

“Having any luck deciding on a short program piece?” Gavrik finally asked.

“No… not really.”

“You’ll get it.”

“Mm.” He drew another line on the page, long and curved, which swooped up and around and became a treble clef.

The track changed on the CD player, and he doodled more notes. Viktor still had a difficult time sight reading sheet music as a general rule, but his recreation of the symbols in random positions on the page was elegant and refined. It just didn’t make any sense. He filled the page with quarter and half notes, adding whole and bass marks wherever he saw fit.

Then he sniffed.

Droplets fell like rain, smearing the fresh ink into running blotches of salty tears, and the notes blurred on the page in front of him. Breath hitching, Viktor choked on a sudden sob and dropped the pen to cover his face.

“Vitya?” Gavrik asked, more confused than alarmed. There was a moment of hesitation, then a frustrated sigh as he got off of his bed and padded to the player, skipping the track. “Dammit…”

That waltz. The Waltz of the Flowers. It was always *that* piece that belonged to her. It was hers, and he thought of her, and he didn’t want to. So he pushed her away, but then there was nothing. Nothing but that song, which was her. Her and nothing. Nothing and that clench of pain and the inability to breathe. Why just *that* song? He shook his head. *Don’t think about it!*

“Vitya, Vitya, here.” Gavrik pushed Viktor’s pillow at him, then reached across the bed to take the stuffed unicorn that hid behind it, adding it to the other boy’s arms. “Here. Hold onto these.”

It helped. It always did. Viktor hugged them both to his chest, burying his face into the pillow to
hide his tears and the embarrassment as it settled in. That always came with calming down, too.

“You should do the Chinese dance…” Gavrik offered, backing off awkwardly. “You said it made you think of mice, right? You could skate like a mouse.”

Viktor laughed, and choked on it, coughing. “Yeah.”

“There. Decision made. No more wasting time or money. Just… do that.” He went back to his bed.

“Thanks, Gavrik,” Viktor mumbled through the pillow after a shuddering breath. “I’ll think about it.”

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Salt Lake City, Utah

The biting, dry February wind kept noses and cheeks rosy red, but the sparkle in Viktor’s eyes was nothing but pure excitement. Yakov had never taken him so far away before, or given him so many responsibilities. He had a bag to carry, an official name badge, and a coat with fur trim just like the rest of the Russian team. Supporting the best of the best from his country, Viktor couldn’t help the feeling of pride that was bursting in his heart. The Winter Olympics! Incredible! Amazing! The best!

Faster! Higher! Stronger!

Everything was enthralling, from the rocky, white-capped mountains, to the overly friendly people, to the snow that was so powdery, so dry. Dry! Everything was dry! His skin was going to dry out, his lips were going to be forever chapped, and his hair was full of static from how dry it was.

Even Yakov, was dry. “I’ve never had to do so much work to get a glass of water,” he said in regard to the vodka at dinner. If it could be called that. The food or the vodka.

Viktor grinned at him. He didn’t even care. He was too excited to eat. “Coach, you’re supposed to be watching out for the athletes anyway.”

“I don’t think I could get drunk off of this if I wanted to!”

They’d be there a month. A whole month away from school, living in the Olympic Village, right in the heart of Salt Lake City. All Viktor had to do was watch the events and follow Yakov around for practices, competitions, and participating in various ceremonies. No ballet. Just skating.

Just skating.

A dream. It was amazing. Everyone was so passionate. So dedicated. So proud of their countries. So proud of their accomplishments. So honored to be there and so eager to prove what they had come to do.

In the opening ceremonies, the committee man said that children around the world were dreaming, right then, of participating one day. Viktor was among them.

There was a fire there that burned, sparked and flamed, ignited in him that burned and burned until was changed forever. His dream wasn’t just to compete in figure skating; it was to make it to this.
To be one of these athletes. To represent not just himself, and not just Yakov, but all of Russia on the most prestigious stage in the world.

Underneath the fireworks, huddled in the cold with all of the others, awash in their energy, Viktor felt something like a higher purpose. A reason to be. And, for once, he didn’t feel alone in the world.

What started as a question turned into a kiss, and that turned into his back against the locker and Yuuri’s teeth against his throat. Viktor groped the smooth metal with a sweat-slicked hand, gasping in the heat that followed. The question- what had it been? It was… no, or was it…?

Yuuri palmed his chest, the pads of his fingers teasing where the muscle was most tender, all while drawing his mouth downward, to the crook of his shoulder. It didn’t matter. They were alone, changing after practice, and Viktor didn’t need to think while Yuuri was trying to break his skin.

He moaned, the sound pulled from somewhere deep and torn from his throat as he tilted his head back, hair mussed on the metal surface. The kiss had taken him by surprise; two quick steps around the bench and then rising on his toes to meet him with no warning. Dry lips against his, chapped and rough with enough eager pressure to force Viktor back half a step. That was when he’d run into the locker, pushing it closed with a thump, caught on the clothes that hung out of it.

But Yuuri wasn’t done. He’d kissed him again; lips and tongue grazing his like he was coaxing out his very soul, leaving him breathless. Then he’d moved on, and the question tried to stir again in Viktor’s mind, but the words caught in his throat where Yuuri nipped and tasted. He could barely breathe.

While Viktor’s hands stayed rooted to the cold, hard metal, Yuuri’s wandered. And wherever they touched spread warmth like fire across his body. Yuuri kissed down his sternum, greedy fingers exploring Viktor’s ribs, his waist, his hips, then played with the hem of his track pants.

He straightened up, dark eyes glinting with that same lustor they’d had the night of the banquet. Even if Viktor had wanted to resist, he’d have been powerless. He could only utter a single whimper before Yuuri took hold of him. First, just the heel of his palm pushing in, stroking down, cradling what he could over the thin fabric. Then his other hand sliding in against the dip of his pelvis, skin to skin as he gathered him, hard and heavy between his legs. Viktor burned in equal parts disbelief and desire, watching Yuuri handle his shame through a half-lidded haze. His fingers curled, tightened, rolling skin over muscle all the way down to the tip. The rest of his body tightened as if it were attached with strings. His spine straightening out that curve. His hips pushed against that hand. His diaphragm squeezed out every bit of breath until he shuddered, finally moaning out his name-

“Yuuri!”

Viktor woke with a jolt as his body snapped forward, thrashing in tangled sheets. The climax came fast and hard, and he only had time to swallow a breath before it dragged him under, drowning his
sudden consciousness in a wave of shock and pleasure. He curled in on himself, muscles taut from his core outward, and he waited it out with shuddering breaths.

When he’d come down and caught his breath, he untangled himself from the covers and massaged the charley horse from his calf, ignoring the hair matted to his face. It was still only just past four am; too early to get up and head to the rink. Too early to try to work out the anxiety and embarrassment with exercise. At least his expensive sheets were just soaked with sweat. Anyone who shared their bed with a pet knew better than to sleep naked, which meant cleanup would be a simple matter. He’d done his own laundry since he was ten; coming to Hasetsu hadn’t changed that, and he was especially grateful for that lately.

He slipped from bed and changed, cleaning up what he could with what he had in the room. There was no private bathroom; he’d have to go down the hall. But he had the bottom floor to himself when Yu-Topia was closed. Thank god.

With robe on, Viktor went to his door to find it pushed open a poodle’s width already. Makkachin had abandoned him. Of course. Not that he blamed him. He would have left, too.

He retreated from the room to clean up and cool off, praying that the heat of the summer night would cool soon, too, and with it his unrequited spark. The fever was nearly as unbearable as the cicadas that never, ever stopped their singing in the most maddening moments.

July wore on into August, each day burning through like the last in the routine they’d established. Some days were easier than others. Ever since their outing in Fukuoka, Viktor hadn’t known how to act. Maintaining a respectful distance seemed like the appropriate thing to do, but at every turn, Yuuri seemed more and more comfortable around him. Like a cat. He sat closer, bumped shoulders, allowed little touches here and here, stopped shying away in the bath so much, and… well… that dance.

What did it mean?

Viktor had made it clear what it meant to him, hadn’t he? That he wanted to dance with someone. That his parents had danced together. That it was… romantic. But Yuuri had danced with him anyway. Initiated it on his own.

And then there were the questions. Viktor had tried to stop asking so many. Had tried to be more respectful of Yuuri’s privacy and discomfort with opening himself up like that. Letting him open up when he was ready. And now that he had, Yuuri was prying at him.

Asking about his early morning practices. Asking about his parents. Offering to dance again, or at least inquire about dance studio space. The mixed signals bothered him. They gave him hope. Hope he couldn’t afford to have. Yes, he loved Yuuri, but a romance with him was something he could never have. He couldn’t allow himself to fantasize, and he couldn’t function if he was distracted by those thoughts about his student.

Things like that dream.

Watching Yuuri work on Eros after that was difficult to say that least. The drills and months of practice had done wonders for his confidence, and in turn, increased the level of eros exponentially. Yuuri had practiced so many times in front of Viktor that he was no longer uncomfortable. He owned every move and executed it with such finality that it nearly drove Viktor mad.
More than once, he’d had to excuse himself from practice to cool down, try to walk it off. Hide in a bathroom stall, fighting with himself, then resort to the cold water from the sink. He could make Yuuri work on his other program exclusively, but their practices were already unbalanced lately as it was. Not that the Free Skate was much better; Yuuri wasn’t as confident with *Yuri On Ice*, but he was so beautiful skating it that he couldn’t look away for even a moment.

And when that happened, it wasn’t long before his thoughts drifted back to the dance, either at the train station or the banquet. Then it was any number of kisses that hadn’t really happened, which only spiraled out of control from there.

It had never been a problem before. He’d never had trouble controlling his thoughts or desires in that way in all his years. Even when he’d been in a relationship, it had been nothing like it was, wanting Yuuri. That spark that he’d lamented destroying had returned stronger than ever before, and seemed to want nothing more than retribution from the inside out.

Any other time, Viktor might have let it drive him to the corner of insanity and frustration and right through to his demise… but it wasn’t just about him anymore. He had a job to do. Yuuri was depending on him.

He had to get through it.

He needed help.

Perhaps what he needed… was a temple.

Although Viktor had sent Yuuri and Yurio to the temple several times, Viktor hadn’t put himself through the paces. He chose an early afternoon that Yuuri could be left to do drills for, and stole away to the temple set against the hillside. The monks recognized him immediately, and asked what English they knew which of his students they would be helping.

“Not a student,” he said with a wincing smile, and pointed to himself. “Me.”

“Ah,” one said. “Now *you* are the student.”

Maybe it was just his imagination, but they might have looked a little too pleased at the revelation as they led him through the temple.

The monk who volunteered to assist him for the afternoon- and as many days as needed -explained that there were three pillars of zen, or three schools of thought, depending on what the specific need was. *Shikantaza*, the art of clearing the mind, was the most commonly thought of with zen, and also the most difficult, especially for beginners.

Viktor knelt and tried to clear his mind. He thought of Yuuri. Specifically, of Yuuri kissing him. Those lips on his, pressing gently, and- *thwack!* -the keisaku came down on Viktor’s shoulder, dragging his mind back to the present. Right. None of that.

Frowning, he tried again. He couldn’t allow himself to think about how nice it would be to have Yuuri touching his shoulders, soothing where he’d been hit, kissing the little sting away. Maybe lipping it, leaving another mark of his own…

*Thwack!*

The opposite shoulder.
Viktor whimpered. It didn’t really hurt, but it was a little startling. He shook his head and went back to it. *Clear your mind… don’t think about anything!*

“If it helps, concentrate on something else. Something specific. One thought instead of too many.”

It wasn’t racing thoughts that he was having trouble with, though. It was just the one thing. Yuuri. Bold Yuuri. *Eros* Yuuri. Viktor closed his eyes, and it was all too easy to imagine him in the locker room, approaching with that wolfish gaze, dark eyes glinting with predatory desire. And *oh*, he was so weak to that.

Several hits with the keisaku later, and in no time at all, the monk suggested that Viktor try the waterfall. “It seemed to work for the other one,” he said.

Yurio hadn’t been good at clearing his mind. Of course he hadn’t. He and Viktor were both aggressive when it came to resolving their issues. Once they had a goal, something they wanted, they went and got it. There was no passive sitting around and moping about it. Viktor wasn’t good at just *letting things go.*

Having to let Yuuri go went against everything in his nature. Viktor Nikiforov could have had anyone he wanted, or so he was told. He didn’t really believe that. Didn’t need it to be true, and didn’t want it to be true, either. But there was a certain amount of competitive pride that he couldn’t let go of, either. He wouldn’t be a five-time consecutive champion if he didn’t.

At least the water was cold, which was refreshing after a day in the outdoor heat.

But the waterfall was also loud, and harsh. It stung like needles, thundering on and around him, misty haze scattering prisms in the sparkles of the afternoon sunlight. The stones underneath his feet were smooth in the shallows where he stood, and it almost didn’t hurt as long as he stood very, very still.

Yuuri wouldn’t get to him here.

He kept his eyes closed against the downpour, squinting at first, then giving in entirely. The green of the forest gradually melded from the soft, vibrant hues of the Japanese maple to the cool tones of pine. White streaks of birch covered the landscape where there wasn’t darkness or snow, and the tower stood beyond that, tall and untouched in the mist.

How was the princess fairing? Did she struggle with the boy?

Of course… Of course she would.

*They set out together, wolf and boy, and travelled from that town in the far East with their backs to the sun. He believed the wolf, admitted that the firebird was real, that the princess could be saved. That he thought she was still alive. There had been rumors for years.*

*She had been beloved by her people, for she was loving, and kind, and spent her days making beautiful things to share with those in her kingdom. Her songs filled their hearts with hope; her dances with joy; and her stories with wonder. Many believed that she would become a wise and wonderful ruler, too, had the firebird not come.*

*Each town they came to, the boy would inquire about the beast and the princess, and the story would be retold. How the firebird had come to the castle one night and burst into the princess’s room, setting everything ablaze.*
The king and queen perished in the fire. Many suspected it was an assassination; someone set the firebird upon them. But who? And why? And what of the princess? They never found her body; they only heard her screams.

Burned to ash, some said.

Carried into the night, others claimed.

To be eaten? To be the firebird’s treasure? To be the slave of whomever sent the firebird?

No one could say.

The head knight took the crown and demanded the firebird’s head and the princess brought home. But years past... years and years... and years... and there had been no sign.

Just those feathers left behind. A trail that went cold in the badlands.

“She’s long since dead,” said a woman who led the boy to the stable where she was letting them stay for the night. There was no way that she would let a wolf come inside. “But there’ll be a handsome prize for anyone who brings the king the head of that firebird.”

“Oh, I know,” said the boy with a smile. “Thank you for your help. Goodnight.”

They settled together in the straw and hay, preferring the close scent of each other to that of the horses and alfalfa, though there was no escaping that, either. The wolf rest his head on his paws and sighed, heavy in heart, in body, in mind. He knew that it would be hard, but there was so little hope among the people, and they’d been to so many towns.

“Don’t worry,” said the boy, running a hand over the wolf’s head, stopping to rub behind his ear. “I know it’s terrible, what’s happened to the king and queen, how the kingdom has been torn apart...”

The wolf shifted his gaze without lifting his head, ears perking half-mast.

“And I know that she’s still out there, somewhere... We’ll find her. We’ll bring her home. You were right.”

“How can you be sure?” the wolf asked.

The boy draped an arm around the wolf’s neck, burrowing into his thick fur with blanket over his back, and cuddled close. “Trust me like I trust you.”

Trust was all that they had. Blind faith and hope with no guarantee that it wouldn’t end with the utter destruction of one of them by the time they were done with their journey.

The wolf pulled his limbs in tighter, craning his neck to curl in around the boy to keep him warm and protected. There was nothing else that could be done; the princess loved him.

Viktor shuddered, body stiff and sore. When he looked around again, the sun had moved in the sky and the afternoon had faded. He was soaked from head to toe, robes matted to his skin, which was cold and clammy. Standing in the waterfall hadn’t done much more than make him even more certain of his predicament; he was in love and there was no changing that. And now he was all wet and cold, too.
Dammit.

Although pouting took most of the energy that he had, he managed that and sloshed out from the pool, step after hobbling step until he got to the bank. At least he’d remembered to bring a towel and a change of clothes. It took an inordinate amount of time to strip down, every movement sluggish as if the robe had become a second skin. By the time he got dried, dressed, and made his way back to Yu-Topia, it was dark and his head was pounding.

He’d missed dinner, but he didn’t want any. No, just a bath and bed. And while he was at it, why not combine the two?

Yes, why not just… fall asleep…

… in..

the… bath…

…

He never actually made it to the baths themselves; only the changing room, where the steam from the bathing area got to his already feverish head. Viktor teetered, then collapsed to the tile, much to the surprise of the other patrons.

“Oi, are you okay?”

“Hey, foreigner!”

“It’s Viktor, isn’t it?”

“Oi, Katsuki!”

“Yes? What’s the noise out here for?” asked Mama Katsuki as she answered the call, then gasped at the sight of her extended guest on the floor. “Vicchan! Mari, please find Yuuri and help me take him to his room. The poor dear should know by now to be careful in the bath…”

The fever only made the dreams worse. Only they didn’t even quite make sense anymore, either. There was touching. There was kissing. And then there was the forest. Turtles. A kappa? He spoke in Japanese, and Viktor only caught bits and pieces. Something about rice and cucumber. Sake. Or was it katsudon? But when it wasn’t the turtle, or a rabbit, or some other beastie, it was Yuuri again, leaning over, drowning him in heated, open-mouthed kisses that left him writhing.

The owl spoke to him, too, telling him stories about the moon and how they needed to get a ring. “How can I marry my love without a ring?” he said. “And if you love someone, you ought to marry them! Don’t tarry, get married!”

“But what will we do for a ring?” asked the cat.

“Well, I don’t know…”

“Oh.” The cat looked thoughtful, then touched the owl’s wing. “You’ve got gold all through you! If we melt you down, we can use that to make a ring!”
“Why… why of course! Why didn’t I think of that!” said the owl, though he looked a little nervous. And for good reason.

“Don’t,” said Viktor. “If you do that, the owl will crumble apart… you can’t get married if you’re in pieces.”

“Oh, I suppose that’s true,” said the owl. This time he looked embarrassed.

The cat was disappointed. “But you’d do it for me, wouldn’t you? Because you love me?”

“Oh, of course I would!” said the owl, taking her paws. “Of course!”

“No! It’s not worth it!”

“Anything is worth it for love.”

“And I want that gold…”

“No!”

It wasn’t the first time he woke up screaming, and it wouldn’t be the last. But it was just the fever dreams… just his brain boiling any sense right out of him, and he usually didn’t remember the dreams for long; they just left him unsettled and shaken and wishing Yakov were there.

Viktor was drenched in sweat and lying helpless under the covers, the slatted shadows on the ceiling blurred and shifting as the hours passed. Was he awake or asleep? He couldn’t tell. It was too hot. Was it the fever or the afternoon? He couldn’t move, couldn’t take off the blankets.

The cicadas kept their chirping on and on, droning and screaming at the same time. Too high. Too deep. He blinked slowly, licking his lips with sandpaper tongue. So dry…

He coughed, and it made his chest and head ache, pressure crushing behind his eyes and temples.

“Makkachin,” he groaned. “I’m dying…”

The dog licked his cheek, then dropped his chin against his shoulder again. He hadn’t left his side since his Person had been put to bed. Of course he knew that Viktor wasn’t really dying; he just felt terrible. It had happened before, and would probably happen again. Despite the dramatics, it wasn’t even very serious. All it required was the bare minimum effort on the poodle’s part.

Viktor whined again, but closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Yuuri was there, tending to him; changing out the cloth on his forehead, touching his cheek, whispering to Makkachin.

“Yuuri…” he said, voice little more than a rasp. “Are you going to kiss me this time?”

Yuuri gave him a puzzled smile. “Uh huh… That’s right, Viktor.” Then proceeded to clean up the bedside table, uncapping the fresh water bottle he’d brought, swiping the used tissues into the trash can. When he was finished, he leaned over to rub Makkachin’s ears. “Yeah, I can’t understand his Russian mumbling, either.”

Then he was gone.

Mama Katuski was there when the fever broke, seated at his bedside, changing out the head cloths. It’d taken nearly two days of rotating the sheets, administering medicine, and keeping him
hydrated, but the Katsuki family was nothing if not hospitable.

“Even with the fever gone, it’s best you stay in bed for a few more days. Rest and fluids is the best way to heal anything. Yuuri can’t have a bedridden coach forever, can he?”

Viktor followed Mama Katsuki’s orders, both out of obedience because he respected her, and because he really wasn’t sure that he could get up and run around just yet.

“Sorry, Yuuri,” he said when Yuuri stopped by to check in. He’d managed to sit up, and move around a little, but it’d left him exhausted. “Can you go on to practice without me again today?”

“Yeah, that’s fine. I’ll just keep working on the routines.”

“Good.” He gave a nod of approval. “Just remember that you’re not going to let me let you off easy.”

“Uh… right.”

“So do your best.”

“I will!”

With Yuuri gone, Viktor was able to clear his head a little bit. He bundled up in spite of the heat to ward off the chills and went out to pester Mama K while she did her morning preparations, leaning on the counter with facemask in place. September was fast approaching; he needed to get better, and he needed to get over his issues.

Since there were no patrons yet, Viktor draped over the bar and rested his head against its cool surface, eyes closing to concentrate on the sounds of food preparation on the other side of the counter. It was such comforting, mundane background noise, and so much better than the bugs outside...

“Vicchan.”

Viktor looked up at Mama Katsuki, prying his cheek from the bar. “Hmm?”

She set a bowl of miso in front of him. “Here.”

He blinked at it, taking several long seconds to process its meaning before nodding his thanks, and accepted a pair of chopsticks.

“I put a secret ingredient in it to make you better faster~”

Viktor lowered his mask and peered down into the clear broth, then pawed through. Green onion, garlic, onion, chicken? Potato…? “Mama Katsuki,” he gasped. “This isn’t miso!”

“Nope!”

He leaned closer to sniff it, but didn’t catch much other than steam. Still, there was parsley. Celery. Viktor grinned. It was chicken soup. “Yatta!”

“I was expecting ‘vkusno ,’ but I guess that works, too.”

“When in Rome…” he shrugged, then frowned. “Or Japan, so oishii, I guess.”
She laughed. “Speaking of, are you two going to Tanabata?”

Viktor chased down a piece of chicken and looked up at her, chopsticks dripping. “We talked about it, but that was a few weeks ago.”

Mama Katsuki, in all her grace and kindness, passed a spoon over the counter. Chicken soup wasn’t miso at all. “It’s good. You two should definitely go.”

She’d encouraged them to go to the last festival, too. For culture? To give Yuuri more of fun in his life? Or was it for Viktor? Maybe both of them. Viktor took a moment to eat some of the soup that he’d been given, quietly bowed over the bowl to ensure he wouldn’t make a mess in the process. It was probable that she was being a good mama to them both, trying to get them to go out and enjoy themselves while they could. They’d been working themselves so hard, after all, and it wasn’t as though either of them were paragons of perfect mental health.

He looked down into the bowl again. It wasn’t just chicken soup; it was Russian chicken soup. It was the parsnip that made the difference, at least as far as he knew. Hot, salty, with the strong flavor of dill and lots of other things but that broth was so distinct. He remembered it from home. Viktor sniffed, taking another spoonful, and swallowed it down. That time, he really did give a quiet, almost wistful little, “Vkusno,” as he melted into the bar stool.

Mama Katsuki only smiled and left him to enjoy his late breakfast. “Think about it. It’d be good for you.”

“Mm-hmm…” Anyone who could make katsudon and this soup had to be right about everything. To Tanabata they would go.

When Yuuri got home, Viktor greeted him at the door.

The exchange went simply--

“Yuuri!”

“Viktor, you look a lot better.”

“Yuuri, we should go to Tanabata.”

“Okay.”

“Mama Katsuki says the closest good one is an hour away by foot.”

“Oh, in Katano?”

“Yeah.”

“Sure.”

“Can we wear our yukata?”

“We can change when we get there.”
“It’d be more fun if we walked there in it. Pretend we’re in ancient Japan.”

“Uh... Okay. You probably shouldn’t wear the geta, then.”

“Oh. You’re right. Sandals?”

“I guess, if you really want to be… authentic.”

“Yeah!”

“Okay.”

-- then promptly got more complicated as soon as Viktor agreed to figure out all of the
arrangements. Or, rather, he insisted on finding it all out, since Yuuri had taken care of the last
festival. It wasn’t until the end of the month, so he had some time to get it perfect; a nice little
hurrah before they went to the qualifiers. Since they would be walking for quite some time, he
thought a nice lunch would be good- their route was scenic, right on along a countryside road. A
picnic lunch! A festival! Yukata! Traditional Japanese!

And then he found out what Tanabata was about. Wishing festival? Star festival? Maybe on some
websites, but at its core, it was about the tale of two lovers torn apart by tragic circumstance! It
was a festival dedicated to the reuniting of a princess and a cow herder, who were so in love that
they had forgotten their duties and had to be kept from each other, save for one night a year. Unless
it rained.

It was a festival for love.

And Viktor had invited Yuuri to go with him. Had insisted, even, and had planned a cute little
picnic lunch for them on the countryside! Where there were probably flowers in the meadow!

Picturesque! Romantic! Perfect!

And TERRIBLE!

No!

Further research suggested that families often brought their children to these festivals, and that
friends came together to make wishes; that it wasn’t always a romantic thing, but that only made it
more devastating. The poor lovers! How could people celebrate the one night of their being
together by ignoring the point entirely? So what if the magic forces that allowed them to be
together granted wishes? It was about them, not everyone else!

Wasn’t love the most important thing in all the world? In all the universe?!

GOD he was in trouble.

“Makkachin,” he moaned. “We’re going for a walk.”

They left. He felt up to it, he thought. Slow and steady, not too hot out, well-rested and hydrated
and staying to the shade with sweater in hand. They went far, far away from the hot springs, from
Yuuri, from the rink. It was actually just outside of town, up the hill, into the woods and along the
path. His favorite thinking spot.

Clearly, he needed to talk to someone. But he couldn’t call Yakov. Not only was his coach not
talking to him, but asking the man for advice on how to deal with the person who he’d gone to see against his wishes seemed in bad taste. Viktor didn’t have many other friends, and even among those, the ones he trusted to talk about this sort of thing were even more limited. Really, that meant Chris. But he never called Chris first. It just wasn’t something he did. Initiating contact was… no, he couldn’t do that. Especially not for something involving romantic advice. Definitely not.

Who else? Georgi was useless and not exactly someone he considered close. Mila was… no. No, he couldn’t talk to her. Yurio? No, he’d probably just yell and tell him to stop being stupid and come back home. None of the Katsukis were appropriate. Nor the Nishigoris. How would they even feel about Viktor’s advances? He might get himself run out of Hasetsu at this rate. It might not be safe to approach Minako-sensei for that matter, even though she would probably have some very good advice.

She reminded him of Lilia anyway. Not nearly as cold or harsh, but nearly as terrifying.

Which left… Chris.

Could he really call Chris?

He didn’t want to.

He really, really didn’t want to.

Viktor frowned at his phone, thumb poised over Christophe’s contact, then looked out at the trees around him. Makkachin had wandered off to roll in the grass in the sunshine, having given up on the squirrel from earlier. His paws flailed in the air, and he chomped at the bits of pollen that floated away.

Brriing. Brriiing. Calling Christophe Giacometti…

Viktor, flailing, almost dropped his mobile. “No! Wait! No no no!” He ended the call before it could connect, and flopped back against the bench. That had been too close. He wasn’t ready to talk to Chris. Definitely not ready.

He groaned, draping his arm across his eyes. How pathetic…

Then chiptune polka began to play, and Viktor pursed his lips into a pitiful pout. Great. Chris was calling him back. And why wouldn’t he? He’d always been the dutiful one.

Viktor sat up and answered. “Hello?”

“Viktor, so sorry I missed your call. What’s wrong?”

More frowning. “What? No. It was…” Could he get away with a lie? “…just a misdial.”

“Oh really?” Chris didn’t buy it. Not for a moment. There was too much warmth and amusement-with a touch of genuine concern-in his tone.

“Maybe..”

Chris laughed, light and airy, like he always did when Viktor was being grumpy. He was the only one allowed to laugh when that happened. “It’s unlike you to want for idle chatter.”

“Can’t I ask how my friend is doing?”

“It wasn’t a complaint, Viktor. It just makes me wonder why now you’d be calling~”
Because I need your help. I don’t know who else to turn to. You’re the only one who would understand. The only one who would know what I’m going through.

Viktor ran a hand through his hair, and let the fringe fall back over his eyes. “I wanted to see how your preparation for the next season was going. I’m not going to be there, after all.”

“Oh, yes.” Chris sighed. “And what an odd season it will be. How is your student coming along?”

“Good… very good. He’s doing…” Viktor turned his gaze to the sky; a vast expanse of blue with soft, puffy white clouds. Beautiful and perfect. “Great.”

“That sounds uncertain.”

“He has a ways to go but he’s showing great promise.” He laughed, short on sound and humor. “I think you’ll find him an adequate competitor.” It would be interesting to see Yuuri’s *eros* against Christophe’s… whatever it was.

“Good. I expect no less from someone being coached by you.”

*You think too highly of me, Chris. I’m falling apart.*

Another laugh. “Are you prepared to fight for your spot on the podium?”

“I had no intention of being lazy~”

“Good… because I need there to be real heat out there on that ice.”

“I will certainly have that covered for you,” Chris said, voice rolling with that deep, textured purr that he usually saved for his interviews and made Viktor long for vodka.

Without it, the Russian looked for Makkachin instead. The poodle had moved on to chasing butterflies, but only in the technical sense; he was sprawled on his belly, tail wagging, occasionally pawing at them as they drifted nearby. Once in a while, a cluster of them would drive him into a silly frenzy, and he’d leap up, trip over his own feet, and flop back down to the grass for more warm-bellied rest.

“Right,” said Viktor, somewhat recovered. “I’m not sure why I said that. Anyway, glad to hear it.”

“So. How are things?”

The mood shift brought the tension in his shoulders right back, and Viktor winced. He should have known Chris would ask. Chris knew. He always knew. “The beach here in Hasetsu is really nice.”

“I’ve never been to Japan in the summer. I bet that’s a turn for you.”

Relief. Viktor shouldered the phone and leaned back on his hands, dropping his head back to stretch his neck in the dappled shade. “It is. It’s very hot most days. It gets up to 26c sometimes. I have to take a lot of naps to cool off, but swimming in the ocean is fun.”

“You doing something leisurely. How nice!”

“Does *everyone* think I’m a workaholic?”

“Is that a trick question?”

“No?” Viktor furrowed his brow, then thought about it, and gave up, laying back on the bench
again. “Nevermind. Anyway, there’s lots of forest trails to hike, and lots of beach to jog on.”

“That sounds lovely. I’m glad that you can relax.”

Relax. Right. “The hot springs remind me of that resort we went to in Switzerland, too. Mineral baths every day.”

“Oh, I hear they’re wonderful out there. Maybe I should visit some time.”

Oh god no.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I bet you’d love it here. It’s warm and humid, nice foliage, cute animals.”

“I’m sure Bastien and his picky skin would like it, as well. Maybe after the season is over. I’d hate to overwhelm you.”

“That would probably be best. We’re very busy training right now; I’m teaching him all of my jumps. At least Yu-Topia is open year-round.”

“Good to know.” Chris changed his tone again. Mischievous. Personal. “So. How are the works on the other end?”

Viktor bit the inside of his cheek. “The other end?”

“The professional side, the… not so professional side.”

“Oh, right. Of course.” He knew exactly what Chris had been referring to. He’d have had to be an idiot not to. How were things going? Viktor considered the question. Terribly? No. That wasn’t quite right. He was enjoying his time in Hasetsu for the most part, and he loved and adored Yuuri. It was a matter of perspective. So it wasn’t entirely a lie when he said, “They’re great. It’s going really, really well.”

“Really? Is he everything you ever wanted in a lover?”

After a quick glance around to make sure that no one was in the immediate vicinity but he and Makkachin- and who would be at the top of the steps in the middle of the woods? -Viktor nodded, and it was sincere. “Yes. And more. He’s… he’s so amazing, Chris.”

Every word hurt to admit. Hurt because it was true, hurt because he realized he had been aching to confess to someone. It was too hard to keep it all to himself. But every ounce of relief was met with a pound of regret.

Yuuri isn’t mine. I am his, but he doesn’t love me. He doesn’t want me. He never will. I can’t stop loving him. I don’t want to.

“Oh! Marvelous! Do give me details.”

“Are you sure that you want to hear?”

I hurt you once before, Chris, and I have nothing but the pitiful false hope of a broken heart to share. Are you asking me to torture you or to torture me?

“Tell me everything, mon amie.”

How could he deny such a request? “He’s a wonderful dancer.”
“When sober?”

“Especially sober. And he’s passionate, but unassuming.”

“A sparkle in his eye, like you’ve mentioned?”

Viktor sat up to rub his arm at the chill that ran through him. Goosebumps and a soft smile that he couldn’t help. He was so far gone and he knew it. “Yes,” he confessed, quiet at first, then with more feeling. “Oh yes. And so determined to do everything the right way. Moral fiber. Dedication. Studious.”

“Good qualities!”

“We went to a bookstore, Chris… He showed me where the fairy tales were.”

“You always said you wanted a man who would take you to a bookstore for a date.”

He bit his lip, and slowly pried his hand away from where he had clutched the fabric of his shirt over his chest. There was no need to get emotional. No need to get so wrapped up in it all. Viktor gave himself a moment to breathe, and laughed when Makkachin nosed at his side, front paws on the bench.

Chris chuckled, too. He probably knew that Viktor was misty-eyed and emotional, and he didn’t mind. He probably thought it was charming, and good for him.

“Chris…” Viktor huffed, finally. “You weren’t wrong about him stealing my heart.”

“Ensnared,” he agreed with a wistful sigh.

“Bewitched. Enchanted. Whatever you want to call it.”

_Cursed. Those dark eyes that won’t leave me alone, sleeping or awake._

“And how’s that spark of yours?”

“Blazing.” Viktor ruffled Makkachin’s ears to keep the poodle from worrying too much. He hated it when his master cried. “You were right about that, too.”

“Sleeping for several years. Good!”

“I guess I just needed time… and the right someone.”

“I’m so pleased to hear that, Viktor. I knew it! I had to make sure you saw him again.”

_I love him. I don’t know what I’ll do when I lose him, Chris. What do I do? What can I do? Please help me. Tell me what to do._

“Thank you, Chris. Really, thanks.” Viktor rubbed a hand down Makkachin’s muzzle, pushing the whiskers in the wrong direction, which made the dog wrinkle his nose in annoyance. “I need to get going, though… there’s a lot of training left before we see you Beijing.”

“I can’t wait.”

Viktor hung up and let his phone fall to the bench, hands trembling. He’d lied to Chris. One of omission, yes, but it was only a matter of time before he found out. They didn’t lie to each other. What was he doing?
“Maybe I need to go back to the waterfall…”

Makkachin took hold of his hand between his teeth and tugged, ever so gently. The waterfall was a bad idea and he knew it, but he was running out of ideas.

He would be returning to practice the next morning. Viktor had put it off for far too long. He was bored and restless, and his body needed the exercise; lazing around never lasted, even when he had very good reason to. Illness? Didn’t matter. Injury? He found ways around it. The depression, now, that was something that had defeated him from time to time, but even that got boring after a while. And avoiding Yuuri because he couldn’t control himself was exhausting and irritating and, quite frankly, insulting.

Maybe he was soft for a Russian. Maybe he was silly, too. But he was Viktor Nikiforov, dammit, and he did not let things stand in his way. He was a champion; Grand Prix, European Nationals, Worlds, and Olympic, several times over! With very few exceptions, he had accomplished every single thing he had set out to do in his life, and he had always prided himself on being a master of himself and his body.

He was an artist and a fine-tuned machine. Few in the world could do what he could, and even fewer could even come close to his level of technical skill.

So what was his problem? This was just another obstacle like any other, wasn’t it?

Was it that he’d been rejected? Another man might have refused to take no for an answer. A wolf might have forced Yuuri to see his side, or just taken what they wanted. But Viktor was no wolf; not really. That wasn’t his way. He was better than that. He’d always been better than that. Even though it meant taking the harder road.

Oh, if Cao Bin could see him then… or worse, his bastard older brother. He was sure that nothing would give them greater pleasure than to see him suffering in such a pitiful state. Of course, he’d just send them both right back into retirement so hard that all of their ancestors would feel it, but even so…

Wait.

Cao Bin.

That was the answer.

Viktor carefully pulled himself out from underneath the covers of his bed and Makkachin and crossed the room to his bookshelf, kneeling to search for a thin volume in red. He found it immediately- a book he so often referenced; Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. He flipped to chapter six and drew his finger to a highlighted passage: *Thus the expert in battle moves the enemy, and is not moved by him.*

Perfect.

Just because Yuuri didn’t know that he had eros, or that he was a dangerous wolf, didn’t mean that he didn’t or wasn’t. Which meant that Viktor needed to be the one to keep him in his place. If he did, the Yuuriwolf wouldn’t step out of line and come after him anymore.

It had to work.
He tried it out first thing in the morning, after getting a nice morning skate in to get refamiliarized with his boots and the ice. It felt like home already, and put him right at ease. Then he stepped off, put his guards back on, and took up the clipboard to give Yuuri the rink to himself.

“So you’re feeling a lot better?” Yuuri asked.

“Yes!” Viktor went over the notes that he’d written the last time, nodding to himself, while Yuuri did his warm-ups. “I’ll get the music queued up; let’s start with On Love: Eros.”

Yuuri nodded, eager to get back to focused practice. They’d lost almost a full week together. “Okay, ready!”

“Though, wait, Yuuri, come here a moment.”

Curious, Yuuri came to him as requested, stopping at the barrier. “Yeah?”

“This time when you skate,” Viktor said, and put on his most dark and charming smile, one hand reaching out to straighten the collar of Yuuri’s jacket. He looked him over, making no disguise of what he was doing, then lifted his gaze to meet his eyes. “I want you to do your very best to seduce me. Do whatever you have to do; imagine beautiful women, the most delectable bowl of steaming katsudon; whatever it is… but if you can seduce me, I can guarantee that you’ll bring the audience to its knees.”

He held onto him for three seconds longer, then let him go to admire the deep pink on Yuuri’s cheeks and his wide-eyed, helpless stare. Viktor stretched out to nudge him gently in the chest to send him gliding backward, and smiled, soft and sweet.

“Go on, then, Yuuri~ I want to see what you’ve been working on while I’ve been out~!”

“Uh. R-right!” Yuuri tried to turn around in both directions at once and immediately spun out and fell, face-first, on the ice.

Viktor winced, but couldn’t help a little smile anyway. Maybe that was a little too much Art of War. “Whoops. Are you okay?”

Yuuri was already getting up, now a deeper shade of red. “Y-yeah.”

“I’ll get the music.”

As Viktor had hoped, his dreamscape evened out into what it had been before, balance restored. At least, for the most part. When Yuuri approached, as he often did, Viktor met him head on like he used to, taking his hand and leading him out onto the dance floor. Whether Yuuri led or he himself didn’t seem to matter; the dance changed from measure to measure, anyway. It was safe to be lost in those eyes as long as there were steps to follow and rules that they both knew; boundaries that were never crossed.

He could love Yuuri while they danced together, even if only in his dreams, and no one would be the wiser. And if those dances occasionally strayed into an embrace, or they were distracted by a kiss or two, or three, he couldn’t be blamed for it. It was just a dream, after all.
The thing that puzzled him most were the times, seldom though they were, when he was the one to pull Yuuri down into the sheets; laying him on his back, taking him in, and then taking him. Fingers entwined, kisses between ragged panting, bodies moving in time to the sweet, sensual music that they made together, with Viktor as maestro.

When Viktor woke from those dreams, calm and dreamy from the afterglow that only existed in fading memory, he wasn’t left with panic, just confusion. He’d never had that inclination before. Stealing kisses, yes. Playing the part of temptress, sure. But the rest?

Of course, before Yuuri, he’d never really had trouble with any of the rest of it, either. He’d just never been the greedy sort.

Until now.

Viktor watched the weather forecast as the festival approached, perhaps even more eagerly than the date for the qualifier. They had their travel to Okayama figured out, and they’d be sharing a hotel room, which he was determined to not think about. Yuuri was on a budget; that was fine. He could work with that. It didn’t matter. It was a tiny competition against amateurs, and Yuuri would use it to boost his confidence and move on to the big leagues. On to the next challenge. Good. Perfect. Moving on.

The festival, though. That was first, and that was important.

When the day came, the sky was bright and clear, with only a few wisps of clouds in the distance. Viktor sighed with relief. The magpies would be able to make their bridge, so the lovers would be able to meet without a problem. At least, so long as the weather held up, but it looked that way. It set the tone for the day.

He’d arranged with Mama Katsuki to make the picnic lunch that they’d be bringing, though she insisted on surprising him.

“It’ll be great, Vicchan, just you wait!” she’d said with an overly exaggerated wink.

Mama Katsuki was enjoying the whole thing even more than he secretly was. That concerned him, but he decided not to worry about it just yet. Later.

They dressed in their yukata as planned, with regular sandals for their hour-long walk to Katano. Mama Katsuki handed them both a patterned cloth satchel for their lunch, which they slung over their shoulders for the trip.

“Be good, Makkachin.” Viktor rubbed the poodle’s head and ears when he stretched up to paw at him. “We’ll be back late tonight.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll watch him!”

“Thanks, Papa Katsuki!”

Mari lit up another cigarette and stifled a yawn with the back of her hand. “You guys better get out of here before it gets too hot. Unless you want Viktor to pass out again, Yuuri.”

“Uh. Let’s go.”
Off they went at a reasonable pace; Yuuri’s measured, Viktor’s bouncy, both of them soaking up the late summer sun and the sweeping views of the Japanese countryside. The roads were marked and paved, but it was easy for Viktor to ignore all of that in favor of watching the trees that hedged their view and the wildflowers that dotted the landscape. Plenty was familiar, with the manicured fields for farmland and even the occasional pine, but it was still Japan all the same.

Plus they were wearing yukata, and *that* wasn’t done in Russia.

He sucked in a deep breath, held it for three broad steps, then let it go with a loud *harruf*, lengthening his stride to get ahead of Yuuri, for an about face. “This is the perfect place for it, I think.”

Yuuri stumbled half a step, but shook his head, pressing on when he realized that Viktor was just walking backward in front of him. “For what?”

“Come on, we’re out walking, middle of nowhere, on a journey. You gotta sing the song.”

He blanched, face screwing up in confusion with just a touch of pink on his cheeks. “The… the song? What song?”

“The Country Road song! You know it. I know you do. Everyone does.”

Yuuri frowned at him, mouth folding downward into an exaggerated crescent.

“Please? I can’t sing or I’d do it!” Viktor stopped in his tracks and used his best puppy eyes and a pout of his own, head tilt and everything.

Nostrils flaring, Yuuri was only able to keep up his resistance for about four or five seconds longer before his shoulders caved and he groaned, mumbling a quiet version of the melody. “Almost heaven, West Virginia…”

Viktor spun around, mouth breaking into a wide smile, and stepped right back into his jovial march, keeping in time with the rhythm of Yuuri’s singing.

By the time he got to the chorus, Yuuri had found his bravery once again, and even had Viktor humming along. Which led to extra rounds of the chorus and repeating verses, and even some in Japanese, which really impressed Viktor.

It was everything he could have asked for in an epic quest, even though they really weren’t going very far at all.

*Country roads, take me home*
*To the place I belong*
*West Virginia, mountain mama*
*Take me home, country roads*

A little more than halfway into their trip, the pair came to a stop at a massive field of sunflowers.

“If we don’t stop soon, we’re going to end up at the shrine,” said Yuuri. “Do you want to eat here?”
Viktor surveyed the flowers, the road, the clear blue skies overhead, and nodded his approval. It was too romantic, but it really couldn’t be helped. If they got to the shrine, they’d end up eating nothing but festival food, and Mama Katsuki’s work would be wasted. Everyone knew that he’d planned to have a picnic, even though it was probably unnecessary. So, a picnic they would have. “This,” he said, pressing his lips into a tight, thin line. “will do.”

They left the road and navigated through the tall grass and flowers to a clearing, where they set out their thin blanket, and got comfortable for lunch. The bento box that Mama Katsuki had packed were vegetables and star-shaped onigiri, spiced with dill and sesame furikake, but each had different filling. Pickled plum, chicken from the night before, and—surprise!—pickled beet!

“Vkusno!” Viktor cried. “It’s like home country all over again!” He took another bite, savoring the familiar flavors, then set it aside to save it for last. “Mm~”

“I can’t tell if she’s trying to bribe you to stay or make you homesick…”

“No one would make me beet onigiri in Russia, Yuuri.”

“I guess.”

They ate and relaxed, drinking from the small thermoses of matcha that Mama Katsuki had so thoughtfully included. Then Viktor yawned, stretching his armed out and above his head, and leaned back to stretch out his neck.

“Don’t fall asleep now, Viktor. We still have a ways to walk… and a festival to go to.”

“I know, I know.” He didn’t always need to nap. Viktor reached behind him and traced the stem of a wildflower, thoughtful. “Do you ever write haikus?”

“Me? Not really. Not since grade school.”

“I’ve been writing them the last few weeks.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” Viktor sat up, adjusting his yukata to form a basket, which he dropped the flower into. “It was a little difficult at first, but once you apply a rhythm to it—making it more of a song than a game of math, it was rather easy.” He went for another flower, fingers picking through for the smaller sunflower blossoms.

“What do you do with them?”

“Nothing, usually. Sometimes I write them down, but they’re just for fun.” Viktor added another flower, then plucked a thick stalk of grass. “Here, I’ll make one for you now—

I love pickled beets

Sesame seeds are so good

So is katsudon!

—good, right?”
Yuuri blinked at him, smile lopsided and puzzled, but nonetheless amused. “Yeah, that was pretty good.”

“I can do more, too.” Viktor hummed a moment, adding several more flowers to his growing pile, then tapped his chin. “Let’s see.” He busied his hands with the flowers he had then, sorting them out in his lap while he spoke. “I’ll do one on skating this time--

_Dancing on the ice_

_Swirling, gliding, and jumping_

_Just don’t make coach mad._

“I’m guessing there’s a story behind that one.”

Viktor shrugged. “It’s never a good idea to make your coach mad. You should know that by now, Yuuri.” He smiled, and went back to his handiwork, fingers busily weaving and adjusting stems here and there. “Do you want to try?”

“To make you mad, or write a haiku?”

“A haiku!”

“Uhm. I guess.”

While Yuuri thought about it, Viktor worked on his construct, stripping leaves, measuring stems, braiding small bundles together with sturdy systems of grass. It wouldn’t be the prettiest flower crown he’d ever made, or the sturdiest, but it had been a long time, and it was still gorgeous all the same.

Yuuri finally cleared his throat, able to draw his attention from Viktor’s work, and delivered his poem:

"Yukata, flowers
Walking to the festival
Blue sky high and bright.”

Viktor sat in silence for several long moments when Yuuri finished, then shook his head. “Of _course_ you’d be a natural. Yuuri! That was beautiful!” He then stretched across their picnic to set the sunflower crown atop Yuuri’s head. “_Et voilà._”

It made Yuuri flush, but not so much from embarrassment. He looked up through the bangs that had been pushed in his eyes, and reached to brush them away from his forehead, adjusting the crown to fit more securely in place.

They made good time to the festival, loads lightened and spirits bright. Yuuri wore the crown the
whole time, on the way there and at the festival itself, which Viktor, honestly, hadn’t expected. He had half a mind to tell him to take it off. What if someone saw? But Yuuri didn’t seem to care.

Neither did anyone else.

If anything, he fit right in. Many of the others were dressed up for the festivities similarly; not with a full-on fresh flower crown, but with other ornaments and accessories. It was a festival for lovers, after all. Maybe they just thought that Yuuri was looking the part. It did look good on him. Especially with the absence of shame.

There was always something so alluring about confidence like that.

Viktor kept to his side, taking it all in. A lot of it was similar to the last festival that they went to, only spring had been traded out for summer, and there were a lot more people at this one than the one in Hasetsu. Though, since news had travelled, and Yuuri Katsuki was a celebrity himself, they weren’t as anonymous as he’d hoped.

Not that Viktor could really go unnoticed in Japan; he still stood out like a giant sore thumb amongst them, but that was all the more reason to try to show that he was there to support and enjoy the culture. Which meant lots of food and drinking.

There were other things too, though; paper strips everywhere, hung from the trees in strips and box kites like the branches of a weeping willow. Multi-colored, glittering, shining strips of all different kinds and widths, lengths, with writing of every imaginable style of handwriting. He didn’t let his eyes linger long, even though he couldn’t read any of it; the wishes were private between the writer and the magic of the Milky Way; they weren’t for him.

“Yuuri, when do we write our wish?” he asked, winding around another stall with a fresh stick of takoyaki. Viktor had insisted on treating that time, but Yuuri had likewise insisted on sticking to his diet; he’d been sensible, and only taken small bites of the offerings, and chosen healthier options for what served as his dinner.

“Oh right, we can do that now.”

They bought paper at a stall, each to match their yukatas; Yuuri’s a shimmering sapphire, Viktor’s a deep, glittery purple, and used a sharpie to write their respective wishes along one side.

“Is it okay if I write it in Russian?”

“That should be fine. The Kami will know. There are some in English already.”

Viktor looked around until he found one for proof, and nodded, assured. He didn’t want Yuuri to know what he would write, but he wanted it to count if he were going to be taking advantage of the lover’s magic, anyway. It was for a good cause, at least. “Whew, okay, good. And it’s supposed to be secret?”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

He considered, then tapped his lip with a finger. “It’s more fun that way, don’t you think?”

Yuuri only shrugged, and went back to writing, sunflowers drooping from the day’s wear. It was getting dark, and they’d been out all afternoon and evening together. Close, and closer still, and yet so far.

Viktor turned back to his strip of paper, considering. It was a lover’s festival, so he could wish for
his heart’s desires. Perhaps for his affections to be returned? But no. That wasn’t right. And he’d heard that others had wished to win competitions or promotions, but that didn’t make sense, either. One didn’t win anything through luck; it was only through hard work and determination, and maybe just a… little nudge of destiny when you’d done everything in your power. He’d believed in wishing stars before, after all, but his dreams had only come from the confidence in believing in himself.

So he wrote, in Russian, the following on his paper:

I wish for Yuuri to realize his worth and find what truly makes him happy. <3

Was it cheating to put down two things? Viktor wasn’t sure. He hoped it wouldn’t be a problem. It couldn’t hurt, anyway, could it? He didn’t dare ask either way. They hung their wishes up next to each other on the same branch, and stood close to make sure that they didn’t fall when they twisted in the gentle breeze. When all was assured and a smile exchanged between them, they went back for another round of drinks before the parade.

Or, well, it was Viktor doing the drinking while Yuuri took photos and tried to keep Viktor from buying too many new little knick knacks for his shelf. “But they’re so cuuuute~”

“I think you already have one of those.”

“Oh, you’re right~ but this one’s bright green!”

Viktor ended up with his satchel full and another bag with odds and ends, but it all made him quite happy. Part of that might have been the alcohol, though. There were all sorts of things for him to try, and no reason not to drink, especially since Yuuri was so cute, but so off limits, and the festival was all about lovers, and pretty paper, and all of the things he loved the most.

They watched the parade while he drank, and the lantern light was warm, and everyone friendly and laughing. He was full, happy, and everywhere he looked was hope; people making wishes, still holding out for good in the world.

“What’d I tell you, Gavirk?” he asked, draining the last of his nth beer. “Not everyone is shinnical.”

Yuuri took his cup and disposed of it in the waste bin for him, reaching out a hand to steady him. “Maybe we should head back. Just what all did you drink?”

“A little of everything! There’s still fireworks, right?”

“We’ll be able to see them from the road.”

“Oh right… yeah, good thinking.” Viktor closed his eyes, brows furrowed to give his very serious nod of approval. “Lessh traffic that way. Avoid the crowds.”

“Yeah. Exactly.”

They set out with the road dark and the sky full of stars, leaving the bright festival behind them. It wasn’t long before the fireworks began, alerting them with a scream in the night and a burst of light that painted the landscape in hues of red and orange. Both of them stopped and turned back to
watch, still and silent until Viktor nearly toppled into Yuuri.

Yuuri steadied him. “We should probably keep moving if we’re going to get you home.”

“Okay, okay.”

Viktor wasn’t stumbling too bad, but his pace was sluggish at best, dragging his feet over the asphalt. An hour’s walk didn’t seem like a long time when sober, but there were second thoughts passing between them wordlessly then, lapsing into a slow and steady silence… but only for a little while, until Viktor burst into his own rendition of *Country Roads.*

It was probably Russian, but it might have been English. Or French. Or maybe none of the above. At least until the chorus, that is, which was the only part intelligible, and also when he slung an arm over Yuuri’s shoulder. And, for being piss drunk and out way past his bedtime, it actually wasn’t half bad at all. Just loud.

“Sing with me, Yuuriiii~!” he crooned. “Country roooooooaadssshh~”

“It’s kind of late for that, Viktor!”

“Pshshhhhh! The midnight hour shhhe calls.. Sh me~”

Yuuri scanned the horizon for any house lights. It may have looked like a dark and empty road with fields and trees, but there were sure to be farm houses nearby.

“Oh, Yuuri. That field is a shortcut!”

“What?”

Viktor pulled away, grasping at his hand. “Come on!”

“Viktor, no!”

He let go of his hand as requested, but stumbled off into the field anyway, cutting through what he was sure was a shortcut to home. It was so familiar; the particular tall grass, the tree in the distance, the view of the whatever-that-was up ahead…

“Viktor!”

Yuuri managed to catch up with him just in time for Viktor to trip over his own feet- and take Yuuri down with him, landing in a tangle with a soft whumph. Yuuri immediately scrambled off, but Viktor lay where he was, on his back in the cool, lush grass, staring up at the sky.

“Viktor, are you okay? Are you hurt?”

“Lookit ‘em up there… Yuuri, look,” Viktor mumbled, voice soft, suddenly somber. He searched the heavens, chest tight from the sudden sense of longing that hit him all at once.

Yuuri hesitated, then got down next to him, pushing up the brim of his glasses once he was on his back. “Okay.”

Viktor was quiet for several long moments, pale blue eyes icy under the brilliant stars. “You know, it’s… funny.”

“Hm?”
“I never did get him to go stargazing with me. Not even once.” A sigh. Viktor kept his head straight, chin up, gaze fixed on the stars straight above him.

Yuuri turned his head to him. “Who?”

“Niko.”

Viktor let his answer rest for a beat, then drew his gaze from the heavenly display to look at Yuuri, whose expression perched somewhere between curious and uncertain. The flowers, now tangled in his dark hair, were soft and wilted; snowdrops in wild bramble. Midnight had cooled his eyes, taking the fire, but leaving the sparkle, and bathed him in shadows of gentle blue. Even with thoughts of Niko looming like a storm on the horizon, he had to admit that Yuuri was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen.

The private admission of that fact alone was enough to make him nervous, but what frightened him more was how close they were... how easy it would be to touch that soft cheek; to try to tame the hair enough to better gaze into his eyes.

He wanted to kiss him. More than anything, he wanted to close that gap between them, just mitigate those five or six inches and show Yuuri exactly how he felt.

Yuuri was already looking back at him, too; gaze transfixed, hesitant. Waiting.

But Viktor shook his head, turning away to look back at the stars above them. He couldn’t. Not even in the lush grass in the middle of the night. “We don’t get stars like this in Saint Petersburg.”

“Probably the light pollution.”

“Mnn... and these ones keep moving. Like they’re melting. You Japanese, always have to be different... streaky stars like spots on the mirror.”

Yuuri frowned again. “Yeah. Let’s get you home.”

By the time they made it back, both Yuuri and Viktor were beyond exhausted and mostly asleep at the door. So much so that they said their goodnights at the genkan instead of the hallway.

“Oyasumi. See you in the morning, Viktor.”

“Y’mean inna few minutes.” Snort. “You could just save time and come to bed now.”

“...huh?”

Viktor squinted at him and leaned against the wall with very little grace or success, slipping and only barely catching himself, clinging to the wood paneling. He managed to right himself, and tried again. “Because you dream... yeah.”

Yuuri only blinked at him twice more, then shook his head. “Okay. Goodnight.” And then he retreated for the stairs.

Watching him go, Viktor felt an overwhelming sense of confusion, relief, and frustration that he couldn’t place. Hadn’t he said a great pick-up line? Wait, why was he hitting on Yuuri in the first place?

He padded back to his own room, leaning against the wall for support. Makkachin greeted him in
the hallway, and bumped against his leg to guide him into the right room.

“... You’re right, Makka… I’m not prinzess Orihime… it’s her night…”

Chapter End Notes

Orihime: Oh, these two... writing wishes for the benefit of the other. It's so romantic. Doesn't it remind you of us?
Hikoboshi: it certainly does!
Hikoboshi: wishing for the other so unknowingly
Orihime: But... they still have so much in their path. Do you think they'll be okay? What can we do for them?
Hikoboshi: Hmm, perhaps a little nudge in the right direction. Set them in motion
Orihime: But what if they end up like us? Only able to see each other once a year, forever aching...
Hikoboshi: They have people in their lives that wouldn't let that happen
Hikoboshi: There's only so much divine interference allowed
Orihime: I suppose... Well then, let's wish them the best. I'd love to see a happy ending for once.

A CHALLENGER APPROACHES IN THE NEXT GAY SKATE!
Fans and rivals! / Not-Dates and wine! / Wolves and katsudon! / Practice and slip-ups!

Please look forward to it!
Fallen Idols

Chapter by gabapple

Chapter Summary

Coach Nikiforov heads to Okayama for the Japanese qualifiers with his student, Yuuri, expecting it to be nothing but a competition of amateurs... and though he’s not entirely wrong, the stage is perfect for their debut as a pair of professionals, and provides plenty of opportunities for very valuable team building exercises. Who knew that sharing a hotel room due to budget cuts could be so rewarding?

Chapter Notes

In this chapter:
Gabapple: I'm just laughing. I love this chapter. All of it. But it's too long. Save Gab from long chapters 2k17.
Mamodewberry: WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR MANY OF THESE MOMENTS SINCE WE STARTED. AND ONE THAT CAME OUT OF NOWHERE. SO MANY GOODS
Gabapple: LOL it's true. :)))))) aaahh~~ Also huge thanks to @SAIL0RMOUTH on twitter for the help with the Italian in this chapter! <3

New Art!
TINY YUURI from chapter 11, illustrated by destiny-hoodie (commission)

Recommended Listening:
" ( : Shadow)" Music box ver, as performed by Reynah
Make You Feel My Love, as performed by Escala
Dream A Little Dream, as performed by The Mamas & The Papas

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saint Petersburg, Russia
Viktor (13 years old)

“Am I to understand that you’re not fond of either of your costumes?”

Viktor kept his head still, just like he’d been ordered to, but shifted his gaze as far as he could to look up and back at Lilia. “They’re… fine, but they’re not really what I want.”

“You always were a picky one. Lift your head up.” Lilia combed her fingers through the boy’s wet hair, adding another dollop of conditioner. “Rest again.” She went back to massaging his scalp,
working it all in. “What does it matter, anyway?”

“What do you mean? It’s my debut. I need to look my absolute best!”

“A good performer could go on stage wearing nothing at all and entrance the audience even so. God, don’t make that face, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Viktor shuddered. “Performing naked… no. No thank you.”

“I just said-”

“I know. Like the Emperor’s New Clothes. His confidence enchanted the entire kingdom, fooling everyone. But can’t I do that and have a nice costume, too?”

Lilia shook her head, reaching back to rinse her hands. “You are beautiful, your program is beautiful, your form is beautiful. You’ve been trained well- in no small part thanks to a solid foundation-” she paused to give herself a nod of acknowledgement, “-and that will stand for itself, Viktor.”

He sighed, tilting his head back to look up at the stucco ceiling, all gold and gaudy. His former ballet teacher’s home was such an odd mix of extravagant styles all mushed together into a much too large, but somehow too narrow space. “I guess.”

“Is that really all you have to say? You ‘guess’?”

Viktor turned his eyes on her. “I guess I just thought that since this was my first performance as an individual, and not for school, that I could, you know, do what I wanted to do.”

“Oh, Viktor.” She shook her head and pulled the nozzle from the wall to rinse his hair out. “There will be plenty of time for that. How does this feel? Too hot?”

“It’s fine.”

“Yet you’re still making a face, child.”

“I dunno.” Viktor bit his lip, hesitant. “Do you… I mean, I don’t know if Coach told you or not, but I, uh, I wear mascara… but it’s the only makeup I know how to do. So I’m not sure what I’m gonna do for the program.”

Lilia checked for any remaining suds or residue, then set the nozzle back in place and shut off the water, setting to work gently wringing out his hair between her fingers. “He didn’t need to tell me; I could tell on my own, Viktor. And the lipgloss, too.” She paused to lean over and smirk at him, brow arched. “A woman always knows these things.”

Viktor opened his mouth to reply, then closed again. If anyone knew how to tell if someone was wearing makeup, it’d be Lilia. Half of her face was makeup. He sunk deeper into the reclining salon chair.

She took a towel and dropped it on top of his head. “Sit up,” she said, and wrapped it around his hair when he meekly followed orders. “As for the rest, did you suppose that your visit here was just for me to do your hair, Viktor?”

He peeked out at her when the towel was moved, cheeks tinted pink. “Huh?”

“Did your coach not tell you?”
“He said you’d show me how to style it.”

“Was that all?”

Viktor nodded, trying not to wince as Lilia squeezed the water from his hair with the towel, expression souring.

“I see.” She scowled at the closed door, beyond which Yakov was waiting. “Of course.”

“Of course what?”

Lilia rubbed the towel over his head, moving him bodily this way and that. It was almost-- playful.

“I suppose he wanted *me* to tell you. As your coach knows nothing of makeup, he’s asked me to teach you.”

“He- what?”

“Yes.”

The color deepened on Viktor’s face. “Now?”

“This is a makeover. A trial run for your debut, yes. I’ll show you how tonight, and you’ll come back twice more before you two leave.”

“R-Really?!”

“Really. We’ll start with your hair.”

Viktor already knew how to blowdry and do minimal styling, but he knew very little about the world of round brushes, curling and flat irons. Nor did he have any particular products besides whatever shampoo and conditioner he could come by. Whatever Lilia had used made everything silky soft and so smooth.

“Your hair is an asset,” she explained as she worked in more product to protect it from the heating elements. “You mustn’t use cheap garbage from the drug store to wash it. Only use salon-quality products. Take good care of your hair and it will take good care of you.”

Viktor nodded, taking mental notes, though he wished he had a notebook with him to be more thorough.

She taught him about the application of heat via water, steam, the iron, and hair dryer to manipulate the hair, and then the cool air settings to set the style in place. When to use hair spray. How to pin things in place. Finding the natural part in his hair and using that to his advantage.

They settled on a semi-half back with a loose bun, pinned to look casual and more organic while being quite appropriate for skating or ballet. It was very cute. Feminine, without being overtly so.

Lilia pinned the sweep of bang out of the way to leave Viktor’s face bare, forehead and all, and pulled a chair over. “For makeup…”

“It’s *not* weird, is it? To wear makeup?”

“Of course not.”

“Even though I’m…”
“A ballerina.”

Viktor snorted, then smiled. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Good. That’s settled. Now, you’re young, and your features are already quite fine, so we won’t need a lot of makeup. You’ll just want to accent them, highlight and bring them out a little.” She set out her tools all along the counter; various brushes and powders and things that Viktor had never seen before. “We begin, as always, with a clean surface.”

Lilia explained each step in detail; the whys and whats, where to get each product and how much it cost, and why it was worth it to go for the more expensive. There was moisturizer, foundation, powder, eyeshadows and eye liners, mascara and brow pencils. Lilia showed him how to blend, how to add blush, how to do lip lining, lipstick, lip gloss, touch ups, contouring.

It was overwhelming and fascinating and Viktor had never felt so close her before. Even when she deviated from the topic at hand to lecture him about other things.

“And Viktor, are you sure they’re feeding you? I’m worried I might cut myself on your collar bones.”

“I- yes, there’s plenty of food at the cafeteria. I’m just not hungry most of the time.”

“Your teeth are so small. If you don’t start eating, you’re never going to fill out properly.”

Viktor frowned. “No one wants to dance on a full stomach, Lilia.”

“Don’t make that face; I’m working on that contour.”

“Besides, there’s just no time to eat.”

“Well, you’d better find time. The dead do not dance, after all.”

“I know, I know…”

Little by little, the makeup changed him. He was still Viktor, that much was for sure, but he was also more, somehow. Softer, more defined, with all of the little things that he liked about his face accentuated with bits of highlight or shadow. It wasn’t like Lilia’s makeup at all; it was subtle and elegant. It was so beautiful.

He was beautiful.

Lashes long and dark, like he’d always longed for. Lips just a little fuller, with a little more color to them. Violet shimmer over his eyelids, mixed with beige, spread so thin that it was almost like a moth’s wing more than actual eyeshadow.

“Is this really me?” He asked, voice just a whisper. Viktor tilted his head this way and that, shifting the shadows on his face watch how it changed the shapes in the mirror. The lighting made his eyes so light, so ethereal, he really could have been an ice princess.

“Of course it’s you, Viktor. Shall we bring your coach in?”

Viktor hunched his shoulders, a little smile creeping on his face. “I guess.”

Lilia squeezed his shoulders, then left him to retrieve Yakov. In the moments she was gone, he pulled the clip from his hair to let the swath of silver fall over his face, then tucked it back behind his ear. If he didn’t know better, he really would have believed that he was a girl, himself.
Such an odd feeling, that. He loved how it looked. Loved how it felt. It was terrifying and powerful all at once.

Viktor pulled down on the sleeves of his sweater, tugging them over his fingers, and leaned back in the chair. Maybe it didn’t matter that his costumes weren’t so flashy, yeah, if he had makeup like this. And stretched his neck out, just like this…

Yakov and Lilia returned a few moments later, both smiling in a way that Viktor could only pin as proud, though he wasn’t sure why. It reminded him of his own parents, actually, the way they’d come to stand around his chair on his birthday before presenting his gift. That had been half his lifetime ago. More than. Viktor blinked up at them, nervous smile stretching under pretty, painted lips.

Then Lilia added a thin, golden tiara to his hair, leaves and crystals interwoven in a circlet around the front.

“I was hoping to give this to you for your debut in a ballet company, but… What do you think?” Lilia asked, setting one hand on the back of the chair while her other stayed behind her.

Viktor gasped. “L-Lilia!”

“Don’t lose it. It’s likely your most valuable possession now.”

He gaped.


“Really?” Viktor asked, tilting his head back to look up at him.

“Pretty as a princess.”

Tears sprung to his eyes and Viktor looked away, sniffling. “Coach.”

“Oh, Viktor, don’t cry. You’ll make your mascara run.”

“I- I can’t help it.”

Lilia shook her head. “Ballerinas do not cry.”

“I- huhh...efhnn figure... skater…”

To that, Yakov chuckled, and Lilia sighed. “Of course. You skaters and your glass hearts. Very well. I want you to practice your makeup techniques before you come back to go over this with me again, Viktor.”

“How’m I gonna..?”

Another sigh from Lilia. “We have all that you need packed in a bag to take home. It’s not as though I can come with you.”

“A bag... Makeup and everything?” Viktor gaped again. “But how…”

“It is a gift from Lilia and I.”

Lilia elbowed the man hard. “You-- you will pay your coach back when you win! And I expect you to, with all of the hard work he’s put into this. And all that I’ve done for you, too. Now come
along, let’s get this makeup off of you so we can get you back to your dorms. You cannot slack on
your \textit{plies} just for makeup lessons.”

Viktor carefully wiped the tears from his eyes. “Actually, I want to show my roommate. H-he
knows already, so he won’t say anything. Is that okay?”

The adults exchanged glances, but were not about to discourage it. Especially not when the boy slid
off of the chair and gave them each a hug, wrapping his arms around them as far as they could go.

“Thank you, Lilia. Coach.”

“Of course, Vitya.”

Lilia patted his hair, then squeezed his shoulder again. “You’ll be fine, Vitya.”

They dropped him off right by the dorms and Viktor waved a very fond farewell, shouldering the
bag of beauty supplies while the tiara glinted in the yellow street light. He followed orders,
heading straight inside and to his room, so he didn’t hear the pair discussing their sweet little
duckling growing into a beautiful swan, or anything about their evening plans.

That was just as well; he was tired from the excitement, and he still had so much to do before he
could go to bed. Getting the pins out of his hair would take a great deal of time, and he really
wanted Gavrik to see the full effect before he ruined it. The crisp September air only needed a few
seconds to put a fresh tint of rose on Viktor’s cheeks and ears before he stole away into the halls,
clutching the bag to his side and the sleeves over his exposed fingers.

When he got to the room, Gavrik was half-asleep and studying french on his bed. He didn’t even
look up when Viktor came in, just nodded. “Welcome back, Vitya.”

“Thank you.” Viktor closed the door while holding the handle, waiting until it made the soft click
of the latch catching. The Academy was old, and while kept in great repair, was showing its wear.
“Lilia showed me how to use makeup. All sorts.” He crossed the room and set the bag on his own
bed, turning back to watch Gavrik as he scanned the page in his book.

“That’s… good?”

Playing with the ends of his sleeves again, Viktor fought the urge to attach his gaze to the floor,
leveling it on his roommate instead. He had to be brave. “Wanna see before I take it off?”

Gavrik finally looked up. “Take what off?” Then he stopped, blinked twice, and stared. Full-on
staring, with wide eyes and dropped jaw and everything.

Viktor tried a hesitant smile, but it didn’t change Gavrik’s expression at all. “I won’t be wearing
the tiara for the performance or anything,” he said, and reached up to pull it from his hair. “Lilia
gave it to me. It was one of hers when she was an active ballet dancer.”

“She…” Gavrik stammered, then shook his head, turning back to his book with a cough. “You look
really nice, Vitya.” He looked back again. “Wow.”

“Thanks.” Viktor scrubbed the back of his neck with the palm of his hand and his sweater. “Think
it’ll go over well?”

“Uh. Yeah. I think so.” He tried to look away again, but couldn’t. “Yeah. Wow. That’s… really
‘Really effective’ was high praise from Gavrik. He’d take it. Viktor smiled, oh-so-pleased, and pulled himself up onto the bed to start taking the pins out of his hair. The occasional glance across the room told him that Gavrik was still watching. “I know this is fascinating, but don’t forget your homework.”

“Huh? Oh. Right. Uh. Sorry.”

“And you’re not getting my tiara.”


Viktor added another mental tally mark for him vs Gavrik in the terribly uneven scoreboard. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

The competition wasn’t technically his first ever; Viktor had gone to local qualifiers and had participated in other tournaments, but only now would his scores be recorded and counted for the length of his career. Whatever he did here mattered. Tests and trial runs had all proven that he had the talent and skill to pull off whatever he intended to do, but it didn’t mean anything if he couldn’t do it in front of the judges of the ISU.

He checked himself in the mirror one last time. The practice with Lilia had been just what he’d needed to refine the technique; doing it on his own had let him experiment, but she had helped to rein him in, kept things simple. There was no drama in the dressing room. His hair was on point; his costume, though simple, was neatly pressed and in place; and he was calm. He was ready. He’d done all of his drills and warm ups without any problems. He knew both of his programs inside and out, backwards and forwards, every maneuver and transition as well as the next. The only thing he lacked was the experience of performing it in front of an audience. That he’d only done a handful of times.

But his coach believed in him. Lilia believed in him. His teachers at the Academy, even though they didn’t get why he would bother with figure skating at all, believed in him. Gavrik believed in him.

And Russia believed in him.

Viktor took a deep breath, held it to the count of three, and tried to rise on his toes for a releve- but it didn’t work in his skating boots as well as he would have liked. He let go of the breath with a laugh. “I’m definitely more of a skater today, I guess.”

He took one last look in the mirror, smiled, and kissed the tip of two fingers, which he pressed to his double’s lips with a wink- “Good luck!” -and then left to find his coach.

Viktor brought a silver medal home, which he wore around his neck, tucked under his jacket, the whole way home. Security had to pry it out of his hands, which Yakov mediated gently, and not-so-gently, on both ends. It was his first win after all. And a debut at that; just barely shy of gold. It left Viktor exhausted. He’d put in a nearly flawless performance, but it hadn’t been quite enough. The points just hadn’t added up. His routines needed to be more complicated, with a higher difficulty. How could he have been so blind?
“Vitya, this is only the start of the season.”

“I’m gonna go home and sleep for seventeen- no, twenty-five hours.”

“If that is what you wish.”

He was proud and disappointed, excited and so tired all at once. By the time they reached the Academy, all Viktor wanted to do was show Gavrik the medal and crawl into his blanket nest. He hugged Yakov over the seat and hauled his suitcase from the car to the dorm, wearily weaving through the other students that milled through the hallways, welcoming him back from his trip.

When he got to his room, he dragged his suitcase to his bed, unzipped his jacket, and looked over to find that Gavrik wasn’t there. It was some other guy. With some other bed. Different posters on the wall. Different bed spread.

“Oh, uh.” Viktor froze, zipping right back up. “Sorry, do I have the wrong--” he looked back at his bed, but no, the unicorn was still there, and all of his other stuff. That was his bed. He looked back. Gavrik’s stuff was gone. “--room?”

“Nah,” said the other boy. He was older than Viktor, with signs of facial hair and broad shoulders. Tall. Square jaw. Fifteen? Sixteen? He stuck out his hand. “I’m Feliks. Your new roommate.”

Viktor glanced down at the beefy man paw of a hand, then back at Feliks and his cleft chin. He was the opposite of Gavrik, who was weasley, and the exact opposite of himself. But he looked friendly enough. “The semester just started, though; why the switch?”

“Don’t know. They didn’t say. But when the administrators at Vaganova tell you to do something, you do it.” He laughed. “But don’t worry, I’m nice.”

Viktor took his hand and gave it the most polite of shakes before stepping back and sitting on his bed. Why had Gavrik left? Was it the makeup? The skating?

“So you were at a competition, right? Did you win?”

Viktor peered back at the Goliath roommate and shrugged, pulling a leg up to hug against his chest. “Silver. For my junior debut.”

“That’s pretty good! Did you get a medal?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I see?”

Another shrug. Viktor pulled it out from his jacket and held it up, but there was little joy in the presentation. It wasn’t as though it had much silver in it anyway; it was more symbolic. Gavrik would have told him all about that.

“That’s great! Congratulations, Vitya.”

“Thanks.”

He let his eyes wander over the things he had on display in the room; things he’d grown comfortable with letting Gavrik see, but wouldn’t necessarily want a stranger to. There was a lot about him that he didn’t want anyone else to know. How would this Feliks feel about the makeup? How did he feel about the long hair? And how long had he been in the room, with all of his idea
books and journals out and unprotected? Viktor winced, looking back at the unicorn at the corner of his bed, and reached back to cover it with his pillow.

“Oh, hey, you don’t need to worry about that,” said Feliks.

“About what?” Viktor flopped onto his side, pretending that it had just been a stretch.

“I like unicorns.”

At that, Viktor peered, incredulous. “Oh?”

“Yeah. They’re symbols of masculinity, you know? Badass stallions with phallic symbols on their heads, running around in the forest, looking for virgin maidens to hang out with… what’s not to like about that?”

Viktor sat up again, pulling the unicorn plush out to sit in his lap. For several long seconds, he didn’t even know how to respond, mind and expression blank except for the shock at such blasphemy. Then, he rubbed his temples. “They… no, traditionally in stories, unicorns are based off of deer, not horses, but even then, their horns are supposed to have healing properties, they’re not… you can’t just reduce them to phallic symbols, don’t be gross. And they don’t just ‘hang out’ with virgin maidens, they’re looking for maidens to protect, because they’re noble creatures and stuff.” He shook his head in an attempt to clear the idiocy out. “Did you really just call unicorns badass?”

“Well, yeah. Cause they are.”

Viktor looked down at his plush, wondering if he could describe it like that. It stared back at him with beady little eyes, but said nothing. “I don’t know about that.”

“Let it wear your medal.”

It was worth a try. Viktor slid the medal off from around his neck and put it around the unicorn, which needed to be looped twice to not hang too low. But, when situated that way, didn’t look half bad. He held it up for Feliks’s approval. “Like that?”

“Yeah! There you go! Now it’s badass, too.”

Viktor hugged his unicorn, shaking his head with a smile; tired, but genuine. “Whatever.”

Over the next few weeks, Gavrik noticed that Viktor was avoiding him, which was expected. He’d left without a word, after all, which was cruel to do to a roommate of three years. But at an academy with competition was fierce as it was, one couldn’t entertain distractions. Not when washing out meant losing your one chance at a career in the arts altogether.

“So Gavrik,” his new roommate, Anton, who was far less interesting than Viktor had been, asked one afternoon while they were doing homework in the quad. The silver haired beauty was passing through in the autumn sunlight, in a hurry as always, which raised the question. “Is Vitya gay? Is that why you changed rooms?”

Gavrik laughed. “No. That’s just his style. I switched because he’s into figure skating, so he’s not really competition. I can’t really make any power plays if he’s not a real rival.”

Anton frowned at that, turning away from Viktor to stare at Gavrik. “What? So I’m your rival
Gavrik only smiled, watching Viktor retreat around the corner. “Mmm-hm. Aren’t you so lucky?”

Inhale. Exhale. Headtilt. Check one side, then the other. The nervous energy had him frantic. He checked the clock. It was only six pm. Still twenty minutes before they needed to head out for the venue. What was he doing? Was he supposed to be winding down, or getting ready? His coach wanted him to be well-rested. He remembered her saying that repeatedly. There was a lot at stake. The qualifiers were a big deal. And Yuuri would be there.

Yuuri friggin Katsuki.

Oh, he could hardly wait! His idol! Skating together, competing again! Maybe they would talk this time. Maybe they would be able to hang out? Maybe Yuuri could give him some advice or tips or even congratulate him on winning the Nationals last year. He wasn’t sure. There were too many possibilities. All of them had him jazzed. Too jazzed. He couldn’t stop moving.

He drummed his fingers on the desk in front of the mirror. Maybe it was mantra time. Yeah, that was it. He just needed a personal pep talk.

“I am Kenjirou Minami! I am not Yugioh, nor any other anime character! It doesn’t matter that I’m not the conventional Japanese male! I do things my way and in my style!” Minami puffed up his chest, jaw set in determination. “I’m not a doctor! I’m not a businessman! I am a figure skater! I was the number one Junior Champion last year, and first in the Japanese Nationals! I can do it again!” Huff huff. “I’m small but I am mighty! I’m going to show the world my style! I’m going to—”

“Minami-kun!” His coach, in the hotel room next to his. “Stop yelling! Are you ready to go?”

Eep. “Yeah, Coach! I’m ready. Sorry.” Little huff. Minami tapped his fang with the tip of his index finger, adjusted the collar of his dress shirt, then plopped down in the stiff office chair. He could barely see his own face anymore. Why was he so short? Did Yuuri have that problem?

No matter. It was the qualifiers. And he was Kenjirou Minami! He would conquer!

And he’d be seeing his idol, in person, in just a few minutes!

Yuuri was not pleased about his assignment. Viktor patted his shoulder on the way back to the hotel, picking up their luggage at the front desk.

“At least you don’t have to worry about waiting through everyone else’s routines. I always liked going first, myself. Not being too nervous to watch, you know?”

“I guess.”

They’d only had time to take a cab from the rail station to the hotel and drop things off before heading to the venue earlier, but now that it was sorted, checked into their room- yes, two beds thank you very much -and decided to settle in before heading out again. It was late, but the
upcoming competition had its own particular energy that kept them bouncing on their toes.

The room was small and simple; nothing special, but, to Viktor’s great relief, Western style. Real beds. A private bathroom. There would be no sleeping on the floor as he’d feared. Then both of them made a bee-line for the bed closest to the window.

“Oh.” Viktor frowned, coming to a halt. “Do you prefer that one?”

“Uhm. I usually do. But I don’t have to.”

Viktor shrugged, turning on his heel, and waved it off. “Nah, it’s fine. Yakov always took the bed closest to the bathroom, so I took the other one. But if you want the one by the window, I’ll take the coach bed!”

“If you’re sure…”

“Yeah, it’s fine.” Viktor flopped onto the other bed, pulling his suitcase up with him. “Besides, I’m Coach now!”

“Okay, Coach.” Yuuri offered a smile, then shook his head as he finally went to claim his preferred bed.

Coach. Viktor stretched out next to his luggage and folded his arms behind his head, closing his eyes. Yes. Coach Nikiforov. A very nice title.

“You two seem close. Did you room together a lot?”

Viktor turned his head, blinking at Yuuri. There he was, sitting on the edge of his own bed, prying again. Trying to be friendly? Spying? Sending mixed signals? He shrugged. “Yakov? Yeah. For most of my career, actually, up until a couple of years ago.”

“You’ve been together a long time.”

The statement brought a fresh sort of ache to his chest that Viktor wasn’t quite expecting. He turned his gaze to the ceiling, biting his lower lip. The tissue box was in his suitcase, wasn’t it? Not too difficult to fish out if he needed to. Not yet. He swallowed. “Yeah, twenty… twenty-one years? Almost twenty-two, I guess.” Viktor laughed, the sound soft, a little helpless. “I guess you could say he practically raised me. I don’t know how he feels about it, but he’s the closest thing I have to a papa.”

“He’d have to care about you a lot to be with you as long as he has.” Yuuri busied himself with his own luggage, turning away- a small relief. “That sounds nice, though. To have that with your coach. That can be with you when you’re out at competitions.”

“Yeah…” The recollection was as comforting as it was painful; the chilly air sucked into desperate lungs at the end of a routine. But with that, every passing moment got a little easier to bear. “It was fun and a lot less lonely that way. I think he liked it as much as I did… he could keep me out of trouble, and I’d turn off the TV when he’d fall asleep after drinking vodka.” Viktor managed a smile at that. “Only the good stuff, of course.”

“Following in his footsteps?”

“What?” Viktor tried to imagine that; drinking vodka until he fell asleep, Yuuri turning off the TV, just the way it had been for he and Yakov. Of course, Viktor preferred wine in his hotel rooms, but…
“Uh, would I need to turn off the TV after you stumble in from being out?”

“Huh? Oh…” Out? Viktor hadn’t ever been much of an out sort of person. It hadn’t occurred to him before, but if Yuuri thought that Viktor might be out, then maybe Yuuri wanted to, as well. After all, he actually had a friend or two, as antisocial as he claimed to be. Maybe Yuuri wanted to have time away from him. “Yakov always drank in the room, and I’d keep him company is what I meant. Watching TV, that sort of thing. Not that you have to.” His smile faded. “As long as you’re back in time to get a reasonable amount of sleep so you can compete, that’s… that’s fine. I’m your coach, but it’s not like I own you or anything.”

Yuuri shrugged. “I’d probably stay in the room most of the time. Unless Phichit’s there.”

“That’s what I usually do, too,” Viktor said, trying not to sound too hopeful, or relieved, as he pushed up to a sit. “Unless there’s a good shopping district or someone drags me to dinner. I’m usually too tired to do anything else.”

“Yeah. I usually have to unwind.”

Viktor rubbed his neck. Did that mean he wanted to be alone? “Hah, yeah. Competing is stressful. The last few years, it’s been nothing but room service and napping.”

“But, uh. I wouldn’t mind grabbing dinner.”

Now? Viktor stole a glance at Yuuri, who was not-not looking at him, so he nodded. “Dinner would be nice…”

“Here or a restaurant?”

Viktor shrugged. “A restaurant probably has better food.”

“Usually, yeah.” Yuuri rubbed his hands over his knees, awkward and cute, smiling.

It was almost like a date. A not date. Like the not-looking. Viktor chewed on his lower lip again, then swung his legs over the edge of the bed. “Okay! Let’s go out, then. Maybe we can find something interesting. I’ll treat. And then I can get a nightcap when we get back. I usually have the hotel send up wine anyway, since Yakov smuggles in his vodka… and I’d steal the remote when he got sleepy. That’s the way it goes. Oh, and it has to be a soap opera in a foreign language so we can make up what’s going on.”

“Okay. And I’ll turn off the TV, since you’re Coach now.”

“You stay up later than I do, anyway, so that should be easy for you.” Viktor grinned, turning his attention to the nightstand between the beds. “I’ll be sure to leave the remote where it’s easy to get to. Sometimes Yakov would hide it, but I’ll be nice this time.”

“Haha. Thanks.” Yuuri tapped a toe against the carpet, hesitating again. “So… have you talked to him since you got to Japan?”

Viktor got to his feet, stretching. It was an inevitable question, really, especially with the way Yuuri had been so curious lately. “Oh. He's not... speaking to me right now.” He kept a careful smile on his face, faint but present. “I’ve written to him... I used to write to him every few days. No response.”

“...oh.”
“Yurio says he’s doing well, though, so I suppose that’s all I can ask for.” He shrugged. “I’m sure he’ll forgive me eventually. Are you ready to go? I’m hungry.”

They found a ramen bar and avoided any further talk about Coach Feltsman. While dinner wasn’t interesting, it was good, and one of the only things open that late besides the sketchy diner that they ultimately vetoed on the premise of pancakes being extremely not within Yuuri’s diet restrictions.

It was well past ten by the time they got back to the room, and though Viktor had wine sent up, he only made it through half of his glass before he was dozing, curled up on the edge of the bed with arms hugged around his pillow. Yuuri took the glass from him, turned off the soap opera— which was in Japanese anyway—as was his duty, tucked Viktor in, then took his time getting ready for bed, himself. In the peaceful quiet, listening to Viktor’s quiet breathing, Yuuri stayed up a while longer on his phone, browsing the internet in the dark.

The next day was Viktor Nikiforov’s first day as Yuuri’s coach on official duty and it was, to no small degree, one of disappointment. It began with breakfast in the hotel, which was a simple offering of traditional miso and rice, and nothing like Mama Katsuki prepared. Then it was to morning warm-ups, during which Yuuri immediately began to let his anxious nerves take over. Was it the draw of the larger crowd? The miniature fan club from the night before? There was no way to tell for sure. Honestly, none of it was all that impressive.

Not that Viktor would ever say that out loud; that would be unprofessional, and it wasn’t as if the event was sponsored by the official channels. It was simply a hoop that had to be jumped through; a trial of redemption that Yuuri had to pass to make up for his failing the previous year. Embarrassing, but necessary nonetheless. The competition was meager. Fine enough at their level, but amateur. Not at all like what Yuuri had faced at the Grand Prix Finals, and not even close to Yurio’s calibre. Not that it seemed to matter to Yuuri. He was sloppy on the ice anyway, and it only got worse once the practice was open for the public to view.

He couldn’t help but notice that even the other judges were, well, pedestrian. That was well and good for a local event, he guessed, but it made things a little awkward for him. He stood out as usual; tall and very pale, with such European features that he felt a bit like a vampire amid a PTA meeting. Once Takeshi arrived, Viktor left to change into his formal coach attire, too, which only made it worse. Black three piece suit, all fine and tailored over a crisp white collared shirt, overcoat, and gloves. Overdressed? Compared to the jeans and sweater crowd, definitely. And it made an impact, just like he wanted it to.

He was, after all, Viktor Nikiforov. Viktor Nikiforov, five-time consecutive champion, Olympian, living legend, and now coach to Yuuri Katsuki, who must be very important to be worth his time. Very, very important. Yes, Morooka-san, look this way. Pay very close attention to this skater. My student.

Only, his student wasn’t paying much attention to him at all.

Yuuri was dismayed at how his coach stood out, and then too distracted by his own anxiety to even let him give any sort of inspirational speech. No chance for a pep talk. When Yakov sent Viktor out before a competition, he always had wise words, but no, Yuuri didn’t even allow him that much; just went out there as if he knew best. It wasn’t as if Viktor had abandoned his own career, spent a small fortune to relocate halfway across the world to coach him, his own life on hold, only to be snubbed by his own student. Not at all. Nope.
So when Yuuri came back, Viktor made short work of that aloof attitude. “Yuuri,” he muttered. “Turn around.” A brisk order, followed. Cameras and audience watching. He embraced him, touch tender, pressing his cheek to Yuuri’s, neck to neck, in a deliberately sensual move. Then, some *Art of War.* “Seduce me with all you have. If your performance can charm me, you can enthral the entire audience.” He pulled back, voice low in his throat, letting his presence linger, warm and close, against his ear. “That’s what I always say in practice, right?”

Yuuri nodded, trembling.

*Good.*

Its purpose was two-fold: 1) to get the audience intrigued, which was phenomenally successful; and 2) to get Yuuri shaken up so he’d stop thinking about how nervous he was. That was also successful, but a little less so. The first half of his performance was brilliant, just as he’d hoped. But somewhere along the way, it fell apart. He was too focused on the jumps, too nervous, too worried about the composition and the points, and the music dragged him along instead of the other way around.

It was so disappointing.

Nevertheless, he scored well. Somehow.

But even that was by far the least of Yuuri’s offenses and Viktor’s disappointments of the day. By the time they got back to the room that evening- opting for a room service dinner -there was more than enough material for Viktor to give a lengthy lecture on.

“That Jessica,” Viktor said, shaking his head as he frowned at the television. “You can always tell when it’s a Jessica because she gives the death glares at the other women in the show.”

“But she just said her name was Ayumi.”

“Aha, you’d think that, but she’s definitely a Jessica.”

It was a drama of some kind, and though Yuuri could understand every word, neither of them had any idea what was going on in the plot. All that they knew were that several of the characters were upset and seemingly blaming everyone else for whatever the trouble was.

“Okay, so who is that?”

“Justin.” Viktor took a sip from his glass of wine and set it on the night stand, scooting back against the headboard of the bed. “He smiles a lot and is trying to defend people; so he’s probably a decent sort of person. Thus, Justin.”

“And… that woman?”


“Are they all American?”

“No way. I’m sure we’ll run into Jin, Jesus, Jezebel, and Juanita eventually.”

Yuuri reluctantly looked away from the train wreck soap opera to glance at Viktor, who was watching intently. “But they all have J names?”
“Of course. It’s part of the Soap Opera Megaverse. It’ll take a few times watching to get the hang of it, but soon you’ll start recognizing all of them and their alternate personas.” Viktor grinned, and hugged his pillow, one leg stretched out, the other tucked under his knee. It was a comfortable routine. Different without Yakov, but still familiar enough that he felt a little less raw. “Gasp, it’s Jack! And is that-- a gun?”

“I think it’s just a cell phone.”

“Oh. Drat.” Viktor sighed. The conflict was significantly less interesting without that bit of tension, but really only because he didn’t have Yakov’s dry wit to keep up the ridiculous banter. Yuuri would have to be trained. That, and there was still the things they needed to discuss before he got too tired. He turned his attention away from the TV, letting a crooked smile slip into place. “So, Yuuri.”

“How does it feel to be the best of the best?”

Yuuri blinked, freezing as he often did when cornered with a question of any sort of personal nature. “Uh. I don’t know about the best of the best…”

“You saw the scores. You’re leading with 25.81 points; that’s fairly impressive, even though this won’t be recorded for the Grand Prix in an official capacity.” Viktor stretched out his other leg, toes pointing, then crossed them at the ankle. “It’s hard to argue with that.”

“I guess…”

“You guess. Hah. And you’ll do even better tomorrow, right?”

Yuuri shrugged. “With some sleep. I want the first time I perform my free skate to be good.”

“I’m certain it’ll blow them all away. Especially that Minami-kun.” A pause. “He seems to be quite the fan of yours. Does he remind you of anyone?”

“Huh? No. Not really. Don’t know why he would be a fan of me, either.”

Viktor frowned, glancing back at the TV where ‘Justin’ had taken the alleged ‘Jessica’ by the shoulders and was giving her an impassioned speech. Probably. He hoped it was a pep talk and not a threat. “He’s just like you, you know. Maybe you don’t get it, but he- and many others -see greatness in you. And that’s something you need to accept responsibility for. Treat it with respect.”

Though Yuuri opened his mouth to reply, he closed it soon after, instead opting to play with the lid of his water bottle.

“You, he looks up to you. You have an opportunity to encourage your juniors and foster a healthier environment for the next generation of skaters. We’re to inspire them. Help them to grow. They are the future of the sport, and what we say and do for them, in those brief moments, those tiny interactions, could alter their entire lives.” Viktor pushed his pillow over, letting it flop into his lap. “What if, for instance, I’d said that I regretted having long hair? Or that I thought the costume that became your Eros was part of my dark past?”

“Th-that’d be terrible!”

“It’s not true, of course. And I’m honored that you are skating with that part of my history in your routine… but this isn’t about you, it’s about him. This is your chance to encourage healthy
"I… I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I’ve never had anyone look up to me before."

Viktor went for his wine glass again, leaning back with a quiet thump on the headboard. “You’re so anxious that all you can do is think about yourself. Perhaps if you think about your junior instead, it’ll help. Clearly, he’s looked up to you for a while.”

There was a few beats of silence before Yuuri nodded, sullen and pitiful. “I know. I messed up.”

“Don’t worry, Yuuri. It’s an easy fix.”

“He probably hates me now. I don’t blame him.”

“Oh, don’t assume that. Come now.”

Yuuri didn’t reply, gaze glued to the floor. He looked miserable. Hands in his lap, feet on the floor, phone dark and dejected at his side.

So Viktor sat up, wine glass aside again, lowered the volume on the TV, then dragged himself off of the bed. “Yuuri. Yuuri. He’s such a fan of yours; I bet if you said even just one nice thing to him tomorrow that everything would be forgiven.”

“Really? You think?”

“I know it. In fact, I’ll demonstrate.” Viktor cleared his throat, and dropped onto the bed next to him. “Yuuri, you did such a great job today. I’m very proud of you. Your triple axel was particularly tight~!”

As predicted, Yuuri perked up immediately, color in his cheeks and a little sparkle in his eyes. “Yeah?”

“Yes. See? Exactly what I said.”

The blush deepened and Yuuri hunched over, embarrassed all over again. “…oh.”

“Trust me. Just throw him a bone, you’ll see. And Minami-kun even has that little fang sticking out; I bet he’d appreciate it.”

“What does that have to do with…?”


“O-oh.”

“…right.” Viktor rubbed a hand down his face. “Oh, but it looks like Jezebel has finally come to shake things up. She’s secretly a witch, you know. Don’t be surprised if she ends up ruining everything for our very dramatic friends.”

Yuuri squinted at the screen, which showed the same characters as before, but in an office setting. ‘Jezebel’ was the secretary who didn’t want to make coffee and stay late. “So you usually watch these in foreign languages?”

“Right. It’s not as fun if you actually understand it.”
“...got it.”

Viktor woke early as usual, long before Yuuri would even begin to stir, and did his morning stretches in bed and on the floor in front of the television in the still and quiet darkness. Makkachin was always ready to run and get moving in the morning, but sharing the room with Yuuri was like his roommates at the academy; quiet and calm. He listened to his deep, even breaths, and tip-toed around the room to get ready, then slipped from the room for coffee and a brisk walk to start the day.

It would be good to let Yuuri get some more sleep before the competition, anyway; he’d always slept as long as he could before competing, himself, and there was time. Besides, he wanted to think, and walking was good for that.

Okayama was a beautiful city; home of some of the most exquisite gardens in Japan and the birthplace of Momotaro. Kouki-san had made him promise to go sight-seeing after the qualifiers were finished, which was in their plans for the next day. There was even a black castle to visit. And koi fish feeding! He could hardly wait. It was all in the brochure that he had with him, tucked in the newspaper he couldn’t read that he’d gotten with his coffee. The photos were nice, though.

Even though Japan was so much smaller than Russia, he’d already done so much more in the way of sightseeing. Most of his life had been spent in the same area of Saint Petersburg when not traveling, and even then, he’d been running in and out of classrooms and practice rooms, studios and ice rinks.

Yuuri had shown him the beach and festivals, fireflies and castles. And they’d danced together on the train platform. Gone stargazing, if even incidentally. Yuuri had even sung for him. Sakura blossoms and goldfish, katsudon and yukata. Haiku and pottery laced with gold. What a life.

Everything had changed. All because of Yuuri Katsuki.

And he had no idea. That beautiful fool.

He didn’t even realize just how much that boy Minami-kun looked up to him. Such a shame; they were so similar. Really, Viktor saw so much of himself in him, too. Young and full of vigor, ready and eager to take on the world, not yet crushed by the cruel wolves of reality. If, in fact, it was reality that dictated the truth and not just the gatekeepers of enforced perception. Those like Wei or Cao Bin.

They didn’t need any more poison among the ranks. The current up-and-coming skaters were doing plenty of that on their own. If he could help it, Yuuri would not be joining them. Nor would Minami-kun.

Or Yurio, somehow.

Ire was such a dangerous thing. Bad blood between athletes crippled the sport; muddied the game. From faking drug tests to influencing score results, blackmail and physical violence in the locker rooms, Viktor had seen it all in his career. Colleagues dropped out, burned out, were forced out, fired, injured, quit, and any number of other things that should have never had anything to do with skating in the first place.

The wolves of competition and greed circled, snapping jaws of jealousy and envy, malice and vengeance. It made some some lose their heads and give in to the wolves of fear, joining the pack.
It was difficult to wear the wolf only as a mask of protection, to walk among them but not be one of them…

Exhausting, too.

--

"Is your wolf okay? It’s bleeding."

"Huh? Where?" The boy looked down at the wolf, who turned his head away. Travelling from village to village over the expanse of miles had taken its toll on the both of them, but the wolf hadn’t complained. He’d simply offered to carry the boy on his back.

"Its paws."

The boy slid from his back to inspect the pink-stained fur, and the pads which were worn and cracked from the miles they’d crossed. Then he looked back at the stone roads behind them and the blood they’d left behind. “Wolf,” he said, taking his muzzle in his hands, turning his face so he could look into those pale blue eyes. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

"There wasn’t time."

"You…" But the boy shook his head. They’d been over the same thing before, just days ago when the wolf had chided him for his own aching feet. So he stroked along his nose, and turned to the other boy. “Is there a stable we can rest in?"

"Yeah. We have one at my family’s inn. Come on, I’ll show you."

The stable was larger than the last several that they’d stayed in, but the man it belonged to was a wealthy knight in his prime. The boy, his son, happened to be one in training. The pair gave them a tour of the grounds as they did for any guests of particular note- and a boy with a giant wolf certainly seemed important enough -and helped them set up in the stables that evening after showing them their many fine horses.

“I’ve been on hundreds of quests,” the father explained over supper, which was a hearty stew they’d brought from the inn. “And even defeated a dragon, if you can believe it! Our family is legendary for our heroism and bravery. Even my son here.”

The young knight puffed up. “I know I’m small, but I have my trusty steed and a valiant heart, and that’s all I’ll ever need!”

They listened to their tales of heroism and bravery long into the night, right up until the young knight finally turned to the wolf’s boy and asked, “And what about you? What is your quest?”

“Oh. We’re going to save the princess... “

“The princess?” The gallant knight laughed. “What, from the firebird?”

The wolf licked his paw pads, but said nothing. It was all the same idle chatter and he was tired of it. So much for the knight’s bravery.

“Yes, of course from the firebird.”

“I don’t even think the firebird is real. If it was, I would have found it by now.”

“It is real, and the princess is still out there.”
“Hah! And you know this because...?"

The boy pulled the feather out from his shirt to show him, glowing brighter than the dim lantern. “Because I have a feather. That’s where we’re going; to the tower.”

“You have a... that’s amazing!” The young knight cried.

The father, gaping, snatched it from the boy’s hand, ripping the cord. “Well if you have a feather, you don’t have to wait until you reach the tower! You can call for it now!”

The wolf stilled. “I wouldn’t do that.”

“And why not? I have my sword at the house; let’s end this now! The acting King has been searching tirelessly for its head. Come, son!”

The young knight nodded, getting to his feet. “Yes, father.”

“For honor!” he yelled, grasping the feather in his first. Then he ran to the house to get his sword. The young knight looked to the boy and the wolf, hesitating.

“What’s wrong?” the boy asked, looking back at him. “Aren’t you relieved? If we kill the firebird now, we can go to the tower without having to fight it! Save the princess!”

“I-- I can’t be here. I can’t be here.”

“Why not?”

“The firebird knows.... It knows what’s in your heart, boy.... It knows, it knows. It will kill you if you’re not ready. It will kill him, too. The knight and his son. It’ll destroy all of this place. Stop him. Don’t let him call the firebird. Don’t let it--”

“Shhh, shh.” The boy put his hands on the wolf’s head, running fingers over his ears to calm him. “It’s going to be okay.”

“No! It’s not going to be okay. Promise me you won’t fight it. Promise me you’ll run from the firebird. You’re not ready, boy. You’re not ready!”

He looked hurt. “I... what do you mean?”

But the wolf shook his head. “I can’t be here. I’m sorry. Promise me you’ll run.”

“I... I promise.”

“Thank you.” He licked the boy’s arm, pushed his head against his chest, then slipped away into the darkness at a breakneck run, leaving droplets of blood in the dirt.

The boy watched him go, just a shape melting into the trees, then turned back when the knight called to him.
“Are you fighting with us, traveller?” the knight asked, broadsword over his shoulder. His son stood at his side, sword in its sheath.

“I should find my wolf.”

“Fine by me. Only real men fight the firebird.” The knight lifted the feather up, high above his head, and called out for the firebird. “Face me, firebird! You can’t deny my challenge of vengeance!”

“Vengeance?” asked the boy. “What do you mean?”

“The firebird killed my brother… it owes me a fight!”

A personal offense… a chance to reclaim honor. Was that all it took? It couldn’t be that simple… Yet, there it was, a cry in the distance; a horrible screeching and then a blazing streak in the inky sky; brilliant gold and crimson. It cut from the tree line and rose up, directly above them, wings and tail feathers flaring.

“There it is,” said the knight, readying his sword. “Are you ready to fight?” he asked his son.

“I’m ready!”

The boy moved back away from them, his own small dagger heavy at his side. Could he fight, too? He stared up at the bird, which beat its wings to stay in position, talons raking the air. The wolf said to run. Made him promise to flee. He wasn’t ready. He was afraid. The bird was huge. Monstrous. Terrifying. Sparks and ash drifted from its body, embers wafting toward the inn.

“Come at us, firebird!” the knight yelled.

The firebird swooped up, then dove, spitting out a rush of fire out ahead of it, scorching the roof of the inn, the haystacks, the wagon, fence- everything in its path on the way to the pair. The knight held up his shield and sword, ready.

The boy dropped his weapon and ran.

…

It took less than an hour for the firebird to destroy everything in the town.

The animals that survived ran for the woods, and the people hid behind stone walls, huddled together like little mice until they were certain that the beast had finally left. The inn was ablaze. The stable, too. So was every cottage and shop.

The gallant knight, for all of his bravery, was dead and in pieces. Some of him shredded, some of him burned. The feather he’d used to call the beast was gone. His son, kneeling at his charred remains, wept for the loss of his father and his own grievous wounds.

“The firebird is real,” the survivors cried. “It’s back… it’s back.”

“But why?”

“It probably had to do with that boy and his wolf?”

A fair conclusion, to be sure, but neither could be found for questioning.
The look on Minami-kun’s face was heartbreaking.

Viktor knew the feeling all too well. Yuuri was just nervous, just trying to work through the anxiety and focus on himself, but he’d pushed the young skater’s attentions aside without a second glance. He’d crushed him. Did Yuuri forget everything that they’d talked about the night before?

“Yuuri.” Viktor uttered, voice a low thrum of warning. He’d waited for him at the barrier for after warm ups, as was his duty, but he didn’t even bother looking at him until he was certain that he had Yuuri’s full attention. “How can someone who can’t motivate others motivate himself?”

His student, confused, stared at him.

For emphasis, Viktor slapped the skate guards against the rail. “I’m disappointed in you.” And then, without another word, turned and walked away, tissue box and all. Which seemed silly, he realized, but it was better to curtail the behavior immediately. As a coach, he would have no tolerance for bullying other skaters. None. Even something simple like that.

Yuuri would be fine for a little while on his own; he was an adult. He could handle himself, and he’d find Viktor when he was ready.

So Viktor found a seat to watch the competitors, amateur though they were, and observe Yuuri every so often to see how he would react to this style of management. Some skaters might cause a scene, but he didn’t think Yuuri would. Instead, he mingled with the crowd, brought himself toward the back wall, and brooded for a while. As expected, really; a cool-down period. That was a fine way to handle things. Process emotions, give himself space.

Then Yuuri turned away, heading for the door-- only to turn back and yell, “GOOD LUCK, MINAMI-KUN! GOOD LUCK!” at the top of his lungs.

It turned heads. It got people to stare. Neither of those things were really what Yuuri liked when not performing, but most importantly, Minami-kun heard him, and it worked like a charm. Just like Viktor said it would.

No longer the frightened little rabbit on the ice, Minami-kun, rejuvenated, threw himself into a spirited routine with every ounce of vim and vigor that Viktor expected. It was charming. Yuuri didn’t stay for long, but that was fine; calling attention to himself like that was more than enough to give him reason to sneak away and be alone for a little while. So Viktor let him.

As a coach, he had no need or desire to coddle his students.

As an audience member, though, he felt such affection for the young skaters performing their free skates; they had so much energy! And though they were raw and unpolished, there was something so exciting about their unbridled love for the sport. They hadn’t been broken yet. Some had more experience than others, like Minami-kun, but they still had years ahead of them in their career if they wanted.

At least, in theory.

It was too easy to let his thoughts wander, imagining what sorts of pitfalls they might face. Injures. Burn outs. Bad coaches. Bad luck…

But it wasn’t long before it was Yuuri’s turn. Viktor stood and retrieved his effects, moving quiet and steady to wait for him. When he did, cheeks cooled from the fresh outside air, he stopped to
give Minami-kun what Viktor hoped was supposed to be a friendly pat on the back, though it looked like Yuuri didn’t know his own strength. Nevertheless, the fanboy didn’t actually seem to mind all too much in the end.

*Heh.*

They regarded each other coolly for a moment, then Viktor offered to take his jacket. Yuuri shed it without a word, and rolled down his cuffs.

“Yeah, this costume’s great,” Viktor said, keeping his smile small. The silent treatment was ridiculous, but he didn’t blame Yuuri. Not too much, anyway. They were still getting used to each other in a professional setting. They would learn. “You look beautiful in it.”

He did, too. Fifi had done a wonderful job at bringing Yuuri’s designs to life; the fabric clung in all of the right places, presenting such a formal, refined look with sheer cuts that were so breathtakingly elegant-- if one knew where to look. The beading helped to draw the eye, but it would be gone in a flash if the audience didn’t pay attention. And they’d want to pay attention.

Viktor leaned in to fix Yuuri’s hair, fingers brushing over gently, then paused, gaze drawn to Yuuri’s lips. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the fanboy staring; cheeks red, eyes wide. Was this too intimate for him? Yuuri was his idol, after all, and wearing such a gorgeous ensemble. And there was his coach, silver-haired and his idol, doting over him. They really were such an odd pair, weren’t they?

“Mm. Your lips are chapped,” he said, and fished the little tub of Chanel from the deep pockets of his overcoat. A twist of the cap and a casual dip of his finger, and there he was, caressing Yuuri’s lips like it was as normal as making the bed in the morning. Viktor took his time, the corner of his own mouth twitching into the barest hint of a smirk.

Minami-kun whimpered in his suffering.

He put the container away, and, without waiting for permission, leaned in to give Yuuri an overly formal coach-student hug. One hand at the nape of his neck, the other between his shoulderblades, so delicate, so ridiculous, as Yuuri still refused to cut the cold act.

But… even so, Viktor couldn’t resist bringing his forehead to Yuuri’s shoulder. He’d always done that with Yakov, every time. It didn’t feel right to send Yuuri off without it, even when the stiff embrace was returned. Tender, perhaps, but as warm as a golf clap. So polite.

Viktor let him go and Yuuri pulled away, moving out to the ice without looking back. Still upset. Or, perhaps, waiting to see if he’d been forgiven. Was his approval really that important to Yuuri?

He glanced back at Minami-kun, who was fanning himself as he joined his fellow competitors at the barrier to cheer Yuuri on. Perhaps if a cold look from Yuuri had crushed the fanboy, a stern and pointed I’m disappointed in you from Viktor had been even more so. Hm. Of course, Yuuri didn’t really care that much about what Viktor thought of him, did he?

...or did he?

If he did, Yuuri wasn’t very good at showing it, completely ignoring everything that he’d told him to do for his free skate. Lowering the difficulty to focus on his performance? Nope. He changed jump compositions- again; smacked his face into the wall- they’d need to get that checked by medical personnel before they did anything else; and changed his ending completely.

Which…
...actually…

...was rather sweet. Viktor frowned at him, torn between frustration and elation. Did he give him a lecture? Rush him to a clinic? Kiss him? No, no definitely not that one. Hug him? Perhaps that. Sighing, he gave in and opened his arms for a genuine bear hug, expecting Yuuri to get embarrassed and skate in for an awkward pat, but no-- no, he started to cry and rushed him.

Perhaps Viktor’s opinion did matter after all. Which meant a lecture would come when they had a spare moment. Paramedic first- staunching the blood, making sure that, no Coach Nikiforov, he doesn’t have a concussion -and then affection, hugging and the aforementioned coddling that he wasn’t going to give, showering Yuuri with praise for his scores even though they wouldn’t count, with a healthy amount of roasting on the side.

Then, when the mini fan club, Minako, and Takeshi had crowded, Viktor pulled Yuuri away. “Would you like to meet for dinner after the awards ceremony? Katsudon- on me?”

The group ended up being the four from Hasetsu- Minako, Takeshi, Yuuri, and Viktor, plus Minami-kun and his coach, Kanako. Minako picked the restaurant with the highest rating- and price per plate, Viktor suspected -in the area, and called ahead for reservations. It was a victory dinner, so why not live it up a little? Viktor honestly didn’t mind. Anything was better than eating katsudon alone with Yuuri again, honestly. As much fun as it had been to suffer the last time, he wasn’t ready to go back under the waterfall again, and seeing Minami-kun so worked up over just sitting next to Yuuri was embarrassing enough, thanks.

This way, Viktor could actually eat his dinner, even if it wasn’t as good as Mama Katsuki’s.

Everyone at the table got the same in honor of Yuuri. Minami-kun had insisted on it at first, and the others followed suit. It was adorable. He had question after question for Yuuri, too, interspersed with moments of intentional silence where he tried to hold it in. Just like Viktor had been when he was younger. Precious. Sad, but precious.

“We should take a photo,” said Viktor, taking out his phone, much to Yuuri’s despair.

It was a little savage, perhaps, but it made Minami-kun so happy, and soothed some of Viktor’s ancient aches. And, with Takeshi and Minako there, the opportunities to tease and give dirt on Yuuri were ample.

“He fell a lot when he was little. That cry baby,” Takeshi said around a mouthful of food.

“And with his fluxing weight, he ripped a lot of leggings.” Minako added.

Viktor rubbed his face, holding back a chuckle. Poor Yuuri.

Minami-kun was taking it all in, defensive and fascinated all at once. A lot like Viktor felt, really.

“Tonight wasn’t the first that he’s smacked his head, either. He was always really clumsy.” Minako was on a roll, and Yuuri sunk further and further into his seat. “But he always tried his best, even though he was so shy.”

Takeshi huffed, smile warm. “He’s come a long way since his first competition, too.”

“With a dream and a prayer in his heart…” Minako sighed, and so did Minami-kun. Viktor might have done so with them, but only on the inside. The ballet teacher continued. “Copying Viktor’s
routines for ages. I think he’s developed his own style now, though. What say you, Coach?”

The attention turned to Viktor, which, for a moment, made him blush. Then he laughed and waved a hand. “Yes, yes… of course.”

“Next thing you know, he’ll be setting records.”

“He still has a long way to go, though, you know.” Takeshi stretched over to take a piece of katsudon from Yuuri’s plate, chopsticks snapping—only to be intercepted by Minami-kun.

“It would have been a record if it were more than just a qualifier! A world record! Just you wait, Yuuri-kun is going to win the Grand Prix!”

So defensive. Viktor laughed behind his hand. “It’s true. We’ll see great things from him in Beijing, no doubt!”

Minami-kun pumped a fist, which let Takeshi do as he liked, and began a rousing chant of “Yuuri-kun! Yuuri-kun!” that rang through the restaurant.

“Minami-kun! Calm yourself, we’re in public!”

He couldn’t help it; Viktor tossed his head back and laughed out loud. He knew that revenge would be swift and painful, but he couldn’t resist. A flustered Yuuri was just too cute, and it was all highly complimentary. Dinner couldn’t go on forever, anyway.

“Oh, and I know you already got his autograph, but you didn’t get one of his photos…” Viktor took an envelope from his overcoat, retrieving glossy prints of an Eros shoot, which had been publicity from the Hot Springs on Ice event. He passed them around the table.

“What?! You had photos made? When?!”

“Yuuri. I’m your coach. Don’t be surprised.” Then Viktor handed him a sharpie. “Go ahead and sign it to him. Write something nice.”

“Wh- like what?”

“I can’t believe this is happening… oMG…!” Minami-kun chewed on his napkin while his coach patted his shoulder, a smile of patient long-suffering on her face. “I can’t look…!”

“A positive affirmation. Warm fuzzies. He’ll look at this often, I’m sure.”

Yuuri gave it some careful thought, then wrote out things that Viktor couldn’t even begin to understand in Japanese. When he was done, he waved it in the air until it was dry, then awkwardly held it out until Minami-kun’s coach took it from him and handed it to the younger skater, who screeched his appreciation.

“YUURI-KUN! Thank you so much! It’s the best-- best thing I’ve ever gotten in my whole life! I’ll treasure it forever and always! I-- I!” He sniffed, lip quivering. “Thank you!”

Kanako-san nudged him. “You can give him your autograph, too.”

Minami-kun immediately turned bright red and sunk down in his chair.

“I’d like one,” said Viktor. “I thought your skating showed great promise; I was very impressed.”

“Did you hear that? Viktor Nikiforov said--”
“Yeah, I heard… uh..”

More photographs were exchanged. The fanboy wrote a novel on one for Yuuri, covering the entire back and most of the front; a single signature for Viktor; and short ‘thank you’ notes for the rest of the table. When Viktor revealed that he, too, had some photos, the ladies-- and Yuuri --asked for one each, which he happily obliged. Someone had to show them how it was done.

“Did you want one, too, Minami-kun?”

“I guess.”

“Minami-kun!”

Viktor laughed. Yes. He was just like his younger self, exactly. That little brat. He made sure to sign the photo for him with an extra large heart. It was fine that he wasn’t everyone’s idol; he was happy that Yuuri had attention, and honestly…

...he’d really, really enjoyed being a coach instead of a competitor.

Yuuri was quiet in the cab on the way back to the hotel, gaze fixed on the barely visible scenery outside the window. It had been a very long day, and an even longer weekend; Viktor couldn’t blame him for feeling a little off. After all, side from the little onsen show off, this had been the first competition since the Japanese nationals that Yuuri had competed in. It wasn’t always so easy to get back into it, even after a short break, and Yuuri wasn’t exactly the person he would put in a category of emotional stability.

Viktor let him be. There was no point in getting into it when they were in the car with a stranger, anyway. The silence between them was comfortable enough; companionable with just an occasional le motif of melancholic discordance. He kept his small and polite coach’s smile until they able to retreat from the cooling evening and into the safety of their room, where privacy and the promise of rest begged to shoulder their masks. There, the smile turned apologetic.

“Sorry,” he said, shrugging off his coat and laying it over the back of the small chair by the desk. “Dinner was a bit much, wasn’t it?”

Yuuri didn’t answer, save only for a little nod. It was a different silence than that at the rink earlier; the emotional weight was tilted inward, swaying like snow-burdened branches in a storm.

“They meant well,” Viktor ventured again, removing his lanyard, then loosening his tie. “We all did, I think.”

“I know.” Yuuri’s voice, soft, barely carried as he sat on the edge of the bed by the window.

Viktor tugged his tie loose and draped it over the coat, glancing back over his shoulder. Yuuri wasn’t looking at him; just the floor at his feet. “You did very well today, though. Very impressive scores.”

“Thanks.”

He watched for a few moments longer, unhooking the first two buttons after his collar, then moved to the little mini-fridge under the flatscreen. Courtesy water bottles were a joke, but it was a godsend for any athlete in need of a refreshment. With two in hand, he returned to the bed and set on on the night stand, then held the other out in offering. “Yuuri…. Are you okay?”
Yuuri took the bottle, but didn’t raise his head. “Yeah.” His hands trembled. “Just… need to sit for a bit.”

“Okay.” Viktor sat across from him on the opposite bed, and watched the liquid turn as Yuuri rolled the bottle in his palms, fingertips tracing the ridge of the bottlecap. An anchor? “How’s your head feeling?”

“The pain killers have kicked in,” Yuuri said, finally lifting his gaze, smile halfway to believable.

Viktor nodded again, mulling it over. “That’s good. Dizzy at all, or has that settled down?”

“The throbbing’s stopped. I think I’ll be okay in the morning.”

“Okay. Good.” At least Viktor was able to give a genuine sigh of relief at that. “I’ll ask again then. Let me know if anything changes, okay?”

“Yeah, I will.” Yuuri nodded again, gaze lowering back to the floor. “Other than… hitting my head, was my free skate okay?”

“Yuuri.” Viktor chuckled. “There were some rough patches, but yes, of course it was. I’m very pleased with your progress… and the audience loved it, too. I can’t wait to see what you’ll do in Beijing. You should be proud of yourself. Though…” he let his smile spread, pained. “You should really try to listen to your coach more. How do you feel about it?”

“I wanted to experiment… but I’ll be better about listening to you. Maybe I won’t lose track of where I am and hit my head again.” Yuuri’s smile, though still small, went a little sheepish. But not too much. He really didn’t feel bad at all, did he? “It felt good performing it in front of an audience. Rocky, but I’ll work on it.”

“Heh… it was just like me, to be honest. No wonder Yakov was always so mad when I’d change things midway through my routine. You scared me a little, you know. It was always ‘Vitya, you almost gave me a heart attack! Blar!’ Hehe.”

Yuuri gave a pitiful little laugh. “I-I’m sorry. I’m a little shaken up, myself.”

Viktor reached over to the nightstand where the Makkachin tissue box was, then got to his feet and took the seat next to Yuuri instead. “You know, I think the water works better if you drink it, Yuuri.” Then he shrugged. “I could be wrong, but that’s always been my experience.”

Yuuri blinked down at the bottle as if he’d forgotten that it was even there, then opened it and took a swallow or two. Then, holding the bottle at his knees, he sighed. “My rinkmate… the one at the hospital.”

“That you mentioned before?”

“Yeah. With the girl that was trying to be there for me.” Yuuri twisted the cap back on the bottle again. “It was a concussion. Not serious- he was fine -still is fine, but… I was just so scared. It could have been so much worse.”

Viktor frowned. “They can be, yeah. I’ve had a few, myself. They’re never fun. I’ve seen them end careers.” He offered the box. “But you’re going to be okay.”

“I think my nose and thick skull were my saving grace,” Yuuri said, and took a tissue.

“Probably. But you weren’t going too fast, and it wasn’t a fall.” Viktork shook the tissue box again,
It took a few seconds, but Yuuri pulled the fake dog into his lap to pet, setting the water bottle aside. It’d always worked for Viktor in a pinch, anyway, so why not?

“Thanks… for being patient with me.”

Viktor scooted closer, huffing a little laugh. “Mmm. Thank you for being patient with me. You know, I have a confession to make.”

“You didn’t go against your coach and be a jerk to a fan…”

“What?” Viktor asked, blinking. “No… What?” Going against Yakov he’d done a hundred times, but a jerk to a fan…? He squinted, trying to remember a time.

“Oh. Was that not related to your confession?”

“No!” Viktor shook his head and waved a dismissive hand. “No, no, no. I was going to say that I was trained as a ballet instructor and choreographer, not as a figure skating coach. Yakov was the best coach I could have ever asked for, and while I helped him out with a lot of things in the past few years, I’m… still figuring all of this out, myself.”

“Figuring out coaching?”

“Yeah. It’s one thing to fill out registration paperwork and make routines, but knowing how to help motivate your students? To keep them happy and encouraged and doing their best, all without pushing too hard or being too soft?” Viktor shook his head.

“But when you’ve had that training, and you apply the methods you’ve liked from Coach Feltsman…”

Viktor shrugged, giving a helpless laugh as he looked up at the ceiling. “If only I were as good as him, I’d know just what to do. But, it’s a process.”

“Every skater is different, same as coaches. You’re a good coach. I’m not... unhappy or unmotivated. I’m just…” Yuuri bit his lip, still so soft from the earlier moisturizing treatment, searching for the word.

But Viktor shook his head and slipped an arm around his shoulders, pulling him close for a hug. “You’re fine, Yuuri.”

He leaned into him, quiet. Warm.

“We can just be patient with each other, yeah?”

“Sounds fair to me.”


Yuuri lifted his head, proper smile back in place. “He did seem better after that, huh?”

“Much. And he’ll treasure those autographs for years to come.”

“I guess he does remind me of me.”
Viktor rubbed Yuuri’s arm, laughing again. “I bet you have secret ebay autographs from me stashed away somewhere back home, huh?”

“I didn’t… need to buy off of ebay. I think I bought a poster that had your signature on it, but…” Yuuri pulled away just enough to unzip his jacket, and dug into the inner breast pocket. “I already had a signed and personalized one.”

The photo in question was worn, with creased edges, ink fading, gloss cracked, but it was legitimate, and certainly Viktor. Long, silver hair and a smile that was… well, Viktor wasn’t sure how genuine it had been at the time, but there was so much life in it. And in his eyes, too. A guardian for *The Heart of the Mountain*. He recognized his signature; loopy curves where there shouldn’t have been in the Russian, the heart that he’d drawn a smiley face in, the message of best wishes and good luck. Viktor reached for it, then hesitated, looking to Yuuri for permission with wide eyes, mouth agape. “Wow…”

Yuuri handed it over, though with some reluctance, and smiled.

“This is… so old. Ten years?”

“Maybe nine, but yeah.”

Viktor turned it over in his hands, exceptionally careful with the fragile edges, and scanned the Japanese characters that he’d had his friend transcribe for him. To make sure that it would be able to be read by the recipient. He turned it back over.

“I’ve kept it with me my whole career. You were... always encouraging me.”

To say he was touched was an understatement. Viktor bit his lower lip, letting his eyes rest on the photo for a few seconds longer before he offered it back to its rightful owner. He remembered sending it. Remembered it well. It was such a fond memory from back before everything got so complicated. He turned back to Yuuri. “My little Japan skater.”

“Y-yeah,” he admitted with a smile.

Viktor leaned back, hands behind him, and breathed deeply through his nose. The smile was fixed on his face, etched in permanence. “See, what did I tell you?” he asked, and shifted to wipe his eyes, returning to his lean immediately after. “Just more proof that I’m always right. I’m sure that Minami-kun will be holding onto your autograph… referring to it for years and years…”

“And I gave him similar advice, too!”

“Oh?” Viktor turned to him. “To… always have well-fitting boots?”

“You remember!” Yuuri cried, then laughed. “I- I told him good luck, and that I look forward to skating against him one day. And if he’s ever nervous, it’s okay because it’s something he cares about.”

“You…” Viktor felt the tears in his eyes welling, and his heart bursting with too much *feeling* to contain it all in as prim a fashion as he was supposed to. Maybe it would be obnoxious, but he was past the breaking point. He lept at Yuuri, both arms wrapping around him, hugging tight for an encore of evening’s earlier affection. “It’s such good advice! Certified Viktor Nikiforov!”

Yuuri, for his part, squeaked. “Yuuri Katsuki tested!”

The Makkachin tissue box slid from Yuuri’s lap, but Viktor was too wrapped up in the emotions to
notice, pressed close, cheek to cheek, laughing. “My little Japan skater… I’m so proud! You grew up! You’re so handsome!”

“Thanks… not so round and nerdy, maybe…” Yuuri couldn’t escape, but he didn’t actually want to; just curled his arms together to huddle closer.

“You’ve done so well!”

“Th-thank you. I couldn’t have gotten here without you!”

“Hah!” Viktor gave him another little squeeze, and nuzzled the side of his face, head to head. “Yuuri! You’re going to the Grand Prix final and you’re going to win! We’re going to win!”

Yuuri sucked in a breath and gave one, firm nod. “Yeah!”

With enthusiasm feeding enthusiasm, Viktor freed one of his arms to throw a fist in the air, alight with determination. “Yatta!”

“Ypa?” offered Yuuri, which only earned him another hug.

“Ypa! Now, are you ready for more Soap Opera Megaverse?”

They left their luggage at the front desk in the morning and checked out to spend the day wandering Okayama. Takeshi and Minako had already gone back home, but they had no reason to stick around, not when the former had a trio of goblins to look after and the latter needed to report to Mama Katsuki. Viktor had heard rumors that there would be a party waiting for them on their return, but all had assured them not to hurry back too soon on their account. None of this information was such that Yuuri needed to be privy to, of course; poor guy.

The only real requirement was posting photographic evidence of their location so that Mari could keep track of their progress. First, it was a series of photos along the Asahi river on their way to U-jo castle. A leisurely tour inside resulted in several more selfies of the pair, all on Instagram for post qualifiers day out. Coach and Student enjoying culture and modern amenities!

The comments poured in.

Then they went to the gardens. Koraku-en was touted as one of the most beautiful gardens in all of Japan. They wandered over the winding paths, basking in alternating shade and patches of sunlight, stopping at ponds and paddies to admire the manicured landscape. More photo opportunities. It was all so ornate, and the way that the greenery swept through the bodies of water like it had always been there reminded him of Saint Petersburg- if only just a little.

They eventually came to the part that Viktor was most anticipating; the koi pond. True, they’d come across several already, and each had beautiful fish to gaze at, but the particular one they had been looking for was the feeding pond. For a mere three hundred yen, an old man loaded Viktor’s palm full of koi feed, and showed him what to do.

“Take my photo, Yuuri! Please!”

Yuuri obliged, taking photos of the fully grown man as he knelt on the bridge in his cargo shorts and t-shirt, one arm thrust into the chilly water below. The koi wasted no time in their frenzy, frantically bumping at his arm and his fingers, mouths gaping as they tried to suck the feed from his closed fingers.
“Yuuri!” he laughed. “They’re biting me!” Of course it didn’t hurt, and they weren’t really biting, but Viktor couldn’t help it. He bit his lower lip hard to hold back even more laughter, watching as more fish joined the fray. “They’re training to become dragons like you!”

Yuuri only shook his head, grinning. “You’re so weird, Viktor.”

Another fish, nearly twice the size as the others, charged its way in and tried to take hold of Viktor’s first, sending him teetering off balance—“W-woah! YUURI!”—and was yanked back just in time by Yuuri.

Viktor, hands now wet, but free, clung to Yuuri with wide eyes, chest heaving. “That one almost got me!”

“Imagine if you fell in… they’d all try to bite,” Yuuri said, patting his shoulder.

“Well,” said the old man who’d sold the food to them. “That one’s named Ryuu, and he loves the taste of foreigners. Hehe.” Then he left.

Viktor looked himself over, safe in Yuuri’s arms, then down at his hand where the fish had left their marks; little pink half moons on his pale skin. “Look. They left fish kisses.”

Yuuri peered down at his hand, and frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah.” They were so close. So close. They’d been awfully close a lot lately. “Do you need a fish kiss, too?”

Although Viktor did, in fact, pucker his lips, Yuuri only stared at him. As if he were a real fish and not Viktor Nikiforov making a lame/cute joke.

“No?” Viktor asked. “Maybe later? Fine.” He laughed it off and extracted himself, finally getting to his feet again. “So that’s the koi fish, what’s next? Bonsai trees or something?”

It was stupid. He knew better. It was the same game over and over again; a rise in desire, a flush of his cheeks. Yuuri would always be doing something cute, something sweet, and Viktor needed to be stronger than he was. For the first time, he had a friend and companion that he was sharing his life with. Despite the complications and heartache, things had never been so good.

Viktor could not afford to mess it up. Not for himself, and not for Yuuri; not when the Grand Prix was just around the corner. They were friends, friends, friends, and that was enough.

When they were finished at the gardens, they gathered their suitcases and headed back for the train station, stopping at the Momotaro statue for a group selfie. Although it was still only the afternoon, they had two and a half hours to go by train to get to Fukuoka, and another hour and a half to Hasetsu.

Viktor napped. Yuuri played on his phone.

“Hey, Viktor.”

Viktor stretched, frowning at the quickly darkening sky. It wasn’t that late, but in September, the sun was already dipping below the horizon. “Hm?”

“Do you want to grab dinner while we’re here?”
Viktor glanced down at his rolling luggage, then at Yuuri’s, then back at him. “I thought you’d be eager to get back home.”

“Yeah…” Yuuri averted his gaze. “It’s just… there are some really great places to eat around here. I think you’d like it.”

“Uh huh…” That was probably true enough, but Yuuri had a terrible poker face; the way his eyes darted around when he spoke was indicative of a lie. It was like he wasn’t even trying to hide it. “Yuuri?”

He froze. “Well. Uhm.”

“What is it?”

“I bet my family is waiting for me… and they’re probably planning to make a fuss…”

Viktor relaxed. Yuuri wasn’t wrong, so at least his gut wasn’t off. Still, though. “And?”

“And… I guess…”

“Even though you won, you don’t necessarily want all of the attention?”

Little nod.

Viktor scanned the busy station again. “Okay. It looks like they have lockers here. Let’s leave our luggage and… go have dinner.” A pause. “We can’t avoid going home forever.”

“I know,” Yuuri sighed.

They secured their luggage and took another train to Nakasu, which offered plentiful food stalls and ramen bars. Tonkatsu ramen was what they settled on, followed by a stroll through the more foreigner-friendly areas of the district. That meant bar hopping for Viktor, who drank with Yuuri in tow, who was in charge of photography for Mari.

“Are you drunk already?”

“No~” Viktor took his hand. “Come on, they have dango down this way!”

They did, eventually, head back to Fukuoka, collect their luggage, and settle in for the ride home. As before, they had the compartment nearly to themselves, and Viktor settled against Yuuri’s side.

“They probably will surprise you.”

“I know.”

“But you can’t tell them that I told you.”

Yuuri grinned.

“Really. They’ll be upset at me if you do.”

“How many comments do we have on those photos?”

Viktor pulled out his phone and scrolled through the messages. “A lot… people are jealous of you.”
“Me? Why?”

Shaking his head, Viktor settled back down for another nap, head on Yuuri’s shoulder. “Just ignore them.”

“...okay.”

The surprise in Hasetsu was a little party with more food, streamers, confetti, and a banner… but it quickly devolved into more drinking. A lot more drinking. And karaoke. Mari and Mama Katsuki kept things under control, but the men and Minako— who could clearly hold her own—were intent on making fools of themselves. At least it was late enough that their paying patrons had gone home.

Still, there was something endearing about Takeshi, Papa Katsuki, Viktor, Yuuri, and yes, even Minako, singing terribly at the top of their lungs to celebrate their little pork cutlet bowl’s success. Even if Viktor didn’t understand a damn word of it.

“Jushtz be careful… with how mush you drink, Yuuuri~” Viktor counseled so wisely between songs around another shot of sake.

“Huh?”

No one could understand what Viktor was saying, either, so it was par for the course.

“You know; like b’fore~”

“Oh, uh huh.” He didn’t. “Oi, lessee if they have Country Roads!”

“I… I luff that song!”

“Me, too!”

It was so easy to think of November as being an eternity away. The summer had moved so slowly, with routine pulling them along, day in and out, with the same, comfortable monotony as the lapping waves on the sand. But the season changed in its gradual way, slow and steady, taking with it the warmer-weather flowers, bringing out the deer, and draining the color from the leaves, little by little. The passionate thunderstorms of summer were more wind than anything on the worst days, taking some of the lingering heat from the afternoon’s stubborn sun.

Viktor clipped Makkachin’s coat again, trimming it down to proper Teddy length, and paid particular attention to his pawpads in the off chance that there might be the arrival of early snow. “You never know in Saint Petersburg,” he explained. “I always want my Makka to be prepared.”

The poodle licked his face in thanks. They would always take good care of each other.

Of course, the skating season meant leaving him behind with the Katsukis, who had already agreed to watch him. As much as it pained Viktor, it was nothing new. He’d always had to leave Makkachin at home, and he knew that they would take very good care of him. His Makkachin was just getting on in years, and normally, Viktor would come home between competitions. A long weekend was one thing, but a month?

Competing in Beijing and then Moscow consecutively was just too good of an opportunity, though.
Saint Petersburg was only an hour from Moscow by plane. They would finish in Beijing, head to Saint Petersburg, make up with Yakov, see Viktor’s home rink and the sights, and then go to Moscow for the next heat before heading back to Hasetsu before Barcelona. There would be plenty of time for training without having to deal with nearly as much jet lag, and Viktor would be able to check on his apartment, spend time with Yurio, explain things to Yakov…

Really, that was the most important bit. An opportunity to make things right with him. Yuuri had to suspect that was the motive behind his offer, but being the fanboy that he was, how could he say no? It would be fun. They could visit the Academy, the ballet, Yakov’s house, or… er, Lilia’s, maybe… probably not, but they could take Yakov out to dinner at least! And go to the zoo. There were museums, too. And the pier! The canals. All of the places that he’d spent so much time wandering as he’d grown up, just like Yuuri had shown him here in Hasetsu.

Georgi and Mila would love him, he was sure. Yakov would, too. He could hardly wait to show him off, both in Beijing and at home.

And it was all just a month away.

“We should practice your exhibition skate, Yuuri.” Viktor tapped his clipboard, rolling his head from side to side to stretch his neck. “We won’t have a lot of time to go over it once we’re away from Hasetsu. At least, not if you want to keep it a secret.”

“Good point. Uh, do you want to do that now?”

“Sure.” Viktor slid off to the side to give Yuuri the ice, leaning against the barrier to take notes. “Go ahead and start from the beginning. I know you can do all of the jumps already, but I want you to focus on the performance aspect.”

“As always…”

“Yes, as always.” Viktor sighed. “This program is my heart and soul. On ice. I want you to really feel it if you’re going to perform it. First, I’ll have you just listen to it… and then I want you to skate it; no music. Just think of the words. Okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Viktor retrieved the remote, leaving his clipboard on the table just on the other side of the barrier, and navigated through the playlist to the song. Stammi Vicino, Non Te Ne Adare… Stay Close to Me, and Never Leave.

He closed his eyes and let it play, fingertips rubbing over the worn plastic of the remote, small smile on his lips. Every time the aria began, he got the same lilting feeling; an ache in his chest like his heart was being tugged by the wind, drawing him away from where he was… out to the unknown, into the flurry of destiny or fate. Would he be lost forever? Or would he be claimed by the arms of those he belonged to, those he longed for? His soul mate, the one he craved, his other half, his--

Viktor shook his head, sucking in a deep breath as the song ended. It had never lost its effect, not in any of the hundreds or thousands of times he’d heard it. And it probably never would. He rubbed his arms, pulling the black fabric of his hoodie over prickled gooseflesh and shivered, caught between elated laughter and the need to cover such vulnerability. Yuuri had been watching him. The whole time? Maybe.
He clapped his hands. “All right- from the starting position. Ready?”

That at least got Yuuri to turn away, but it did nothing for the chest flutters.

“One, two, three… _Sento una voce che piange lontano, Anche tu, sei stato forse abbandonato._”

Viktor spoke the words, keeping in rhythm with where they would be in measure but without melody, simply a beat for Yuuri to follow. “Good, good- watch that free leg, Yuuri… tighter there, all right…”

It was clear by watching Yuuri move that he’d done the routine a hundred or more times before. He handled it with a sort of reverence that was different than either _Eros_ or _Yuri on Ice_; each movement graceful, precise, and with care… like he felt like he was intruding on something. And in a way, he was. Even though Viktor had given him permission, he’d been serious about the routine being his heart and soul. Seeing Yuuri navigate through it, up close, blades cutting through the ice, carved through him, too. Through every part of him.

For the first time in… well, since he’d written the original poem that had become the aria, Viktor forgot the words and found himself simply watching, lost in his own heartsong. Once more, Yuuri’s body created the music, figure weaving the melody before him in the movement of his turns, the arc of his arms, the flash of his blades.

The setup for each jump caught in his throat, and he clenched the remote in his hand until Yuuri landed the third quad, flecks of ice catching in the light like diamond dust. Then he dropped it, letting the little piece of plastic hit the ground, and pushed off from the barrier just as the chorus played on in his head.

Yuuri came to a stop as Viktor came to him. “What? Start over?”

But Viktor only reached for his hand, letting the momentum of his approach pull Yuuri along with him, first around in a wide arc, then a closer twirl, turning toward him. He’d started working on choreography for a pair version of _Stay Close to Me_ since the first day he’d come to Hasetsu, but the implementation of it was an entirely different matter. Nevertheless, being the natural dance partner that he was, Yuuri spun out of Viktor’s arms when he dictated, breathless and confused, but smiling when he reached the end of his arm.

“Viktor?”

Viktor pulled him back in, the ice making the motion effortless; Yuuri couldn’t ignore his charms when the blades cut right through his resistance. “Did you ever do lifts in ballet?”

“Only once or twice…”

He smiled, sliding his hand from Yuuri’s arm to his back, then the other to his stomach, gaze never leaving his face. “Tense here… and here; hold position. Don’t worry, I won’t drop you.”

With a nod, Yuuri did as instructed while Viktor led him through the steps, becoming pliant or rigid when and where requested.

“_Stammi vicino- and lift -_” only half, but it would do, gently setting him on the ground and guiding his arm up over his chest to rest his hand on his shoulder. “_Non te ne andare, ho paura di perderti._”

There were so many pieces to work out and to try; which worked best with two skaters? When to switch the lead? Viktor led him through what he could, improvising the rest. Parallel steps in some places; mirrored in others where Viktor took his place as his opposite; and even tried a round robin,
where he had Yuuri set up a jump only to follow half a measure behind.

They came together again, hand in hand for a pair spin. Yuuri, bright-eyed and breathless, smiled up at him with an awe Viktor had only seen maybe once or twice before in all the months they’d spent together. Viktor touched his cheek, tracing his jaw on his way to his shoulder.

“E i battiti del cuore...” he said, toeing the ice for more speed as they went around again, the world nothing but a blur. “Si fondono tra loro. Another lift.” Viktor picked him up again, and Yuuri stayed in beautiful form, just as expected of a ballet dancer. “Ora sono pronto... I’m lowering you into a lunge.”

Yuuri nodded, holding steady, and transitioned as his blades met the ice, letting Viktor dip him down, low and supported into a final finishing move; one hand behind his back, the other cradling his head. Yuuri held onto him, grasp firm, waiting for instructions to move.

There Viktor held him, both counting seconds while their breaths tried to even out. He felt the heat in his cheeks, saw the blush in Yuuri’s; beads of sweat tangled in his hair. And those eyes. Those beautiful, dark, enchanting eyes that had held him ever since that first night at the banquet. “…E adesso ti bacierò.”

He gave Yuuri just enough time to realize that those weren’t a continuation of lyrics before he pulled him closer, meeting him halfway with a kiss; his first in eight years. The touch was slow at first, with the brush of hesitation as his lips parted, but then blossomed into a deep, warm caress the moment Viktor felt Yuuri tremble beneath him. The fingers at his shoulders tightened, curling into his hoodie, and Viktor closed his eyes to savor the moment before it could flee from him.

God, he loved him. His heart sang and broke in that instant, stealing precious seconds in an attempt to convey everything he felt. Even just a glimpse.

And then it was over. The single most incredible kiss of his life had swept him away, as everything with Yuuri Katsuki did.

He parted, lingering just long enough to feel Yuuri’s breath against his lips before pulling away from the man in his arms. "I... uh..." the words were tangled, thick in his throat. "Y-you... hah, I don't think you'll have anything to worry about, with the, uh, gala."

But the exhibition gala was the furthest thing from Viktor’s mind now.

What have I done?

Chapter End Notes

Phichit: How do you think Yuuri is doing without me?
Hamster1: He's probably staying in his room
Hamster2: doing nothing
Hamster3: not even eating pizza
Hamster2: well he's getting ready for the skating season, of course he's not eating pizza
Hamster1: Phichit eats pizza
Phichit: I'm... not eating as much as I used to :D
Hamster3: uh huh
Phichit: :(  
Hamster2: but Yuuri at least has that Russian guy to keep him entertained  
Hamster3: uh huh, entertained amirite  
Hamster1: he he he  
Phichit: omg :3c u really think so?  
Hamster3: no, he's a huge wuss :V  
Hamster2: sad, but true  
Hamster1: sorry, Phi, they're right  
Phichit: poor Yuuri. That's so sad. :(  

**WHEN THE CURTAINS RISE ON THE NEXT GAY SKATE:**  
Declarations! / Memes! / Turning wheels! / Suffering! / Stargazing!  

*Please look forward to it!*
What My Heart's Saying

Chapter by mamodewberry

Chapter Summary

The surprise pair skate and kiss has Yuuri confused and he makes a very important discovery.

#brief mention of drug use (but not by either characters)
Not as important tags: #extra cute #soft 2.0

Chapter Notes

I apologize for the long wait on this chapter. I know you all have been DYING! We had to break for a little while to do some very serious outlining to ensure everything we want to do is in place. As you can see, we changed the chapter count from (?) to 34! Still got quite a ways to go, lucky you ;) This chapter also became longer than I intended and since I'm generally a slower writer than Gab and my home life requires more of me, it takes me longer! BUT, never fear, for it is here.

This chapter though... it contains one of the earliest RPs we did; the moment we decided Yuuri and Phichit were meme lords. The pair skate from the end last chapter was something we wanted to do before the series ended, and now we get to use it as foreshadowing B) I also deem this Soft Chapter 2.0. I know I got the last one and I hope that's not disappointing. Yuuri is just generally soft, even when he's flipping out.

This chapter brings us to the end of chapter 5! You all made it, congrats.

Special thanks to Gab for lending her skills for writing the King and the Skater song!

Gabapple: I could not stop reading and rereading this chapter as Mamodewberry wrote it. Every time she'd finish a segment, I'd beg to read it. I was like a happy little puppy rolling in soft, sweet, spring grass. Yuuri is too cute. It was heaven. Please enjoy this chapter with your whole heart and be prepared to suffer with chapter 17, because it will be a whirlwind as we move on to Beijing and the GRAND PRIX! Woaahh!!!

There is now an OFFICIAL NLA PLAYLIST containing all of our recommended listening so you don't have to go hunt for it! It will be updated with each chapter.

New Art!
Yuuri eats katsudon while Viktor suffers from chapter 9 pt 1, pt 2 illustrated by fourcorneredgod (commission)

Recommended Listening:
A Chemical Reaction, by Asami Tachibana & Yuuki Hayashi
You, by Safetysuit
Something's Missing, by Sheppard
Have You Ever Been in Love? by Celine Dion
“Great job today, ladies. I’ll see you next week.”

Stretching out the day’s aches, the women began removing their dancing slippers and conversed amongst themselves.

The bell at the door tolled.

Briefly, Minako looked at the clock, already knowing it wasn’t time for her private lesson student. She smiled as the familiar blue beanie with small ears peeked inside, and Yuuri scurried along the far wall, trying to be invisible to the class, to the far corner he claimed as his own so often on his way home from school.

One by one, Minako’s women’s class, aka Stay-at-Home Mothers That Wished They Looked Nearly as Young as She Did (it was a gift), exited the studio, bowing and saying their thanks on their way out.

Their obvious jealousies aside, they were a good bunch looking to be fit, and she couldn’t fault them for that.

She closed the door after them, then took a few steps toward the middle of the room, studying Yuuri in her wake. Did he want interaction or not? Sometimes he’d come and sit for a time and leave without a word. Just a quiet and familiar place to center himself. Others times it was seeking comfort and guidance. One couldn’t assume when it came to the independently anxious boy.

Yuuri sat on the floor, legs crossed with a magazine in his lap, frown evident.

Oh boy, what was happening in the skating world today? An article on him? His debut was impressive as far as his personal bests went. There was that one interview she was aware of. Then again, it could be one of the imported magazines that Mari helped him get. Which usually meant Viktor, but a frown?

Casually she walked to her desk to jot down her session minutes. Periodically she looked up at him across the room, until she saw his brown eyes looking back at her. Ah, there it was - the permission and admittance of wanting to talk about it.

Closing her notebook, she made her way over to him with a leap, sticking the landing with a curtsy.

“What’s up, kiddo? Can I sit?”

Yuuri nodded, chin disappearing into his scarf.

Minako sat beside him on her knees.

He’d closed the magazine, though kept his spot with his fingers. After seconds of consideration, he was handing it to her.
As Minako expected, Viktor was on the pages. Multiple images of varying quality of Viktor wearing hoods or hats. ‘Viktor Nikiforov hiding from the Paparazzi?!’ Well, the paparazzi was annoying, but that wasn’t typically a concern for the Russian figure skater. Looking at the dates of the photos, he’d been covering himself throughout the summer.

Yuuri then flipped back to the previous page, highlights of the senior Grand Prix.

The long silver hair that had become iconic for the young man, now eighteen, was gone! Short crop, save for long fringe on one side. Wasn’t a bad look, actually. Mature and fit his facial structure. Masculine. Clicking her cheek and winking “Wow, looks who’s so handsome!”

Yuuri’s frown deepened.

Oh. Was that the problem? Was he not into that?

“They say so, too.”

“Is he not?”

He shook his head. “It’s not… that. It’s just… he was handsome before, wasn’t he?”

She had to stop and think about how to answer. Typically handsome wasn’t a word you’d use to described femininity, at least, not in the media. Beautiful, maybe? Viktor had some of the best eyelash game going for him; there were a lot of women envious of him and his delicate features.

“He looks sad.”

Minako gave the photographs another lookover. He seemed more serious about his career to her.

“Maybe it was starting to get in the way. I can’t imagine trying to skate with hair that long forever.”

Yuuri ran a finger over a blurry photo of Viktor in a hoodie. “It’s not just his hair, though. His clothes and his costumes for the season…”

“Kiddo… sometimes things change when you get older and you mature.”

“What if he didn’t have a choice?” He sounded so worried.

“What does the article say?”

“Stuff similar to what you said. I don’t believe it, though. Doesn’t feel like him.”

She shifted on her knees to a sit instead and gave him a side squeeze. “I think you’re reading too much into it. Lots of male skaters start out kind of innocent looking and feminine and then develop more of a manly style as their bodies change. Don’t worry so much, Yuuri. He’s still the same Viktor Nikiforov.”

He went quiet for a moment, absorbing her words while he flipped back and forth between the pages, a smile and blush across his face. “He’s still really pretty, huh?”

“Hell yeah, he is.”
“...E adesso ti bacierò.”

The only Italian Yuuri knew, rather, could recite, were the lyrics to Stammi Vicino. Knew the song as well as any song in Japanese, despite being foggy on translation, and he knew the words that Viktor spoke weren’t the next phrase.

He knew and yet… Viktor’s soft face and blue eyes drawing closer took precedence.

Their lips touched and his eyes fluttered closed, warmth spreading from his mouth, down his neck and beyond. He grasped onto Viktor’s hoodie, inviting more of this and then he was pulling away from him, looking as breathless as he felt.

“I... uh...” Viktor tried, ”Y-you... hah, I don't think you'll have anything to worry about, with the, uh, gala.”

Yuuri tilted his head. Gala?

“I think, uhm, there probably isn’t time for a pair skate routine, but you'll definitely be just fine with the program itself... you... oh, uh...” Gently, Viktor straightened them both to their feet, skates parallel for a brief moment, then Viktor pivoted, not facing him, rubbing at his neck. “If you want to use it, it's... uh, it's yours. The program, I mean.”


Why was he upset?

“Look,” he said sharply, and then softened, realizing his tone. “No, it's-- sorry. I got a little carried away, I guess... that's... how I am, you know... Viktor Nikiforov, prince of... the dramatic. Right?”

A shrug. “Superfluous at every turn. I’m sorry.”

Was he apologizing and sputtering self-insults because he was mad or embarrassed? The fog in his head made it hard to tell. Either way, they weren’t facing each other and the distance was unsettling considering moments before.

“We should run through something else!” Viktor suggested, skates cutting the ice, finally turning back to Yuuri, but not meeting his gaze.

“It was a good practice. I wouldn’t mind going over it again. Unless you’re done?”

The eyes that looked back at him were the opposite of what they were before the kiss-- startled. Like Yuuri had just slapped him across the face. Or a frightened animal about to run.

“Y-yeah. Sure. I’ll lock up.” He really was leaving…

“Good.” A jingle of metal, giving up the keys on the bench, and Viktor failed at metering his paces to conceal he wasn’t in a hurry to get out of there.

The door closing echoed through the locker room. It was then that Yuuri’s stance wavered and let
the breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding, out. The exhale rolled over his lips, reminding him of Viktor’s breath ghosting them…

He rolled his lips inward. Was this what it normally tasted like or was it Viktor’s?

It’d been awhile since he’d been alone for practice like this. There was a time he would have called it his favorite way to practice, but not lately. Something about having someone watching. Someone he really wanted to be watching, watching.

Discarded on the ice was the remote. One toe kick and Yuuri was sliding back towards it, lunge and grab in motion. He hit play and the aria began.

Letting the remote drop, he caught up with the timing to take the first form.

The singer’s voice intermingled with Viktor’s spoken voice in Yuuri’s memory, a low metronome keeping time.

A forest is what Yuuri always imagined for the program. Cold and dense. A deer being dragged by the call of the wind. Aura of the unknown. Uncertain, but graceful in each step. Jumps sending the deer further through forest, searching for its lost loved one or purpose. A little more hopeful as the music builds in volume and momentum.

*Non te ne andare, ho paura di perderti*…

The deer approaches a meadow and-

*E i battiti del cuore*…

A soft touch to his face. Skin.

*Ora sono pronto*…

A break in the storm-- a kiss.

Short a rotation. Biting his lip, Yuuri continued through the rest of the program, the deer and Viktor fighting their way to be the visual.

At the final spin and cross of his arms, chest heaving with exertion, that meadow was bright and Viktor was there smiling at him. *With* him.

Viktor’s heart and soul was this program. It was a call. And Yuuri had called in return, and Viktor had answered.

When Yuuri returned home from the rink, Viktor had already eaten dinner and locked himself in his room.

“Is Vicchan all right?” his mother asked, serving him a plate of ginger rice and broccolini gomaae. “He seemed kind of… off?”

He wished he had a good answer for her. “I’m not sure.”

Settling onto her knees across from him to eat her own tonkatsu, she gave him a suspicious look. “Are you all right?”
“Me? Y-yeah. I’m fine. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Are you two fighting?”

“No!” He was certain he didn’t not sound guilty as her look didn’t diminish, but decided to let it slide.

After dinner, Yuuri excused himself for a quick bath. On his way to his room, he paused at Viktor’s door, debating about knocking, then the anxiety came and he padded to his room.

Viktor was upset. Why else would he be avoiding him? Nobody liked a pest, so it was best to let him be until he calmed down. Both of them.

Okay, Yuuri surprisingly wasn’t freaking out. A healthy mixture of happy and disbelief. If that was a thing.

Closing his door, Yuuri opened his closet for a clean set of pajamas. In the process, one of his posters fell and rolled open on the floor.

It was the one Yuuri distinctly remembered kissing once or twice for luck when he was a teen. Subconsciously he brought a finger to his own lips. He now knew what the real thing felt like…

Heat rushed to his face and furiously (but carefully) rolled the poster back up and stowed it in his closet.

Once he’d changed into pajamas, he fell face first into his bed and pillow.

*I thought I was over this.*

A notification ping sounded on his phone. Probably from Phichit’s Instagram. Blindly he groped around his desk for it, rolled over and unlocked his phone to discover he was right - he’d bought a new wheel for his hamsters.

Phichit. Could he talk to him about this? He could count on a hand the people he could talk to about things, and one of them was currently mad at him. And making his chest do things.

His friend may not even have a solution, but talking to someone would at least help him process it. In theory. Steeling himself, he pressed the call button and sat up. A few rings and Phichit was grinning back at him.

“Yuuri! Didn’t expect to hear from you so soon before the Cup of China.”

“I can hang up…”

“I’m kidding and you know it!” he giggled.

Yes, he did know he was kidding, but it didn’t help the jab of guilt he felt at not talking to his best friend more often. “Yeah. Um. Do you have a minute?”

“Sure. Let me set Pakpao on the floor in her ball. Don’t want her to roll off the bed.” A bright, green plastic ball passed over the screen and Phichit soon returned.

“Actually, it may be more than a minute.”

“No worries. I’m not on a schedule. What’s up?”
What was the easiest way to approach the subject?

The delay prompted Phichit to speak. “How are things with you and Viktor?”

Why did he always make it seem like they were an item whenever he asked?! “About that…”

Phichit’s eyes widened in anticipation, and he shifted in place to get comfortable.

“I was practicing for my gala exhibition tonight - you know, just in case - and Viktor came onto the ice with me and we had an impromptu pair skate.”

“First; do I get a hint on your gala piece? Second; how do you do an impromptu pair skate?”

He’d forgotten how much Phichit would ask questions. Then again, he would need the full story anyway. “Viktor’s letting me skate his free skate from last season. And… I don’t know, it just happened? Viktor is amazing like that. I was just following along.”

“Yeah, because he spends months and months over preparing each season. Which you have told me. Repeatedly.”

“So it’s not out of the ordinary?”

“Or it wasn't impromptu…”

“What reason would he have to plan a pair skate version of his program?”

“...Yuuri.”

“It was really easy to follow him since we both know it so well, but I didn’t get much practice for lifts since my ballet experience was fairly single and private.”

“Lifts? Yu-”

“There’s just no way the kiss could have been planned…”

The phone fell into Phichit’s lap. And then he was shaking it on purpose. “Wait, what, huh? YUURI! He kissed you?!”

The motion was dizzying, so Yuuri put his phone to the side until he was done. “Um… Yeah. That’s what I was calling you about, mostly.”

And maybe it wasn’t the wisest of decisions.

A few more excited cries later and Phichit simmered, as if knowing how much freaking out didn’t help with Yuuri’s freakouts. He closed his eyes and let out a very zen breath. “Okay. So. Coaches don't normally kiss their students. That's the kind of thing you find out in scandalous tabloids.”

Yuuri covered his face at the rising blush. “It’s not like that.”

“Then what is it like?”

“I… I don’t-- it’s not. Calling you really was a bad idea!”

“What else could him kissing you be?”

“Lapse in judgement?” The way Viktor came onto the ice… so entranced like he had been when
they danced at the train station. It was his heart song, so of course it would have an effect on him. Relief from the world, something they could share together. They were friends. Besides, “Phichit… he’s Viktor Nikiforov! And I’m… just Yuuri.”

“‘Just Yuuri’ who Viktor Nikiforov decided was important enough to leave Russia for to personally coach. I think it means something more.”

“He was caught up in the moment. That was all. He’s here to better me as a skater since he saw that video.”

Phichit straightened and gave a very flat look. “You gonna have to take a selfie and snapchat it ‘portrait of denial.’ I think he’s in love with you. Like, legit, not tabloid-y.”

“He could have anybody he wants in the world, Phichit!”

“And he’s choosing to spend all his time with you.”

“What if I asked him why he kissed me?”

“I think it’s pretty obvious, but I guess it doesn’t hurt to confirm. You can always put the eros on him. I bet that would clear things right up. Oh Viktor~” Phichit then proceeded to make kissy faces and sounds.

“S-stop that! This is way different than when I was a kid.”


“I mean, my theme is love, cause that’s probably what it is, but not like love-love.”

Phichit face-palmed. “Because you go around kissing everyone, right?”

“He kissed me and I… happened to react…”

“And he goes around kissing everyone.”

Neither of those statements were true, no matter how much the media tried to claim otherwise. Yuuri had made his own evaluations of the claims of Playboy Viktor Nikiforov and it never went further than rumors and forced stereotypes. There were plenty of opportunities for Viktor to have taken advantage of him. But he hadn’t. Other than their kiss hours ago.

And Yuuri had kissed back.

If Viktor kissed him for being caught in the moment, could the same be said for Yuuri?

In his younger years, he’d thought about kissing Viktor. But that had been different. A child looking up to someone. An innocent crush due to aspiration that made his heart flutter and get embarrassed at any mention of how pretty Viktor was or desire to hold his hand.

Then when Viktor came to the onsen, he’d thought the similar flutters that weighed were because he was ashamed of making a fool of himself at the Grand Prix Final, but happy and grateful for being coached by his idol, despite not understanding the why. Those reactions fled like the crush ones had over time.

Or so he thought.

He held his hand above his heart, feeling the palpitations there, clenching his shirt.
“Is it sinking in yet? I’ll wait.”

Sinking and spreading. “I’m an idiot. What if he’s been flirting with me this whole time?”

“Yeah, what if?” Phichit tapped his chin.

Bile burned up his throat. “I’ll be back. I need to throw up.”

“Wait. Yuuri, no! He’s obviously willing to--” Phichit’s voice faded as Yuuri made his way out of the room, down the hall, and to the toilet.

He knelt at the porcelain toilet and allowed his anxious stomach to empty its contents. The sickly pressure gone, the emotional one gave way and heaving sobs followed.

This hurt wasn’t fleeting or juvenile. It was real.

Eventually he stood and flushed toilet and looked in the mirror. He was a mess. Unsure if it would do any good, he splashed water on his face, anyway. It have to do for now. Checking to make sure the hall was clear, Yuuri returned to his room to find Phichit still waiting on his screen and a tweet notification.

[What do u do when you make ur friend cry and it's a good thing but like u still feel rly rly bad? #goodguy? #badguy? #harshtruths

[Sometimes u just gotta cry it out]

As much as Yuuri wanted to glare at Phichit for sub-outing him on his social feed, he was right. “TBH crying does make it better. So you have helped.”

Phichit softened, maybe he was bracing himself to get yelled at. “Oh good! You, my friend, are a warrior.”

“More like an idiot with a plastic sword.”

“At least it's something! Whatcha gonna do now?”

Yuuri repositioned his phone on his pillow and slumped onto his stomach. “Still doesn't explain why he’d fall in love with me.... So I guess figuring that out is a thing.”

“Does it matter why? Can't he just, IDK, like you? Or does he have to fill out an application?”

Yuuri bit his lip, not having a response to that.

“Humor me for a sec? Let’s make a list of things to prove he loves you. No, seriously. I’m getting paper.” Phichit set his phone down, ceiling coming into view until he was back with a pad of paper and pen. And a white hamster on his shoulder. “Okay, go.”

“Is there really a point to this? I’m not…”

“Not what?”

Worthy? I lost the chance to stand with him as an equal. That was the goal he set to finally talk to him, after all. He was in the process of accepting he’d been in love with Viktor for years, how could he expect someone like Viktor to fall in love with him? “I’m… just Yuuri.”
“Again, Just Yuuri who Viktor Nikiforov put his career on hold for. Come on, give me something here.”

Yuuri looked around his room at the bare walls, eyes coming to his desk with the small framed photo and a plastic display box. It had the flower crown Viktor had made him at the Tanabata festival inside. He’d come home that evening and asked his mother to help him preserve it. “He… made me a flower crown.”

Finally getting an answer, Phichit smiled and set to work.

“He’s patient with me. Doesn’t get mad when I’m freaking out. He brought me miso in bed once.”

Phichit did a knowing eyebrow wiggle at him.

“Um. He’s a really good coach - runs through things with me. Taking a break from his career to do that like you said.”

“For you and only you.”

“My video inspired him.”

“And his program was like his, what did you call it? His heart calling?”

Yuuri nodded and thought back to the ice rink. How he came onto the ice and pair skated with him, was that Viktor answering him again? “And I kept skating with him... Lead and leading like a conversation. Caught in the song and dance as Viktor was. Starry-eyed.”

“You were both in your own little world?” Phichit slammed his hands on the notebook in his lap like he just received the greatest epiphany. “Like the King and the Skater?!”

“Oh... I guess that’s a way to put it.”

“Ahh he-you-he. Yuuri! Okay, so what do you want? Do you want him to love you?”

Yuuri clutched at his chest. “I’ve always loved him. Before I thought maybe it was just stupid crush I’d eventually get over. How could I ever stand a chance, anyway?”

“And now he lives in your house and skates with you every day and kissed you.”

“And now?”

“The feeling has gotten stronger and it hurts and...” tears welled in his eyes, and his heart seized tighter. “I don’t know what to do!”

“Aww, Yuuri! It’s okay. He’s with you until the Grand Prix Final. That’s plenty of time to figure this out, right? Honestly, if you’ve loved him forever and, going off this list, and him kissing you, I’d say you’re both in love with each other!”

“What if he finds out he doesn’t want to stay with me...”

“Why would he--ugh, Yuuri. If you try and he doesn't want to stay, he's going to leave. If you don't do anything, he's going to leave. What’ve you got to lose?!”
Yuuri rolled in his lip in thought. And to see if Viktor’s taste was still there. “Well… he actually ran away after he kissed me.”

“What would you do if you accidentally got caught up in the moment and kissed someone you liked but didn't know if they liked you back?”

“Regret? Probably run away, too…”

Phichit made another audible thinking sounding and took the hamster from his shoulder to pet her between her ears.

“He looked so pained. Like I’d slapped him. And then he was trying to laugh it off. Started talking himself down. I tried to tell him we could keep practicing… I didn’t want him to leave or keep feeling awkward about it. Cause obviously I was fine about it…”

“I’m trying to picture it… Guess he was hoping for a different response. It's not like you're psychic.” The hamster weaved between his fingers and ran up his arm and Phichit retrieved her before she could reach his shoulder again.

“I messed up.”

“Now you’re the one belittling yourself. You want my advice?”

“Just give up, because I'm already bad at this?”

“OMG you’re really bad at guessing my advice! Jeez, Yuuri.”

Yuuri winced.

His friend sighed and allowed his tiny critter to go where she pleased. “Do you still have The King and the Skater soundtrack that I sent you? Who am I kidding, of course you do. I'd kick you out of my harem if you didn't~”

The Harem he spoke of consisted of his home country of Thailand, his Instagram followers, pet hamsters, and then Yuuri. It was an odd way to collect and rank the most important things in your life, but Yuuri couldn’t complain about the sentiment. “Yeah, I’m pretty sure I do,” he smiled, thinking of the playcount of the soundtrack.

“Good. Do me a favor and listen to track twelve. If you pay attention to the lyrics, you’ll understand. I promise! Be the King, Yuuri! Don't sell yourself short; there’s a lot to like about you.”

“It’s strange I’ve been doing this Eros skate for him in mind, because that’s what he’s told me to do in practice, but I never thought of the possibility of him actually…”

“So you’ve worked real hard to seduce him never expecting it to work?”

“Take longer… Maybe by then I’d believe it.”

“He couldn't take it anymore. Your eros was too much for him, breaking down the barriers he had for trying to be all pro coach.”

“What if I'm really ruining his career?!”

Phichit held up his hands in defense. “He dug his own grave deciding to come teach you the eros dance. That’s all on him. Not your fault that you're so good at it~"
It was useless to hide the color on his face at this point, at which Phichit laughed. Everything his friend was saying made sense, felt like it made sense, yet it was all so difficult for his mind to process. “Should a coach be dating their student? Asking for a friend…”

“Hehe, probably not, technically speaking, but secret affairs are always really fun and saucy. I don't think it's against the rules necessarily. Not that Viktor seems to care about the rules.”

“I AM going to ruin his career!”

“Again, that's his choice. Also, I can't say I'd date Ciao Ciao, but who’s to say you can't date Viktor? Oh, by the way, I saw your region competition floating around online. I took screencaps of Viktor hugging or putting his arm around you. There are tons.”

“...Really?”

“Yeah, really.”

“Uh, so... If Viktor also ran away to his room.... What do you think that means?”

“That he doesn't know if you want him to like you or not.”

“Oh...”

“You can get kinda cold when you're mad.”

Yuuri dragged his hands down face. It was true but, “I'm not mad, though! I didn't say anything that would-- did I?” He stopped to think and nothing came to mind what had he said that would make him believe he didn't like it? “He doesn't deserve this. I don't deserve him. I must have done something!”

“Whatcha gonna do about it?”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Storm into his room and lay a big fat kiss on him!”

“NO!” The thought was downright horrifying, what would that even prove? Aside that he'd never kissed before...

“Okay fine, have fun being awkward”

“And storming in there isn't awkward how?”

“At least it would be DOING something.”

“Sorry I'm a moody little bitch, imma kiss you now, okay’?”

“You don't have to say it like that. Plus, you're not a bitch, Yuuri. Though, you’re getting really heated and definitely need to calm down before you talk to him. Promise me?”

Yuuri took a long breath and exhaled. “Yeah, I can't tell to him like this. More of me to burden him with.”

“Youuri, it's okay Just take it easy and relax and try to be normal. Try and sleep. It's late. Okay I sent those screencaps.”
His phone pinged and a mail envelope appeared at his tool bar. With another heavy sigh, a pathetic laugh followed. “Thanks for talking to me. Sorry. I’m ridiculous.”

“It’ll work out somehow. Time for regrouping. Oh, and don’t forget to listen to the song. It’s important!”

“I will. I’ll… update you after I talk to him.”

_I Will Be Teacher Now_

_From The King and the Skater_

Teacher:

_Sire, the evening is full of starlight_

_The air is scented with ginger, rose_

_and honeysuckle chrysanthemum_

_The river weaves such a beautiful song_

_Can you hear its melody sing for their king?_

_The water lilies bow to you_

_See what my cards can show you_

_Would you like to take to the ice again?_

_I can already hear the koel calling_

King:

_Who cares of the koel when you are here?_

_You speak of lily and orchid canopies_

_And stars in the sky_

_Yet all I see is your eyes_
Teacher:

Summer sleeps entwined in this garden
Even ice remains, enchanted in place
Devoted and loyal as any you've touched

Ah, here I can explain about the rain
And how it scatters the grain, on the plains, in-

[speaking] Your Majesty?
...Oh, he's distracted again. Well. No matter.

Look how the petals have fallen to the bank
Drifting back toward the surface
A feather on ice, under twilight sparkling heavens

Sailing in a dream that we share-
-with the shining birds in willing splendor
Shall we skate again, like we did before?

King:

Skate like we did before?
When a king was in the arms of a man
Who says everything but the feelings of his own heart?
Perhaps I will be teacher now

[speaking] A king doesn't waste time with words.

Teacher:

[speaking] Pardon?
King:

I will be teacher now
You will listen to me
Hold my hand, watch my eyes
And find you have much to learn

Teacher:

[speaking] Your majesty, I don't know what you're talking ab-

King:

I will be teacher now
Ignore the birds and the waxing moon
Show me what you really feel
I can even tell you how

Teacher:

But... the moon is waning,
And the air is so sweet
Perhaps a walk would be preferred?

King:

[speaking] No.

Teacher:

[speaking] No?

King:

I will be teacher now
Sleep came easier than Yuuri had imagined, and he thanked being emotionally exhausted. Waking up with his alarm was good, that way he’d be on time for breakfast and to meet Viktor at the rink. Not disrupting routine was a sign things were good, right?

He dressed and made his way down to the table where Mari and his breakfast were waiting.

She took a drag of her cigarette, giving him a sympathetic look, “Did you and Viktor fight?” Was it really that obvious something had happened between them? “Why? Was he okay this morning?”

“A little more neurotic than usual. Tetchy. I mean, I’m used to you being in a bad mood in the mornings, but Viktor is the happiest person I know to be awake at the buttcrack of dawn.”

Yuuri reached for his small bowl of tamago kake gohan. “Not really a fight… Maybe a misunderstanding? Did he still head to the rink?”

“As far as I know.”

If Viktor was at the rink, that was a good sign. That meant he wasn’t avoiding him.

He finished his meal, zipped up his hoodie, and started his morning run to Ice Castle Hasetsu.

There were mornings Viktor was on the ice already, may it be skating his old routines or going over what he was to teach Yuuri for the day. Or standing at the barrier with clipboard in hand with the day’s exercises, a bright smile on his face.

Today’s was the latter, though he hardly looked up from his work to greet Yuuri; a brief “Good morning,” and then “Let’s start from the top.”

Yuuri didn’t argue and stripped off his tracksuit into his warm-ups, then laced up his skates to start with the short program.

Viktor didn’t join him once, staying firmly on the sidelines of the barrier, barking at him more than usual. At least lately. Any changes they would undoubtedly make would be after seeing the competition and adjust as seen fit.

But now… Viktor was taking it - whatever emotion it was - out on him. None of the corrections were out of the ordinary, but the frequency and tone were projecting way too much for Yuuri to blame his own stubbornness and defiance. Between the drilling and mental and emotional uncertainty, Yuuri was exhausted when they finished for the morning.
“Watch that free leg, Yuuri.”

“Yeah, I will,” he said, for the fifth time that day, slipping back on his warm-ups.

“Hold tighter on the rotation on that last quad. Getting too loose there.”


“Need to work on sticking that landing in the second half, too.”

“Viktor?”

“Tomorrow we’ll work on refining that with more drills.”

Still wasn’t listening. Or hearing him. His back was turned to him, engrossed in what was written on the clipboard and coach mode. That never seemed to stop him before from pausing if Yuuri had a question. Yuuri pushed off the bench and took a few steps towards him while Viktor continued to rattle off a checklist and touched his shoulder.

The reaction was immediate; a jump with a sharp intake of breath, turning to face him, taking a step back.

Yuuri held up his hands, “S-sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

A few blinks and Viktor looked less frightened, but still on edge. “No. It’s… fine, Yuuri. What is it?”

“Um. About yesterday?”

“Oh. Don’t worry about! Just chalk it up to the playboy in me. I can’t help it.” He forced a small smile. “You know what they say. Literally. You’ve… probably read every one of those magazines.”

“I’ve read them.”

Viktor, put a hand on his hip, looking anywhere but at him. “Then none of this should be a surprise to you, I guess.”

“Doesn’t mean I believe them.”

He was quiet at that, thoughtful in how to respond. A few more moments and he wet his lips with a swipe of his tongue before finally speaking. “Well. Not every story was a lie.”

What parts were true in that case?

Viktor huffed, cheeks tinting a little in pink. "...I'm going to run some errands. Go ahead and take the rest of the day. You earned it."

How had he earned it? Viktor spent the whole morning session telling him everything needed work! “Uh-”

“See you tomorrow morning!” And with that, Viktor dropped the keys for Yuuri to lock up.

With that incident, it was clear Viktor really was upset and avoiding talking about it. It was like how it had been at the bookstore, but ten times worse. Although, the bookstore did give him an
idea and reminded him of a promise. Now having the day off, Yuuri showered and changed into street clothes and walked to Minako’s studio to catch her right after her morning class.

The door chime sang as he entered. He removed his shoes at the genkan walked up the ramp on his toes like he did when he was five to find Minako doing her after class routine of stretches.

She caught his reflection behind her. “Good morning, Yuuri. Joining me today?”

“Until your next class at least. I’ve got the day off.” He padded over to shelf where Minako kept her many pairs of slippers, and Yuuri found his tucked away behind them.

“Ah, your coach giving you a break?”

“Something like that. I also have a favor to ask.”

“Always an ulterior motive with you.”

He chuckled as he took position beside her. “I like doing two things at once I guess.”

“I’m intrigued. Go on.”

“Would it be all right if Viktor and I used your studio every once in awhile to dance?”

She narrowed her eyes whilst pulling her leg up and over her head. “You want to use the studio to dance with Viktor?”

Yuuri nodded and balanced on a foot to do the same.

“Look at you being all Mr. Forward.” If her hands hadn’t been occupied, Yuuri was sure she’d be jabbing his side with an elbow.

“H-he just wants to dance.”

“With you.”

He nodded. It did typically take two people to dance, after all.

“Sounds pretty romantic to me~”

“Maybe a little.”

“I don’t mind if you two use it. I’ll have to look at my schedule. I’ve got the place wired with cameras, too.”

“What do you think we’d be doing?!?”

“You have a crush and he has a rep, I’m just playing it safe. But I guess he’s alone with you all the time, the setting shouldn’t change anything.”

That much was true. Hence why Yuuri was led to believe more and more Viktor wasn’t what the media claimed he was. “Can I... ask you something else?”

The hesitance in his voice didn’t go unnoticed by her. Her leg finished extending and she let it drop to the floor. “...I’m listening.”

Yuuri too abandoned his exercise. “If someone kissed you and then later they seemed upset about
it, what would you do?”

Her eyes widened and she lunged forward to grip his shoulders. “Oh my god, you kissed Viktor Nikiforov and you freaked out!”

“W-what! No! It wasn't me! I mean, I-I. No! Viktor kissed me!”

“Okay, so your newly found womanly wiles finally sunk in? I’m so proud of you!”

He hadn’t considered that. “…Oh. Maybe. I don't really know. That's not the point. Answer my question, please?” How was she condemning Viktor one moment and then proud of Yuuri the next for seducing him?

Minako pulled away, placing her arms akimbo. “Is asking for the use of my studio related to the kiss?”

“I actually promised him on the way back from Fukuoka. He was feeling down, there was a song playing we both liked, so I took his hand and danced with him. It cheered him right up! I thought if I could bring him here, it would have the same results.”

“…Yuuri, there are some juicy details you're not telling me.”

“There's nothing juicy to say!”

“You danced with your crush. That is a big deal. This is something you used to get all cute and flail about doing when you were little.”

“I wasn't thinking of it that way, then.”

“And you are now?”

His heart skipped a beat. It wasn’t his intention for asking permission, but the thought of holding his hand in dance, or skating, again…

“Wow, you’re all reeeed.”

All he could do was nod, the burning in his face wouldn’t stop.

“So, let me get this straight: Viktor kissed you and now he’s seemingly upset about it. You want to try and smooth it over by dancing with him? There’s a step missing somewhere.”

“Well, we’d talk about it. Figure out why he’s upset. Tell him he doesn’t need to be. That I, uh, liked it.”

“And that you’d marry him tomorrow if he asked.”

“No I would not! Speaking of missing steps, jeez.”

“Boyfriend, then?”

“That… sounds more my speed, yeah.”

“My little Yuuri all grown up.” Minako took a step forward and clapped his shoulders, head bowed, then raised, “See? You knew what to do before you even asked me. This plan has merit and I will do my part to see it through.”
The next morning after practice, Yuuri approached Viktor with renewed purpose. He had respected Viktor’s space and let him be after being told to have the day off and hoped that would earn him his graces and would may be more attentive to what he had to say.

“I talked to Minako-sensei yesterday,” he started, feeling his nerves trying to take over. “She gave us the go ahead to use her studio once a week. Sorry it took me so long to ask, but, looks like we can.”

There was a flicker of excitement behind his ice blue eyes, face softening at the proposition, and then it was gone. He cleared his throat, authoritatively. “No. We need to work on your programs. We’re only a month out from The Cup of China. We have to focus. Can’t afford to be distracted. Until evening practice, I want you to do your usual exercise routine.” He motioned to pick up his duffle bag, but stopped when he realized he was already holding it. “Got your things? Let’s lock up for the morning staff.”

Too stunned to object, Yuuri followed Viktor out the door.

Yuuri’s plan failed and it was a hard blow. If Viktor rejected an invitation to dance, what else could he do to try to bridge the gap that was between them now? Approaching directly certainly didn’t work. Food and gifts would be bribery and he didn’t want to seem desperate.

All Viktor wanted was to talk about the upcoming event, his programs, the buzz in the media. Business. Any attempt at anything else was quickly dismissed.

After the fourth day of failed ideas, Yuuri decided to give his coach what he wanted - silence unless it was about skating. Impersonal and detached.

It hurt to give up, but he couldn’t risk making things worse and push his coach away further. Coaching was why Viktor was here, he couldn’t jeopardize that by being a pest.

He wish he knew what he did to make Viktor like this and he’d hoped being pleasant and acting like things were fine would prove that he liked the kiss. And he’d kissed back. Or at the very least, their relationship didn’t need to change and remain as it was.

But no, Viktor acted like Yuuri had rejected him. No matter how many times Yuuri went over the pair skate in his memory and their discussion afterwards, he couldn’t figure out what went wrong.

Over the next few days of Yuuri relenting his efforts, he noticed a shift in Viktor’s avoidance. Rather than being quick to get out of Yuuri’s presence or jumpy, he seemed melancholy and resigned to be around him. He’d given him the peace he wanted and now it was like Viktor was pouting about it? Which confused Yuuri more than the previous attitude. He supposed it was better than getting snapped at.

On Sunday when they finished practice and dinner was eaten and cleared, Yuuri stood to stretch and announced he’d be taking a bath. He had expected that to be the last he’d see of Viktor until tomorrow, as it had been since the incident, but Viktor stopped him with the call of his name at the table.

“Yuuri. I think we should discuss hair and makeup choices for your programs. Can we do it after
your bath?"

His voice was subdued and he didn’t quite look at him when he asked. But it was Viktor talking to him, proposing interaction that wasn’t skating (okay, it was skating related, but they weren’t on the ice), Yuuri didn’t want to say no and chance for the worst. Yuuri smiled gently. “Yeah. That sounds great.”

“Would you mind if I joined you?”

Yuuri had never been so excited for a bath in all his life.

He had never regretted something so much in all his life.

A bath was something they had shared casually pre-kiss almost nightly and it hadn’t been an issue, other than Yuuri trying to be polite for modesty sake. With all the new/renewed feelings raging, it was proving incredibly difficult to be polite in his line of vision and thoughts. He was glad Viktor was keen on keeping his distance. If only it were for the same reasons, he’d almost feel relieved.

The temperature was brisk and tranquil, cicadas singing their last songs before disappearing for the colder months. Moonlight cast on the ripples of the water and seemed to make Viktor’s pale features glow. It was all so picturesque. And unfair.

Viktor propped himself up on his elbows over the pool’s edge, allowing Yuuri an appreciative view of the slender curve of his back, narrowing and dipping into the soft muscles of buttocks. He wanted to run his hands down it…

Blinking hard, Yuuri forced his gaze higher, traveling up his spine and broad shoulders.

What once was sharp of Viktor’s features had toned and softened, filling out his frame. Healthy.

Yuuri turned his head to the side as Viktor pulled off from the edge to turn around and rest his back instead. He brought a hand to his fringe, dampening the ends as he pushed it out of his eyes.

The movement was entrancing. Especially when coupled with leaning his head back for a breath and a swallow, Adam’s apple bobbing down his long neck.

Yuuri sunk into the water, praying for strength to get through the rest of this bath. However long it would last.

“Yuuri, don’t stay under too long. That’s one of the first things you taught me when using the hot springs.”

He jolted up, voicing cracking. “Huh? Y-yeah, you’re right. Let me know when you’re done.” So I can prepare myself to look away…

Viktor hummed and settled in once more, contentedly letting his eyelids waver to the heat of the water. He looked so much more relaxed than he’d been in a while, and that realization made Yuuri happy.

There was little warning when Viktor did eventually stand to get out, but Yuuri caught the motion enough in advance to avert his eyes. Then followed after when hearing the rustle of a towel.

The pair dressed, backs turned to one another, grabbed the bag that Viktor brought along with him
for the evening into the broiler room where it was quiet and they wouldn’t be disturbed as easily as in the house.

At least they were clothed, now, but the light from the broiler and soft moonlight illuminating the steam from the springs through the the shutters was almost as bad. Soon Yuuri would be the center of Viktor’s attention and he wished he could question why he agreed to it. It was something that needed to be done, much to the dismay of Yuuri’s awakened frustrations.

Viktor sat him him down in one chair, pulled up a taller stool from himself behind him, and a final stool to ready his tools.

“Hair first?”

That made sense. With hair done, it would be out of his face for the makeup. “Yeah. Sounds good.”

Yuuri turned his head to watch Viktor unzip a bag that rolled out into a long cloth with vinyl slots and holders for makeup and hair supplies of all kind. Was this something Viktor always had on him for competition? Recalling his trivia, Viktor usually did do his own makeup, yeah. He’d be using Viktor’s…

He bit his lip.

Viktor ran his fingers through Yuuri’s hair, deeming it wet enough from their bath to continue. Taking a comb, he made deliberately even strokes through the strands, scalp to ends, one hand holding his head steady so not to pull.

Yuuri closed his eyes. He always liked it when others did his hair. Would Viktor be the one to do this from now on? Why else would he want to practice on style?

“Would you like something similar to the qualifiers?”

Honestly he came up with something last minute and it happened to work. “What would you do to improve it?”

“More volume. A better comb would define the grain of your hair as well. Gel for hold. More sophisticated.”

“Let’s go with that.”

Being behind him, he couldn’t see Viktor’s face, but his voice… something was off. Bored? No…

Little was said as Viktor set to work on his hair, gently combing his way through Yuuri’s dark locks and styling it into position. Viktor rubbed gel onto his fingertips, intricate touches like picking up rice one grain at a time. With as short as Yuuri’s hair was, the task was, likewise, short.

“What do you think?” Viktor asked, holding a mirror in front of him do see.

It was enough of a difference that Yuuri could tell someone that knew what they were doing had their way with it. Sophisticated. Refined. Perfect. “Wow.”

“Amazing what some product can do.”

“Yeah! I really like it.”

“Test run of hair; complete. Now for your makeup.” A clink of plastic on wood, and then wood on
wood as Viktor moved the stool to sit in front of him, tool stool within reach.

Now Yuuri could watch him. Which was both a good thing and a bad thing.

Unscrewing the cap of the moisturizer, Viktor squeezed a large dollop in one palm, inserted a finger, then dabbed at Yuuri’s forehead, cheeks, and chin, until it was spread throughout his entire face. He held three tubes of foundation up to Yuuri to choose the closest tone. Yuuri could never remember, so was glad the silence wasn’t for him to decide when Viktor made a selection. More cold goop all over his skin, touch delicate like Viktor was touching a hot surface. Tickle of blush.

The eyes were next and little was said between them or consulted on. Yuuri trusted Viktor to make the right choices, he just found it odd he wasn’t asking for input for the makeup. He’d be right in assuming he knew little beyond basic covering up and contouring. Trying to decipher the colors from the dark tubes and pencils, he couldn’t be sure on the shades being applied to his face.

“Close your eyes.”

Yuuri did so, once more confused at his tone. They hadn’t discussed what had happened, but Yuuri had hoped their time tonight was some sort of compromise. Maybe it wasn’t.

Small bristles painted on his eyelids.

When asked to open them, he caught Viktor looking back at him mildly strained. Did he look bad?

“Mascara.”

Looking upwards, he could see more of his coach’s troubling expression. Did he not want to do this? He frowned.

The frown was straightened once Viktor set to work on his lips, all the while, Yuuri continuing to observe this odd behavior.

A few more touchups with a brush on his cheeks and nose and Viktor held the mirror up once more.

Yuuri’s brown eyes were accentuated in charcoal tones with a bronze highlight. Lips a pale pink like his blush. Simple, but enough to merit the word-

“Stunning,” Viktor breathed, but lacking in the enthusiasm Yuuri had come to expect.

Looking from the mirror to Viktor standing behind it, he was hardly concerned about the makeup anymore, but the stark difference of their eyes.


Viktor’s blue eyes widened at that. It was so easy to notice this close, did Viktor not realize? He dropped his gaze to the floor between them, hunching his shoulders, but said nothing.

“You should take the day off tomorrow. Get some rest.”

He looked up at what Yuuri hoped sounded like a gentle order, brows furrowing in uncertainty.

“We can do something fun together? Or, uh, if you want to be alone… that’s fine, too.”

Viktor blinked and shook his head, worrying at his lip. Still silent.
“I don't want you to overwork yourself for me. I can't be at my best when you are…” Yuuri waved his hands at him in a useless gesture, “Like this.” Tired. Worn. Sad. Miserable?

A laugh, small and awkward, followed. “Do I really look that bad?”

Taking advantage of Viktor’s lowered head, he poked his whorl. “It just may be thinning.”

Pulling away, Viktor brought a hand to his head, blinking, then gave a faint smile. “You're so mean, Yuuri…” he mumbled. “But you're probably not wrong.” Pursing his lips, he looked down again. Thinking. Hesitating. “Yuko... was saying something about how they go camping. I've only ever been once…”

He wanted to go camping? He didn’t seem like the outdoorsy type, but maybe that’s because he didn’t have many opportunities. Maybe it was too cold in Russia to really enjoy it? Viktor, who had spent the week mad at him, was asking to go camping. With him. Yuuri couldn’t say no to that if he tried. “Hmm a little cooler than normal for camping, but... I think we can do that. We can hike a trail nearby. It’s not an official campsite, but should be fine for a night. Spend the night. Come back in the morning?”

Viktor’s face had softened by the second. “Can Makkachin come?”

“Of course! He’d love it.” Yuuri couldn’t imagine leaving their four-legged companion.

“Good. He'd be mad if we left him behind.”

“Then we better not leave him out!”

While a reconnect was pending with their approaching campout in a few days, they still hadn’t discussed the kiss. Viktor’s gloom was most concerning, and Yuuri was convinced it wasn’t just because he was tired and overworked. Already he’d proven the methods he had wouldn’t work.

“Did you listen to that song?” Phichit asked over video chat once he’d cleaned the makeup off in getting ready for bed.

Yuuri slumped onto his desk. “Of course I did. I don’t think Viktor has seen the movie, though.”

“Maybe if he saw he’d also understand and then he’d kiss you for real!”

“Not a bad idea to ask, but I don’t know if it’ll be that simple. He agreed to go camping at least. Somehow I still think he’s going to avoid talking about it.”

“Somehow you gotta wheedle it out of him… hmm.” Phichit scratched a hamster’s back in his palm like an evil genius in the movies would with a cat. “Wait! I can’t believe I haven’t thought of this before; your books! What would they do in those saucy romances in this situation?”

“They’re not all saucy!” While at university, Yuuri had taken to binge reading cheap romances novels on his phone during down time. It was an enjoyable way to improve his English. And no, they weren’t all saucy.

“Still, all lovey-dovey stuff, right? Just do what they do.”

Between morning and evening practice, Yuuri snuck away to talk to Minako. He didn’t need her to
know about what he read in his leisure time (it’d open up way too many doors for blackmail fodder), so left out the bit where he spoke with Phichit.

She tapped her chin, then her lips curled into a knowing smirk. “Just use your newly discovered womanly wiles.”

“What do you mean, exactly?” Although after his friend’s suggestion, his mind was already starting to lean the direction of Minako’s suggestion:

“Flirt with him. Be obnoxious and drop some hints. Be savage.”

“I-I don’t know if I can…”

“Just think of all the stereotypically petty girlfriend drama you see in anything. He kissed you, Yuuri. He obviously has feelings for you. He’s just being an asshole about it. Don’t let him get a free pass.”

With renewed purpose, Yuuri arrived at the rink for evening practice, mind racing for how to begin. Couldn’t start too strong. That’d be suspicious. Even though resorting to these tactics at all was suspicious. But… if Viktor was going to act weird and not own up to it, this was only fair. He just hoped it wouldn’t make things worse.

Skating went without incident. Viktor still quieter than usual, reserved in his emotions and comments, but at least he didn’t make Yuuri’s heart ache so much with guilt. The prospect of their outing made him hopeful. And now…

Yuuri let the momentum of the blades take him across the ice to the barrier where Viktor stood with clipboard in hand, making figures. “Viktor?” He waited until he was looking at him before he reached to touch his arm. Then gave a sweet smile and said, “Thank you for today.”

The pen in Viktor’s hand dropped and rolled onto the clipboard and to the floor.

Maybe this wouldn’t be as hard as he thought.

Yuuri, having never dated before, let alone flirted, was getting a thrill from seeing Viktor get so worked up over his tactics. Over the following days, some attempts garnered more of a reaction than others.

Blatant attempts usually resulted in confused stares--

"I hope you like bad boys... because I'm bad at everything ."

Honestly he couldn’t fault Viktor for not being impressed. Or looking at him like he just showed up to skate in a fish costume. It was pretty pathetic. Pick up lines were not his forte and he tried to avoid them after that.

-- while the blending praise with appreciation managed to be very effective. Like thanking him for practice and being a good coach, reinforcing he liked the makeup and hair from the other night.
Bringing his fanboyism into it didn’t get much beyond a thanks and a smile back, until he mentioned the only reason he knew how to do certain techniques was because of him. Then he’d blush and look away again.

Dropping hints that might have been a bit too obvious, but was too playful to be ignored, though; *that* seemed to be what really got Viktor riled.

“I think someone who sings is really nice.”

“I guess it’s too bad that I can’t sing,” said, Viktor sniffing, and picked up his clipboard. “Are you skating today or what?”

“Modest, too.”

“Yuuri. Ice. Now!”

“Someday I hope to get a bouquet of flowers after I podium.”

“Really? You haven’t ever received flowers?”

“Not of my faaaaaavorite,” Yuuri pouted.

“And what’re your favorite?”

“Camellias.” That was true, at least.

“I’ll be sure to make that happen. *If* you podium.”

And sometimes Viktor would start--

“What’s it today? Are you going to tell me that you like candlelit dinners, too?

A pause Yuuri played cheekily thoughtful, when really he was thinking “With an ocean view. I want to hear the waves.”

Long stare, cheeks pinkening and a pointed glance away. “Okay. Well. Good to know. Seems kind of excessive, but I’ll keep that in mind. Do you have a preference in wine, too?”


“Noted.”

Yuuri even saw him write it down for show.

But when he tried to play into finding out what Viktor liked, be it real or convoluted for the sake of the game they started to play, Viktor just *couldn’t*. 
“Do you have a favorite flower?”


“What other animals do you like?”

Flushed. “What? Poodles are enough.”

“If you could go to any place in the world with your lover, where would it be?”

Hunched shoulders, a quick about face. “I’m not…”

“Ideal first date?”

Blatant avoidance. The tables had turned.

Yuuri would keep trying, but so far, dropping the hints, may they be true or not, did pique an obvious reaction. He’s just have to keep up the game. Either way, Viktor seemed to be having fun, and seeing a smile here and there - even a reluctant, secret one - was satisfying.

In the late afternoon, the pair and their dog set out carrying their own sleeping bags and blankets upon their backs, and a sack each of what Mama Katsuki made them for dinner and breakfast for the morning.

Yuuri lead the way through the forest line along the coast, Makkachin running around and between them, barking at the birds and squirrels and his own happiness to be outside with his two favorite people.

Before the sun could start its final descent into sundown, they reached their destination in a small clearing in the forest. Yuuri explained his father used to take he and Mari out here when they were little. Far enough away to not see the city, but close enough if they needed to return home quickly with summer rains.

Firewood and kindling was gathered, and Yuuri set a match to it, and coaxed it into life to warm up their stew in time for twilight.

While they ate, Viktor told a story about how the rabbit stole the moon, explaining they lacked paw pads because they rubbed off due to trying to keep the moon in their paws. With the moon full on the sky as they laid out their sleeping arrangements was the temperatures dropped, Yuuri tried to picture the rabbits trying their very best to hold on.

A breeze rattled the nearby tries, a comfortable lull in conversation, until Yuuri felt Viktor’s eyes on him. “What?”
Viktor rubbed his hands on his jeans. “It’s so quiet.” A twig snapped in the fire, startling him, but then he smiled and relaxed in spite of himself.

“Yeah. It's nice sometimes.”

Tugging on the sleeves of his hoodie to coax them from his jacket and cover his fingers, Viktor turned his gaze to the sky. “We could be the last people in the whole world.”

“It kind of feels that way out here, huh?” There was a time the thought would have startled him, being alone. Not so much now with Viktor. “Peaceful, though.”

“Yeah…” He dropped his gaze again, leveling it on Yuuri once more, who pulled his hood up. “Yuuri…”

“Hmm?”

“Do you ever... think about what you'll do when you retire?”

Yuuri smirked. “I thought we were the last people on Earth? We wouldn't need to think about that stuff?”

“Hah…” Viktor managed a weak smile in return. “I guess you're right. No competitions or anything, so no need to stop skating.”

“Yeah…” But, reality wise... Hmm. Well. “When I quit skating, I tried to think about that. My schooling was finished. My skating career would have only lasted a few more years, anyway. Probably help out at the onsen until I figured something out.”

Viktor gave a thoughtful nod, reaching over to pet Makkachin's head. The dog didn’t even bother to give anything more than a quiet sigh in return. “Did it scare you? Not knowing?”

“Of course it did. My career, my dream, ended before I wanted it to, so I was upset about that for a while. But around the time I picked myself up…” A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. “You helped. There’s time to figure it out. Not knowing is scary, but I'm also not a good planner!”

The admission drew a little chuckle from Viktor, who turned his head away like he had been all week to avoid showing his reaction.

“Um. So. Maybe I'm being lazy?” Was that for agreeing with him or admitting he also wasn’t a good planner? Maybe they were both professional procrastinators on top of skating.

“At least I bought you some time I guess. You're not being lazy, though; we're going after your dream right now.”

“Well, I mean, after that.”

“I guess we'll see after the Grand Prix Final, when you have gold in your hand.”

“Go for the next dream.”

“Yeah... I guess so. I think you have a good few years left in you. I told Christophe to watch out.”

“R-really?” They were friends, so it wasn’t really surprising, but how much was he exaggerating?

“Mmmhmm. He needs some good competition.”
“And you think that's me?”

“Of course I do! I trained you myself; you're going to give everyone a good shakeup.”

“Ahh but he's like second amazing.”

Viktor rolled his eyes. “Hell, I'd love to compete against you.”

“Wh-what? Really?”

“Yes, really. But I'm your coach. And Chris... Chris gets bored so easily. He's worried that no one is going to keep him motivated. Between you and Yurio, though....”

“I will do my best to not bore him!”

Viktor laughed. “Good. And the rest of them, too. Don't want them to get complacent with me gone.”

While they were at it... “So, uh, what about you? After you retire?”

There was a long, awkward pause, and Yuuri almost regretted asking until Viktor finally answered. “Oh... I keep trying to figure that out, but I've been skating so long, and it's all I've ever wanted to do, that I... have no idea.”

“You've been a really good coach.” Would he want to continue doing it, or was Yuuri enough?

“Thanks... I guess we'll see how this season goes.” Flustered again, Viktor rubbed his neck with just the tips of his fingers.

“We'll both prove ourselves this season.”

“It's hard to imagine life without skating... competing... sort of empty... but coaching could be...” He sucked in a breath, frowning, and let it go. “I always thought I’d make it into the Olympics one more time. I didn’t realize I'd gotten so ol- Hey!”

Yuuri stretched over to touch his whirl in the name of age, but Viktor ducked, instead falling to his side on his sleeping bag, defeated, hands covering the top of his head.

“Yuuri! Mean!”

“You're not old. Though I guess they won’t let you compete much longer out of recommendation for safety.”

“Regardless, with this latest stunt I've pulled, I don't know if they'll allow it anyway.” Viktor stretched out on the sleeping bag, uncovering his head. “I'm always on thin ice with the Russian Skating Federation.”

“You, uh, did it out of the goodness of your heart. If I win, doesn’t that count?”

Viktor chuckled. “For Japan...”

“Oh. Right.” It was so easy to forget, sometimes. The race and culture between them.

Viktor breathed and rolled onto his back, Makkachin promptly draping on him. The thought crossed Yuuri’s mind to flop on him as well, but didn’t. Instead, Yuuri left the rock he’d been sitting on by the fire to sit on his own sleeping back. With Yuuri on the low ground, Makkachin
came to see him. Viktor mumbling ‘traitor’ after him. May it be out of spite, or to be cute, Viktor reached into his bag for a cream-colored knit hat with ear flaps. It was too cute. Yuuri felt personally attacked. Especially when he laid on his side and propped himself up with a hand on his cheek.

“There's just something about the Olympics that's different…”

The contentedness he felt over Viktor’s cuteness started to waver. “Than World's?"

“Yeah... Because you see all of these different athletes from everywhere. So many different sports and they all want to be there. Everyone loves what they do so much… It's not just figure skating: so many dreams, from all over the world, coming together in one place.”

"Yeah. That part was definitely neat.”

“You? ...oh.”

Yuuri kept to petting Makkachin. Maybe Viktor would drop the subject. Not likely. It wouldn’t be fair, what with Yuuri asking probing questions, and Yuuri hadn’t averted it smoothly, either.

“That makes sense, since you're the top figure skater of Japan…”

“Yeah. Didn't amount to much there, though.”

“It's… a saturated competition.” Then, hesitantly, “Sochi?”

“Yeah.”

“You must really love Russia. The Winter Olympics, last year’s Grand Prix Final, the home country of your obnoxious coach…”

He snorted. “Not like I had a choice in going there. It's... not the location's fault. You were there. And you won. It was incredible watching from the stands.”

“You watched me~? Of course you did.”

“I was glad I was there for that.”

“A lot of people were there; people who don't normally watch figure skating. People all over the world watched. Saw what we did.” Viktor sighed. “I'm glad you were there, too. Sorry you didn't have a better time, though. I guess a lot of people didn't.”

“Seeing people become fans is always fun. It wasn't a good experience for me, no.”

“I’d ask what happened, but that’s probably a stupid question.”

“I don't want to ruin your vision of the Olympics. Even though I'm sure you saw the same things I did. Mostly I... lost pretty early on and it hit me hard. I wasn't in a good state of mind, and the atmosphere didn't help.”

“Doping scandals and shady dealings not really your scene, huh?” He offered a weak smile.

Yuuri shook his head, shivering. “It would have been worse if Mari hadn't been with me.”

“It was kind of a mess, wasn't it? I lost count of how many drug tests they had me do…”
“Awful. All of it.”

“I don’t know; it was kind of poetic. Like a beautiful train wreck. Maybe you’re right. You work so hard to get there, jump through all of their hoops, only to find out that there are wolves there, too. Nothing is sacred, I guess.”

Viktor had worked hard since he was young through his skating career, and yet, “‘That’s right, you weren’t in the games during your senior debut… I always wondered why.”

“Yes, it’s strange, isn’t it? Why wouldn’t the Junior World Champion be part of the Olympic team? So, so strange.”

There was a bitterness there that Yuuri could have missed, had he not known better. "Did it... have to do with your hair?"

Viktor kept his gaze on the stars. “All we were told was that I wasn't qualified. Everything else was speculation. When I talked to a rep, he said…” A pause. “…a lot of things, really, but it came down to that I wasn't ready to represent Russia. Georgi went instead. And Sasha.”

"So you really don’t know why?"

"Oh. I know."

"Oh. But you... can't say." Of course it wouldn’t be that easy. Disappointing.

Viktor shifted in his sleeping bag, prompting Makkachin to slither between them. “No.”

Yuuri hugged his legs. “I’m sorry.”

"It's okay. We're the only ones left in the world, right? So it doesn't matter… We can both win gold in every event."

"We can invent the rules."

"I was going to say that I'd win gold for being best coach, but if you want to be silly, sure..." Viktor turned a smile to him, an ear flap draped over his cheek, distorting it a little.

The fire crackled, slowly dying.

“This is nice,” Viktor said, breaking the silence of nature. “Makkachin and I would sleep out in the backyard growing up sometimes, but the only other time I went camping was with Yakov.”

Viktor was volunteering information. “Yeah?”

“Yeah. He tried to take me hunting.”

“Oh?”

“But I can’t talk about that, either.”

“Oh.” Can’t or won’t?

He smiled wide, coy and pleased, fingers on his lips.

“Viktor.”
What else wouldn’t he answer…?

“Hmm?”

“How did you kiss me?”

Stunned silence followed, like a chill.

“Or… can you not talk about that, either?”

Viktor swallowed, shoulders rolling up as he shied away, brows furrowing. “The truth… Yuuri…”

Yuuri waited. Was he really going to-

“...Look, drama follows me wherever I go... so it... doesn't matter why I did it…”

He felt his heart sink.

“This isn't about me. This,” he gestured at the starry sky. “Is about you. I’ve had my fairy tale already. This isn’t Viktor Nikiforov’s time. This is Yuuri Katsuki’s. And a good fairy godmother doesn’t... kiss Cinderella and distract her from the ball. Not when she has lots of gold medals to win.” He dropped his arm. “It’s my job to get you to the ball and nothing more.”

“But the fairy godmother did kiss Cinderella.”

Instead of responding, Viktor turned onto his other side, back to Yuuri.

“But if it was just an accident... That's that, then.”

“I can't mess this up for you, Yuuri.”

How would kissing him mess it up? Didn’t love make people stronger? That was always something that brought comfort to Yuuri. Was Viktor someone that thought being with someone was a hinderance? If he said he liked the kiss, having been told it was an accident, it probably wouldn’t do any good.

“I was selfish... I'm sorry, Yuuri.”

“You don't need to apologize.” He really didn’t, because he did like the kiss, he did feel something, and it had consumed his thoughts and very actions for the last week and he had no intention of stopping. Not for a second. “I've always wanted to go stargazing. Maybe not with a fairy godmother, though.”

Viktor rolled back over to face him. Skeptical.

Yuuri continued. “What good does someone with infinite wisdom get out of looking at infinity?”

“Sorry to disappoint. Fairy godmothers aren't perfect. You know that, right? We make mistakes constantly. Obviously. To be honest, we’re just retired princesses, anyway. Just people in the end.”

“Do they still have to learn what their godchild needs?”

“Well, yeah...”

“Even after the initial call?
“Sure. They just do their best and use their resources to try to make dreams come true… I had no idea what I was going to do when I got on that plane. I came up with most of my plan on the flight.” He paused. “It's a really long flight.”

“Has most of your plan been laid out?”

“I think so. I won't know for sure until I can see the competition up close. And adjustments made depending on performance.”

“Still have to have the dress made.”

“It's on its way.”

“Really? I was just kidding…”

“I called Fifi a few weeks ago. She needs adequate lead time. We're professionals here, you know. We magic workers.”

“My gala costume?”

Viktor snickered. “What else~?”

“Oh, I don't know. I guess it's a surprise.”

Viktor tapped his lips again. “I'll let you know when it gets here. Maybe.”

“Oh good. I think.”

There was a satisfied smile on Viktor’s face, Yuuri almost believe they hadn't been at odds. So selfish of godmother to sneak a kiss… he wondered if there was more behind the guilt. He crawled inside his own sleeping bag. “Stargazing would be nice with hand holding, huh? Holding in through infinity…”

Even in the glow of the nearly-dead fire, Yuuri could see the flush. “I, uh, wouldn't know.”

“Yeah, me either.”

“Too bad I'm a bitter old fairy godmother,” Viktor said with a weak attempt at a laugh, covering his face with a hand.

“A shame, yeah.” Yuuri pointedly looked at the stars. Beside him he heard the rustle of Viktor’s sleeping bag. He glanced to the side at him to see a casually set hand between them. Selfish accident, huh? Yuuri sighed dramatically, ignoring the offered hand. He would not be the one to cave.

“Makkachin, do you like camping?” Viktor asked his dog, not so successfully smooth.

The poodle huffed, then curled tighter.

“He likes it.”

“He's been pretty quiet, so I've wondered.”

“He's just enjoying our company,” Viktor said, and yawned. “Two favorite people and it’s past his bedtime.”
Makkachin confirmed by thumping his tail on the sleeping bags.

“Yours, too.”

“I guess so. Like a bitter, old fairy godmother.”

“Best not risk a cranky fairy.”

“I'm not... cranky.”

“If you don't sleep well?”

“I hardly slept all week.”

“Oh. Right.” Yuuri said with a wincing smile. “Um. Sleep.”

Viktor, thoroughly chided, curled up on his side and tugged on the ears of his illegally cute hat, getting all settled and snug in his sleeping bag. And managed to put his hand back in place, palm down this time. “Sorry.”

“For?”

“For being so... grouchy. I was mad at me, not at you. I'm trying to do better.”

“O-oh. Yeah... I did think you were mad at me. Don't be mad at yourself. Fairy godmother works hard just like a coach.”

“Fairy godmother is a coach... among other things. But it’s no excuse.” He closed his eyes with an sigh. “I never appreciated Yakov enough, Yuuri.”

“What do you mean?”

“In all the years he was my coach, he always knew what to do, always had a steady hand and a plan, always had the answer. He didn't let his personal feelings endanger my career; he always put his skaters first, always took care of us. No matter what we were going through, or what he was going through... I never missed a season, despite everything. He always found a way to make things work.”

“All those things are probably true, but Coach Feltsman also has had years of experience. You're... still new at this. You've been focusing on your career until now. His job has been focusing on his skaters. It's like you said: We just need to be patient with each other?”

“...yeah.” Viktor snuggled into his pillow. “But I want you to have that gold.”

“I'll do my best.”

“So will I. I'll give you my very best, Yuuri. I promise.”

“That means a lot, Viktor. Thank you.”

“You're welcome.”

“I understand and I forgive you, even though I wasn't blaming you.”

“That makes me feel a little better anyway,” he said through another yawn.
“Good.”

A long stretch of silence until Yuuri heard Viktor’s breath evening out.

“*Oyasumi.*”

“Mmn...?” Viktor sleepily answered. “Oh... *spokoynoy nochi .”*

Yuuri waited for Viktor’s breathing to relax and even before he risked rolling onto his front, looking over at him, fully.

His hand laying there innocently, now that he was asleep, was still and inviting.

Awake, and for the sake of the game and pride, Yuuri had resisted the obvious bait, but now… the temptation was hard to bear.

Carefully he reached for Viktor’s exposed hand and slotted their fingers, pressing their palms together. The touch only caused a sigh from his sleeping coach, but Yuuri remained as still as he could, holding his own breath.

He’d noticed the difference in their hands when they had danced, when he’d lifted him, when he’d touched his cheek… Holding like this was warm. He was sure it’d be warmer if Viktor were conscious.

Giddy, Yuuri ducked his head into his own shoulder. It was silly and ridiculous. Selfish, even. But he couldn't deny the fluttering in his chest.

The discussions at their campout added more to repair the bridge of their communication. Although he had received an answer about the kiss, Viktor still sounded like he was hiding his real reason. Yuuri wouldn’t give up his new tactics until Viktor decided to be fully truthful with him.

One morning Yuuri woke up before his alarm and couldn’t get back to sleep. Restless, he got up and proceeded with routine. Viktor would still be there at the rink, though not expecting him so early.

It wasn’t meant to be deliberately sneaky, but since Yurio had returned to Russia, he saw less and less of Viktor’s skating outside of Yuuri’s programs. But that morning, maybe he’d see something else.

Quietly, he entered the lobby, pulling the door behind him to minimize the sound. He set his duffle bag down on the bench in the locker room and took to standing in the doorway where he could see the rink and hear the soft echo of the song being played - it sounded like a pop song from the states that had been instrumentalized. Phichit had exposed him to a lot of music.

Light cast through the window in soft golds over Viktor, skating in that grace that was his. His movements weren’t exactly *rusty* but there was a raw feel to it, figuring out the right components. Stopping, correcting. Stopping, changing his mind. Loose and playful. No restrictions. Beautiful.

Yuuri watched him skate three playthroughs of the song (which he noticed was a mashup of two songs), how he picked up the momentum so effortlessly with the bass line. So free and happy. A lot like Viktor’s programs from his younger years. Hopeful and brimming with life.

And romantic.
Viktor didn’t want to think about retirement, that was obvious under the stars and here.

The day before Yuuri was meant to leave for press conference in Tokyo with the other skaters of Japan, the package from Fifi arrived. Viktor made a show of hiding it, even when he cut open the box at the top to verify the contents, his back was to Yuuri, so it wasn’t like he’d be able to see.

“Should I try it on? Make sure it fits.”

Viktor tapped his chin, looking from Yuuri to the box in his arms, and back. “Let’s have a costume rehearsal. I’ll grab my makeup bag.”

Having received the mail between practices, they headed back to the rink, the costume Yuuri had yet to see, now in a garment bag slung over Viktor’s shoulder.

They arrived at Ice Castle and Viktor began to set up shop: costume hung on a locker door, makeup spread out securely on a bench next to them.

“Go on, Yuuri. You can open it now.”

Excited to finally get to see the secret costume, Yuuri restrained himself from skipping over to it. He unzipped the garment bag, and immediately stopped at the sight of the upper half.

It couldn’t be…

He looked to Viktor, who sat, looking all too pleased with himself.

It was. He’d done it on purpose. “Just like… yours, but blue.”

“Almost! I felt it was only appropriate. You skating my program, may as well wear an homage to mine.”

More than an homage, it was a direct color swap. “I’ll… try it on.” He finished unzipping the bag and toed off his shoes. Suddenly, Viktor there watching him undress wasn’t a concern. He slipped on the form fitting black pant ensemble, then the black collared undershirt, sleeves covering his arm to thumb. And then the blue, sheer vest, sparkling while he hooked the silver accents together.

Yuuri stood in front of the locker mirror, admiring himself, his hand feeling the material, smoothing it down his frame. He wasn’t tall and trim like Viktor, but the way his Stammi Vicino costume looked and felt, he liked what he saw.

Viktor stood behind him, reaching a hand over his shoulders to adjust the collar, a pleased smile on his lips. “Do you like it?”

“I… I love it.” His admission was quieter than what was going on in his mind. He’d never had a costume like this before.

“Good. Let’s complete the ensemble, shall we?”

Viktor straddled the bench parallel to the set up and invited Yuuri to do the same in front of him, and grabbed the brush and spray bottle. Hands and brush worked through Yuuri’s hair in gentle motions, scalp to ends, while Yuuri examined the sleeved gloves of his costume. It all felt so soft and fresh and he could smell the new fabric all around him.

When Viktor came to sit in front of him, Yuuri hadn’t realized how lost in thought he’d been.
Guess the hair was done.

Not having his pores be freshly opened from the bath, Viktor cleansed his face with a moist towelette. Putting the used cloth aside, he uncapped the moisturizer and set to work. With one hand he held Yuuri’s chin to steady and maneuver his face as needed, and the other to spread the moisturizer.

Knowing his tone, selecting the foundation came with ease. He painted with his fingers across Yuuri’s face, thoroughly covering with care.

It was calming compared to last time. Most of the uncertainty gone. The quiet between them was reverent and comfortable as Yuuri trusted Viktor to make him beautiful again. The beating of Yuuri’s heart was less hormonally charged, and more somber and absorbing of the moment. Touch of his hand at his chin so tender. Fingers and brushes lingering on the canvas of his face, yielding to the master’s touch.

When prompted to open his eyes, this time Viktor stared back at him with such wonder, Yuuri had to avert his gaze, lest his face melt.

“Would you like to see?” Viktor asked, voice cracking.

He nodded, despite being incredibly flustered by Viktor’s expression.

Viktor reached for the mirror and held it for Yuuri see, almost bracing himself for an unfavorable response.

And he wouldn’t receive the negative critique he feared. The marvel that peered at him through Viktor’s eyes, he completely understood. The makeup was more or less the same as at the onsen, but with blue added with the bronze as an accent. Hair perfectly coiffed. And the costume completed the look and… Yuuri had to catch his breath and hold back a sob.

“Don’t ruin your mascara, Yuuri,” Viktor gently chided, though sympathizing.

“I… I know, I’m trying not to.” He was pretty and handsome at once. A princess in prince’s clothing. A few shaky deep breaths and he found himself composed enough to don his skates.

Viktor assisted, making sure the pant cuffs were smoothed inside the skate, spread out creases, then took a moment for his eyes to travel up him. Had he not been so emotional, Yuuri probably would have turned red again. Like a gentleman, Viktor took Yuuri’s hand and placed it on his arm and walked to the rink with him, uneven skate steps and all.

Yuuri entered the ice and took position in the center, waiting for the music to start, heart so very full, head bowed.

It was as if he was made to be Viktor’s proxy. He looked everything the part, had permission to skate his heartsong, trained by him.

When would he have what he wanted most from him?

The Aria began. Head rising, fall, tilt, rotating, hand caressing.

*Sento una--*

Straighten, push, rise. Every movement ingrained in his muscle memory. Felt it through his bones. Automatic. Would the audience see Yuuri on the ice or Viktor?

Being Viktor had never been a goal, but to share the ice, and the gala exhibition was the closest he’d get to feeling that sense of achievement he longed for throughout his career. But…

Now he wanted more.

Toe loop. Figures.

The verse approached… Yuuri came to the barrier where Viktor stood transfixed and--

Extending his arms to him, hands reaching like the program called for. Physically calling for another.

This song was Viktor’s soul, of course he couldn’t resist the hand gesture. Instinctively, Viktor started to reach back, but just as quickly pulled away, pained, spell broken.

The audience wasn’t supposed to join the skater, no, but Yuuri thought… maybe he would. Answer him directly. Join him in the pair skate once more.

Galas were singles, anyway. He needed to finish the song.

Combination spin, then arms raised above chest. Breathe.

Viktor’s clapping in applause was a lot softer than the emotion he held in his eyes.

Why didn’t you take my hand? You wanted to…

Yuuri considered going over it one more time, but it took too much energy both in body and mind, so relented to changing out of his costume and call it a night. His hair a little wind swept, but his makeup still intact, he decided to leave it on for the walk home. He felt nice.

Viktor offered to carry the garment bag, treating it like precious cargo.

Their words were sparse, both shaken by the obvious, heavy tension between them.

Yuuri wanted to address it, but the ache was almost comforting and he didn’t want to chase it away with conversation. Instead, he chanced a glance at his coach.

He was smiling.

Mooroka-san picked Yuuri up at the airport and they took a cab together to the press conference. Viktor would have come along, as what was expected of his coach, but Yuuri insisted he was okay to go alone. He’d be back the next afternoon. No worries, it was fine. He tried his best to not be suspicious and he wasn’t entirely sure if he succeeded, but at least he convinced Viktor to stay at home with his family.

“How is prep for the season coming along, Katsuki-kun?”

“Good, I think. A little nervous after my big loss last year, but…”

“You’ve got Viktor in your corner! And me. You’ll do great. Make Japan proud!”
“Yeah. I’ll do my best!”

Mooroka was always so enthusiastic, despite everything.

The cab pulled up to the hotel and Yuri let Mooroka lead the way until the were amongst the other Japanese skaters of Japan. Singles, pairs, and dancers.

Press gathered with their notebooks and cameras at the ready.

The skaters filed to their seats and one by one they each stood to share their theme for the year.

Yuuri took the canvas board in his hand, and with a broad marker, wrote “love”.

Soon the girl sitting next to him was poking his arm, signalling it was his turn.

He stood, one step at a time, willing his body to move, and his brain to not doubt his resolve.

“Please, if you’ll show us your theme for this year,” Mookoka-san’s voice finally registered to him, gesturing with a hand to Yuuri and the audience in wait. “We’re dying to know.”

Yuuri turned his board and placed it on the pedestal for all to see. All in attendance gave a hushed gasp.

Grasping his microphone, Yuuri kept his vision to the back row, grateful for their blurry faces without his glasses. “I struggled to find a theme for this Grand Prix. It was hard, but in the end, I chose love. There’ve been so many people who have helped me in my competitive skating career. I somehow never thought of it as love until now. I was lucky to have people supporting me, but I had a hard time accepting that support, so I always felt like I was fighting alone. But since Viktor came into my life and became my coach, I’ve started seeing things differently. This love isn’t something as clear-cut as romantic love. It’s more of an abstract feeling that encompasses my relationships with Viktor, my family, and my home town. It took a long time, but I’ve finally realized I’m surrounded by love everyday. For the first time, there’s somebody I want to hold on to.”

He paused and thought of them reaching for one another at practice.

“That person is Viktor. I don’t really have a name for that emotion, but I’ve decided to call it love.”

Yuuri clenched his fist. “It’s changed me! I’m stronger now! And I’ll prove it at the Grand Prix Final with a gold medal!”

The press applauded his uncharacteristic outburst.

Satisfied, Yuuri took back his seat. His love for Viktor was stronger than anything. It went beyond platonic and romantic. He was sure Viktor seeing him declare it on national TV would prove it.

Chapter End Notes

Yakov: Da, da. Da.
Yurio: geez Lilia, he's been on a million of these trips, I think he knows what he's doing
Lilia: you will address me with respect, Yura... ..... ... and yes, I know you know what you're doing, Yakov, but still.
Yurio: but still nothing! What's more important is that you make sure Georgi kicks that Katsudon's fat ass, okay?!
Lilia: Yura! Language!
Yakov: That's what we intend to do
Yakov: language is fine, Lilia :v
Lilia: it's unbecoming for a prima ballerina...
Yurio: tch... whatever.. And make sure to kick Viktor, too.
Yakov: but he's a skater
Yurio: YEAH.
Lilia: He's both. And what have I said about mentioning...
Yurio: omfg Viktor isn't Voldemort
Yakov: it's fine, Lilia. It's not like I can avoid him in Beijing :[
Lilia: ...I suppose. Though, he may as well be be a dark wizard. Are you ready to go, Yakov?
Yurio: seriously?
Yakov: I answered yes to all your questions, so I think so.
Yakov: we won't let Vitya forget that Russia is still a force to be reckoned with
Yurio: GOOD.
Lilia: I just wish I could go with you, Medvezhonok.
Yurio: ughh... just go I can watch myself.
Lilia: No.
Yakov: you still need to prepare for Moscow
Yurio: Yeah, yeah…

One Truth Prevails on the next GAY SKATE!
Sunsets! / Slippers! / Heartbreak! / Vengeance! / Confessions!

Please look forward to it!
Saying goodbye to his new friends in Hasetsu before leaving for Beijing was hard enough, but it's even harder for Viktor to face his former coach Yakov after months of silence. It's a never-ending emotional rollercoaster as team Katsuki-Nikiforov faces the media shark infested waters of the Grand Prix China Cup!

#lots of fluff #lots of angst #irresponsible drinking

In this chapter:
Gabapple: I know I keep saying it, but WHY is this chapter so long? WHY...?! Ugh. Whatever. It's done. Please enjoy. Also, super special thanks to Mamodewberry for writing not one, but TWO special cameo scenes by my request. <3 We may switch off prose chapters, but we're still supervisors for our individual characters, and since I REALLY wanted those two scenes that featured her characters exclusively, it only made sense to force HER to write them. :))~ Thankyouthankyou.
Mamodewberry: we really do keep trying to stop writing long chapters. We don't want to make it a habit. I'm positive 18 will be on the smaller side, so please don't be sad or disappointed!
She sure forced me to write the scenes, guys. At gun point. But that's fine, I hurt her with feels :) she wanted it, so it was only fair!
Gabapple: It's true, it's true. I asked for the pain. And the fluff. I just... angst and fluff is the deal. Just wait until we get to the smut??! Geez, we really need to redo our tags, speaking of. Oh, also: I think we're going to do our next giveaway at 25k hits and I'm pretty sure it's going to be a button set... so watch out for that. 8)

New Art!
Viktor and Yuuri in THAT SCENE from chapter 15, illustrated by j-witless
(commission)

Recommended Listening:
Dear... Burning my Lady!, by Junichi Suwabe
A Simple Motion, by t.A.T.u.
Don't Know Why, by Norah Jones

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Viktor (14 years old)

The dance floor was covered in a thin layer of PVC coating, which made it comfortable enough to lie on when desperate. Which Viktor was. He stared up at the catwalks, closing his eyes just enough that his lashes diffused the stage lights to a bearable level. Breathing was at least an option again, and he drew air in slowly, gratefully, one lungful at a time. Everything hurt, but it was the good kind of pain; the sort that came only after wearing out every part of every muscle he knew the name of through hours of hard work. Exhaustion, complete and utter.

“Vitya.”

Viktor blinked up at the figure that cast a shadow over his form and smiled. “Feliks.”

“Are you ready to head back yet?”

They’d been at the Mariinsky Theater for the better part of the day, which was all part of the upcoming recitals, though most of their peers had left some time ago. Viktor tested one leg, then the other, and shook his head. “Nope.”

“It’s going to start snowing again. We’re going to get caught in it if we don’t head back soon.”

That was a concern. They’d brought winter gear, as was customary for anyone attempting to survive the Russian winter, but the buses didn’t always run when the snow got too heavy… and what took fifteen minutes by public transport took forty to walk. Or, in Viktor’s current condition, he’d never make it. It would be safer to stay in the theater, and wait until the storm passed and travel back to the dorms in the morning.

Viktor groaned. Though it was wise to leave, he really didn’t want to move. “You’ll have to carry me.”

“Vitya… I’m not going to carry you. It’s not my fault that you insisted on hours and hours of tango.”

“I had to tutor.”

“No, you didn’t. You volunteered.”

Viktor dragged an arm from the floor and draped it over the self-satisfied smile that snuck onto his face. “Oh. Right.” Tutoring for his classmates was the only way he could learn both parts to each pas de deux without anyone throwing shade. The girls loved having him for a partner, which was fine, but they were the ones that had the really intricate footwork, and that was the interesting part. Filling in as a partner for the boys who were too shy to ask for female assistance was almost too easy. There were plenty who were willing and needed the help.

Really, a lot of them were great at ballet and terrible with the tango. Vaganova Academy prided itself on producing students that were well-rounded in all aspects of the art of dance, from history and linguistics to a broad variety of dances. It all supported ballet. And yet…

“Come on.” Feliks nudged him with a dance flat against his hip, which earned another tired groan.

“Nooo… I can’t.”
“You have two feet. Use them.”

“No, I don’t.”

Feliks nudged Viktor’s feet next, one after the other, and folded his arms when his roommate only whined again. “Vitya. I can’t always carry you around.”

“Why not?” Viktor dropped his arm to look up at him, putting on the pitiful, pleading expression of shameless innocence. “You know you like it.”

“I do not. You’re being lazy.”

“Nooo. You’re strong … and the ladies all love it.”

The older boy paused to consider this. It was true that when he’d carted his much smaller roommate around before that they’d received quite a bit of attention. The girls did seem to love it. They’d said it was cute. So cute. Feliks and his little buddy, Vitya. Like brothers. He smiled at the thought, but it faded when he saw the way that Viktor was smiling up at him. It was a sly. Too sly. “Vitya. Come on. All of the girls went home already.”

“That’s not true.” Viktor held up an arm. “Help me up. There’s a company here practicing for next season. They’re older than you, but some only by a couple of years… recent graduates, I bet.”

Feliks took his hand and hoisted him up, which wasn’t difficult; Viktor didn’t weigh much even on the best of days. He held onto him until he was sure that he was steady, then sighed and picked him up.

“Oof! Wait, I thought you weren’t going to carry me.”

“I wasn’t.” Feliks pushed him up until Viktor could climb onto his shoulders, then took hold of his knees, frowning at the tremor in his legs. “You really overdid it. Are you going to be able to dance tomorrow?”

“Oh yeah.” Viktor draped over his head. “A long, hot shower and some ibuprofen and I’ll be fine. Icy hot, maybe.”

“Foot massage, too, I bet…”

“I’ll trade you.”

Feliks sighed. “Sure, sure. Now where are the girls?”

“Thataway!” Viktor pointed off stage left, and tucked his heels against Feliks’s ribs to urge him forward. “Feliks ho! To Mariinsky II!”

Feliks took off at a gallop across the stage. There were still a handful of hours before that evening’s performances would begin, assuming that the incoming storm didn’t prompt closure, so the theater was open to performers and staff that were supposed to be there. This included, at least for the time being, students of the Academy, though they weren’t supposed to be running around like idiots and were called out by several staff members in their wake.

Not that they listened.

The Mariinsky II was the newer, much more modern theater built to be a companion to the original Mariinsky, and was accessible via bridge over the canal that separated them. In current conditions,
it was more of a snow tunnel, with white plastered against the glass from the wind.

“Maybe we should head back,” said Feliks, slowing to a walk as he made his way through the artificial dark. “I really don’t want to get trapped in the theater overnight, Vitya.”

“But what if it’s haunted?”

“...wouldn’t that make it worse?”

Viktor smoothed out Feliks’s hair, then patted his head. “No. That’d make it more interesting.”

They pushed on and into the next section, stopping to listen, then followed the sound of the music being played. Orchestral accompaniment; a rehearsal, as Viktor had said.

“If they’re dancing, we can’t interrupt.” Feliks sighed.

“No. But we can watch.”

“Fine. But only for a little bit, and then we’re going back home.”

“I’m fine with whatever as long as you carry me.” Viktor tapped out a rhythm on his head. “Oh, but not the auditorium. Let’s go backstage.”

“Backstage?”

“Feliks.” Viktor leaned over sideways to peer at him. “You and I both know that you love watching from backstage.”

Feliks conceded, then turned on his heel and slipped through the door marked for the stage, drowning them in darkness. They fought through the curtains and props, and that was when Viktor saw her.

Seated just off stage was a black woman with a large sketch pad, scribbling away with a piece of chalk pastel. Her face was fixed in concentration, so fierce and determined. Like a hunter seeking out meaning in the lines of her art. It helped that her skin made him think of the sun-soaked stripes of a tiger, and that her hair was swept back in a fearsome mane of jagged curls. She was amazing.

“Feliks,” he whispered. “Put me down.”

“What? Why?”

“I want to talk to her.”

“Who?”

Viktor turned Feliks’s head and angled it until he was sure that his roommate was looking directly at her, then pulled his head back again. “Her.”

“Woah. So that’s your type? I think she’s a little old for you, buddy.”

Viktor huffed. “I don’t want to date her, I want to talk to her.”

Feliks crouched down, letting Viktor slide off of his back, but took hold of his arm. “I don’t think you should bother her, Vitya. She looks busy.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Viktor batted his arm away and crept ahead, dance paws making his approach nearly
silent. Like a little snow leopard stalking a panthress. “Just watch the girls dance.”

Feliks didn’t stop him.

“Excuse me,” Viktor whispered when he was standing next to her. The drawings on the pad of paper were so expressive they were almost violent. Gorgeous. “Miss?”

She looked up, hazel eyes catching the light of the stage for an instant, which made Viktor absolutely certain that she was part cat. She shook her head.

“Pardon?”

“Hi.” Viktor realized that he hadn’t planned out what he was going to say, but he had to talk to her. So he rubbed the side of his neck and tried to be cute. “Are you drawing the ballerinas?”

The woman stared at him a moment longer, then shook her head again. “Do you speak French?” she asked in Russian, though the accent was terrible.

“Oh! Uhm.” Viktor closed his eyes, attempting to recall the past four years of classes. “Sort of.”

She frowned at him, then continued on in her native tongue. “Yes, I’m a designer. I’m drawing the ballerinas to get ideas for their costumes.”

Viktor squinted at her, piecing the sentence together, but the process was agonizingly slow. No, that wouldn’t do. He held up a finger. “One second,” he said, then turned and hurried back into the shadows where Feliks was. “Pssst. Feliks.”

“What?”

“She’s French. I need you to translate for me.”

Feliks turned to him, frowning. “You’re in your fourth year, aren’t you?”

“Yeah… well… come on!”

Even though it meant giving up the opportunity to watch the dancers, Feliks came along and crouched in the dark to listen to the quiet conversation and help translate.

“She says she’s designing costumes for this season.”

“Oooh.” Viktor bounced in place. “Okay, okay, ask her what her name is.”

“You know how to ask for that, Vitya.”

“I don’t want to sound stupid.”

“It’s kind of late for that.”

The woman watched them with a little smile of amusement on her lips. “Perhaps we should talk in the hallway, no? Your little friend makes it sound urgent.”

“I guess.”

As they moved to the hallway, Viktor explained his plan to Feliks. A designer like her would be perfect for making his skate costumes, he just needed to talk to her, get his story out, and she would agree. It was obviously destiny or fate or whatever, so Feliks had to help him or he would never be
able to break the silver streak and win/continue to skate and his life would be over.

Feliks sighed the heavy sigh of patient long-suffering, and relayed the basic message once they were out in the hallway. “This is Viktor Nikiforov. He isn’t just a ballerina, he’s a figure skater. He needs costumes for his competitions, but he’s broke. He thinks you’ll help him.”

Viktor put on his biggest smile. He’d at least understood most of that. “Yeah!”

The woman put a hand on her hip. “Oh, is that so? And why would I do that?”

Feliks translated, and Viktor batted at him again. “I understood that one!” he said, then puffed up his chest, calling on all of grit he had in him. “Look, I know this is crazy, but sometimes that’s how life is, right? You’re an artist. You get it. The universe brought us together, so obviously there’s gotta be something that I can do! Please!”

She considered for several long moments, then crouched down and touched his chin, tilting his head this way and that. Viktor went still, but let her do as she pleased. “Tell me, Vitya, was your mother a ballerina, too?”

He understood the question, along with the significance of the past tense. “She was. For the Imperial Ballet.”

Feliks translated and the woman gaped.

“Incredible.”

“Did you know her?” asked Feliks.

“I tried to get her to model for me so many times, but she was always too busy dancing.” The woman gave a soft, sad laugh. “You look so much like her, Vitya.”

“That sounds like him, too. Any time anyone needs a dance partner, they come to our room and he’s always ready to go.”

“I’m going to guess that’s why his French isn’t very good.”

“Probably, yeah.”

Viktor frowned at them. “…what’re you saying about me?”

The woman stood up again. “Very well. I’ll give kismet a chance this time. I’ll need to speak with his coach, of course, but I think we might be able to arrange something.”

“Oh yeah? The modeling?”

“Yes. A photo shoot. A few hours of his time could make my time worth it with his unique looks. He’s like a little unicorn, isn’t he?”

Feliks nodded. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“What are you saying??” Viktor whined. He was never going to fall asleep in French class again.

“But I’d need to see if he can really perform. Of course, students of Vaganova are only allowed to stay if they’re good…” She hummed. “Then again, they’re supposed to be fluent in French, too.”

“Oh, so that’s why you’re here at the Mariinsky.”
“Yes. My studio comes here to do the costuming as part of our master course in winter semester.”

“He’s performing tomorrow. It’s the tango unit for his group.”

“Oh? Here at the Mariinsky?”

“Yeah. The original one, though. At three.”

“Perfect.” She took out a bill fold from her pocket and withdrew a business card. “Fifi Séverine. I’ll be here tomorrow to watch.”

Viktor turned the card over in his hands, nodding, though he’d only caught bits and pieces of the conversation. It had something to do with him and the tango, which got him excited, but also made his legs hurt all over again. “So what’s the plan?”

Feliks grinned. “I’ll tell you on the way back to the dorm. You really need to rest, Vitya.”

“Huh? Oh…” Viktor tucked the card into his pocket, then waved at the woman Fifi. “Okay. Though, Feliks, are you gonna carry me again?”

Feliks sighed and scooped him up to throw him over his shoulder. “Let’s go.”

Viktor watched Fifi as Feliks carried him away, staring after them mystified. It was a common reaction from adults, and Viktor didn’t mind. At least she was sure to remember him.

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*Paris, France*

*That Summer*

“It’s amazing that our little Vitya was invited to go to Paris! For a photo shoot!”

“Yes, yes it is.”

Viktor huffed, turning from his aunt and uncle to look around the studio again. They’d been repeating the same thing ever since he’d given them the news and translated for Fifi, but they wouldn’t shut up about it. Yes, Paris was beautiful, and he was excited to be in France, but he’d been there before, just for skating. It wasn’t exactly new. What was new, though, was standing in a hallway wearing skin-tight black leggings and an over the shoulder poly-lycra blend top cut in feminine style- with his aunt and uncle staring at him.

He liked the costume, honestly; it had a lot of nice pieces that alluded to wings or tails, and the deep crimson lining was a beautiful contrast to the sapphire pattern on the outside. The stiff stitching along his chest made it look like rose leaves, and the matching choker around his neck tied it all together. But his surrogate family couldn’t stop picking at it.

“It’s just not… well, you know. Very manly.” His aunt said, shaking her head. “But at least they’re not making you wear makeup like they usually do when you perform.”

That wasn’t true, though; they’d put a lot of makeup on him, but it didn’t look like it hardly at all. Pale and powdered. And his lashes? They were long and luscious, sure; they’d been curled and
treated with some kind of product in them, but they were almost white. What good was war paint if he looked naked?

Really, the only small comfort Viktor had was that his relatives couldn’t speak French, which meant that anything anyone said had to be filtered through him. They were only able to watch.

Viktor rubbed his arms and tried to shut out the commentary while he waited until they were ready for him. He’d had his photo taken several times, but nothing quite like this. They did class photography at the Academy from time to time to show off how skilled the students were for brochures and programs, but individual attention was rare, and here, he was the star.

His aunt touched his hair again and he pulled away, chewing on his lower lip. “Auntie…”

“What? I’m getting impatient because I’m so excited for you.”

“I’ll… I’ll go find someone. You two wait here.” Viktor gave them his best smile and tip-toed to the door and cracked the door open just wide enough to slip inside.

“Look how he moves; so graceful, just like his mother!”

“I don’t know. I still don’t think ballet is very good for him.”

Viktor ignored them, rolling his eyes as he wandered away from their criticism. Fifi should have been there to bring him in already. He was fine doing ballet in exchange for her design work, but the longer he had to wait, the more anxious he became. Yes, he understood that she had other models, but she’d said he was her special guest. Didn’t that come with perks?

The inside of the studio was dark; lighting controlled only by what the photographers had set up around the staging area. Viktor only had a vague sense of what they all did, but it looked both complicated and expensive, so he approached with caution. The staff members were chatting and changing scenery. Maybe they’d just finished? It’d be just his luck to get impatient at the exact wrong time. He frowned, coming to stand at the edge of the taped area, watching a man set up a fake tree against the wall.

“I think that’s for you.”

Viktor froze, eyes widening. The voice was French, male, and came from someone standing far too close; he could feel their breath against his neck. “Uhm.”

The speaker swung around to face him, wearing an easy smile and only half a shirt. He was a teenager, Viktor guessed maybe a year or two older, and had the kind of hair that looked like it was fashionable bed head, but could only be the work of stylists and a lot of mousse. No one had that much natural hold. He looked Viktor over from head to toe, thick, well-groomed brows rising as his smile widened.

“Bonjour, my sweet,” he said, taking Viktor’s right hand and bowed to kiss his knuckles. “I heard that we were expecting a foreign guest, but I had no idea that you would be so beautiful.”

“Uhm,” Viktor repeated, struggling to find a reaction that made sense for the situation. “Wow. Thanks.”

The boy lifted his dark-eyed gaze, smile going crooked.

Somehow, just that little change brought on a sort of warm daze that Viktor could not explain. He laughed, though it came out as nothing more than an awkward little trill, and turned his head away.
“You know I’m not a girl, right?”

“But of course, Viktor.” Still holding onto his hand, the boy reached his other to touch Viktor’s cheek; an action so tender, so gentle, that it almost didn’t feel like he was touching at all. “That makes no difference, however. You’re still absolutely stunning.”


“I’m Raphael,” the boy said, and slid his fingers along the side of Viktor’s face, tucking stray locks of hair behind his ear. “But you may call me Rafe. That blush looks good on you… like rose petals in the snow.”

Viktor bit down on his lower lip, caught in a helpless stare. What was this? Who was this? Rafe? No, it was a cute boy. A real, genuine cute boy. Really cute. So cute. And existing. In real life. How was he supposed to act? What was he supposed to do? The cute boy was still watching him, sizing him up. What did that mean? Oh no. oh no. He was really cute. Really, really cute. REALLY cute. He’d never run into one of these before, only heard stories. How… how was one here, of all places? Because it was Paris, the city of love? Maybe… That would make sense. Oh no. Ohhh no. Oh no. He wasn’t prepared.

“You look nervous, Viktor.”

“M-me? Haha…”

“Yes, of course you.” Rafe brought two fingers to Viktor’s chin, tilting his face up. “Perhaps you’d like me to kiss you… that might help.”


“No?” asked Rafe.

Viktor shook his head again.

Rafe let his smile spread a little wider. “I think that might be a yes, then.”

Viktor choked on nothing.

“Rafe! Leave Viktor alone!”

The teen model sighed, pulling his hand back and proceeded to slip his bare arm back into the sleeve of the button-up shirt that was hanging off of him. “Yes, Fifi.”

“I’m sorry. He’s the worst, but trying to find a better model for these projects is impossible.” Fifi put herself between them, bending down to give Viktor a kiss in greeting on each one of his cheeks. “Thank you for coming. I’m so sorry to keep you waiting.”

“I-it’s okay…”

“I see that you’re all ready for the shoot, though; you look magnificent, my little unicorn.”

Viktor sidled closer to her, peering around the woman at Rafe, who was adding a jacket to his still-opened shirt. “Thank you, Fifi. Will this take long?”

“No, just a couple of hours. We’ll take breaks, of course. I just want to get some good poses and action shots, but there are several costume changes to make.” She untucked his hair from where Rafe had messed with it, then nudged him toward the stage. “Go ahead and get familiar with the
"props we’ve set up. I hope there’s enough space for you to dance."

“Oh, uhm, I think so.”

“Your french has gotten a lot better since the last time I saw you! I’m impressed.” Fifi strode away to one of the camera men, shouting orders to get ready to begin.

Viktor approached, taking deep, even breaths to get into ballet mood. He needed to be calm and poised, just as his instructors had taught him. They’d be seeing the photos, after all, and if he messed up this, they’d have his head for sure. He was an ambassador of the academy whether he liked it or not, and would be until his skating career became anything of note. If it ever did. Which it wouldn’t, unless he owned this photo shoot.

The setup looked like some sort of bizarre garden; some elements realistic, others very abstract art. Viktor didn’t get it, but thought he might after next year’s round of courses, when he’d be taking modern art history. He started his stretches, arms, neck, legs, taking the time to really feel the pull in each one. Then it was down, fingers curling around the end of his ballet slippers to work out the remaining stiffness in his back and hamstrings. He needed to be loose.

It was at that moment, of course, that Rafe goosed him.

Viktor screeched.

Rafe laughed.

Fifi yelled.

In seconds, Viktor had his left slipper off of his foot and in his hand, and chucked it as hard as he could at Rafe’s stupid head. “You jerk face!” It hit home, right against his forehead, and he clasped his hands over his face while the laughter continued.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry!” he cried. “I couldn’t resist!”

“Get out, Rafe!” Fifi screamed.

Viktor smoothed down the back of his costume, shoulders hunched, hair messy and face red.

“You’re so precious when you’re angry, Viktor!” Rafe called as he scurried from the studio. “Keep up the good work, my love!”

Viktor sniffed once, gaze dropping to the fallen slipper. Well. At least it was good to know that cute boys could be scoundrels, too. Maybe even more so. And to think, he’d almost fallen for it.

Huff.

“...And I’ll prove it at the Grand Prix Final with a gold medal!”

In the seven months that Viktor had lived in Hasetsu, he’d picked up a decent chunk of the Japanese language. He was nowhere near fluent, but he could get by in half Japanese, half English conversations with any of the locals, and his vocabulary had grown to include several hundred of the most common words. Understanding a grasp of basic grammatical structure to accompany
context was helpful, too. Immersion was good for that, and learning foreign languages was nothing new. He wasn’t trilingual by accident.

Though, even if he hadn’t been able to pick out a handful of words among the heavily accented, passionate speech (was it some kind of country thing? He’d only heard Yuuri talk like that when drunk), he definitely would have been able to pick up the awkwardness that radiated from both the television audience and the onsen crowd. The former clapped politely, barely masking horrified or confused faces; the latter stared incredulously, all while a clueless Yuuri Katsuki looked on, smiling and waving.

Ai was the word used. Love. It was one of the first words he’d learned, even before he’d left Russia. Yuuri’s theme. That was a given. But he’d used it in connection with his name, Viktor, with the cute little oo at the end that sometimes happened when Yuuri got too excited. Viktoru.

Love. Viktor.

But it wasn’t that simple. He’d mentioned a lot of other things, too; things he didn’t catch.

Love. Viktor.

His heart was trilling, and he hugged Makkachin close to his chest to smother the sound. What did it mean? What had he said? Had it been some kind of confession? Was that why they were upset? Viktor slid his gaze from the TV to the Nishigoris and Katsukis, to Minako, then back again. They were muttering, displeased, but what about?

If it had been one of the soap operas, it would have been easy enough to guess; to make up a narrative as dramatic and disastrous as they came, but broadcasts like these went online. Yuuri Katsuki fans would repost it. Viktor Nikiforov fans would--

He forced a smile. “When you come back, we’ll burn that unfashionable necktie, Yuuri. Let’s buy a new one before the Cup of China.”

The others turned to him, stares confused, some annoyed. Viktor waited them out, simply smiling. It only took sixteen more seconds before Mama Katsuki gasped.

“Oh, Vicchan! I’m sorry, you probably didn’t catch most of that, did you?”

Viktor shook his head. They didn’t need to know what he suspected; it would be better to get the story presented without assumption. “Not really. What’d he say?”

One by one, the anger shifted on their expressions to an awkwardness similar to that of the audience, though they’d moved on to another competitor by then.

“Uhm.” Yuko tried and failed to surmise it.

“Well…” Minako made a vague hand gesture. “You’ll probably have to ask him.”

“He’s such a dork,” said Mari, ever helpful.

Mama and Papa Katsuki both winced, but looked unwilling to participate.

Takeshi opened his mouth and Yuko jabbed him in the ribs with her elbow.

Viktor frowned. Personal feelings aside, it was starting to look like there might be damage control to take care of, in which case, he needed to get to work right away. “Anyone?”
It was the goblin trio that finally came to his rescue.

“He basically said that he loved you.”

“Yeah, and that we were chopped liver.”

“Abstract chopped liver.”

“But that he wanted to hold onto you.”

“And he’s going to prove it with a gold medal.”

“But he still doesn’t care about us.”

“Pretty much.”

“Yep.”

“But you know what they say about cats and gold.”

“Girls…!” Yuko began her reprimand, but didn’t really have anything to counter with.

Especially not when Takeshi joined in with a sage nod and a coy, “They’re right. He’s had a crush on you for ever, but wow.”

Viktor tucked his chin behind Makkachin, glancing back at the TV again. He was sure that it wasn’t a direct translation, but no one was correcting them, and Minako’s cold stare was heavy; she was waiting to see how he’d react to the news. And how was he supposed to take it, surrounded by Yuuri’s core support network, who loved and berated him all at once?

Love. Viktor.

He smiled, soft and thoughtful, and tipped his head to kiss the top of Makkachin’s head. The dog leaned back to lick his nose in return. Then he laughed. “Yuuri’s so cute.”

It was dismissive… his words and the shrug that followed. Viktor didn’t mean to be patronizing; he was sincere in his assessment, but it was all too easy to read it as a man casting off the childish admiration of his junior. The chest flutters tightened their hold, escalating in arpeggio. He’d read the full transcription later. It wouldn’t be difficult to find. It’d even be in his inbox and from multiple senders, he had no doubt.

For now, Viktor needed to deal with the family. They watched him, expressions mixed and bewildered, but he didn’t yield anything more. So they relented, turning away. Their manners forbade them from doing anything else.

They sat through the other skaters and their announcements out of courtesy, though no one was really interested. Viktor felt their eyes on him, stealing casual glances in hopes of gaining more information, but he gave them nothing. As a coach, he had an obligation to keep abreast of the competitors in the field. That was his reasoning and excuse.

He waited them out, a wolf biding his time while the hounds lost interest. And eventually did, breaking away and filtering out little by little as the evening wore on. Viktor got up, stretched, and made his way toward his room. It was late enough that no one would need him for anything and still early enough that he had time to gather his thoughts. He needed to get to the rink.

“Hey, Viktor.”
He stopped halfway down the hall and looked back. Minako’s poise was her usual swagger, but her expression was downright devious. *Predatory,* even. Maybe not a wolf, but like the kitsune he’d heard about. “Hm?”

“How haven’t you been dancing at my studio?” she asked, one slender brow arching. “I already gave Yuuri permission. Didn’t he tell you?”

Oh. Right. The dancing. Viktor fought back the sudden urge to confess the truth—his heart was such a tangled mess!—and instead offered a helpless shrug. “Well, you know, we should be focusing on getting ready for the cup of China. We’re leaving in just a few days, every spare minute is devoted to practice.”

Her eyes narrowed; she wasn’t buying it. “Dancing is practice. It’s beneficial for fluidity.”

“R-right... but...” Great. He was losing traction. But he couldn’t help it; she made him nervous. And she knew it.

“It’s not like Yuuri asked a favor of me, thinking it’d help you feel better.”

“He said that?”

“Sure did.”

More evidence, more things stacked in favor of Yuuri caring...

Love. Viktor.

Viktor tugged at the nape of his robe, adjusting it over his neck. “I guess it’d be rude not to come by, wouldn’t it?”

“Maybe a little...” Minako waved a hand that was meant to be dismissive but her tone was anything but. It was a threat. “I’ve only had to keep a slot open for the use.”

“I’m sorry. We’ll come by.”

The venom disappeared all at once, replaced by a tight, but pleasant smile. “Oh good. That will make Yuuri so happy.”

“Yeah... uhm...” With how Yuuri had been lately, Viktor had no doubt. Not that Yuuri had been clingy, exactly, but there’d been so much contact and dancing, well, that was dangerous. So dangerous. “How about next Thursday?”

“Sounds great.” She clapped her hands together, then halted. “Actually, tomorrow would work better for me.”

“T-tomorrow?”

“Yeah, forgot that I have that day booked with a bunch of private lessons.”

He doubted it. “Oh... right... of course...”

“Perfect. See you then!”

Once he was able to get away, Viktor changed into his sweats and t-shirt, grabbed his coat and
sneakers, and called for Makkachin. They snuck out through the front door and nudged the gates of the onsen open just as Yuuri had shown him.

“Let’s go, Makka.”

They took up an even, jogging pace, puffs of breath visible in the street lamp light through the city. Viktor and Makkachin used to jog together every day just like that, alone together when the world was abandoned to the chill of darkness. Mostly in the morning, though often also at night. These days, Makkachin preferred to linger with the Katsukis and come to the rink with Yuuri if he came at all. The warm weather had been good for him, and it was getting colder now.

Like Saint Petersburg.

He checked for ice when they approached the bridge, but found none. It wasn’t quite time for that yet, apparently; not so far south. They kept running.

Love. Viktor.

They’d confirmed it for him. His phone had been pinging with notifications but he couldn’t bring himself to check them— not yet. He wanted to hear it from Yuuri himself. Even though he knew… he knew and Yuuri knew and everyone knew what Yuuri meant. That’s what he’d always meant, even if he hadn’t known.

Viktor ran harder, pounding pavement with an extra spring in his step. Makkachin raced ahead, looking back with wild eyes and a smile, ears flapping with each bound. Poodles were so good at reading emotions. They felt it, too. And Makkachin was leaping for joy.

No. He couldn’t think about that— not yet. Not until he’d had a chance to sort it out a little more. Make a list. Organize his thoughts. There were so many things to consider. Viktor needed to think. He couldn’t rely on his heart.

Could he?

He followed Makkachin’s lead and took the steps up to Ice Castle Hasetsu two at a time, racing his companion to the doors only to fumble with the keys. His hands were shaking. Why were they shaking? It was so silly. He steadied himself, took a deep breath, and unlocked the doors.

The lobby was dark, but he didn’t need anything more than the dim, after-hours halogens to guide him. He knew the facility like he knew his home rink. Ice Castle Hasetsu was his home-away-from-home rink. In no time at all, he was lacing up his skates with Makkachin at his side, watching with drooping expression. Skating meant that he got to nap.

Viktor rubbed the dog’s ears, then got up to set a playlist over the PA system with his phone. It would be short, but he didn’t have the stamina to skate for too long; not so late at night, and not after a jog like that. That was fine. He just needed time away from everyone else to move, to think, and to feel.

The first song began, and Viktor took off his guards and stepped onto the ice to meet it, shedding his coat on the way. Nothing felt as free as being on the ice. Gentle harp plucking gave way to horns and oboes as Tchaikovsky’s *Waltz of the Flowers* filled the air, and he settled into the familiar routine to warm up as the strings joined the instrumentation.

When he’d left Russia, he hadn’t known what to expect. Chris had wanted him to find romance, obviously, and Yakov had probably expected him to take a brief excursion and come running home terrified. But he’d gone off to become a coach with the sub plot of soul searching and snaring his
apparent soulmate. In retrospect, it really had been insane. And painful. But beautiful, too. Other than hurting Yakov, really, he wouldn’t have done anything differently. And even then, if Yakov had kept an open communication, would he have been brave or stubborn enough to stay? He wasn’t sure.

Yuuri had answered his prayers in a lot of ways already. He’d been desperate for a change. He’d been wasting away in Saint Petersburg, consumed with the stress and fear that only grew every day. Even that, the chance of doing something else, having a glimpse of a future that wasn’t just empty nothingness, made it all worth it. He’d learned so much coming to Hasetsu; stood on his own two feet, proved he could handle himself- at least so far -and had done it all on his own. Sort of. Close enough.

Independence was something he’d always counted as one of his personality traits, but Yuuri was truly the independent one. He didn’t need anyone. Or, maybe he did… his support network, the abstract loves in his life….

With Viktor being the first one that he’d ever wanted to hold onto.

The song faded right into the next one- a strings and piano medley mashup of *Love Story* and *Viva la Vida* -it wasn’t his usual style, but there was something sweet about it that he couldn’t resist. Hopeful. Even though he wanted to resist it, it had kept him going most mornings. The routine that went along with it was full of energy, and the building layers kept the momentum moving forward in his skating, each leap and quad a little more dramatic than the last.

Something he’d learned from Yuuri. He loved it.

And he loved Yuuri.

So much that it ached all through him.

Each compliment that Yuuri gave burned him. Every touch was painful. All of his smiles and hints tightened the vice that his heart was in, and the displays of concern were daggers in his back.

Did Yuuri love him?

Viktor slowed toward the end of his routine, gaze falling on the spot just ahead where they’d been during their pair skate when he’d ignited that forbidden flame. He toed the ice and slid to it, taking in the dark rink around him once he was in position. It had been just like that; only hours earlier, with the sun setting and the world drenched in roses.

He’d thought about the kiss so many times, relived it in his mind so often that he almost wasn’t sure if it had really happened or not. But oh, he could remember the taste, how easily Yuuri had given into him, how soft and sweet it all had been…

And he remembered, too, just barely, that Yuuri had kissed back.

Only for a moment, but in that moment, Yuuri had held onto him, and reciprocated.

Viktor tapped his lower lip with his index finger, considering, then brushed his thumb along the bottom and tried to recapture the feeling. It didn’t compare.

The song ended, and *Yuri on Ice* took its place. Viktor shook off his thoughts and hurried to catch up and put himself in position. He’d done Yuuri’s free skate enough times to know how much room he needed to complete the jumps and turns, and though he was already getting tired, he threw himself into it full force.
Yuuri wasn’t used to love; not the way Viktor had been trying to give.

Quad-triple combination.

Maybe he hadn’t recognized it before, and it had taken root over the summer.

Quad-double. That had been an interesting change… but it did feel good. Sit spin.

Their time together had been priceless. It could very well end his career, but that had always been a risk. His time was running out either way, and spending it with Yuuri, someone who was eager to learn, who cared about him, who loved him, seemed like a worthwhile way to go.

Quadruple Salchow. How did Yuuri keep up with this pace? They ran through the program so many times at once… Camel spin. Triple toe loop. And then his favorite part…

Viktor stretched his limbs, elongating his form like all of his instructors had taught him. He knew which muscles to tense and which to relax to maintain a perfect arc, transitioning from outside spread eagle to Ina Bauer to lunge, twirling, then out to a triple axel.

They were the same, he and Yuuri; ballerinas on ice. Dancers who faced the world alone, by choice or by chance. But maybe they didn’t have to be.

Yuuri loved him.

There were still so many complications with that; reasons why it was imprudent and potentially disastrous.

Triple flip. The music picked up tempo, and Viktor had to concentrate to keep the pace, chasing the steps with the same impatience that Yuuri always had. It was difficult not to; not when there were so many moving pieces left and the song was reaching its climax.

Maybe it didn’t matter that they shouldn’t be together. At least not at that moment. He wouldn’t be able to confirm with Yuuri until he got home the next morning, and even then, Yuuri probably wouldn’t even own up to it. Why else would he give the announcement on Japanese television? Convenience, yes, but did he really expect Viktor to understand it? Doubtful.

Or maybe… Yuuri was smart, but he wasn’t very good at planning, as he himself had said. He was impulsive, much like Viktor. They were the same in so many ways. Cautious until the right wind pushed them to be reckless. Alone by choice but terribly lonely. Admired but never good enough. In love, but--

--but what?

When Viktor came to the final pose, arm outstretched, he was panting. Makkachin lifted his head from the bench and looked at him, angling his snout to sniff in his direction. When Yuuri did his routines, he did them without his glasses or contacts, so the crowd was blurred; Viktor always assumed that it helped him concentrate on the programs and the music and distract him from the audience. The ending pose, though, always had him pointing at the coach position. At Viktor. Yuuri had made that change at the qualifiers, and done it in practice ever since, but Viktor hadn’t bothered to try the new ending until just then.

Viktor held the pose until the first few measures of the next song began- Ten Minutes Ago from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Cinderella -then lowered his arm. “Makkachin! Come here, please.”

The poodle stretched and dragged himself from the bench, coming to the edge of the ice and
hesitating only to sniff at it before picking his way across the rink at a trot. He was no stranger to ice, and he wasn’t a pup, so it was easy to keep his footing until he got to Viktor. There he sat, tail wagging.

“Good Makka,” said Viktor, and crouched down to scoop the large dog into his arms, hooking half of him over his shoulder. “Oof, you’re getting heavy. Have you been stealing food again?”

The poodle looked away, feigning innocence.

Viktor laughed, shifting the dog in his arms until he was secure. “Okay, are you ready?”

Makkachin licked his ear, which was a yes for him, and Viktor pushed off to carry them into a wide arc, humming as he went. It’d been a long time since he’d been skate dancing with his Makka. He’d been so busy. Or… maybe that was just an excuse. He just hadn’t felt like this in so, so long.

Love had found him, after all these years, and though he didn’t know what to do about it yet, he could at least enjoy the feeling for one stolen night.

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“Thanks for checking, Yuko-chan…” Hiroko blew a sigh of relief. “I hate to have you go all the way out there, but he didn’t say where he was going.”

“Oh, it’s no problem. I wanted to make sure that everything is locked up, anyway…” Yuko checked the locker room first, though she had a pretty good guess where the missing Russian skater would be, and nodded to herself as she headed for the staff room. “I’m almost there.”

“Thanks again, dear.”

“I hear music.” A musical?

“Oh, so is he just skating after all? It’s kind of late for him to be out.”

“He’s an adult, I’m sure he can…”

“Yuko-chan?”

“You won’t believe what I’m seeing.”

“What? What is it?”

“He’s… skating with Makkachin.”

“That sounds unsafe!”

“By the looks of it, I’d say they’ve done this before.”

“Good to know he’s found. Is he all right?”

“He looks pretty fine to me. More than fine.” Yuko leaned against the wall, in shadow and out of sight. “I’d say he’s happy.”

“Well… as Yuuri as that confession on TV was, Vicchan must have felt what he meant. Even with us trying to explain it to him.”
I may never come down again.

I may never come down to earth again.

From time to time, Yuko had lingered around to watch Viktor and Yuuri in their evening practices. It was indulgent to watch her childhood friend and idol in the coach and student role. Her skating days had remained leisurely, content to watch the pros and admire and mimic their skills. The best part had been being able cheer Yuuri on in the last few years.

Seeing them together, knowing how Yuuri felt about Viktor, made her just as happy as if it were happening to her.

If that was the first time Yuuri had confessed his feelings, Yuko was confident they were reciprocated.

--

Viktor was waiting for Yuuri when he came home, dropped off by Mooroka-san just in time for lunch. He put on a cautious smile, and met him at the gekkan with a little wave. “Yuuri! Welcome home.”

Yuuri looked up, face flushed as he finished removing his shoes. There was hesitance there, plain and palpable, in his body language and in his smile as he lowered the face mask that he wore when he traveled. “Thanks…” He straightened up, unbuttoning his coat, shifting from one foot to the other. He was waiting for Viktor to say something.

There was hope in that smile, too.

That made it all the more difficult to do what Viktor was going to do. Just like with Chris.

“Great job on your presentation. I’m not sure about your choice in suits, but you did look good up there.”

The color on Yuuri’s face deepened and he took a moment to adjust his glasses. “Oh, yeah?”

Maybe he was being cruel, dragging it out like that. Viktor let his smile turn a little playful as he nodded. “Your speech was very passionate. I had the others translate it for me because I still don’t know Japanese.”

Yuuri paled immediately.

Viktor stepped closer, reaching to set a hand on each shoulder for a reassuring squeeze. “They’re all very hurt that you think of them as abstract, by the way.”

“...oh.” The smile faded, as did any trace of hope. He dropped his gaze.

It hurt to watch. As curious as he was at the play of emotions that raced through the fascinating, incredible Yuuri, Viktor couldn’t bear it. He thought he had a plan, so thorough and precise, but actually following through wasn’t so easy.

He tried to push the smile a little further, but it didn’t hold. They were standing at a metaphorical crossroads, and Viktor had to make the decision; it was in his hands. Yuuri’s shoulders slackened beneath them, shrugging to pull away.
“I’m tired. I think I’ll go to bed…”

Each word came weighted with dejection and disappointment that crushed Viktor’s heart, squeezing the breath from him with a spike of panic. He was losing him. Wasn’t that a good thing? Letting him go? No! He didn’t want to. But how could he-?

Viktor tightened his hold on Yuuri’s shoulders with just enough pressure to keep him there. “Yuuri.”

Yuuri stood quietly, face turned away.

He’d tensed up, closed himself off, and was ready to run. Viktor knew all the signs too well. He gave Yuuri’s shoulders a gentle squeeze. Was it a mistake to give in? Maybe. But maybe Yuuri was worth it. He had been every other time, too. That conclusion had already been drawn. He was a fool, but a fool in love.

“So,” Viktor smiled again. Timid. A little nervous. If he was going to compromise in any way, he needed to be sure. “You’re going to prove it with a gold medal, hm?”

Yuuri stiffened again, but it was with energy that time, blinking twice as hope flickered in him once again. He turned to Viktor, face once more determined. “Yeah! I definitely will!”

It wasn’t as confident as it had been on the broadcast, but it still eased the tension and brought back every bit of chest flutter from the night before. Viktor nodded once, his smile small but genuine as he rubbed his hands down Yuuri’s arms. “Okay.”

Yuuri blinked at him again, uncertain, and pulled out of his arms. “I’m going to just… go, though. Really tired.”

Viktor hated that tired, miserable look on Yuuri’s face as he pushed past him. “Yuuri…” He reached for his arm, then took it back as soon as he made contact. Viktor had nothing to offer him; no answers, no conclusions. Just more mixed signals and frustration.

“Sorry,” he offered lamely.

Still, it brought him to a stop.

“Oh. I forgot about this.” Yuuri dug into his coat pocket and pulled out his closed fist, which he held out to Viktor without looking at him. “For you.”

Viktor had long since learned that intentional suspense was a tool for wolves, and he avoided taking the bait when he could, but this was Yuuri, so he gave it only a second thought. He held out his hands. “What’s this?”

Yuuri dropped a little ceramic figure into Viktor’s waiting palms, peering at him from the corner of his eye with nose upturned. Sniff. “Famous dog.”

It was an Akita by the looks of it, with folded ears and harness in a very familiar sitting pose. Viktor held it up and out to inspect, then gasped. “Hachiko! It’s a tiny Hachiko! You brought me a Hachiko!”

“Yes.” Yuuri gave one firm nod, attempting to hide the pleasure of Viktor’s reaction behind an aloof little frown. It did nothing to disguise the blush, though. “For your nook.”

“I love it.” Viktor stroked the little dog’s back with his index finger, then tucked him away in his
pocket, freeing his arms to wrap them around Yuuri’s neck. “Thank you, Yuuri!” He kissed the reddest spot on Yuuri’s cheek with a loud muwah!, then released him to run off down the hallway toward his room. “I’ll put him on my shelf right now!”

Yuuri stared after him, glasses crooked, jaw slack, eyes wide, which Viktor saw just before he took the corner.

He jogged backward, peeking around the wall, and grinned. “Go put your stuff away and get ready! Just because you were in Tokyo doesn’t mean you get to slack off. That’s how I show my love, remember?”

“Huh?!”

Viktor stuck out his tongue. “Besides, Minako-sensei will kill me if we don’t go to her studio today.”

“Wait, you- the studio?”

Laughing, Viktor took off again, bare feet thudding on the wooden floor. The bewildered expression on Yuuri’s face had been priceless and so charming; he’d really need to be careful if he was going to keep his wits about him.

After Yuuri had been given a chance to change, eat, and rest for a little bit, student and coach went out with gym bag in hand bound not for the rink, but for Minako’s studio. Yuuri might have been dragging his feet at first, but the closer they got, the more pep he had in his step. He really was looking forward to dancing. With Viktor.

Viktor stepped into the studio after Yuuri just in time to catch the dance instructor’s wink as she set up a playlist.

“Oh good, you made it.”

Yuuri slipped off his shoes and crossed the room to her, abandoning Viktor at the door. Was he mad? Happy? He couldn’t tell.

"What did you say to him?"

The tone was conspiratorial. Viktor took off his shoes and pretended not to notice.

"Oh, just threatened his life."

"Did you really?"

"Nah, I guilt tripped him."

Viktor moved over to a bench to set down his bag and dug through it. Minako, much like him, loved to have the upper hand. He had been right to be wary of her, but this was her territory. What could he do about it? "Are we doing ballet? Should I change into slippers or...?"

Minako looked back at him. "Yuuri kept saying dancing together so that was my assumption."

"Okay." He dropped the slippers back into his bag. There went that escape route.

Yuuri’s brows creased. "Unless you want to do ballet..."
The disappointment again. Viktor shook his head. "No... no..." He zipped up the bag to stow it away. Barefoot was fine, especially since they weren't doing anything \textit{en pointe}. That was actually a relief. "This is a ballet studio, but... right, what should we start with? I didn't bring any music."

Minako held up a remote. "No worries. I've got it covered. I trust you've warmed up?"

Viktor rolled his shoulders and ditched his coat, then made his way to the center of the studio. "Some."

"Stretches, then."

She ordered them through various ballet positions and stretches to start, which all felt far too much like the days in the Academy. But at least he was able to show Minako that yes, he had been trained, and very well thank you. Watching Yuuri was a very nice perk, too.

Finally, she announced that they were ready while a waltz began to play.

"So, Yuuri," Viktor began as he approached, looking almost as nervous as he himself felt. "Do you have a preference in who leads?"

Yuuri shook his head. "I'm fine either way."

"Very well." Viktor held out his hand. "We'll switch between songs, then. I'll start."

Once he took his hand, Viktor pulled him in and settled his other hand at his waist. Then, after his posture was adjusted, he offered a small, polite smile, and began the dance. Just as before, Yuuri moved along with him without hesitation, following his guidance as easily as if they'd done this dance a thousand times before.

And they had... at least, in Viktor's dreams.

"I know you've studied dance. You must have. Did you do more than just with Minako-sensei?"

Viktor kept his tone light and casual, just like the dance space between them. From the corner of his eye he could see Minako sneaking glances while she pretended to be busy with paperwork. He wouldn't have been surprised if she were taking covert photos, either. He could always sense that sort of thing...

"Yeah. Did some ballroom and modern throughout my time in Detroit."

He nodded, turning his attention back to Yuuri. "That explains why you're so well-versed and practiced, since you just graduated. It's been years since I've done much, so you'll have to forgive me if I'm a little rusty."

"You're not bad." Yuuri smiled as he said it. Was he teasing or being sincere?

"Not... bad?" Viktor couldn't decide if he should be offended or not. "But not good?"

"Hehe, of course you're good."

So it was a compliment. Or a tease. Or something. Viktor frowned, nodding, and let his gaze fall away. "Oh... okay. You're quite good, too."

"Thanks." Yuuri adjusted his hold on Viktor's shoulder, bringing his step in just a little bit closer. "I've missed dancing."

"Me, too..." Viktor made the admission before he realized that his tone had shifted again- it was
wistful. He retaliated by twisting his palm against Yuuri’s, angling their hands to lace their fingers instead of simply holding on. “I always forget how nice it is.”

If it did anything to fluster him, Yuuri didn’t let on, simply keeping perfect time with each of his movements, smile soft and fixed into place. A gentleman. "And how easy it is to fall into step."

It was easy to fall into step, especially with such a good partner. The triple time carried them around the room in languid circles, feet moving with the melody. "Mmm. Or get lost in the music..." He was falling into that trap again, watching Yuuri’s eyes, body moving on its own, really and truly lost. Viktor pulled Yuuri closer. "And pretty soon... you're the only ones left in the world..."

"We keep doing that... Being in our own world."

"We do.” Viktor longed to keep it that way. To be taken in by that spell and give all of himself away without hesitation. But the music came to an end, as did their dance, and Viktor pulled back to bow to him instead. "The next song is your lead, Yuuri."

"Y-yeah..."

“Okay, here we go!” Minako started the next song, one with 4/4 time and rhythmic tempo. “Let’s see what you’ve got!”

A tango. It was a tango.

Viktor turned a flat smile on Yuuri. "I guess we need to show Minako-sensei that we know what we're doing and don’t need her meddling."

Yuuri shot one glance at Minako, then turned back to Viktor with equal coolness. "She knows that I know what I’m doing... I think she's testing you."

"Testing me...?" Great, just what he needed. It was one thing for her to drag them out to the studio, but he’d complied with her threats already. What kind of testing did she need to do? Viktor narrowed his eyes, looking to the woman in the corner. What did she think she was going to do? Stop him from being Yuuri’s coach if he didn’t do whatever she had in mind?

All thoughts, paranoid and otherwise, came to a screeching halt when Viktor’s attention was pulled away by the touch to his face. The back of Yuuri’s hand, two fingers to wrist, slid down his cheek and along his jawline, lingering only long enough to give the impression of follow through- neck, shoulder, chest, oh yes -before he took it away with an innocent smile.

It left Viktor stunned, staring and helpless, head turned back to Yuuri with all attention undivided once more. Had he taught him to do that? It didn’t matter. There wasn’t time to think. Yuuri pulled him in and all at once, the music had him, too.

Yuuri was confident, and that had Viktor weak to every suggestion, subtle or not, which made him an exceptionally receptive dance partner.

It felt like that night at the banquet, with Yuuri’s hands on his thigh or at his back, supporting him through the tight turns, the dips, the leg lifts and hooks, only Yuuri wasn’t drunk. Yuuri knew what he was doing; every movement had feeling behind it, and the intimacy of dancing so close, stepping so quickly, miming the actions he ached for, all left him dizzy and breathless and so, so, wanting.

In the end, Yuuri held him in a dip through the customary beats of final pose, then brought him
back to his feet.

“Thank you,” Viktor said, and took two steps sideways to give himself room to breathe and cool off, like the proximity to Yuuri were burning him alive. He brought two fingers to his cheek where Yuuri had touched him earlier, surprised at the heat there. Worked up. Over a tango. But a tango with *Yuuri*...

"Partner switch! Let's give Viktor a breather."

A breather? Since when did Viktor Nikiforov need a breather? Still, his heart was pounding and he couldn’t get his head to clear. Those hands… the way he’d--

“Go on, off the dance floor. Shoo!”

Viktor dragged himself away, returning to the bench and his gym bag. He fished out his water bottle and drank, letting his gaze rest on them. They were setting up for a jive by the sound of it. Cute. Just the sort of thing a teacher and student could do without it seeming too predatory.

Not like that last dance.

Minako had been trying to make a point. And perhaps she was right to do so. If he hadn’t turned his head away in that last dip, and Yuuri had gone in for a kiss- what would he have done? Given in, probably. It was dangerous, the game that they played. Yuuri didn’t always know what he was doing, but he knew what he was doing.

If he had any sense at all, he’d run. Cut the intimacy between them, force cold professionalism, and keep his head this time. Not like he had after the kiss. Those days had been miserable and hard on them both. He thought that if he could get through the week that maybe it wouldn’t be so difficult, that they could talk it through and dismiss things. But then Yuuri had to keep trying to cheer him up. Had noticed that he wasn’t himself. Had told him to take a break and touched his head, played with him, like before…

God, no. There was no helping it. Viktor had no sense and he didn’t want any. Not if it kept him from Yuuri. And yet…

Minako was doing most of the work on the dance floor, as was the usual in partnered dances. The women always had the best and most interesting steps. Not that Yuuri was a slouch; he was doing his part very well, but Minako was the one showing off. It wasn’t fair. Granted, it’d been the same during the tango, too; Viktor had been the one pressing his knee to Yuuri’s side or using him as a pole to twirl around.

It was stupid.

And he was jealous that he wasn’t the one dancing the jive with Yuuri. Either part. Which was also stupid. He took another long pull from his water bottle and slumped back on the bench. They really were cute, though.

When they finished, Viktor clapped, setting his bottle aside. “Bravo!” he called. “Encore, encore!”

“Nope,” Minako said, crossing over to him. She took his hand. “Will you lead me in a samba?”

"Aha!” Viktor got to his feet, casting one glance at Yuuri as they switched places on the bench, then turned back to her. “So now I see what your plan was all along.”

"Oh? And what plan might that be? I could lead you if you prefer."
"I'm quite comfortable either way," Viktor shrugged, then tugged on her hand to gently guide her into a twirl, right up against him. She responded *beautifully*. “But I think you just wanted to have us come so you could dance with me." 

"Maybe a little. You are using *my* studio."

"Of course, Minako-sensei. I'm happy to."

The samba was one that had always intimidated his male peers at the Academy; they could do lifts and leaps just fine, but moving their hips? It probably shouldn’t have been a surprise, but Viktor still didn’t understand it. There were few dances that were as fast and as fun, allowing both partners to show off their moves, and he *loved* it.

Of course, he had no problem shaking his hips, so that may have been why.

She asked Yuuri to start the music, and then they began; standard steps for a song that Viktor was familiar with. A classic. He hoped that Minako would be impressed by his polish, leading them through a mix of simple and more complicated moves to stretch out the pacing. He knew what he was doing when it came to dance, on or off the ice, and he wanted her to know that. More importantly, he hoped that Yuuri was watching. Perhaps even wanting, too. Although the samba wasn’t as intimate as the tango, it was still a passionate dance, and Viktor could fake that better than most.

By the end, Viktor was breathless again, but only from the exertion, laughing to himself as he twirled Minako once more for good measure. “There you go. One samba!”

“Very nice.” She twisted from his hand and turned back to Yuuri, smile sweet. “Yuuri, could you dance on your own for a little while? I want to talk to your coach.”

“Uhm. Sure.”

“This way to my office, Mr. Nikiforov.”

Viktor sighed, but knew it was an inevitable outcome. The samba wasn’t one for discussion, so if Minako wanted to corner him, it’d have to be another time. Of *course* he wasn’t going to get off that easily. He followed her into the little corner office and stepped aside while she closed the door.

"I think I understand you a bit better, now," she said, and moved to sit on top of her desk.

Viktor stayed standing, arms folded across his chest. "Oh do you now? Am I passing your little test?"

"With flying colors and extra credit."

"Okay, I'm used to breaking world records but *that* statement concerns me. What is this about?"

Minako crossed one leg over the other and leaned forward, steepling her fingers over her knee. "Yuuri hasn't been one to be fooled by the playboy rumors. Tabloids and all that. He wants to believe in the good of people."

"So he's told me..."

"You put on a persona is all. And it's more than finding an experienced dance partner."

He didn’t like where the conversation was headed. "Is that so?"
"Dancing with me was how I'm used to seeing you; pro flirt, but subtle."

"And why shouldn't I, right?" Viktor leaned against the door, lips drawn into a frown. “You’re a beautiful woman.”

She smiled, calm and invincible as ever. "So closed off and not letting anyone in, even while dancing with you."

It was as if he hadn’t even given her the compliment. Was she listening to him at all? Viktor shook his head. "That's not... Are you saying I wasn't a good partner?"

"No, no, of course not. I'm just saying there's a difference between dancing with me and dancing with Yuuri. Here, let me show you." Minako took out her mobile and unlocked it, swiping to her recent photo reel. "Your posture is a big giveaway."

Wincing, Viktor pushed from the door and stepped over to peer at the image on the screen. It was from the waltz- that much he could tell by their posture -and the soft, dreamy look on his own face was impossible to miss. He swallowed.

"Not saying it's bad one way or other, but you were stiffer with me. Loose and open with Yuuri."

She scrolled through more photos to show him, all while Viktor dragged a hand through his hair. The evidence was clear; he couldn’t pull his eyes away. He couldn’t stop touching. They got closer and closer…

"Awww this is a good one. You like his hand there."

He choked.

"I didn't get him touching your face, but I got your face after. Priceless."

Viktor frowned at the color on his cheeks and the wide-eyes, so terribly obvious that it hurt to look at. He closed his eyes. "Damn..."

"Yuuri may not notice everything, but he knows, okay?"

"So was the point of this to... what, warn me?" She had him right where she wanted him. It wouldn’t be difficult for someone like her to destroy the fragile image he’d built up in the community. Viktor had let his guard down since coming to Hasetsu; he knew that, and yet he still hadn’t expected this…

"Yuuri asked to use the studio to dance with you. He told me you kissed him." She shrugged and set the phone aside. "He was pretty frazzled about it. I wanted to help him out since he's loved you forever. Then he was so sad when you said no. I approached you on my own. All me. He was ready to let it go."

Viktor reached behind him, feeling back until he found a chair to sink into. "I didn't say I..." He needed to breathe, to calm down, to clear his head again. There was a rational way to approach the situation. Was Minako for or against Yuuri being in love with him? Viktor wasn’t sure. The evidence suggested for, but then again… Viktor shook his head. "I don't want to stand in his way or hold him back. I don't want to distract him or ruin his chances. I don't want to make things difficult. I've been down that road before, Minako-sensei."

"Why don't you let him make that decision?"
"Because he's impulsive like I am!" And that had only led to disaster.

"I suppose, but I've never seen him work for something like this."

"I want to prove it to him: that he can win... that he can do it."

Minako studied him for a moment, then frowned. "...Oh, you're talking about skating."

"I'm talking about all of it, but especially now."

"You want him to win your affections?"

"I- what?"

"Pffft, well if you do, he deserves a trophy."

"N-no, look, I just have to-" Viktor gestured with his hands, but the movement didn’t even make sense to him. He was flailing. "I can’t. Just until the grand prix final, get him to gold, and then, after that..."

"Well, isn't this 'dance' putting unnecessary strain on him? It'd stress me out."

She was right. She was completely right. He groaned. "It wasn't supposed to be like this..."

"Affections on hold for months to win a competition... Didn’t expect him to wrap you around his finger?"

Viktor responded by dropping his head into his hands and groaning again. She was right about that, too.

"I'm surprised and proud, to be honest."

"Oh I'm sure you are,” he grumbled, voice muffled by his palms. “After teaching him those moves for Eros."

"He had it in him the whole time. I just had to convince him it was okay to let it all out. He needs a little push from time to time."

"God I'm in trouble..."

"I'd say if you're not interested, tell him, but we know that's not the case."

"It was hopeless from the start. From the very first moment…” Viktor finally lifted his head, meeting her smirk with a look of weary despair. “I'm sure you're just loving this, aren't you?"

"Even five-time world champs need a push."

"You're a bully, Minako-sensei."

"Is it bullying when it's something you want?"

"Yeeeeses. Technically, it is." Sighing, Viktor pushed up from the chair. "And what'll you have us dance next, oh Puppet Master?"

"I can start busting out the threats if you'd like."

"Threats?"
"Clearly I put you on edge. So you'll take anything I say very seriously."

Again, truth. Viktor hesitated where he stood, completely unsure if she was teasing or not.

She continued. "You were expecting me to anyway."

"That does seem to be your modus operandi."

"Yuuri is very precious to me. It's my job."

"Well if it's any consolation, I'd much rather it be my heart and reputation broken than his. So no matter what happens, I'm prepared to take the fall if I possibly can."

"Sweet, but... That's still Yuuri grasping at straws."

"So what you're saying is... that this isn't noble at all."

"Break your heart all you like, but this? This will wear on him."

Viktor straightened up again, arms returning to their previous position; folded, closed off, cold. "So it's pointless, unnecessary torture that I'm putting us through, that's what you're telling me."

"It's noble to a point, I see what you're saying, but you aren't considering Yuuri. What he wants, what he's capable of. At the very least, tell him what you told me."

"What, that I don't want him to go through what I did?" Viktor rolled his eyes. "How is that not considering him?"

"That's something you need to talk to him about. You can't assume things like that. Some people are willing. Besides... you wouldn't want it to happen to him, so you'd do your best so the same things wouldn't happen, right?"

"Of course, but I can't change the world, Minako-sensei. The wolves are everywhere."

"I suppose not... Can I ask you something?"

He gave himself a moment to consider, studying her while he sorted things out in his head. If she wanted to know where he stood with Yuuri, he'd tell her. He'd own up to it. Yes, he loved him. More than anything. With everything that he was. If she really wanted to hear that from him, he'd say it. "Sure."

"You talking about the world and what you went through, it reminded me of when you cut your hair. Was that your choice? Yes or no, is fine."

Viktor stilled. Of all the things she could have asked, that wasn’t what he expected. It’d been so long since anyone had asked him about that; so long since he’d had to deliver the lines prepared and excuses that had been made. He struggled to recall them again; the proper wording in English, the right nuances, how to keep his voice from waverling and his hands from reaching to touch the severed, silver ends when he talked.

Every second he hesitated was another bit of power that he gave up, exposing weakness, revealing too many secrets. Things he wasn’t prepared to discuss. Not with her, not with anyone.

Was it his choice?

"It's- complicated," he finally said, voice strained.
"I see. Yuuri knew a lot about you."

Viktor stared at the floor. "Oh?"

"At the time I didn't give it a whole lot of thought, just trying to placate him. He was worried about you."

"Way back then, huh?"

"Yeah. I told him it was probably because you grew up and it was getting in the way, things like that happen, etc. And I know it does, but it's not always that simple. He was fourteen; I wasn't going to get all political on him. I'm sure by now he's pieced together more."

"...it's not exactly a pleasant topic of discussion."

"I imagine not. Are you worried about that for him?"

"Of course I am..." It was one of the many things on the list that he was worried about, and definitely one of the most concerning. Hasetsu seemed reasonably safe, even with Minako the Bully, but the rest of the world? Competitive skating? Viktor didn't trust any of it.

"He's dealt with it to some degree. He's not completely naive."

"No... but as you've said, I have a reputation."

"Well, you kind of mucked that up coming here for him."

"I know... I know. This is all my fault."

"He doesn't like to be coddled, so don't protect him. Well, from everything."

Yuuri had said it himself that he hated that, and Viktor had told him that he wasn't weak. He still didn't think so. Was Minako right? Was he coddling Yuuri, doing too much to protect him when he didn't need protecting? Viktor brought his hand to his neck and rubbed at the undercut of his hair. It was damp with sweat and getting too long; he was due for another haircut. He sighed. "You're right."

"He's been denied what he's wanted for a really long time."

"Me, too," Viktor said, and pressed his back against the door. The truth of it all weighed on him. He was tired. "I know I don't need to tell you this, but... I love him. I do. I just need to... figure out a way to make it work."

She clutched her chest, the narrow-eyed coldness fading. "No, you didn't, but that was so sweet to hear. Just talk to him. Lay out the concerns."

The door that separated him from Yuuri was smooth under his hands. "Right... he's probably wondering what we're talking about."

"Yep. And I'm sure he will ask you about us, so you better tell him."

"I'll tell him you were a bully."

She laughed, and the tension broke.

"...Anyway, thanks for letting us use your studio."
"You're very welcome, please use it anytime."

Viktor managed a half smile. "It was nice to dance again."

"I could tell. Hey, so, you think you can introduce me to Christophe Giacometti at the cup of China?"

Oh. Of course. He should have been expecting that. While Minako’s smile spread into a brilliant and charming plea, Viktor’s went flat once again. "I certainly can, but he's taken."

"Oh I know. He's still super hot."

"I'll let him know." He shuddered. "...You two would get along; you both like to meddle."

"Meddling with you specifically ooooor?"

"With everyone, but especially me."

"Jeez don't look so jealous~"

"I'm not." He wasn’t. He thought. Probably.

"Someone saying someone is hotter than you bothers you."

It didn’t. At least, he was relatively sure. "No it's just- okay I think…” Viktor turned away, hand on the door knob. “I think we're done here."

"Sure, sure~"

"Yuuri!"

Yuuri looked up from where he was at the bench, wiping his face with the end of his shirt. The music that played had been abandoned, but he’d kept dancing as asked. “Yeah?”

"Have you had enough fun dancing? We can leave now if you'd like."

"Is everything okay?"

"Oh yes everything is…” Viktor considered his words, forcing a tight smile. “Great."

He regarded him with a wary glance, but nodded. "I'm... done if you are."

"I am. That is, unless Minako-sensei had any more special surprise traps for us."

"Someone is testy," Minako said from the door frame where she’d taken residence, leaning and examining her nails. “Nah, I'm good."

"She says we can come back anytime, though. So don’t worry about that."

"Let me know when."

"Right, so you can be prepared to meddle."

"No, I have paying students. Don't be so full of yourself."

"We'll let you know." Viktor went to the bench to gather his things in a huff, and looked Yuuri over when he came to his side. "How tired are you?"
"Not too bad."

"Even after all that travelling this morning?" Viktor patted his face down with a towel, then smirked up at him. "Wow."

"Just a little winded. Why?"

He pursed his lips. "...Quick question."

"Yeah?"

"Who's hotter, me or Chris?"

"Huh?"

"You know, Chris... Christophe Giacometti. Swiss skater. Minako says he's hotter than me."

"Oh. Is that why you're upset?"

"Uh... sure." It wasn’t. But Yuuri didn’t need to know that. "Just answer the question."

"Um... Minako-sensei is entitled to her opinion."

Viktor looked him over, gaze traveling from his face down to their matching bare feet, and then back again. It was an opportunity to openly compliment him. Was Yuuri still in the game, or not?

"Sure but what is your opinion?"

What followed were a handful of seconds for Yuuri to look thoughtful, and then he smiled, lifting a hand to Viktor’s face once more. "Isn't it obvious?"

When the heat prickled under Yuuri’s fingers, Viktor let his water bottle slip from his grip and fall to the floor where it bounced once, then rolled underneath the bench.

He was still in.

Viktor snapped Yuuri’s hand away from his face and dragged him back out to the center of the floor. "Minako-sensei!"

"What? Changed your mind?"

"Yep! One more for the road please. I'll be leading... do you have any preferences, Yuuri? Cha cha? Mambo?" Viktor spun him, bringing him in as he’d done to Minako before, then out again to a starting pose. "How about... a salsa?"

Yuuri had to skip a step or two to keep up, but turned out gracefully, free arm extended. "Yeah. I'll see what I can do."

"After that tango I'm sure you'll be fine. Minako-sensei, a salsa please."

"Sure thing."

As before, the pair of them were ready when the music started, and Viktor led Yuuri through his paces. Salsa meant that Yuuri would be given ample opportunity to show off, which was just what Viktor wanted. It wasn’t that he needed Yuuri to earn his affections as Minako had wondered; Yuuri had them already. He had his heart already locked up and the key was gone. So where was the resistance coming from?
Salsa was all about the legs; step after step, shifting weight to create the movement in the hips, while the rest of the body just followed after. Viktor was free to touch his waist, sides, and shoulders, whatever he needed to in order to guide Yuuri where he wanted, so long as they both kept moving. Yuuri complied, kept moving, another step on each beat while Viktor stayed close, pulling him along.

Wasn’t that what Minako had hinted at? That Viktor was stringing him along? Interested, but unwilling to own up to it. He spun Yuuri out again, taking his time to return to him with his own quick step, wishing he was wearing real dancing shoes or a nice pair of heels. Was it the fear of the media? If so, why had he asked Yuuri out in the first place? It hadn’t bothered him then. Or had it just not occurred to him to worry?

He was stupid. Yuuri had proved that he wanted give and take. He was quiet. Good with secrets. It wasn’t like the media didn’t already suspect; it was all over the internet that Katsuki and Nikiforov may or may not be a thing. Them not being together didn’t change that at all. So what was the problem?

Yuuri stumbled once, his movements a little sluggish as he made up for the lost time, getting back into step. He was tired. And the salsa was not an easy dance by any means. Viktor should have recognized it long before, but at least he could do something about it now.

When Viktor pulled him in next, Yuuri twirling in, back against his chest, Viktor caught and held him there, arms around his middle. And there he just… stopped.

"Music... Still going." Yuuri looked back at him, confused.

"We don't have to finish. Are you okay?"

"Yeah... Just tired."

Tired was one way to put it. Viktor could feel him shaking. "Rain check on the salsa?"

"Yeah! Sorry about that..."

"Not at all." Viktor offered a gentle smile, loosening his arms to let him go, but Yuuri stayed where he was, leaning against him. “I shouldn't have pushed you."

"Not a push when I wanted to."

"Yuuri tired?" Minako laughed, coming over to see why they’d stopped dancing. “I don’t believe it."

"He was dancing the whole time you were lecturing me, and he just flew in from Tokyo this morning." Viktor didn’t like the way that she was looking at them, examining their body language, trying to puzzle them out. He tightened his arms around Yuuri again, and set his chin on top of his head. Protective.

"Giving him the night off?"

Viktor nodded, which nodded Yuuri’s head, too. "I don't want him getting hurt."

"I could have stopped…" Yuuri settled his arms on top of Viktor’s, apparently quite comfortable with the arrangement. “But it was fun."

"That's why you have a coach... to stop you anyway."
"I guess so..."

Minako watched them for a few moments longer, then waved them off. "Well you both should stretch out before you leave."

"A good idea. And then a hot bath, right Yuuri?"

"That sounds nice."

"Okay, stretches, c’mon."

"Hai, hai."

Viktor let him go once more, keeping just one hand on his shoulder to make sure he was steady. After what Minako had seen, there was no way he could just ignore it. He had to figure it out.

The lamp lights switched on not long after the pair of them made it to the bath, freshly scrubbed and tired. Evenings in early November weren’t as popular for guests, especially during the week, so they mostly had the onsen to themselves. Not that it would have mattered, anyway; they were always given privacy by the locals and Yuuri’s family, which hadn’t occurred to Viktor to be significant until then. Was it really that obvious?

Perhaps they were just being respectful. Viktor was a celebrity, after all. That could have been it… just giving him space. He and Yuuri both; living legend and the country’s top skater, alone together. He had to smile at that, wondering just how many knew. Certainly, there were paparazzi photos floating around by then. The news hounds had come to Hasetsu once they’d figured out where he was, and it wouldn’t have been difficult to sneak in as a guest for photos; it wasn’t like Yu-Topia had tight security.

Viktor leaned his head back against the smooth rocks that made up the sides of the pool, eyes closed to savor the warmth that spread down his spine. It didn’t matter to him if they saw; his body had long since ceased to be his own property, but how did Yuuri feel about it? He was much more reserved…

They sat in comfortable silence for several minutes, just soaking and relaxing, before Viktor opened his eyes again. The tension was gone, leaving him with the floating feeling that mineral water always did, aches and pains numbed for the time being. Yuuri seemed content, too, with a little smile of contemplation playing over his lips, eyes half-closed and unfocused.

It was nice, seeing him happy like that. Not at all like that morning.

“Can you believe that we’re leaving for Beijing in just a few days?” Viktor asked, voice just loud enough to carry over the steady trickle of fresh water into the bath.

Yuuri shook the daze off to look at him, then smiled and drooped again, sinking until the water just covered his shoulders. “It’s weird thinking that earlier this year, I was convinced I was never going to do this again.”

“And I thought I’d be going for my sixth consecutive win.”

“Crazy how life changes like that.”

“Yeah…” Viktor wasn’t sure which part of it all was the craziest, but it had all led to this. He
stretched his arms above the water, letting the droplets chill on his hands above the mist, then lowered himself to soak up just a little more warmth. “You know, I’ve probably said this before, but you’re an excellent dancer.”

Yuuri laughed, such a sweet and soft sound, so calm and open that Viktor had to turn away from the stars to watch him. “You have. Once or twice, I think,” he said, and canted his head to one side in the most impossibly cute expression of sincerity. “You’re incredible.”

There was no mistaking the ache in his chest at hearing those words, and Viktor ducked his head in defense as if the sweetness of the complement and his face were too much to bear at once. Why did it hurt so much? Was that why he was pushing Yuuri away? Acting so hot and cold, sending mixed signals of yes, I want you, with but we can’t be together, all adding up to a menagerie of confusion for them both? He was afraid, and the realization had him staring through the sting of sudden tears at the surface of the water.

Viktor Nikiforov was afraid.

Loving someone was one thing, but being loved in return was such a terribly vulnerable thing. It wasn’t safe or cautious, it left one open for so much pain and exploitation. Yet there it was, right in front of him, warm and inviting, with the most precious smile and beautiful eyes. His soulmate. Someone who wanted to hold on to him, who wanted him to be himself. Just Viktor.

Perhaps for Yuuri, he’d try to be brave.

Viktor met his gaze, painfully aware of just how raw his heart was, and gave his surrender with a quiet hum. “Thank you.”

This continued over the next few days, with Yuuri offering his flirtations and sweet nothings and Viktor shyly accepting them. It was hard to take, but harder still to see traces of hesitation on Yuuri’s face. There was practice each morning following the same routine, Yuuri meeting Viktor at the rink to go over the programs for fine-tuning before Beijing. Viktor offered his criticism, honest but gentle, and Yuuri took it in stride.

That in turn made Viktor more confident and thus, more receptive. And the more receptive Viktor was, the less aggressive Yuuri had to be until they settled into a companionable level of affection that neither could define… not that they needed to. Not yet, anyway. Trading compliments and innocent touches to shoulders and arms seemed enough. The occasional significant glance that lingered was appreciated and wondered at. They sat close together, spoke softly, and teased playfully.

The air turned colder as the days grew shorter, and before either realized it, the time had come to leave their sleepy Hasetsu to begin the season.

“Yuuri. Come with us to the beach!”

“It’s November…”

Viktor crouched at his door with Makkachin, arm around the poodle’s neck, cheek against his ear. “Makka really, really wants to go one last time before we leave.”

It was the day before their flight, and Mama Katsuki had told them to be ready for dinner by seven.
Katsudon, because it was Vicchan’s favorite, not Yuuri’s, therefore an allowed exception to the diet.

Makkachin licked Viktor’s face from the side of his mouth, then panted happily as his master wiped off the slobber with the back of his hand.

“Come on, Yuuri. Please?”

Both man and dog gave puppy eyes, which was known to work wonders on even the busiest of Yuuris, and he relented with a smile. “Okay. Let’s go before it gets too dark.”

They set out a few minutes later, both in jeans and t-shirts, and made their way to the beach just as the sun began to sink toward the horizon. Yuuri had been right to be wary; it was cold, and the ocean uninviting in its chilling sprays of salty mist off the shore. Not that it seemed to matter to the dog, or the Russian for that matter, who abandoned his shoes the moment they were in the sand.

“Now this! This is like Saint Petersburg!” Viktor laughed, waving his arms in the air and taking in the scent of the sea with a deep breath. “Makkachin! Let’s race!”

Makkachin didn’t need to be told twice, taking off at a gallop across the sand with tail high and waving. Viktor chased after him, kicking up sand as he went, which got the poodle barking. He loved this game!

They weaved in and out of the surf, Viktor letting the water come to his ankles before he ran out again, laughing and leaping into the air. “It’s cold! Yuuri! It’s so cold! Come on!”

And Yuuri followed, jogging after without so much of the crazy, though he couldn’t hold back the smile on his face. “Of course it’s cold!”

That only made Viktor laugh harder, and soon he was turning his frenzied jumps into twirls and sashays, arms spreading out to dance, though he had no idea which dance he was trying to do. Half of the movements looked like they might have been from Stay Close to Me, but the rest were a mishmash of all sorts of other things, and he didn’t care. It was cold and he was in love, and they were going to Beijing to start their journey to win gold.

Viktor pivoted in the sand and pounced at Yuuri, taking his hands to swing him around. “Dance with me!” he yelled, breathless from the running and jumping, but he couldn’t stop. And when Yuuri, laughing, followed suit in the impromptu ring around the rosie, Viktor couldn’t help himself. He had to declare it, one way or the other, heart too full to do anything else.

So he did. In Russian. And at the top of his lungs. “I’m in love!” he crowed. “In love with you! And it’s SO cold!”

Yuuri stared at him, glasses askew, expression somewhere between charmed and so confused, but at least didn’t seem to understand what Viktor had said.

He let go of Yuuri’s hands, smile so broad that his face hurt, and took off again, jogging backward. “Come on, Yuuri!” Viktor called to him again. “Come on, come on!”

It was only a few more yards before Viktor tripped over his own feet and went sprawling, flat on his back in the sand with a wUMF. The sand that billowed up was swept away by the freezing wind, and in return, both Yuuri and Makkachin raced to his side.

“Viktor! Are you okay?”
“Yes, I’m--- ack!” Viktor coughed as Makkachin pounced him, licking his face all over. It was one of Makkachin’s other favorite games; tackling whenever a man was down. It left him laughing again until he was winded. “NoooOoo! Makka!”

Yuuri grabbed Makkachin around the middle to haul him off, letting Viktor sit up and comb the sand out of his hair and shake it off of his clothes. The poodle was only temporarily deterred, though, moving back in for more affection as soon as Yuuri’s grip had laxed.

“Sorry!”

“It’s- fine! Makkachin, c’mon!” Viktor ruffled the dog’s ears, then ran his hands down his neck and to his shoulders, then took him by the front paws to make him dance. “Tram-param-param-param-pam-pa!”

Makkachin, who had never been a fan of being made to dance- with the exception of being carried on the ice -licked Viktor’s hands until he let go, then backed up, barking again.

“No more dancing? Aw…”

“Guess he doesn’t like it. Like you said.”

“Oh well.” Sighing, Viktor offered his hand to Yuuri instead. He clasped it, shifting his weight to pull up- only for Viktor to yank him down to the sand with him. “Ha!”

“Woah-hey!” He tumbled, first into Viktor, and then scrambled to his side, flushed, but eventually got settled again. Sitting, as requested, right next to Viktor. “You could have just asked.”

Viktor shrugged, stretching one leg out, then the other, bare toes digging into the sand. “I guess,” he said, then heaved a sigh and dropped his head onto Yuuri’s shoulder with a little plop. “But that was fun.”

Yuuri said nothing, only tilted his head a little. To catch his eye? Maybe. Viktor kept his gaze on the vast expanse of open water ahead, keenly aware of the warmth between them where the skin of their arms touched and their sides almost met.

It was nice… to sit and watch the sunset like this, even though it was cold. Yuuri didn’t complain, and neither did Viktor. Not for a long stretch of time, simply sitting together, close and quiet, listening to the waves on the shore and the occasional call of a gull.

The golden autumn sunset faded with the sinking sun, setting in a deeper chill with the night. Viktor turned his head, touching his nose to Yuuri’s neck, smirking when he shivered and laughed in response. “It’s cold,” he said, and pulled himself away to sit up straight and stretch out his arms.

“Yeah. We should probably head back.”

“It wouldn’t be good to get sick before the competition.”

“It wouldn’t.”

Viktor shifted onto his hip, lips pursing a moment as he considered. “Hm.”

“Hm?”

“Oh, nothing.” Viktor tapped Yuuri on the end of the nose, then got up with a grunt, reaching back for him after shaking off the cold. “You’re just cute, that’s all.”
Yuuri took his hand after staring for several seconds, cheeks rosy once again, and let Viktor help him to his feet.

“Makkachin! Let’s go home!” Viktor called, tugging Yuuri along. “Where did my shoes go?”

They found them near the start of the road where Viktor had discarded them earlier. He bent to take them with his free hand, only for his other hand to slip free. He hadn’t meant for that, but then, he hadn’t exactly meant to keep holding Yuuri’s hand, either. One awkward glance told him that Yuuri hadn’t, either. He flexed the fingers of his cooling, now empty hand, shifting his weight from foot to foot. “I’ve, uh, got ‘em,” Viktor said, waiting. Hopeful. Even though it was stupid. Childish, even.

Yuuri looked at the shoes, then Viktor’s hand before meeting his gaze again, nodding. “Good. Don’t want to lose those.”

“No…” Viktor shook his head and forced another little smile, shuffling off toward the road again. “Okay, let’s go before we miss dinner.”

“Viktor.”

Viktor turned to him, fighting to keep the dejection seeping into his expression, and hesitated at the smile that greeted him. Yuuri stepped up close and took his hand, lacing their fingers before he continued on.

Had it been anywhere but Hasetsu, and any time other than under the cover of nightfall, Viktor might have been more worried. Instead, all he could do was bite his lip to calm his giddy smile, sure that he’d stay plenty warm for the walk home as long as Yuuri kept holding his hand.

Saying goodbye was tough, especially for Viktor. Yuuri gave out his hugs and said his farewells just like every time he’d left for a competition before, while Viktor lingered with each one. Normally when he left, the only one he had to say goodbye to was Makkachin, not an entire loving family, who squeezed tight and wished well in their own words.

It was hard to leave them. The family, Makkachin, Hasetsu, all of it.

Viktor hugged Makkachin twice as long as anyone else, giving him instructions like he had for the others on how to take care of things in his absence. Yu-topia wasn’t his apartment; Makkachin wasn’t just going to get to sleep all day until the superintendent came by to take him on a walk. He had people to look after and love on.

“And don’t you dare steal any steamed buns, okay?”

“Viktor, we’re going to miss our flight!”

They left, carting luggage into the frosty morning, bound and ready as they’d ever be for Beijing.

It was going to be a long day, but at least both of them were experienced travelers; moving through airport security without any hiccups or confusion. Having gone on so many international flights, the process had lost all novelty.

Almost.

“Do you ever think about how everyone in this airport has their own story?” Viktor asked, pace
leisurely to keep up with Yuuri’s shorter-legged hustle through the crowds. “I mean, how many of the people here do you know?”

“Probably no one.”

“Exactly. And yet they all came from somewhere, have families and memories, hopes and dreams… and they’re all going somewhere, too. Some will be on our flight, but are any of them going to the Cup of China, or just to Beijing? Or is it just a connecting flight for them?” Viktor shook his head, smile wide and dreamy as he took in all of the people around them. “Where are they going? Why are they going there?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s amazing! Don’t you just wish you could ask them?”

“Not… really.”

Viktor bumped his shoulder. “Yuuri,” he said, and clicked his tongue in disappointment. “It’s fun.”

“Sorry.”

They got quiet after that, walking to and waiting in their terminal while Viktor watched him, thoughtful. Was he nervous? That would explain the terse responses, anyway. But Yuuri had flown a hundred times before at least, and the Cup of China was only the first leg in their competitive tour. If the anxiety was already eating at him…

Viktor kept his comments to himself until they’d boarded and he felt comfortable joking about the seats. Flying coach! Of all the things. Now that was different. Champagne? But Yuuri didn’t seem amused. He just wanted to sleep.

And Yuuri was nervous. He could feel the muscles in his arm tense against his own, see the way his gaze shifted from seat to seat ahead of them, then to the window, aimless and roving. Brows creased, mouth drawn in a tight, thin line. Was it the flying or the competition? Viktor wasn’t sure.

So he reached over to borrow some blanket, dragging it slowly away from Yuuri until he noticed, then flashed him a smile. “It’s cold,” he said, feigning innocence.

Yuuri frowned at him, but said nothing, just shifted in his seat to get comfortable once more.

Once the blanket was shared well enough, Viktor folded his arms and stretched out his hand to brush over Yuuri’s fingers, teasing at first, then gently. He watched Yuuri’s face, smile quirking when he looked down to the blanket where their hidden hands were.

“It’s going to be just fine,” he said, voice quiet.

Yuuri took his hand, sliding fingers between Viktor’s to lock them together, and nodded.

“I’m with you, Yuuri.” Viktor wriggled in his seat until he could lean against his shoulder, getting comfortable, himself. “And I’m not going to leave. Okay?”

Yuuri squeezed his hand once, then nodded again. “Thanks, Viktor.”

The flight from Fukuoka to Beijing was just under five hours, which amounted to several short naps for Viktor, and one long one for Yuuri. By the time they disembarked, went back through the
terminal, picked up their luggage, and found a cab to get to their hotel, both of them were restless. Viktor had been sitting still for **way** too long, and Yuuri, well, the anxiety was still gnawing at him as far as Viktor could tell, which only made him more antsy.

They got their room keys, dropped their luggage off- Yuuri taking the bed by the window, Viktor taking the ‘coach bed’ by the door, then got ready to check in at the venue. It wasn’t far from the hotel, and though it was plenty cold, neither of them would be outside for long. But, dealing with people- particularly the press -they had to be prepared. For Yuuri, that meant trading his coat, hat, and scarf for his Japan jersey. For Viktor, it was a complete outfit change. A light jacket and a soft v-neck tee was fine for traveling, but a public appearance meant wearing clothes that would boost his masculinity. The key was layers- his stiff and heavy black jacket over a rounded-neck t-shirt in neutral grey would do the trick. It broadened his shoulders and added a nice bit of contrast, making him look bigger, tougher, and, well, more confident. It was the armor he could wear when mascara wasn’t an option.

They set out to the rink, making plans for the evening. Registration never took very long the night before, and though they’d been given snacks on the plane, Viktor was already dying to try out the local restaurants. Hot pot? Perfect.

It wouldn’t be a date, but it might as well be. Just like going out before the Japanese qualifiers. Then it’d be relaxing with wine and the Soap Opera Megaverse, just the two of them. Maybe, just maybe, he’d come up with a clever way to sit on the same bed as Yuuri. Getting a little cozy couldn’t hurt…

The walk was short and pleasant, but as soon as they stepped through the doors, they were assaulted.

“Mr. Nikiforov!”

“Yuuri Katsuki!”

“We have questions for you!”

“Are the rumors about your relationship true?”

“How would you describe his coaching tactics?”

“We’ve heard that you’re not coming back to the ice; do you have any statements to make on that?”

“What are your plans for next season?”

Viktor frowned at the group, lips pursing in a tight pucker, then put an arm around Yuuri’s shoulders to guide him through the flock of camera-hungry reporters. “Sorry, I need to get my skater checked in at registration. We can answer your questions after that, if you’ll just **excuse us, thanks.**”

They moved, but they weren’t happy about it. Not that they could do anything against the Russian, who made it clear that he was going **that way** whether they were in his way or not. Yuuri went with him, stiff once more, eyes a little wide.

“Just ignore them.” Viktor sighed, patting him on the shoulder. “You know how the paparazzi are.”

“Right…”
They went beyond the roped off area, and to registration, filling out the necessary forms to retrieve their badges.

“There.” Viktor rubbed his thumb over the laminate where it read Coach Nikiforov, unable to hold back a proud grin. Yes. He was the coach. Then he looked to Yuuri. “Hot pot now?”

“Er, I think we’re supposed to answer those questions.”

Viktor sighed. Right. His patience for the media ran as hot and cold as anything, but now that they were interrupting dinner plans, it was nothing but icy. “Fine, fine…”

He managed a smile, scouting the lobby, and took note of the familiar faces that he saw. Chris was already there, talking to his coach while his manager, Mr. Mancakes, looked on. Good. At least that would keep him busy. As much as he wanted to see his dear old friend, there was a particular nigglng feeling in his gut that flagged as a warning. He wasn’t ready to face him just yet. Almost. Close to. But not yet.

With little effort on his part, Yuuri was soon swept up by a different crowd of interviewers, who nudged him on the makeshift platform for on-the-spot appearances, and began their grilling. At least the questions were a little less invasive.

Viktor stood at his side, half-listening, ready to take care of damage control if he needed to. But Yuuri was rambling on about his theme; that was a safe enough topic. Or, at least, it should be if Yuuri had any sense at all.

They asked about Yuuri’s goals and what love meant to him, but all he could get out were half-formed answers and vague suggestions. Yuuri still wasn’t sure what his confession had even meant, it seemed, which was cute but nothing he didn’t already know. Viktor’s attention wandered. It was difficult to stand idly by instead of making up elegant answers off the cuff for the stupid reporters. How did Yakov stand it?

Speaking of Yakov…

Viktor angled his head back to take in the sight of his former coach stalking toward them, though his gaze was focused straight ahead, right past Viktor. He looked serious. Gravely serious. But that wasn’t unusual during competition time. With him was Georgi, as was expected, though his expression was strained. Was he trying to stay focused, or was he in trouble? Viktor couldn’t tell.

“Huh? How much… power of love do I have?” Yuuri asked, awkwardly running a hand through his hair.

The questions were tough, but only because they were ridiculous. Viktor turned to Yuuri with a hopeful smile. “Yuuri. Let’s go have hot pot already.”

“Hey, I’m in the middle of an interview!”

That was technically true, but it wasn’t one that Yuuri was being paid for, and Yakov was getting away, along with his chance at fixing things before they got any worse. Well. He could leave Yuuri for a moment. With a flash of a bright smile, Viktor hopped off of the tiny stage and hurried after Yakov to catch up.

“Oh, Yakov! Ne, ne!” Viktor took hold of the back of the older man’s coat, tugging at him. “Want to come eat hot pot with us?”

He used his particularly sweet voice, which was impossible to resist with the sudden excitement
bubbling up inside of him. Yakov! Finally, Yakov! It’d been months! Yakov!

The man kept walking, steps heavy, head not even turning a fraction of an inch. It was as if he hadn’t even heard him.

Viktor laughed, half hopeful, half choking, and tugged a little harder. “Heeey, why are you ignoring me?” It came out playful, but there was a plea underneath that he knew Yakov would understand. Yakov had never ignored him before. Not more than a few seconds, anyway, and certainly not in public. It actually really hurt.

He tugged once more, and finally, Yakov stopped.

“Viktor!” he barked, turning to glare at him from over his shoulder.

Viktor let go, and took a half step back. Viktor? Not Vitya? He shook it off, forcing the hopeful little smile again. It was so good to see him, but at the same time-

“Listen, I feel sick when I see you playing pretend-coach,” he said, voice nothing short of a disgusted growl. “I’d prefer if you’d only talk to me when you’re ready to plead for your return to skating. Got it?”

The smile fell away in an instant, and Viktor shifted his gaze from Yakov to Georgi behind him, who waited for Yakov, but wouldn’t turn his head. Then he looked back at his coach. Had it been any other person in the world, Viktor would have retaliated with witticisms and banter, matching blow for blow with haughty retorts and a flippant attitude.

But Yakov. It was Yakov.

The one person he’d always been able to rely on, no matter what. The man who had always been there. Now yelling at Viktor, insulting him, calling him out, not only in front of his former teammate, who looked ashamed, but in front of his student, the press, other skaters and coaches, sponsors…

Yakov wouldn’t have done that if it wasn’t a bridge he couldn’t risk burning. He was too rational, too careful, too good at his job to destroy someone that way unless he’d meant to.

Viktor hesitated. Just three or four seconds was all that it took for the disbelief to clear away, leaving him perfectly ended. There was nothing he could say. He didn’t want to fight, and couldn’t possibly stand hearing another word. Not if he was going to survive with even a shred of dignity to his name. His heart was broken; the anguish a real and tangible, and the tattered pieces of metaphorical hope clung to the flagpole of his standing facade. If leaving Yakov had been a mistake, thinking he could approach him again had been a death sentence.

The hard limit had been reached and he needed to leave.

So he did, turning on his heel and walking quickly to sling an arm around the stunned Yuuri, who stood with equally stunned reporters, and dragged him away. “Yakov’s not interested,” Viktor announced, voice cheerful, even sing-song. “Let’s go!”

It was all he could do to afford himself a graceful exit, and he owed them both that much. They made a bee-line for the doors and out into the evening, where Viktor hurried them along back toward the hotel.

“Viktor- are you okay? Hey, wait up!”
Viktor glanced back over his shoulder, wondering when he’d lost hold of Yuuri, and slowed his step, but only a little. He had to keep moving. If he stopped, he would have to think, and he thought, he would— he shook his head. “Let’s not talk about it, okay?” he said, a terribly weak smile plastered on his face. “I just- I just want to get hot pot. It’ll be fun.”

“Yeah, okay, Viktor. Sure.”

The wolf ran hard and fast through the underbrush, branches tearing at his fur and his ears, rocks and bramble cutting his pads. He had to run, even though he knew that no matter how fast he went, or how far, he would never be able to escape what he’d done.

What she’d done.

He came to a stop in a small clearing, panting and tongue lolling out of the side of his froth-soaked muzzle. Exhaustion didn’t quite reach the depths of what he felt. It was despair. Agony.

His paws only carried him a little further before his legs gave out, and the wolf fell against the mossy earth with a groan. Maybe he’d die there and save everyone the trouble. No one needed the princess. Not when she just brought anger and misery to everyone she came in contact with.

Shuddering, he let the fur fall away, desperate to feel the rocky ground with her own skin. Once transformed, she pressed her cheek against the rain-slicked stones, dug her fingers into the mossy earth, and sobbed there among the gnarled weeds.

It was what she deserved. Baba Yaga would never take her back, never let her come home. The witch had warned the princess not to leave the tower, but she hadn’t listened. How much more blood did she need to have on her hands before she would finally realize that her life ended the night the falcon came?

She lay there, silver hair strewn, tears rolling down her pale cheeks, and tried to sleep.

... 

“Wolf!”

Startled, the princess tried to sit up. The boy! He’d found her? No… no, that wasn’t good. He couldn’t see her like this!

“Wolf, where are you?!”

He was… looking for her. Out in the dark woods, all alone.

She wiped her eyes. Crying didn’t change the fact that she’d started this journey and gotten him into this mess. She’d have to see it through, no matter what, if for no other reason than for him.

“Wolf, please… I listened to you, I ran away like you said. Please.”

The princess donned her wolf cloak and, with great effort, followed his scent to meet him. The wolf ached everywhere, tired and streaked with blood, but the boy didn’t look much better when he found him. He was worried half to death.

“I’m here, boy,” the wolf said. “I’m sorry for worrying you.”

The boy ran to him, as he’d done before, and threw his arms around his neck, also as before. “It’s
okay," he said through tears. “I found you.”

---

“Má fán nǐ, liáng wè,” Yakov said in his best Mandarin.

The waitress politely bowed, grabbing two menus, and lead the two Russians to a table, where Yakov spotted several obvious foreigners. He couldn’t pronounce the name of the restaurant, but it was one he made a point to visit when competition brought him to Beijing.

He’d even brought Viktor here before.

Yakov helped Georgi decide on a dish that satisfied his palate and competitive season diet (forever grateful for the pictures as an aid) and ordered his usual of egg foo young and a bottle of baijiu he had no intention of sharing.

Once the order was placed, he removed his heavy coat and hat and draped them on the back of his chair. Settling back in his seat, he folded his hands and rested them on the table, fingers drumming on his knuckles the seconds it took for Georgi to undoubtedly speak.

Fifteen… sixteen… seventeen --

“Viktor looked well.”

Even though Yakov knew it was coming, his hands clenched on themselves. “He did,” he admitted, sharply.

The tone served its purpose of warning, and Georgi visibly backed off, ducking his head, and clamping his mouth shut.

However, Georgi wasn’t wrong. Viktor did look well - color in his complexion, cheeks fuller, and hair thicker. Eyes bright.

Until Yakov rejected his dinner invitation.

There’d been so much hope on his face at the sight of him, and just as quickly, Yakov snuffed it out like a candle.

The old Russian didn’t consider himself a cruel man - bitter, perhaps - but what he did…

“Coach… why didn’t we go get hot pot with Viktor?”

All of his skaters had varying amounts of persistence and stubbornness. It made for excellent athletes. Not so much in being able to avoid probing of personal affairs. Had it not involved a fellow skater, a skater that clearly Yakov had a favoritism for, the chance for the subject to be dropped was higher.

But Viktor - Vitya - was a sore spot throughout the rink.

Yakov heard the unsaid ‘Didn’t you want to see Viktor?’ in Georgi’s cautious voice. Of course he did, and no, he hadn’t admitted it to his student, either. He couldn’t bear it. Not now. Not yet.

“You’re welcome to join him,” Yakov said, straightening in his seat.
Georgi did likewise. He made a move to cross his arms, but then rested them on the table instead. Good. Otherwise Yakov would have taken it as a reprimand than a thoughtful suggestion. “It wouldn’t be the same without you, Coach.”

It was then that their food arrived, platters hot and fresh, bottle of baijiu and corkscrew and two glasses placed neatly.

Even if Yakov felt like being generous, he wasn’t one to encourage his skaters to drink the night before a competition, thus pushed the would be unused glass to the center of the table.

The meal was an appreciated deterrent from conversation. The alcohol would provide a greater one.

Georgi meant well, he always did, in skating and attempts at comfort, but he couldn’t possibly understand what it was like to be approached as if he hadn’t been cast aside without a second thought.

--

Baijiu had been the right choice. Strong like vodka, great with food, and perfect for a Russian trying to forget. Viktor savored each sip like he did any night the wolves were howling, drowning them with the satisfying burn down his throat and haze in his head. Perfect. It wasn’t like he was competing, and he held his alcohol better than most that he knew. Including that damned Celestino that showed up, invited by Yuuri’s friend.

“Are you having fun playing coach still, Viktor?”

“You bet. Let me buy you a drink.”

“Hah! I’ll take the drink, but don’t think that kissing my ass is going to make me like you any better, Nikiforov.”

Viktor shook his head, pouring himself another shot. “Not at all. I intend to earn it by having my skater beat yours.”

“Oh really? Yuuri beat Phichit? Hah!”

Phichit and Yuuri exchanged nervous glances across the table. Why dinner had turned into a competition between the two coaches was beyond them, but there was clearly something going on… and it only got worse once the other bottle of baijiu arrived.

“You’ve already finished off a lot of your bottle,” Celestino said, taking a shot of his own. “So I’ll be a sport and catch up. I know you’re a Russian, but I doubt you can drink me under the table. I’ve heard things about you, Nikiforov.”

“Oh, I’m sure you have.” Viktor let him drink, pacing himself by eating more of the shrimp. It was such a wonderful indulgence, and since no one else was interested, he had it all to himself. “You probably hear all sorts of things.”

“I do, as a matter of fact.” Another shot. “Even from your ex coach, old Yakov. I heard that you two had a fight tonight.”

Phichit gaped. Yuuri grimaced. But the two other men ignored them entirely.
“We’re not on speaking terms, it’s true.”

“Because you’re a traitor, from what I hear.”

Viktor calmly poured himself another shot and downed it, tossing back his head. Another wolf drowned, and he turned an icy smile on the other man. “So I took a sabbatical to give a fellow skater a chance… I don’t think it’s a crime to see if a career can be salvaged if only with a decent coach.”

“Viktor… Ciao Ciao wasn’t a bad coach!” Yuuri hissed.

“Yeah!” Phichit added to the defense. “Don’t talk about him that way!”

But Celestino waved it off. “Let him talk. Yuuri, you do seem to be doing a lot better this season.”

“Uhm. Thank you.”

“But I have to wonder about the ethics of his teaching methods…” Celestino leveled his suspicions on Viktor, challenge on the table by pouring himself another shot. “You know, with your reputation.”

Viktor licked his lips, slow and steady, and filled his own glass without looking. He lifted it halfway across the table to accept. “Of course you’d know all about that. You are the Italian Stallion, after all, aren’t you?”

“Ohhhh…” Phichit fumbled his phone onto the table and scooped it up, fingers trembling as he hurried to find the best recording app. “This is getting real, Yuuri.”

Yuuri hadn’t stopped wincing “Viktor, maybe you don’t need to do this?”

“Oh yes. I do.” Viktor didn’t even need to turn his glare on Yuuri to get a little apology from him, and the two coaches continued to drink.

Viktor wasn’t wrong about the baijiu; it was like vodka, and the two men were steadily becoming very drunk very quickly. Moderation had no place in a figurative pissing contest.

“Wow.” Phichit leaned back in the booth, free fingers drumming on the edge of the table. “I didn’t realize that Viktor hated Ciao Ciao so much. Do you hate Ciao Ciao, Yuuri?”

“No, of course I don’t!”

“Okay, so why does he hate him?”

Yuuri, shifting uncomfortably where he sat. “Dunno.”

The pair of coaches were glaring at each other over their empty glasses until Viktor offered Celestino another shrimp. “Are you sure you don’t want one? They’re really, really good.”

“Ugh! Get that out of my face!”

“Hey Viktor.” Phichit held up a pair of chopsticks to his mouth as if it were a microphone. “Do you hate Ciao Ciao?”

Viktor blinked slowly at the chopsticks that Phichit turned on him and set the shot glass down with a solid plick. A game? A fake interview. He offered a charming smile and an oh-so-casual shrug to accompany the haughty sniff that followed. “That depends. Can you really hate a monster, or is it
just professional courtesy at that point?”

He let the words sink in, gaze flicking over his audience while their reactions registered a mix of shock, disbelief, and horror, then laughed. Perfect.

But Celestino wasn’t one to be outdone. He stole the makeshift microphone and Phichit’s hand along with it to air his own assessment, mouth cracking into a wide smile. “At least I’m a real coach, Nikiforov! Did you even fill out your paperwork? Are you even certified?”

Viktor rolled his eyes. “I take my duties as a coach seriously, unlike some people.”

“Ohhohoo, and what is THAT supposed to mean?!”

The smile dropped and the glare returned. “Leaving Yuuri like that, that’s what I mean!”

“I have NO idea what you’re talking about!”

They poured another drink, eying each other while Phichit and Yuuri exchanged nervous glances.

Yuuri set a hand on Viktor’s arm, but both coaches took their shot anyway. He waited until they were finished, then tried again. “Leave me… Viktor, I fired him.”

“It’s not about that! It’s about the banquet!”

“He’s an ADULT!” Celestino fired back, hitting the table with the flat of his hand. “He can handle himself!”

“You’re his coach!”

“He doesn’t need a babysitter!”

“No, what he needs is a friend!”

“Wow.” Phichit wasn’t sure if he was going to be able to post any of what he was getting, but it was such good drama. Such a shame.

Yuuri was nearly as helpless, but for entirely different reasons. “I’ve been to several banquets… I don’t know what he’s talking about.”

“Yeah, I have no idea.”

“It sounds to me like you’re blurring the coach/student line, Nikiforov.”

Viktor stiffened, teeth grating against each other. He shouldn’t have given so much away, but the more he drank, the less able he was to control it. He picked up the bottle of baijiu and swished it; it was three quarters of the way gone. No wonder he felt so hot under the collar. He stared at it, and the bottle doubled in his hand. That wasn’t a good sign. Huh.

“Ohhoo, did I hit a nerve?”

Ohhhhh. No. Viktor snapped his attention back to the Italian coach and poured himself another shot, though a decent amount ended up on the table instead of in his glass. “You’re the one that was fired, Celestino!”

“Wow again,” said Phichit, hand to cheek. “This is getting really savage.”
“Viktor, calm down…”

Celestino knocked his glass over when he went to fill it up in response, righted it, and successfully got it half full with only equal amounts on his napkin and plate. “Yuuri!” he laughed. “Let the real men speak!”

“Don’t you talk to him like that!” Viktor sloshed the baijiu out of the glass as he picked it up.

Phichit reached across the table to grab Yuuri’s sleeve with an insistent tug. “Yuuri! I think he’s fighting for your honor. OMG.”

“You’re damn right I am!”

“But… why? What are you on about?”

“He knows what he did,” Viktor hissed without taking his eyes off of Celestino.

“I didn’t do anything!”

“That’s exactly the problem!”

“Wow.” Phichit took his hand back to rub the ear closest to his coach, wincing. “You guys are going to get us kicked out. And is that… Italian or French? I can’t even tell, they’re slurring so much.”

“I think it’s a combination…” Yuuri grimaced. “At least lower your voices?”

They took another shot, but did, at least, drop the volume in their drunken argument. To Celestino and Viktor, it all made perfect sense. They didn’t look like red-faced idiots fighting over vague events and alcohol; they were having a heated and well-articulated discussion about very serious matters like real men.

In their minds, the conversation went something like this:

“Yakov and I have been talking.”

“Don’t you even…”

“You’re selfish.”

“So. Are. You. You should have been there for him, Celestino. He was under your care. He was alone and unattended and any number of things could have happened that night. Especially that night.”

“Maybe, maybe not. He’s old enough to make his own mistakes.”

“Coaches are supposed to watch out for their students.”

“Like Yakov has for you?”

“…Yes. Just like that.”

“Well, now Yuuri is under your care, so maybe it worked out for the best. In fact, maybe you owe me a thank you. If it hadn’t been for me dragging him to that banquet, would you have had your fun with him that night? Oh yeah, don’t think I didn’t hear about that. And now you’re his coach. Everyone who’s talked to him for ten minutes knows that he’s obsessed with you. How’s that
working out? Is he stroking your ego?"

“Don’t you dare insult him or me like that.”

“I’m a drinker myself.”

“Obviously.”

“Who was looking out for me that night? Who is looking out for me now? My student is just taking photos of me while I’m getting wasted. He’ll probably post them like it’s a big joke. Who looks out for any of us, Nikiforov?"

“Touche.”

“If we don’t take responsibility for ourselves, no one will.”

“Thank you, Lilia.”

...but all Phichit and Yuuri heard was vaguely European gibberish and growling between drinks and insults until Celestino passed out, foaming at the mouth. Viktor reached for his bottle of baijiu, but couldn’t figure out which of the four was real, and knocked it over in the process of elimination, so Yuuri gently guided his hands away.

“I think you’ve had enough, Viktor…”

Viktor mumbled something under his breath and then flopped on Yuuri’s shoulder, nuzzling against his neck. “I won…”

“That’s... Uhm… nice. Good job.”

Phichit continued to take photos. “So are you guys a thing yet?”

“...no. We aren’t.”

“Aw man, what? Why not? Look, he’s all over you!”

Yuuri nudged at the cuddly Viktor, who clung to him. “Yeah, because he’s drunk. I don’t know, I’ve tried talking to him about it. At least he isn’t upset at me anymore.”

“Viktor, what’s your deal?” Phichit aimed the chopsticks at him again. “Don’t you like Yuuri?”

“Mmm… Yuuri…”

“I probably messed it up again, Phichit.” Yuuri sighed, and picked up the half-empty glass of water in front of him with the hand that was free.

“What?! Don’t say that!”

“I confessed on TV.”

“But that’s so romantic.”

“He doesn’t speak Japanese.”

“Oyasumi…” Viktor chimed in with another nuzzle.

“So tell him again!”
“Like now would do any good.”

The group dinner had not gone well.

“Viktor, adoring fans want to know: do you love Yuuri?”

“Phichit, he’s drunk! It’s not fair to ask.”

“I guess. But seriously, Viktor, you should confess. Yuuri’s kind of dumb and needs things put really clearly.”

“Phichit! Uhm, Viktor, what are you doing?”

Viktor rubbed his face against Yuuri’s neck again, then stretched up to do the same to his cheek. “Yuuri,” he whined. “Yuuri, it’s so hot.”

“That’s because you’ve been drinking, you lush. Here, take off your jacket.”

“Hehe…” Viktor leaned away from him to do as suggested, head drooping, hands fumbling. “Issa good idea…”

“Wow. He’s really drunk.”

“Yeah. I haven’t seen him get this bad. Ever. Er, here, Viktor, I’ll help.”

Phichit watched the photo roll pile up as Yuuri worked the jacket off of the squirming Viktor in such a small space, draping it over the bench behind them. “I guess drink battles are a bad idea.” Then Viktor took off his shirt. “Wow. A really bad idea.”

“Aaaahhh… much betterer, yeah…” Viktor latched back onto Yuuri. “So smart, Yuuri…”

“Wow. Yuuri.”

“Ah, V-Viktor! Put your shirt back on!”

“Too hot,” he mumbled. “Hot… hot… springs…”

“Well.” Phichit set his phone on the table. He was going to fill the whole thing at this rate. “I wanna stay and talk, but you have an octopus coach and I have a dead one.”

“Y-yeah, sorry.”

“It’s okay. It sounds like you don’t have any new stories, anyway, since you’re a huge wuss.” Sighing, Phichit swiped to send a text instead. “I’ll see if Leo will come help me drag Ciao Ciao back to the hotel.”

“You know, we could talk about other stuff. Like friends do.”

“Lol like what? Viktor is all you talk about anyway.”

“Mee…” said Viktor, being so helpful.

“Ouch, rude.”

The phone flashed and Phichit checked it, tapping out a reply without missing a beat. “I’m kidding, sorry. I just want you to be happy.”
“It’s not my fault you don’t date anybody so I can’t razz you…” Yuuri slumped back, taking Viktor with him.

“I told you. Thailand is my one true love.”

“I know. I’m kidding.”

“Okay, looks like Leo is on his way.” Phichit leaned over to poke Ciao Ciao on the shoulder, but the man only gurgled. “I told him I needed him to interpret. Won’t he be surprised. Hehe. Oh, by the way. He and Guang-Hong are totally dating now, I just know it.”

“Wow, really?”

“Yep!” Phichit switched galleries to bring up some photos he’d saved from Skate America of the two of them together. “It’s the cutest little romance, just like in your books. I think you’d be all over the story.”

“Long distance, though… I bet that’s hard.”

Phichit shrugged. “Yeah, but they make it work because of the internet. Watch their social media feeds; you see signs of it all over the place. They just can’t help it.”

“That’s really cute.”

“You’re really cute,” added Viktor, though neither of the others could actually understand him.

Phichit decided to ignore him, and continued. “I only texted Leo, but I bet you anything that they show up together. Maybe even sneakily holding hands. That’s kind of their thing, I guess. Juvenile, but it’s so cute.”

“You’re not much older…”

“Yeah, yeah. And yet they’re the ones in a relationship while you and Viktor…”

Phichit didn’t need to go on, and Yuuri didn’t want him to.

Fortunately, it was only a few minutes more until Leo arrived with Guang-Hong in tow, the hands between them hidden behind the bulk of their coats. Phichit cast significant glances at Yuuri who, yes, had noticed, but was preoccupied by trying to stop Viktor from stripping.

“Yuuri… Yu-Topia… Hot Springs… nice place…”

“No, Viktor!”

The bill ended up on Viktor’s credit card, which Yuuri retrieve from the wallet in his pants when Leo gave them back along with his underwear. There were apologies to all, but Viktor was uncooperative until the others had gone. Then, and only then, did Viktor allow himself to be redressed.

“Viktor, we can’t have you catching pneumonia. Or getting arrested for indecent exposure.”

“But it’s hot…”

“You can be naked in the hotel, okay? Ten minutes.”
“Mmmnhmmm… okay… Oooh, your hands…”

“Viktor!”

Yuuri tried walking with him, arm around for support, but they weren’t getting anywhere with the way Viktor was stumbling. At least the cold night air had gotten him to stop complaining, but it was getting later and later, and there was open practice in the morning.

“Ugh. Viktor, I’m carrying you.”

“Wow, really~?”

“Keep your arms around me the best you can.” Yuuri stooped down and helped Viktor climb onto his back, then hefted him up. “We’re going to have a talk when you’re sober. For someone who wants to be professional… this sure is the opposite.”

“Mmm-hmm.” Viktor agreed, though he wasn’t sure with to what, only pleased that he had much better access to Yuuri’s neck this way. That meant being able to nuzzle him while they walked. “Dun’ be mad, Yuuri~”

“No… I’m not mad.”

“Gooooood…”

The hotel wasn’t far, which was definitely a good thing. Viktor kept his eyes closed for the majority of the trip, because the moving lights of the city in triplicate made him very, very dizzy. Besides, Yuuri smelled so good and he was so warm, it was much nicer to burrow against him instead.

He must have dozed off, too, because before he knew it, Yuuri was shifting his weight to get the key card for their room out of his pocket. Viktor tried to help, but only got a smack on the back of the hand for it, and pouted. “Mean…”

Yuuri got them through the door, locked it, kicked off his shoes, and made his way into the room just as Viktor kissed the back of his neck. “Viktor!” he shrieked, and quickly dropped him onto the bed closest to the door, then hopped out of the way of his reaching arms.

“Yuuriiii…”

“What, want out of your clothes?”

Viktor groaned. “I want you, Yuuri… you don’t… remem… remember, but I do. When we danced.”

“Of course I remember dancing with you.”

“No… n-no…” He choked on a sudden wave of emotion, draping an arm over his eyes as if it’d help hold back the tears. “I’ff luffed you… so long, Yuuri… but you…”

“Tell me about it in the morning.”

“No! Yuuri…!”

“You’re not making sense.”

“Ish breaking my heart!” Viktor dragged his arm away, showing the tears and the passion in his
plea. “I luff.. Lovf… love you… so mush… only you… in the whole… in the whole world, Yuuri.”

“Well.” Yuuri hesitated. “I’ve tried telling you back, but you keep getting mad.”

“The whole world, Yuuri…”

“What?”

“Yuuri…” Viktor reached for him again, with both arms outstretched. “I need you… only you can satisfy me.”

Yuuri stood there for several long seconds, watching him from the side of the bed. Then he took off his coat and tossed it onto the empty bed, sighing again before coming to sit at the foot of Viktor’s bed.

“All right then, Viktor,” Yuuri said, and patted the duvet next to him. “Show me.”

Chapter End Notes

Phichit: YUURI~ adoring fans all over the world want to know: what R U gonna do next?! Phichit: get it, I used 'r' and 'u' like ... RUSSIA Yuuri: but I haven't wo-- Yuuri: I don't know about Russia Phichit: I'm talking about the Russian in your bed. Or, his bed... the one that you're... on Phichit: that one Yuuri: I'm waiting for him to decide Phichit: well, there you have it, folks... Yuuri Katsuki is gonna do nothing. As usual. :V Yuuri: V:

YOU WON'T BELIEVE IT'S GAY SKATE:
Death by Eros! / Confessions! / Caught in a WEB OF LIES!

Please look forward to it!
Venom

Chapter by mamodewberry

Chapter Summary

The first night in Beijing causes Yuuri to worry about more than just the competition.

Chapter Notes

*rolls out a list of excuses* Here we are with 18! The length is back down to what we aimed for at the very beginning. We'll see how long it lasts. A few important reveals, so don't blink too fast ;) There's also CHRISTOPHE POV. Several of you requested it on Twitter and tbh it worked really well here. I think. Y'all be the judge. I love him, guys. Also, get ready for Spicy Katsudon!

Gabapple: I'M... SCREAMING... about EVERYTHING!!! and need to lie down... huff huff... things are happening... being revealed... going on... spiraling out of control! IT IS IMPORTANT. (ノictured^v^ノ)

...also we'll be at afest. And we have a tumblr for our joint projects!

YEAH! We created a tumblr specifically for our projects. Give it a follow!

Gogoichirin

Recommended Listening:
Roxanne, as performed by Escala
Untouchable Pt. 1, by Anathema
Love Me Like You Do, as performed by Brooklyn Duo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Japan Junior Figure Skating Championships - Sendai, Japan

Yuuri (15 years old)

Yuuri held his finishing pose, breath and heartbeat drowning out the applause. Muscles gradually unlocked and he allowed himself to skate off the ice to his coach. Coach Ito said something while he handed him his guards, but the buzzing in his head was too loud to hear it.

They walked to the kiss and cry to receive the results. It couldn’t have been more than a few minutes for the judges to tally their scores, as was normal, but to Yuuri it felt like hours.

Numbers came through the PA system, tinny, carrying through the arena. More applause.

A personal best. A record for junior Japanese figure skaters.
And the gold medalist of this year’s Junior Nationals.

He’d done it.

Ito embraced Yuuri, congratulating his student, and urging him to take the podium with a hearty pat on the back.

The spotlight prevented Yuuri to see much of the audience much like the lack of his glasses did, but not the pair of his fellow skaters at his sides.

Yuuri’s skating career thus far had been a mixed bag of results and today was his first gold. Animosity among his country kin wasn’t thick like it was with those of other nationalities in the competition due to his unpredictability. He could feel that changing.

He took the medal in his hands, fingers tracing the grooved edges.

*One step closer.*

“Show me.”

In several books Yuuri had read, there had been a similar setups. The sober protagonist would be forced to confess feelings in return and the drunk-stupid crush would have them pinned to the bed in seconds. They’d make love guilt-free and somehow climax together as if it were choreographed and coordinated, not a drunken night of dubious consent. The morning after had a 50/50 chance of the night giving positive outcomes.

However, this was real life.

Wonderful, comfortable, and logical real life.

Viktor watched Yuuri from the bed on his back, squinting like he was processing the request, and then he was raising his arms. Was he inviting him— no, now his legs were moving. He was trying to get up. Like a turtle.

Sighing, Yuuri pushed him back down by the face. “When you’re sober.”

“Mmmsober now,” came a muffled response.

“Oh huh. Go to sleep.”

Viktor kept Yuuri’s hand on his face as he tried to take it back “Yuuri… Yuuuuuuuri.”

“W-what?”

“I dream of you. Only you.”

Drunken babble or not, it still brought color to Yuuri’s cheeks.
“Luff Yuuri. Only Yuuri. Cold hand… good hand.”

Yuuri gave him have his hand, letting the temperature difference in their skin be a relief. Eventually Viktor stopped saying his name and dragged Yuuri’s hand to his lips and gave his palm a kiss. To save himself from a possible outburst, Yuuri allowed it. With his drunk coach’s voice slurring so much and movements more lethargic, he was likely to pass out soon. It wasn’t hurting anything, just odd. And strangely kind of cute.

The kisses slowed and morphed into puffs of breath as sleep finally overtook him.

Carefully Yuuri retrieved his hand and wiped the moisture on his own pants and got up from the bed.

His coach really was a pathetic sight: mis-buttoned shirt, partially tucked in, pant pockets inside out. He’d never seen him get drunk like this before. Was it Coach Feltsman yelling at him at the registration hall that had driven him to drink himself senseless? Even so, it wasn’t responsible. Viktor was Yuuri’s coach, now. He needed him at his best.

There’d definitely be a lecture in the morning.

For comfort sake, Yuuri undid Viktor’s belt buckle and shimmied Viktor out of his slacks and let them fall to the side of the bed. He didn’t know how well Viktor handled hangovers, and decided it best to prepare a water bottle and ibuprofen for him for the morning on the night stand.

Yuuri got ready for bed soon after, wondering if it would be for better or worse if Viktor would remember the restaurant or his confession.

A large THUD awoke Yuuri, jolting him upright in bed.

“Oh…”

Yuuri looked to the bed next to him, finding it sans Viktor - the source of the whine. Bedsheets were pulled over the edge. An alarm was going off somewhere in the heap he couldn’t see. More groaning and the shrill beeping was silenced.

Glancing at his phone, Yuuri wondered how long Viktor had ignored his own. It was unlike him to sleep in. The effects of his hangover, probably.

With a stretch and a yawn, Yuuri got up to assist. “Viktor?”

“Ugh my head…”

He rounded the bed to see his coach tangled in sheets, shirt halfway over his head, leg up against the bedside. Yuuri crossed his arms. “Serves you right.”

“Wha-why?!?”

“I had to drag you back here last night because you got so drunk.”

“Oh.” He looked away, confusion morphing into shame. “Did I get hit by a car?”

That was a dramatic conclusion. “If you did, we’d be in a hospital.”

“Did I get into a bar fight?”
“No, but you did have a fight with Ciao Ciao.”

“Oh god, he beat me up, didn’t he??”

“Of course he didn’t.” Although, Yuuri wouldn’t put it past him for being capable of doing so. “You had a drink off and he passed out first.”

“So I won…”

“Congrats, you won a hangover.”

“But I don’t get hangovers,” Viktor pouted.

“Well, you sure drank a lot. Something Chinese.”

Viktor moaned. “So this is what it’s like.”

“There’s some water and pills on your night stand.”

Angling his head towards the location, Viktor tried to reach up with a hand to no avail and collapsed back onto the sheets, paling. “Don’t feel good… Yuuri, help me, please?”

Sympathy rising despite his efforts, Yuuri did so. “No more drinking the rest of the competition, okay?”

“Or never. ..Heh, just kidding.”

“Yeah, I thought so.” Yuuri took his hand and pulled him up to a sit, then held the water bottle and pills out for him. Viktor took a few cautious sips as he downed the pills. He capped the bottle and closed his eyes for a few moments and then, “Can you help me to the bathroom?”

Yuuri got to his knees and slipped an arm around Viktor and hoisted him to his feet. They stood until Viktor’s world stopped spinning, then began a staggering walk to the bathroom.

“Please don’t tell Yakov or Yurio… or Georgi. Or maybe Mila? Yeah, not Mila, either.”

“Because you don’t usually get drunk?”

“We get drunk, but not hung-- gover.”

“Need to throw up?”

“N-yeah…”

Both pairs of feet padded on the tile floor as they entered the bathroom and turned the light on. Yuuri helped Viktor to his knees and lifted the toilet lid. Viktor lunged at the toilet to empty his stomach.

“You don’t have to--” Viktor turned away from the oh so attractive sight to focus on the painting on the wall of downtown Beijing. When Viktor finished, coughing and moaning, Yuuri patted his back. Reaching for the handle, Viktor flushed the toilet, then slid from Yuuri’s touch to fall on the floor, cheek to tile. “I’m dying.”
“No dying. I need you today.”

“Is this what it’s like every time you drink?”

“Depends on what I drink and how much.”

“Put me out of my misery, Yuuri.”

“How about I go to the grocery store next door and make you a turmeric shot, instead?”

“If it helps. If it doesn’t, then we put me out of my misery?”

“Nope. Consequences.”

“Uuuuugh. It was like vodka, but not quite. Maybe I shouldn’t have had so much.’

“Note to self,” Yuuri suggested, dryly.

“Yakov would have liked it. Oh, Yakov… Goingtobesickagain.” Viktor scrambled to his knees and stuck his head in the toilet bowl once more.

“I’ll be back as soon as I can, Viktor,” Yuuri said as he stood up from floor and didn’t wait for an answer. He grabbed his coat and wallet and headed for the elevator.

The sooner Yuuri could mix a remedy, the sooner Viktor would - hopefully - get to feeling better, and be able to stand for warmups and his short program. Yuuri envied that Viktor had never had a hangover before. He was Russian, but still.

Puking thinking about his coach… That proved that he was the reason. Whenever Coach Feltsman came up in conversation, Viktor would light up and deflate all at once. Did he think seeing him would mend whatever bridge there was between them?

After The Cup of China they’d have to talk about it. It was too important to Viktor not to.

For now, Yuuri would help him feel better so they could both focus.

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The satisfying burn of aftershave settled in fresh skin. He leaned in closer to the mirror one last time to ensure his perfectly intentional scruff was maintained. Oh, a missed hair on his jaw... One swift pluck with tweezers and the offending hair was gone and Christophe was ready to face the day and for the world to receive him.

Steam escaped the bathroom like a visible cloud when he opened the door to the suite he shared with his companion.

Said companion was seated in the armchair by the window, polishing his oxfords. From his stylish dark hair to his charcoal suit, to his posture in the soft glow from the window, he was nothing short of perfection. A perfection he sustained for the benefit of professionalism and for what it did for Christophe on personal levels.
As much as he loved watching his lover preen, there was something he loved even more.

Bastien’s blue eyes lifted to acknowledge Christophe’s presence, and then went back to his shoes.

Christophe laid out his skating costume and jersey onto the bed, taking his time to smooth out the creases, and then he let the towel about his waist fall to the floor.

He didn’t need to turn to know Bastien was watching him, and he’d give him something worth watching. His full-bodied costume wasn’t the easiest to slip into - off was a different story for later - but there was nothing he couldn’t make look good, and Bastien knew this, eyes alight with interest.

In no time he’d swayed and shimmied inside, casting looks his lover’s way, and by the time he had it onto his shoulders, Bastien was standing to assist with the zipper.

“Thank you for the pre-show,” Bastien cooed, savoring where his hands fell whilst pulling the zipper upwards.

When the zipper reached its destination, Christophe turned to wrap his arms around his neck, Bastien’s resting around his waist. “There’ll be an aftershow. You won’t want to miss it.”

“I’ve already purchased front row seats.”

This year’s Grand Prix had line up included several skaters Christophe had skated with throughout the years, all of which he looked forward to seeing their improvements. As a senior to a majority of them, it was something he found joy in.

Unfortunately, his favorite part of the competitive season would be absent. He was present, yes, but would otherwise be occupied. Out of all the people to leave the safety net of the ice, Viktor was the last he’d expected to do so.

And for love?

Well, that part wasn’t too surprising.

When Christophe had presented the viral video to him, he didn’t expect him to immediately pack his bags to pursue. Romantic, but not thought out.

That wasn’t surprising, either.

Still, from the last time they spoke, Viktor had been successful in his endeavors of the heart and that was more than he could ask for. Viktor was a known workaholic, it was good for him to pursue wholesome desires.

Even if that meant losing the chance to skate against his best friend.

“I’m going ahead to the stands. The less bodies in the back area, the better. And less distracting.” Bastien stopped in the breezeway and paused to brush a stray eyelash from Christophe’s cheek and let his fingers stay. “I’ll see you from the sidelines, mon amour.”

Christophe took his fingers and moved them to his lips to kiss his palm. “I’ll see you soon.”

“He’s in your care, Josef.”
“Must you two be so dramatic?” the old coach asked with a long-suffering sigh.

The pair of lovers only shrugged and then Bastien was leaving them to business, walking onwards to intermingle with the other competitors.

“I’m sorry… I wasn’t going to, but my hand slipped.”

“No fair you big cheater, we didn’t post ours!”

Christophe looked towards the offending cries. Yuuri Katsuki looked dismayed over, by the sounds of it, something Phichit Chulanont had posted. He unpocketed his phone and checked Phichit’s Instagram page for the latest photo - Viktor shirtless -nude? Drunk perhaps- and clinging to Yuuri. What fun had he missed out on last night?!

Putting his phone away, Christophe sidled his way behind Yuuri and copped a feel of his ass, just to check. For a friend. Ooh, how firm! The Japanese skater tensed and emitted a small squeak.

“Yuuuri, why didn’t you invite me to the party?”

“I-it was just hot pot…”

That was all the protest he got?

“You’re in better shape than last year. I guess your new master must be giving you very thorough training, eh?”

Yuuri smiled nervously back. He was in better shape than last year (and he thought he looked good at the banquet on the pole!), but the double meaning was lost on the poor boy. Or was it just his skittish nature?

“Hi, Chris.”

And thus his best friend, the five-time world champion, had finally taken notice of him. Here to reprimand him for touching his lover so inappropriately?

“How are you doing this year?”

Odd. So formal. Just because he was a coach now, didn’t mean Viktor had to greet him like they haven’t spoken in months! Was this how he thanked a friend? “I’ve lost all motivation, how could you abandon me?” A partial accusation.

Viktor didn’t flinch, even as Chris took his lanyard. “It always takes you a little while to get warmed up.”

“He’s right you know,” piped in Josef. “Chris can’t get serious without you to skate against. It’s time to come back into the fold.”

It wasn’t that he couldn’t get serious , the stakes just weren’t as high. He’d appreciate if his coach had more faith in him. Hmph!

“Hi Viktor.”

“You’re seriously a coach, then?”

Viktor walked away far too easily towards the lady Russian skaters. Was he happy to leave the conversation? No, it was the same conversation, just different people. Was he avoiding him?
Suspicious...

Christophe turned to his friend’s beau, instead. “Yuuri~ You’re committing a grave sin, keeping him to yourself. The whole skating world is hoping for his return.”

Yuuri frowned while he watched Viktor and didn’t answer.

It was meant to tease, but also to garner a reaction, something, as neither of them seemed to show any sort of skinship. It was one thing to try to keep their relationship status on the downlow as both their nationalities frowned upon such things, but where was the eye contact? The warmth? The undeniable magnetism?

“Yo, Yuuri!”

Young Chulanont must have felt forgotten, having stolen his friend. Christophe took a step to the side to include him.

“Oh, hey Phichit.” Yuuri rubbed at his neck, “Sorry, I didn't mean to leave you hanging.”

“That's okay. I know you're busy being all cool. Especially after that post on my IG blew up! I noticed you liked the post, Christophe. Wild, right?”

“I'll have to make a reservation for the next party. Do put me on the list!”

The boy visibly held himself in place from jumping through the ceiling. Had Christophe known he'd been dying to get to know one another, he'd have approached him much sooner. “Yeah, sure thing,”

“Viktor can normally take his alcohol, so I'm oh so curious to the happenstances.”

“It was intense!” Feigning nonchalance, Phichit then nudged Yuuri. “Oh hey, maybe we should go to dinner tonight!”

Yuuri was weary at that, but agreed to the gathering, regardless. “Was there anyone you wanted to invite, Chris?”

“If it's not too much trouble, my beau Bastien. He's a quiet one, but quite the entertainer when the mood strikes.” The skaters from China and the US stood in the background, anxiously looking their way. More shy ones. “Oh you two over there, won't you join us tonight?”

The pair looked like he'd just told them he was giving them an all expenses included cruise.

“Yeah! I know Leo and Guang Hong would like another chance to meet Viktor, too, since they showed up when Viktor was already wasted. What do you say, Yuuri?”

“Yeah, I definitely think last night should be remedied…” the Japanese skater sighed.

“For what it's worth, Ciao Ciao seems to think that they're good friends now…”

“Wow, Viktor said the same thing after puking his guts out, despite everything…”

“The yelling and insults and glaring? Crazy.”

“It is part of the drinking culture, believe it or not,” Christophe nodded affirmatively.

“Is it also part of drunk culture to strip in public and spill secret confessions? Cause I haven't done
a lot of drinking, but yikes.”

There was an awful lot of emphasis and winking as Phichit said all that. The Thai boy wasn’t at the banquet last year, so he wouldn’t know that was precisely what Yuuri did. Unless Yuuri informed him. “In recent cases it seems,” Christophe said, leaving it at that.

“I didn't get it all on film, but it's pretty incriminating... Wasn't it, Yuuri?”

“Y-yeah... uhm. Phichit, aren't you first in the lineup? You should probably get out there.”

Everything Christophe was hearing wasn't aligning with Viktor and Yuuri being a couple and it was progressively making him want to revoke his trust card with his best friend.

“Oh, right! I guess Ciao Ciao will be looking for me. He hasn't been on the top of his game today after that hangover.”

“I missed out on a lot,” Christophe smiled. “I hope the fun will continue tonight! Send me the deets and I'll be there.”

Phichit ran off, flashing a peace sign in his wake. Guang Hong and Leo followed after him, leaving Christophe and Yuuri alone. Aside from Viktor, who was still speaking with his country kin, though he clearly was only humoring them and their giggles with closed off body language. Poor girls.

Was that why Yuuri hadn't gone with the younger skaters to the rink; waiting for his lover?

“Confessions, eh? Isn't it a bit late for that?”

Deer in headlights. “I... don't know what you mean. Just drunk babbling. He was a bit out of control.”

Was he embarrassed that Viktor was being open about their relationship while being intoxicated or was it because he had no idea about Viktor’s true feelings? It was hard to say given how reserved the Japanese tended to be. He’d just have to keep an eye on them.

When Yuuri took a fall during warmups, Christophe didn’t expect Viktor to go to him and kiss his knees, but his professional composure could have been more in favor of concern than exasperation.

Thinking about past years... Yuuri did often flubbed his jumps in warmup and in competition. So that couldn’t be helped, he supposed.

At the sound of a buzzer, the skaters exited the rink from the free practice and filed back into the waiting room. Christophe watched Viktor and Yuuri as they walked ahead, a distance between them.

Something wasn't right.

Were they together or weren’t they?

Phichit was the first skater in the lineup of group one, and the rest of the skaters mingled and stretched in the waiting area.

Christophe took up a mat for his own stretching, observing his friend and potential beau.
Viktor looked good in that suit. He was glad he taught him how to buy one. However, he still needed to work on accessorizing. He’d look better in it if he were wearing heels. Probably feel better, too. Had he bought any while in Japan, he wondered?

Five years ago, having left the banquet at Trophee de France early, Viktor and Christophe stole away to Christophe’s hotel room. His dear friend came to him with a request, reluctant in the shadow of rejecting him in the spring of that year. Viktor was, to put simply, tired. And a fashion disaster with a neon sign.

The latter being the reason he came to him.

Christophe dug through his luggage for the menswear catalog he picked up at the airport. He was in the market for some new clothes himself and he was happy his purchase could have double use.

Viktor was nursing the glass of wine he brought back with him from the banquet, legs crossed. He sighed, looking himself over. “I’m not fooling anyone, am I?”

Regrettably no, but that was why Christophe was helping him. He tossed the catalog on the bed beside Viktor and tapped his knee. “A bit wider apart--just like-- yes, there.”

He frowned and took a sip. “Thank you.”

“Perhaps if we go the metro angle…”

“Ooh! Then I get to buy expensive clothes!” The brightness in his eyes faded, ashamed of his sudden outburst and then, “I mean, what a waste… I’m not gay, I just love clothes!” and then he dragged his free hand down his face.

Constant denial of oneself. No wonder he was so tired. “Not having to explain metro to you saves me a step.”

"I just know it means expensive. And probably not in the prada heels way.”

“A simple definition, I suppose. Tailored suits and shoes. Watches and belts. Well dressed and mindfulness of setting. It would curb your dress-up desires, at least. We just need to get you more conscious of your clothing. When you think of a cute boy, what do you picture them wearing?”

Viktor swished his drink in his hands. “When I think of cute boys, I think of bookstores and coffee dates and warm hands… not what they’re wearing.”

That wasn’t insightful at all. “All right, when you think of a straight man, what comes to mind?”

He took longer to answer that time. “Well, I think of how if I wore high heels and blazers and short skirts that I could probably make them un straight, but that doesn't really help... and I don't like skirts.”

“That doesn’t tell me anything about what they are wearing, Viktor.”

“Maybe if straight guys dressed like ladies I’d pay more attention. How come girls always get the cutest clothes? I wanna wear cute turtlenecks all the time…”

The irony of a gay man coming to another gay man on how to be straight… Honestly it was
touching Viktor trusted him with the task. “Viktor, why don’t you look at that catalog there. See if anything strikes your fancy.”

“What do boys usually wear? Pants and shirts? Shoes?” Viktor muttered and mused, taking the catalog and thumbing through the pages. “Feliks had terrible taste and he’s straighter than those poles you dance with. Er, that your co-eds do, anyway.”

“A lot of straight men do have terrible tastes, it’s true. That’s why I’m here. Ooo, that one there!” Christophe reached to point at a three piece suit. “Good, yes? Oh, that’s for me.” Quickly he dog-eared the page. “Sorry, continue.”

Viktor continued along with the same bored expression, slowly transforming into helplessness. “Do I really need to dress like a fancy salad? You want me to dress like a cute boy, but I can’t dress like a fun coffee date. Or sweet nothings? Or ... Chris I-I can't do this!”

“Are the suits salads? For goodness sake, here-” Christophe took the catalog and flipped to informal wear. “There, find your coffee shop whatever.”

A small pout on his lips, Viktor looked again, seemingly taking longer on each page, and Christophe hoped it was because he was more interested rather than trying to not get scolded. So childish.

Several solid pieces and outfits passed his fashionably challenged friend by and it was maddening! Choice was a powerful tool, he didn’t want to start assigning him. Yet. But maybe he could give him an incentive. “I have a slightly inappropriate proposition for you.”

His prudent friend gave him an uneasy look. No faith!

“How do you feel about undergarments?”

Pink dusted his pale cheeks. “Oh, I’ve always worn briefs. Except, um, for him.”

“Ah I see.” Christophe made the attempt to unsour his voice. He wasn’t sure if he was successful or not. “Imagine not doing it for him. Did you like it?”

Viktor looked down at the catalog in his hands in thought.

“Many find wearing flattering underwear as a way of expression.”

“I guess if I was careful, no one would ever see it...”

“There’s all sorts of things we can try.”

“...Somehow I don’t think you need to try anything, Chris.”

“I meant we as in --oh nevermind. Maybe I just want to go shopping, too.”

“Yeah, yeah, okay.”

“It doesn’t have to be anything lacey if you don’t want. Even just the cut of women’s unmentionables will suffice.”

He nodded, gears in his mind obviously turning. Good.

“I personally enjoy thongs.”
“THAT--” he coughed. “Uh, okay, thank you for that, Chris…”

“Pesky lines show through sometimes, gotta do something about it! Is my choice so surprising?”

“No, I just wasn’t expecting the image in my head.”

Fair enough. Picturing your best friend in their underwear, whether they had a past crush or not, probably was unwanted. “Anyway, consider that while you’re looking through there. You’ve got to have some joy in your life while trying to deny your true self.”

But, of course, he continued to deny himself joy. Obviously since he still, for whatever reason, wasn’t together with the tail he went to chase! Perhaps it was a matter of he didn’t trust himself in this area anymore than he did shopping. So unsure and sure all at once, it was just easier to defer to his best friend or a catalog full ad or simply buy the mannequin on display. Several years of shopping after banquets and Viktor hadn’t learned much.

Yuuri paced the hall up and down in a jog, looking worked up and mentally distant.

Christophe got up to ask Viktor if he was all right and was quickly dismissed with a shush.

Shushed and leaving Yuuri to deal with his thoughts and struggles. If Viktor was going to quit his career for someone, wouldn’t he dote? He certainly seemed the type.

If the two of them truly weren’t an item, why would Viktor lie about it? Yes Chris had helped in setting this in motion, but if Viktor wasn’t able to woo Yuuri, it was nothing against him. Disappointing, but…

The princess was still running from the ball.

A turmeric shot, bath, and nap and Viktor was on his feet by afternoon warm-ups. A lingering headache and groggy, but that was to be expected. It was something he could easily conceal behind his coach persona, Viktor assured Yuuri as they got ready to leave for the venue.

Beijing reminded Yuuri of Tokyo with its highrises, compact streets, and traffic along with hidden treasures. Maybe before their flight to St. Petersburg they could do some sightseeing and sit down and enjoy an authentic meal without the alcohol.

With the eventful morning, of course the hangover wouldn’t have been the last he’d hear about last night. Hand shaking, he looked at the photo Phichit posted on Instagram. Phichit apologized, and he was glad Guang Hong and Leo had more sense.

Already he was worried what the competition would think of him - losing in last year’s Grand Prix Final, quitting, then coming back with Viktor as his coach - and now they could potentially think he was screwing around? Would anyone take him - them - seriously as a team after seeing that photo?
Had it been anybody but Chris that groped him, he would have panicked. He was forward, but harmless as far as he could tell when he saw the Swiss man interacting with their peers. Maybe he would have been able to rein in Viktor from last night...

“Why is Viktor wasting his time with you?”

Yuuri lifted his head from his thoughts. It was one of the Russian women Viktor had been talking to. Her accent was heavy and he had to take a moment to understand.

“I just can’t wrap my head around it.” A sweet smile and voice, but there was an unmistakable condescending twinge. “What is Viktor's big secret?”

“Secret?”

“He's always got something planned - some big surprise. It's the only thing that makes sense. Him coaching you. So what is it?”

Yuuri considered for a moment. “Coaching me is the surprise.”

She blinked hard. “Okay, but why? What's his angle? There's got to be more to it, I mean, why would he coach you?”

“He saw me skate to his Free Skate last year. Saw something in me he wanted others to see.”

“We all know the story,” she said, flipping her blonde hair over her shoulder. “But so what, are you saying that this is a charity case? Viktor is a Russian champion. It doesn't make sense for him to just... go off and abandon his career and country to teach some Japanese nobody.”

When Yuuri didn’t have an answer for her, she sighed.

“I guess he hasn't told you whatever his scheme is, either. You poor thing.”

“Yeah... poor me.” He paused, and then stood taller. “Being coached. By Viktor Nikiforov.”

She raised her brow at him, face shifting into amusement. “Just don't be too surprised when he leaves you. Viktor doesn't play well with others.” She huffed and turned on her heels and walked away.

“Thanks for the warning,” Yuuri said quietly after her. He didn’t know the exact reason Viktor was coaching him, but he could think of several with wishful thinking and deduction of their time together since April.

Everyone that came up to them to comment was either disbeliefing Viktor was capable of coaching or expecting him to come back to skating after he was done “playing.” Yuuri understood them thinking he was such a lost cause and needed Viktor’s coaching to have an impact with his comeback, but to doubt Russia’s hero?

Yuuri couldn’t let them think that way about Viktor.

Or him.

He wasn’t the same Yuuri this year, and he’d show it to them and the world. Viktor left the ice for him by choice, and Yuuri wouldn’t let him regret it.
As Yuuri watched Phichit over the live feed—his best friend, rinkmate, and college roommate—skate the program of his dreams, he felt pride, and hope, and a little anxiety. Phichit had improved so much! Due to his injury before the Prix last year, he was forced to drop out before it began. His friend was incredible, but Yuuri was here to win, too.

The people that were there to watch Viktor’s skating wouldn’t be satisfied with Yuuri’s. Nor would those that have supported him for years. If everyone hated him for taking Viktor away, it was fine, because he’d prove today that he deserved him. His time and effort.

And love.

*In Regards to Love: Eros* ended its fifth playthrough and Yuuri extracted his earbuds from his ears and tucked them in the pocket of his jersey. Viktor walked over to him with guarded skates in hand.

Color had returned to Viktor’s cheeks, and he seemed less tired than earlier.

Did Viktor remember anything from last night?

*I want you, Yuuri… I need you…*

Why couldn’t he be honest when not under the influence?

The barrier door to the rink opened and Viktor let Yuuri brace himself on his shoulder to remove the skate guards and then the wall was separating them as coach and student for the first time in front of the world.

Viktor cupped Yuuri’s clenched fist on the wall with a hand. “The time to seduce me picturing pork cutlet bowls is over. At this point you can do it just by being yourself.” His index finger rubbed at Yuuri’s knuckle; a light caress. “You’ve figured that out by now, haven’t you?”

All this time - for months- Viktor had been telling him to seduce him. At first Yuuri thought it was a strange tactic, but he’d actually meant it all along?

He’d figured Viktor had come to fall in love with him over the summer as he had for him, but now he realized Viktor had wanted him from the very beginning. Why was beyond him, but Viktor had been asking to be seduced from the first time he skated to *Eros*. Then why resist the obvious reciprocation Yuuri had shown him recently?

*Skate like you’re trying to seduce me.*

*Only you can satisfy me…*

That was it: A challenge! He had to make Viktor know it from his very core, so he could no longer resist him. Beg for him. It, like everything else with Viktor and skating, and love, it seemed like, was a game. Which meant that all Yuuri had to do, now that he knew how to play, was win.

Determination renewed, Yuuri pulled his hand away to entwine their fingers, secure, and hoisted up on the barrier to press his forehead to Viktor's, eye to eye, voice challenging. “Watch me, Viktor. Don’t take your eyes off me.”

He’d give the most sensual performance Viktor had ever seen. Make him fall to his knees and know without a doubt that Yuuri was the only one that deserved him and could bring him the pleasure he sought.
Taking position, he popped his hip out just a little more, facing coach position. The music began, guitar strumming, and he licked his lips after coming out of the first movement.

Being so far away, he couldn’t rely on touch as he had with their dances. His face wasn’t clear, but Yuuri could tell Viktor was paying attention.

Good.

The princess heard of a traveler in the city. He’d come from a faraway land. Handsome and exotic with talents and wares in exchange for lodging and safe passage.

Normal circumstances, the princess would allow the transaction without lifting a hand, but she caught sight of him.

Indeed he was handsome. Charming. Sophisticated. Witty. Voice golden and sweet like honey.

She had to make him hers.

With a finger and lidded gaze, she beckoned the traveler.

He hesitated. Did he not trust himself around her or was it that he didn’t trust her?

It was of little consequence of the reason, for it would not detain her from her goal.

At the flourish of her hand, a serpent came to her aide, slithering around her feet toward the man. As expected, he flinched and didn’t dare run lest he be bitten.

No, she couldn’t have the fear… he had to be willing.

Little by little he approached her until he was within reach. She wrapped her arms around his neck pulling herself flush against him while her pet serpent, and a second, traveled up her body. Fingers in his hair, his resolve faded and her lips captured his.

She swallowed the traveler’s moan and raised a leg, foot rubbing all the way up his leg, hooking around his waist, along with one of her snakes, coil firm and tight. His interest was immediate, heat budding between them like a young flame. Pulling down the collar of his tunic, she hissed to the other of her pets and it answered by piercing the traveler’s neck with its fangs.

The cry was laced with arousal and she felt her own need grow at the sound.

Soon he would be hers and no one else’s.

Thanking her pet, she placed her mouth over the punctures to inject her venom. His stance stuttered under her while the venom traveled through him, but only for a moment, as she took to sucking at his throat, becoming aware of her once more.

She rolled her body up his, hands dragging up his tunic as she came down.

Nails tracing his skin, both snakes flicking their tongues like an extension of her own, tasting and smelling him… so exquisite and he belonged to her.

Violin came to its abrupt stop, and Yuuri snapped out of the trance. The snakes and marble palace
gone. And the traveler…

His cheeks were on fire, heart pushing out his breath like an accordion.

What was that just now?

Arms unwrapped around himself as he took a bow to the audience, various plush toys thrown about the ice.

Viktor met him at the kiss and cry and he felt so confused.

He’d intended to do what his coach insisted on, but that imagery… his mind had never supplied something like that before. Phichit’s voice saying “Saucy Books” came to mind. He frowned.

“You did well. How did it feel?” Viktor asked.

It took Yuuri a moment to answer, hazy. Feel? He exhaled through his nose. Honestly? “Good. I just hope everyone watching felt good, too.” Despite the burning in his entire body, it was pleasant.

A score was read off far too quickly, but he caught that it was a personal best. Yuuri leaned forward and squinted to try to read the teleprompter, but sans glasses and head in a cloud, proved difficult.

Viktor clapped and embraced him, hand rubbing his head. “Of course they felt good! How could they not? You were incredible today and I couldn’t ask for a better student!”

But did Viktor feel good? That was the point of that display, after all. Yuuri glanced back at him as he hugged him, face close to his ear, voice warm and affectionate. Through his jersey he could feel heat on his back - sweltering - but was it Viktor’s or his own?

Chapter End Notes

Phichit: So you guys excited for tonight? Did I hook you up or what???
Leo: You are brave, my friend
Leo: Think Viktor will take a look at my choreography for next season? *Squeezes
Guang Hong’s hand SO EXCITE*
GH: Y-yeah! Will he, Phi? Leo's worked so hard...
Phichit: Uhhh... I don't see why not! I bet Yuuri could get him to do it! I'll make Yuuri make him do it!
Leo: Make Yuuri-- well I guess you did butt in to his and Christophe's conversation
Phichit: Yuuri's my roomie! Er, WAS my roomie. I'm allowed. Besides, if I don't, you guys would NEVER get in with them. Christophe finally noticed you 'cause of me~
GH: Hopefully they won't be drunk tonight...
Phichit: Nah, Yuuri said Viktor would be on his best behavior. Don't worry, this dinner is going to be absolutely perfect~
Leo: Oh good. Taking Viktor's underwear off of Guang Hong's hair was weird.
GH: Y-yeah...
Phichit: But your expressions were priceless, and you'll remember that moment forever. What a cute couple you are. :3c
GH: >////<; Phichit!
ON GAY SKATE: THE NEW BATCH
Spicy Katsudon! / Shoes! / Miscommunication! / Feelings! / Spice!/ Also more Spice!

*Please look forward to it!*
Crumb By Crumb

Chapter by gabapple

Chapter Summary

Yuuri is first in the standings after the short program for the Cup of China, and Viktor couldn't be prouder of his student. He's truly blossomed into the most seductive pork cutlet bowl that enthralls men. Really. It's quite distracting. In fact, Viktor isn't sure what to do about it. How is he supposed to remain professional and keep his heart in check when Yuuri is deliberately trying to break him?!

#yuuri seduce #yuuri attac #viktor is weak #spicy spice #important backstory #heavy emotion #FLUFF #the POWER of FRIENDSHIP

Chapter Notes

Gabapple: Look! A new chapter! Sorry for the delay; it was a difficult one to write, and my day job has been incredibly busy lately. I got a promotion earlier this year and it's definitely catching up with me now. But here we are, closing out episode 6 once and for all, bringing us to the halfway point in the series. There's a LOT more to come with some significant character development on the way, and woah woah woah-- SLOW BURNING COALS are READY for COOKIN', watch your fingers. 8)

Mamodewberry: WE ARE HERE. FINALLY HERE. What exactly is here? Well, lots of Things I've been dying to have written for months. There is a slight alteration (referring to THE Thing Yuuri has been looking forward to), but for the sake of plot, I think it'll work out well this way. Please read and enjoy. There's so much here like Gab said and it's just so good. Little by little, the past unfolds!

Gabapple: Also it was Mamodewberry's birthday this week, so please give her all of the love!!! Happy birthday!!! <3333

New Art:
- Viktor and Mama Katsuki from chapter 5, illustrated by citra (commission)
- Viktor skating with Makkachin from chapter 17, illustrated by Maddie (commission)

Recommended Listening:
- No. 5 Pas de deux - Andante (Swan Lake), by Tchaikovsky
- Jericho, by Celldweller
- Brave Enough, by Lindsey Stirling
- Hey Jude, as performed by Joe Anderson

See the end of the chapter for more notes
The Hague, Netherlands

Viktor (14 years old)

The season had been an uphill battle from the start; a minnow against the relentless current. But he’d made it to the Grand Prix Finals for the single men in the junior division, and there was just one more performance to go. Viktor Nikiforov, the last competitor in the second group, skating to No. 5 Pas de deux - Andante from Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake.

He took his place in the frozen battlefield and stretched into an effacé devant, one arm raised in a delicate arc over his head, while the toe of his opposite leg pointed, tip of the blade leaving its mark. Viktor raised his free arm until it was parallel to the ice and relaxed his fingers, breathing out slowly to the count of un, deux, trois…

Violin cut through the air; its high, clear notes rising to the rafters and filling the stadium with each stroke of bow on strings. The piece was perfect for a solo performance despite being a pas de deux, with only a single violin’s voice singing, refusing to be ignored. It was exactly what Viktor wanted. He, too, refused to be ignored.

Last season, he’d placed second in every event, earning him silver time and time again. This season had been no different, despite the increased complexity of his programs and the custom costume design. But, just as Tchaikovsky’s piece picked up momentum, and Viktor swept through each choreographed sequence with increasing speed, the overall performance in context of the season moved forward, too.

The sleek, pearly silver that covered his body from collar to toe had nothing to do with angels or swans, and the ornamental accoutrements that graced his shoulders and wrists were not feathers or wing. That wasn’t part of his story at all.

No; they, like his silver ponytail, were the trails of stardust and ice, sparkling in the light from all of the other heavenly bodies in the universe. He was a comet, searching endlessly for the star that he would make his home. Only then could he grant a wish- one wish, flashing brightly for just that moment, giving way to destiny.

And he needed that wish. He needed gold. Unless he could win, breaking the silver streak and proving himself worthy of sponsor attention, Viktor knew he would never be able to make it in the competitive world of skating. Those who didn’t win weren’t monetarily supported, and orphans like him could only survive on charity for so long.

But skating, like a comet hurtling through the vast expanses of space, wasn’t in itself the reason for being; it was a means to an end, a way to find purpose, meaning, and ultimately, home. Viktor knew all too well that the life of a figure skater, much like that of a shooting star, was short. And if he wanted anything beyond the ice, some day, he would need to be the brightest star among the countless others, each competing for love, attention, and a chance to be more than a brief flash, quickly forgotten in the velvet black.

He believed in kismet, and in luck, but only so far as he believed that it was dependant on the work someone put in themselves. It was up to him to effectively draw from his years of training, the support of his mentors, the efforts of practice, and the desperation of hope to elevate his performance, force the audience to see what he saw with every move that he made.

Viktor was the wishing star, holding nothing back as he went for gold, setting in motion all that
would lead him to the arms that waited for him with the promise of *home*.

When he finished, tears threatening to spill onto the sparkling silver galaxies that he’d dusted onto his cheeks, Viktor had to take several moments to catch his breath before he could make his way to his coach and the Kiss and Cry. On the bench, trembling with nerves and emotion, Viktor stared at the little rabbit pin on his jacket instead of the scoreboard, body pressed tight against Yakov’s side.

“That was a moving performance, Vitya,” his coach said, slipping an arm around the boy’s shoulders. “Though I wish you’d stop changing your jump compositions in the middle of your programs…”

That at least got Viktor to turn a smile up at him, weak though it was. “Just keeping you on your toes, Coach.”

“Hmm.” The old man was amused, but not pleased.

That made Viktor smile even more.

The scores came over the PA system and flashed on the screen, overlaid on the video feed of the pair of them. Viktor flashed his teeth and waved, then came to an abrupt halt as he processed the numbers in his head.

“Wait.” He looked up at Yakov, who was staring at him, his own smile stretched wide and proud, though he was quiet, waiting. Letting him figure it out. Viktor looked back at the screen and the standings, startled to see his name on top.

First.

And since he was the last skater… he was staying there.

Gold.

Viktor looked back at Yakov again, eyes wide, smile gone. “C-Coach?”

Yakov nodded.

“B-but-?”

“Yes, Vitya.”

“Gold?!”

“Yes.”

There was no saving the makeup then as the boy burst into tears, hands covering face, face buried against coach, body shaking, all while Yakov patted his back.

“I told you, Vitya. It’s going to be fine. You’re going to be just fine.”

The win, along with Sasha’s in both the Grand Prix Final and Russian Nationals, were celebrated at a benefit party on New Year’s Eve in a hotel downtown. The host was one of Sasha’s oldest sponsors, and had provided his skates for many years. Everyone dressed in their finest- which was suits and evening gowns for most, and a turtleneck and blazer for Viktor. He was nervous, rubbing elbows with such fancy people, but no less excited. It was a bit like getting to mingle with the
audience at the Mariinsky without having to perform or wear tights.

Yakov introduced him to several of the people there, none of which he recognized or would be able to remember for long, but he did try. He took hands, nodded, and put on his best smiles. But it wasn’t like the interviews after a performance; they didn’t just ask him questions about what he thought about what he’d done or how he’d come to this place, they always followed it up with information about the world that he had very little concept of.

“Oh, Vitya,” said an old woman who Viktor had already lost the name of, largely in part because she refused to let go of his hand. “You must be so proud! A gold medal, your very first!”

“Uhm. Yes. It was a long time coming.”

“Of course, of course. You **must** remember, though, that Ivan didn’t get his gold in one day, either.”

He blinked. “Ivan… and the Wolf?”

“What? No, no, my son-in-law Ivan, who works in industrial brokerage. You would like him. He’s just like you. Wouldn’t you say?” She turned to the man next to her.

“Oh, yes. Just like.”

Viktor had no idea what that meant. Or anything about the trades. Just skating and ballet. The life advice that was imparted to him, as well as everything financial, went completely over his head and was carried away by the winter wind just as easily as all of the names and fancy titles and relations.

Ivan and the Wolf, though. That he **did** understand.

“Vitya, go find some food. Mingle.”

Viktor looked up at his coach, who smiled down at him with warmth and understanding. It was easy to get overwhelmed in a place like this. He was giving him permission to wander, since his mind was already doing so.

The boy smiled back—“Okay, Coach.”—and off he went.

Finding food wasn’t difficult; there were banquet tables set up with an assortment of fine offerings, but as usual, Viktor wasn’t keen on any of it. Even if he was, the amount of people surrounding him had his stomach locked down tight. He selected, instead, a delicate flute of pink champagne from the drink table to carry around with him as he made the rounds, looking for somewhere to settle in and observe for a while. Everyone was so pretty in their formalwear, and spirits were so high. It was just like a ball at a castle, and he a princess, too young to be presented, but old enough to sneak around. Just to watch them dance…

Like he’d watched his mama and papa dance. The king and queen. But oh, that’d been so long ago.

One day, he’d find his own prince to dance with. Not that anyone was doing much dancing, really. Small talk, then. And it’d be so… perfect. So romantic. So-

“Vitya. There you are.”

He recognized him at once. It wasn’t even the voice of his former roommate that pinged the instant memory, but the distinct tone of patronizing criticism wrapped in amusement that came with it.
“Gavrik.” Viktor faced him, looking the young man over with one swift glance. He was dressed in a charcoal suit with a tie. With his hair slicked back, he looked quite mature. Even handsome. It just made it all worse. “What are you doing here?”

He shrugged, then smiled. “My parents came to visit from Moscow for the holidays, and since we saw your win at the Grand Prix Final, we put feelers out… found out about the benefit, and…”

“…got yourself invited?” Viktor set his jaw. Of course. The rich were able to get into anywhere they pleased. It was a privilege.

“Well. It wasn’t as if it was hard. This is a party for sponsors, and my parents-”

Viktor cut him off. “Why?”

The smile faltered, then reset, firm on that face that Viktor had tried to forget in the past year and a half. “I thought it was obvious, Vitya. Why else would we come?”

“I don’t know, Gavrik. To tell me I’m stupid?”

Gavrik’s expression slipped once more, and he let it stay a frown that time. “Vitya. If this is about my changing rooms…”

“Changing roommates.”

“It was complicated, Vitya.”

“No. It wasn’t.” Viktor squeezed the stem of the champagne flute, wondering how much pressure it would take to shatter. He hoped it wouldn’t, but the thought of it breaking did give a sort of satisfying thrill to the back of his mind. Even so, he couldn’t bring himself to look Gavrik in the face. He huffed. “You and I know exactly why you left, so don’t try to pretend that you’re my friend now.”

Stunned, the other boy had no retort.

That made Viktor braver. He stuck out his chin and his chest, eyes narrowed, and gave Gavrik the iciest glare he was capable of. “I’m a Grand Prix Champion, Gavrik. I’ve got gold under my belt… and I don’t have time for you.”

Then he turned on his heel and stalked away, leaving Gavrik staring after him.

It had been a good getaway. He somehow hadn’t lost his cool despite the twisting anxiety in his gut. He’d missed Gavrik, but Gav himself had told him that he needed to grow a spine on more than one occasion. Maybe he would appreciate that he would be the first target of his newfound bravery.

Not that it mattered.

Stupid Gavrik.

Stupid party.

Stupid rich people.

And there were still so many hours left before Coach would take him home.

Sasha was entertaining a group of adults near the staging area. Even though he was always so
grumpy at the rink, he looked so suave and natural among them then. He really knew how to play
the game with the press and the sponsors; a faint smile here, a nod there, and soft-spoken answers
that got a laugh from the crowds. How did he do it? It looked exhausting.

Coach was busy mingling with some others, too, introducing more of the teammates to people he
could only guess were made of money. None of them looked like a good reprieve, because none of
them could possibly understand. He was supposed to be wooing sponsors, and yet…

Viktor sighed, looking into his champagne flute, and slumped against a column. He wanted to go
home, even though that meant being with his Aunt and Uncle for the holiday. He wasn’t any good
at selling himself; he just wanted to skate. But Coach needed him to try. What was he going to do?

That was when he saw him, sitting at an empty table tucked away in the corner with a book. He
wasn’t much older than Viktor as far as he could tell—maybe seventeen or eighteen—with a fringe
of dark chestnut hair furled over one half of his face, pale eyes fixed on the text in his hands.
Intense was the word Viktor pulled for him immediately, and sipped from his glass of champagne
while he observed the other boy in silence for several long moments. He didn’t notice, too busy
devouring whatever it was that he was reading.

Viktor had to know.

Had to.

He ran a hand over his halfback, adjusting the tightness of the hair tie and barrette, put on his best,
cutest, most charming smile, and approached with the mincing of a mink, flute stem in delicate
fingers.

It failed to catch the boy’s attention until he reached the table, at which point he simply raised his
head, then his brow, and scowled.

Viktor smiled harder. “Hi.”

“...Hello?”

“I’m Viktor Nikiforov.”

The boy looked him over, annoyance ebbing and confusion taking its place. “Viktor…” He said it
as if he were testing the name, then shook his head. Apparently, he didn’t like it. “Are you—”

“The figure skater, yeah. I won gold in the Junior Grand Prix.” Viktor beamed at him, raising the
champagne flute in salute. The medal in the inside pocket of his blazer was a gentle weight and
constant reminder of his success. “Two gold medals for Russia this year!”

He set his book on the table, looking even more perplexed. “Skating,” he repeated.

“Yeah.” Viktor wasn’t sure why, but the lack of recognition made him all the more interesting.
The benefit was for the skating, and the only way to get in was to be connected to the skaters or the
sponsors, and yet…

“Are you trans?”

Viktor felt the heat rise to his cheeks in an instant and forced another smile, shaking his head. “No.
I’m... I’m just Viktor.”

“Oh.” The other boy clearly didn’t understand, but he nodded, anyway, and held out a hand.
“Nikodim Yermolai.”

His hand was warm. Soft. Not calloused the way his own were from the barre or hardwood floors. Viktor held the boy’s hand between his fingers for a few seconds, watching his face as it, too, colored, then smiled and took it fully for a proper handshake.

“I’ll call you Niko.”

“Niko?”

It wasn’t really a proper diminutive, but Viktor liked it. He let go of his hand and turned to the book on the table. “The Wheel of Time?”

“It’s… a fantasy book.”

Viktor pulled out a chair and sat next to him, turning the paperback toward him. “In English.”

“There isn’t much out in Russian yet. I had this imported.”

“Oooh. Exotic. Look at you, so well-read! All tucked away in the corner, reading a foreign book as big as a brick. You must be some kind of genius, right?”

Niko frowned, blushing darker. It was just the start.

They talked for an hour or two. Or, mostly Viktor did while Niko offered the occasional awkward answer, and little by little, the pink champagne disappeared. When Gavrik found the courage to look for him again, Viktor had dozed off at the table, with Niko back to reading quietly at his side.

“Coach Feltsman, Vitya is… well, it’s far past his bedtime, should we do anything?”

The old man looked at the pair at the back of the room, then shook his head. “It’s fine.”

“I don’t suppose he’s charmed his way into any pocketbooks this way, though. Isn’t he supposed to be getting sponsors?”

Yakov considered this, and what he knew of Viktor’s former roommate. He’d had to hear the complaints and hurt for days after the switch, and Vitya’s finances had never been the other boy’s business, no matter how much he’d tried to make them. “He secured one earlier this evening, actually. And this way, Vitya is not getting into trouble.”

“He did?”

“Thank you for looking out for Vitya. But he is fine on his own.”

Gavrik nodded, justly reprimanded, and excused himself to return to his parents. Maybe he was just fine on his own, but the most beautiful boy was missing the party, sleeping next to an apathetic young man who had no business even associating with him. The Yermolai boy knew very little of the arts, Gavrik knew, and couldn’t possibly appreciate Vitya… could he? Not that Viktor would listen to him now, anyway.

It’d been a mistake to leave him in the first place. But it was also business, and Gavrik knew he had to let him go. Vitya had never been his.

Once the countdown had commenced, the guests had adjourned to head out to their respective after
parties. Niko helped Yakov shepherd a very sleepy-but-startled Viktor out to the car.

“Don’t forget to text,” said Viktor, struggling with the seatbelt. They’d exchanged numbers inside; Viktor’s on a napkin for Niko, and Niko’s right into Viktor’s cellphone.

The boy laughed. “Sure, Mishka. If you even remember this.”

“I’ll remember, Niko.” Viktor offered one of his most adoring smiles, reserved only for the cutest of boys. “Don’t you worry.”

Yakov didn’t fail to notice the way either of them were looking at or pointedly away from each other. He kept it to himself until they’d said their goodbyes and had pulled away from the hotel, off through the snowy streets of Saint Petersburg on the way to the home of Viktor’s aunt and uncle.

“Mishka?” he asked, unable to hold back a chuckle.

Viktor lifted his head from the passenger-side window, blinking away the sleep. “Hmm? Oh, yeah. He said I was like a hibernating bear. Cute, right?”

There was definitely no mistaking the blush on his cheeks; deep, rosy, and coupled with a pleased little smile. He sighed and leaned his head back against the seat, once more closing his eyes.

“I suppose it is,” said Yakov.

“Mmmhmm~”

“By the way, you impressed a sponsor and you didn’t even have to talk to them.”

Viktor sat up straight. “Wait, what? Oh, no, I fell asleep… I’m sorry, Coach!”

“We’ll talk more tomorrow.”

He sagged against the window again, resigned. It was too difficult to keep up his energy now that it was well past midnight. “Okay.” Viktor fought a yawn with barely passable effort, then snuggled up to the door. “I hope you have fun with Lilia tonight.”

Yakov’s fingers tightened on the steering wheel as he fought back a little pink in his own cheeks for once. “Always do.”

“Good.”

The rest of the drive was quiet, at least in the car, with the rest of Russia out celebrating the biggest holiday of the year. Yakov had hoped that the excitement of the party would have kept his little Vitya awake, but he should have known better; the young skater, as far as he could tell, had never been able to stay up for New Years. At least, not in the traditional sense.

When they got to the relative’s house, Yakov nudged the boy awake.

“Come, Vitya. I’ll get your suitcase.”

Winter holiday meant spending time with his aunt and uncle at ‘home’ away from the Academy. Viktor groaned and unbuckled his seatbelt, then moved for the door only to pause. “Oh, wait, right… Coach?”

Yakov turned to him.
“I almost forgot.” He dug past his coat and into his blazer’s inner pocket, feeling around until he closed his fingers on the handkerchief and the medal inside it. Viktor held it out to him. “Here. For you.”

Yakov took the wrapped bundle with both hands and pulled back the handkerchief, frowning at the glint of gold in the dim houselight through the windshield. “This is your...”

“Yeah. I want you to have it.”

The corners of the pale blue handkerchief draped like opened flower petals in the older man’s steady hands, the golden center entwined with a coil of burgundy ribbon. “But your first gold... it’s important, Vitya.”

“I’ll get more. Lots more. And besides, you worked harder than anyone to get me here, didn’t you?”

Viktor, then fifteen by only a few short days, wore a sleepy smile that was no less stubborn than if he’d been fifty-eight like his coach. Only Yakov’s resolve never could stand up to him for long.

He sighed, brushing his thumb over the grooves along the surface. “Your aunt and uncle. They know you won; wouldn’t they like to see it?”

Viktor stuck out his tongue. “And let them get their grubby paws on it? Nah. I’ll tell them you put it in a trophy case at the rink. If they want to see it, all they have to do is come see me skate. Since they’ll never come, they’ll never know.”

Yakov fell silent at that, simply touching the medal, wiping fingerprints from it with the handkerchief.

“...Birds don’t just fly into your mouth already roasted, Coach.” Viktor nodded. It was a matter of fact.

Yakov chuckled, conceding, and wrapped the medal back up in the handkerchief. “That they don’t, Vitya. Very well. Let’s get you inside.”

“Watch me, Viktor. Don’t take your eyes off me.”

The request was essentially the same as it had been before the Hot Springs on Ice; watch me and perhaps, on a deeper level, stay. But that hadn’t been the only thing that had echoes from that first performance; Yuuri had changed the story again.

Eros had always been the tale of the predator and the prey, but the roles had become Yuuri’s to play with, and he did so with the same ease that he played with Viktor’s heart.

First it was the quiet intensity, studying him as Viktor cautiously ventured that Yuuri didn’t need to use stand ins to seduce him. The impatient silence made Viktor feel like a fool, as if he were treading on an unspoken, but obvious and understood truth.

Then it was the way Yuuri had taken his hand, as he’d taken his hand so many times in the past few weeks, shredding the tentative subtlety that Viktor had laid with an aggressive confidence he’d
only seen once before- at the banquet. There was no question, no hesitation; just a firm connection between them. And Yuuri, with his dark eyes, was left in complete control.

It left Viktor standing helpless before Yuuri had even begun. Or, no; the performance always started long before an athlete stepped onto the ice, that was true, but when had he become Yuuri’s prey instead of his coach?

Viktor brushed the soft leather of his gloves over his forehead, mystified, gaze transfixed on the other man as he took his position. The headache from his hangover had subsided for the most part, but what remained left him in a fog. Whatever Yuuri was doing now wasn’t helping.

The rhinestone fittings caught the overhead lights, drawing attention like the blades of his skates, and for a moment, Viktor’s thoughts turned to pride at just how effective that design decision had been. He and Fifi had worked hard to get it just right; pulling the eye across the torso and down to the hip, zig-zagging across lycra and mesh, snatching attention with that flash of blood red under the half skirt at the thigh… just that little bit of warning before-

-before Yuuri licked his lips and drew him right back to his face.

Viktor swallowed at a suddenly parched throat. When the announcer, too, stuttered, he shook it off. There was no need to feel embarrassed for staring; everyone was. They were supposed to. As if he needed further incentive to pay close attention. Yuuri was his student, after all; he needed to keep track of his every move. And oh, he was in such good form. Every movement told the story while leaving a solid, technical impression; smooth undulations caused by the roll of his hip, letting the blades cut through the ice, carrying the shifting of his weight to make it all look so effortless.

It was unbearably addicting to watch, mentally adding up the multipliers for each complicated step sequence and jump that he managed to land so perfectly while staying in character. Yuuri had learned to make it an art. Finally, God! Yes! And the lift he could get with those muscular legs of his… Eros had been the perfect choice. No one could do Eros the way Yuuri could. He loved it

“Perfect!” Yes, and it was. Next up was the increase in tempo and-

*Keep your eyes on me.*

She beckoned him, and he followed, winding down the narrow pathways of the cave, deep into the mountain. He could not refuse. Could not resist. Everything about her told him to run, but just as badly did he want to stay.

It was a story that Viktor knew well.

Far too well.

Except that *he* wasn’t skating it.

Her eyes flashed the color of rubies instead of blue diamonds; her smile that of desire.

*Come,* she whispered.
And he was helpless.

The spirit who guarded the heart of the mountain had always been and would always be all or nothing. Those who sought its precious stones could either give up their quest entirely, never to return… or fall prey to the mistress, never to be seen again. She was as ruthless as she was beautiful. And that man, the one she lured with promises of emeralds and sapphires, had long since forgotten about all of that.

_I want the heart_, he said. _I’ve travelled far to claim it._

She kissed him. He weakened in her grasp. There was no saving him now; not with the way she had him pressed against the cold, hard wall of the cavern, fingers clawing through his hair, body pressed to his. _Eros_ had always been a cobra; now he understood why. Twin snakes made their mark on his throat, and she lapped at the blood while the heat of his racing heart sent the venom coursing through his body. The tongues of the serpents flicked over his skin as she pulled him into her arms and away for his final dance; a tango, intimate and violent, letting her take all that she wanted until she was sated. Pleasure upon pleasure. Drowning in ecstasy.

Discarded and lifeless, another victim of _Mednoj gory hozjajka._

Viktor exhaled sharply, staring in disbelief at the finishing pose of Yuuri at the center of the ice. What had that been? An intrusive fairytale, but… He shook his head. “That was perfect…” It had been. Every jump and turn had been made with precision, and no element of the story had been lost. In fact, it’d been so intense, it’d left him breathless. “Yuuri!”

“The kiss and cry’s that way.” Chris didn't add “you stupid idiot” to the end of his statement, but he didn't need to. Not his index finger pointed in the direction of Yuuri's retreating figure, or the look of irritation plastered on his face. The message was loud and clear on its own, and Viktor felt it all the same. That, and terribly bewildered. Why was he standing with Chris in the first place? When had he wandered over?

Had Yuuri's _Eros_ really become that powerful?

Sparing a thought for the performance, from the moment he'd forcefully taken his hand, to the flush of his cheeks when he'd finished, certainly made it easy to get distracted…

“Go already, _coach Viktor!_” Chris took him by the shoulders and gave him a shove toward the kiss and cry.

It only got worse from there, sitting close, watching him breathe. But he was distracted, too, which made it… easier? Harder? Viktor smiled, bursting with praise, all of which he tried to hold in. Yuuri was sensitive to compliments, he had to choose wisely and not overwhelm him, especially when he was already under pressure.

“You did well,” Viktor offered first. That would be safe enough. But Yuuri seemed off, somehow. The scores hadn't even come in yet, but he was… distressed? Disappointed? How they could possibly be he couldn't even begin to tell. From technical standpoint to _Eros_ , it has been incredible. He was still reeling. But then, with everyone watching, and Yuuri still so uncertain about everything, maybe it's just left him feeling awkward. He wanted to understand. “How did it feel?”
“Good. I just hope everyone watching felt good, too.”

Still so stiff! Why?!

"And we have his short program score: 106.84!"

Amazing! There was no holding it back; Viktor couldn’t help it. 58.91 for technical elements, 47.93 in presentation? How far he’d come! And it was just the first heat of their Grand Prix tour. Yuuri was just getting warmed up! Clapping wasn’t enough; he threw his arms around him, hand affectionately seeking his scalp, and snuggled in against his face. “Of course they felt good! How could they not?” He crooned. Yuuri moved in his arms like a big dog; allowing himself to be hugged, but not necessarily enjoying it. Viktor pulled back just enough to admire his face, give him some space. Just like Makkachin. It was only then that Yuuri looked at him at all. “You were incredible today and I couldn’t ask for a better student!”

Those in the stands had various chants for the Japanese skater- mostly variations on the play of his name, Katsu-Katsu! Win win Katsuki! -but even with the fanfare, Yuuri was still tense. Distracted. Viktor tried to catch his eye, little smile curious, concerned, letting his hands linger as he pulled them away. “Yuuri…?”

“Skater Katsuki! Can we get an interview?”

Yuuri looked their way and nodded. “Guess I better get to that,” he said. “How’s your head, Viktor?”

“Doing better…”

“Good.” Yuuri set his palms to either side of him for leverage- one on the bench, the other on Viktor’s knee, then up to his thigh -and got to his feet. “See you in a bit, then?”

In the span of three seconds, Viktor all but forgot the entirety of the English language, and found himself staring stupidly after Yuuri in wide-eyed, slack-jawed, bewildered wonder. The scores? Gone. Skating? What was that? And what had Yuuri even asked him? The air was stifling, his throat dry all over again. He swallowed at it, gaze stuck on the curve of Yuuri’s smirk as he looked back over his shoulder before walking away.

And, for a moment, all Viktor was able to think was one simple question: had Yuuri touched the bench like that, too?

Damn.

A quick check under the stall doors verified that the bathroom was, in fact, empty. Of course it would be; only badge carriers were allowed in this section of the facility, and anyone with sense was out there where the action was. Viktor slipped into the stall furthest from the door and bit down on the loose end of his glove’s middle finger, working his hand free. Lovely as the soft leather felt on skin, he had no interest in tainting the pair with what he was about to do. Hand free, he latched the door, removed his other glove, and stowed them both in the pocket of his slacks, which he loosened, belt first, then button, and zipper.

The cold tile was hard against his back, and he braced himself, shoulderblades rolling until he could barely make out the temperature through his jacket. The arc of his spine was curved with his rump pressed so, but it was easy to flatten himself when he imagined Yuuri pushing him against the lockers again, just as he had in that dream. The kiss that they’d actually shared hadn’t been
anything like that fantasy, but the way Yuuri had drawn his tongue over his lips before *Eros* had made it so easy to blend the image and imagine what it would be like.

Mouth dry, Viktor allowed himself a silent gasp as he rolled his head against the wall. What little effort it took to maneuver his underwear out of the way still offered plenty of friction for his growing desire. He gathered himself, long fingers gentle, teasing with care to assess just how much trouble he was in.

The answer? *So much.*

He laughed at the absurdity of his plight, hiding in the bathroom with such a problem at a public venue during a competition of all things- and as a *coach*-and snatched a handful of toilet paper from the dispenser. It wouldn’t take him long. It didn’t need to. He just needed to *clear his head.* Of *Yuuri.*

If Viktor could just massage him right out of his thoughts, *stroke* him from his mind, all of those dark glances and flashes of red each time he lengthened his stride on the ice… No one should have had the stamina to keep up the pace the way Yuuri had, lifting his skates, showing the mesh of his inner thigh as if there were no more weight on his boots than the laces that kept them secure. And the way he controlled his breathing, equal breaths in and out; what he wouldn’t give to feel them hot against the back of his neck.

The heat from the Kiss and Cry had been maddening; the scent of his sweat, fresh and clean from exertion, so close he could nearly taste the salt on his skin. He’d wanted to. *Oh* how he’d ached to. That and more. He could still smell him on his clothes, and with his eyes closed, thoughts scattered in the feverish haze, he *could* taste it, and *feel* more. Yuuri at his throat, strong hands drawing each ragged breath from him in staccato rhythm, faster and harder.

He worked the reverie like a violin, tension in tightening strings bringing a higher pitch to the stifled whine in his voice. Viktor bit down on his lip, head bowing as the constricting muscles in his stomach bent him over. He readied the toilet paper. Just a little more…

“So! That was… an amazing performance by your lover.”

Viktor wasn’t sure if it was the sound of the voice from right outside the door or the sudden shock climax that did it, but all at once he was reeling, hands clamped down over himself, head smacking back against the wall in an explosion of bright white while he gasped and sputtered and desperately tried to keep his knees from giving out.

He managed. Barely. Heels firmly planted on the tile, body wedged against the wall, waiting out the long stretch of seconds that he needed for closure and comedown. Viktor kept his mouth open to pant as quietly as he could manage, eyes closed against the heat of haze and utter mortification.

Chris, thankfully, stayed quiet, only shifting his weight from one foot to the other, skate guards clicking on the floor.

The walls slowly came back in a blur of washed out blues and greys and Viktor forced himself to stand, legs trembling under him. “*Y*-yes, it was…” He cleared his throat. “*Very good.*”

There was more silence as Chris hesitated, giving Viktor an opportunity to concentrate on cleanup. The headache from earlier had returned, so he was grateful for the chance to not have to think about more than one thing at a time for the moment.

“I was just checking on you,” Chris finally said, and Viktor didn’t need to look at him to know that
he was frowning. “You ran off so quickly after Yuuri’s Kiss and Cry… but it seems you are…
\textit{fine.}”

Viktor flushed the evidence away and quietly returned his clothing to its previous state of tidiness. He couldn’t let Chris see him wearing it poorly. Shirt tucked in, everything zipped and buttoned, belt buckled, jacket, vest, and coat in place. He rubbed his shoulder over his cheek and it came away damp. \textit{Fantastic.} “Yeah. I’m just dandy.” Viktor grunted and bent down to work open the stall latch with his elbow. Though his hands were dry, he wasn’t about to touch anything until he’d washed them. Not after \textit{that}. “And looking forward to seeing you skate.”

“Oh, yes, please do watch~!” Chris moved out of the way for him, delighted at that prospect, but it only lasted for the space of a few seconds. Then it was back to an irritated pout. “We’ll have to have a chat afterwards. About you and that lover of yours.”

Viktor ignored him, moving right to the sink. He shrugged off his coat and rolled up his sleeves, setting to work on sanitizing his hands. Catching a glimpse of himself in the mirror said it all; he was florid, silver hair matted at the sides of his face with sweat, lines carved deep around his eyes. Exhausted. He switched the temperature from scalding to icy- there never was a middle ground at these venues -he bent over the faucet to wash his face and draw the heat from his skin.

“Shall I leave you to \textit{handle} things, then?”

A glance showed his friend with a look of more concern than before. Chris might have even been nervous. They’d never been in \textit{this} situation before. It wasn’t a good feeling. Lies between them, and Viktor caught unaware like a wolf in a trap… He shook his head and turned off the tap. “Could you get me a paper towel?”

“Of course.”

Viktor took what was offered and dried himself off, straightening up to make himself presentable while Chris watched at his side. No. He hadn’t caught him like this, but otherwise compromised? The parallels were too close. It hadn’t been the first time, and that made him nervous. That had been… so long ago.

“You don’t need to wait for me.”

“I have a few minutes.”

Viktor shook his head, but there was nothing that could be done. Chris would do what Chris would do. He coiffed his hair, fingers teasing the short ends, waiting for the color in his cheeks to die down until he was relatively certain that he’d regained enough composure. It was silly; he wasn’t going out on the ice. Christophe was. And yet, Chris waited with him. Quiet, steadfast.

They left the restroom and moved down the hall where Mr. Mancakes Manager waited at the end. There were penalties for late skaters, and the stress was obvious from any distance.

“It’ll be nice to catch up later,” said Viktor. “Good luck.”

“It certainly will. And do remind Yuuri of our dinner plans tonight.”

“Dinner plans?”

Chris left him with a parting wink and a smile, bewildered, to return to Bastien and, Viktor imagined, shake free of all that had just happened. Perhaps get a proper send off for his short program that was undoubtedly inappropriate for the public space
Viktor slipped away to look for Yuuri, rubbing the tender spot on the back of his head. When had dinner plans been made? It was clear that Chris was on to him, but what did it matter? Even if Chris took him aside, forced the truth out of him, it wouldn’t make a difference…

He was still staring his fear in the face, alone.

The last time, he’d taken that final step forward. This time… he wasn’t sure.

At least the air in the arena was well ventilated and cold. By the time Viktor found where Yuuri had hidden himself away, stationed with the other young skaters Guang-Hong Ji and Phichit Chulanont, he felt much, much better. At least physically. Emotionally, he wasn’t certain. That is, until Yuuri offered him a little glance and smile over his shoulder, and all of the tension in his shoulders melted away. Viktor draped his coat over one of the chairs and came to stand behind him, peering at the flat screen over his shoulder. Chris had just begun.

The younger skaters spared him one glance was all, each with a warm smile of their own, then returned their attention to the screen. And Yuuri… Yuuri leaned back, just enough to make contact, bridging the gap between them without a word. Not even another glance. Just a simple, quiet touch. Though the urgency and heat of earlier had been sated, what remained was an overwhelming rush of warmth and affection. Viktor remembered this. Just brief and distant, fleeting snatches of feeling, but it was there, and he moved closer to it, to Yuuri, winding one arm under his arm and around his waist, wrapping the other at his shoulder.

He held him. Felt the rise and fall of his chest with each breath, appreciated the sweet timbre of his nervous voice when he spoke, and took in the scent of his skin as he hugged closer. If they’d been alone, and if they’d been together, there would have been nothing to stop him from kissing his way from the nape of that lovely neck up to the back of Yuuri’s ear, and then mouthing at his jawline. They could have even continued the same droll conversation about skating and statistics; Viktor frankly didn’t care much either way. He could rattle off facts about any one of the skaters in the lineup just as easily as the next. Christophe was even easier, and the performance was typical of his repertoire. Not bad, really; certainly Bastien’s handiwork.

But the commentary seemed to please Yuuri as it did his friends, and since they were not, in fact, alone or together, that was just as well. As much as he wanted to continue the post-relief cuddle and then some, Viktor pulled himself away as the program came to an end and returned his gloves to the rightful place on his hands. It was time to go back to being a coach, after all; after that performance, Yuuri would be in first, which meant more interviews and media control.

"I guess today's sex appeal award goes to Chris."

Yuuri sounded disappointed, which was ridiculous. But Viktor could only smirk and offer a consoling pat pat on his student's shoulder. Sex appeal was one way to look at it, he guessed, but Viktor wasn't about to out himself, or comment on his Swiss friend’s hypersexuality— it had been awkward enough before Chris had caught him red handed, so he clearly has no place to judge, but… he knew the kinds of things Christophe’s manager whispered in his ear right before he went on the ice. He wished he didn't, yet here he was.

At the end of the row, Phichit winced. "The ice looks soaking wet."

Viktor would have laughed if it weren’t so crude, shaking his head while the poor, young, sweet little innocent lambs looked on in horror. Oh, how they would be prey to such wolves. In his day, they’d have been eaten alive.
“...he’s ended the short program in fifth place.”

Yuuri pulled out of Viktor’s arms, shoulders hunched. “Huh? Then am I…?”

It was almost like watching an old toy being wound up, the way his body tensed up like that. Viktor could just imagine a key right between his shoulder blades, being cranked with every passing word by the announcer, and more with those of his rivals.

“I’ve still got a chance!” Guang-Hong said, though his statement was largely unnecessary. Of course he did; the free skate was where the points were really stacked, but even so, the tiny Chinese skater was nothing compared to his predecessors. Adorable, mind, but lacking a season or two of experience. He wouldn’t beat his Yuuri.

The Thai skater, however, was a much more significant threat- he had both confidence and charisma, with the ability to read a room. What he lacked in experience, he more than made up for in his steady patience. He wasn’t eager to rush things. Viktor could tell he would be a fierce competitor in seasons to come. Phichit turned to Yuuri, one hand clapped to his shoulder, smile bright and genuine. An ally. “I’m gunning to pass you in the free program, Yuuri.”

At least it had a positive effect on his student. Viktor had to give Phichit credit for that. Maybe not a wolf, then.

“Leo’s in third… look, he’s so cool…”

Viktor turned back to China’s skater and the screen. He vaguely remembered something about Guang-Hong and the American skater from the night before… they’d arrived together for hot pot for some reason. Phichit had invited them?

“Finishing in second is within my expectations for the short program.”

Yakov’s voice on the TV. Viktor stepped up to watch, barely noticing as the younger skaters shied away in his presence.

“I won’t lose to a third-rate coach.”

Yakov looked pleased with his comment; it had clearly gotten the reaction he’d wanted from the interviewers. And Georgi… Viktor could only imagine how happy Georgi was to be taking the spotlight as Russia’s crown prince.

Only for the moment, of course. Georgi wouldn’t be there for long. Viktor knew Georgi’s skating inside and out, and his Heartbreak was no match for Viktor’s Love. Eros and Agape, and their respective skaters, would destroy him. Of course, it was nothing personal, but Viktor couldn’t help enjoying the idea of that smirk on Georgi’s face crumbling just a little, contrasted with the memory of disgust that he’d wore the night before when Yakov had--

“Viktor.”

“Hm? Oh.” Viktor blinked, tearing his gaze from the screen. Yuuri held his sleeve, nodding at the camera people who were in place to get their action shots for the ongoing film spots. He put on a smile, small and simple, and watched the playback of Yuuri’s skating on the small screen below. He needed to forget about Yakov for now; that would come later. If his former coach really wanted to declare war on him, it would take careful planning, and Yuuri needed Viktor at his best, as he’d said. Not distracted or emotionally compromised.

They were shuffled back and forth between small groups of interviewers to get quotes and
statements for the different networks, each looking for *exclusives* even though they were all asking the same questions. Viktor, for the most part, let Yuuri handle them; it was a small enough crowd and, just as the day before, he was giving all the right answers. The power of love was going to help him win. Yep, his theme. Just restate, reuse, abuse; no one needed to be impressed by anything more than his skating... yet. The sincerity that his nerves lent to the interviews made him humble, too; softened him. Made a plea for understanding. They would get why he hadn't succeeded in previous seasons, and why he now was a serious contender. The audience, and thus the sponsors, would be on his side. It was his heart that they needed, not any sort of speech.

“Skater Katsuki, your thoughts on the upcoming free skate?”

Yuuri’s blush darkened- a very cute side effect of the subject, but he’d brought it on himself, so Viktor didn’t feel too badly for him -and he put up a fist in a display of determination. “W-with my coach, Viktor, I’ll win with the power of love!”

“Win, win!” Viktor added with a cheerful chirp, though it didn’t make sense, and he felt so silly doing it. But he was a *third rate coach*, so how could he be expected to do any better?

Hah. Third rate coach with a first place skater; bringing a diamond in for the gold.

“Hey Yuuri! Guang-Hong says he knows a great place for dinner.”

“Oh yeah?”

Viktor patted his coat down once he’d draped it over his arm and glanced back at the other skaters who, like any flock of ducklings, had huddled together again.

“Yeah. It’s not hot pot... I hope that’s okay.” Guang-Hong spoke to Phichit, though he was peeking past Yuuri to Viktor himself, freckles clearly visible in the flushed skin of his face. “Ask him, okay?”

Phichit looked to Yuuri, then both turned on Viktor. He chuckled. Yuuri wasn't scared of him now, too, was he? “That’s fine. I’ll try anything once... twice, if I like it.” When only Phichit laughed, he continued. “I used to eat out with Yakov every time we came to Beijing; I quite like it. Please, pick whatever you’d like.”

Guang-Hong nodded, pleased and flustered, scrambling to rapid fire text on his phone. “I’ll tell Leo!”

Shaking his head, Viktor turned to Yuuri. “So I guess these are the dinner plans Chris mentioned.”

"Yeah. I hope that’s okay. They really wanted a chance to meet you."

Viktor tucked his coat against his waist and settled his other hand at the small of Yuuri's back. "Didn't they meet me last night?" It was going to be a long evening, but it seemed harmless enough. As long as he got to have more painkillers, it probably wouldn't be that bad.

"...sort of," Yuuri said, looking away. Embarrassed.

Had he really been that bad?

One glance at Phichit was enough to confirm it. The bright-eyed socialite was near bursting with a
smile that hides secrets like a psychopath hides murder. And, in similar vein, holding eye contact sent a cold chill down his spine with aching regret. There was a glint there that screamed wolf. Crazy wolf.

Phichit took the shudder as an invitation to speak, reaching out to nudge his arm as he couldn't easily reach his shoulder. "Maybe you should skip the baijiu this time, Viktor."

Viktor frowned. "Yes. I guess so."

The Thai skater turned his contact to Yuuri instead, taking him by the shoulder furthest from Viktor to give him a little shake, thick brows wagging. "But hey, it looks like that confession went well, riiiiight?"

At his side, Yuuri went rigid, each muscle responding to that invisible key, cranked hard at what Phichit had said. Instead of answering, though, he coughed.

Was Yuuri supposed to have confessed?

Phichit’s eyes, sharp like the hunting mongoose, darted to Viktor, mouth forming a tiny oh, which he covered with a hand. Even though his expression was that of shock, everything about him read ‘sorry, not sorry.’

Yuuri’s shoulders sagged, muttering “Phichit,” under his breath.

Viktor wanted to be amused. Maybe even to tease Yuuri for being the one to lose their flirting game, but something wasn’t right. Yuuri wasn’t embarrassed in the way that he got when it was for himself, and Phichit wasn’t razzing his former roommate, either. It didn’t add up. Instead, there was an awkwardness hanging in the air that filled him with a sick sense of dread. Like the tendrils of hangover were clawing its way back up through his stomach, twisting…

“Okay, Leo should be on his way over.” Guang-Hong looked up from his phone, giddiness undeterred by whatever was going on in the rest of the room. He clearly wasn’t a reader of atmosphere. “I’ll text everyone the address, and then, um.” He looked at the floor, shuffling his feet. Shyer than Yuuri by orders of magnitude, that one.

Phichit took over, slinging an arm around his shoulder. “Great! Then we’ll all meet there. Except my room is close to yours, so I’ll swing by- unless you and Leo want some time alone first, huh?” More wagging brows.

“Phichit!” Guang-Hong whimpered, blushing, but he was smiling again. “Shhh!”

At least Phichit only used his powers for good- as far as Viktor could tell. Dangerous, but only a potential threat. But Yuuri was still unsettled, wearing only a half smile. Stealing glances while the ducklings played.

“Oh, I better text Ciao Ciao…”

Baijiu.


Yuuri Katsuki.

A confession.
Only you can satisfy me.

Viktor cleared his throat and lifted his arm, glancing down at his wrist just past the coat where a watch would be if he was wearing one. After inspecting the cuff of his sleeve, he frowned. “Oh. I was supposed to talk to Chris about something.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Do you mind going on ahead to the hotel? I’ll meet you at the restaurant.”

“I could wait for you at the room…”

Smiling what Viktor was sure counted as something akin to plastic, he shook his head and rubbed Yuuri’s shoulder before slipping his hand into his trouser pocket for safekeeping. “I have a few things at registration that I need to take care of, too… that I missed last night, since we left so quickly. Is that okay?”

Yuuri hesitated, studying his face, but Viktor kept the smile firmly in place. The years of practice didn’t betray him, and soon, earned him a nod. “Okay, Viktor.”

“He can go with us,” Phichit said. “The B list getting the table ready for the A list. Though, I guess Yuuri’s on this way up to the A list now, huh? Aren’t you, Yuuriii?”

“Phichit…”

“He he he.”

Back to normal. Good.

“Perfect. Thanks. I’ll see you all then.” Viktor flashed a signature Nikiforov smile- broader that time, almost showing teeth -and a wink, then took his leave.

Yuuri was in good care and company.

And Viktor…

…

Viktor needed some air.

It was a little over an hour later when the final members of their party arrived with apologies and smiles, taking seats at prime section of tables set aside so that Guang-Hong, Leo, and Phichit could get the best view of the A-List skaters, while Yuuri could sit closest to his… coach or boyfriend or idol or whatever he was, now. Phichit wasn't 100% sure, but they were something more than friends and something less than lovers. Yuuri had been tight-lipped about it, but there was little that he could keep from his former roommate, no matter how hard he tried. Yuuri had always been an easy read.

Chris took the middle seat with Bastien Müller ("Baz" - like Baz Luhrmann, the man behind Moulin Rouge, one of the other best musicals in existence) at his left, and on his right- wait. "Where's Viktor?"

The last chair, the one set aside for the five time champion, was empty, and there was no sign of
him anywhere. The others looked around the restaurant, even Chris and Bastien, which had Yuuri on edge at once.

“Did… Viktor find you?” he ventured. Cautious.

Phichit scooted his chair closer, and stretched his foot under the table to nudge him. Physical contact was a good anchor for anxiety. That much he’d learned right away in their time together back at Wayne State University.

“He didn’t find me, no. He was looking?” Chris pursed his lips and leaned back in the chair, one arm sliding back over the edge to let him brush fingers over the back of Baz’s shoulder. So casual. Then he smiled, like the thought had steeped into the perfect Bai Miang. “How… surprising.”

Surprising, maybe, but Chris was the only one who looked happy about it. The Swiss man’s lover gave him a questioning look, but Chris only shushed him, taking out his phone, presumably to check for messages. One glance at Yuuri showed that none of this was neither normal nor going to plan. Yikes and double yikes.

Phichit stepped in. “That’s what he said anyway.” Did he use a little more force than necessary to imply oodles of doubt? Yeah. Probably. But the meaning needed to be clear. None of his friends were happy, and Viktor may have been the ultimate champion, but they were all still people. And he’d kind of sort of dragged them into it, so he would throw around what little weight he could to get his point made. Hmf.

Besides, Yuuri kept saying that Viktor wasn’t the self-centered jerk that everyone said he was. Now was the perfect chance to prove it.

Chris simply smiled. “Perhaps I just missed him. I’ll go to retrieve our missing guest.”

That was better. Phichit relaxed, nodding his gratitude. If Chris was on his side, then things were definitely going to be okay. No one was closer to Viktor than Christophe. Except maybe Yuuri. And even then, no one had history with the Russian like the Swiss skater did. The archive history went way back- even if he hadn’t had a walking Nikiforov wikipedia for a best friend, it was easy enough to find out.

Guang-Hong didn’t look convinced, only confused, so Leo sat up straighter to mediate. “You’ll be back, though, right?”

“That is the goal. Please, start without us.” So polite, that Christophe! He offered a charming smile, and turned to Baz as he pushed back from the table. “I apologize, Bastien. Be good with the young ones.”

“Of course.”

They all watched as Chris pushed his chair in and walked away, leaving a second empty chair between Yuuri and Bastien on the other side of the table from the three younger skaters. Guang-Hong sagged, staring directly in front of him where Viktor was supposed to have been sitting, and then dropped his gaze to the menu on the table.

“Aw, cheer up, Guang-Hong! If nothing else, this’ll be a fun story to tell later, right? The second time we had dinner with Viktor Nikiforov…”

“Easy for you to say, Phichit…” he muttered.

Leo bumped his shoulder, which prompted him to lean over the gap in their seats, pouting
miserably.

“Well…” Phichit tried a duck face, but no one was even looking. Baz was even on his phone. So he took out his own, and scrolled through the notifications. “Hey Baz. I like your latest drawing on Insta. Is that Sabine?”

“Why yes. Thank you.”

“What?! You’re already friends?!”

Phichit smirked. “You gotta move fast around here to keep up. C’mon.”

Shopping malls were blissfully wonderful things. A few minutes on his phone and seven minutes in a cab, Viktor was exploring the wonders of one right there in Beijing. He’d been there before, but it’d been a few seasons. Things had changed since then. Or, at least, he thought. He wasn’t entirely certain if he could be sure. The outside of the mall was so striking; domed arches of steel and glass, cut like waves, but on the inside, it was chaos. Bright lights and signs and a constant stream of people. He couldn’t read any of the signs and he didn’t know anyone there; not a single face or voice was familiar.

It was just what he needed. The sensory details washed over him and let him tune out the world, and he wandered, free from it all, mingling with the crowds. So what if he stood out? He never fit in anywhere, even in Russia. He was at much at home here as anywhere. It was just as well. He weaved in and out of shops, aimlessly searching, but never too hard. Things always escaped when he did; it was better to be coy, to cast nets to the side and see if the quarry would happen to slip in rather than go for anything directly. Fate was like that. Just stringing along… especially when one didn’t know what the were looking for.

Viktor looked at watches, but didn’t buy one. The quality was fine enough, but he had the one he wanted back in Russia. He’d just left it there. It’d been a gift. There was no need to replace it. He looked at stuffed dogs, too, but the stuffed Makkachin tissue box was already perfect, too. He missed it. It would be safe at the rink overnight. None of the plush animals could replace Makkachin, either, and it was silly to even think otherwise.

There were electronics, but he didn’t know what to do with them- those were more Yurio’s thing - and jewelry, which he’d always wanted, but had never been able to afford when he could have worn it, and then clothes. It was tricky to shop overseas. Having to send boxes home or bring extra luggage on the plane was an annoyance, especially to coaches, and the reporters were always keen on making a statement about it. So vain, they said. And maybe it was. But when else did Viktor have time to go out and look and enjoy? When else was he not supposed to be actively training and skating and working on his next programs if not during rest periods at competitions?

When he might have had a shopping companion that would tell him what looked good and what didn’t. Appropriate or silly. Who tried to get him to indulge from time to time but never really managed, yet…

Viktor pinched the fabric of the duster between his thumb and index finger, then removed his glove and tried again. It was so soft. Fluffy. Fleecy, even. Pale blue with a touch of indigo, like the morning winter sky before anyone else was awake. It looked warm. Poodly. It’d be so comfortable with emails and tea or coffee. Or evenings, sitting on the balcony, watching the shadows stretch over the canals.
He frowned, letting go of the sleeve, and stepped away from the garment. There were many beautiful things, all around him. But even if he found anything in his size - which wasn’t likely - it wouldn’t matter.

Damn.

*I love you, Yuuri, so much.*

*Only you in the whole world.*

*I need you. Only you can satisfy me.*

The memory was still hazy, but he could remember what he’d said, how he’d felt so desperate, aching to the point of madness. Yuuri had given him that tired look, half affection, half annoyance. No wonder his *Eros* had been so aggressive. He knew. Viktor had already lost the game.

*Show me,* he’d said. And Viktor had tried.

Tried and failed. It had been so pathetic. So humiliating. And then he’d passed out, thrown up, and had to be nursed back by his would-be lover. What a pathetic excuse for a playboy. It would have been funny if it hadn’t been so sad. Yet, despite all that, Yuuri still taken care of him, still asked-no, demanded - that he watch him.

The seduction had been intentional and Viktor had been, once again, a complete idiot.

“It's one thing to lie to me, but it's bad form to lie to your lover.”

Viktor sighed, shoulders going slack as he turned the six inch heel over in his palm, then set it back on the display. “Hello, Christophe.”

“But you're not lovers.”

No greeting? Fair enough. “No,” Viktor answered. “We're not.”

“Why would you tell me you were?”

It wasn’t like Chris to interrogate so to the point, but then, Viktor didn’t usually lie or skip out on dinner plans. He generally just rejected invitations and deny all allegations. But if Chris wanted to play it that way… “Because I knew you’d ask too many questions if I told you the truth, and, at the time…” Viktor wet his lips, searching for the right way to explain it. “It hurt too much.”

Chris pressed on, coming to stand at his side. “Is now any better?”

“It's a different kind of pain, Chris…”

He finally let up, giving a few seconds of reprieve, followed by a sigh. “I only ask you questions because I care, Viktor.”

“Yes, I know…I know you do.”

“I also know that you want this. So why won't you let yourself have it?”

The parallels were the sort of funny that really weren’t funny when in the moment, standing in front of the shoes, trading such similar lines over and over again. Viktor traced the line of the stiletto in front of him, one corner of his mouth turning upward into a faint smirk while his eyes stayed icy, transfixed on the black ankle strap. Just like before. “It doesn’t make sense, does it? I
know he cares for me. I know he knows that I do, too.”

When Viktor got to the pointed toe, he abandoned it, turning on the heel of his oxfords to put distance between him and temptation. Ah, sunglasses. Perfect for serious conversations.

“Actually, from what I’ve heard, no. He was quite disappointed that you weren’t there for the dinner, Viktor.”

“I’m sure he was.”

“And…?”

Viktor inspected his choices from the display and selected a pair of aviators, which he slipped on to frown at in the mirror. “I panicked.”

“Viktor, if you know you love him and that he loves you, what’s the issue?”

The issue… Viktor tilted his head this way and that, inspecting the glasses in the tiny vanity a little longer, then returned them to their place to try another pair. Then another.

“Viktor?”

Viktor could have tried on every pair of sunglasses in the store and it wouldn’t have made a difference. He had only had half answers for Chris; nothing that would satisfy, and all that were too dramatic. Excuses. He knew that better than anyone. It was stupid. He knew that better than anyone, but logic didn’t get rid of whatever kept him standing still, and no one was going to understand that. Especially if he couldn’t, himself.

Chris took his shoulder, touch light and gentle. “Can we sit and talk?”

Viktor took in the halogen lights above them, made to give all of the displays extra sparkle, then back at Chris with a tilt of his head downward, letting the glasses slide down the bridge of his nose so he could give him a look. One brow arched, the other furrowed. Undeserved incredulity.

His friend shot him a tired look back. “Really.”

“Fine.” Viktor peeled the shades and folded them with a snap. “But you’re buying these and—” he peered at the price tag. “—er, I’m buying these, and you can’t stop me from wearing them the whole time.”

“Sure. I’ll buy you something else after we chat. How about that?”

“…I guess.”

A few minutes later, the pair of skaters were situated on a stone bench that was one small part of a larger green-space feature of the shopping structure. The flowers and hedges that normally occupied the space were remembered by the carefully arranged rocks and naked trees left behind.

And, dark and cold as it was, Viktor dutifully set to work removing all of the tags and tiny stickers from his new pair of sunglasses as soon as they were settled, all by the street lamps overhead.

“To be clear,” Chris began. “I’m not mad that you lied. Disappointed, maybe, but I’m more upset that you’d lie to yourself.”
Viktor used his teeth to break the last tag, and gathered the plastic into his pocket. "I didn't want you to worry."

"It's too late for that. I was worried the moment you left."

"The moment I left..." Viktor played with the temple tips, pinching the ends running fingers along to the screws in the hinges. "For Japan?"

"Yes. Japan."

Viktor turned the glasses over in his hands, rubbing his fingerprints from the frames. “You told me to go, you know.”

“I thought you’d woo him, go on a date, maybe convince him to pick up the sport again… not quit your career overnight.”

“I didn’t quit. It’s... a break.” He slid the glasses on, adjusted the bridge until it was comfortable, and closed his eyes. Was it, though? “Like Yakov said, I went to find inspiration. For the season.”

“And you’re just as bad at romance as you are at lying, it seems.”

To that, Viktor shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not. Who knows, maybe I won’t ever go back.”

He felt Christophe’s gaze level on him for a good, long, stare. “Ever? Viktor...”

“You wanted gold, didn’t you? It’s no challenge for me anymore, so you take it.”

“Viktor.”

Viktor laughed, though the sound was a little too harsh, and leaned back on his palms. “I’m the undefeated champion. And I don’t even have a coach anymore, Chris. What could possibly bring me back?”

“Don’t be so dramatic. You know that’s not true. Your coach...”

Viktor cut him off with sharp snapping motion of a conductor silencing the chorus of doubts. “It's war, Chris.”

There was more staring, first in horror, then in suspicion. “Have you been drinking?”

“No.”

“All right. Have you eaten anything, then? At all. I heard you had a hangover this morning…”

Viktor slid the shades down the bridge of his nose to give Chris his most withering glare before turning away, pushing them back into position. The mall was had closed by then, but the ad displays continued their rotations through one product or service after another. Bright, shiny, fun, sexy; whatever they could do to tempt people to buy what they were selling.

“So you haven't, then.” The tone of Chris's voice was relief of all things.

Silence wasn't confirmation. It never had been, but that had never mattered to the Swiss skater. He was already damned at this point, but he could try to salvage it. “You didn't have to skip dinner to come looking for me if you're really all that hungry, Chris. I'm okay.”

“I could never miss out on the next Nikiforov drama…” Chris ventured lightly, then sighed. “And
as I said, I've been worried.”

“You don't need to be. I'm fine.”

“You're not. But let’s get back to Yuuri.”

Viktor rolled his eyes and then his body, pulling away from Christophe with a snort. “Isn’t that the point, though? Maybe that’s what all of this is? Maybe for once, just once, it isn’t what Nikiforov is going to do next- what crazy scandal or image change of bar fight -maybe it’s all about Yuuri Katsuki now. And maybe that’s not such a bad thing. Maybe Viktor Nikiforov is dead and everyone needs to get over it!”

Chris gaped. Horrified again? Shocked? Offended, maybe?

Viktor wasn’t sure, which pleased him, so he continued. “I flew halfway across the world to coach the man who dared try to sweep Viktor Nikiforov, undefeated champion, off his feet, and guess what?”

“...What?”

“Yuuri doesn’t even remember the banquet.” Viktor let that settle while he uncoiled from his guarded folded, gradually letting go of the aloof once more. “And he doesn’t care, either.”

“This is all very romantic… literarily speaking… but Viktor, what’s this really about? You sound as if you are giving up pursuing him.”

“I’m not! But can’t you at least sound a little bit surprised? I've spent the last several months chasing someone who didn't even remember me, who- quite frankly -didn't even seem to like me, all while learning to be a coach, on my own.”

"And?"

"It was so awkward, Chris! I even asked him out a month in, and he rejected me!"

"And now?"

"You're supposed to look a lot more shocked at that! He turned down Viktor Nikiforov!"

"Time passes. Feelings change. And I thought we were no longer speaking of Viktor Nikiforov, only Yuuri Katsuki. Or are you no longer interested in him?"

"Of course I'm interested in him!"

"Then why don't you make him yours?" Chris asked.

Viktor stretched his legs out on the paved walk before them, squinting behind the shades until the neon from the ads blurred into pale, fuzzy shapes that flickered like candlelight. He had no answer.

"He clearly has your heart, and anyone watching him skate could tell that he wants you, too, Viktor. I don't understand."

In hindsight, it was ridiculous. They'd kissed, held hands, sat together on the beach, walked the lonely road to and from Tanabata. Yuuri had seen him at some of his best and his worst, and still wanted him to be at his side. Still wanted him to be himself. Just Viktor.

It didn't get any better than that.
"I love him, Chris," Viktor said, voice soft. He'd admitted it before; not to Chris, but he was sure that it was nothing new. "It hurts, I love him so much."

Chris sighed. Deep, heavy. Frustrated. "Then why do you continue to deny yourself? It's the European Championships all over again; even when you win gold, you're miserable! Viktor, he cares for you. It's obvious that he does. You can have it all. It's right within your grasp and yet, for some reason that God only knows why, you refuse to let yourself take it!"

Viktor clamped his jaw tight and, not for the first time that evening, missed his dog. That wasn't going to get rid of Chris, though, or the truth of the matter. He would have to face it one way or the other. He worried his lower lip, scrambling for answers. Something, anything to explain the surging panic.

"Viktor, that pain could be euphoria if you let it, and playing hard to get like this... you're only going to hurt him."

Viktor was quiet for several seconds before he tried to speak, and when he did, all he managed to get out was a stuttered, "I can’t," before the words caught in his throat. He shook his head, struggled to make them come again, but once more gave in to a hiccupsed breath and a little huff. Then the tears came; silent and rolling down his cheeks from behind the sunglasses, which he wiped away in distress. "I will," he tried again, voice breaking too thick from the strain of his efforts to control himself. "But even the crumbs are too much, Chris!"

Chris gave him a few moments to try to sort it out or explain himself, but when nothing else came, put an arm around his shoulders.

When Viktor didn’t pull away, he rubbed his arm over the suit jacket sleeve, and turned his attention to the walkway between them and the shopping center, and the people still walking through. Despite the tears, no one had stopped to look at them, which was good. Viktor didn’t need any press right now; not like this.

"Viktor… what you had in the past was not how love works."

"I did the best I could," came the weak retort, broken and quiet.

"I know you did. But you can’t give and give and get nothing back. Unless you want Yuuri to be like that—"

"No!" Viktor bit back a cry, breath hitching again. "He’s not like that at all."

"Then don’t insult him. Yuuri is clearly wanting to give you what he did not. You are to love and be loved; that’s the natural course of things, even if, for you, it’ll be a learned skill to let someone in your life."

"I came to coach him, Chris, not to…"

"You’re not being honest with yourself. And even if that had been the case, don’t plans change sometimes?" Chris squeezed his shoulder. "Feelings change?"

"I… need to be objective. Consider the logistics…"

"Bullshit, Viktor. ‘Oh, hello. I flew across the world with my Feelings. Now I’m scared that since I actually love you, you might love me back. Time to remove myself from the situation.’ Isn’t that about right?"
Viktor said nothing, only sank lower against his friend’s side.

“And tell me, are Yuuri’s feelings objective?”

“He’s not thinking about that…”

“Easy for you to run, I suppose.”

It was an unexpected blow, deep and thorough. Viktor sucked in a breath, but it only eased the pain in his chest a little. “Chris.”

“Think about how strung along he’d feel after all of this, Viktor.”

“I’m not planning to leave! I just need to think about his career, his reputation, his safety… Chris! You’re not being fair!”

“Good. If you did leave, I’d tell him of your whereabouts.”

Viktor dragged a hand down the side of his face, then fixed his glasses, head aching. “You really want me to go for this, don’t you? Why?”

“I know you want this, and I know you really care for him. I’m tired of seeing you miserable, Viktor.”

Viktor stayed quiet for several seconds, staring through wet lashes and dark lenses at the empty pavement in front of them. “But I’m so good at it.”

"Va au diable." That got a little laugh, and Viktor dropped his head on Chris’s shoulder, body sagging. He was exhausted. “You can’t tell me what to do, anyway… I’m older than you.”

"Mmhmm." There would be no convincing him, and no wiggling out of it, either. The best he could do, Viktor knew, was to sort of duck out of Chris’s hold and stretch out on the bench below him, head propped up on his hand. It was a ridiculous sight, he knew, but the absurdity of a grown man posing like a model in suit and sunglasses, at night, in November, was at least a decent counterbalance to the mess that was his life. Chris gave an exaggerated sigh and brushed the hair from Viktor's forehead. It immediately fell back into place. "You look like Ferris Bueller."

Viktor tipped his shades by the bridge with his middle finger and gave him a crooked smirk.

“So what are you going to do about Yuuri?”

The smirk pinched itself into a pout as Viktor considered. “I apparently confessed while I was drunk last night, so it’s not like I can just pretend it didn’t happen.” He didn't need to peek far to see that Chris’s brows had disappeared into the fringe of blond. “And we're sharing a room.”

“Oooh.”

“I was thinking flowers? And wine?”

“Making your intentions clear. That sounds familiar. Good. Is he a flower man, then?”
“He said he wanted them if he podiumed, but even if he hadn’t, everyone wants them. Secretly.”

“It’s true. So romantic. Bastien and I have a lovely flower bed at home…”

“I know.” Viktor looked up as a couple walked by them, watching him watching them, then he sat up with a grunt. It was cold enough out that his knees and back were getting stiff. “I do check your Instagram. I just never leave comments.”

“Oh. I know. You like to be very secretive on the internet. And everywhere, really. That’s okay.”

“...right.” There was no end to the hidden truths that Chris could uncover, so Viktor decided to move things along. “Do you think chocolates would be nice, too? Though, he’s on that diet…”

“It’s the thought the counts, though. Might he eat it if it were gift?”

He laughed. “You don’t know Yuuri. He’s even more disciplined than I am, I swear.”

“That can’t be.”

“Oh, it’s true. Though…” Viktor drummed his fingers on the bench. “If he didn’t want to eat them, perhaps… I could.”


The outcry pleased him for so many reasons, Viktor didn’t even want to try to to explain it. He just let himself enjoy it and the pink warmth in his cheeks that flooded in with a smile. “Yes. I’ll eat chocolate for him, if he likes. And even if he doesn’t. I think I could handle that.”

“Well then, we’d better find some that you’ll like!”

With the mall closed, the pair took to wandering the streets on the way back to the hotel, stopping by whichever stores were open with their phones to guide them. In the end, they only had to take one taxi, which was needed only for the specific flowers that Yuuri had requested. It made it easy to bring everything back, though, which was good as Viktor had his arms full by the time they were finished.

“You’ll thank me later,” said Chris as he held the door to the lobby open for Viktor to shuffle in. “Trust me.”

Viktor, flushed and nervous, already knew that he was grateful to the other man. Whether or not any of what he’d purchased ended up being of use, having it on hand just in case really was a good idea. Chris being the one to suggest and drop the items- condoms and lube (“oh, this Chinese brand is excellent! Tested and approved; you’ll love it!”) -into the basket had been more than a little mortifying. After all, Viktor hadn’t done anything like that in years, and he was quite sure that Yuuri had never.

Besides, there was no need to rush, was there?

Chris walked him back to the room, holding the room key aloft while Viktor’s arms were otherwise occupied with flowers, wine bottle, and shopping bags. “And remember,” he said, voice cheerful. “If anything goes wrong, just let me know and you can stay with Baz and I.”

Viktor paled almost immediately. “R-right.”
“But nothing will go wrong. You are a champion!”

“Y-yeah… sure…” Viktor whimpered.

Chris swiped the door lock and pushed it open. “I’ll let Bastien know that it’s time to send Yuuri back over. Now get ready to make this count.”

Into the room he went, though ‘ready’ was something of a tall order. Viktor looked back at Chris, shuffling the goods to reach back for the room key. “I’ll do my best.”

“Good. I’ll leave you to it.” Chris flashed his biggest smile, then moved to step back into the hallway- only to pause. “Oh, and Viktor?”

“Huh?”

“Earlier, were you really relieving yourself in the bathroom stall?”

Had Viktor not been holding wine and flowers, he might have dropped them. Instead, he just gaped, knees locking into place. “Chris…!”

“Take Yuuri in there with you next time. It’s fun.”

“Oh my GOD! It’s a public venue!”

Chris shrugged. “ Doesn’t stop most. Besides, there is a lock, which you could have used.”

“I’m… still recovering from a hangover, cut me some slack! And go! Get out! Go back to Mr. Mancakes!”

“Fine, fine~”

Phichit looked up from his phone at the empty dishes that surrounded the table. It was lucky that Christophe’s boyfriend was an official with the ISU; though not quite Viktor Nikiforov or Chris levels cool, it had still made for an interesting evening… and was probably the only thing keeping Viktor off of Guang-Hong’s secret to-kill list. That, and the fact that he was pretty sure that he and Leo were playing footsie under the table. Those two.

Baz had no shortage of stories to tell, and not just about Chris; any skater they named seemed to have some kind of record, at least in passing, with his killer memory. Phichit was impressed. He hadn’t seen many people who could read the room as well as he did at any given time, especially when it came to calming people down. Interesting. And Baz still had time to keep in constant contact with Chris through texting. Phichit could tell by the incredible amount of emojis being sent back and forth- he’d recognize those swipe gestures anywhere, even upside down and backwards - and no one as professional as Bastien would send those to anyone except a lover. But that meant that things were probably well in hand, since Baz seemed unconcerned about the absence of his partner.

But dinner was over and the guests of honor were still missing, which was a serious problem, especially since Yuuri was slowly dissolving into a nervous wreck. And that made him mad. He didn't care how cool or good at skating Viktor was, or how much he'd done for the sport- and yes, he'd become an expert at that thanks to Yuuri's constant babbling -if Viktor was going to stand Yuuri up. There were no excuses for that.
Starting a one on one IM conversation with Christophe Giacometti without building a stronger rapport first was kind of a ballsy move, but Phichit had been left with little alternative. Besides, it's what the Skater would have done. What was a King without proper etiquette? Why, hardly a King at all!

p+chuchu: I don’t wanna sound mean but if Viktor isn’t dying, he better be buying my boy Yuuri a hundred roses or I’m probably gonna kill him.

Not that Phichit could kill Viktor. Even if he managed to, he was sure that the Russian Mafia was somehow involved with the coach. Yuuri had sworn on multiple occasions that it was just a rumor, but Phichit knew better. There were too many stories on the net that said otherwise. Too many other skaters in Coach Feltsman’s repertoire that had gold medals and squeaky clean histories. No one was just that good. It wasn’t like Russia was a magical fantasy land. And who was Yakov, anyway? Clean records or not, all of his skaters were dysfunctional nutcases with equal amounts of talent and personality. That guy had a winning formula. He must have seen things. Probably in a war. Or several. You just didn’t mess with Team Russia’s skaters. China had tried and…

Phichit shifted his gaze over to Guang-Hong, who was chatting happily with Bastien. At least there was that. No more wars, he hoped.

Chris pinged him back a moment later.

Chris G.: He's been running from his heart. I convinced him he shouldn't anymore. I assisted in him buying flowers.

p+chuchu: oH

p+chuchu: well in that case!!!!!! :3c

Chris G.: You may want to send Yuuri back to the room soon

p+chuchu: you got it!!!!122223

Chris G.: Apologize to the dinner party for us once more, will you? We’ll make it up to them. Somehow. This just couldn’t wait!

p+chuchu: I TOTALLY understand. Don’t worry i’ll take care of it!

He set his phone face down, propped an elbow on the table, and swept the back of his hand under his chin as he turned to Bastien, batting his dark lashes with the sweetest smile. Common courtesy when interrupting a conversation. “Ahem.”

The three skaters and Baz turned to him, each their own shade of curious and/or afraid.

“Baz, I just got word that we need to charge dinner and invoice it to Mr. Nikiforov. Can you take care of that? Something super, super important came up. Legit.”

The manager quirked a mysterious sort of smile, one brow quirking as he indicated his own cell
phone with a nod. “I’m aware of the emergency, but is he aware of his transaction?”

“He will be once we tag him in the group selfie!”

“Very well. I think I can handle that.”

“Sweet. Okay, everyone, let’s get together for the selfiieeee!”

“What was it this time?” Guang-Hong asked, pouting once more. The distraction of Baz had worn off.

“Matters of the heart.” Bastien’s answer, short, soft and succinct, caught on instantly with the living hamster of a boy, who perked up with wide eyes and grabbed onto Leo’s arm.

“Leo!” He gasped.

Leo shifted his sleepy gaze over to Yuuri, but said nothing, only looked to Phichit for confirmation, brows rising.

“I can’t say anything else or it’ll spoil it,” said Phichit. Though, he was starting to doubt it. Despite all of the clues- if they could be called that, with how OBVIOUS they’d been -Yuuri still looked miserable, staring down at the table with a little frown. Had he even been listening?

It was only when he realized that everyone was staring at him that Yuuri even looked up, blinking nervously. “Huh? Spoil what?”

“Hehe, well, let’s get that photo and then get you back to your Viktor, Yuuri. It’s getting late!”

“My Viktor?”

“Er, your coach, I mean. Hehehe.”

They posed for the group photo behind the table to show off the empty plates and bowls, chopsticks and other utensils a mess among the napkins and cups. It had been a good dinner, and Phichit was full. Probably too full. It wasn’t good to eat so much the night before the Free Skate, but he was glad they’d done it, even with their missing guests. Skating wasn’t going to be their whole lives, after all. Not for any of them.

Life had a way to pulling people apart through the years, letting them drift and wander as they grew up, helping them find their way. The more experience someone had, the more capable they’d be in recognizing opportunity and seizing it, making the most of it. That was what mattered, wasn’t it?

The photos he took were precious memories to document the experiences he’d come across on that journey. He had dreams, just like any of them, and he wasn’t going to waste a moment of it. And a dinner like that, with his friends, even though it wasn’t perfect, was… well, it was perfect. Who knew what Yuuri and Viktor would go on to do? Leo and Guang-Hong. Bastien and Christophe.

He looked at the photo when he got back to his room, posted on Instagram and the comments it was getting. His fans, their fans, all the favorites and support and well-wishes.

*Good luck tomorrow.*

*You guys look great.*
It looks like the food was tasty!

So much fun with friends!

Wish I was there!

Love from Thailand!

Maybe the world wasn’t perfect. Far from it.

But their worlds, the smaller ones that they shared between them, were wonderful and worth protecting, preserving, fostering, nurturing. He loved them. He wanted to share them with everyone. Let them feel the love like he did.

He’d do his best every day, just as he had been, to show them the possibilities. The silver linings were worth it. The sun always rose. Love could always be found.

Things always got better eventually.

They lived in infinite worlds of endless possibilities; how could it not?

Viktor looked around the hotel room with narrowed, skeptical eyes. He might have gone a little overboard. Sure, he was making a proper confession to the love of his life, but they were going to have to take anything they kept back with them on the plane. Besides, he’d known that open flames in hotel rooms were prohibited, so why had he bothered with candles in the first place?

Yet there they were; tea lights and a few others dotting the surfaces of the room uselessly. They were pretty at least, pale lilac with smooth surfaces and tiny, untouched wicks. It’d been a nice thought. The lotion and body wash were tucked against Yuuri’s pillow with the other little bath items he’d found to pamper him with; fuzzy slippers, a loofah, and… he wasn’t even sure what the other things were. Gift baskets were beyond him, but Chris had assured him that it was a good choice. But what would Yuuri think? Every time Viktor had received a gift basket with this kind of stuff, he’d taken out the things he’d recognized and left the rest to rot under his bathroom sink. Would Yuuri like it? Or know what to do with it?

The little stuffed bear was the last of the gifts; it was brown and tan, the most obvious of representations. Should he have gone with something else? Maybe. Probably. It was too late to do anything about it, though he found himself thinking of the stuffed dogs back at that shop back in the mall. It would be open again in the morning if he got really desperate.

Chocolates were on the desk; a variety box because he didn’t know what Yuuri liked. Honestly, Viktor didn’t know what he himself liked, either. It wasn’t something that he’d often indulged in. Or, well, ever. He’d had an inkling for chocolate-covered strawberries, but the thought was too specific and far too revealing to even consider in front of Chris. If he’d let it slip, Chris would never forget, and he’d never hear the end of it. Chocolate-covered strawberries forever! That was the last thing he needed.

It was bad enough that Chris was as involved as he was. Viktor sat on the edge of his bed, the bottle of red wine- a Lux Regis R6 Merlot - to his left side, the bouquet of red and pink camellias to his right. The more intimate, just in case supplies had been stashed in the drawer of the night stand, tucked discreetly underneath a brochure. He wasn’t going to think about them. Not unless he had to. There were plenty of other things to worry about without that.
Any moment, Yuuri would come through that door and Viktor would have to own up to it; all of his stupid games from the past several weeks or months, or, well, years, depending on how someone looked at it. But especially the past week. The last twenty-four hours. Who stood someone like Yuuri up for dinner?

Viktor Nikiforov.

Enough was enough. He’d gone to Hasetsu to coach Yuuri to win, and in a sense, he’d already done that. After all, wasn’t it true that in chess, you didn’t have to defeat each piece, just put the King in check? And Yuuri had already taken the most powerful player off of the board. If he were trying to play at war, he was doing a hell of a job.

Actually, he hadn’t even considered that… seducing the five-time champion away from the ice to take the crown? Others had tried and failed, miserably. Of course. No one else had ever had his interest like Yuuri. That was really the point, wasn’t it? Why he was sitting there, tensing at every sound in the hallway, heart aching with the strain of the chest flutters. Yuuri wasn’t his past. Yuuri could be his future.

All he had to do was stop going around in endless circles. Fight his way through the storm.

If Viktor was good at anything, it was fighting.

Set his mind to a goal, follow through.

It could be that simple.

No need for a fairytale. The wolf wasn’t ready. The princess wasn’t, either.

But Viktor.

Viktor was.

Finally.

When Yuuri came through the door, disheveled and tired, a bundle of shocked nerves and confusion, Viktor was ready. On his feet, flowers in one hand, wine in the other, facades cast aside leaving nothing but the vulnerable honesty of fear behind. It wasn’t what Yuuri had been expecting; that much was clear as he shut the door behind him, hand on the handle to keep the sound minimal. His gaze stayed fixed not on the offerings, but on the man that held them, his own feet rooted in place until the door came to rest with a resolute click.

“Viktor?” he asked, voice timid. Curious.

He answered with a nod, and while Yuuri removed his shoes, became aware all at once just how much like a performance all of it was. Going on stage. Risking it all for the chance to impress, to fight for another day. Yakov would have told him to be bold. To not be afraid. That he was Viktor Nikiforov, that he took what he wanted. The pep talk had always helped before, even if he hadn’t always achieved victory. That wasn’t the point. The point was to try.

“Yuuri. These are for you.”

Yuuri left the doorway to join him, gaze finally drifting down to the bottle and the flowers. His cheeks colored the most beautiful shade of pink and he smiled, reaching for the bouquet.
“Camellias,” he said, and brought them up to take in their scent, eyes closing. “You remembered.”

“Of course I did.”

“But I haven’t made it to the podium yet, Viktor…”

The way he peeked over the petals was almost enough to drive Viktor wild all over again. There was a sparkle in his eye, a coy sort of quirk to his lips, and that soft thing that his eyebrows did, making everything about his face so utterly kissable. Viktor shook his head. “No, that’s not-”

But Yuuri laughed, the sound sweet and amused. “Bouquets at least wait until after the competition.”

He wasn’t mad. Quite the opposite, it seemed. He seemed quite pleased. Amused, even, and that just frustrated Viktor even more. “Yuuri…”

“That’s okay. I know you’re new at this coaching thing.”

“No. This has nothing to do with any of that.” Viktor set his jaw. “I love you, Yuuri.”

The words, once spoken, couldn’t be taken back. And it was a relief, really. Even if it only led to disaster, it was chaos finally set in motion, not just tension endlessly building up in a rolling storm. They’d hit with precision, too; strong, hard, like lightning, leaving Yuuri standing still and silent with wide, staring eyes.

What Christophe had lacked in reaction to Viktor’s antics, Yuuri gave in ample supply. It was a nice change, and scratched that itch that he had for getting a rise out of people, but all too soon, the continued silence began to scrape out a new void and fill it with a renewed sense of dread.

Was he going to say or do anything but stare? Had he broken him?

Viktor frowned. Maybe Yuuri hadn’t heard him. Maybe he was standing too close? Maybe the flowers were too much. Maybe the words had been too strong. The Japanese were known to be funny about that. But then, Yuuri had used ai on TV first. So what was that about?!

Viktor cleared his throat. “I have for a while now, Yuuri. And if that’s an issue, I understand. I… I just had to tell you. I couldn’t hide it anymore. I… I love you, Yuuri Katsuki.”

There. That was clearer. Wasn’t it? Or were love confessions supposed to come after being a couple for a while? He’d never been good at this, so he gave in and scratched at his neck, digging at the collar of his shirt. Was he going to need to call Chris? Oh god.

“There isn’t an issue.”

“Oh.” What did that mean?

“I…” Yuuri shifted the flowers in his arms. “I’m so happy I can’t think of what to say.”

“That’s… that’s okay! You don’t have to say anything if you don’t want to.” Viktor wasn’t sure he could take it, honestly. He laughed, the candles on the night stand between the beds catching the corner of his eye. Too much. “Just, uhm, maybe say it’s okay? …is it?”

The plastic of the cellophane around the flowers crinkled as Yuuri hugged them against his chest and he nodded, hiding his face among the blossoms. “Yes!” he cried. “It’s more than okay. I’ve been trying to get you to tell me for weeks… I just never thought of what I’d say back? I’m so bad
at this…”

“It’s okay, Yuuri, really. It’s enough for me to to be able to love you, and-”

Another crinkle of plastic cut him off. Yuuri cut the distance between them in two steps, and cradled the flowers in the crook of one arm to free his other hand. This he used to take Viktor’s tie, pulling it free from the vest and suit jacket. He didn’t use words to answer or give the reassurance that Viktor sought, but instead curled his fingers around that strip of silk, dark eyes searching Viktor’s, then pushed up onto his toes once he was certain that he had his attention.

*Relevé.*

The ballet term flitted through Viktor’s mind the instant before Yuuri kissed him, and then it was gone, replaced only with the sudden burst of excitement that overcame him; each like tiny sparks traveling through hundreds of wires all throughout his body, starting with that kiss. In that first moment, the shock of it made him tense all over; both from surprise and sheer elation! But two or three seconds later- just as Yuuri was beginning to pull away -the tension ebbed, dissolving the structural integrity of his body completely.

Viktor swayed, knees unwilling to hold his weight under such an overload of sensory input, and the wine bottle slipped from his fingers and to the plush carpet with a thud. In the space of time it took for him to remember to breathe, Viktor could already read a small flicker of doubt on Yuuri’s face. But it wasn’t doubt in him, it was in himself; he could practically feel the questions pouring out of him. Had that been okay? Was he allowed to do that? Was it enough?

*Watch me, Viktor.*

*Stay with me.*

*Please.*

Viktor didn’t want to see that look on his face anymore. He never wanted Yuuri to have reason to doubt him or himself. There was no need.

With wine abandoned, Viktor made his move, reciprocating in kind; one hand on the small of Yuuri’s back, the other moving to stroke his cheek. He’d wanted to do this for so long, had been so jealous of his own memories for that stolen moment that he’d been able to have with Yuuri on the ice before. But he’d make up for it, starting with returning Yuuri’s kiss with one of his own.

This time, he made it count for everything. It wasn’t just a moment, swept up in feelings too intense to be ignored; it was deliberate and committed, a kiss long as Russian winters, warm as Hasetsu summers, and passionate as Katsuki tangos. One kiss became two, then three, and Viktor’s palm drifted from cheek to ear, then to cradle his head, fingers dipping into his hair.

By the fourth kiss, Yuuri was giving back, picking up all that Viktor was expressing and teaching, and once again changing the game. The friction of lips in each caress became its own conversation, and as in all things, Yuuri was quickly fluent.

Resisting the smile that crept up on him would have been impossible, so Viktor let it happen, even though it stopped him from reaching the double digits. It didn’t deter Yuuri, though, who kissed him twice more before looking up at him with the most perplexed and frustrated sort of expression he’d ever seen before. *Why did we stop?* With heat in his cheeks and fire in his eyes, Yuuri was impossibly cute.

And Viktor loved him. *So much.*
“The flowers and wine weren’t all I got you.”

Yuuri’s brows pinched together and he frowned. “Oh?”

The interruption was clearly annoying him, but that was part of the fun. At least that was one good thing about how stupid it all had been. Viktor nodded, smile getting wider in true maniacal style. “You might notice the candles I’ve placed strategically around the room for extra romantic ambiance, though we can’t light any of them.”

“...okay.”

“And there’s a gift basket on your bed with all of the essentials for a lovely lilac-scented shower, should you be interested in that sort of thing.”

Yuuri blinked once, dark eyes turning back on him instead of to the basket, and Viktor realized the implication a few seconds too late, face coloring all over again.

So much for just teasing Yuuri.

“...there’s a teddy bear, too.” Viktor had no idea if that would help or hurt the situation, but it was all he had left. It did little to change Yuuri’s expression, which spoke volumes about impatience with an eerily calm silence.

Gulp.

And then, sure as it had before, there was a waver in his confidence. Just a tiny flicker of doubt in his eyes. Yuuri’s gaze moved from his, off an away to elsewhere, unfocused, and he nodded. “Thank you.”

Viktor abandoned his back, taking Yuuri’s face with both hands to drag his attention back into focus, and kissed him again. First on the lips, then the corner of his mouth, his cheek, his nose, his brow, gradually letting his hands fall away again to give himself plenty of access for the barrage of soft kisses all over Yuuri’s face. No, no, no. Don’t make that face.

“V-Viktor!”

Kiss. “Hmm?” More kisses, each little more than a peck as he worked over every inch of that beautiful, handsome face.

“What are you-”

“Making up for lost time.” He finished with one last kiss to Yuuri’s forehead, sweeping his bangs out of the way with the side of his hand. Muwah. “There. Is that better?”

Yuuri laughed, equal parts breathless and helpless, balancing the flowers between them so he could reposition his glasses where they’d been knocked askew. “Y-yeah…”

“Good.” Viktor pulled his arms around him for one close, tight hug, then let him go, running his bare hands down Yuuri’s arms, stopping at the flowers. “I guess you need a vase for those.”

“Oh. I guess so…”

What could they use? There were the little cups in the bathroom, that might do… He should have just purchased a vase while he was at it, but he wanted it to look like a traditional bouquet when he handed it over, and there was something so calming about trimming the flowers on your own… the
final step in accepting the gift. Very important. Viktor looked around the room for something suitable, but stopped when Yuuri tugged on his tie again.

“Viktor.”

Blinking, Viktor looked down at him again. “Yes?”

“It took me a while to successfully seduce you.”

The words worked their way through Viktor much like rain water winds through brick; trickling down through the grout, but soaking through the surface, filling every crack and crevice until it’s layers thick. Viktor first blushed pink for longing, then red for desire as he took the Camellias from Yuuri’s hands, desperately needing a distraction, bringing them up to smell. They had a lovely fragrance. It was no wonder they were used in tea. A good choice. “Is that so?” he asked, ignoring the way his voice cracked. “You… were very good today… was that on purpose?”

The devious Yuuri crept out in the smirk that played on his face. “You sort of confessed a few things last night.”

“How you’re the only one who can satisfy me?”

Yuuri pried the flowers away from him. “Maybe.”

“I’ll have you know that when you licked your lips… I almost died!”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“I still can’t believe I did that…” Yuuri laughed. “I’ll have to remember it for later.”

“Whenever you want,” Viktor said, though it came with a healthy dose of instant regret, especially when Yuuri took the opportunity to try it right away.

It wasn’t at all like it had been on the ice; the nervous and blushing Yuuri, with messy hair and tangled glasses, was hardly the crystal guardian of the mountain, ready to seduce and destroy… but he didn’t need to be. The little swipe of his lower lip with his tongue was just so charming, so adorable, and undeniably sexy anyway that Viktor was in trouble no matter what.

“You little minx,” he said, and went in for a kiss once more, that time reckless and playful, arms wrapping around Yuuri’s middle to capture his prey. There was a startled eep! from Yuuri when Viktor half dragged, half carried him backward to the bed, and somewhere along the way the flowers fell to the floor.

“My Camellias!”

“Too late! Buwahaha!”

If Yuuri really wanted kisses, kisses he would get.
(AT DINNER. Bastien texting Christophe)

Bastien: [there's a rumor you're cheating on me]
Chris: [Oh yes. With the man that broke my heart]
Bastien: [savage (House Emoji)]
Chris: [.... What? Is that for HOMEWRECKER?]
Bastien: [0:-)]
[I'm not lonely here by myself, btw.]
Chris: [:;) I'll warm you up, later.]
Bastien: [Viktor's heart delight seems to be troubled. He and your friend from Thailand are in discussion.]
[He was trying to confirm Eros. Does that mean anything?]
Chris: [if by confirm you mean, if Viktor was effected, then yes]
Bastien: [they are both insecure about the other's feelings....]
Chris: [So it seems. He’s running. I’m trying to keep him focused on what he wants.]
Bastien: [Confident in winning gold, but not in securing a relationship that’s staring him in the face :((]
Chris: [Skating is all he has known. Anything else he avoids. I’m getting through to him :)b]

(LATER IN THE ROOM)

Bastien: What are you doing, Mon Amour? It’s getting late.
Chris *lying on the bed, staring at his cellphone* I’m waiting for a text.
Bastien: From?
Chris: Viktor. I’m worried. He’s never had to chase something like this before. I offered our room and-- *phone buzzing* Oh! All is well. Let us have some fun of our own.

Gay Skate! Gay Skate! Gay Skate!
Answers to cliffhangers! / Surefire cures for anxiety! / Spicy party times ayyyyy!

Please look forward to it!
Trust Fall

Chapter Summary

The confession turned makeout, spirals into a whirlwind that Yuuri doesn't anticipate. AKA: The Cup of China moves forward into its second day with the Free Skate event, with pressure reaching its peak despite Yuuri's high standings on the ice AND with in his personal relationship with Viktor. The resulting downward spiral sends both student and coach on a roller-coaster of emotional turmoil, and they'll need each other to get through it. Can they struggle through and advance to the next stage of the Grand Prix? Will they be able to maintain their newly established boyfriend status?!

#episode 7 #here's the smut we promised #please stay in your seat until the chapter comes to a full and complete stop #important backstory #cute fluff EVERYWHERE #everyone cries #save them

Chapter Notes

Please note: this chapter was split into two pieces from its original posting. Trust Fall and Stay Close to Me together are the original chapter 20, which was 32k. To that end, the following notes are no longer accurate... we'll clean those up in the coming weeks.

Mamodewberry: Major apologies for the delay in the monster of a chapter. 32k... how?! Well, we are covering the entirety of episode 7 and, for whatever reason, when we try to cover canon events with dialogue it takes us twice as long? I know, doesn't make sense... you'd think that'd make easy words, but no.. we have to analyze like mofo's. That said, uh, here starts all the intimacy we've been really excited to write since the end of the series. This chapter is PACKED with information. We can't force you to slow down and digest it all, but here's that warning that you may need to sit down.

Gabapple: Hooboy. This chapter. Yes. Uhm. I hope you all enjoy it. There were several scenes that were extremely difficult to write. We did our best. Some important items of business, though... The Giveaway: We wanted to reach 25k and do a button giveaway, and somehow we hit 33k instead... Uhhh. So we're looking at our plans for upping the ante on that. Also, I managed to lose my ipad at the airport, so the art isn't even done anyway. Whoops. We'll get back to you on that. IN THE MEANIME, THOUGH... PLEASE NOTE that the overall chapter count has been changed from 34 to 36 because we decided to include a something that we were going to save for Part 2 in the main story line because it's so important. It will be amazing, I promise, and I'm excited that we're going to just make it OFFICIAL. :)

Vitya Diaries! http://archiveofourown.org/works/11799600/chapters/26615346

Chapters 1-5 of Vitya Diaries have been posted. This is a first person teenage Viktor PoV YA novel that I'm doing with Mamodewberry's help and parallels NLA chapters 19-22. It will provide some extra detail for the Viktor flashbacks, since there is
definitely not enough room to tell it all. Now that NLA 20 is done, I'll get to work on the next 5 chapters and get them up soon, so please subscribe if you want to get in on more crazy Vitya hi-jinks!

**New Art!** a lot of people finished with their zines at the same time so... wow lots of new art.

- [Yuuri's horrible pickup lines from chapter 16](#), illustrated by Maddie (commission)
- [Viktor and Chris from chapter 19](#), illustrated by Quel (commission)
- [Viktor and Niko from chapter 19](#), illustrated by Priya (commission)
- [Viktor and his illegally cute hat from chapter 16](#), illustrated by Kyy (commission)
- [Viktor + Idea Book / Yuuri with Sunflower Crown](#), illustrated by Meye (commission)
- [Viktor breaking Chris's heart into tiny pieces from ch 12](#), illustrated by Dettsu (commission)

**Recommended Listening:**

- [I Won't Let You Go](#), by Switchfoot
- [Dance in the Dark](#), as performed by Vitamin String Quartet
- [Light Dance](#), by Akira Kosemura
- [Bailamos](#), by Enrique Iglesias
- [You Only Live Once](#), by w.hatano

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Saint Petersburg, Russia

**Viktor (15 years old)**

Despite his first gold at the Junior Grand Prix Finals, Viktor placed second at Junior Nationals in Russia and scraped by with silver at Junior Worlds. He'd taken it hard. His newfound sponsors had assured Yakov that they were still pleased with his performance, and he had relayed the message, but Viktor hadn't listened. Not then, nor when Yakov assured him that no, he wasn't being replaced by the Popovich boy that he had recruited from Siberia.

Georgi had taken the gold where Viktor had not in both of the remaining competitions for the season, so it was easy to see why he might have felt that way, just as it was no surprise when Yakov got the call after practice one evening with Vitya in tears.

The old coach sighed, rubbing his temples. What was it now?

"Coach!" Came the barely intelligible plea, choked out over a broken sob.

He practiced patience, as always, staying calm and steady. Gentle, but firm. "Yes, Vitya?"

There was a moment of hesitation, then a hitch of the boy's breath and another sob. "C-can you come get me? I don't... know where... they... Coach..."

It was more than enough for Yakov to be on his feet, keys in hand. "Where are you, Vitya?"

Yakov found him in a church. It was the third one that he tried, but the only one that was actually open on a Wednesday evening. The black iron gate had been pushed away from its latch as if it were asking him to come in, and the large, heavy doors gave easily to his hand. It was no wonder Vitya had chosen it as his sanctuary.
The boy himself had been asleep among the pews, evidenced by the way he startled awake when Yakov called for him. He sat up, dried blood streaking his head, nose, and mouth, fresh tears recoating what was left on his cheeks.

"Coach," came the pitiful squeak.

Yakov sat next to him long enough to piece together what had happened, though Viktor was in no shape to give specific details. He'd been jumped coming home from practice, and it'd been some rowdy boys over his hair, of all things. He was okay... mostly. Just shaken, some scrapes, and what looked like a broken wrist. Vitya was nothing if not fast and that, he guessed, had saved him.

Yakov took him to the team doctor. He preferred him for his skaters unless their families already had someone that he himself approved of. It let him keep track of their health. Besides, he never wanted there to be any disputes when injury occurred; anything that happened would be treated immediately, and payment would be taken care of later. The governmental provisions were unnecessary delays when Yakov had the finances to avoid it. His skaters were investments. They were precious to him. Someone like Vitya would hide an injury out of fear of being a burden, but that would only make things worse and Yakov wouldn't hear of it.

The doctor cleaned him up, examined the wounds, gave the boy medication and pain relief, which Viktor took with gratitude.

"The wrist is the worst of it," the physician explained, watching the coach's gaze drift from the chart to the dozing teenager in office chair. "Mild concussion, but as long as his symptoms don't worsen, he should be fine. Keep him off of the ice for two weeks. Will his guardians be able to follow this regimen?"

Yakov turned back to the clipboard in his hands.

"I'll keep him the first day or two... he will be fine after that."

"Okay. Call me if you have any concerns."

Yakov kept Viktor at his modest home for two days to monitor his condition, then took him back to his aunt and uncle’s house. No skating for two weeks would be difficult, he knew, but it would be best. The encounter had left the boy shaken, and the nightmares were probably not going to go away anytime soon. He only hoped that they could provide the gentle, low-stress environment that Vitya needed to recuperate in before returning to the rink.

He should have known better.

Viktor did return to the rink on the day scheduled, but two hours late. There were excuses, but he gave up halfway through airing them, and immediately got into a fight with the Popovich boy. Over what, Yakov didn’t know, but it ended with Viktor screaming and storming off to cry in the locker room, leaving Georgi staring in shock.

After that, Vitya’s attendance record suffered immensely. He only came to two practices in as many weeks, and then missed another full week without a text or phone call.

It wasn’t like him at all.

Consulting with the relatives at least revealed that his student was still alive, but as expected, not well. Without the physical outlet of ballet or skating, the teenager was restless, anxious, and, as the
“aunt put it, ‘acting out.’ They were at the end of their rope.  

“It’s almost like having teenage girls in the house again,” she said. “It’s driving me crazy!”

“Maybe we can arrange to have a chat? About Vitya.”

“If you think it will help, we’ll do anything.”

They met over dinner at Lilia’s home, the aunt and uncle, Yakov, and the hostess herself, to discuss their concerns and options. Together, they came up with a plan, and Yakov left them to take care of it.

Again, a mistake.

“He won’t even come out of his room, Coach Feltsman!”

“All right. I’ll come Thursday.”

It had taken some work to convince Vitya to leave the house and get in the car, but he was as weak to Yakov as Yakov was to him, and the ice was a difficult call to resist. Still, even hugging his skates in the passenger seat, the boy didn’t look happy about it.

Then the moody, listless staring turned to anger once he realized that they weren’t heading to the rink at all.

“...Coach, where are we going?”

Yakov didn’t answer, just continued to drive.

“Coach. Coach, are you kidnapping me?!”

“No, Vitya.”

“Then where are we going?! This isn’t how we get to the rink!”

“You’ll see.”

“Take me back home!”

“We’re almost there.”

Viktor knocked his head against the window then huffed, curling in on himself. He couldn’t sit still, legs bouncing, fingernails digging at the laces of his skates. By the time they got to the animal shelter, he was just a bundle of nerves. He took one look at the building, then turned all of the venom he possessed on Yakov, livid. “Why are we here?! I told them I didn’t want one, Coach!”

Yakov turned off the ignition, unbuckled his seatbelt, and calmly got out.

“I’m not going in there, Coach! I don’t know what you told them, or what they told you, but I don’t need a dumb dog!”

He closed his door without answering and moved around the front of the car to open the passenger side, and waited for him.
“Coach!” Viktor cried. “I swear I’m fine! I don’t need- I’m okay! Okay? I’m sorry I didn’t go to practice! I’ll come back! And I won’t yell at my aunt anymore!”

But the pleas fell on ears attached to firmly rooted feet; Yakov was a stubborn old man who could outwait an emotional fifteen year-old. He’d coached enough teenagers to be an expert.

“Stop standing there…” Viktor leaned out of the car for the door to pull it closed, but Yakov held it firm. “Let’s go to the rink, da? You wanted me to skate? I’ll skate. I promise I’ll skate. Please, Coach. Please.”

Each word that came out was tighter and more broken than the last, emotion choking the pitch in his voice. But as much as it hurt, Yakov refused to yield.

“Coach,” Viktor tried again, tears welling in his eyes. “Why are you doing this to me?!”

It was the crying that always got to him. Yakov sighed, dragging his hand from the open door to put it on Viktor’s shoulder, crouching at his side. The boy shot him a look that was half furious, but mostly hurt and frightened, and that only hurt worse.

“Vitya, I’m sorry, but you need help. Out of all the options, this seemed to be the answer. Do you want to go to therapy?”

The question hit like a slap to the face, and Viktor stared at him in shock for several seconds before giving a tiny shake of his head. “...no.”

“Do you want medication?”

That got a more vigorous shake. “No!”

“Then we’re trying a dog.”

It was a statement, not a suggestion, and Viktor dropped his gaze to the floor of the car. There would be no arguments.

Of course there wouldn’t be; Yakov knew it was best. A dog could be with Viktor when no one else could. It would provide companionship, stability in routine, emotional support, and some degree of protection. Vitya needed something, and this was the best option if they had any hope of willing compliance. And even then…

Viktor considered for a little while, wiped his eyes, and got out of the car to follow Yakov like a lamb to the slaughter.

The shelter was very nice; a facility that specialized in rehoming rescues and matching people with animals for special needs cases. It was clean and bright, and the woman who met them for their appointment was friendly. Viktor said very little to her or anyone else as she went over the paperwork for adoption and the training process afterward.

Most of it were things that Yakov had heard before in previous discussions over the phone with them, but he was glad that there were written instructions for Vitya, who was slumped in the chair next to him, resigned to his fate. When Yakov passed over the written prescription for the Emotional Support Animal from the team doctor, Viktor gave him a look that spoke of utter betrayal, but Yakov ignored him. He knew that as soon as he saw the dog that they’d found, all would be well.
Once all of the paperwork was finished, the woman led them through a back area with rows of kennels, each with dogs that barked and yipped and pawed at the chain-link gates. Viktor stayed close to Yakov, both hands in the pockets of his jacket, scuffing sneakers over concrete every step of the way.

At the end of the hallway, they came to another lobby area, where the woman asked them to wait while she retrieved Vitya’s ‘perfect match.’

“I hate this,” Viktor muttered as soon as she left.

Yakov rubbed his shoulder.

A couple of minutes later, the woman returned with a curly brown dog on a leash. Viktor had known to expect a poodle, but he hadn’t expected it to look so... fluffy. Poodles were supposed to be fru fru, not cute.

“This is Makkachin,” the handler said. “He’s six months old, already fixed, and has all of his shots. We’ve been working on basic commands, but he still needs a lot of training. Poodles are athletic dogs, so you’ll have your hands full keeping him exercised, young man.”

Viktor stared at her, then at the floppy dog, who looked around, tail wagging. It wasn’t like any poodle he’d ever seen before. He pushed closer to Yakov.

The woman clicked her tongue. “Makkachin, sit.”

The dog- a puppy, really -looked up at her, then sat, tongue lolling, and wagged his tail harder when she pet him.

“Come say hello, Vitya. It’s okay, he’s really friendly.”

Viktor looked to Yakov, who nodded, and nudged him over.

“Go on, Vitya.”

Viktor approached with caution, frowning, and crouched when he got closer. “Uhm. Hi, Makkachin.”

The poodle cocked his head to one side and sniffed at him.

“Um.” Viktor looked helplessly at the handler.

“He’ll shake your hand if you want, Vitya.”

“It’s… nice to meet you, I guess,” Viktor said, and put his hand out.

The dog glanced down at the hand, and happily set a paw in it, tail swishing against the tile floor again.

“H-He… He…” Viktor burst into tears, dropping to his knees. “He SHOOK MY HAND!”

Makkachin got to his paws and hurried to lick the crying boy’s face, smothering his cheeks and eyes with wet kisses, which only made Viktor cry harder, wrapping his arms around the dog’s neck.

“Oh Vitya…” Yakov sighed, relieved despite the sobbing. That, at least, was normal.
“H-he’s so… beautiful…”

“There, see? You’ll be just fine.”

The woman gave Yakov a sympathetic look and a nod, smiling. “It looks like it was a good fit.”

“Seems like it. Shall we take him home, Vitya?”

“Y-y-yeahhh!” Viktor wailed against the dog’s neck. “I love him so much… I love you, Makkachin! Ack stop licking my ear, that’s so weird, oh my god!”

Makkachin didn’t stop. And wouldn’t stop. As long as his little person was crying, he would do anything he could to make him feel better.

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v.nikiforov: you were right

Chris.G: oh u like the lube? ^3^

v.nikiforov: … why are you trying to ruin this CHRIS

Chris.G: i’m not ruining anything, i’m helping

Chris.G: as your fairy godmother, that is my job

Chris.G: but tell me: what was i right about this time

v.nikiforov: he loves me. He didn’t say it but he does, and we’re working it out

Chris.G: good

v.nikiforov: thank you

Chris.G: have fun~ ;) ;) ;)

v.nikiforov: STOP

It had been the most perfect evening Viktor could have ever hoped for: the confession, the kissing, the cuddling-turned-make outs, the conversation… all of it. They’d moved to the bed, playfully wrestled for control as if that was ever an issue, and Yuuri had ended up in his lap. Viktor, sitting against the headboard, was free to explore his back, his sides, and those incredible thighs while Yuuri got used to everything. It was all so new to him. So different.

The flushed-face, bright-eyed wonder had him feeling almost predatory and Viktor almost hated to ruin his innocence, but if anyone was going to, he wanted it to be him… and Yuuri was eager. He did want it. To kiss and be kissed, to be close like this.

But even with the heat between them, it was easy enough to keep his head in such a passive position. Besides, he was so fascinated by Yuuri’s transformation. For Viktor, the sparks had always been used to fuel more of a slow-moving but heavy locomotive; harder to get started, but
long lasting. Oh, he could get frustrated, that was no question, but he didn’t often lose control; at least, not as easily as what he’d come to know as normal. His inner tiger was patient. Reactive. There were moods and seasons.

Yuuri, though. Once the spark had caught, the fire was ablaze, and the passion unbridled. Just like everything Yuuri did, he put all of himself into it, no holds barred.

It made for very good kissing, which was easily Viktor’s favorite part.

He’d parted for breath, eyes bright, and taken the wild dark of Yuuri in, hands on his shoulders to keep him at arm’s length. “Be mine, Yuuri?”

“Yes!” Yuuri cried, frustrated, elated. “I’m yours.”

“My boyfriend?” It was probably cruel to keep playing with him like that; holding him close only to push him away again, then bring him in once more. But Viktor couldn’t help it. There was a mad joy in all of it, and the more he teased, the more Yuuri confessed in his desperation.

“If that’s what you want me to be… boyfriend… lover…”

Husband… soulmate… Viktor drew a hand from shoulder to his cheek. “Those and more, my Yuuri.”

Yuuri leaned into his hand, nuzzling his palm, turning to kiss the creases that made up his lifelines. “Your Yuuri,” he said, voice soft, covered in a little laugh. “I like the sound of that.”

“Your Viktor, too.”

Those dark eyes turned on him, then, with a glint of that same predatory fervor that he himself felt. It wasn’t that either of them felt unreasonably possessive- at least, Viktor didn’t think so -but there was something about willingly giving yourself to another, and receiving the same in return, that felt so… powerful all the same. Yuuri’d kissed him with a bit of that power, and murmured, “Mine,” against his lips.

And Viktor, helplessly weak to it all, mouthed his reply right back. “Yours.”

Chris had been right; there was nothing to worry about. They were together. An official couple. No more question of interest or insecurity; it was what it was, Viktor was sure of it. Surely Yuuri was, too. The moment Viktor had thrown his own skin into the game, everything else had fallen into place.

They kissed. They got a little heated. They made out in their hotel room, and it was everything good and wonderful that Viktor remembered about the closeness and intimacy of relationships without any of the negatives. It wouldn’t be like before. They could do things right. Be careful. Be sure. Take their time.

Even as Viktor allowed himself to run his hands down the length of Yuuri’s thighs, fingers memorizing the curvature of every muscle that he could beneath fabric, he made that clear.

“Is this okay?” he asked of the touch, and then brought them back up again to rest at Yuuri’s hips when he nodded his consent. When his hands were settled, Viktor turned his gaze aside, chin down. “You probably already guessed that I’m not a virgin…”

Yuuri confirmed the statement with a nod with nothing to suggest that there had ever been any doubt in his mind. It was both a relief and a bit of a disappointment. Yet, it was the truth, so Viktor
had no room to be disappointed except in way of failing to surprise him. That, and a certain sense of bitter loss that still lingered. A void that might always linger.

Viktor swept that thought away, small smile upturning at the corners of his mouth, eyes shifting back to Yuuri’s. “But, it’s been a long, long time since I’ve been with anyone at all… in any sense… and I don’t mind waiting, either.”

The realization that dawned blossomed slowly, and Yuuri’s eyes widened like the opening petals, face gradually darkening to the color of the discarded Camellias.

“I never want you to feel like you have to do anything, Yuuri.” he’d said, continuing, hoping that the words would sink in despite the fried circuits in his boyfriend’s brain. “You set the pace, I’ll follow.” The dip of Yuuri’s waist became the focal point for Viktor’s fingers, idly stroking over his shirt to soak the warmth into his fingertips. “Do you understand, Yuuri?”

The dazed stare from the shaken Yuuri regained focus then, and he nodded. “I just want to be close right now… Is that okay?”

“Of course it’s okay.”

A nervous smile. “Am I heavy?”

“Not at all.” Viktor slid his hands around to the small of Yuuri’s back. “You’re quite comfy.”

The smile turned warm. Satisfied. “Can I kiss you some more?”

“Please do.”

Each kiss taught Viktor a little more about Yuuri, and gave Viktor the opportunity to teach Yuuri more about himself. It was subtle, the way that the language evolved between them, how they learned to anticipate each other’s needs and desires, bending to the ebb and flow of each other. Kissing really had always been Viktor’s favorite in the way of actively showing affection; be it on the mouth or on the neck or elsewhere, and spending the evening doing just that was nothing short of perfect as far as he was concerned.

Honestly, it wasn’t until after his text conversation with Chris and Yuuri asked if they could share a bed that he imagined it could get better.

“Yes. I’d like that,” he’d said, doing all that he could to keep his smile soft and sweet, not to leap up and tackle Yuuri with joy. Of course he wanted to share a bed! Just to sleep? That was just fine. Sleep, cuddle, just be close. Safe, warm Yuuri. Taking comfort in each other. The fact that Yuuri had been the one to suggest it made him the happiest he could ever remember being. Yakov would have called it being mad with happiness, and he understood that.

Even when the tiredness took him so quickly after they’d settled in under the covers, Viktor gazed contentedly through the dark at Yuuri. His Yuuri.

His boyfriend. Lover.

Soulmate.

The last thought on the edge of his mind right before giving way to sleep, wrapped up in the scent and those arms of his partner were, of course, those that aptly described all that had come to pass-
At the conclusion of the short programs, Yuuri stood at third place. United States and Sweden in first and second. The free skate was where the points came from, after all. Keep up the momentum and he could easily keep his place and advance to the finals. Bronze wasn’t gold, but it would get him the furthest he’d been able to thus far. the opportunity to get the most important gold of all.

The crowd cheered for his program with its high-spirited choreography and song composition, more enthusiastically than Andorra had. “Katsuki” rolled off their European tongues, clapping and singing along.

If his family were here, they’d be the loudest.

“You can do it, Yuuri!”

“A big bowl of katsudon will be waiting for you at home!”

His father had come with him to Andorra, but had to return to Japan afterwards, leaving him with his coach for a week of training in Croatia. With Mari off to university, it was difficult for the onsen to be understaffed as it was. Minako-sensei had several recitals. And Yuko and Nishigori were on their honeymoon.

He was alone.

“Ten more minutes, Katsuki,” Coach Ito said, shoe tapping in time with the prelude music that opened the skate floor for the day.

Ten more minutes and two free skate programs and it would be Yuuri’s turn on the ice once more. To make history for himself and Japan? As Ito’s student, maybe?

Ito pushed off the wall and cupped Yuuri’s shoulder as he rose from a lunging stretch. “You’ve got this.”

That proved his coach was counting on this being the moment he took international glory. Yuuri couldn’t disappoint him. Or his family. Or his country.

His chest constricted, breath staggering on its way out.

“Katsuki?”

Yuuri lowered back to the floor mat on his knees.

The irritated sigh Yuuri had gotten used to, followed. “We don’t have time for this. You’re in third place!”
Presently yes with the scores, but he could just as easily lose here as he had many others… slip away with the pressure of body and mind. The closer he got, the more he felt like he was suffocating.

“You were fine yesterday... Get it together, Katsuki. You’re going on soon!”

He was a burden to his coach. A failure. He’d never get to Viktor this way if he couldn’t even find the strength to stand.

“Phone call.”

Yuuri startled to awareness, the corner of his own cellphone pressed to his cheek, insistently. When had his phone rang? How long was he-- “H-hello?”

“Oh good, we caught you before you went on,” came his mother’s voice, relieved.

“Looks like the livestream is working, now,” Yuuri heard his father in the background.

“Hear that? We’ll be able to watch you after all! Your father and I aren’t the most tech-savvy people. Thankfully a patron is around to help us.”

Clenching his phone, Yuuri still couldn’t stop the tremble in his, “M-mom…”

“What’s wrong, sweetie?”

“I… I can’t.”

She made a soft sound, the one that meant she was smiling and reading right through him. “Yes, yes you can, Yuuri. We are still watching you. We’re not there with you but we’re with you. Give it your all. We believe in you.”

“We’ll cheer so loud you’ll hear us all the way from Japan,” Yuuri’s father said, voice beside his mother’s. “Isn’t that right, Vicchan?”

Yippy barks responded and what was probably sniffing and licking the receiver until his parents were able to push the poodle away. “Yes, it’s Yuuri, you’ll see him very soon!”

“We love you, Yuuri. We’re so very proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom, Dad. Vicchan,” Yuuri eventually vocalized after choking on a sob. “I’ll try.”

He fell to fifth place.

He crumbled at his coach’s lecture.

He ignored the calls and texts from his family.

The flight home was delayed. Grateful for the delay in facing his parents, but dread in it being that much more time spent with a coach that was at wits end with him. Unfortunately, being delayed meant he had to inform his parents.

Carefully he scrolled past the previews of their texts of concern.
Our plane won’t land until after midnight, now. I’ll be home around 2am or so.

He pocketed his phone and didn’t look at it when it vibrated with responses.

Their plane landed as re-scheduled. Patrons awoke and staggered in single file out of the plane and towards baggage claim. Being at this time of night, the airport was nearly deserted.

Quiet, wide-space, sparse movement echoing…

It was exactly how Yuuri felt.

When coach and student collected their bags, little was said, just like their flight. The tension in the air was thick.

“A week off. Then we’ll train for Nationals."

“Yeah."

“Don’t over eat. You can’t afford to."

“I know."

Yuuri was sure the look Ito fixed him was a warning, but he was too tired to care. What did it matter, anyway?

He dragged his luggage to the tram and to the connection to the rail line that would take him home. It was easy to locate an empty cart. Settling into a seat, he opened his music app and queued his Viktor playlist.

For motivation? Punishment? He wasn’t sure. At least least he didn’t have Ito around, now.

Turning on an alarm, Yuuri adjusted his headphones and scarf and closed his eyes, letting the music take him to where Viktor was on the ice.

The intercom announced his stop coming the moment his alarm off. Stretching, Yuuri grabbed the handle of his luggage and rolled it behind him off the train to the chilly platform. Reaching into his pocket, he realized he didn’t have enough yen for a taxi.

Not like he was in a hurry to get home. At least it wasn’t snowing.

Walking got him home closer to three, hands and toes numb even with his boots and gloves.

He left his luggage in the genkan with his boots, wheels would have made too much noise on the floors. Couldn’t add ‘waking up parents in the dead of night’ to his list of recent disappointments. Toeing off his shoes, he slid into his house slippers, grateful for the instant warmth they brought. Soaking in the hot springs all day tomorrow sounded like heaven, however… he didn’t deserve that luxury.

Having not eaten anything since the in-flight meal nearly four hours ago, he was hungry, and quietly made his way into the kitchen. Food and then bed and sleep until he couldn’t anymore.

Flicking on the light, he habitually started to walk towards the refrigerator when his mother with her head down at the small table they kept for when the foyer was in use, stopped him. To her right was a covered bowl of katsudon that must have been cooked hours ago.

Like a diligent mother, the presence of her child awakened Hiroko. She lifted head, blinking to
awareness and smiled. “Okaeri.”

“Why were you waiting?” Yuuri grumbled, leaning against the fridge.

“I wanted to make sure you got home safe. I didn’t mean to fall asleep. Come sit down and eat.”

The katsudon was so inviting… it’d be even better once he warmed it up. He turned his eyes to the floor. “That’s for winners.”

“You won bronze.”

“It doesn’t mean anything.”

Silence passed between them for what seemed like hours, neither speaking or willing to budge. Soon Yuuri relented and took the seat across from her. He would not be touching the katsudon, though. He’d take her disappointment, but not her pity.

“Third place in the first round didn’t help me win.”

“But you advanced. That’s good, Yuuri.”

“And lost!”

“The important thing is that you did your best.”

Yuuri closed his fists and hit the table, rattling the chopsticks on the container. “My best isn’t going to me to Viktor, Mom! I’m not—I’m not good enough. I have to work harder. I’ll never skate with him if I can’t win the competitions that count!”

His mother laid her hands over his trembling ones, tugging towards her. “My sweet boy, you are enough. Every competition is a victory.”

The warmth of his mother of her hands and voice made it difficult to retort. He looked up to her face, puzzled.

“You gain experience with each of your programs. As an athlete, you’ll always be fine-tuning your skills. You may think you aren’t progressing when you lose, but you are, Yuuri. Know why?”

Yuuri shook his head twice.

“Because you come back stronger than ever. You’re not losing sight of your goal. You’ll get there, Son, as long as you keep moving forward.”

One kiss wasn’t enough. Or two. Or even three.

He needed more.

Words were too difficult to conjure or even articulate.

Somehow Viktor could say them easily.

They were words Yuuri had desperately wanted to hear, and yet… saying them back? Slack-jawed
and cotton-mouthed.

If there was one thing he trusted, it was his instincts, so he kissed him in return. Yuuri would show Viktor that he loved him with his kisses now and his free skate tomorrow.

Soft and playful they wrestled on the bed. It was fun.

Boyfriends? He’d only read about what the relationship was like.

The weight of the confession was obvious between between them - a sense of possession. Acting faster than his words, he wound up in Viktor’s lap. Flushed, Yuuri managed to admit he didn’t want to separate. Be close? Physical touch wasn’t something he usually sought out, shied away from more than anything, but with Viktor… he craved it. It felt important.

After removing the contents of his pockets, Viktor’s hands were on him. Hands with purpose. It wasn’t anything like the casual touches they shared before on accident or when Yuuri took the initiative in dance or sleeping under the stars. He shivered, despite the warmth in his cheeks.

Yuuri had to kiss him again. Embrace whatever these feelings were that were overtaking him.

Viktor eventually let out a heavy breath, pulling away to undo the top two buttons of his shirt. The pale skin there was becoming blotted in pink… Yuuri wanted to see how far it went. He reached for the next button and helped him out of the sleeves. The sight of his chest this close, colored and rising with each breath… he was glad Viktor helped him out of his own shirt.

He didn’t have time to shiver at the exposure, as Viktor’s hands were on his bare skin. Breath catching and eyes fluttering at the new sensation. Startling in the best of ways.

Their lips found each other once more, only now their hands were free to roam. Viktor’s hands on Yuuri’s sides and lower back, branding him with each touch, keening in for more with moans he was partially aware were embarrassing.

“Yuuri…”

He opened his eyes, held in suspense of another kiss. He tried not to frown in favor of answering his boyfriend. Boyfriend! “Yeah?”

Viktor walked two fingers up from his sternum stopping at the soft part of his pectoral. “I want to leave a mark.”

A mark? How--oh. Was he mapping out where to put it so his costume would cover it for tomorrow’s free skate?

The consideration prompted Viktor to continue. “I’m proficient in covering bruises.”

Why was he-- did Yuuri have to hunt people down? Who would dare hurt his Viktor?

“Hickeys are technically bruises, you know,” he said, amused, sensing his inner struggle.

Oh. Yuuri guessed that was true. What was worse; past enemies or lovers? It didn’t really matter anymore. Viktor wanted to mark him. Was he proficient in that area, he wondered.

When Yuuri nodded his consent, Viktor leaned in to suck the supple skin.

The feeling was another sensation he could add to the list for the evening. Warm and wet. Pleasant. Even when he felt teeth.
Viktor wiped the remnants of saliva from his lips as he sat up, giving Yuuri a predatory look, eyes usually bright so dark and pupils blown. May it be his original plan or a way to get Yuuri to respond, Viktor cupped his rear.

A swallow and then Yuuri had to have his mouth on his, moan muffled between them. Was that enough to tell him he liked it? Wouldn’t mind him doing that again?

He received his answer with Viktor squeezing both cheeks, pulling him closer in the process.

Yuuri’s hips followed with the momentum, rolling into Viktor and--

Oh, that… felt nice. Pressure and heat between them both...

He wanted - no - needed to be closer. Tight...

Whatever instinctual need that overcame him, Yuuri submitted and clenched his thighs on either side of Viktor’s legs, trapping them and placing him right where his body needed.

The connection of their lower regions and mouths left Yuuri in a haze of pleasure and greed he couldn’t stop.

It was made worse when he felt the pressure increase when Viktor below him decided to participate. Fierce and straight to the source.

The urgency built, tightening like a hot coil begging to be released.

With one more thrust upward from Viktor, Yuuri cried out with a shudder. When the world returned to his senses, he was in Viktor’s arms, collapsed on top of him whilst he reclined against the headboard.

The heat that came to his cheek was of shame and he buried his face in Viktor’s shoulder. How could he have let himself do that? He wasn’t some hormonal teenager! Well, maybe he was. Somehow he’d skipped that phase, so was this delayed sexual urges? What he had for Viktor back then was nothing like it had been in the last hour. Desire.

Eros…

Viktor was patting his back. Occasionally a giggle rested in his throat, amused.

He knew exactly the face that accompanied that - that grin that feigned innocence.

“Viktor… stop making that face. I’m a sexy katsudon.” A sweaty and pathetic katsudon, but sexy nonetheless. He had to be to get someone like Viktor to notice him, right?

“Yes, yes, you are. The most…. So enthralling.”

It was placating, but maybe he was saving face for him as well. Still, it didn’t make him feel any less embarrassed for making a fool of himself. Especially since he could feel Viktor hadn’t been affected like he was.

Slowly he peeled himself off of his experienced boyfriend. “I’m, uh, going to take shower and clean up.” He’d hide in there if it were possible. Although, being away from him too long sounded awful. “I’ll be back.” Yuuri maneuvered off Viktor and the bed, grimacing at the mess he’d made of himself, grabbed a change of clothes from his suitcase and escaped to the bathroom.

He shed out of his sticky clothes, shaking his head in disbelief at them while he slid them away
with a foot.

When he looked up, his eyes caught sight of the forming hickey on his chest. He took a moment to touch it with two fingers. Dry, but slightly tender with small indents where teeth had been around the blossoming purple.

Leaving marks was a claiming thing, right? Symbolic. Viktor really wanted him.

Touching and thinking of the hickey and who gave it to him, had his eyes traveling downward in the mirror’s view to his wakening desire.

He sighed and let his hand fall to his side. Was his recovery time impressive or was he that needy?

Their relationship would be one endless embarrassing moment after the next if he couldn’t figure that out.

Would Viktor find him immature?

First he took a warm shower for cleansing, and then ran a cold one to calm his raging hormones. This kind of thing happened in romcom books and Yuuri felt secondhand embarrassment when written well. Now he could truly relate. Fiction really did have grounds in reality.

Viktor was setting his phone down on the nightstand when Yuuri came out patting his hair dry in a towel. He stood and kissed Yuuri’s cheek on his way into the bathroom to ready himself for bed.

Yuuri flopped on the bed. A bed.

Would Viktor want to sleep in the same bed with him?

Boyfriends did that. Sometimes there were steps. Did Viktor follow steps?

Or maybe he shouldn’t ask and just forget it and sleep off his humiliation of the evening.

The bathroom door opened and Viktor emerged looking fresher somehow despite the shower not having been turned on.

Or Yuuri was just happy he was back in the room not leaving him to his thoughts.

“We’ve got your free skate in the afternoon, so we better get to sle-”

“Viktor can we share a bed?”

Viktor blinked at him in rapid succession.

Maybe his life really was a comedy and there was a laugh track somewhere he couldn’t hear.

As much as he wanted to crawl in a corner and die, he wanted to be closer to Viktor more. “I-if you want…” Yuuri looked at the ground.

“Yes. I’d like that.”

He sounded surprised, yet pleased. Yuuri sighed of relief.

“Although, I guess I left a bunch of stuff on your bed. Is mine okay?”

“Sure. It’s, uh, where we were before.”
The practical solution was the best one and they pulled back the covers and crawled in, one after another.

As Viktor shifted, for a horrifyingly curious moment, Yuuri wondered if he was going to take his clothes off. He often slept in the nude, right?

No, it was just to turn the lamp off.

Yuuri sighed and settled back into his pillow.

But not for long, as Viktor came in for kisses that were soft and quiet in comparison to what they were just doing. Ah, he was tired. “Good night, my Yuuri,” he said, resting a hand at his cheek, brushing with a thumb. “Sleep well.”


His...

If it weren’t so late, the sparkle in his eyes would have been more prominent. “Spokoynoy nochi.” With a final pat of his cheek and a yawn, Viktor took his hand back and closed his eyes and was out within seconds.

Yuuri knew the moment he crawled into bed he would not be sleeping.

The beautiful man in front of him with flawless skin and silver lashes breathing ever so softly had made out with him.

_Him_, who had idolized the man and dreamed of skating with him. Hold his hand. Maybe a kiss and that was as far as his juvenile fantasies took him. After all, he was a Japanese nobody… how could The Viktor Nikiforov have interest in him?

How did he get so lucky? The virginiest of virgins and Viktor fell for him first. In the romantic sense.

Viktor’s lips were so close on their long, shared pillow… he could touch them with his finger. Or even kiss him…

No!

This was all so new. He’d liked Viktor before, but these stirrings and urges weren’t something he dealt with and had only gotten worse since the incidental kiss and impromptu pair skate sparked a fire. Tonight had not helped that. First his short program and his brain supplying him for a seductress and poisoning Viktor, and then he sat in his lap…

It started out innocent enough. Keep contact? Hands in places he’d never been able to reach on his own or cared to. Eyes watching him and only him. It was the most intimate thing Yuuri had ever felt!

So intense, he naturally had to defer attentions by more kissing. The second most intimate thing.

And then Yuuri had to go and ruin it by getting excited. He trusted his instincts too much and it was childish. Had Viktor not just said they’d wait for Yuuri to be ready and take it slow? Yuuri knew he wasn’t ready and felt betrayed by how much his body hungered.

He had to calm down.
Carefully he moved off the mattress, trying his best to not disturb his sleeping beauty.

The camellias were on the floor, a few stems escaping the rest of the bouquet. Not wanting them to die, Yuuri found the complimentary ice bucket and removed the plastic lining and went to the bathroom to fill it with water. It would have to do for a vase for now. Wide enough for the arrangement, but not quite tall enough to hold it all, so he placed it on the television stand, letting the flowers lean against the wall.

Viktor remembered his favorite flower. What an easy thing it would have been to forget, especially with how Yuuri went about flirting with him. One could have easily shrugged it off as nonsense, but Viktor took him seriously.

Even red wine. Yuuri didn’t drink enough wine to have a favorite brand. He only said it cause it sounded romantic. And would look nice with the red camellias. He smiled at the label thinking he’d have to savor this bottle more for the sentiment than flavor.

Would Viktor share it with him? After the cup was over, of course.

What else would Viktor remember from his flirting?

Then there was the gift basket on what was Yuuri’s bed. He dared not open it, fearing the cellophane wrap would make too much noise, but could make out most of the objects inside.

Bath salt and bubbles, gel, and moisturizer. Hand and foot lotion. Loofah and hand massager and foot scrubber and nail brush. Argan oil. Towel and candle. The labels of things that should have scents said lavender and lilac. He’d never received something like this before. What was it like to use? Minako occasionally gave him manicures, and that was about as Spa Treatment as he got.

Would Viktor indulge him with it?

Yuuri glanced at the analog clock. He had to be up in five hours.

Feeling a little more relaxed, he climbed back in where his side of the bed had cooled.

It didn’t take long for Viktor to move towards him. Seeking warmth, maybe? Was he-- yes, he was asleep.

Wow… Viktor was pleasantly warm…

Okay, no. He couldn’t think about sitting in Viktor’s lap right now. He had to sleep. Had to think about…

Skating. Yeah, skating.

Rolling onto his back, he pondered his free skate for tomorrow. What if he added a flip instead a toe loop… or extra salchow. Picturing the crescendo in the music and--

He’d seduced him all along, and with that knowledge he scored a personal best. It was possible tomorrow would have the same results.

Now he just needed to actually sleep or he wouldn’t have the energy, natural stamina or no, sleep is what gave it to him. Without sleep he’d fail. He couldn’t fail because the program was his story with Viktor and if he failed… that’d be like showing their love would fail…

Like last year…
Closing his eyes tight, he forgot his resolve to not face Viktor, and snuggled next to him as best he could.

The touch was enough that Viktor reacted and put an arm around him at his waist.

Yuuri swallowed, all the heat rising to his face with thoughts he was desperately trying to ignore.

Would the Viktor from the tabloids have waited for him to be ready? The Viktor he imagined in his youth? The Viktor he knew now? What was more surprising? Was he disappointed or relieved?

How would Viktor make love to him?

What if Yuuri made—No! It wouldn't be enjoyable for Viktor and he'd sit there unsatisfied. Blue balls and then Yuuri would be long done just like tonight.

The thought was upsetting, so he went back to thinking about Viktor over him...

Until it occurred to him he’d come too soon.

Either way he’d ruin it. Viktor didn’t know if he could really satisfy him.

He shut his eyes again, tight enough to see stars, then loosened his lids as he allowed his thought train to return to skating. A safe topic, one that didn’t set his body on fire.

Once his breathing evened, his mind brought him to a familiar place.

Ice. Cold blades scraping snow.

Dark room, moonlight shining through the high panels.

Hair...

Viktor was skating, face mostly in shadow, but unmistakably him. Small smiles. Glint of gold from the blades. Figure disappearing behind a pillar and then his hair was gone.

Viktor reached for him.

Sometimes Yuuri reached back in these dreams, much like how he wished Viktor had during gala practice, but this time…

He couldn't.

Did Viktor really love him? Would he still after he lost the competition?

Would he leave him?

Before Yuuri knew it, dawn shone through the slit of the drawn curtains. For hours his mind had run in circles and spiraled into a pit of despair.

Spent the first night sleeping beside his new boyfriend and he couldn’t calm any part of himself to enjoy how calming it should have been. Childhood idol and crush was his and here he was, a disaster in his own mind.

Used to the early mornings, it wasn’t long before Viktor stirred beside him. Hazy blue eyes blinked
to awareness, a yawn, and then he was snuggling in close, head tucking under his chin. “Yuuri! Morning.”

If only he were so bright and chipper. “M-morning.”

“I didn’t expect you up.”

“Me, either. Excited to see you!”

The admission, however much of a cover it was - though also true - lit up Viktor’s face in such an endearing way, Yuuri shied out of guilt. It wasn’t enough for Viktor to notice as he came in for a series of kisses. Yuuri moved with him, his heart picking up the pace which, in theory, was better than anxiety, but when it was the cause of his sleepless night…

“Mwuah,” Viktor pulled away with the adorable sound effect, eyes aglow. “After we get showered and dressed, let’s head down to the lobby for breakfast, da?”

“S-sure.”

One more smile and then Viktor was rolling off the bed and digging in his suitcase for a change of clothes.

With the close of the door, Yuuri rolled on his back, basking a little at what just happened. Until he got embarrassed that they kissed like that with morning breath.

Getting ready for the day and breakfast went without incident.

Yuuri couldn’t focus on the way his heart fluttered when Viktor kept looking at him. It made him feel flushed and conflicted all at once. He had to focus on his program. If he couldn’t, wouldn’t he lose Viktor?

They left the hotel to the rink on foot, no words between them as the morning traffic was too loud and Yuuri didn’t have the energy to shout.

At the venue they checked in for day two and were greeted by staff, other coaches, and skaters Yuuri probably should have recognized by now.

During stretches for the morning warmups, Yuuri inserted his headphones. Had to concentrate. Get in the zone and think of nothing else. Intro to Yuri on Ice played and he visualized the poses and incorporated it on the mat in his stretching. He could feel Viktor’s eyes on him from time to time, but was grateful he kept his distance as he usually did for skating prep.

Yuri pocketed his headphones in his Japan jersey when the time for his group to practice came.

He dragged his feet through the tunnel. The rink was normally blurry from afar without his glasses, but today it was ten times worse, a looming blob of white with dark specks.

“Yuuri? Yuuuri.”

How long had Viktor been trying to get his attention? With heavy steps he turned to face his coach.

With a fist to his chin, Viktor studied him. “Yuuri, you haven’t slept, have you?”

Oh no, was it that obvious? He couldn’t let on that it was sort of his fault. “I-I-I did! A little bit,
anyway."

Not convinced, Viktor took him by the shoulder and marched him back through the venue tunnel and they were back on the sidewalk and waited for the rotating hotel shuttle.

What was going on? Why were they leaving?

Viktor wore a stern face and Yuuri dared not question out loud. Was he in for a lecture? He didn’t have the strength to fight back, so Viktor would definitely get his words in.

Room key out, Viktor swiped the card and shuffled them both inside. The door clicked closed and Viktor went for the zipper on Yuuri’s jacket.

“Eh, V-Vikto-”

Somehow from the time his mouth opened to when he was cut off, Yuuri was stripped to his boxer-briefs and a sleep mask was snapped on his head, then shoved to bed, blanket falling on top of him like a giant petal. Before Yuuri could question further, he felt the bed dip and a weight on his hip.

“Nap until this evening’s event starts,” Viktor said, patting. “It’ll be fine. I always slept in until the last minute before competitions, too.” A yawn and then the weight shifted completely on top of him.

“Viktor! Did you set an alarm?” he squeaked. An alarm? That was the least of his problems. Wasn’t this inappropriate? Or was Viktor really that comfortable, already? It couldn’t be helped… Viktor settled himself on his chest, arms on either side of him. Trapped.

Couldn’t move. Couldn’t see.

Actually… it was possible he could nap like this; warm and stationary.

Maybe too warm.

Nope, he couldn’t let himself imagine what this would be like without clothes.

It wasn’t fair how easily Viktor could be so affectionate. Or unaware to how much it affected him. Honestly he was grateful he couldn’t see him from this angle.

Would someone that took him away from the rink to get rest end their relationship if they lost in the competition? Viktor would want him to be at his best no matter what so of course he’d want to take care of him. Until now where he was forced to rest, Viktor’s methods of motivation and comfort hadn’t been overbearing. If Viktor had intentions of leaving if Yuuri lost, what was the point of learning about his behaviors? The entire summer getting to know each other? The beach. Camping. Dancing.

Viktor wouldn’t leave him, he knew that, now.

Sadly, it didn’t change the fact that he still had to score high on tonight’s program. Relieved, but he still had a job to do. He had to prove to everyone that Viktor wasn’t wasting his time on him. Show Viktor, too.
Somehow, despite all that was good and pure and wonderful in the world, Viktor’s Yuuri wasn’t satisfied. It just figured, and he realized too late that he should have known; should have expected it, really. Anxiety wasn’t something that just went away in the face of happiness, even though it definitely should have. Even though it left Viktor wondering if Yuuri really was happy… with him, with their arrangement, with being dragged back to competitive skating after having quit.

Maybe it hadn’t been fair to ask him to come back. After all, Viktor was really enjoying his time away from it, as much as he’d escaped, which he hadn’t. He was being a hypocrite, and he realized it. Or at least, part of him did. Having a foot in both worlds, letting Yuuri take the heat and the pressure…

The pressure, the pressure. He remembered what it was like, at least in part. Back when the competitions had been a challenge. When they’d been more than a puzzle to obsess over and tear into pieces, analyzing until they fell apart at his fingertips. When he wasn’t a lonely prince unable to sleep for fear that any one of his loving subjects would murder him the moment he dropped his guard.

Was he bringing Yuuri to the wolves?

Adding a relationship to it all, well, of course Yuuri was a little stressed!

But that was also why he had Viktor. Viktor, who could take care of him. Who would love and protect him, defend him from those foes, fend off the wolves and fight for his honor. And insist on bunny naps, of course.

Bunny naps had always gotten him through competitions before, no matter how difficult things got. Just get away from the venue, the crowds, the pressure, the ice… be alone- or nearly, Yakov had almost always been around -turn off the light, cuddled up with a pillow, shut everything out, and sleep. Sometimes just for a few minutes, usually for a few hours. It was tough to be anxious or upset when you were asleep, after all. No need to stress unnecessarily when sleeping would do just fine.


Honestly, Viktor was surprised that Yuuri hadn’t learned the trick years ago. But most skaters liked to be in the public eye during competitions; milling around, meeting with people, including their peers. He understood that, he did. If more of them were friends, he might have been more inclined to.

But they weren’t his friends. They watched his every move when he made his appearances, speaking in hushed tones, passing secret judgments between themselves.

Viktor could only conclude at the end of his musing, thusly, that Yuuri wasn’t wrong to be paranoid, necessarily; he just needed to be smarter about dealing with it. The bunny nap would help. Dragging him back to the hotel room, stripping him down, removing all of the distractions and outside stimuli, and settling down had always, always worked for him, and it would work for Yuuri, too.

He settled on top of him, comfortable in the familiar routine and took in the scent of his boyfriend, which he’d also now become so familiar with. It was comforting. There was nothing at all to worry about; things would be just fine. Just fine.
Oh, Yuuri smelled so nice..

The wolf and the boy cut across the forest heading westward, winding alongside a river and into a mountain pass. There, the trees gradually shifted from the gentler broad-leaf to the sturdier pine, and the ground from soft soil and ferns to packed dirt and rocks. Snow capped the peaks ahead, sending a chill on the breeze that swept through the canyon.

They stayed close for warmth, the boy on the wolf’s back, fingers in his fur, both while they travelled in the day, and when they settled down at night.

Still, each morning, the wolf rose early to meet the pre-dawn light to slip away, letting the boy sleep on in what was left of his warmth. While the boy woke up in the gentle arms of lingering memory, the wolf shed his cloak to greet the sun as the princess once more, dancing to remember herself. Even as the days grew colder, and the wind harsher, and her bare feet bled against the stony ground, she refused to give up her ritual.

It would have been easy to give in, stay with the peasant boy- no, he really wasn’t a boy at all anymore, but a young man -linger in his arms and let him burrow deeper into his fur. What would it harm? The princess could have stayed a wolf forever, simply been content to aid him in whatever quests he sought.

Certainly, whatever quests he took on would be legendary! More than worth fulfilling. It could be a good life. Not as grand and glorious as ruling a kingdom, and certainly not as satisfying as seeking revenge on those who had murdered the king and queen, but as long as the wolf could be by his side, well, it wouldn’t matter, would it?

No, of course not…

But, to leave the kingdom abandoned? And Baba Yaga, what would she think? After all those years of caring for her, keeping her protected in the tower, soothing the scars and the hurt of the Firebird curse…

The princess couldn’t let herself give into the temptation to be complacent; she had to keep fighting, no matter how badly it hurt, no matter how easy it would be to stay a wolf and nothing more. Let herself go. Just as it was the young man’s destiny to break the curse, it was her duty to see it through. She had to try. Her kingdom, and all of the people in it, needed her.

At the very least, they needed to see the threat of the firebird destroyed.

At the end of each morning’s dance to greet the sun, the princess put the cloak back around her shoulders and become the wolf again; large, shaggy, formidable. He shook out his fur, sniffed the air, and adjusted to the thrill of being wild once more. It was so much calmer in the wolf body than it was as a princess; the beating of his heart was steady and strong, not a weak trill of fear and panic.

He picked his way back to the peasant boy with ease, large paws traversing the path as easily as one might expect of a giant wolf, muscles taut, limbs gliding. The princess would have had a much more difficult journey. Her dress would have been caught on bramble; the wind would have whipped her hair about; her pale and fragile skin would have frozen in the chilly air. The wolf was tough; guarded and ready for the approaching winter.

Often, the wolf would hunt on the way back, bringing the young man something to cook for
breakfast—a thrush or a small hare—and they would eat together. Then they’d set out for another day of travel once the sun was high and warm enough to be of use. Sometimes, the young man would walk at the wolf’s side. Other times, he would ride on his back—as long as they rested, the wolf’s pads were kept from wearing too thin. Either way, they stayed close, with one of the young man’s hands in the wolf’s fur at all times.

They met the occasional soul along the way, usually a traveler carting wares from one distant market to the next, but every once in awhile they came upon an outpost, nestled against the mountainside, ready for guests. A warm bed, a warm meal, and a warm bath could not have sounded better to the young man, who eagerly traded his meager coin for a brief reminder of the comforts of home.

The wolf stayed outside, as he always did, waiting for his man to return with scraps for him.

Clouds covered the darkening sky and the wind barrelled down the canyon, beating against every surface it could get its frosty claws on. The wolf sniffed the air and huddled against the inn, tucking his nose under his tail. It was too cold for a human to sleep outside in this weather, even in a stable. They would have to find shelter every time the sun fell or he would die.

Inside the lodge, the young man found himself in the company of travelling soldiers—knights, in fact, and the acting king himself. This would have been something that would have thrilled him before, giving him the chance to learn of his heroes and ask of their adventures, rubbing elbows and building a rapport, but… all he could think of was his wolf outside in the cold.

The men shared their ale, and they did tell a tale or two, eager to have a young adventurer in their presence, especially one with some experience under his belt. But seeing him so distracted…

“What’s wrong, son?” asked the acting king. “Are you not pleased to be in our presence?”

“Oh no, no, it’s not that at all! I’m very happy…it’s just…my friend is outside in the cold…”

“Your friend?”

“He’s a wolf.”

“A wolf?” The other knights asked.

The young man nodded. “We’re travelling together.”

“You’re braver than we thought, young man.”

They laughed and ordered more drinks.

“Is he tame, then?”

The young man frowned. “He’s his own person. I don’t think ‘tame’ is the right word, but he’s not dangerous.”

“Then why don’t you bring him inside?”

“I don’t think the staff would like it.”

The acting king laughed. “Would they deny me?”

The young man thought about that.
“It’s going to snow soon if it hasn’t started already,” said the acting king. “Go get him.”

He didn’t need to be asked twice.

Soon, the wolf was crouched at the hearth, fur drying in the warmth from the fire little by little while he watched the room of soldiers with cautious eyes. Who would invite a wolf inside? It didn’t make sense. His man, maybe, but these knights? He recognized their scents from somewhere, and that was never a good sign. It made him nervous.

At least the staff were afraid of him, even as they fed him—hanging off food to his man, who brought it to him on a large plate. Bones. Gravy. Scraps. It didn’t matter. The wolf would eat it all, and he didn’t care about being polite in the face of these people who would just as soon hunt him. After a while, food eaten, fur dry, the wolf moved to the corner and stretched out to rest, content to observe and doze quietly. The patrons soon forgot about him almost entirely as if he were just part of the decor.

With the wolf taken care of, and the wind howling outside, the young man was content to talk to the knights, soon basking in their stories with his usual enthusiasm. They swapped stories back and forth, the monsters they’d seen or killed, the other heroes they’d met, and of course, the firebird.

The wolf flicked an ear and slid one eye open, but stayed still to listen as the knights described their hunt. Every year, on the night that their beloved princess disappeared, the acting king sent his best men in search of her. For a fortnight they combed the kingdom in pairs, sent in each direction, looking for any answers they might come across… and then they would meet the king to discuss their findings.

They were on their way back from the annual hunt. Nothing found, just vague reports of a disturbance to the East several weeks ago. But it could have been anything.

Though the young man had learned to be more discretionary with his own details, choosing to keep the feathers and his involvement secret, it was only with his words that he managed to keep. His shifting gaze to the wolf did not go unnoticed by the king, nor did the wolf’s tense body under the pretense of sleep.

By and by, the knights went to bed, and the young man, too, retired for the evening. The wolf was not permitted to go up to the rooms, but he assured his man that he would survive without him for one night by the fire just fine. It wouldn’t have been the first time, and he was certain it wouldn’t be the last.

When he was alone, he stretched in front of the hearth, letting the stone warm his belly, and readied himself to sleep.

He’d only drifted for a few minutes when approaching footsteps dragged him from it, ears twitching, then perking.

“Shhh,” the man said, voice only a gentle whisper as he slowed. “I’d just like to speak with you.”

The wolf lifted his head, vision clearing, and paused, frowning at the person before him. It was the acting king, of course, but more than that, it was someone he knew. Of course he did; he’d known the knight before, before his hair had gotten streaks of grey; before he’d grown such a full beard. But it was certainly him. The man who had been in charge of the king’s best men before, but had now stepped in to rule the kingdom. He’d tried to save the princess that night...

He still had scarring on the side of his face from those burns...
The princess had known the knight since she was a child. Give or take a few years, they’d grown up together. The knight had replaced her father after he’d died. He’d been searching for her all these years.

The wolf stared at the man and wondered if he, too, could smell the scent of fear that he was giving off. He hoped not.

The acting king—no, just the king now—studied the wolf’s face for several long moments, then gave a sigh, shoulders sagging as he moved into a deep bow. “Your Royal Highness.”

“I’m not—” the wolf began, ears falling back against his skull. “Don’t do that. Get up.”

The king raised his head, amber eyes brimming with tears, and he smiled with such tenderness that it nearly broke the wolf’s heart. “I’ve been searching for you. We all have. We never gave up hope.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Dear, sweet princess. You don’t need to run any longer… come home with us. With me. Your kingdom needs you. We have magicians. Healers. Anything you need.”

The wolf turned his head away, tears pricking in his eyes, too. “If Baba Yaga can’t help me, nothing you can do will, either.”

“So what will you do?” The king asked, sitting back on his heels. The pain scrawled on his scarred face was incredible. Confusion, hurt, denial, all muddled with the relief and love and gratitude that he also felt. “We’ve finally found you… our princess is alive. It’s a miracle. Everyone will be overjoyed to have you back.”

“I can’t come home.”

“Why not?”

“I’m not ready.”

The king turned his watery gaze to the stairway, indicating the sleeping quarters. “Because of him?”

“You don’t understand…”

“Try me.”

“He’s the only one that can bring me home.”

Yuuri didn’t know how long he slept, but at some point he was shaken awake. There was no urgency in Viktor’s eyes or touch, so they must have had time to spare. Viktor offered him his clothes.

“Feeling any better?”

He sat up, keeping the blankets in his lap to cover himself, unsure why it made a difference, and
grabbed his glasses from the night stand. “Yeah, actually.”

“Good,” Viktor said, patting his back, letting his hand linger there before he stood. “We’ve got about an hour before we need to be there. Why don’t you freshen up a little and we’ll head over.”

Taking his coach’s advice, Yuuri took a quick shower and washed his face and purposefully did not stop to look at the hickey in the mirror. He redressed and was out the door with Viktor with twenty minutes to spare.

The peaceful feeling he had after his nap was momentary. Being back at the rink invited the swarming doubt back in.

Each skater they passed was a reminder of what he had to do. Each brush of Viktor’s fingers on his face in the makeup room was an added weight.

Yuuri grabbed a water bottle after they were through with the makeup and sat in a chair while they waited for their group’s warmups. Water would help.

What was wrong with the cap, why wasn’t it opening?!

Viktor clapped his shoulders, startling him. “Yuuri, were you unable to take a nap?”

“Huh? I did nap. I did!” And he meant it this time.

“I forbid you from doing jumps in the six-minute warm-up.”

“Oh?!” The more lead in the better, didn’t Viktor understand that?

“That’s an order from your coach, Yuuri,” Viktor warned, voice losing its honey with each word.

Once on the ice, he did exactly what Viktor told him not to. He had to make sure he could do the jump, feeling as stiff as he did. His program depended on the technical scoring!

Just to spite himself, he fell. He could hear the lecture the moment he hit the ice.

There was no lecture, only an exasperated sigh and words of encouragement that fell on Yuuri’s unreceptive ears. Practice and repetition would land his jumps.

But with that flub all in the audience saw, he feared it would be the prelude to his program. He imagined them thinking his luck had run out, no hope of recovery after a strong short program.

Guang-Hong was first for the evening. Yuuri cheered him on yesterday, but today… he couldn’t handle it. The television feeds with the commentators and their speculating of the current standings, the crowds and their cheering… it was too much, so he shut them off.

He took to a mat for lunges, both in prep and distraction along with his headphones.

It wasn’t working. His mind wouldn’t stop rounding back to the fear of losing his chance at the Grand Prix, repeat of last year, and ruining Viktor’s reputation as a coach forever.

Worst of it was picturing Viktor looking so hurt and disappointed in him. The person that looked up to him… dragged his name through the dirt.

“Yuuri!”

He heard the call and felt himself be pulled away by his jersey, a mass of people and lenses
growing smaller.

Where was Viktor taking him and why?

They entered into a stairwell and proceeded to go down without a word.

As they got closer to the ground floor, the smell of oil, rubber, and metal told Yuuri they were heading for the parking garage. He continued to follow after Viktor. As long as they were back before it was his turn to go on, it didn’t matter the reasoning for leaving.

Viktor stopped them down an aisle, breathed, and noted how quiet it was. Not completely, as distant music and cheers reverberated even from this far underground.

Could Viktor see him falling apart and was trying to distract him?

It didn't last too long.

“What was that? What are the current standings?” Guang-Hong was just on, who was next? Christophe?

“You don’t need to know,” Viktor said, hands in surrender. “Why don’t we take some nice, deep breaths?”

He did so, closing his eyes, inhaling the unpleasant fumes. Having already stretched, he took to positions of his skate on foot, stepping in place of blades sliding on the ice, but arms and middle moving as they would. It wouldn't help with the jumping aspect, but moving his body helped him get in the zone. Usually.

How were his competitors and friends doing? Did he even have a chance? He'd never placed first in a Prix circuit before.

Applause.

Leo was after Christophe. How did he do?

Removing his headphones, Yuuri strained his ears for a score.

Viktor took a step towards Yuuri, voice sharp and sudden, cupping his ears with gloved hands. “Don’t listen!”

The noise from upstairs was replaced with Viktor's presence in that moment. He stayed put, letting the hands of his boyfriend ground him. If that's what he was doing. Viktor's gaze was so intense and analyzing, he had to look away. The physical contact did help, but he knew he couldn't stay like that until the dark cloud subsided.

Grabbing his arms, voice apologetically soft, “Viktor, it’s almost time. Don’t you think we should be getting back? I’m up soon.”

Slowly Viktor removed his hands, but didn't move aside, leaving them square with one another until Yuuri took the initiative. They couldn't be late... had to leave.

“Yuuri.” A pause in his speech in anticipation for Yuuri to stop and turn in his tracks. “If you mess up this free skate and miss the podium, I'll take responsibility by resigning as your coach.”

A chill coursed through Yuuri, heart stopping. Pindrop silence. He'd been on the verge all day, the fine thread that had held him together finally snapped and the tears came. “Viktor. Why would you
say something like that like you’re testing me?”

It had to be a test… a cruel test.

“Uhm. Sorry, Yuuri. I wasn’t being serious.” Viktor stepped closer, cautious.

Yuuri didn’t look at him, hunching over at the weight of his own emotions, lip and voice quivering. “I know I fail a lot, so I’ve gotten pretty used to it over the years, but it’s different now because I’m worried about my mistakes reflecting on you! Part of me has been wondering if you secretly want to quit.”

“I was just saying that. Of course I don-”

“I know!” He’d come to the conclusion that afternoon. It didn’t make sense for him to want to. It was harsh to joke. Viktor’s pride in himself as a coach was stronger than that. He wouldn’t throw himself into something if he didn’t believe it would succeed, would he?

“I'm not good with people crying in front of me. I don't know what I should do.” A sigh. “Should I just kiss you or something?”

“No!” Yuuri raised his head at that, hurt Viktor could humor that would solve anything and be so dismissive! “Just have more faith in me I’m going to win than I do. And you don’t have to say anything, just stay close to me, Viktor!”

Ito’s furious lectures and disappointment when he lost or Celestino’s way of not pushing him hard enough to his potential were toxic to what he needed, and what he always needed was someone to believe in him at his lowest points. Trust that he could recover no matter how long it took.

__________________________

Just stay close to me, Viktor!

That pleading, and this time with tears. Beautiful, messy tears streaming down Yuuri’s face, splotched red with frustration, upset, and probably embarrassment- and it was all Viktor’s fault. Again.

Yuuri didn’t need words, he needed action. He needed the calm, quiet support that his network had always provided; they’d never thought of Yuuri as weak, just let him grow, been there for him, believed in him. Unwavering confidence in his potential. And despite Yuuri’s anxiety, he believed in himself, too. At least in the hard facts and statistics. He couldn’t have gotten as far as he had without it. But if Viktor couldn’t offer encouragement without sounding patronizing, and physical affection was off the table…

Well, he knew that song and dance. He’d lived it for years. All he could do was apologize and wait to be forgiven, however long it would take, and hope there wouldn’t be too many hoops in the process. It was part of every relationship.

Viktor cleared his throat, combing fingers through his hair while he stood at the edge of the awkward rift between them. Yuuri was still in tears, nose running, hair drooping from the sweat. He’d made himself a hot mess, and all because he was worried about his coach. That was the worst part of it, because he understood so very, very well. And it hurt.
“Yuuri,” Viktor began, as cautious as before but much more gently. “You’re right. I’m sorry. You’re right.”

He turned his gaze to the concrete at their feet, digging in his coat pocket for a handkerchief. When he found the folded piece of fabric, he held it out in offering, but Yuuri didn’t take it as he’d moved on to crying into his hands. Sighing, Viktor stepped in to wipe the tears where he could reach.

“Shh, shh, Yuuri…”

Above them was the muffled sound of music, bass reverberating beneath the whir of fans and generators from the garage. These were interrupted only by the sniffls of the man he’d broken, breaths hitching stuttered and uneven.

He really wasn’t good with people crying in front of him; that hadn’t been a lie. Especially not when he was to blame. Viktor didn’t get close to people as a general rule for a reason. Hearts of glass were better left isolated. What if Yuuri failed because of this? Because of him and his inability to remain professional? He’d known that Yuuri’s motivation had been derived from the threat of losing him before, but this… he couldn’t stand it. Viktor couldn’t be the heart of stone that Lilia had instructed, that Niko was, that he’d tried so hard to pretend that he was.

“Yuuri,” Viktor tried again.

Yuuri hiccuped.

It was such a small sound. Choking and strangled, muffled by Yuuri’s palms, but it was enough, and Viktor couldn’t take it. He abandoned his efforts, instead tugging Yuuri against his chest in a hug, and buried his mouth and nose in his hair. Maybe it wasn’t dignified, maybe it was against the rules, and maybe he’d regret it later, but Viktor would risk it.

“Oh Yuuri,” Viktor said, his own voice nearly breaking as he whispered against the side of Yuuri’s head. “My dear little Pyatachok… I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you so.”

He received a little half grunt, half whimper in reply, but that was all. It might have been something of displeasure or disbelief; Viktor couldn’t be sure, but he wouldn’t have been surprised with either one. He resorted to kissing his hair, just in case. With each one he uttered another apology, both for what he’d done and for what he was doing. Yuuri hadn’t wanted Viktor to kiss him, but he was doing it anyway.

“I’m sorry,” a kiss, “I’m so sorry, my Yuuri,” and another. “I love you, I’m sorry.”

He didn’t want to think about the aftermath; what kind of punishment it would result in, or how long it would take Yuuri to cool off afterward. He’d seen Yuuri avoidant before, but he’d never seen him truly angry until now. It was only fitting that they’d have their first real fight so soon after becoming an official couple. Why not? Viktor hated uncertainty. Better to get it over with.

What would it be like sharing a room together after this? Would Yuuri still want to share a bed? Would he even let him have a kiss goodnight? Viktor wasn’t sure.

Saint Petersburg was shaping up to be an out and out nightmare.

Viktor held him there, pressing those tiny kisses and mumbled apologies until Yuuri relaxed where he stood. Then, after a while, Yuuri pulled out of his arms, body loose and arms falling slack to his sides. “I need to get back,” he mumbled. “Don’t even have my skates on yet.”

Viktor let his own arms fall away, but with no shortage of regret, heart aching more and more with
every passing moment. The stolen moment was over. “Oh, you’re right. Sorry.”

Yuuri said nothing as he turned from him, and Viktor somberly followed suit to leave the garage and head back into the venue proper. Though Viktor wanted to help, Yuuri took care of fixing his own hair and makeup, and lacing up his skates. It wasn’t unusual; Yuuri was always independent, but he wasn’t usually so cold or prickly about it.

Neither of them were particularly prepared to face the press, but they didn’t have a choice. Viktor was keenly aware of how it looked; both of them coming in exhausted, disheveled, downtrodden. And though Yuuri had managed to calm down enough that it wasn’t as noticeable, any professional would be able to tell that he’d been crying. There were tell-tale physical signs that didn’t just disappear so quickly. Perhaps worst of all, Yuuri refused to look at him, gaze sliding over Viktor each time as if he weren’t even there. But he deserved it, he knew he did, and he took it without anything more than quiet acceptance.

Once Yuuri had taken to the ice, Viktor went to the barrier to wait for him, taking comfort in the Makkachin tissue box. If only the poodle were really there; he’d know just what to do. But perhaps he should have asked Yakov what to do as a coach in situations like this, too. Coach advice. Relationship advice. Life advice. Anything, really. Anything at all.

In lieu of outside perspective, Viktor erred on the side of caution and took on a more submissive role, offering the tissues so that Yuuri wouldn’t have to ask, and then held out his hand to make it even easier for him to be done with the exchange. Whatever Yuuri needed. When he was finished, Yuuri crumpled the tissues into a ball, then diverted his aim to let them fall not into Viktor’s hand, but to the ice, forcing Viktor to scramble to catch it. A prank? Really? He knew that Yuuri could be petty, but he didn’t expect-

_Poke._

_Poke twist. Pat._

Viktor blinked up at Yuuri’s retreating form through the fringe of silver hair, utterly bewildered. He’d caught the tissues, yes, but head bowed and unguarded, Yuuri had taken advantage and touched his scalp, right at the part, just like he’d done twice before. Viktor straightened up to watch Yuuri move to his starting position, fingertips coming to rest where Yuuri had touched, and frowned. Was Yuuri trying to be mean, or…?

No… The first time Yuuri had poked him was a few days after the initial rejection and heartbreak, and was the first physical touch initiated by Yuuri that Viktor could remember _not_ motivated by desperation or fear. The second time was after the impromptu pair skate, when Viktor had been avoiding him. Both times, the simple action had dragged him back from the slippery slopes of despair. And maybe…

There was no denying the chest flutters that hit like moths clustering around a porch light, clamoring for attention as the tension broke in that moment. Viktor stared after him, confused by the giddiness that was quickly welling up to fill in the cracks of his own broken heart, drawing his hand away from where Yuuri had touched his hair. Had teased him. What did it mean? And why was Yuuri _smiling_?

Lost as he was in his thoughts, Viktor almost missed Yuuri nailing his first quad. Right, he needed to pay attention. Yuuri warmed up as he went, limbs loose and limber as he set up his quadruple salchow and- “Perfect, Yuuri!” -he nailed that one, too.

Despite the fight and lack of sleep, Yuuri kept going, triple loop and lunge, every section as
breathtaking and beautiful as could be expected. Even when he touched down during the triple axel, he recovered quickly and it added a little bit of drama to the presentation—something that was so apt for his story, their story.

He had the audience eating out of the palm of his hand from one sequence to the next. No one could look away.

Yuuri’s blades left a spray of glittering ice in his wake as he jumped, following his intense step sequence, going in for the quadruple toe loop—no. Wait. He’d changed jump compositions again.

A quadruple flip?

*A quadruple flip.*

“He fell, but there appeared to be enough rotations! The quadruple flip was a signature move of Viktor Nikiforov, his coach. Not even Nikiforov did a jump this difficult, when fatigue would be at its peak!”

There was a reason for that, of course. It was insane. Impressive beyond belief, but crazy! If Viktor hadn’t seen it himself, he wouldn’t have—but no, he had. Yuuri had done a quadruple flip in the second half, which added points for additional difficulty, increasing his chances of reaching the podium. Yuuri was keeping him close with an homage to Viktor himself.

Would Yuuri do any of this if he hated him? If he didn’t want him at his side? No. No, of course he wouldn’t. Yuuri wasn’t Niko. Viktor knew that. Had always known that.

That was true love.

After the final step sequence, Yuuri raised his arm, long, delicate fingers reaching out to the coach position, and Viktor covered his face with his hands. He couldn’t. He just couldn’t.

“There is a man who’ll go above and beyond our expectations,” cried the announcer over the screams of the audience. “Yuuri Katsuki!”

Yuuri held his position for a few seconds longer, then addressed the audience, even as his gaze strayed back to Viktor again and again. Even from across the rink, Viktor knew that look of wide-eyed hesitance, searching for approval and acceptance. Was Yuuri asking to be forgiven, too? For what? It didn’t matter. Viktor didn’t care. He would stay by Yuuri’s side and never leave, just as he’d asked. Glass hearts would always be broken, but theirs could be broken together.

Together: that was the important part.

Viktor took off for the barrier entrance at a run. What he was about to do was dangerous; audience and press there, alert and ready to capture the moment, but he didn’t care. Yuuri was willing to risk everything for him, and so was he. How else could they be expected to defeat Moscow unless they were fully committed?

One sideways glance told him that Yuuri was likewise racing to meet him. “Viktor! I did great, right?” he called—yes, desperate for his approval, that sweet, silly student of his. His boyfriend. Bright-eyed, smile stretched wide, breathless, cute as could be with none of the former bitterness.

Viktor came to a stop, gave himself two seconds to catch his breath, straightened up just enough to give Yuuri a beaming smile in return, and leapt at him.

It was a very simple matter to topple Yuuri over; Viktor’s forward momentum and fresh kickoff
from solid ground gave him more than enough force, and Yuuri, having not expected the attack, had no chance for recourse.

Arms outstretched, Viktor slipped one hand behind Yuuri’s head and the other at his shoulders and pulled him close to cradle and to kiss him. Just one kiss; simple and to the point, head tilted, eyes closed, full contact. It was perfect for the camera and perfect for the message he was trying to convey.

*Yes, Yuuri. I am with you. I believe in you. We are a team. I stand with you. Our fates are tied together, and I’m not taking that lightly.*

They hit the ice with a solid *whumpf,* and Viktor waited until they came to a complete stop before pushing up onto his elbows to take in Yuuri’s expression. Shock, mostly. Wide-eyed, adorable shock.

Viktor laughed, unable to hold back his pride and pleasure at having shaken him so. “That was the only thing I could think of to surprise you more than you’ve surprised me.”

“Well,” said Yuuri, his own fond smile coming into play while he curled his fingers at Viktor’s shoulders. “It worked.”

Had they been alone, Viktor wouldn’t have hesitated to go in for a reprise, all of the relief and love aching to be let out. But they weren’t, and there was already damage control to be dealt with, so he settled instead for stroking fingers through his hair at the back of his head. “We’ve already kissed,” he said. “And you’ve already cried… but let’s go get your scores anyway, okay?”

Yuuri laughed and tightened his grip around him, pulling Viktor back down close for one last hug there against the ice. “Okay.”

“Oof- Yuuri! You’re strong!”

The Thai skater ended up with gold, leaving Yuuri with silver and Chris with bronze. No gold for Yuuri, but still a win. Viktor was beyond pleased. For the first leg of their international tour, it was very promising.

“Now that Yuuri can do a quadruple flip, he’ll definitely win at the Rostelecom Cup and advance to the Grand Prix Final,” he said, cutting in on Yuuri’s interview. With how much they needed to button down on the media now that they were heading into Moscow, Viktor was ready to step in, and Yuuri yielded the floor with only an awkward sideways glance. Fortunately, the press loved the Russian’s enthusiasm. “I’m looking forward to going to Russia as his coach!”

Yes. Russia.

“Oh, the kiss?” Viktor laughed again, for the fourth interview since the kiss and cry. “In Russia, we have a saying, ‘Only he who does nothing makes no mistakes.’ Yuuri changed his jump composition to include a quadruple flip, because he is a soldier who dreams of being a general—another saying we hold dear, and, you know, I could not hold back my pride as a coach for my student! We have worked hard to make sure that his intensive training pushes him to his limits and exemplifies all that he is good at, and he continues to impress and surprise me with his talents and potential. Yuuri Katsuki is eager to prove that he is a suitable student for Viktor Nikiforov!”

“So you were just excited?”
“Yes! Very proud and excited! Weren’t you? A quadruple flip!”

No one could disagree with him, and everyone was more than happy to accept Viktor’s reasoning behind his actions, as predicted. The press, especially, was eager to finally get sound bites and interviews from Coach Nikiforov on the new direction of his career, and Viktor was happy to feed them the carefully tailored information that he had been preparing.

Not once did Viktor waver in his confident explanation. Not once did he act as though it was strange, arm around Yuuri’s shoulders in some interviews, just standing at his side in others, playfully ruffling his hair here, using his hands for animated gestures in others. The media and the fans were finally getting their information, which came in ample supply.

Yuuri Katsuki, training under Viktor Nikiforov in Hastetsu, using Nikiforov’s own strict exercise regime, a specially calculated diet, rigorous training schedule, aggressive program choreographing, and even a sleeping schedule. It had been a bootcamp in Katsuki’s own home. No wonder he’d gotten so good. Yes, he was certainly a formidable opponent.

“And just wait until you see his special exhibition gala performance tomorrow,” added Viktor, taking the opportunity to wink at the camera, which of course murdered several of the long-standing fans in the gathered audience. “Not bad for a third-rate coach, right?”

They laughed.

Yuuri, though grateful that he hadn’t had to say much, tore his attention from the crowd-pleasing Viktor to Phichit, who had just finished with his own round of interviews, and waved him over.

“About done, Yuuri?”

The rink had mostly cleared out by then, save for those with staff or press badges and the skaters themselves. Christophe was lingering near the stands with his own crew, and the two other young skaters quickly flocked to the gold medalist.

Yuuri set a hand on Viktor’s back to get his attention, smile tired but gentle. It had been such a long day. “Are we wrapping up?”

Viktor blinked, turning away from the cameras and microphones, then over to Phichit with a little grin. “I think so.” He waved a dismissive hand. “That’s enough for today; we can answer more questions tomorrow.”

“Aww, come on Viktor!”

“Just a few more?”

“Nope. Yuuri needs to rest for tomorrow’s exhibition. So does Mr. Chulanont. We athletes take these things seriously so go on, shoo~”

The flash of that white playboy smile was enough to smooth over any hurt feelings, though, and the paparazzi left with only minor complaints, allowing both Yuuri and Viktor to depart. Viktor didn’t blame Yuuri for being tired of it; their interactions with the media were usually much, much shorter than all of this, and he imagined that he wanted to catch up with his friend.

Which, of course, he did. And while Yuuri and Phichit chattered about how great it was that they podiumed together, and how it had been one of their dreams, and the Chinese and American skaters chimed in with their oohs and ahhhs and so on and whatever, Viktor checked his phone to keep tabs on how things were going in the social media circuit. The kiss was all over the internet, of course,
along with every sort of speculation that one could imagine.

None of which was surprising. Viktor was only really relieved that Yuuri had abandoned his own social media accounts after the last Grand Prix Final, and even before that had never really been active on them. The more Viktor could mitigate that drama, the better. Yuuri didn’t need the additional pressure, that was for sure.

He slipped his phone back into his pocket and scanned the area. The janitorial staff were hard at work cleaning and preparing things for tomorrow’s gala, but just beside the tunnel was Yakov, watching him. He wore the neutral expression that he often did, nearly unreadable, especially at a distance, and Viktor allowed himself two seconds to meet his eyes- just two -with an empty glance of his own before he turned away. He gave nothing and he got nothing in return.

No warmth, no warning, no fear, no hatred. Just nothing.

Viktor trained his eyes on the collar of Yuuri’s jersey, pretending to be engaged in their conversation, though he had no idea what they were talking about, and only stole one more glance over his shoulder after that- but Yakov was gone.

“So did you want to get a late dinner tonight or something to celebrate, Phichit?” Yuuri asked, finally pulling Viktor’s attention back to the present.

“Oh. I would, but…” He laughed, and fiddled with his cell phone, rubbing thumbs over the front of it. “I actually need to go make a very important phone call. Y’know.”

“Family?” asked Viktor.

“No, they’re here,” said Yuuri. “Right, Phichit?”

“Yeah, they always come when they can.” Phichit put on his best little grin. “But hey, maybe we can hang out at the banquet? ‘Cause it’s not like Chris and Baz are here anymore.”

One quick glance confirmed that the Thai skater was, indeed, correct. Christophe and Bastien had managed to sneak away, which didn’t surprise Viktor in the least. “They do that,” he said, and rolled his eyes.

“I guess the banquet would be okay. We’ll all be there… right?”

Viktor peered down at Guang-Hong, who, though tiny and chubby-cheeked, was giving him a quiet warning glare under blush and freckles. He blinked. “Yes? I think so.”

Yuuri nudged him aside, taking the floor then. “Yeah, we’ll be there. I’ll make sure of it.”

That seemed to satisfy the Chinese skater, which in turn made the American relax, and everyone seemed more at ease. Except Phichit, who anxiously scrolled through his phone.

“Okay, one more group selfie to go with the other and then I’m gonna go! Gather around!”

“Don’t you have enough, Phi? C’mon…”

“Never!” Phichit cried, waving everyone into place. “Don’t you know that’s the cardinal rule for getting good photos? You gotta’ take a gajillion of them! Set ‘em up right, take a bunch, and the winning photo is sure to be in there! Besides, this is like a ‘before-and-after’ kind of thing.”

“Fiiiiiiine…”
They obeyed, Viktor in back, Guang-Hong in front, everyone else sort of middling, and Phichit got the photo with his selfie stick.

“Perfect. Okay, see you all tomorrow!”

And then he was gone.

“So what was that about?”

“I dunno, Yuuri. If anyone knows who he could be calling, it’d be you.”

“Sure, but he doesn’t tell me everything, Leo. Especially since we’re not roommates anymore. He’s allowed to have secrets.”

“I guess…”

Viktor scratched the side of his neck, wondering if the drama between the young skaters was worth worrying about, then broke into a broad smile. “Yuuri, we should probably head back now.”

“Hm?” Yuuri looked up at him.

“It’s getting late.”

“Oh. Right.” A smile. “See you two at the gala.”

The two younger skaters exchanged knowing glances, then nodded, wearing not-so-casual smirks.

“Yes. See you then.”

“Goodnight, Yuuri, Viktor.”

Viktor might have been a little embarrassed if the blush on Yuuri’s cheeks wasn’t so cute. It was hard to be upset when he was so distracted.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was split into two chunks-- read the second half in 21, Stay Close To Me!
Stay Close to Me

Chapter Summary

With the short program and free skate out of the way, Yuuri prepares to perform his exhibition gala piece for the world, putting all of those feelings on display... and Viktor prepares to reciprocate in kind.

#more nsfw #they don't waste any time #lots of emotion

Chapter Notes

This was originally part of chapter 20, Trust Fall. Many found the chapter to be far too long on its own, and kept losing their place, so we've split it into two. This is the second half. As such, it does not include a flashback section for either Viktor or Yuuri. Nothing is missing; that's just how it was written. Thanks. :)

"You know," Viktor said, the hand free of the costume garment bag playing along the brushed metal railing. "We could go out. Just the two of us. Dinner. Find a restaurant with katsudon, since you did have a win, after all." He shifted a sly glance at Yuuri, who was staring straight ahead at the elevator doors, grip tight on the strap of his track bag. "A first date, if you will?"

Yuuri's fingers flexed, relaxing then clenching again, and his mouth twitched. "But I didn't win. I got silver."

"It's still a win, Yuuri. You made the podium. What, do you have to get gold to have katsudon? I don't remember that stipulation being part of it. That's silly..."

The elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open. Viktor waited for Yuuri to leave first, then followed after. Their room was just down the hallway, 704, and Yuuri walked toward it with purpose. "It has to be gold. Besides... I think I want something else."

"Has to be gold... you're starting to sound like me. Haha." Viktor shook his head, searching for the card key in his numerous pockets. Once found, he swiped the lock and pushed the door open to let Yuuri in, stepping inside after him. "But okay, what are you in the mood for?"

"Let's not go out at all. Stay in?" Yuuri asked, waiting just a beat before turning on his heel and stepping up to Viktor, pressing him between the garment bag and the door. "What I'm in the mood for it... already here."

Viktor swallowed air, blinking twice, then uttered a soft, almost breathless "Yuuri," as all thoughts of food were promptly forgotten. Pulling the garment bag away, he made one blind attempt to hang it up on the hook that was two feet out of the way, then let it fall to the floor- they could worry about it later -and let his hands come to rest on Yuuri's waist instead.
Taking Viktor's tie, Yuuri pulled it from the vest like he did the night before, and tugged on the smaller of the tongues with both hands to give himself something to do. As sure as his needs as he was, the color in his face betrayed his embarrassment even so. "I don't know, well, I'm not... confident on how. Can you show me?"

"Yuuri..." Viktor dragged one hand away from him to reach back for the deadbolt, which clicked in place with a soft, metallic thunk, then used his teeth to hold the glove in place while he slipped his hand free. He tossed it aside, removed his other glove, then reached up to rub his hands over Yuuri's, steadying them. "Just tell me what you want to do."

His answer was simple, dark eyes determined. "I want to make you feel good."

"Okay." Viktor slid his hands up higher, coming to loosen his tie, freeing the restraint on his throat with a swift twist of a button or two at his collar. "There are lots of ways to do that... did you have anything in mind? What we did last night was really nice..."

Yuuri answered by kissing him, first on the mouth, but then to his chin, jawline, and quickly working his way down to Viktor's neck. Each kiss was more aggressive than the last, open-mouthed and heated, and Yuuri's hands worked their way to Viktor's shoulders to push and pull at his coat.

"Ah- Yuuri!" Viktor's protests were weak, so weak, and protests in name only, biting his lip and leaning his head back against the door. "Haaa, I thought you wanted my help."

The coat came away, but not without difficulty, and Yuuri gave a frustrated growl against Viktor's skin in the process. "I do!"

"Right, right!" Viktor rolled his shoulders, shedding his suit jacket quickly. "This might be easier if we moved to the bed."

Yuuri finally pulled the tie free and tossed it aside, reaching for his hand with a nod.

They moved to the bed, both flushed and breathless. Viktor kicked off his shoes and climbed onto the bed, moving back into the position of the previous night against the headboard. One quick pull of a zipper, and Yuuri joined him, sans jacket, close and hungry.

"Viktor... can I touch you?"

"So bold, Yuuri!" Viktor hoped his laugh would cover his genuine surprise. "I'm yours."

Yuuri reached for him, hands wandering over his chest, stopping at the seams and darts where the fabric was pressed. It was taking too long, even with Viktor unbuttoning his shirt for him. He touched Viktor's chest, fingerpads lightly exploring, paying careful attention to where and what brought out the best little sighs and the prettiest little faces, but it wasn't enough.

He finally hid his face against Viktor's neck, pressing kisses there, and along his shoulder, blindly feeling his way around the different textures of Viktor's skin. "Viktoruuu..."

"Hmmm?" Viktor asked, hands coming to rest at the hem of Yuuri's shirt. "Yes, Yuuri?"

Yuuri left another kiss at his throat. "I want to... make love to you."

The weight of those words, soft though they were, barely above a whisper against his skin, left Viktor still and silent against the headboard. He angled his head, but it did little to help him see anything more than Yuuri's hair, still swept back from the free skate. Words failed him, so he said...
nothing, too stunned for anything else. So soon?

"Unless you, uhm, don't want me to," Yuuri continued, pulling back enough to sit back on his heels, eyes fixed on Viktor's collarbone. "I don't know what I'm doing, s-so..."

That uncertainty again. Viktor tilted his head the opposite way, studying the pained face of his lover. He brought his hand to his cheek, cupping it gently, stroking with his thumb. "You're sure?"

"I've been... thinking about it since last night." Yuuri leaned into the affection, turning his face just enough to kiss his palm. His brows then furrowed in a determined expression that lasted long enough to utter a firm- "Yes. I'm sure." -before wavering again with a nervous frown. "If you're okay with me..."

"More than okay." Viktor kissed that frown until it was pliable beneath his lips, working it with caress after caress. "I can't tell you how long I've waited for this moment, my Yuuri."

"How long?"

"My entire life."

Yuuri managed a little smile, which Viktor kissed, too, before he could speak. "I won't make you wait anymore, Viktor. Unless, uh... unless I screw this up."

To that, Viktor laughed, offering affections to his cheek. "I'll walk you through it, don't worry. You're a wonderful student; I think we can manage."

Yuuri nodded. "Show me how to make you feel good."

They began with more kisses.

"What do you think I'd like?"

"This."

First on Viktor's lips; a careful kneading with his own, then working back down to his neck as he'd done before. Yuuri knew that his throat was a weak spot, and soon had Viktor tilting his head back, making those soft, breathy sounds again.

"Go-good..."

"And this."

Yuuri's hands worked over Viktor's shirt front to finish slipping each button from its place from top to bottom, fingers dipping in to savor the warmth of his skin with every exposed inch. When he reached the belt, Yuuri checked once for permission, and nearly lost it at the half-lidded doe eyes that met him.

"You're doing well." Viktor touched his hair, just the dark lock at the side of his face that would have been pressed under glasses if Yuuri had replaced them after his performance, and swept it behind his ear. His fingers were so delicate, so gentle; his cheeks bright with the heat.

The belt came free despite some fumbling and nerves, clasp giving way with a click, and Viktor arched his back when Yuuri pulled it free of his trousers, giving enough of a visual preview to make his head spin.

Viktor laughed, chin tucking in embarrassment once he settled back against the headboard, and
tugged at his sleeves. "Sorry, I..."

"No, it's okay."

It was endearing to see Viktor bashful now, of all times. Pink and beautiful and he'd hardly done anything.

Yuuri went in for another kiss, back to his neck to earn a breathy sigh, then down to his collarbone, across his chest, taking care of the button and zipper of Viktor's slacks while they were both distracted.

With shoulders braced against the headboard, Viktor lifted his hips, making it easy for Yuuri to work the expensive suit pants down and off of Viktor's legs, leaving him in nothing but the opened dress shirt and black high-cut briefs. Viktor stretched one leg, then the other, toes pointed, and relaxed again, bringing his knees together, which bent upward when he scooted down, head to pillow.

"Do you like what you see?" Viktor asked, voice even despite his nerves. He'd had years of practice to hide them all, even if he couldn't help that the blush had even spread to his chest.

Yuuri swallowed. Of course he liked what he saw. He'd seen Viktor plenty of times in the bath, completely naked, but this was different. Every inch of perfectly smooth skin was warm and dry and free to touch. The faint marks on Viktor's throat were from him. And he'd noticed- he had to notice- the way that Viktor was straining in his underwear. He was doing this to him. Yuuri Katsuki was making Viktor Nikiforov ache.

"Y-yeah," he finally said. "I do."

"I get everything waxed, so enjoy it." Viktor stretched his leg out again, toe once again pointed, and bit his lip to keep himself from saying anything else.

Yuuri at least knew how to take a hint like that, hands taking the offered leg to run down from ankle to hip, exploring every inch.

"Your hands are so nice. My ankle is a weak spot..."

"I noticed."

"And I can't resist..." Viktor gave himself a moment to breathe. "Kisses on my inner thigh."

Whether or not it was true was beside the point; it was what he wanted, and Yuuri was happy to obligé. The more Viktor hummed and sighed, the more Yuuri would explore. Would it be too much to try both at once, he wondered? Viktor made no protests as Yuuri moved his legs, spreading his legs like a poseable doll. Still holding onto his ankle with one hand, Yuuri kissed the exposed thigh, savoring the supple skin and muscle there, thumb massaging until he got the sound he was hoping for- a moan. An honest to god moan.

Viktor gave a helpless laugh, sheets twisting between his fingers. "Both at once? Yuuri, I'm surprised at you..."

"I asked you to help me make you feel good. I'm just trying to follow through." Although the talk was big, Yuuri hid his face against Viktor's leg. "And you like surprises."

"You are an excellent student..." Viktor said, tilting his head back with a smile. "Kiss me?"
Yuuri couldn't refuse, sitting up just long enough to strip off his shirt, then stretched out over him to take his lips at an angle, open-mouthed, putting all that he'd learned in the past twenty-four hours to use. He was an excellent student, and proactive at that, slipping a hand between them to palm between Viktor's legs, feeling the shape of him. Viktor moaned again, but into his mouth, which Yuuri smothered with each successive kiss.

Not watching what he was doing helped him be bold, just like skating without glasses or contacts. He pulled at the waistband and slipped his hand inside, wrapping fingers around bare skin. Viktor was bigger than himself, which he'd known for quite some time, but now holding him like this, hot and heavy and ever hardening...

Between kisses, Viktor's sounds became delicious whimpers, which was both thrilling and beyond real.

Yuuri kept his movements deliberate and slow as he became familiar with him, memorizing every different part that he could reach. Smooth. So warm. So soft. Each touch earned a reaction, each more fascinating than the last. The way Viktor's legs tensed and hips moved when he pressed here, or how he keened against his lips when he squeezed there-

"Y-Yuuri!" Viktor gasped, finally yanking his head away to breathe, hands coming to Yuuri's shoulders to hold him at bay. "Yuuuri!" It was a plea, followed by a sharp intake of breath. He knew that he could hold out longer, but his body wasn't used to this anymore, and the direct stimulation was maddening, almost painful. "Th-the drawer." His palm came away from him, sweaty, reaching toward the nightstand in desperation, but he couldn't reach the handle. "Your fingernails... are they?" It was so hard to think. Viktor looked back at him, blinking hard, trying to concentrate on the words in English. "Filed? Short..."

"N-nails? Wh- oh. Uh." Yuuri abandoned his ministrations to examine both hands, nails uneven, but short. He held them out to Viktor for approval, brows knit. "Are these okay?"

Viktor stared for several seconds, waiting for his hazy vision to clear, and finally took Yuuri's hands with his own to bring them to his lips, kissing them once, then tested them with a quick swipe of his tongue. Relieved, he breathed out, and let them go.

"Should be fine, as long as you're careful. The drawer..."

Yuuri scrambled for the bedside table, digging under hotel brochures and pamphlets, and found what he was looking for; an unopened box of condoms and a bottle of lubricant.

It was really happening. Really, truly happening.

The moment apart gave Viktor time to cool off enough to get back some of his head, and he pushed up onto his elbows to watch as Yuuri poured over the instructions on the back of the box, holding them close to read without his glasses.

"They're instructions are in Chinese... but they'll work just the same. Yuuri, it's okay."

Yuuri squinted, first at the box, then at Viktor, wondering if it was worth explaining anything about kanji and international Asian markets, but decided not to. "R-right. Okay."

"Let's get those pants off of you first."

Pants. Right. Those did need to come off. Yuuri set the essential supplies aside and hurried to take care of his track pants, only to be joined by Viktor a moment later, on his knees, helping to shimmy him out of them. The heat and the ache lessened, and he took the opportunity to breathe while
Viktor gave himself a selfish moment to appreciate Yuuri's bare legs in such an intimate context, running his hands down his thighs with an appreciative hum.

"Beautiful," he mumbled. "Are you ready for the next stage?"

"A-as ready as I can be."

"Okay." With a swipe of his hand, Viktor tucked his silvery hair out of his face, though it swept right back in place the moment he moved again, shoulders rolling to help him slip out of the dress shirt, which he discarded on the side of the bed. Then he went for the bottle of lubricant, twisting off the cap before reaching for Yuuri's hand. "Remember, more is better," he said, pouring a dollop into his palm.

"Liberal, right? That's what the books say."

"The... books?"

"Nothing, nevermind."

"Right." Viktor added a little more, then set the bottle aside. "Basically, the more you use, the less it will hurt. It's been... a long time for me, so it will be tight. Rub it between your fingers- get it warm for me, da? I don't like it cold."

"Uhm. Right."

With Yuuri occupied, Viktor slipped his little black briefs off of his hip and down to his knees, then settled back onto the bed to pull them the rest of the way. He tossed them aside, careless, and took a deep breath. "Right. Now... use as much as you need, it's right here," Viktor pointed out the bottle on the bed. "And take it slow. Just... Here, I'll show you." He took Yuuri's clean palm and demonstrated with his own fingers, first one, then two, rubbing long strokes, then scissoring. "Da? It makes sense?"

"Yeah. I think I've got it."

"Okay."

It'd never occurred to Viktor before how much something like this could be compared to skating. Or coaching. But as he laid back, taking his deep breaths to relax, it made sense. He was the experienced one, and Yuuri was the eager, determined student. Of course it would be like this. There were minor adjustments for positioning, and though Viktor didn't want to admit it out loud, he really was rusty. It came back to him, though; the hands on his thighs, the exploratory testing, the initial tensing that always happened when being touched so intimately.

"Hh- y-yes, that's good, Yuuri... perfect."

"Should I do anything else? Is this too much?"

"No... no, I just need to relax. You're doing just fine."

Little by little, it became easier for the both of them. The more Yuuri did, the more Viktor responded, working through the physical, emotional, and mental barriers between them. As Viktor relaxed, his body became more receptive, which allowed Yuuri to be braver, soon adding another finger, stretching, coaxing the tight walls to give way to him.

It was almost too much, but Viktor wouldn't admit it. His breaths were coming in huffs, torn
between discomfort and the strange pleasure that came with approaching that high but never reaching it, and it was already making him tired. And even more impatient. They wouldn't find the spot their first time, and that was fine. What mattered was getting adequately prepped so that Yuuri could finish. Was he ready? He couldn't quite tell. "Just a little more... use your other hand like you were before. Get me to cry your name again."

"Which before? I'm losing track..."

Viktor craned his neck to catch a glimpse at him, though that might have been a mistake. Seeing Yuuri, so flushed and excited, doing that to him, had him clenching his stomach to try to resist-what, orgasm? No, no, definitely not. But even so. "Your palm," he tried, instead, to explain, dragging a hand away from the covers to indicate between his legs. "H-here..."

It only took one gentle touch, feather-light, for Viktor to gasp again, back arching and legs closing in around Yuuri until he managed to breathe a few seconds later.

"Y-yes! Yuuri, once more, like that, oh..."

If this wasn't too much for Viktor, it was getting there for Yuuri and he wasn't sure how much more he could take! Watching him, hearing him, and how he clenched around him. "Utsukushii..."

The word was entirely lost on Viktor, who pressed his cheek against the mattress, and uselessly slapped at his hand. "N-now, the..." His brow furrowed, words failing him again. He could picture the box of condoms in his head, what they looked like, what they were used for, even the brand logo, but the name? Any of its translated titles? No. And 'lubrication' was right out.

Yuuri understood even so. He took care of the lubricant and the condoms both in spite of his nerves, tearing packages with his teeth. He readied Viktor first, then quickly abandoned his own boxer-briefs, situated a condom on himself, and- and realized he didn't know what to do after that. Viktor pushed onto his elbow, shifting onto his side, but then flopped onto his back again; did he want to turn over, or had he changed his mind?

"Viktor, are you comfortable like this?"

"I..." Viktor blew out a long puff of air, forcing a strained smile while he ran his hands down his own body from stomach to hips, then to thighs, hoping to distract them both. "I want to look at you. To watch your face. Is that okay?"

"Yeah." There was relief in his voice and on his face. He had wanted it this way, but hadn't wanted to ask. The faces Viktor had made, would be making, only for him? The small, selfish thought brought on a new kind of thrill. He just had to force himself not to think about what his own face looked like through all of this. "I want to watch you, too."

"Yuuri..."

It was the way Viktor asked for a kiss; Yuuri knew that now. He leaned over him, bodies pressed together, and kissed him. They worked out the logistics through feeling and a few spare words, as useful as they were.

Holding on or being held onto, legs here or there; they figured it out as they went. It didn't matter as long as they stayed close. Yuuri used one hand to guide himself, the other to grip the thigh of the leg that wrapped around him. He went slowly, just as he'd been instructed, it was excruciating. The wet heat closed around him, offering all the friction and pressure his body would ever need, already clouding his head in overwhelming pleasure. And he wasn't even all the way in yet.
Viktor trembled beneath him, holding his lower lip between his teeth and the sheets in his fists. He fought back a whine in his throat, unsure of where it had come from, or why, and forced himself to breathe again. Each time he did, getting his body to relax, Yuuri pushed deeper.

When there was resistance, Yuuri waited for Viktor to exhale again, pulling back just enough to give himself room to move. In a way, it was like a dance; shifting weight to accommodate his partner, then stepping forward to lead him on. And Viktor did love to dance. Yuuri stopped when he could go no further, hand that guided him now resting at Viktor's waist. As difficult as it had been to take his time, having that moment where they were connected, fully, while still having some of his mental capacity left, made it all worth it.

He finally allowed himself to look at Viktor's face, realizing then that his concentration had kept his gaze anywhere but. His thin brows were furrowed- in pain? in pleasure? -and his eyes, usually piercingly blue were dark like an ice cavern. Yuuri had never seen him like this before. He couldn't help it, reaching out to touch a glistening cheek. "You okay?"

Viktor turned into the hand, eyes closing, and nodded. His own hand left the sheets to seek Yuuri's, tracing over skin from wrist to shoulder, mirroring the touch to cup his cheek without looking. "Perfect," he said, accent thick, voice strained.

"I can move now. If you're ready?"

"Please."

Yuuri braced himself on the bed on either side of Viktor and gave a shallow thrust, then another. And another, stronger. The hold Viktor had on him was perfect, keeping him close even as he moved, legs clenching each time he gave. His body began to move instinctively as it did the night before, giving into a carnal appetite he didn't know he'd had.

Just as Viktor thought, Yuuri's instincts were just what were needed. Raw, imperfect, sincere power, each movement more eager than the last. And Viktor... he knew just how to move to meet him. His eyes watered and he tilted his head back, teeth clenching again to bite back a moan that escaped anyway, fingers digging into bed and skin, wherever he could reach. With his head leaned back that way, he could offer a little more leverage with his shoulders, pushing back with his hips to help Yuuri go deeper, though he wasn't sure how much more he could take, himself. It had been so long; he was already so worked up; and his back was already arching, body twisting for more friction, squeezing Yuuri tighter. He opened his mouth to pant, huffing- right, he always had been vocal -and gasped again, crying out the only word he could hold onto- "Yuuri!"

It wouldn't take long at this rate.

The way his name sounded in that voice, pitched and wanton, nearly drove Yuuri to madness. He wanted to steal it. Rolling hips forward, he leaned in and captured Viktor's lips to do just that, one hand on the bed, the other taking hold of Viktor's length to squeeze him.

All of which proved to be too much, pushing him just past the edge and right through to climax with a sudden jolt. Viktor just had time to gasp against Yuuri's open mouth before his body arched upward, every muscle clenching tight enough to blind him. Every inch of his lean muscled body stayed clamped for several long seconds through the release, intense enough that he almost missed Yuuri's cry against his neck.

Viktor came down, body dropping back to the mattress with limp legs and noodle arms, unable to tell if it was sweat or tears on his cheeks. Yuuri, now spent and resting half on top, half against his lover, caught his breath while tucked up to his shoulder. Neither of them had lasted long, but
neither of them cared all that much.

As sense and strength gradually returned, Viktor wound an arm around him to stroke fingers lazily up and down his back, and Yuuri traced the line of his sternum.

When their breathing had calmed enough to return the room to gentle silence, Viktor swept his hand down over Yuuri's hip, then let it rest there. "Yuuri?" he whispered.

"Hmm?"

"Are... are you okay?"

Yuuri tucked his chin, blurred vision settling on Viktor's hand over his naked hip. "Oh, from when I fell earlier? Yeah, I'll be fine."

"No. I mean…" the petting came to a stop. "Are we okay?"

The emphasis drew Yuuri's curious glance back to Viktor's face, but he was looking off elsewhere in the room- at the window, perhaps. "Okay with what?"

"With us, I guess."

A frown. "Why wouldn't we be?"

Viktor's fingers curled gently where a bruise was no doubt forming deep under the skin. "I upset you earlier."

"Viktor, we just-" Yuuri began, then shook his head. "Yeah. I've upset you, too."

"Oh."

"You said you were sorry."

"...yeah." Viktor smiled, but his thoughts were still a million miles away.

"So." Yuuri drummed his fingers over Viktor's chest, shaking off the uncertainty that was trying to creep in. "Should we get cleaned up? That's... what's next, right? Tie these off and shower?"

Viktor blinked once, then again. "Tie them up? Why would we..."

"That's... that's what they say in the books. At least, the ones with condoms do."

Another hard blink, then a frown. "These aren't gift bags, Yuuri. Just put them in tissue and throw them away. Just what kind of books are you reading?"

"Uh." Yuuri had wanted to distract him, but wasn't particularly keen on discussing his casual reading material, either. So he smiled, embarrassed, and dragged himself away from Viktor with a wince. "Nothing. Nevermind. I trust you, Coach. We'll do it your way."

Viktor stared after him, one part irritated, two parts confused. "Tying them off... waste of time... just throwing them away anyway," he muttered, and very slowly began his test to see just how sore he was after the whole affair. His legs were stiff, mostly, which he expected. The rest-

"Oh, and Viktor?" Yuuri reached back to help him off the bed. One hand and a strong arm was all it took and Viktor was back on his feet, forcing Yuuri on his tiptoes to kiss him, but he did so with a smile. "To answer your question, though... yeah, we're okay."
Whether from the previous exertions or incredibly romantic gesture, Viktor swayed, legs weak, and fell against him with arms wrapping around tight. "Yuuri!"

Although his arms were caught, Yuuri managed to give a half hug in return, holding back a laugh. "Come on, Viktor. My legs are killing me."

"Okay~"

Once they were thoroughly showered, had kissed a hundred more times, and dressed in the fluffy bathrobes and towels that were provided by the hotel, Viktor insisted on room service to keep his student properly taken care of. Coach's orders. Choices were limited, but they settled on a turkey wrap for Yuuri and a hamburger for Viktor.

"I just never thought of you eating a hamburger before," Yuuri said, unwrapping the provided utensils that came with his tray. "It seems so... I don't know. Pedestrian?"

"And I'm so fancy?" Viktor stuck out his tongue, but guessed Yuuri had a point. It wasn't like he'd done much to disprove anyone's theories about his tastes. Whatever they were. Even he didn't really know. "Yakov is the one who suggested ordering hamburgers at hotels, though. Anywhere in the world can do a hamburger, because Americans travel everywhere. Reasonably priced, better quality than local chains, and a decent enough vehicle for carbohydrates, proteins and..." He picked out the single slice of tomato from the bun. "Well, a little bit of plant matter, anyway."

"I guess that makes sense."

Viktor shrugged, and set to work cutting his meal apart. "They used angus beef for the patty, so that's nice, cooked medium well; you can tell by the little bit of pink center. Salt and pepper. Sharp cheddar on top. Arugula salad. Tomato. Red onion. Pickle. Brioche bun. Good components. They like to try to be gourmet to justify the cost and appeal to high-end clients, so it's decent." He cut a piece of beef to nibble on. "And then there are the french fries. Would you like one?"

Yuuri eyed it warily. "Is it approved by my coach?"

"It's not katsudon, but I think a few would be okay."

Yuuri turned back to his wrap, doubtful.

"I'll feed it to you myself if it helps."

"...okay, but just a couple."

It was a fair compromise, and Viktor plucked one from the plate to offer, right to Yuuri's mouth, which he took with a bashful little smile. "Have you ever had fry sauce?"

Yuuri covered his mouth with a hand to chew. "What?"

"Fry sauce. I learned about it at the Salt Lake Olympics. It's just ketchup and mayo mixed together and it's terrible for you, but it's good."

"I... no?"

"I'll show you." It didn't take long to mix the primary components from the tiny bottles on the edge of his plate, and soon, Viktor had a small pile of pink sauce to show for his efforts. "Et voila! Fry sauce. Go on, try it."
Yuuri did as requested, cautiously dipping the fry, tasting it, and tilted his head in thought. "This could be good with tonkatsu, too."

"Yeah, probably!"

"I had no idea you knew so much about cooking, Viktor."

"Oh." Viktor went back to dissecting the hamburger, cutting a bite-size piece of bun and a small portion of meat to join it on his fork. "I used to watch a lot of shows on the Food Network. I like Gordon Ramsay; he reminds me of Yakov. Yelling and scaring people, but he's really just... trying to get things done. Wants people to own up to their potential and mistakes. Truly cares. Very funny."

"I can see that." Yuuri smiled at him, so sweet and fond. Pleased, no doubt, that he was talking about Yakov and Saint Petersburg again.

A mistake.

Viktor frowned, and set his utensils down on the plate. "I know a lot about food, but I don't really know how to cook it. Or shop for it. And I was always too busy to go look for it... And, honestly, I perform best on an empty stomach anyway, so now is the first time I've really had a chance to enjoy it. Thanks to you."

"I don't know if I really did anything, but..." Yuuri rubbed the cloth napkin between his fingers, then reached the short distance between them to rest his palm on Viktor's hip where the bathrobe had bunched up. "I'm glad you're eating the food instead of just watching it, now."

"...me, too," he said, and only let the silence hang a moment before continuing. "Now, help me eat more of this. There's no way I can finish it myself."

"Hey Viktor?"

"Mmn...?"

It was late. The trays of mostly finished food had been left outside their door some hours ago, Do Not Disturb sign placed back in its rightful place, and bathrobes abandoned on the floor with the rest of their clothes. The television was on, quietly playing out a Chinese drama, though neither of them had been paying attention for quite some time. Yuuri, pressed against Viktor's side, set his phone on top of the covers and turned to the dozing Russian. He'd sworn he was still watching several times, but every time Yuuri looked, he'd been asleep. No surprise there. Even now, talking to him, Viktor didn't open his eyes.

"Viktor?" Yuuri tried again.

"Wha? Is it Josh? Or Jerry?"

"No, it's not the Soap. I was wondering... What was it that you called me? In the garage... when I was crying?"

It took a couple of seconds for Viktor to even react, but then he blinked, turning his head to give him a blank, sleepy stare. "What are you talking about?"

"Py-pyo...?"
Viktor sat up straighter, suddenly much more awake. "O-oh. Pyatachok."

"Yeah! Russian for...?"

"Well..." Viktor cleared his throat and turned his gaze to the ceiling, pink dusting his cheeks. "It's... a character. The little friend of Vinni-pukh. You know of Vinni-pukh?" His accent was thicker when he was tired, and even more so when he spoke of things from home. "He has a different name outside of Russia. Vinni-pukh the bear and Pyatachok the-" he coughed "-little piggie."

"Oh. Pooh Bear and Piglet?"

"Uhm. Yes. I think so. Let me show you." Viktor retrieved his phone from the other side of the bed and, after a quick google search, pulled up an image to show. "Ah, yes. See? Pyatachok, best friend of Vinni-pukh. Always does his best, even though he is an anxious little piglet. Very cute, too."

Yuuri showed Viktor the other version, round and soft and not so Soviet-era. "Yeah, he's like that in the Disney version, too."

"Good. You see? It's a perfect name for my Yuuri."

"Like... a nickname?"

"If that is okay," said Viktor, setting his phone aside. "Just for special occasions."

Just because he'd always wanted to give Yuuri a pet name- or a hundred -didn't mean that it was necessarily acceptable. Even Yuuri's friends in Japan just called him Yuuri-kun, and where was the fun in that? He had his own Russian diminutive set aside for him, but that... would come later. For now, he just hoped that Yuuri wasn't too offended by a cute piggie nickname.

He wasn't.

"Y-yeah! I'll have to come up with a name for you, too!"

Viktor gave him a smile, sweet and close-mouthed, which was all he could do to resist tackling him in an outburst of joy. A nickname from Yuuri? A dream come true! "I'd like that, Yuuri," he said, and stifled a yawn behind his hand. "Please do... when you think of one. A good one..."

"Yeah... A really good one."

"Mm-hmm." Viktor kissed the side of Yuuri's head and settled back down again, warm and giddy, but still so very sleepy. Maybe he was still dreaming.

Everything was still so perfect...

Late morning sunshine filtered through the curtains of the hotel room, throwing bars of pale gold across the bed in the calm quiet. Even the traffic that hummed outside from the seventh story sounded calming. The Gala was that afternoon, but the pressure of competition was off.

For the second time in a row, Yuuri was the first one awake. After the last twenty four hours, he'd thought he'd sleep longer. He must have passed out at some point after they talked about nicknames. He wasn’t surprised at that, emotional roller coaster as it had been since Viktor showed up with flowers.

What was a little surprising was being sore in places he wasn’t used to.
He really had sex with Viktor. Used his approximate knowledge with Viktor’s guidance and made love to him. Yuuri spent most of the day stressed he wouldn’t be able to satisfy him and in the end he had and it was intense and humbling.

Would Viktor be sore when he woke up? Or was he used to it, even though he did mention it had been a while.

Viktor’s back was to him, silver hair aglow in the light, white sheets draped partially over his naked body. His pale skin… neck, defined shoulder blades, and back.

He couldn’t resist.

Yuuri bit his lip and reached out with a finger, tracing the long line of his spine until he reached the edge of the blankets. He hesitated again, glancing back at the head of silver on the pillow, then the rise and fall of his ribs, each breath deep and even. Yuuri slid his hand further, peeling the blanket away little by little down the curve of his back, to his waist, over his hips, the rise of his ass. Viktor stirred with a deep breath and Yuuri stilled until he settled.

Yuuri slid his fingers over the dip in his spine. That curve... His hands came to rest on his waist, thumbs rubbing up and down. The small of his back...

 Unable to stop himself, he pressed a smile between Viktor's shoulder blades, followed by a series of tiny kisses. He couldn’t see his backside from last night, and was reaping the discovery by physical examination and confirmation from the past.

“You checking out Viktor’s butt?” Phichit asked as Yuuri hung up a new poster from the latest photoshoot.

“No?”

“Well, you can only see part of his face there. What else are you looking at?”

One of the most beautiful things Yuuri found in The Viktor Nikiforov was his form, and form came in a body’s natural structure. The way Viktor’s back arched just so, tensed here and there, there was something alluring about the prominent dip of his back before it rounded back out to his ass. This poster highlighted that. It was an odd attribute to be fascinated by. He’d let Phichit think his butt was what he was looking at as that was something people normally found appealing. Not that his wasn’t, it just wasn’t the same.

He felt silly, but there was some kind of uninhibited joy from knowing that that spot was his. Only he would see it and appreciate it like this. His, his, his...

A hand moved under the blankets, quiet and subtle, back to rub from Yuuri's hip to his thigh.

Yuuri went still, eyes closing to assess the touch of that hand, fingers strong, but so affectionate. "Good morning."

"Good morning," Viktor answered, voice sleepy but warm, pulling away from him-- but only to to roll over, coming right back and face him. It wasn't like him to sleep in so late, but it had done him a world of good. His smile, sweet and adoring, was nothing but sincere, eyes bright. He brought his hand up from Yuuri's hip to his face, stroking his cheek, up to his hair, tucking messy strands behind his ear.

Yuuri closed the small distance between them, sliding his arms around him to put his hands right back to his spot on Viktor's lower back. "Did I wake you?"
"No." Viktor pressed closer, body against body, nothing between them, and drew his finger down to his neck, then his shoulder. He tilted his head back on the pillow, admiring him. "How long have you been awake?"

"Mmm... I wasn't keeping track..." He really wasn’t and was enjoying every minute of it.

Viktor slipped his fingers up and into Yuuri’s hair, leaning in to kiss him, soft, gentle, and slow. Yuuri hummed his approval and returned in kind. Morning breath wasn’t so bad after all. Then Viktor parted to nuzzle his face, cheek to cheek, pressing kisses to the rest of his face. It was very hard to kiss his mouth like that, so then it became of game of chasing kisses.

His love laughed, soft and teasing as Yuuri tried to keep up, going after his mouth, and he kissed him again and again, only to dart and kiss his cheek instead, while his hands ran through his hair, slicking it back, messing it up, kissing his forehead-- then abandoning his hair all together to rub all the way down his back while capturing his mouth in a sudden, deep, passionate kiss.

Flushing and panting, Yuuri took him by the shoulders and shoved him onto his back, blinking in equal parts frustration and confusion, blankets draping off his body.

Viktor blinked up at him once, twice, then his mouth split into a wide smile. "Yuuri~!" he gasped. He wasn’t sure what had happened, so a response to all of that wasn’t available. Yuuri was so overcome with love and joy, it all happened on its own and wow Viktor was so beautiful from this view when not fueled by desperation.

"I love you," Viktor said, voice thick with temptation. He reached for Yuuri, arms wrapped tightly around, and rolled them both to pin him down to the bed, pulling himself on top. And there, he pushed up just enough to give Yuuri a good look at his face, casting a most devious and predatory smirk down at him. Dark gaze, eyes half-lidded, flash of teeth, and then a slow, sensuous lick of his upper lip. "Mmmm~ my Katsudon," Viktor crooned, then leaned down to kiss him.

Yuuri had barely begun to process the Points of Seduction before Viktor’s lips were on his. Which was fine, because he needed his brain to reciprocate. After a good night’s rest, stress ebbed, the force behind the kiss and his own mind were much more aware to the sensations that overcame him. Viktor was on top of him now... Would the teacher be taking his turn?

Viktor worked his lips over Yuuri’s, caress after caress with growing friction as he worked the moisture out between them. He ended the attention there with a playful tug of Yuuri’s lower lip, then retreated to his jaw, scooting down his body with ever-growing excitement. Kisses to his chin, then his neck, working down to his throat and collarbone, fingers winding their way down to his chest all the while.

Each touch was like a brand to his skin, his heart beating faster and faster. He wriggled and panted, resisting the urge to touch him, fearing it would detour Viktor. Whilst laying submissive, Yuuri remembered how his mind wandered to a scenario such as this, and suddenly it became that much more intense.

Expertly, Viktor worked his way down Yuuri’s chest, pausing briefly over to draw his tongue over a nipple while his opposite palm cupped and fondled the muscle of the other. Tongue became teeth, pulling on the hardening buds. The sharp pinch elicited a gasp from Yuuri, and he reflexively grabbed for Viktor’s hair.

Viktor’s mouth and hands stilled, then slowly he pulled back, blowing a hot breath over moistened skin, then retreated further, kissing his sternum, ribs, down to his navel, hair slipping out of
Yuuri’s fingers.

He didn't have the capacity to chase after. Instead, Yuuri let his hands slide back down to the sheets and attempted to watch Viktor do as he pleased. The haze made it hard, though. He wanted to watch him so badly... So gorgeous...

Viktor’s hands went for Yuuri’s hips, dragging down to his thighs as he took the blanket with him, scooting back on the bed with each subsequent kiss.

Growing up in an onsen, seeing a naked body - being naked - was nothing, but in this situation… it was hard to fight the reflex to cover himself. He managed to convince himself it was stupid before Viktor could address it by word or hand.

Getting to his knees, Viktor spread Yuuri’s legs and wriggled between them, one arm wrapping underneath and around his left thigh, the other reaching over to his right hip. He pressed a cheek against his inner thigh. "Yuuri," he called to him, gaze dark and wanting.

Carefully Yuuri pushed up on his elbows to see. Without his glasses, Viktor was a tad out of focus, but it was enough to see the heated gaze. He swallowed, unsure how to answer or if he needed to. He had a pretty good idea of what he was planning.

Viktor turned his head to kiss Yuuri's thigh, and flashed him another gaze now that he was watching. Then at once, Viktor pulled himself closer, fingers sliding up his body, arching his back and drawing his tongue all the way from the base of Yuuri's length that was resting on his stomach to the tip.

The hot and wet sensation caused a full body shiver, heels digging into the mattress. "Viktor!" he hissed. His tongue wrapped around him as if testing his size, then massaged his sensitive skin in place between his lips. Gentle nibbles, lipping, licking, suckling the head.

Firmly Yuuri kept his heels planted, thighs tightening, trying his best to fight the impulse to lock around Viktor's head and shoulders. What was harder to control was the ache for friction, suction, and heat or how chopped and high his voice was getting with each call and moan. Wonderful, torturous bliss.

The hand that roved made its way down Yuuri's body to grasp him at his base to feed him into his mouth. Inch by inch, working his tongue over the underside, lips closing firmer intermittently until he was completely inside his mouth.

Yuuri pressed his head into his pillow, panting and steadying himself from thrusting into Viktor’s mouth… so hot and inviting. “Viktor… that feels good…”

Maybe ‘good’ wasn’t what Viktor wanted to hear, because next he brought a hand to Yuuri’s sac, giving him a squeeze.

“Vik-hah--!”

It encouraged him further; hand rolling and fondling him, while his tongue pressed and ran along his vein.

Yuuri tensed at the new technique, a cry and a whimper. It all felt amazing. Every tingle and every breath that came and went. The furnace in his middle churned and churned. Was he close? There was an urgency, but could he hold out longer to keep feeling this or would he unexpectedly come like his uncoordinated lap dance?
Soon Viktor was increasing his speed, head bobbing, and hand retreating from his sac for his base to pump. Was Viktor able to tell he was about to--

Oh, there it was.

His breath caught in his throat with a shudder and he felt himself collapse even though he was already laying down. World still coming back into focus, Viktor was still between his legs with his member. Gently he pulled along the length and out with a pop and proceeded to lick around the crown.

Yuuri groaned, body too tired and too flush to show more mortification than he already had. Did he taste sweet or salty? Wasn’t that something you warned someone you were going to do? “You didn’t have to… do that.”

Viktor finished cleaning, then nuzzled Yuuri’s inner thigh with a hum. “It’s all right. I didn’t want you to have to worry.”

“Too late for that…”

He laughed and pressed a kiss to the hot flesh. “It’s fine, it’s fine. There’s less than you might think.” Another kiss and a pause. “Yuuri?”

Seeing him down there, looking up at him like that, was something he never wanted to get used to. “Yeah?”

“Were you wanting me to take you just now?”

“H-huh? Well, the thought crossed my mind, but… I really enjoyed what just happened.”

Slow press of lips to his thigh again. Thoughtful? Considering if he was being truthful? “You’re performing in a few hours. It wouldn’t be wise to strain you right before. I would like to, though, my Yuuri. Later.”

Later like, after the gala? Tonight? Tomorrow? Next week? It didn’t matter, just the promise was enough for heat to rise to Yuuri’s face and, embarrassingly enough - again - his lower regions.

Viktor took notice, “Wow, Yuuri!”

Unless, it was possible, he died before then. Stupid, unreasonable thing.

Sparing whatever was left of Yuuri’s dignity, Viktor offered his hand. “Let’s get going for the day.”

It wasn’t as grandiose as the day Viktor arrived in Japan, but Yuuri couldn’t help but draw a parallel - the start of a new chapter of his life with the man he admired most.

Since the first time Viktor volunteered to do Yuuri’s hair and makeup, it had become an increasingly intimate ritual. Yesterday it had been done at the venue, too many eyes for the slow and affectionate touches Viktor was now giving in the room.

He knelt behind him on the bed with brush in one hand and gel in the other, carefully coiffing his hair into place and taking every opportunity to let his thumbs graze the tips of his ears or cheeks in the process. Tender contact. And Yuuri watched him through the vanity mirror on the wall parallel
Today would be the first time Yuuri would perform *Stammi Vicino* in front of a live audience. He felt confident he’d nail the quad and all the step sequences, but would the viewers be able to feel an ounce of the emotion he’d undoubtedly put in it?

"Viktor? This program... you've said it's your heart song."

Attention caught, Viktor tilted his head, “Mm? Yes, at least, that's what I think of it as. It's been called *dramatic*, but...”

“Well, you are a little dramatic.”

“I guess.”

“It makes sense why you'd give it to me now, but was it always your intention to skate or give this program to someone?”

He hesitated, looking down in thought. “I'm not sure... I don't think I could have ever imagined that my-” Yuuri watched his lips purse for a moment, then frown.

“I'm sorry! We don't have to talk about it. I know it's personal.”

“No, it's fine.” Viktor set the brush down and dragged his makeup satchel over. “My mama believed in soulmates. She and my papa were destined for each other, she said. They were so in love, you know? So, *so* in love…”

Viktor was talking about his parents and not running away. Progress. Yuuri stopped the questions from spewing out of his mouth, lest he ruin the moment.

“I don't remember very much about them, really, except that they were in love and that they were happy,” Viktor continued, wistful. “And that she always told me to find *my* soulmate, no matter what it took, so I could be happy, too…”

Were they soulmates? Yuuri liked to think so. After all, despite losing at the GPF and quitting, fate had a way of bringing them together.

With a tap of his shoulder, Yuuri turned around to face Viktor, face moisturizer at the ready on fingertips.

“She was my age when she died, which you know, and I thought...I didn't know how much longer I had left to search, so…”

“You thought her dying so soon meant you would, too?”

“I don't know about *dying*, but I can't keep skating forever, can I? I thought maybe I could, but I guess that's impossible. And I had no idea what I'd do with myself after... Saint Petersburg isn't exactly the broadest dating pool for someone who only knows how to do one thing.”

“I don't know about *one* thing, but Russia doesn’t seem very... accepting.”

“That depends on who you talk to, but I'm not very good at branching out, either.”

“So it had to be another skater.” Thinking of the ISU as a dating site was amusing in and of itself.

“...I don't even talk to most skaters.” He sighed. “Chris was right... I *am* a hermit…”
Yuuri snorted at that, picturing Viktor in his home all cooped up with books and notes for programs. “I’m not much better, to be honest.”

Viktor let the brush he'd picked up, fall and took Yuuri’s hand instead. “It was meant to be!”

“Skating to find someone. Not good at anything else...yeah!” In any other context, the traits would have been seen as self-deprecating, but sharing them with Viktor…

His love laughed “Dog lovers, foodies, extremely attractive and talented... A perfect pair!”

They really were soulmates.

“But that’s more than skating!”

“Shhh don't ruin it. I love you, Yuuri!”

“Sorry, sorry.”

“You are too cute. I should finish with this makeup before I end up kissing it all off of you.”

“After?”

“Definitely.”

Viktor couldn't kiss Yuuri with the whole world watching- at least, he was pretty sure that he wouldn't be able to get away with it a second time -so instead sent him off to skate with a gentle squeeze of his hand. Yuuri looked back at him, face soft, relaxed, and smiled.

He'd never seen him look so happy to go out before an audience, but love really did have a way of making people stronger. The crowd, already warmed up from the debonair gentleman's performance of *I'm Your Man* by Christophe, screamed their approval at Yuuri's continued homage to his idol as soon as he came under the spotlights.

"Next is Japan's Yuuri Katsuki, silver medalist, whose exhibition is one of the winning free programs of his coach, Viktor Nikiforov." There was even more fanfare, but hushed quickly once the music began. "The music is *Stammi Vicino, Non te ne Andare*, commissioned by Nikiforov for this program."

The program was meant to cater to Viktor's tastes and capabilities, but Yuuri had repeatedly proven in practice that he could handle it. At least exhibitions weren't scored in any way, so even if the pressure of so many watching got to him, there wouldn't be penalties. But he didn't need to worry; Yuuri moved like the music flowed through him, pulling it from the air through his fingertips, and using it to propel him on the ice. He took the quadruple lutz as if it were nothing, drawing applause from the crowd, then set up for the quad flip without even a hint of hesitation.

Viktor grasped the edge of the barrier, breath held until the jump was complete and the roar of the crowd overtook the aria. Unlike the previous evening, Yuuri landed Viktor's signature move perfectly, just as he had in the viral video months earlier. He'd never seen Yuuri so in tune with a program before… and the significance of that pulled at his heart.

It was easy, far too easy, to imagine a future with him. Coaching Yuuri Katsuki for years to come, taking him onward from one program to the next, unlocking each secret level of his potential. Could he really have it? His soulmate, a career, a life, all wrapped up in one perfect, beautiful person? *Stay Close to Me* had been his plea to find his someone, and that someone was skating for
him now...

He held back the tears, forcing slow, even breaths as he watched the story unfold before him. The snowstorm became gentle drifts; the forest led to a gentle meadow, and the deer was no longer alone. They lovers kissed at the edge of the woods, snowflakes dusting rosy cheeks and hairlines, soft laughter muffled by their private winter canopy.

"My fairy godmother works hard," Yuuri had said while Viktor was dressing him earlier, taking great care to ensure that every fold of fabric was placed where it needed to go.

"He certainly tries."

"So if your costume for Stay Close to Me is pink, and mine is blue... is this from Sleeping Beauty?"

_It was cute. The reference hadn't been lost on Viktor, but he'd skirted the question with a little smile and a shrug. "I think you look very handsome in blue. Very regal. Blue like the sea and the sky, strong and infinite. The source and reflection of life. Don't you think?"

He'd blushed. "...I do wear a lot of blue."

_It was perfect.

"Besides, it complements your skin tone."

"Oh. So that's why you chose it for me."

_The way he said it made him sound almost disappointed. That Yuuri...

"But you do like it, don't you?"

"O-of course. I love it! More than I can say..."

"Then that's all that matters," he'd said, then paused. "...my charming prince."

_Yuuri, too shy to say anything, instead took Viktor's hand in his and bent to kiss his knuckles._

Though it was clear to him that Yuuri had no idea of the significance of the action, it answered several questions for him. Viktor brought the back of his hand to his own lips, grasping at the memory while his lover performed his heart song for the world.

He was ready when Yuuri came to him after the bridge, hands outstretched, reaching, and Viktor reached back for him. Their fingers briefly entwined, grasp loose, then slipped away for Yuuri to finish the program, leaving Viktor weak-kneed and slack as he settled back on his heels and leaned against the barrier.

_It was dangerous, laying his heart and soul so bare and open for everyone to see. Although the rink was dark, anyone watching would know, would feel the love between them. How could anyone not?_

Honestly, he wanted them to know.

But they couldn't, and he knew that.

He closed his eyes and let the cries of the audience wash over him. They loved Yuuri. They loved the program. They'd loved Viktor, too. Surely, they could find room in their hearts for them both.
When Yuuri came off of the ice, Viktor wasn't the only one waiting for him.

"I guess you won't be watching my exhibition, huh? It'll be online later, though. Tell me what you think, okay?"

"Uh, yeah. Sorry, Phichit."

Phichit patted his shoulder, smile and eyes bright and warm. "Thanks for warming them up for me."

"Yeah... go, uh, be the King."

To that, Phichit laughed while Celestino rolled his eyes and pushed him out to the ice. "Go, go..."

With the best friend gone, Viktor helped Yuuri with his jacket and skate guards, ignoring all of the eyes on them. Yuuri's former coach, his own former coach, the other skaters... and, as soon as Yuuri was ready, they slipped out through the dark tunnel without a word to anyone.

In the locker room, they fell into a silent and efficient hustle. Viktor unlaced Yuuri's boots, taking care to check his feet once they were removed, then set to work packing their equipment while Yuuri changed into street clothes. In a normal exhibition gala, it was customary to wait out the rest of the performances, relaxing with the audience and seeing just what the other divisions were up to. Afterward, there were always opportunities for autographs, press, and photo shoots. But none of that held any interest for either of them; not after Yuuri's performance.

The walk back to the hotel was all of five minutes; just out the side door, around the venue, across the street. They could see the hotel the moment they stepped out into the afternoon sunlight. Yuuri shouldered his track bag, Viktor held onto the garment bag, just as they'd arranged it before, and walked in silence together. With everyone still occupied by the performances inside, they weren't deterred or detained by anyone.

Brushing fingers with each step kept their pace quick. Crossing the lobby with the appearance of nonchalance kept them eager. Standing close in the elevator kept them hungry.

By the time they made it into the room, garment bag hung on the back of the door, duffel on the floor in the closet, lock clicked into place, they'd had enough resisting and waiting and playing along.

It wasn't anything that they'd needed to discuss.

There had been no words between them since the aria had begun.

And there didn't need to be.

Yuuri was a prince. There was no mistaking it, even without the ensemble, and Viktor had meant every word that he'd said. Strong and infinite like the sea and the sky, Yuuri was his everything, what he'd been searching for. And Viktor, retired or not, was still a princess, even if Yuuri didn't know it. That really just made things easier. For him, a princess didn't wait or falter. A princess took responsibility and did what needed to be done.

Viktor took Yuuri by the hand and pulled him close, watching him step tip-toe in sneakers. With one movement, he'd taken the lead, and Yuuri had understood. He used his other hand to touch his face and kissed him, once softly for a taste, then another to savor him; deep and passionate. Yuuri bent to him, hips pressed close, arching back to pull away, as if to ask Viktor to chase him. He did,
one kiss after another, down his neck, to his collar, one arm looping around his shoulder blades to support him. A dancer. His lover was a dancer.

He took the zipper of Yuuri's jacket in his teeth and pulled it down as far as he could reach, then finished the job with his free hand, moving back up for another taste of skin where his t-shirt didn't cover. Nosing the material away, Viktor pressed his tongue to wherever he could reach while his hand slipped into the back of Yuuri's jeans, groping, kneading. Each gasping breath and moan that Yuuri offered was music that Viktor craved, that he needed to hear, and he pawed under his clothing to find more of it. Greedy hands, greedy mouth, fighting a growing frustration that he couldn't quite place in memory. The desire was so new and so aggressively present, Viktor could think of nothing else.

Only thoughts of Yuuri, Yuuri, Yuuri...

"Viktor...?"

The breathless question brought his eyes, icy and bright, back to Yuuri's face. He brought his hand out and to Yuuri's hip, struggling to come up with the words- any words -but they wouldn't come. Viktor opened his mouth, voice thick in his throat, accent deep and heavy. "Yuuri... I... want to..."

It stopped there, English failing him once again.

After a slow breath out, Viktor touched his cheek to Yuuri's, closing his eyes against the heated skin.

Yuuri shuddered, fingers curling at the small of Viktor's back- the spot he'd been preoccupied with earlier.

The sound of Yuuri's breathing and the thudding of his heart was killing him, burning every sense of self away into a desperation that he only had a tenuous hold of.

"Vik-"

It came to him in a rush, and Viktor uttered the words against Yuuri's ear, heated and quick. "Ya khochu byt sverkhu."

Russian. Yuuri wouldn't understand, would he? Viktor pulled back only enough to catch his eyes, wide as he tried to puzzle it out. He had ideas. He even looked... vaguely hopeful.

Viktor managed a terse nod. "I... I show you."

A flicker of excitement passed over Yuuri's face before turning soft, melting in his arms.

He'd made Yuuri weak.

Viktor kissed him again, and while Yuuri was sufficiently distracted and pliant, scooped him up into his arms to carry him to the bed. It wasn't far, just the few feet from the doorway and past the dresser, but enough to bolster his confidence, especially with the way that Yuuri reacted. His arms around his neck, torn between the heat of the moment and concern, no doubt, of being too heavy. Which he wasn't. Ever anxious, his Yuuri, and he loved him so.

They made it to the bed and Viktor undressed them both. There was so much of Yuuri that he still wanted to discover and appreciate, so with each piece of clothing he removed, he took the time to look and feel and taste. It made Yuuri impatient, but so beautiful in his frustration. Viktor could only imagine the things he would say if he were able, but every time it built up too much, he'd kiss
him again, and move on to the next stage.

It wasn't until Viktor was kneeling between his legs, supplies at the ready, that he actually stalled again. Kissing he could do. Touching and grinding were no problem. But this...

He'd walked Yuuri through it. He couldn't lose confidence. Not now. If he got nervous, Yuuri would get nervous, and then they'd both be in trouble.

Viktor fought through the haze, struggling to concentrate, fumbling with the bottle as he poured the lubricant into his palm. What had he said to do? More is better. Warm it up. Be slow and gentle. Careful. His nails were short and filed. He knew what not to do. He hoped it would translate and that he could-

"Liberal." Yuuri grinned at him, flushed and hazy from the pillow. "Nice."

It took a moment for the words to parse and Viktor blinked at him, then laughed, helpless and relieved. He offered a smile back, biting down on his lower lip, and went back to it. Light touches and testing first, using his clean hand to help adjust Yuuri's position, and then the actual preparation.

Was there a thing as too much lube? Maybe he was being too careful. Too slow. Too gentle. How could he tell without feeling it himself? He watched his hand, trying to guess the effect, then caught Yuuri's expression in a sideways glance. He was still getting used to it, if Viktor had to guess, but he was taking it well. Yuuri wasn't weak. He'd never been weak.

"I'm okay," Yuuri said, smiling again. "Keep going."

"You're... so beautiful, Yuuri." Finding those words had been a challenge, but needed.

For a night of firsts, Yuuri was being remarkably brave. Viktor bent to kiss his thigh, which earned him a little gasp and shudder, followed by a soft moan. Every sound made Viktor braver, and the more he did to prepare him, the more sounds he made.

Watching Yuuri and all of the ways he moved, the things his body did, slowly burned away at the remaining nerves. Viktor wanted more of those sounds again. More of those faces that he'd make, eyes nearly closing, mouth partway open, just a little dazed, then coming back to clarity. It was so different. Intoxicating. Viktor's free hand wandered over the rest of his body, seeking ways to make him keen, and when his fingertips brushed between his legs, Yuuri reached for him with an impatient hum.

"Viktor-!"

Viktor went to him, providing distraction from his fingers with deep, thorough kisses. Each was returned in kind, arms around his neck, mouth chasing after that tongue, hips rocking into his hand.

It was in that moment, with nothing but their sweat-dampened bodies pressed together, chests heaving, trying for air between each kiss, that he felt it. Stammi Vicino. Stay Close to Me; he'd written a version of the words himself, but he'd never felt the concept he'd been trying to grasp. There had always been a distance between him and every other living thing in the world; a barrier that he didn't know how to take down. It had never fallen for his former lover which, in the end, had protected him. But he wanted it to be different with Yuuri.

Viktor didn't have the words he needed for what he was doing, or even how he was feeling; it was all abstract emotion. He could have skated a program about it and done so beautifully. A gold
medal performance. His love for Yuuri, the expression of it, how he wanted to give himself in
every way possible, something he'd never had before with anyone.

But perhaps, in a way, he already had skated it.

*Your hands, your legs*

*My hands, my legs*

*And our heartbeats*

*Are blending together*

"We try now, da?"

"H-hai."

Tearing himself away was difficult, even more than trying to get the little packets open with slick
hands. Maybe condoms should have come first. Viktor eventually managed, though it was less
than elegant, and got himself ready before Yuuri. It had always been him first, but was there
protocol for that? Maybe Yuuri's books knew. Not that he could ever ask about that kind of thing.

Now, the positioning...

It was so selfish to take Yuuri on his back. He knew it would be harder on him- harder on them
both -even though Yuuri was definitely flexible enough. But just as the night before, he wanted to
see his face. It was the only way he could know if he was hurting him or not, and Viktor would
never be able to forgive himself if he did.

Later. They would have other times if they could get through this. Viktor wasn't even sure if he
would be enough for Yuuri. For all he knew, he'd be terrible. There'd been so many stories and
rumors about what kind of lover Viktor Nikiforov was, he had no way of knowing what sort of
perception Yuuri had built up in his mind.

Viktor wanted to give him his wildest fantasies, but all he had was himself.

Of course, Yuuri had said that's... really what he wanted, wasn't it?

So he approached it like he did any other challenge, taking the information that he had, having the
data he'd gathered, and proceeded directly. But slowly, gently, with the utmost of care. And the
sensation, pushing into him, was so intense that he was immediately overwhelmed.

"I'm okay... keep going."

That's what Yuuri said, but what about Viktor?

His body wanted it. Yuuri wanted it. Everything about what was happening screamed for him to
move, but he couldn't remember what he needed to do. Viktor Nikiforov didn't cave under pressure.
He didn't stall. He was a champion. He was-

He was-

Yuuri patted the hand braced on the bed, and Viktor turned his hazy vision down to stare at it. Was
he asking him to stop? No, he was... asking to hold hands. Viktor shifted weight to his other arm
and lifted his hand to give it to Yuuri, who immediately laced their fingers and brought it back to
the bed.
Stay close to me, Viktor!

That's all he needed to do.

He gave in, caving to the instincts and the eros that he didn't even know he had. It had always been a facade, but with Yuuri's legs wrapped around him, and his heart so full, he couldn't ignore it any longer. Every thrust stoked the coals until the the spark was a fire, blazing and driving him, and even though he was terrified, he let it consume him and Yuuri both, giving way to all of the passions that had long since been buried.

Fingernails found his back and spurred him on. The urgency wasn't the same as the night before; it was desperate and clawing, with Viktor chasing after as hard and as fast as he could. He couldn't breathe, couldn't even begin to comprehend, just had to move.

When he came, it was far more forceful and sudden than he could have anticipated, hoarse cry cut off with a gasp and a shudder. The white-hot jolt that had swept through him moved on after several seconds, and left him collapsed and limp with ragged, pitiful breaths. The come down was sobering. It gave him a headache, and he'd never felt more exhausted in all his life.

Yuuri stroked his hair with one hand and his back with the other. "Viktoru... Amazing..."

Those hands were trembling, fingers trying not to show impatience on his skin. Viktor pressed one kiss to Yuuri's neck, then buried his face there. He had to finish. He wouldn't leave him hanging.

He made Yuuri moan again with just one stroke of his hand. It was good, but not good enough. Yuuri hissed as Viktor rolled the condom off of him, exposing heated flesh to the cool air. Better. Skin on skin was always better.

With nothing in the way, Viktor set to work, wrapping fingers around his length, squeezing him, and pumping from base to tip until he'd made an absolute mess of him. He loved every whimper, every tremble, every breath of Yuuri, even though his head was so foggy it was hard to keep track of it all.

But once Yuuri was satisfied, and the warm wet between them, Viktor touched his nose to the underside of Yuuri's chin. He was too tired to kiss him, but he hoped that would do. There was a word Yuuri might have used... spent, he thought it was. And now, more than ever, he needed a bunny nap to recover from it. With Yuuri.

Had he been enough? Too much? Just right?

He didn't know.

Stay close to me, Yuuri... and never leave.

Please.

For the fourth time in the last thirty-six hours, Yuuri laid in bed next to Viktor after being spent. Only this time, it was the middle of the day. Night and morning made sense, but the afternoon? Yuuri smiled at the missed opportunities of his books. It wasn’t practical in a day to day sense, but after an emotional performance and no engagements until later in the evening… the romp and nap was nice.
Yuuri had been able to bring pleasure to Viktor Nikiforov, World Champion Figure skater and glamorized playboy in giving and receiving. ‘Playboy’ was something he couldn't ever quite swallow and now being in bed with him, he saw why. A playboy would leave immediately after, body trained so they'd have their wits about them, emotionally removed. But Viktor was here, clinging to him and the sheets around him as if he were the playboy to leave any moment.

_I'm not going anywhere_, he thought to him, too tired to speak, but felt it all the same, stroking the back of his neck up his hairline with a nail.

Viktor wanted him more than anyone else. Said that Yuuri was the only one that could satisfy him. Both times Yuuri had been able to bring him to release, so it had to be true to some degree? Emotionally and physically.

He’d lost his virginity to the man he’d idolized and crushed on for half his life. It was the dream of anyone. But could anyone imagine their crush giving them the choice of how to proceed with their first time and have him agree and go at his pace? Even a pace that became unpredictable?

There was more to Viktor than what the public saw, a fact Yuuri knew before he knew him. Nobody has expected Viktor to openly kiss anyone on camera. Not even Yuuri did.

Yuuri didn’t think he had a problem with PDA per se, but being both men would definitely draw attention. Especially from Russia. It had been a risk and Yuuri was willing to trust Viktor could keep things smoothed over with the media. They’d been a couple for just over a day, they hadn’t talked about how they’d be in the open.

The public also saw his gala performance and would soon be available online. Yuuri had landed every single jump, every sequence and cue… he’d wanted their love to be obvious to anybody that watched. Not as overt as a kiss, just something sentimentally beautiful and visual as proof of their bond.

What he wanted most of all was for Viktor to feel it. They hadn’t planned to reach for one another, but he was elated that their hearts had resonated so wholly that Viktor returned the gesture that time. So entranced...

And then they’d abandoned the banquet in favor of quenching the desire they felt.

Viktor had been so uncertain off and on while he was making love to him. Pausing, lost in thought. He’d worked with him through it, but Yuuri didn’t have an answer as to why he froze up. Did he not have good experiences with topping and primarily received? Did that mean his past lovers were male in that case?

The details didn’t matter, Yuuri supposed, only that Viktor had some blocks and, despite that, still pushed through, figuratively and literally. Yuuri was grateful his anxiety had left overnight in order to help for both their benefits.

Like the blow job from that morning, he was able to fully enjoy what his senses were telling him, falling into the sway of what Viktor was giving.

Once Viktor woke up, the pair had a shower together to wash the sex and leftover makeup off and slowly readied themselves to make their way to the ballroom of the hotel where the banquet was held.

Their skating friends had managed to stop them after the Free Skate event to make comments on
their public kiss, but now the other skaters, singles and pairs, dancers, and sponsors offered congratulations or significant glances at the pair of them. Viktor had played it off as one with the moment and varying Russian proverbs Yuuri couldn’t confirm were actually true, but that didn’t stop the press or those they knew by name only from looking their way. The gala performance had been particularly telling. Viktor told him to not worry about them, wolves or not, just let him do the talking for now, but go ahead and sign autographs. No problem there, Yuuri tended to get tongue-tied, anyway. Signing things would always be weird, though.

“Where are you going, Yuuri?”

He stopped and retracted his next step. “To get some champagne,” he said, indicating with a nod of his head towards the table where many flutes were set.

Viktor raised a thin brow. “Do you think that’s a good idea?”

“I’m just having one.”

“If you’re sure... just make sure that it’s only one. That’s the first rule of banquets.”

“Rule?” Yuuri was aware of some basic etiquette when attending these functions, but rules? Viktor followed him to the table.

“I guess I haven’t gone over them with you.” He pursed his lips, and gave the room a once over. “We can go over it in more detail later, but mostly; limit yourself to one drink so that you can keep your wits about you.”

Yuuri looked at his meager glass of alcohol. “Okay... I really was just going to have one.”

“Good. The banquet is a battlefield, so you arrive a little late late, leave a little early, make a show of it... and have them wanting more.” Viktor winked and grabbed himself a flute. “That’s all.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Paranoid, much?

Viktor didn’t leave his side for longer than necessary while they walked the banquet floor, mingling with those who approached. It was more socializing than Yuuri had ever done, but he let Viktor continue to take over and parade him around. As much as he didn’t like to be the center of attention, there was something about Viktor’s unusual cheery disposition that he allowed it.

And then Viktor wandered back over to the alcohol table for another glass.

“I thought we were only having one?”

“Ah, but that rule is for skaters.”

He didn’t recall that in the original agreement, but decided to let Viktor do as he pleased so not to ruin his good mood.

They walked past the food table where a chef was preparing crepes. Skating always worked up his appetite, and now he could add sex to the list as well. Yuuri waited for the crepe base to be completed, then asked the chef to roll up bacon, lettuce, and tomato for him.

“Did you want one, too?” Yuuri asked Viktor since he has been watching the process with interest.

“I’m not that hungry,” Viktor said out of habit and Yuuri frowned. “But I’ll have a bite of yours~” Viktor leaned over Yuuri’s shoulder and forced the hand that held the crepe up enough for him to
take a bite. He chewed and savored and let out a quiet *vkusno*. Sparkling blue eyes scanned the options on the table spread.

“Changed your mind?” Yuuri asked, taking the opportunity to take a few bites before Viktor decided he wanted more.”

“They have strawberries and creme... I’d like one.”

After last night’s discussion, Yuuri was happy Viktor wanted to eat anything. “Then have one.”

He considered a moment more and then asked the chef to make him a strawberry crepe.

It surprised Yuuri that Viktor went with a sweet one over a savory, but he wasn’t going to comment. Viktor was too *excited*.

Once Viktor had the crepe in hand, he offered Yuuri the first bite.

With a smile, Yuuri opened his mouth to be fed. Fresh cream and strawberries, and the pastry had a perfect consistency.

“Did you know that crepes originated from France and was born from an accident? It just goes to show you that what I said in the interviews yesterday was true, you know. There is nothing gained from not trying... and this is my first time trying Chinese crepes. That reminds me, I need to try them in Japan as well.” He took a bite of his own crepe. “Mmm this tastes better than what I make at home. Yes, there *are* one or two things I can make, Yuuri.”

“You’ll have to make me your recipe sometime.”

At that, Viktor hid his face with his pasty, cream transferring to the tip of his nose.

When Viktor didn’t notice immediately as he straightened, Yuuri reached out with a finger, swiped and licked it clean. “I’ll take you to a creperie, too. Yuko’s probably the best one to ask which one is the best, actually.”

“I’d like that. Outings for when we get back to Japan?” Viktor asked, hopeful.

“Sure. Whatever you want.” Yuuri thought dates needed to be more extravagant, but if Viktor was pleased with only that, dating Viktor would be a lot easier than he expected.

Viktor’s eyes sparkled again and he happily set to nibbling on his strawberry crepe.

The pair stepped away from the creperie and finished off their food in their pacing. Just as they deposited the wrappings in the garbage, they nearly fell forward at the sudden weight of Christophe wedging between them, and arm on each shoulder.

“We saved a seat for you two!”

The bubble of their own world now popped, Yuuri saw the table in question. That’s right, they had promised to have a proper gathering with everyone. Thankful for the reminder of the engagement, as well as their surroundings, Viktor and Yuuri followed Christophe to the table where Phichit, Guang-Hong, and Leo sat, champagne and water glasses spread around.

Yuuri took the seat next to Phichit, who greeted him with a wiggle of those knowing eyebrows. Viktor took the empty seat next to him, then Christophe between Viktor and Bastien.

Viktor touched Christophe’s arm, saying something in French, and the two of them hunched
forward on their elbows, hands shielding their mouths in whisper. Yuuri wasn’t sure why they bothered being so secretive since he was pretty sure the only other person at the table that spoke French was Bastien, but he let the friends conspire over… whatever.

Leo and Guang-Hong were laughing about something and Phichit was only half there as he scrolled his feeds, not paying mind to Viktor and Christophe.

Yuuri wanted to leave them to things, not watch, and catch up with Phichit, but Viktor looked so happy with whatever he was telling his Swiss friend. Cheeks flushed and looking shy, nodding at anything that sounded like a question. It was hard to look away.

Christophe’s eyes widened, mouth opening in a silent gasp - scandalized, maybe? - but then he was looking at him?

Yuuri tried to appear nonchalant, but the act had Christophe hugging Viktor with a hearty laugh.

Viktor shoved at his friend, too overwhelmed by the attention? And then Chris kissed the top of his head, to which the shoving lessened, but he looked no less pleased with whatever they had been discussing.

Chancing a glance, Yuuri looked over Christophe’s bent head at Bastien who sat contentedly in his seat, hands resting on the table, surveying their group and those around them. He didn’t seem at all concerned about the familiarity between the two. Honestly, Yuuri wasn’t either, but… he was curious more than anything about their history. There were rumors, there always were, none of which seemed possible. Although…

Like Viktor, Christophe also had a reputation of being a playboy, though more prominent in his early senior days. With Bastien working for the ISU, naturally rumors spread about a “beneficial relationship.” How much flack did Bastien himself deal with? Or did he have to assess for himself what was and wasn’t true as Yuuri had?

“So what are they on about?” Phichit asked, finally acknowledging their guests of honor, giving Yuuri a nudge, startling him from his thoughts.

“Don’t know.” And it probably didn’t matter. If they wanted to be heard, they’d speak English. Viktor would tell him if he wanted. Wouldn’t he?

The two renowned skaters wrapped up their secret discussions and then took to sitting proper in the chairs to face the rest of the party. Now they could all make it up to Guang-Hong for bailing on him.

Being in their presence seemed to do the trick more than anything. Viktor and Christophe shared stories throughout their careers; places they’ve visited and the competitors they faced that were now retired. Most had been things Yuuri knew from his years of being a super fan, but it was nice to hear about it from the source or a close source.

Best of all was Viktor sharing the information so openly and with what looked like genuine smiles. He’d told Yuuri he didn’t like repeating information people could easily find, but he was having a good time with Christophe and the facts of the past and present, as well as analyzing their competitors for the season. Guang-Hong, Leo, and Phichit ate it up.

Every once in awhile when Viktor wasn’t speaking, he’d look Yuuri’s way, then shy away when caught, moving just a little closer by the minute.

Was he wanting their legs to touch? That was easily done. Yuuri shifted the leg closest to him so
their knees touched. That proved satisfying for a time, but Yuuri could see his hands fidgeting in his lap. Yuuri reached over and laced their fingers together, tips curling down at Viktor’s knuckles.

The effect was immediate; blush and a smile, relaxed grip and no longer antsy. He was happy and content to stay that way until Georgi Popovich came to their table - fingers tensed.

“Dobryy vecher,” he greeted.

All at the table nodded towards him or raised hands in acknowledgement. Except Viktor.

Georgi either didn’t notice, or chose not to. “Congratulations on your win, Phichit. Your country will be very pleased.”

“Tell me about it! You should have seen my family and my feeds,” Phichit grinned. “It’ll be a huge party when I get home.”

“And you, Yuuri. Congratulations on your comeback.”

“Thanks!” Their conversations in the past had always been brief, but Yuuri never felt any sort of malice from him. He was a great skater and seemed to value good sportsmanship. Like Viktor, he wasn’t very sociable, but did like to make efforts to commend his fellow competitors whether he was on the podium or not.

“Bronze for you, Christophe. That’s normal with your starting-slow tendencies.”

“Well I’m not the most unpredictable person,” Christophe shrugged. “You and I share that. A shame you won’t be continuing in the circuit.”

“Yes. But there is always European Championships. I will see you there.”

“I do look forward to seeing your short program again.”

Georgi then turned to the youngest skaters, “I enjoyed both of your performances, as well. Better luck next year.”

Guang-Hong and Leo looked absolutely starstruck by Russia’s past champion.

Once all the the skaters had been addressed, Georgi shifted on his feet to be centered with Viktor’s position at the table. “Viktor?” He waited in a way that felt rehearsed. Like he was prepared to not be answered.

Viktor didn’t let up his hold on Yuuri’s hands.

“You… look well,” Georgi ventured.

Viktor’s gaze finally lifted, but he didn’t say anything.

“You must be proud of your student.”

Yuuri watched Viktor’s lips form into a smile that he knew very well, but by now knew that was also something that was rehearsed for the cameras. “Georgi, *spasibo*. Why yes, I’m very proud of him. He’s an excellent student and even better skater, as I’m sure you’ve noticed, da?”

There was a mixture of surprise and intimidation on Georgi’s face at that. Did they not have a good relationship? What was with the tension in the air? “Y-yes. Yak--” he shook his head, retracting whatever statement was forming, “I’ll be watching the rest of the season. Perhaps we’ll be
competing at Worlds. It is a possibility.”

“He’ll be make it to Worlds. That much is certain.”

Yuuri could hear the unsaid ‘but you won’t be.’

“Although, you still have my other Yuri to contend with at Nationals.” Viktor gave a one-shouldered shrugged as his other hand was still occupied under the table.

Georgi looked rightfully threatened, but clamped his mouth closed at a retort, a soft breath through his nose. Then Georgi’s eyes went from Viktor to Yuuri, and then back again. “I wish you the best of luck in your coaching, Viktor. As well with each other. May you find the happiness you’ve wanted.”

The hold on Yuuri’s hand loosened, shoulders slacking. The expression on his face didn’t soften into gratitude or forgiveness, but… something else entirely that Yuuri couldn’t place.

When Georgi didn’t receive a verbal response, he bid the table good evening. Was that also something practiced?

For a moment the table let the awkwardness of that linger, and then Phichit broke the silence with wanting to share photos from the audience of the evening. Guang-Hong and Leo readily closed in on his phone for the distraction.

Viktor patted Yuuri’s hand with his free one. “Yuuri. I need to use the restroom.”

“You okay?” Yuuri asked, trying his best to search his profile.

A forced smile. “Yes. I’ll be back. Don’t worry.”

Yuuri let him slip his hand away and stand up from the table. Then watched him purposefully walk the opposite direction Georgi had to make his exit.

He was not okay, but Yuuri would let him have a moment to process whatever had just happen. Cool down, right?

“Yuuri.”

“Huh? Yes?”

“Can I have a word?” Christophe asked once his eyes found the source of the one that called him across the empty space between them.

Yuuri was prepared to close that distance, but Christophe stood up instead, thus Yuuri followed after. Since everyone at the table spoke English, Yuuri guess that’s why Christophe had to take him aside for whatever it was he needed to tell him. They stopped at a curtained window that was mostly abandoned in favor of better viewing of the live music.

“I’m impressed things have progressed as they have between the two of you,” Christophe started, a hand adjusting the cuff of his opposite sleeve, ever the presentable one. “You turning down my invitation in Denver all those years ago has proved to have worked out for the best.”

“I had to earn it, remember?” Yuuri chuckled at the memory of their first meeting. Christophe had offered to introduce him to Viktor at his first grand prix competition as a senior, but Yuuri declined. One, he didn’t deserve to meet him just yet. And two, talking to Chris when under so
much pressure back then did nothing for his nerves.

“That you did. Fair and square, true to your word. Speaking of, Yuuri, I hope you realize how fortunate you are.”

“Fortunate that I earned the chance to win his affections?”

“Well, *that*, and, you’ve no idea how many men and women would give anything to be in your-” he paused and clicked his tongue in thought. “*position*. To that I say: congratulations.”

Which position was he referring to?! Either way, Yuuri felt heat rise to his cheeks. Was *that* what he and Viktor were discussing?

“Oh yes. Many have yearned and fantasized, but you have been granted a most precious gift. He truly treasures you to give you what he’s given no one else.”

Did that mean that Viktor had never-

“He has the heart of a princess and must be treated as such. Call him Princess some time. It’ll no doubt have favorable results.”

Yuuri blinked at him. “W-what?”

“As a princess with their skirts ruffled and dashing out to the powder room in distress, they wait for their prince to find them.”

It took him a moment to catch up to Chris’s meaning. “But… he said he’d be right back?”

“Of course he’ll say that, Yuuri. A proper princess wishes to not be a burden. You, the gentleman in question, must be at the ready.”

“I was going to go after him if he took too long…” He knew the signs well. If Yuuri was upset, he just needed a moment alone. Viktor acted like he didn’t want to be bothered, so...

The playfulness in Christophe’s voice disappeared. “You saw what I did, Yuuri. No matter what he says about being fine and well, you need to be able to confirm with a certainty. Don’t chance it.”

There was a weight in his words, and Yuuri quickly drew the conclusion that it was experience talking. “You’re right. Sorry. I’ll go find him.”

“Good man!” Christophe cupped both his shoulders and then pulled him into a hug. “Take care of him.”

The more they talked, the more questions Yuuri was starting to ask himself. Viktor was still a mystery and he hoped Viktor would be able to open up more and more to him. “I will. I promise.”

After a quick exchange of phone numbers for the sake of a new friendship and an open hotline for Viktor assistance, Yuuri went in search of Viktor, hoping for sure he’d be in a bathroom. Somewhere. In the large facility.

The first bathroom he came upon from where Viktor left was empty, having checked under the stall doors. He found him in the second bathroom down a less-lit hallway, standing at a sink with the water running.
His hair that usually laid nicely, was now out of place and partially damp. Running wet hands through it? Through the mirror Yuuri could see his eyes were red from crying. What had Georgi said that upset him so much?

Yuuri took quiet steps towards him, unsure if Viktor had even noticed he’d entered the room. “Viktor?”

Blue eyes startled at him in the mirror. “Oh. Yuuri.”

Yuuri closed the gap between them and gently pressed against his side. “We can head back to the room if you’d like.”

He considered, looking from their faces in the mirror to the faucet. “But the banquet…”

As much as Yuuri hated to skip out early on another event, Viktor wasn’t well and that was more important to him. “That’s okay. We made an appearance. They’ll understand.” Considering the whole table witnessed the odd exchange with Georgi, he doubted they’d hold it against Viktor. Yuuri just hoped Viktor would tell him what exactly was wrong.

“Okay.”

Yuuri pulled out his phone and texted Phichit that they were bowing out for the night and that he’d see him at the finals and to apologize to Guang-Hong again.

[Uh huh, sure. You do what you need /;)]

Phichit had the wrong idea, but Yuuri didn’t feel it necessary to correct him. Somehow comforting your boyfriend felt more private.

Yuuri escorted Viktor out of the bathroom, slipping an arm around his waist when the coast was clear and located the tower elevators. The ride up was quiet, Yuuri offering the assurance of touch. The hallway to their room was also clear, and they walked together, Yuuri finding his keycard to open the door.

With the door closed, Yuuri pulled Viktor into a hug.

The stiffness of Viktor’s limbs had him wondering if he’d made a mistake in assuming this was what he needed, but eventually he slacked, bending forward to rest his chin on his shoulder.

Asking what was wrong was too broad, because of course viktor would try to dismiss it. But if he could get a yes or no answer, maybe he could work with that. “Was it something that Georgi said?”

They stood there for a moment, silence being the confirmation Yuuri needed, and then Viktor was shifting in his arms. Yuuri let him go and followed where he sat on the edge of the bed. Yuuri removed both their suit jackets and laid them on the back of the desk chair before joining him.

Viktor leaned onto his elbow on his knees, burying his face in his hands, body and voice trembling. “I can’t go back to St. Petersburg tomorrow. I can’t… face Yakov.”

Last night while they ate room service, Viktor had spoke so fondly of his coach. Then again, Yakov had also yelled at him at check in, then was avoidant of him after the prix. Georgi coming to the table… Was that what it took to remind him they were flying out in tomorrow afternoon? Viktor wasn’t ready. “We don’t have to go back tomorrow.”

“I may never be able to go back home.”
“...Let's go after the Rostelecom Cup. Cancel our flight.”

“How would that change anything? Yakov... he’s still... angry. Upset. Disappointed. Knowing that is what hurts the most.”

Yuuri knew what it was liking disappointing your coaches. Ito and Celestino put up a lot with him, and he hoped Viktor wouldn’t be a reprise. “Maybe he just needs to see there's nothing to be disappointed about.”

Viktor removed his face from his hands enough to give a small, sad smile.

He knew that wasn’t all there was to it, but if Yakov could see that what Viktor was doing was working out, then that could be something. “I did win silver, so...It's a testament to you as a coach, yeah?”

“I am very proud of you no matter what he thinks. I have no regrets about that, but I don't know what I can do to make it up to him... leaving like that.”

“That's something you can ask him. When you're ready. You want to apologize and make it up to him, right?”

Viktor looked down at the floor between his legs, then nodded. “I do. I miss him, Yuuri.”

“I’m sure he misses you, too.”

It was probably the wrong thing to say as Viktor looked on the verge of crying.

“I'll go with you to talk to him. I don’t know if there's anything I can say, but... I'll support you.”

The sparkle returned to his eyes as Viktor removed his hands completely from his face, still frowning, but hopeful. “Really? You'd do that for me?”

“Of course I will!” Yuuri kissed his cheek. Why wouldn’t he? Isn’t that what couples did for each other? But just in case, he reminded him: “I love you.”

Chapter End Notes

Yurio: Georgi, don't make me go alone with Mila, she's crazy!
Mila: You just don't want to go alone because you'd get all embarrassed, Yuri~
Yurio: Why would I be embarrassed to visit Viktor and and that stupid pig?
Mila: Because everyone knows you're a Viktor fanboy and you'll probably DIE setting foot in his apartment!
Yurio: SHUT UP YOU HAG! I'LL CUT YOUR FACE
Mila: Okay, well now you to come along to keep our junior in line... what about it, Georgi?
Yurio: I'M NOT A JUNIOR ANYMORE
Georgi: yeah, yeah, I'll come...
Yurio: ...wait, his instagram says they changed plans... HE'S NOT COMING BACK TO SAINT PETERSBURG?!
Georgi: Really? I'm not surprised
Mila: Oh yeah?
Yurio: THAT... SELFISH... IDIOT.
Yurio: ...whatever. I'll just destroy them in Moscow.

Don't Look Now: it's GAY SKATE STYLE!
Super secret training mode! / More dual PoV! / That'ssa spicy katsudon! / Let's prepare for WAR!!!

Please look forward to it!
Chapter Summary

Viktor and Yuuri steal away for nine days of luxury and each other. OR: In order to prepare for the Rostelecom cup, Coach Nikiforov absconds with his student to an undisclosed location for top secret training. There, Viktor teaches Yuuri all that he knows of love and warfare, which is turned back on him tenfold. Of course, he expected nothing less of his most beloved soldier.

#no more dual chapters #no more 20k chapters, please stop us #remember when we said this fic is mature? REALLY WE MEAN IT #spicy fire #burning the hotel down #spoiled yuuri #spoiled viktor #switching couple #yuuri: stamina monster #important back story #tw: the boy #tw: discussion/hints of past abuse #tw: lots of sex

Chapter Notes

Mamodewberry: Sorry for the wait again, but it's another long one, so maybe all will be forgiven. Same probably can't be said for using Sun Tzu's works for our own doing, but oh well :) there's a lot in the chapter that's, well, MATURE. Be aware of that as you make your way through. There is a lot of reveals in between the spice. The best porn is with purpose/plot! We honestly could have written more, but we decided it would never end if we let them have their way. This chapter is compromised of little vignettes of their intimacy.

Gabapple: I'm pretty sure Mamodewberry's mom would say this chapter is super rowdy. And it is. I like to call this... the honeymoon chapter. I promise that this is the MOST mature chapter of the whole fic, at least in terms of quantity. They went a little crazy, but can you really blame them? :V;; I'd say just skip it, but like Mamodewberry said, there's a looootttt of important stuff here, so... please read it all and accept my apologies while I hide under my desk lol

Bonus Stories:

Vitya Diaries chapters 6-10, the YA novel-style adventures of teen Viktor. Read this if you want more details on the recent Viktor flashbacks! Warning: he cries a LOT.
Special Delivery, a super fluffy, post-series, NLA-canon one shot in which Viktor and Yuuri invent their own AU while waiting for dinner to arrive. :)

New Art:

The Great Kappa Hunt, illustrated by rainlikestars (commission)
Vitya and Fifi meet!, illustrated by June (commission)
Fifi and Vitya finalizing the Wishing Star (agape) costume!, illustrated by Yoyo (commission)
Yakov & Lilia / Viktor, Yuuri, and Yuri / SAD VIKTOR, illustrated by Adashuko (commission)

Don't forget to check out the official NLA gallery, which also includes fanart and all of our promo graphics like posters, banners, excerpts, and bookmarks! Go look!!!
Yuuri drummed the eraser end of his pencil on the college consideration form. He knew this day would come. Thankfully being a figure skater had the gears of his mind turning from the early start of his career.

Skating would only keep him consecutively busy for half a year at a time. It would take years to reach Viktor’s level, so he couldn’t rely on his winnings to support him. He had to attend university to get an education to have something to fall back on for the if and when his athletic career came to an end. Hard fact of life.

His country had groomed him into certain expectations of careers for the traditional Japanese man, none of which held interest for him. He’d considered not continuing his education and simply help out at the onsen as he had from a young age. The flaw in that was that it really only would pay for room and food. Living with his folks would be an easy route, but Yuuri wasn’t interested in easy, either. An emergency plan if anything.

On his tenth birthday he had been given an electric keyboard and a lesson book. When he’d breezed through that book, his father took him to second-hand stores to find more for his continual self-teaching. Soon after Viktor skated into his life, he developed a newfound appreciation for music as a whole. Music was the key component to every performance.

Last year Viktor had skated to an original piece that he had commissioned. It was then the thought occurred to him that he could write his own songs for his programs.

Entrance exams permitting, Yuuri could have his pick of any of the outstanding performing art schools or programs he wanted.

But did he want to attend university in Japan?

After his loss at the early round of the Grand Prix Final, Yuuri took home silver at Junior Nationals and gold at Junior World’s. What was it about the prix that he couldn’t progress? He’d earned enough points to compete at World’s and yet… Just as it wasn’t good enough for Coach Ito, it wasn’t good enough for Yuuri. He had to medal in everything. Medals and points to contribute to his path to advance to the senior division.
Could Ito get him there, he wondered? Ito was a good coach as long as Yuuri was performing well. But the moment Yuuri faltered during competition it felt like they were no longer a team - Impatience and distance. Punished.

It wasn’t the student/coach relationship Yuuri wanted, but it _had_ gotten him to this point. The drive to win out of fear of reprimand and causing disappointment. From what he saw of other skaters, their coaches seemed fairly warm. Was it a front?

How different would it be if Ito were more encouraging and didn’t shut him out when Yuuri was shutting down?

Changing coaches was normal as far as Yuuri understood, but did it matter the reason?

…

Was it wise to debut in the senior division with a new coach?

For the next few months Yuuri researched schools overseas and coaches. English was a language he was already learning, thus looked at universities in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States. Then narrowed it down by performing arts programs. Then cross-checked with coaches that were native or made their base of operations in the country.

At the start of the season, Yuuri approached Ito, heart-pounding, but ready to deliver the verdict of his research. It actually felt satisfying to see his coach gape, shocked that his student would be abandoning him for the better.

No matter the results, at the conclusion of the season, Yuuri would be firing Ito as his coach to go to America and attend university in Detroit, Michigan and be coached by Celestino Cialdini.

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_Saint Petersburg, Russia_

Viktor (15 years old)

Makkachin made life bearable again.

Viktor settled into the puppy-parent routine, which kept him moving on a daily basis; walks, service animal training, and a lot of clean up. And on top of that, he had skating and the occasional ballet tutoring with Lilia, which he’d agreed to in desperation. His body was changing, Yakov hadn’t been wrong to suspect that, and it left him more exhausted than ever before.

Resting would have been nice, but he didn’t have time to slack off, not with the skating season starting again so soon. If he’d been going into the senior division, he’d have had until October to be ready, but being held back… he only had until the end of August.

“I don’t want to damage what you’ve cultivated so far,” had been Yakov’s excuse. Viktor needed to mature a little more, he’d said. There was no reason to rush it.
What he really meant was that he didn’t want Sasha or Georgi to have more competition than they already did for the upcoming season. Sasha, because he was already the King and getting to that age of retirement, and Georgi…

Well, Georgi was Viktor’s replacement.

Younger, taller, more masculine, a traditional family, and the winner of the Jr. Nationals and Jr. Worlds.

He was even experienced with romance, which he was sure to point out at every opportunity. How many ex-girlfriends did a fifteen year-old need, anyway? When did Georgi even have time to skate?

Viktor really wasn’t a fan of his new comrade.

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“Hey, who are you texting?”

Viktor looked up from his phone, glared, then went back to it. “No one.”

“Really? You’re blushing.”

Georgi was teasing him, but keeping his distance- at least three feet from the benched Viktor, who clutched his phone to his chest.

“Back off, Georgi… this is none of your business.”

The other boy gasped, and Viktor couldn’t tell if it was really out of shock- or if he was just making fun of him. He could never tell with Georgi. His reactions to everything were exaggerated. All the time.

Despite his wounded feelings, Georgi continued. “It's not a girl is it?”

“No!”

“Looks like I struck a nerve… or should I say heart string?”

Viktor clenched both fists and his jaw. “Struck a heart string? Really? That doesn't even make sense!”

“Plucked, then. Oh, young love! I can always tell. How lovely!”

“You're younger than me. And shut up! You don't know what you're talking about!”

But Georgi had moved on to clutching his chest, gazing into the distance with a sigh that cracked with his voice. “It's all over your face, Viktor! And I think it's sweet. Tell me, what is she like?”

Viktor wasn't about to spill about Niko. Even if he wasn't a boy, giving his rival something like that seemed like a terrible idea. “I'm not saying anything.”

“So you're not together yet… that explains so much.” Georgi hefted another sigh, which seemed to be his favorite thing to do. “You have a terrible crush… probably talk all the time, sometimes into the night, right? And yet you haven't managed to close the gap and make her yours!”

Viktor looked up from his phone at the dramatic pose Georgi had arranged himself in, so wistful
and longing, then set the cell back in his lap. Aside from the gender thing, Georgi was right.

“But! Viktor, I can help you.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah! I have tons of experience in that area.” He flopped down on the bench beside him. “I can definitely help you win the heart of your mysterious lady.”

Viktor took another peek at his phone, angled out of his rink mate’s view. The Boy was talking to him, yes. A lot. But things weren’t romantically charged as far as he knew. There’d be no way to get things moving forward unless something changed.

And maybe Georgi knew how.

“No thanks,” Viktor huffed. Tempting though it was, it was way too dangerous to mix rivals in with his secret love life- especially one so controversial.

But then Viktor got his photos back from Fifi, who had come out to Saint Petersburg for the shoot-“I want to get some action shots of you on the ice; you’re more a figure skater than a ballerina now, my little unicorn.” -and they were breathtaking.

He sent three of the best to Niko- the ones that best showed off his butt and made him look like a girl. Viktor hoped that it would spark some interest, but what he got was an invitation- Niko’s mother would be in Saint Petersburg for business the next month, and Niko would be tagging along; could he meet for dinner?

Which meant a date.

And also meant that he had no other choice but to turn to Georgi for help.

“Your first date.” Georgi wiped what Viktor hoped was a fake tear from his eye, then smiled, so sweet and fond. “I’m so proud of you, Viktor.”

“Yeah. Uhm. Thanks.” Viktor rubbed at the nape of his neck, chasing the anxiety away. “What do I do?”

“Oh, I have so much good advice for you, don’t worry.”

With Georgi’s help and training, things progressed much faster than Viktor expected. Sending texts with words deliberately chosen to evoke images of romance received warm responses. Sometimes reciprocating. Viktor was definitely flirting and, thanks to Georgi’s counsel, not denying it.

The date, such as it was, mostly involved spending time with Niko and his mother. Tetya Olya was so kind, thrilled to discuss Viktor’s plans for the upcoming season, his daily life- which of course included Makkachin -and everything going on at the rink. Niko paid attention when he was called to it, content to be a sort of a third wheel. They went to lunch, out shopping, and then found dessert. It was too much food, but there were stolen moments with Niko that made it all worthwhile, even if he wasn’t so enthused about Saint Petersburg.

Viktor kept Georgi up to date on the progress.

“So how did it go?”

“I’m…” Viktor struggled to come up with a way to adequately describe his feelings. “I’m
definitely in trouble.”

“It’s love! It has to be!”

The final day of Niko’s long weekend trip was what ended up being the real date, though it didn’t start out that way. It was just a little more shopping, dinner, a trip to the zoo, but it was romantic. Mostly.

At least sort of.

“Some people are like lions,” Viktor said, doing his best to keep calm. “Where the males have big manes and the girls don’t, right?”

“Yeah…”

“And then some other people are like tigers, where it’s harder to tell, but they’re all just sexy and powerful. You know what I mean?”

Niko looked at the big cats, then at Viktor, squinting. “Do you want to date a tiger or something, Mishka?”


In the end, as evening gradually fell, they wandered through a park. The swings seemed like the obvious choice for a romantic moment, but Niko sat on the bench, instead. Viktor sat with him. Close, but not too close.

“So…” Viktor broke the silence that had hung there for the past ten minutes. “I really like you. And, I dunno…”

“What?”

“Will you…” Viktor started, stopped, and took a deep breath. Right. He needed to be direct. Confident. He looked Niko right in the eye, putting on the sweetest face he could for maximum effect. “Would you be my boyfriend?”

Niko stared at him, mouth fixed in a little frown of confusion. “Mishka… “

“Yeah?”

“I’m not gay.”

It took everything Viktor had to not curl up and die right there on the spot, but he managed, instead laughing. “I’m not either. So it’s fine.”

“What? How does that work?”

To that, Viktor shrugged. “You’ll be my boyfriend, and I’ll be your… whatever. See? Not gay.”

Niko didn’t get it, not really, but he blushed anyway and stumbled over some ums and ahs before shrugging, himself. “Yeah. I guess so.”

“Perfect.”

They had their first kiss, then parted for the night. The kiss wasn’t anything like Viktor had expected it to be- awkward, dry, and with so much hesitance on both sides, but it didn’t stop him
from being ridiculously happy. Viktor had never felt more relieved in his life. Boyfriend. He had a boyfriend.

There was so much to report to Georgi, which he did the moment they were both at the rink.

“First kiss? Oh, Viktor!”

“I- I know! I know, right? It was so romantic. I can’t believe it, I have a… And… and…”

“Georgi! Vitya! What are you two doing? Get back to practice!”

“Oh, but Coach! Viktor was just telling me the good news.”

Yakov folded his arms, waiting for an explanation.

“I, uhm. Went on a date last night. And got my first kiss.”

It was difficult not to giggle all the way through speaking, but Viktor did his best. Georgi was bursting with so much pride and excitement, gripping Viktor’s arm, that Yakov couldn’t help a small smile. “With the Yermolai boy?”

Viktor’s own smile fractured, leaving something vaguely akin to horror in its place as the blood drained from his face. “Uhm.”

“No.” Georgi was laughing. “Viktor’s got a girlfriend, Coach!”

Yakov and Viktor exchanged significant glances before the coach looked off toward the window, and the student looked down at the floor.

“Oh,” said Yakov. “I see. My mistake.”

“He’s not gay. Right, Viktor?”

Viktor couldn’t look at him, only offered a little shrug. He didn’t want to lie. Not about his heart. But what choice did he have?

“…right, Viktor?” Georgi prompted again. Now he was getting nervous.

“He was really sweet, Coach,” Viktor said, and got to his feet. “It all worked out.”

He left to get on the ice before he could see or hear any more reactions. He couldn’t bear it.

Before turning in for the night, Viktor called the airline to cancel their flight to St. Petersburg and hung up. Then picked up the phone once more, redialed, and booked them flights for Shanghai.

Couldn’t he have done all that with the first phone call? Why Shanghai?

Yuuri didn’t really get it, but Viktor explained it was the perfect place to go “dark” for super secret training. As long as they’d be in Moscow in ample time, Yuuri didn’t care where they went as long as they were together.
“Special training for what?” Yuuri asked.

“For war,” Viktor answered so matter-of-factly, Yuuri almost felt like he missed something. “We’re preparing for war. First step, sneaking into the territory of one of our enemies under the cover of darkness. And in the shadow of anonymity, I will teach you all that I know of warfare.”

Territory? Was there a skater from Shanghai Yuuri had forgotten about? “War, what?”

“Each cup is a battle. Each season is a war. The wolves are everywhere, Yuuri... our rivals, competitors, and other threats are lurking, but we can defeat them! I will show you how. There’s a reason that I’ve been the number one champion for so long.”

Ah, wolf talk again. “For winning battles and wars?” Of skating?

“You trust your coach, right?” he winked. “Have you ever read Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*?”

Yuuri laid his head back on the pillow. “When I was a kid, probably.”

“Kind of an advanced subject for a young person... Anyway, I keep a copy in my luggage. We'll be studying that over the next week and a half.”

“Ciao Ciao only had me read skating fundamentals book, so this’ll be interesting.”

“Ciao Ciao...” Viktor hummed in consideration. “Celestino missed a lot of opportunities to realize your full potential, Yuuri.”

“He did better than my first coach, I think.”

“What was your first coach like?”

“He was fine and friendly for the most part. Ready to sing my praises as long as I was performing well. Then I’d mess up. He'd get impatient and distant.”

“Ito?”

“Yeah. He... really didn't know what do when I--had breakdowns. It really made him mad that I couldn't just stop.”

Viktor carded through his hair. “Hmm..... An inexperienced coach.... a poor general. We'll go over that, too, Yuuri. Mistakes are part of learning. You can't grow without making mistakes. And a tired soldier will only become more and more weary if pushed. They can't be expected to fight if they aren't treated well. It's a general- or coach's -responsibility to make sure that their soldiers are kept in good condition. And when mistakes are made, you treat them first with humanity and then with discipline. A general should see his soldiers like his own children... That's what Yakov always did.”

His authoritative voice and movement in his hair sombered at the mention of his coach as usual. “Yakov is a very experienced general,” Yuuri offered.

“Yeah. He is.”

He hadn’t expected it to cheer him up completely, but it had helped. “Ito coached before me. His other skaters performed better than me. Eventually they transferred to Tokyo for new coaches.”

“A good general can command any soldier, Yuuri... As long as the soldier is willing to follow.”
“Maybe I wasn't willing.”

“I don't believe that. I know you. Anxiety is difficult, but with enough preparation, it can be defeated just like any other obstacle on the battlefield.”

“I... I know. It got better with Ciao Ciao. Switched armies.”

“And we’ve tackled it, too. I learned from the best general there is. I remember what it's like to be a soldier in your position.”

“It wasn't that long ago, I sure hope so!”

“Exactly. Together, we can't be defeated. The first step of this training is to get you equipped with the materials. Why don't you download *The Art of War* on your phone while we have reliable internet? I’ll be reading it to you cover to cover -as well as with the notes in my copy that I’ll translate- but it’s important to have for reference at any time. You do that and I’ll book a hotel.”

There was still no explanation as to why they had to go to Shanghai for this.

It was evening by the time they landed in Shanghai, collected their luggage, and a taxi brought them to their hotel.

Yuuri craned his neck at the skyscraper before them, then back to Viktor, suspicious. “You told me you weren’t going to book a fancy hotel.”

“Not *the* fanciest is what you said. Let’s get inside and check in.” Viktor took a step forward and rolled both their luggages behind them.

Yuuri groaned at the technicality. Once inside the lobby, Yuuri stared at the luxurious decor, high ceilings, and polished floors. What were the rooms like? No, he couldn’t accept this. “Viktor,” he tugged on his sleeve while they waited for the concierge to assist them. “This is too much. Let’s stay somewhere else, okay?”

“It’s already booked, Yuuri. I’ll be fined if I cancel this late.”

He’d been tricked again. Viktor knew he couldn’t inconvenience him with a cancellation fee. None of this wouldn’t have happened if Viktor weren’t such a big spender…

The gentleman at the desk that checked them in was so crisp and sharp, Yuuri wondered if he was actually human. Everything about this place screamed money.

“You’ll be in the Pearl Tower Suite with the requested river view on the fifty-second level, room eight, with club access. You’ll find a brochure in your room with all of the amenities available to you. Should you have any questions, feel free to ask.”

Viktor signed a few more papers, pocketed his wallet and they headed towards the elevators, wheels and feet on what was maybe marble floor? Whatever it was, it was far too clean.

Clutching the strap of his bag, Yuuri watched the numbers light up with their ascent. There was nothing that could be done now, right? He had to calm down. As to be expected from a five-star hotel, it was a smooth ride.

The elevator dinged and let them off at their floor.
Carefully Yuuri followed after, watching his steps in hopes he wouldn’t trip over the carpet runners or tread dirt.

Viktor waved the room key over the fob and Yuuri braced himself.

It was a suite with bed and bath on one end of the room and a study with table and couch on the other. Low lights. Everything was shiny. Not a crease in the sheets or pillows. He dared to venture in the bathroom to see a bathtub a person could sit in like a chair and the shower with rainfall fixtures.

Too much… It was too much. He felt so out of place.

“Do you like it?”

Yuuri turned to face him standing in the bathroom doorway. “Viktor… we-” he shook his head. He couldn’t speak for Viktor. “- I don’t need all of this. It’s too… nice.”

The curious smile Viktor softened and he placed his hands on both his arms to run them down until he was taking his hands. “Yuuri. I phoned a sponsor of mine to pull some strings on top of my membership discounts from this hotel chain. Don’t worry. I want to treat you to nine days of luxury. You deserve more, but I know you’ll fight me on that. Let me spoil you for this time we have. Please?”

Like Yuuri’s previous thought, they couldn’t do anything about it, now. Asking for permission was unnecessary, but appreciated. He managed a nod.

“Come look out the window with me,” Viktor said, giving his hands a tug.

Yuuri’s steps slowed as he was greeted with the cityscape over the large river. How had he missed that coming in? Were the curtains drawn? Gradually he came to the window, maneuvering around the arm chair. The neon and gold lights from the skyscrapers and much smaller buildings below cast reflections on the water. Being this high up he could see the skyglow of Shanghai.

He felt small again, but for different reasons.

It was beautiful.

Yuuri turned to the one still holding his hand, realizing the room lights had been turned off.

His boyfriend smiled at him, moonlight and far off city lights casting his pale skin in colors and shadows.

This picture was priceless. His Viktor was precious.

Irreplaceable.

For nine days he would suck up his insecurities of extravagant living, allow himself to be indulged and, in the process, indulge the love of his life.

Yuuri flashed him a smile of his own, and instantly he saw the effects, even with as little light as there was - blush and interest. One step and raising on the balls of his feet, he brought Viktor down for a kiss with promises of more.
1. **Initial Estimations**

“All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable; when using our forces, we must seem inactive; when we are near, we must make the enemy believe we are far away; when far away, we must make him believe we are near. Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.”

Reading *The Art of War* together should have been a quick and easy task. Viktor had done it a hundred times or more in his career, and while he took his time to do it—lapping up the poetic, articulate phrases that Sun Tzu had so carefully crafted and streamlined—it had never taken long. But reading a book by yourself and reading it out loud to an impatient lover were completely different experiences altogether. Thank God each section was short, allowing Viktor enough time to get through the concept and how it applied to skating before Yuuri was pawing at him again.

Not that it was a problem, really. After years of nothing but the ache of loneliness and regret, Yuuri's warmth and affection were a welcome change.

Getting through the book, then, between breaks for meals (room service was a blessing) and languid moments of pleasure, took the entire day. But at least that included all of Viktor's side notes that he'd added in the margins over the years, and lengthy monologues to explain how it all applied to skating. Viktor wasn't sure if Yuuri was taking it as seriously as he should have, but at least he seemed to be having a good time.

Viktor couldn't believe it. His little Japan skater, all grown up, in love, being spoiled and lavished and preparing to take Russia by storm. It was the perfect way to spend the time before the next battle. So much better than moving on to Saint Petersburg, which would have been fraught with emotional turmoil, tension, awkwardness, and—worst of all—other people.

Being alone with Yuuri was far better.

Especially in a lavish place like this.

Yuuri hadn't stopped worrying about the expense or grandiose nature of their hotel, but for Viktor, it was a rare indulgence. He didn't travel by himself, and until Hasetsu had no one to travel with, Not for pleasure. Viktor went where the ISU assigned him, stayed in the official hotels just like any other skater, and otherwise focused on refining his programs. Every day, every month, every year, with very few exceptions.

But Yuuri didn't need to know about that; he'd already destroyed enough of his darling's fantasies.

The cotton pillowcase was cool against his cheek, perfect for the heat between them. Yuuri kissed the nape of his neck, his shoulder, then pressed his forehead against him to exhale, each breath hot and timed with his slow, decisive movements. Love making had never been like this before; peppered with sweet kisses and such tender caresses. His lover wasn't shy about touching, those strong, lovely hands worked over every inch of his body, kneading his skin to pull the gasps and moans that Viktor had forgotten he had in him.

With Yuuri’s chest against his back, Viktor could thoroughly feel Yuuri’s efforts in each thrust. There was the tremor of mattress as Yuuri tried to gain traction on the 800 thread count sheets; the tension in his thighs when his legs met the back of Viktor’s; the deep, filling friction that kept them connected as one; and those hands…
Yuuri’s palm slid over his leg from knee to hip, brushing the skin with it, and adjusted his position. Changing angles and pushing Viktor’s legs further apart let him reach deeper and, with easier access, just a little harder. Viktor bit his lip, eyes squeezing shut to force himself to breathe and relax. He’d last longer if he was relaxed. Yuuri would too. And this languid, deliberate passion was something he desperately wanted to hold onto.

At least Yuuri was quiet when it came to sex; Viktor wasn’t sure if he’d be able to hold back at all if he’d started speaking. He wouldn’t even have to be particularly romantic, just the sound of his voice, breathless and needy, would probably drive him over the edge. As if the warmth of him weren’t enough, or the way he braced him with his arm across his chest, holding him close and protective. His thoughts, divided between savoring each part of the sensuous experience and his lover’s name, repeated in earnest- Yuuri, Yuuri, Yuuri - were almost enough to break him on their own. Their continuous rhythm was almost like a metronome, rocking tension through his core over and over, steady and strong.

Then there was a tapping at his hip, and then another. Was Yuuri trying to get his attention? One look over his shoulder told him that he wasn’t. No, Yuuri was still quite invested in his efforts, furrowed brow with jaw clenching then relaxing in each driving motion.

The drumming fingers continued, alternating pressure along the curve of his waist, up onto his ribs, all in time with the music that Yuuri was making with him. Viktor let his head drop back to the sweat-dampened pillow, and closed his eyes to concentrate on the way Yuuri moved as if he were playing scales. As if Viktor were his instrument.

Little by little, Viktor was able to map out the notes given the position of his hands, and followed the rhythm until the melody became clear. It was the right hand of Yuuri’s free program, *Yuri on Ice*, just before the bridge.

“Yuuri.” Viktor only managed to get his name on his lips before his breath hitched and stuttered. Yuuri only answered with a grunt, likely too focused on trying to get through the song. But that was the problem. Sucking in a breath, Viktor gathered the sheets in his fists and dragged himself away- not far, he couldn’t get far with Yuuri holding him, but enough that Yuuri had to pay attention.

“Hhu- Viktor?”

Viktor pushed up onto his elbow to get a good look at his disheveled and confused boyfriend, “Yuuri! You didn’t tell me that you could play piano!”

“I- what?”

“That’s it… stop, stop right now. I need you to play for me immediately.”

“N-now?”

“Yes, right now. There’s a grand piano in the executive level; no one will mind if you play it, even at two-something in the morning.”

Yuuri’s jaw hung open until he had to swallow, then went right back to breathless confusion. “But we’re right in the middle of-”

“This is important! Yuuri, I want to hear you play!”

“But…” Yuuri’s face was a mixture of frustration, horror, and confusion, but it quickly settled into
resignation in the form of a tight-lipped frown. Loosening his hold, he pulled out and away, leaving him red-faced, still hard, and disappointed.

Now free, Viktor scooted to the edge of the bed and dropped his feet to the floor, turning back to flash the sweetest, sparkle-eyed smile to show his approval, then rolled his own condom off and into the trashcan next to the bedside table. “Don’t worry, we’ll continue as soon as we get back. Hurry, hurry!”

It took Yuuri a few moments to collect himself and get dressed, but soon they were both out the door and headed to the elevator in pajamas. But while Viktor was practically skipping, Yuuri was dragging behind. One swipe of the room key over the sensor and they were off to the 49th floor, which was, thankfully, just as empty as Viktor had hoped it would be at that time of night on a weekday.

“Here we are! Okay, Yuuri,” Viktor said, pulling his frustrated lover to the bench. “Now play for me, please.”

Yuuri stared down at the keys in disbelief, taking a moment to swipe his hand over his face, still damp from his quick rinse at the sink, then pulled his glasses off to wipe them on his shirt. “Viktor…”

“Shh shh, just play. I’ll make it up to you.”

“I haven’t played since I left Detroit, though.”

“And I haven’t played since I was a teenager! But I’ll play what I know if it helps. Let’s see.” Viktor stretched his arms over the keys and began the worst performance of Beethoven’s *Moonlight Sonata* that either of them had ever heard. “Ah, look, I can still play with both hands! Amazing!”

Perturbed, Yuuri slid his glasses back into place and batted Viktor’s hands away. “Viktor, please!”

He just laughed. “Okay, go. Please play something lovely for me.”

“Just… keep your hands over there…” Yuuri muttered and breathed deep. He rubbed his hands, flexed his wrists and fingers and, after another moment of deliberation, began to play.

Viktor recognized the piece at once—Tchaikovsky’s *Pas De Deux - Intrada* from The Nutcracker—which he’d performed as his short program in his third year as a senior. He’d heard it at least a hundred thousand times, both recorded and live, but hearing it played, just for him, by way of Yuuri’s talented hands was extraordinary. The lilting notes built upon each other, bleeding into the perfect, glittery sort of feeling in his chest, forcing him to breathe a little deeper, slower, losing himself in the melody that poured from Yuuri’s hands.

“Oh, Yuuri.” Viktor spoke in a whisper, voice nothing more than a breeze in his astonishment. “This is… so incredible.”

“It’s not that impressive…” Yuuri muttered, brows once again furrowed like they had been upstairs. He was trying to concentrate even as Viktor wound his arms around his middle, chin on his shoulder. “Anyone can play the piano.”

“Not true… not true at all.” Viktor sighed and swooned, mouth finding the little wisps of hair that met the nape of his neck. “The ability to play music… to create something like this… this experience… You’re incredible. You’re so amazing, Yuuri… I…”
“Viktor, we’re not in our room!”

The hiss of protest earned a little pout, but Viktor withdrew, flushed with embarrassment. Or was it more out of his own frustrated desire?

“Sorry,” said Yuuri, fingers working over the keys with a little more purpose now that he wasn’t being distracted.

“No, it’s all right. But…” Viktor reached a gentle hand for Yuuri’s, sliding fingers between those that splayed to reach the sharps, and brought them to a stop. “I think that’s enough for now, don’t you?”

Blinking, Yuuri let the notes subside and hang in the hair until he pulled his foot off of the pedal. “Enough?”

“I’m getting a little jealous of those keys… let’s go back upstairs.”

“You want to… go back to…” Yuuri sighed, pushing his glasses up to pinch the bridge of his nose. “Really?”

With a doe-eyed smile of innocence- which no one who knew him would believe or be able to resist -Viktor slipped his hand to Yuuri’s leg and let it rest there on his thigh. Casual. Simple. “I’d love for you to play me again. Please?”

Yuuri’s resistance lasted just seconds more, fading from irritation to amusement. “Fine… but only if you promise to wait until the performance is over before interrupting this time.”

“I promise, maestro. No more words from my lips unless they’re breathless cries of your name.”

“…r-right. Uhm. Let’s go, then.”

“Bravo!”

2. The Challenge

“Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays.”

“Youuri, you’ve never been on a date before.”

It was a blunt statement, not a question. A realization? Hadn’t they moved passed the dating experience talk? “No. I stood her up, remember?”

“We should fix that. Let me take you out. I want to treat you to your first date!”

“Isn’t this whole trip about treating me? You’re overdoing it.”

“Nonsense! It’d also be a good excuse to do some sightseeing.” Viktor reached over to the nightstand for his phone, revealing his backside in the process which Yuuri immediately shimmied down to appreciate. With Yuuri’s hands and mouth on him, Viktor settled on his side. “Are you
trying to distract me?”

Kiss. “Maybe…” They’d spent their whole first day in the room together having sex, Yuuri didn’t mind staying in and letting that continue. He’d began to wonder if that was the sort of training Viktor was referring to as they clearly were not heading to a rink anytime soon.

Viktor kicked his legs back and forth, only sort of jostling Yuuri’s position. “I want to take you out, Yuuri! Please~”

Eventually Yuuri relented. Only because his boyfriend was so cute.

His boyfriend was so cute in fact, that by the end of lunch at the restaurant in the hotel, it was almost as if this was Viktor’s first date, too. Obviously that wasn’t the case as Viktor easily made reservations and paid for tickets like he’d done it a million times. It was easier to soak in Viktor’s enthusiasm and allow the contagiousness to consume him. If left too much to his own thoughts, he’d try to back out again.

Like how their meal probably cost them as much as it would have for a party of five.

But, as Viktor has said multiple times; *vkusno*. Yuuri couldn’t deny good food. If Viktor didn’t know that was a weakness, he was pretty sure he did now.

After lunch they headed over to the Shanghai Aquarium. By comparison to the rest of the trip, it looked like something Yuuri wouldn’t feel like a peasant in. Rejuvenated by the thought, he took Viktor’s hand to get in line.

Once inside they took the stairs to the basement to what the woman at the desk said was the highlight of their facility - the Deep Ocean Room: a 120 meter water tunnel with varieties of undersea life. Had there not been so many people around them, the water shadows and blue lights and calming scenery would have been romantic.

They continued on to the high floors, exploring and learning of the aquatic life of the world. Yuuri learned that Viktor loved penguins. Other than the water tunnel (of which they went through again), they spent the most time watching the flightless birds play.

On their way out they stopped by the gift shop for a commemorative souvenir. Magnets or postcards seemed an obvious choice. And cost efficient. Just as he found a small selection to chose from, Viktor came back to him with tiny ceramic penguins in scarves and kissing position.

“Salt and pepper shakers?” Yuuri asked, noticing the slotted holes on top.

“These are perfect!” Viktor exclaimed.

With small gift bag in hand, they made way for their dinner destination.

The restaurant wasn’t as posh as back at the hotel, but with its elegant and rustic decor with warm and dark lighting was other-worldly. They dined on Yunnan cuisine and Viktor forcefully hid the check from Yuuri’s eyes when they finished.

When Yuuri patted his stomach in defeat as they stepped out into the night, Viktor led the way to what he said was the last stop of the evening: Shanghai Oriental Art Center.

“Concert hall?” Yuuri asked, heart pounding in excitement, though questioned.
“I pulled up an events page this morning and saw there was a young conductor’s debut concert being held with the Vienna Philharmonic. I’m not sure on who your favorite classical composers are, but the program being performed tonight is Beethoven’s Symphony No. 8 in F Major Op. 93 and Strauss’ Ein Heldenleben Op.40.”

“Viktor… Perfect. They both good. Good choices, yeah. I. Wow.”

Pleased that he caused Yuuri’s inability to articulate sentences, Viktor took Yuuri by the arm and led him inside.

Had they not already been dressed to go to two high-class restaurants, Yuuri would have felt out of place. They made their way through the lobby to the mezzanine entrance to their seat.

House lights dimmed and a hush fell over the audience at the first note of the first movement of Symphony No. 8. Four movements, twenty-six minutes later, Yuuri was teary-eyed and clapping for the orchestra. A fifteen minute intermission and then the young conductor lead the orchestra into Ein Heldenleben. The piece was nearly fifty minutes in length. It was one thing to listen to a recording, but to see it performed in person without a break was incredible. With the final ring of the sixth movement, also known as Des Helden Weltflucht und Vollendung, Yuuri offered a standing ovation, heart heavy and inspired.

“Viktor, Viktoru!” Yuuri took his hand once they’d weaved out of the concert hall, tugging until he had his eyes. “In Heldenleben’s third movement. That violin solo? Ah! Wasn’t it amazing?”

Throughout the performance, Yuuri had felt his boyfriend’s gaze on him. Making sure he was enjoying himself? More entranced watching him than the orchestra? Viktor smiled at him, adoringly, “It was magnificent. That was your short program piece two years ago, wasn’t it?”

“Y-yeah. You remembered?”

“Researched. I need to know everything about my Yuuri’s skating career to be a better coach. Was that why you were so excited?”

“Was that why you knew I’d like coming?”

“Regardless of who was performing, I knew you would have enjoyed. It was a happy coincidence.”

“I… I loved it. Thank you for taking me. Thank you for everything, today. This was the best date, ever.”

“And it won't be the last.” He placed a finger to his lips. “You know… watching all those musicians play tonight, especially the pianist, I couldn't help but wonder when you'd play for me again.”

He felt his cheeks warm at the memory of the night before “Maybe if we asked the hotel staff proper and not go during the middle of the night I could play again while we're here?”

Viktor considered the offer, then nodded. “Consider it a return date.”

It would take years to accrue Viktor's wealth, so of course any date Yuuri conjured would be mediocre. With Viktor being able to buy and do whatever he wanted, it didn't mean as much being given things. Playing the piano cost Yuuri nothing, but to Viktor it was like he won the lottery.
3. **Strategic Attack**

“If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat.”

“-And here are highlights from the Cup of China-”

Yuuri padded from the bathroom whilst scrunching his hair dry with a towel to see Viktor with remote and hand on the edge of the bed, watching the television.

“You missed a brief play of Skate Canada,” Viktor commented.

“Oh? Did they show Yurio?”

“Oh course. He’s a force to be reckoned with. His senior debut will be very defining for him.”

His *Agape* performance in Hasetsu was incredible. Yuuri could only imagine what it was like in actual competition. He was nervous about the Rostelecom cup because he’d be facing him.

With little preamble, Yuuri dropped the towel from his hair as he continued his path and sat himself on Viktor’s lap as easily as if he were part of the bed itself.

“Yurio is a very hard worker,” Viktor continued his commentary, resting his chin on Yuuri’s shoulder. “Excelling in jumps, quads especially, spins, and all combinations therein. He’s improved his performance aspect, too; infusing his ballet experience into skating, resulting in elegant routines. Also able to adjust program on the fly to make up for any setbacks.”

It was all true. Frowning, Yuuri deflated a little against Viktor.

A hand ran down one of Yuuri’s sides. “I consider him my protege, though he’d bark at me if I said so to him. I’ve no doubts he’ll advance. Although, he really should relax and focus more on the feeling and make Russia proud with beautiful storytelling. Like another certain student of mine.”

His voice dipped into a lower register at that, other hand teasing the skin under Yuuri’s shirt.

The television flashed to a reel of Czech Republic’s skater, Emil Nekola. A banner in the corner stated he took third at Skate Canada.

“Nekola possesses excellent sportsmanship, impressive quad loops, and unique program themes. Affable - he did compete at World’s last year, but didn’t podium. I wouldn’t worry about him for the Rostelecom cup.” Fingers skittered under Yuuri’s shirt. “His stamina is nothing compared to my student’s.” Then Viktor let out a groan as Canada’s star skater came on, palms flattening on Yuuri’s skin. “Leroy is a bonafide wolf; a self-proclaimed king. Arrogant and pushy. With so many coach changes, I suspect a behavioral problem. I hate to admit that his tenacity and aerial feats are striking, though... He has the skills and drive to win, but I really hope he doesn’t. You’ll defeat and dethrone him.”

The disdain in Viktor’s voice was replaced with an encouraging coo, soft and sweet as a feather, not at all like the deft hands that fondled his chest, pushing into the muscles Yuuri had only recently known were tender and sensitive.
-These three will be moving on to their second event with the Rostelecom Cup, as well as Japan’s Yuuri Katsuki, who took silver at last week’s Cup of China. Italy’s Michele Crispino and South Korea’s Seung-Gil Lee will also be attending the Rostelecom Cup. After yesterday’s Short Programs, these two could have some favorable points in their second event-

Yuuri let out a breath as Viktor abandoned his chest for a lower playing field, touching and tracing the lines and dips of his sternum and ribs. He was used to Viktor watching his exploration, but with his back to him and the distraction of the television, it was all by feeling. He closed his eyes, giving into him completely.

“Crispino is average at best. He’s emotional, and that either fuels or hinders his ability to land his signature triple lutz/loop combination. Not a wolf, even with his anger management problems. Predictable.”

Oh… he should probably be paying attention. Just as he opened his eyes to see Seung-Gil appear on screen in a rainbow Latino motif, a wet kiss was placed on the back of his neck and a hand pressed into the hardened muscles of his abdomen. Yuuri raised from his lap at the building churn in his stomach while Viktor continued.

“-same could be said with Lee, but to a lesser degree. He really needs to boost his performance aspect. He excels at quad loops and technical execution and exciting costumes, but… no emotion. I like his adorable husky, though. Oh, and do not, under any circumstances approach him at banquets. You don’t want to know.”

He didn’t. Especially not now. What he did want to know was why Viktor was spreading his legs, which in turn spread Yuuri’s own legs…

“Altin from Kazakhstan is the one you should be keeping an eye on the most. He took bronze at World’s last year for his senior debut, and gold at Skate America this season. Hard-working, impressive quad Salchow, and generally beautiful and expressive skating. He doesn’t appear to have any athletic weaknesses, really, except flexibility… but he sort of reminds me of my ex if he were good at anything. Hard to read; maybe a wolf of like mind. It’ll be a difficult battle, but you must take the crown before he does.”

Slender fingers that had been biding their time finally reached their target. Being in his sleepwear, it left Yuuri with little protection. And in his current position, he was wide open. He sucked in a breath as Viktor cupped him.

“Your friend from Thailand,” Viktor resumed, “Had he not had that injury, I’ve no doubt he would have made it to the GPF last year. No idea why he has two coaches, though. Placed fourth in the first event and first in the third. Depending on the scores of everyone in the next two events, he may or may not make it to the finals. He has showmanship on his side along with passionate performances and costumes. He strikes me as devious. Or sneaky. Possibly a wolf, but with good intentions. His only weakness is lack of experience, so not a threat. For this year, anyway. You have experience on your side.”

Phichit had come a long way since their early rinkmate days. His love of musicals complemented Yuuri’s own love of music. Wait, why were they talking about Phichit? He wasn’t at the NHK trophy nor on the highlight reel. It was commercial. Was Viktor giving him the rundown of everyone while giving him a rub down?

Viktor shifted them both into a slightly straighter sit and hooked Yuuri’s feet around his shins.

“Then we have Chris. He consistently podiums. If it weren’t for me, he wouldn’t be stuck in a
silver streak. Probably. Overly friendly, somewhat pushy. Enjoys being in your head; he gathers secrets like your Thai friend. He’s a confident and mature skater. Exceptional jumper, even better spins. Better than me. His weakness is his habit of starting the season slow. I wish he would concentrate and put his best efforts in at the start. Also, his programs are… awkwardly sensual, though the audience loves it. Either way, you should focus on the others. Without me there to push him, he won’t take it as seriously.”

All of this was informative, but Yuuri couldn’t help but think he was being mean. Everyone else Viktor didn’t have a personal connection with, but with Christophe he did. Yuuri tried to speak once, voice cracking with a particular squeeze of his sac, then tried again. “A-aren’t you two close?”

“Who can say~?”

Yuuri frowned at the non-answer and tried for something else. “Were you really talking to him about us having sex?”

Viktor’s ministrations stopped. “Uh…”

He couldn’t see his face, but Yuuri waited all the same for whatever excuse was there.

“It was a special occasion! He’s been waiting for me to give him juicy details of my romantic life for years.”

“What did you tell him?”

“I can’t recall. Anyway, next is Raul Araújo from Brazil. He has a cooking show on YouTube-”

Why was he being so secretive? And that intel Chris had given him… “Is there anything I should know about? With you and Chris.”

There was a pause and then a sigh. “No, Yuuri. Contrary to popular belief, I’ve never slept with Christophe. He asked me out once, years ago, and I turned him down. We’re just friends.”

“Oh.” Was he sounding too accusing and possessive?

The silence prompted Viktor to give him a hug from behind. “I promise! Anyway, back to Araújo.”

He was avoiding the subject, but maybe he really wanted to get back to his game as his hand found its place over his crotch again.

The more Yuuri thought about it, the more it was a game. Actually, a tactic.

*Art of War … “Know your enemy as you know yourself.”*

But why the handjob? Was that also part of it? Combating distraction. Maybe?

With the lack of participation, Viktor stretched the elastic of Yuuri’s sleepwear and boxer briefs to grip his harder-than-he-realized length.

Yuuri hissed and reflexively jerked while Viktor grounded him by putting his chin on his shoulder once more. “He debuted two years ago, but has yet to podium. His flair and performances are enjoyable to watch but he always misses his jumps in the second half of his Free Skates. He was fifth at Skate America and I doubt he’ll podium higher than bronze with Chris at Trophee de France. Needs more experience; not a serious contender.” Viktor thumbed at the head of his length,
letting his voice drop low, yet playful. “It’d be different if he were like you and could still have steam in the second half.”

Yuuri had competed against Raul before. When, he couldn’t recall in that moment. What was he supposed to focus on? Pleasure or the information his general was providing?

Faster. Firmer. Free hand back in his shirt to tease at his chest.

His body was making the decision for him.

Yuuri’s breath picked up, and even though Viktor was very much speaking directly in his ear, the playfulness turned deep and sensuous, he couldn’t parse all the words. Something about Georgi having once been champion and was now average. Little faith he’ll make it the the prix. A marshmallow?


“--My Yuuri.”

“Wha-huh?” Yuuri snapped back to present as he felt the pressure cease. Viktor stopped?

“I said that’s two opponents you’ve defeated thus far. You’re a loyal soldier.”

“Oh.” He took one more moment to clear his head. He had a theory, of course, but getting confirmation from Viktor was what he really wanted. “So, was there a reason you were feeling me up while talking about other people?”

While Viktor had stopped moving his hand, he’d left them in place when he’d tried to get Yuuri’s attention. It was then his hands fell away. “Oh.” How could he have done that without thinking? Or had he intended it to not be so… weird? “We can talk about you now!”

That settled it at least. Did he really want to hear Viktor’s analysis of him? He was so brutal to the others. But with how sweet he wrapped his arm around his middle and pressed against him… then casually dipped into his pants, he supposed he’d listen.

“Top figure skater in Japan, made it to the Sochi GPF and placed sixth last season; various victories here and there throughout his career. A pouty katsudon with the cutest laugh and most beautiful smile. Would definitely spend time with at a banquet or otherwise. Hard-working, anxious, adorable Pyatachok. His strengths: Stamina, strength, and great step sequences and spins, all of which are influenced by his experience with ballet and other styles of dance. Dedicated. Tenacious! However, he does get a little cold during competitions. Quads need work. In the current season, he’s placed first at the qualifiers in Japan and second at the Cup of China. Final thoughts: With his new coach, Yuuri is sure to destroy the competition in Moscow and advance to the Grand Prix Final, where he will definitely win gold! Love wins!”

“... Is ‘pouty katsudon’ really in your skater stats for me? And Pyatachok?”

“Yes, they are. Personal notes are very important when analysing the competition. In parentheses.”

“Mm I see. Well, you're forgetting the largest threat to my success, Coach~” Before Viktor could ask ‘who’, Yuuri unhooked his ankles from Viktor’s legs and turned in his lap to momentarily straddle him, only to step back onto the floor, one of Viktor’s bent legs between his as Yuuri pushed him on his back with a hand. “-Viktor Nikiforov. Five-time world champion. One of four of
the competitors on the roster that can accomplish quads. The others slip up sometimes. But Viktor... He lands them every time.”

Viktor blinked up at him, eyes sparkling, despite the composed face he was nearly keeping. “And why do you suppose that is?”

“Because Viktor is dedicated to consistency and upping the ante.”

“Yes, that's true... That's how you win wars.”

“Constant training. Living and breathing the ice. A valiant soldier.”

“Now a general…”

“How does a soldier defeat a general, I wonder?” Yuuri unbuttoned Viktor’s shirt the rest of the way. He’d been waiting his turn to get ready for bed. With the removal of his shirt, Yuuri danced his fingertips from his throat to above his heart. “Going straight for the vital spots…”

A guilty smile spread on Viktor’s face. “Now, now, I didn't get in my position by letting Delilahs steal my weak points from my lips.” He placed his index finger on his lips for emphasis. “That would just be begging for defeat. A good general keeps his secrets.”

“Viktor wounded me. It's only right I return the favor.”

“Wounded? Is that what they call it in your books~?”

Yuuri had to give it to him, that was really lame. “… No. Now you ruined what I was going for.”

Viktor regarded the remark, though the smirk remained. “Mmm... I still think you should go for complete victory, honestly.”

Yuuri licked his lips and raked a hand through his hair, pushing the damp locks from his face. No skates or costume, but it was what he had for the moment. “Either way, I'll return ten-fold.”

The coach facade Viktor had been clinging onto by a thread snapped in that moment. Eyes sparkling, body wriggling for him.

Placing his knee on the bed between Viktor’s legs, Yuuri leaned in for a kiss and was met with eagerness. His leg had been strategically placed, and it didn’t take long for Viktor to take the bait and rut against him as they kissed.

When the heat became too much, Yuuri divested them both and kissed down his exposed body to his pants. He made quick work of removing them, but stopped at the sudden inkling to try something he hadn't before.

Yuuri took to one knee and got between Viktor's legs and took him mouth.

Viktor's reaction was sharp and sudden, hips rolling towards him with a trembling whimper.

He hadn't wanted to get him off this anyway. He didn't trust he'd be able to, but he at least confirmed the taste and if he'd be able to fit him in his mouth. Stopping didn't disappoint Viktor, and Yuuri hoped it was for favor of his original plan.

Viktor stretched an arm to the nightstand and groped around for the open box of condoms and lube. Once he found them, he practically threw them.
And here Yuuri thought he was the impatient one. What's more, wasn't Viktor the one that started all this? Yuuri wouldn't put it past him to have planned this all along. He did have a knack for riling him up.

It really was ten-fold. Then again, they'd been becoming adept at meeting the others challenges and demands each time they came together, one-upping along the way.

Just as Yuuri's hands were becoming used to prepping his love for him to enter, learning it was only made easier with frequency. They were learning to answer the call of the other's desires, giving and taking.

Knowing your enemy as yourself was important, but knowing your general had its own reward.

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4. Tactical Dispositions

“*To secure ourselves against defeat lies in our own hands, but the opportunity of defeating the enemy is provided by the enemy himself.*

*What the ancients called a clever fighter is one who not only wins, but excels in winning with ease.*

*Hence his victories bring him neither reputation for wisdom nor credit for courage.*

*He wins his battles by making no mistakes.*”

“So I’m sure you’ve been wondering… why Shanghai?”

It was mid-morning, and Yuuri looked up from his phone, from which he was getting directions to the building that Viktor had designated. “A little, yeah.”

“A little, he says.” Viktor huffed, adjusting his coat and his scarf for the hundredth time since they’d been wandering the city blocks, moving in and out of the deep shadows of the skyscrapers. “You probably think I’m crazy or random, don’t you?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Viktor shook his head. “Never mind. We have a point and purpose here in Shanghai. You remember what I said about being in the territory of our enemies?”

Yuuri nodded. It would have been hard to forget. “Yeah?”

“We are literally in the shadow of one right at this moment.”

They both looked up at the building across the street, large and impressive with its glass windows stacked all the way to the top. The sunlight glinted off of what wasn’t shaded by other buildings nearby, and though neither of them could read the sign on the side of it, Yuuri’s phone confirmed that they had reached their destination.

“Okay. So what is this?”

“This is the InveCom Shanghai Tower; a company dedicated to financial services. Specifically, investing in commercial real estate ventures and all of the ins and outs associated with that.”
Yuuri stared at him with a blank expression, then at the building, waiting for the point.

“This,” Viktor continued, tone dipping low and silky- his narrator voice. “This building is where Wei Bin makes his living now. Do you know who Wei Bin is?”

“He was the competitor who podiumed next to you until Christophe came along, right?”

“Yes. That’s one way to put it. He’s also the older brother of Cao Bin, whom I’m sure you recall from last season.”

Yuuri scuffed the sidewalk with his toe. “Yeah.”

“Good. Let’s go inside.”

“Huh? Why?”

Viktor didn’t answer, just hurried to the end of the block to cross with traffic. In moments, they were inside the expansive lobby, decorated with modern furniture and clear acrylic features strategically placed to direct visitors and employees to their destination. Viktor gave a nod to the reception desk, then kept walking past it, over to one of the sitting areas against a large, pale blue wall.

“Are you saying he’s your enemy?” Yuuri asked once Viktor found a suitable table with armchairs that were comfortable, but not too comfortable, to sit in.

“Hm? They both are, yes. Now take this notebook… we’re going to have a little business meeting here.”

“Are we allowed to be doing this?”

“I look confident and authoritative, and we’re not going anywhere upstairs. We’ll be fine. Just pretend that you belong here. For all they know, we’re waiting for a client or business partner to join us for lunch.”

Yuuri took the offered notebook that Viktor retrieved from his briefcase, then a pen with Ritz-Carlton written on the side in faded gold.

“You’d be amazed at what you can get away with if you just act like you’re supposed to be there.”

Yuuri flipped the top sheet of the pad of paper- which turned out to also be from their hotel -over, and readied his pen. “I can see that.”

“Perfect. That’s a very important war tactic, you know.” Viktor got out his tiny laptop and set it up to be open, but not on. “Now. Wei Bin was a talented skater, but a wolf if I ever saw one. Dangerous. Crafty. Rude. You remember the year I debuted in the Senior division?”

Yuuri nodded. Of course he did.

“And how I skated my last performance to The Lakme Duet at Worlds with an injured ankle?”

“You still got silver, but I was so worried.”

“Oh, you.” Viktor smiled in spite of himself, pleased at the admission, then straightened up to get serious again. “Wei was the cause of it.”

“Really?”
“Yes. He’d been threatening me ever since the Grand Prix Final the year before. I was still a junior then, but with how well my season had gone, it was obvious that I would be debuting as a senior the next year. He said then, and again throughout all of the competitions between, that I should have been skating with the ladies, not the men, and that my skirts and makeup didn’t belong in his bracket.”

Viktor waited until Yuuri was properly baited, protective anger brewing beneath the surface, then continued.

"Right before my Free Skate, he cornered me in the locker room. Not for the first time, either, but he was so angered by my world record-breaking streak that he actually pushed me. I toppled right over a bench and twisted my ankle."

"He-"

Viktor cut him off with a smile and a soft tut tut. "We're supposed to be in a business meeting, remember."

Frustrated, Yuuri began to scratch the notepad with the pen, drawing dark, angry lines.

"It was lucky that I didn't crack my head open. I was already in my skates, after all."

"What happened then?"

"He left with some stupid remark and I tightened my boot up. I wasn't about to lose the points I'd earned, or pay a penalty fee, just because of a stupid bully."

Yuuri frowned, cross-hatching the notepad darker and darker. "At least you still got silver."

"Yeah. I did. And Yakov was furious with me for skating while injured- and not telling him -but..."

He shrugged. “Either way, that was the true start of our bitter rivalry, Yuuri. You know that the Chinese are all about honor, so Wei took every success that I had as a personal offense. Oh, don't give me that look. I'm not trying to be offensive when I mention the stereotype, it's just how it is. I guess the Japanese are the same way, aren't they?"

Yuuri rolled his eyes.

“Anyway, from then on it was constant tension between us. I would best him in the cups and he would try to get me in trouble with technicalities. The ISU was not a fan of either of us. But when I brought my firebird routine, he was utterly defeated. He never recovered from his pitiful scores- neither Georgi nor I could be touched that year -and retired another year later.” Viktor, so pleased with himself, gave a long and wistful sigh, which ended with a mood-shifting frown. “Then came Cao.”

Yuuri looked up from his patchy storm cloud of notes, expectant. “And?”

“And he was ten times worse! No, a hundred at least! Cao marched right up to me in the first cup we were both in and told me that he was going to avenge his brother and dethrone me! Who does that?!” Viktor actually had a good idea who would try to do that- who had -but didn't want to even give the pleasure of acknowledging him again.

“JJ?” Suggested Yuuri, dedicated student that he was.

Viktor shuddered. “Ugh.”
“Sorry.”

“Cao did manage to best me in some of the early years. You know, while I focused on the Olympics, or physical therapy for my knee. But when I made my comeback, I made sure he never saw gold if I was in the ring. Hell, after that, he barely even made it to the podium if I was there! I shattered his confidence and ruined any notion of vengeance for him or his brother. He didn't do very well last year, did he?”

There was a moment of silence as Viktor waited for Yuuri's equally enthusiastic righteous indignation, but instead he looked distinctly dampened.

“He did better than me…”

“Yuuri… that's not…” Viktor swiped his hair back with the tips of his fingers. “Look, Cao retired after his loss.”

“So did I.”

“But you're here now! And you're amazing. Cao never asked me to be his coach. You picked yourself up and have been conquering at every event!”

Yuuri didn't look convinced, turning to the notepad to draw little circles in the corner.

“He gave up. He retired. You didn't. You're here, fighting. And you'll win. I know you will, Yuuri.”

“If you say so.”

“Am I your coach or not?”

“Yeah…”

Viktor fixed him with a hard stare. “So I'm leading you into this battle as your general, right?”

“Yes.”

“Then act like it!”

Yuuri blinked up at him, shaken, then nodded with a determined frown. “Okay. Got it.”

“Good. Now let's go sneak a peek at Wei’s desk. I bet he’s in a cubical, ha ha! So much for fame and glory!”

“Sure…”

5. Energy

“Indirect tactics, efficiently applied, are inexhaustible as Heaven and Earth, unending as the flow of rivers and streams; like the sun and moon, they end but to begin anew; like the four seasons, they pass away to return once more.”
They’d gone to the rink and stayed focused long enough to run through both programs, with a bit of padded time for warm ups, cool downs, and a break in the interim. When they got back to the hotel after lunch, Viktor read The Art of War again, sharing the highlights with Yuuri to reinforce the concepts as they applied to the upcoming battle. Then it was time for a nap, which turned into sex and then a nap, and when Viktor woke up, it was to soft hands running up and down his naked side.

In the past few days, they’d both learned so much about each other. Spending so much time being open and intimate had cemented Viktor’s trust in Yuuri and increased the affection he felt for him tenfold. He wasn’t used to so much touching, and the sweet smiles that Yuuri gave him whenever he caught him in those moments before and after sleep made him absolutely weak.

Viktor had never been so in love or so happy, and he gave a soft, approving hum when Yuuri kissed him.

At first, Viktor was sure that he’d never get these moments; warm and dazed as he came around in the arms of his lover. He’d always been a morning person, up before everyone else. Bed early while everyone stayed awake, then sneaking out of bed when he woke up to give his sweetheart the best chance at peaceful slumber. While Yuuri always stayed up later, letting Viktor be the one to watch him stir come late morning, Viktor’s naps provided plenty of opportunity for returned affection. Yuuri gave it at every opportunity.

Viktor sighed, stretching under Yuuri as he worked his way down his body, kissing every inch of skin as he pulled back the blankets. He closed his eyes, soaking up the warm attention, and might have fallen back to sleep if Yuuri hadn’t settled between his legs and took him into his mouth.

Sleep was then the furthest thing from Viktor’s mind.

Yuuri had given him so many incredible experiences over the past few days; so many firsts that he’d never expected, but this… this was something else. It wasn’t the first time he’d felt the warm wet of Yuuri’s tongue on him, but every time had been brief and testing; just a step on the way to something else- giving him a taste of excitement to whet his appetite, then finish the foreplay with those delicate hands before moving on to the main course.

This time was different. Yuuri wasn’t moving on, he was fixated; sucking and rolling his tongue, bobbing his head, cradling him with his palm. These were all things that Viktor had done to him over the last week, with tactics developed over the years of experience in his previous relationship. It hadn’t taken him long to figure out how to make Yuuri squirm and writhe under his touch, and he’d always been so good with his mouth. But to receive it… to have all of that experience- which he should have expected Yuuri to soak up, of course he would -turned back on him? Seeing the way Yuuri checked his expression, wild hair over dark eyes and wet lips, licking him from base to tip? It was maddening, and Viktor was a hot, babbling mess in very short order.

That Yuuri looked so into it was almost enough to to finish him off, and Viktor barely had the presence of mind to reach for the box of tissues at the side of the bed, blindly groping while Yuuri kept on, full-steam.

“Y-Yuuri-” Viktor muttered between ragged breath, body tensing. “H-here…”

Yuuri did take the box, but set it aside, redoubling his efforts to break him.

Swallowing wasn’t a difficult thing to do; Viktor had done it so many times that it was easy enough to get past the taste and texture, but it could be overwhelming. Especially when new to it all. But if Yuuri wanted to try, he wasn’t going to stop him. Yuuri would hate that.
He came with the cry of Yuuri’s name on his tongue, interrupted with by a sharp gasp and hard shudder. Each breath that came after was one of sweet relief from the tension and pressure. But while Viktor was adrift in ecstasy, Yuuri did not look happy. His mouth was stretched in a tight frown over his lovely pink cheeks. The word that best described Yuuri’s expression was sour, but Viktor quickly realized then that salty was the more likely culprit... and that Yuuri hadn’t managed to swallow despite his best efforts.

Laughing, Viktor pushed himself into a sit, arms and legs more jelly than solid, and plucked two or three tissues from the box, handing them over. “Just spit it out, Yuuri. You don’t have to- yes, that’s… good, then.”

Yuuri, wiping his mouth with the tissues, took another couple from the box and coughed into it. The evidence of his heated embarrassment had spread to his ears, and his frown deepened the more Viktor chuckled at him. “Sorry,” he muttered.

“It’s fine… Really! More than fine.” Viktor dropped himself back onto the bed, stretching out his legs with a long, pleasant sigh. “That was amazing.”

“Probably not what you’re used to, but…”

The contented smile that Viktor had been wearing fell flat at that, and he lifted his head to peer at him over his own naked body. “Yuuri, I’ve never even had a blowjob before just now.”

What followed was a slack-jawed stare, then a small gasp, and stuttering as Yuuri tried to backpedal out of whatever trap he’d fallen into. “I- uh, well I just assumed. I shouldn’t, but I thought that since you seemed so skilled with giving, I… I’m sorry.”

With another sigh- this one of marked long suffering and distant pain -Viktor pressed the back of his hand to his forehead and shrugged. “That’s because my ex was an ass, Yuuri.”

More staring. Yuuri, the often deer-caught-in-headlights fanboy, wore a face that was so obviously torn between excitement at learning more about his idol’s mysterious past and being horrified at his faux pas, that Viktor had to laugh again. It was charming, even though it hurt a little.

When the gaping silence had gone on for another ten seconds or so, Viktor continued. “To set the record straight, I’ve only ever been in one relationship before, Yuuri. One boyfriend. For three years. After that, there were… a couple of one night stands- just for the paparazzi -and I was completely wasted for both, so I don’t really remember them. That’s it. I needed the media to think I was straight, so… I did what I had to and…” He shuddered. “Anyway, I’m sure you’ve seen the tabloids. Those were the rumors that weren’t false.”

Yuuri said nothing, only nodded, brown eyes like a dog’s when they’re being baited with a particularly tasty treat. Cute, but ridiculous.

“The boyfriend- Niko -is someone I met when I was fifteen. Young and stupid.”

“Really?” Yuuri’s voice wasn’t skeptical so much as it was curious.

“I may be a genius when it comes to skating, but back then, I was so naive about everything else in life. I was desperate to have something, or someone pay attention to me for more reasons than my dancing or skating. So desperate, in fact, that I didn’t even care he was a jerk most of the time.”

“Well… a lot of people want someone, Viktor. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Defending him to the end. Viktor let himself smile for Yuuri’s sake. “He didn’t even like figure
skating. And repeatedly told me that he wasn’t gay, yet still managed to convince me to sleep with him as soon as I turned sixteen.”

“What? How did he meet you if he didn’t like skating? That’s been your life!”

At least that’s what Yuuri had gleaned from his confession, which was a relief. “His mama was my first sponsor. We met at a benefit party; the very same night she signed up to support me, in fact. I don’t think she ever found out that we were together, sneaking around.”

“Oh… that makes sense. I can’t imagine being in a relationship when I was fifteen. I skated a lot, too, but I was more shy than I am now, I think.”

“It was fine at first. Fun, even, to have a boyfriend… He lived in Moscow so we didn’t see each other much, both too busy with school.”

“…yeah,” said Yuuri, though his voice was more somber as he continued. “And then he pressured you?”

“He said he loved me, and that it was what he needed for support. Niko was constantly getting into fights with his parents, and I wanted to be there for him… even though I had my own reservations about it.”

“He used family drama to guilt?”

“Well, I…” Viktor trailed off as he thought about it, reassessing. “That was one of his strategies, yes. One of the many joys of dating Niko.”

“And things were like that for three years?”

“It wasn’t as bad in the beginning, like I said, but progressively got worse. I was in school almost the entire time I was with him, so I only saw him once or twice a month until summer rolled around. We texted a lot, mostly.”

“Long distance… Easier not in person?”

Viktor shrugged, and folded his arms behind his head. None of this was easy to talk about, but Yuuri needed to know. Someone who insisted on making sure that Viktor felt good and loved deserved to know. “It made it easier to forget and pretend that we were both with the person we’d built up in our minds, I guess, instead of the truth.”

“You said he denied that he was gay.”

Viktor nodded. “Repeatedly. Even to the last day we were together.”

“So,” Yuuri ventured, voice gentle. Cautious. “Did he pretend you were a girl?”

Viktor turned his head away, cheek against the pillow, and stared off at the curtains over the window. “Except when we were in public. Even then, I’m sure he wanted to. His favorite things about me- his words -were my ‘amazing ass’ and ‘ethereal hair.’” The laugh that followed was hollow at best. “He had a point, though. I was pretty amazing.”

Yuuri’s frown turned to a scowl. “You’re still amazing, Viktor, but that’s not… how pig-headed!”

“Yuuri…”

“I was… I was looking at every magazine and poster I could get, just wishing I could talk to you,
“Again, I was very naive. An old roommate of mine found out about us, and he was so disappointed. I think that’s when I knew that it wasn’t meant to be. That my roommate was right, I should have held out for someone who really cared, but…”

Yuuri squeezed his knee, waiting.

“I just remember thinking that I’d lost my chance.”

“But you were so young.”

Another laugh. “Yeah, but who would want someone so dumb? Someone who lets a jerk like Niko push them around? Yakov never liked him, even from the start, but I didn’t listen.”

“You wanted love. It just… took a while to see that it wasn’t with him, right? You’re not damaged, Viktor.”

“Yuuri…” Deep breath, slow exhale. Just enough to compromise with a smile. “I have you now. Nothing else matters.”

Yuuri bent to kiss Viktor’s stomach, then crawled to him for a kiss on his lips, soft and sweet.

*Yuuri* was soft and sweet. Caring, trustworthy. Encouraging, too. Even after admitting all of what he had, Yuuri still wanted him.

Viktor kissed him back, putting every ounce of gratitude and love that he had in him.

Then Yuuri pulled back, sudden horror on his face. “I should have brushed my teeth first!”

“…What?” Viktor asked, too stunned to process for a full fifteen seconds. Then he frowned. “Yuuri. You don’t need to worry. *Stop* worrying.”

“I’m sorry!”

“You could kiss me a hundred more times and I would love each one! Trust me, it’s fine.”

“W-okay…”

“Really.”

“You aren’t bothered by it. I get it now.”

Viktor smacked his forehead, then pinched the bridge of his nose, huffing once, long and weary. “We’re still in bed together, Yuuri! If we were going out, then, sure, brush your teeth. But for now it’s just fine.”

“Okay…”

“For all you know, I’m about to attack you next. What’s the point of wasting toothpaste? It’s all the same… it’s… Well, all right, there are some exceptions, but for the most part…”

“Okay! Okay, I get it!” Yuuri hid his face against Viktor’s chest in shame.

“God, Yuuri…” Viktor turned his efforts to stroking his anxious lover’s hair, sighing once again. He may have lacked the clever phrases and terminology of those saucy books that Yuuri had, but
Yuuri’s practical knowledge of experience was sorely lacking. There was so much still to learn. So much to… Viktor hummed. “Though, that does remind me of something that I’ve always wanted to try…”

“Oh?”

Even at his most paranoid or flirty, Yuuri Katsuki was pure at heart. It was so cute.

“Yeah. One of those exceptions I mentioned…”

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6. **Illusion and Reality**

"...the clever combatant imposes his will on the enemy, but does not allow the enemy’s will to be imposed on him."

“So that’s what it’s like. I’ve always wondered. No wonder he was so obsessed with it,” Viktor said whilst rubbing the back of Yuuri’s thigh, tone light and amused like he’d been watching a puppy at play.

Face burning against the sheets, Yuuri tried to regain composure. Viktor's head had been between his legs before but never like that. Wet and soft. Best, or was it worst of all, Viktor had been completely into it. The pressure and sounds...

Intimate life with Viktor had been one surprise after another having been in relationships - correction, a relationship - before, he had hands-on experience. Yuuri wasn’t naive of course. He’d read multiple instances in his books, but hadn’t given it much thought besides “That sounds gross” and moved along.

It had been weird. But not unpleasantly so. Different. Embarrassing! Really, really, embarrassing. And he had liked it. Out of all the things they had tried from his books, that had not been one he was going to suggest. “So he did that to you, but never let you do it back?” Yuuri asked. Anything to get his mind off of wondering if he was clean enough down there.

Viktor snorted, "Are you kidding? Of course not! That ass’s ass was off limits, no exceptions.” He paused, and then, “Okay now is the time to brush teeth." Laughter followed him on his way to the bathroom. “He wasn’t gay, Yuuri! Don’t forget!”

“Oh. Right...” Yuuri rolled onto his back, tissues underneath him. Even with brushed teeth, just knowing where Viktor’s mouth had been...

Viktor came back moments later, minty fresh. “He had free reign over my body, but refused to face the fact that I was male, and I wasn't allowed to do anything that would make him feel less masculine. Otherwise he’d get mad... Needless to say, he got mad a lot because I've always been kind of sassy~”

Was ‘sassy’ the right word? “You have free reign over mine…” Whatever he wanted, whenever he wanted. He’d hoped these last few days had been proof of that.

Viktor paused in his steps to complete his path to the bed, face softening from amused to adoring.
One knee to the bed and he was crawling towards him to settle into the crook of his neck to nuzzle under his chin. “Same for you. Thank you for loving all of me.”

Yuuri kissed the top of his head. “He didn't deserve you.”

An arm came up to wrap around his chest, grip tightening with each word like it was the first time he accepted the fact. “No, he didn't. I'm lucky to have you.”

It wasn’t luck, it was fate. Yuuri began to card his fingers through the longer strands of Viktor’s hair, slowing as he approached the ends. “Was Niko the reason you cut your hair?”

“Hmm…” Viktor sighed before answering. “After we broke up, I knew if I cut my hair that he'd never want me back. So in a way, it was insurance. But I had a hundred reasons for cutting my hair. He was just one of them.”

Cutting your hair was something Japanese culture did to symbolize heartbreak. Obviously his heart had been broken, but it wasn't the same kind of reasoning. “Was it Russia? The ISU?”

Viktor went quiet, considering his words as he cuddled in close. “You have to understand that in Russia, men are expected to be a certain way. It's one thing for a child to get away with unconventional things because they might grow out of it, but an adult…”

“Minako said something like that.” That had been her theory and one Yuuri himself tried to accept, yet felt there was something more.

“She’d mentioned something along those lines, yes. There are laws in place. To protect children from gay men. Apparently, no following societal convention means mentally unstable. A predator. A sick pedophile. Certainly not fit to represent our mother country. When I turned eighteen, I knew there were complaints, but a representative from the Russian skating federation came to speak to me directly.”

“And told you had to cut your hair and change your costumes if you wanted to keep skating for Russia?” The ISU had so many regulations from costumes to music. Russia had their own on top of that. Yuuri liked the traditional men’s costumes and wore them without a fuss, so he never gained the attention of Japan’s officials for rule-breaking. If he had, how would he have reacted?

“They made it very clear what they expected, but the choice was mine.”

“You knew cutting your hair with Niko would get him to leave you alone, did you think the world would, too? Expose yourself less.”

Viktor trembled against him, jaw clenching for a moment. “I hadn't even considered cutting my hair until they spoke to me. Not for any reason. I loved my hair. But there are some things worth sacrificing for... I dumped my boyfriend, rewrote my programs, cut my hair. I changed in every way I could.”

“Skating itself is sacrificing. You gave up so much to keep doing what you loved.”

“It's a little more complicated than that, but... Russians never do do anything halfway. That’s... why it's so important that we win in Moscow.”

“A soldier from Russia turned general now bringing a soldier from foreign soil to win?”

“Yes. Their hero presenting a new champion to win for another country. The Russian people love me, and they will love you, too. The federation won't be able to do a thing about it.”
“For revenge?”

“I guess you could call it that... But I want them to know that they don't own me anymore.”

“I believe we can do it. I'll bring victory home.”

Viktor lifted himself from his shoulder to give him a smile that was tired, but grateful. “I know you will.”

“I have an experienced general on my side. Taught me everything I know.”

He laughed. “And the power of love, too, yeah?”

“Most important of all!” While it was his program’s theme, as cheesy as it sounded, it was becoming a life mantra. All the loves in his life. Especially the one in his arms.

“I love you, Yuuri. Thank you for doing this for me.”

As much as Yuuri felt the affirmations, it was still a work in progress with saying it between them. When it was said, he did his best to return it. “I love you, too. It's really... always been for you.”

The ISU may not have approached Yuuri, but he had sacrificed a lot in order to have Viktor in his life. His time, health, body, and dedication had all been for the purpose of reaching Viktor on the ice.

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7. **Engaging the Force**

   “*Ponder and deliberate before you make a move.*
   
   *He will conquer who has learnt the artifice of deviation.*”

---

It was late and the pair of lovers had just finished another room service meal. They sat comfortably lounged together on the suite’s sitting room sofa like birds in a little nest, huddled together, preening absentely with fingers in hair and on the triangles of exposed skin where shirts and sweaters were displaced. The flat screen droned on with a Chinese soap opera involving an assassin who couldn’t stop sleeping with his targets. Or, at least, that’s what Viktor assumed. It was a classic *Jason* move.

They’d spent the day at the rink, and they were both tired from a long day of resisting each other and exercising in the usual way. It wasn’t nearly as fun, they’d decided, but couldn’t be helped. But, now sated in their appetites, their only goal for the rest of the night was to relax. No more work until morning.

That meant slipping into a vegetative state while waiting to go to bed. Yuuri had his phone, which Viktor assumed kept him entertained while he pieced together little bits of story for the Soap Opera Megaverse. Without Yakov, though, it wasn’t quite the same; Yuuri didn’t know all of the backstory and plot lines so far, and explaining them- particularly in English -was a near impossible task. The story had been years in the making... it was no wonder that Yuuri wasn’t invested.

Viktor set his chin on Yuuri’s shoulder and peeked down at the cell phone, which had a veritable wall of text on it that he was scrolling through. Squinting, he could make out a few words-
something about an Angellica and the broad-chested man with chiseled jaw and the scent of evergreen aftershave…

He frowned. Was this one of Yuuri’s infamous Saucy Books?!

Yuuri continued to scroll through, face impassive as stone, just reading as if the scene in his hands weren’t about the impassioned fantasies of the man with the eyepatch.

*Angellica’s skirts were dampened with mud and rainwater, blonde tresses smattered against her face. He kissed her, lifting her up and onto the hood of the carriage, and smashed his lips against hers for a second time. Then a third. She cried his name and he silenced her with the kiss of heady desire, which made her moan-

“Yuuri…”

“Hm?”

“Tell me about your books?”

In a flash, the text disappeared from the screen with a single swipe of Yuuri’s thumb; a practiced movement if he ever saw it.

“Huh?” Yuuri asked, making a poor attempt at feigning innocence. “Which books?”

More frowning. Viktor touched his nose to Yuuri’s neck, then a small kiss with pouting lips. “Your saucy ones. Like the one you were just reading.”

“Oh.” Yuuri’s cell phone slipped from his fumbling hands and onto the couch. Once retrieved, he stuffed it into the pocket at his hip. “I don’t really read that much. They’re just, you know, silly romances…”

“You seem to like them, though, so they can’t be that silly.”

“They’re cute. And…” he hesitated.

“Hmmmmm?”

“I got turned on to them by a figure skater- Annika Larsson -who based a program on this series of novels…”

“Oh, I’ve heard of her. She was a champion in the ladies’ division five or six years ago, wasn’t she? Did you know her?”

Yuuri shook his head, nervous eyes drifting from the hands in his lap to the television, then off toward the door. “No. But I loved her program. It was… romantic like yours are. So I looked up the books and I sort of got hooked.”

“Is that so?” Viktor’s arm found its way behind Yuuri’s back, winding around to hug against his side. “Romantic… You think I’m romantic?”

“Viktor…” Yuuri whined at him, wincing.

“Fine, fine, what are these books?”

“The Vision’s Pearl by Ingrid Frey.”
“Gasp, that does sound saucy!”

Another pained whine. “They’re not that saucy!”

Adding his other arm, which he wrapped around Yuuri’s front, Viktor ceased his teasing with a tight hug. “If it helps any, Yuuri… once I read a very romantic book…”

The uncomfortable squirming ceased and Yuuri cocked his head to one side, looking back at him. “Yeah?”

“Yes. Where a young man was travelling with a wolf to save a princess. Loosely based on the famous Russian folk tale, Ivan and the Grey Wolf. Are you familiar with Ivan?”

“Somewhat, anyway.”

Viktor nodded, relieved. That would at least save him from having to explain it all. Most of the Ivan stories followed a similar path, but the iterations diverged wildly from one to another. Like his. How would Yuuri react? “The princess was kidnapped years ago and everyone had been searching for her. Failing that, they wanted the firebird that had taken her in the night. Little did the young man know, though, that his wolf companion was actually the princess in disguise.”

“And she couldn’t let him know?”

“No. He wouldn’t need to go on a journey to save her if he knew.”

Yuuri considered this, shifting on the couch to lean back against him. “Does he need to save her from herself?”

“Essentially, yes.” Viktor bit his lip. Yuuri was astute, he’d always known that, but this observation… “She’s cursed. The princess turns into a horrible monster when triggered, laying waste to the villages and everyone in them. So, she’s preparing him to break the curse through various trials in their travels.”

“Like a chosen one?”

“Yes! Just like that. Only he can save her, even if it means that he has to kill her in the end. At least she would be free.”

At that, Yuuri gasped. A cute and tiny gasp that was sincerely shocked. “A tragedy!”

Tragedy? Viktor frowned. “It… it sounds like one, but…” That wasn’t what he wanted to hear. “Every morning, the wolf goes out hunting and turns back into the princess. It’s part of what will keep her human. And one day, the young man follows the wolf…”

_The wolf was weary. After speaking with the King, whether he accepted the crown or not, the guilt of having abandoned the kingdom was nearly too much to bear. He would never have let the young man follow if he’d not been distracted. A wolf’s keen sense of smell and sharp ears had never betrayed him before, but as the wolf shed his cloak, and the princess emerged to dance in the rising sunlight, the young man witnessed it all from the underbrush._

“So he finds out… Does the princess see him?”
“Only once it’s too late. He’d followed the paw prints in the snow, and she knows he’s too smart to be tricked any longer. Besides, she’s not as fast on human legs, and she’s so in love with him…”

She stared at him, he stared back, neither of them daring to breathe. The princess had never been so vulnerable, not to anyone in her entire life. She shivered. Her dress wasn’t enough protection from the cold, not like the wolf’s fur was. It was only a few feet away. She could take it, transform again, but… it was already too late. He’d seen her for what she was, and that thrilled her as much as it terrified her.

“Does true love break the curse?”

“It’s… not that simple. He already loved the wolf as his dearest companion. If it was up to love, the curse would be broken already.”

Her skin, pale beneath the pink blossom color on her cheeks, ears, and nose, was like moonlight; her hair, long and silver like the finest silk; her eyes an icy blue, just like his wolf’s. His most beloved companion. The one who had helped him, believed in him all this time.

The young man, heart full, took one step toward her. She, the most beautiful woman in all the world, who he had loved… Not a princess, perhaps, but winning the heart of the missing royal had never been the point. But his wolf girl, who trembled in uncertainty before him; she was who he needed in his life.

Yuuri nodded in concession. “That makes sense.”

“Love,” continued Viktor, closing his eyes and pressing closer. “Love can make you stronger, but it doesn’t fix everything…” He knew that first hand, much as he didn’t want to admit it. Shutting out the rest of the world had been wonderful, but their sabbatical would eventually come to an end, and they’d have to face the falcon again. Together.

“Not all books can skirt around that, I guess.”

“No. I love fairytales and love stories both, but I like it most when they’re grounded. Magic I believe, but life isn’t simple and isn’t fair. Sometimes the mistress of the mountain kills you; sometimes she saves you. Either way, you’re changed forever…” Viktor dropped his voice to a low murmur, holding tight to his love like a safety line. “The princess will never get her parents back, or all of those years she spent alone in her tower.”

Yuuri nudged his head, nose pushing at his hair until he could kiss his scalp where he’d poked him so many times before. “Do you relate to the princess?”

Viktor blinked hard, then again, lashes fluttering in awe. Was he really that obvious? He hoped the warmth in his blush wasn’t as obvious to Yuuri as it was to him. “I like to think that anyone can relate to the princess.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” Yuuri kissed his head again. “Or the young man. Be the hero.”
“Yes. Exactly. And though she can’t change her past, she can move forward. The young man, his love, can change her fate.”

Yuuri smiled, then, pressing the pleasant curve to Viktor’s forehead. “The story doesn’t end when they get together.”

“No. They have more quests, more things to learn, ways they can be stronger, evils to defeat. But they are stronger together than they are alone. He doesn’t even know that she’s the princess, just a girl.”

“He just knows that his wolf companion is a beautiful maiden…”

“Right. It’s not like being a princess is a physical trait; a person is a princess because of who they are, not what they look like.”

Yuuri hummed in thought, then nodded again, which offered some relief to the bashful storyteller. “So what happened next?”

“With the princess and the young man?”

“Yeah, after he discovers that she’s not just a wolf.”

“Oh,” Viktor said. “They kiss, of course.”

She didn’t move as he approached, bare feet rooted to the frozen earth. The look on his face was one of adoration and understanding. Warmth, too. He removed his own traveler’s cloak and set it around her shoulders.

“You’re cold,” he said, and his fingers lingered at her neck after pulling the fur lining close.

“You will be, too… I can retrieve my own, and-”

He touched her cheek so gently that her words left her, and in their absence, tears gathered on her lashes.

“Don’t cry,” he said. “It’s okay.”

She smiled at that, though it was the soft, sad smile of a broken heart. Could she have this? Was it right? After all these years, was she really allowed some small happiness? It had been so long since she’d felt such a tender touch that she’d been sure she would never feel it again. Yet here they were, and he was gazing at her like he was already her lover.

Had she been the wolf, she would have howled.

“Please.” He wiped her cheek with his thumb.

“I love you.” Her confession, timid and drenched in heartache.

The young man took her into his arms and kissed her.

“Gasp, Viktor. Is this a kissing book?”
Viktor frowned, pulling back to get a good look at the playful expression on Yuuri’s face. “Is that a Princess Bride reference?”

“Mmmmmmaybe.”

“It’s not one of your saucy books, but it’s very romantic, like I said.”

*She wept and he kissed her again, soft and sweet.*

“I love you, too.”

“So does it have a happy ending?”

Viktor blinked again, lips pursing. How was he supposed to answer that? “You know… I… don’t know.”

“Was it ambiguous?”

“No…” Viktor tucked his head under Yuuri’s chin. “I just haven’t finished reading it. I accidentally left it in Russia when I came to coach you.”

“Oh. I see.” He was smiling—Viktor could hear it in his voice—which meant that he’d accepted the answer. “Let me know when you find out?”

“Sure. When I finish reading it, you’ll be the first I tell.”

“Great!”

It’d taken all of his bravery to tell Yuuri as much as he had, but Viktor thought he could manage that much, one way or another. Viktor kissed his neck, then looked back at the soap opera playing out on the television. He’d completely lost track of what was going on. But he had Yuuri, and the princess had the young man.

Viktor gave a soft sigh, content for the moment. “I think it’ll have a happy ending, though.”

8. **Variations and Adaptability**

“There are five dangerous faults which may affect a general:

(1) Recklessness, which leads to destruction;
(2) cowardice, which leads to capture;
(3) a hasty temper, which can be provoked by insults;
(4) a delicacy of honor which is sensitive to shame;
(5) over-solicitude for his men, which exposes him to worry and trouble.”

Their time in Shanghai, thus far, had been quite productive. At least it could be considered as such by some measurement, and that was what mattered to Viktor. The last few days had been filled
with learning and indulgence, each of them getting more comfortable and familiar with each other, letting secrets slip from their tongues to be received with reverence and respect. Viktor hadn’t planned on telling Yuuri so much about his past, or the inner-workings of his mind, and he certainly hadn’t expected to be so candid about it, but Yuuri had exceeded his expectations and accepted it all without making him feel… *odd.*

Generals were meant to have secrets, but letting Yuuri in on what he had gave him more comfort that he’d ever thought possible.

Yakov knew things about him because he’d been there and observed for most of his life. Viktor told him things, too, but it was always danced around, confessing half truths that his former coach had always managed to sort out eventually.

Christophe always *just knew* what Viktor’s secrets were. He didn’t have to tell him anything unless he wanted the pleasure of being the one to deliver the message- most often he didn’t, because he didn’t want Chris to know half of what he did. But he always knew. Somehow, he always knew.

Yuuri, though, he’d told. Admitted his secrets and his feelings, his lies and deepest thoughts; things that, before, he’d only ever told Makkachin in the dead of night when he was sure that the poodle was asleep. But for Yuuri, he had outed himself.

The fairytale was his own. No one else could know. No one else should. But Yuuri did. He knew about Niko- at least the important things -and more about what had happened before the year of the Firebird than he would have ever cared to tell anyone else.

It made him vulnerable and stronger all at once. Someone else knew and still loved him. Yuuri knew and still *wanted* him. There’d been no break in the affections, no change in the way he spoke to him, touched him, made love to him. He’d promised to defeat Russia for him in Moscow. He’d understood the importance of it, as vague and mercurial the notion of defeating a faceless, invisible injustice was.

Viktor had no doubt that Yuuri was his soulmate. Not a single thread of uncertainty was left; each end neatly tucked away in the fabric of his heart.

A hazy mist covered the city, storm clouds above hanging low, casting the city in darkness. Viktor woke long before Yuuri, taking time to admire him before he left the bed to prepare for the day.

He showered, taking stock of the various bruises and marks left behind by his lover, amused at how bold he’d become, giddy at being loved so thoroughly. Viktor felt both sore and tired, muscles still getting used to the recent exercise. It wasn’t a problem, not at all. He was happier than he had been in so long, possibly ever. Having the favor of Yuuri Katsuki, his most treasured beloved, was worth everything.

Once he was dressed and ready, Viktor ducked out to go shopping while Yuuri slept on. Beauty sleep was important, especially for the day’s plans. All of the lavish attention, expense, and luxury had been according to design. Yuuri was a practical man, which he understood well, and he wasn’t used to giving into indulgence except out of guilt. That wouldn’t do. Viktor needed him confident, willing to accept and to take, to understand that he deserved the love that was offered. He’d worked hard and he’d earned everything that was being given. He needed to know that if the plan was going to work.

He returned from his outing with an assortment of supplies that he thought would help get Yuuri in
the right mindset. New makeup, a silken shirt, comfortable slippers, and diet-safe food perfect for hand feeding. Viktor knew that Yuuri would complain about it all, but he wouldn’t be deterred.

With a little more bustling, their suite was ready for a day of worshipping his lover. The goal was to get him to let go enough to enjoy it. It would be difficult. The anxiety was an unpredictable beast; Yuuri’s own inner-wolf. But, as with all things, Viktor had a plan for that; advanced tactical maneuvers to manipulate the wolf into lying down and staying there. At least long enough to compete.

Viktor waited until it was nearly noon before waking Yuuri up, peppering him with soft kisses and gentle touches. He murmured the plan for the day against his skin while his hand wandered, letting the arousal stir him to attention.

“You, Yuuri,” he crooned. “Are my beloved… I love you, I worship you… the Russian people love me, their hero, and so they will love you.”

Yuuri looked doubtful beneath his flushed and feverish skin. “Okay…”

It wasn’t enough. Viktor kissed him, whole and open, then pressed his forehead to Yuuri’s. “I believe in you without a shadow of a doubt… so trust me. Know that I am sincere. If you believe in me, then they, too, will believe. Do this for me, Yuuri. Believe in me, and everything will fall into place.”

As expected, Yuuri was unable to deny such a heartfelt plea. He said that he would and what he meant was that he would try, which was close enough for now.

He would learn.

They made love, Viktor asking Yuuri to relax and let him take care of everything. He still wasn’t used to being the one on top, but he gave Yuuri everything he had. When they were finished, Viktor reminded him that he was the only one to have that part of him. No one else in the entire world knew Viktor’s love that way. Only Yuuri.

Then they showered, and Viktor made use of the soaps and shampoos that he’d picked up earlier, washing Yuuri’s back and hair, cooing compliments and brushing his hands over every part of him that he gushed over. Yuuri was embarrassed, of course, but took it without too much complaint. Afterward, they soaked in the tub with bath salts and candles, surrounded by the warm scents of lavender.

Viktor massaged him on the bed; neck, back, shoulders, arms, legs, and feet. He used body oil, working every inch of him with tireless care. When Yuuri asked if he could do it in return, Viktor promised later- he was enjoying himself too much, and wanted Yuuri to indulge him for now, which Yuuri accepted with mild reluctance.

Afterward came a modest lunch of the grapes, strawberries, and other things Viktor had found, in and out of season, insisting on feeding him, but allowing Yuuri to do the same in return. Yes, Viktor worshipped him, but theirs was a partnership built on mutual respect and care. When they were done with that and it was all cleaned up, Viktor set in to give his Yuuri both a manicure and pedicure. He explained while filing and buffing, taking great care with cuticle and quick, that the pampering was equally important to aesthetics as they were to self-confidence. Being prepared to face the enemy, knowing that you were ready to the smallest detail, made an army a formidable opponent.

Yuuri admitted that Minako had done this for him before- nail treatments, anyway -and he'd always
liked the polished result.

This pleased Viktor to hear for multiple reasons, and when he was finished, had Yuuri get dressed in the dark blue silk and his briefs, sweeping hands over the buttoned front up to the collar. He looked magnificent, and Viktor told him so, which garnered more blushing and mumbled half-acceptance.

Viktor did his hair, just as they had done now several times, taking care to massage his scalp in the process, coiffing the thick, luscious locks into place. Yuuri relaxed, tension finally melting away at his fingertips.

“And now, my love… your war paint.”

Before, Viktor had done Yuuri’s makeup to be suitable for the rink. It was subtle, but beautiful. With Viktor being the only audience member, he took a different approach. Nothing too gaudy, just amplified; a little more accentuated. Long, thick lashes with volumising mascara; a bit of matching blue color to his eyelids, all carefully blended out to the skin he’d contoured with foundation and russet blush; winged eyeliner to emphasize the natural shape of his eyes; lipstick three shades deeper than he normally used, topped with a bit of gloss to make his lips look as soft, supple, and irresistible as they actually were.

It took everything in Viktor to resist him, in fact. If he hadn’t been so dedicated to sticking to his plan, he’d have given in immediately. Yuuri, now blushing faintly as he looked into the vanity mirror with Viktor behind him, was so utterly breathtaking that he found himself seeking possession of him. Hand on his torso, another on his thigh, lips to the crook of his neck. It wasn’t an act or an exaggeration of what he felt, it was the very real compulsion to keep Yuuri all to himself. 

Mine, mine, mine.

...But he had to share his beauty with the world, and Yuuri deserved to be fawned over and loved by all. In truth, the training was just as much for Viktor as it was for Yuuri.

He pressed a dulcet kiss to the nape of Yuuri’s neck, then pulled him away from the mirror and to the bed. There, he had Yuuri sit at the edge of it, and kissed his hand before kneeling at his feet.

“You are my beloved,” Viktor began, repeating the mantra of the day as he took Yuuri’s foot in his hands, fingers spreading over the top, caressing his ankle. “I love you above all others.”

He bent to kiss his foot- which made Yuuri give a startled laugh. Viktor held him still, grateful that he’d decided to start with this instead of going right for kissing Yuuri’s skates; that would come in the next few days. Getting kicked in the face would be far from boosting Yuuri’s confidence, he was sure. Viktor kissed the knuckle on his big toe, then worked his way up to his ankle again.

Yuuri squirmed in place. “Viktor…”

“I’ll be lavishing affection on you in Moscow, Yuuri. For the public, for the media. Nothing inappropriate, I promise. But you’ll need to get used to this… they need to know, without a doubt, that I submit to you.”

“But...”

Viktor kneaded the pad of his foot, all the way up to the heel, and kissed his foot again. “I willingly serve and adore Yuuri Katsuki.” He kissed his foot again, slowly moving up to his shin. “The five-time consecutive champion chooses to pour himself into this man.” Another kiss, then
another between each point made, higher and higher along the soft, bare skin. “Career on hold, all of my knowledge, my skill, my dedication, happily given to you.”

When he reached Yuuri’s knee, Viktor looked up at him, smile small and reserved, but pale blue eyes ablaze with passion.

Yuuri held his breath, conflict stirring with counterpoints that he didn’t voice.

“This all will catch their attention, Yuuri… but do you know what will make them really, truly love and respect you?”

He shook his head. “What?”

Viktor slid his hand up Yuuri’s leg, from knee to hip. “The fact that, despite all of this prostration, you see me as an equal… you love me just as much as I love you. You respect me. Admire me. That alone should hold their attention and favor.”

Swallowing, Yuuri nodded.

“You only need to prove that to them, to the world… and our victory will be assured.” Viktor bent to kiss his thigh, fingers tracing the hem of his briefs.

They practiced a few more times, Viktor serious in his act of servitude, and Yuuri gradually got more and more used to being doted on. The kisses, gentle handling, and purring compliments may have been excessive, but if he could get Yuuri over that hurdle, a little kiss or lacing up his boots in public would be easy to deal with. He hoped.

Yakov had called him a selfish man; someone who never thought of anyone but himself. If the media believed that, they would have to question the old man after this. Such an act of submission would set Yuuri above the other skaters, flaunting his elevated status, shaking their confidence. Yuuri would never be treated lightly again.

Rain drummed against the many floor-to-ceiling windows in their room, but barely made a sound. The thick glass shielded them from the outside world save for the spectacular view. Even though it was dark and the clouds swept low and fast, the city below rose out of the mists like the trees in an ancient forest.

Viktor kissed up and down Yuuri’s legs, starting and ending with his toes, until he was satisfied with Yuuri’s reactions. Either he’d gotten used to the doting, or he was thoroughly distracted by something else. On his last return trip, Viktor stopped at Yuuri’s briefs and kissed his aching bulge, the twitch and shudder that followed answering the unasked question. Yuuri watched him, dark eyes hungry, body barely trembling. He was holding himself back.

“Yuuri,” he said, voice a sweet and breathy sigh that changed into a soft moan as he straightened his back, running his hands over the silk shirt, up his torso, to his shoulders. Viktor had resisted long enough. He pulled Yuuri down by the collar for a kiss, dry lips against his pretty painted ones, eager to make a mess of his work.

Once they started kissing, they couldn’t stop. Yuuri’s arms took hold of him around his ribs, pulling him up for easier access, and Viktor leaned against his body, between his legs, to smear that lipstick all across his face. Fingers found hair to tug on, bare skin to fondle, and places that elicited the most delicious of sounds.

When they parted for breath, Viktor nipped at his neck, hot breath rushing over Yuuri’s dampened skin, then nuzzled from shoulder to ear, near mad with the heat and desire. Yuuri supported him
with one hand squeezing the back of his thigh, right beneath the swell of his rump. He was taking a little, but not enough. Viktor wanted him in control; to know that he was Yuuri’s, anxious and insecure or not.

“Yuuri…” Viktor spoke against his throat, needy, wanting. Pleading. “I want you to show the world that I’m yours… that I belong to you.”

He felt Yuuri swallow against his lips, adam’s apple bobbing, then leaned back to take in his expression. Yuuri wanted it, too.

“How?” he asked, voice cracking.

Viktor rubbed his hands back down his body, and got properly to his feet, using one hand to loose his trousers, and the other to push them down until they dropped to the floor. “Meet me at the window,” he said, and stepping out of his discarded clothes.

In the reflection of the window, Viktor watched Yuuri scramble for the needed supplies behind him, stumbling on his way to the bedside drawer. Then he turned to the city, gaze shifting from the buildings below to the rain on the window, and finally to his own face. Lipstick marked his face on cheek, chin, neck… even the collar of his shirt, and he smiled. He looked the perfect picture of the playboy that the paparazzi so desperately wanted to portray, and yet when Yuuri came to him, strong hands caressing under his shirt, dipping down into his hi-cut briefs, there was no image that could be further from the truth.

Viktor Nikiforov had found his lover and soulmate; the years of loneliness and longing were over. He had no intention of looking anywhere else, and supposed, with just a tickle in the back of his mind, that everything he’d gone through had been worth it if it meant it had saved him for Yuuri Katsuki.

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9. The Army on the March

“If soldiers are punished before they have grown attached to you, they will not prove submissive; and, unless submissive, then will be practically useless. If, when the soldiers have become attached to you, punishments are not enforced, they will still be useless. Therefore soldiers must be treated in the first instance with humanity, but kept under control by means of iron discipline.”

They were good, getting started that morning without too many delays. Shower, breakfast in the hotel’s restaurant, and a cab ride to the ice skating rink. It was a weekday, so reserving the space for a two hours of private practice hadn’t been an issue, even though the staff were still a little star struck by who would be skating there.

“We’re doing some secret training before the Rostelecom cup,” Viktor explained to the girls at the desk with a charming smile and a wink. “Please make sure that we’re not disturbed.”

They nodded, wide eyes sparkling. They’d heard that celebrities were using the rink from their manager, but to see it up close, first hand…

“Of course, Mr. Nikiforov!”
“Let us know if you need anything…”

Viktor nodded and waved his approval before leading Yuuri to the changing rooms. The social media accounts hadn’t blown up yet as far as Viktor could tell, so his requests thus far had been honored. It was a refreshing change. But then, the staff was probably aware that if he caught wind of them talking, he’d never return.

Although both of them were going to skate, Viktor insisted on helping Yuuri with his boots, sitting him on the bench and gently guiding his feet into them. It made Yuuri blush when Viktor traced his ankles, long fingers running up his leg. Then he laced him up.

“Is this necessary?”

“This is practice for Moscow, Yuuri.”

“I can lace my own skates…”

“I know.”

Once they were cinched tight, Viktor tested the brace of it, moving Yuuri’s foot. The skates were in good condition; they would cushion against impact and keep his ankle from rolling- or worse. Bones were so fragile in the face of so much abuse. Joints, too. He lifted the skate and kissed the toe of his boot.

“Viktor…”

He looked up at his bashful Yuuri and smiled. “Now for the other. Remember not to kick me in surprise.”

Yuuri agreed and stayed still while Viktor repeated the treatment with his other boot. It was clear that he was uncomfortable, but he managed. For that, Viktor was grateful.

He put on his own skates while Yuuri fidgeted at the barrier, hands wringing together. Viktor met him in short order, looked him over, and nodded his approval. Even without a costume, Yuuri was gorgeous. It was no wonder they’d had such a difficult time focusing the last few days. No one could blame them.

“Let’s have you run through On Love: Eros. I want to see if we can improve your statistics for the jumps, especially since you can land the quads in Stay Close to Me so cleanly.”

“S-sure.”

They went through the routine with Viktor successfully playing the role of responsible coach, but Yuuri was nervous. Jittery. Did he have too much energy? Viktor had known that he was a monster when it came to stamina, but after everything they’d been up to, Yuuri hadn’t let up at all. Viktor, on the other hand, was grateful for the reprieve. As tired as he was, he knew he was in no shape to compete. Fortunately, he wasn’t having to compete, so there were no regrets to that end. But Yuuri…

Yuuri was insatiable.

But he couldn’t land his jumps cleanly or with even a fraction of the grace that Viktor had come to expect. Was he too distracted? They couldn’t do nothing but have sex; they’d never win that way, and there had to be a finite limit on Yuuri’s energy. That needed to go toward skating.
Yet, Viktor knew if Yuuri was stuck in his head, there was no use just trying to push through. They’d tried that before and it hadn’t worked. If anything, it had made things worse. It was entirely possible that, while unfocused and unhappy, Yuuri could injure himself trying.

Sighing, Viktor shook out his limbs and set a hand on his hip, which he cocked, tilting his head to emphasize the sultry look he put on. “Yuuri-~” he called.

Yuuri came to a stop immediately and looked at him, eyes widening like the fangirls at the desk had.

It was… impossibly cute, but Viktor stayed strong. “Could you come here for a moment?”

His student came to his side as if pulled by an invisible thread, stopping just short of him with the eyes of a puppy, eager to please. “Yeah? What is it, Viktor?”

“Were you aware… that after your Eros performance in Beijing, I was so… enthralled that I had to…” He hesitated, but only briefly, tapping his lip with his index finger. “I had to do something I’ve never done in my entire life.”

Yuuri stared at him, and leaned his head to one side, puzzled. “You mean… confess to me?”

“No. Well, yes, but that’s not what I meant.” Viktor shook his head. “No. Do you remember when I disappeared after we got your scores?”

“Yeah…?”

“I was hiding in a bathroom stall, taking care of what your Eros did to me.”

Yuuri’s jaw dropped, mouth hanging open for three full seconds before he began to babble. “O-Oh! So… s-so that worked! I meant to seduce you, so…”

There was no use resisting the urge to smack his palm to his forehead, so Viktor did it with a groan. “Yes, of course it worked, Yuuri! What do you think?!”

“Sorry, I… well, I made myself hot and bothered, but…”

“That just makes it worse, you know.” Viktor laughed. It was too cute not to. His Yuuri, still so insecure. So unassuming. Both egotistical and humble. The most complicated, sweet, adorable man he’d ever find in the entire universe. He fanned himself for effect. “Whew!”

It got Yuuri smiling again. “Well… with what I thought about out there…”

“Ooooh? Something saucy?”

“No! It’s really stupid!”

“Oh, I doubt that. But let me tell you, teaching Eros to you, back in Hasetsu? That was absolute torture. I was dying every day.”

“Really? But…”

“You, Yuuri, Yuuri… I had such a crush on you, and then I taught you a sexy skate dance and told you to seduce me. Do you not see how terribly masochistic that is?”

It was meant to be taken light-heartedly, but Yuuri was gaping again- this time with his fingers over his open mouth as he whispered in awe. “You had a crush on me…”
Again, Viktor smacked his head. “Yuuri!”

“I’m sorry! I just haven’t… thought about you crushing on me! It’s a lot to take in, okay!”

“Oh, Yuuri. I was in love with you the whole summer, you know.”

Yuuri’s hands left his mouth; one to play nervously with the bottom hem of his jacket, the other to rub at the back of his head. “Well, that’s… different. ‘Cause same.”

“You’d be surprised at how long I’ve admired you, Yuuri. But enough about that…” Viktor leaned in close enough that their noses almost touched, giving his best wolf gaze with a smirk to match the murmur that followed. “I want you to seduce me with all you have, Yuuri. Show me your Eros.”

Yuuri swallowed, a look of determination crossing his face. “Okay,” he said with a firm nod. Good. “…but I’m still not telling you.”

Viktor blinked. “What? Not telling me what?” He watched, suddenly helpless, as Yuuri backed away from him wearing his own little smirk. “What aren’t you telling me?!”

“Nothing~”

“Yuuri!!” Viktor’s wolf facade fell away to a pout and he whined after him. “That’s so mean!”

“I gotta seduce you now! It’s not important.”

Viktor went after him. What else could he do? “Noooo! I want to know! What aren’t you telling me?” He took hold of Yuuri’s arm and brought them both to a stop. “Yuuuri!”

“Oh. I see. That makes sense, I guess.”

For several long moments, all Viktor was able to do was stare at him. “You don’t say…” He pursed his lips, clicked his tongue, then turned his head away, wracking his brains for some sort of an explanation. “But it makes sense, really.”

“How?”

“The Eros story is similar in theme to the folklore I used for the Crystal Guardian; the program that your Eros costume was originally from. I bet you watched it a thousand times.”

“At least that many, probably,” Yuuri admitted, blushing all over again.

“So when you adopted that costume, you must have subconsciously pushed it to evolve in that direction! So obviously, Mednoj gory hozjajka had to make another appearance. She’s a fickle seductress, that one.”

“Oh. I see. That makes sense, I guess.”

Viktor tapped his lip again. “Though, I do have to ask… just out of curiosity…”
“Yeah?”

He tread lightly, words careful and casual. Gathering intel of such a personal nature could be dangerous, but Viktor had wanted to know the truth for months. He managed a neutral smile with a hint of teasing. “Was it taking me as your prey that got you hot and bothered, or being in the position of ‘powerful princess’?”

“I… uh…” Either Yuuri didn’t want to answer the question, or didn’t know how, rubbing the back of his head again as he turned his gaze away.

“You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to.” There was no need to push on the topic. If Yuuri really didn’t know, maybe Viktor didn’t want to know, either.

“I think it’s more that any of it came to my mind like that. It’s cheating to say both, isn’t it?”

Relieved, Viktor shook his head. “No. That makes sense. You can say both.”

“Why do you ask?”

“I was just curious, like I said.” Viktor shrugged, busily storing the information away the way a squirrel hoards walnuts. It left him shaken; how was Yuuri so candid about it? So comfortable in admitting something like that? It was both intimidating and intoxicating. They were the same, the had to be. “I want to know everything about you, my Yuuri… and I want to keep that in mind when I watch you skate for me.”

Yuuri smiled again, hands slicking back through his hair to try to improve the image. “The seductress capturing her man… keeping him all for herself.”

The flash in his eyes was predatory. Viktor couldn’t dismiss the image of Yuuri going through with it- holding him against the wall, biting his neck -and he didn’t want to. Prince or princess, his Yuuri could take control at any moment, and he knew he would cave to him every time.

He shivered, folding his arms. Not from the cold, no; he was burning up under the gaze of his lover and the heat of desire slowly burning him up all over again. “Perfect, Yuuri. Now, if you could… skate it again, and seduce me… really seduce me, we can end practice for the day.”

Yuuri’s eyes sparkled at that. “Yeah! Okay!” And off he went to the starting position. “Let’s do this.”

Properly motivated, Yuuri skated beautifully. There were no mistakes in the run through, and Viktor ended practice just as promised. He helped Yuuri with his skates once more, but neither of them said much, not there or in the cab ride back to the hotel.

All Viktor could think about was how sore he’d be later on, and how that really didn’t bother him in the slightest.

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10. Situational Positioning

“Regard your soldiers as your children, and they will follow you into the deepest valleys;
They were more than halfway through their time in paradise when Viktor woke to the distinct feeling that he’d been absolutely wrecked. It took all of his energy to pry his eyes open, and when he did, he groaned at how bright it was in their suite. Each limb was heavy, muscles weak, back and hips and head aching. Ow.

Clearly, they needed to take a break. Viktor couldn’t keep up. Too much sex. Too much cardio. He was tired. He was sore. He wasn’t nearly as young or as fit as Yuuri was, not now. So far, he’d been terrible at putting his foot down. Viktor was weak to Yuuri, there was no question about that. But he could be firm when he had to. And he needed to. He was useless feeling like this.

“Oh. You’re awake.”

Viktor blinked up at Yuuri, who was sitting next to him on the bed, cheeks rosy, mouth pinched in a tiny smile. He looked guilty, but shamelessly so. It was cute, and Viktor tried to reach for him, but the wave of exhaustion hit again and he resisted, instead turning his face into the pillow. He almost never slept on his stomach; it was always his side or his back. “Yuuri,” he mumbled. “What happened last night?”

“You… got really excited.” Yuuri bit his lip, but the smile only got wider.

They’d had dinner and wine along with it. They’d made love, too; that he remembered, but it didn’t strike him as anything particularly taxing. In fact, they’d opted for intercrural specifically because Viktor had complained about being sore. Maybe it was because they’d taken turns. Prolonged activity? He should have just let Yuuri handle it, but he’d so desperately wanted to feel those thighs around him. Yuuri’s thighs were incredible. But it didn’t explain how tired he was.

Groaning again, Viktor pushed up to his elbows and rolled onto his back and into a sit at the edge of the bed. It had taken a supreme amount of effort and his body was already complaining. “I’m going to… go shower… and then we think about breakfast?” he asked, then got to his feet… and immediately toppled over.

“Sur- ah- Viktor!?”

“Ow… ow ow… ow….”

“Viktor, are you okay!?” Yuuri peered at him from the edge of the bed, where he’d scrambled to.

Viktor whimpered, naked shoulder burning from the friction with the carpet, hands grasping his thigh. “I must have pulled my hamstring.” He dragged himself away from the nightstand to lie more comfortably on the floor, but every movement of his leg shot fiery pain through him, dragging out hisses and another moan. When his head came in contact with not one, but two empty bottles of last night’s wine, he lay still. “Just what did we do last night!?”

Yuuri came to him, kneeling on the floor with helpless hands reaching, hesitating, then reaching again. He let them rest on Viktor’s arm. “In the middle of the night… I woke you up and you…”

Oh. Viktor rubbed a palm down his face and forced himself to get a good, long look at his naked lover. As suspected, there were nail and bite marks all over him. “Sometimes that happens, when I’m woken up,” he said with a sigh and let his head roll back, eyes closing. He was done.

“But I’ve woken you up before…”
It was true, but now that he was thinking about it, the memories came back quite clearly. “Yes, but if you wake me up with sensual touches and kisses, it makes me a little crazy.” Yuuri had been needy, he recalled that well. Soft hands, little pleas of Viktoru... Begging and desperate. So cute.

“I didn’t think you would... uh…”

Viktor smiled. Yuuri didn’t often get tongue-tied about the things they did. But then, Viktor didn’t usually attack like that, either. It was something that Niko had really enjoyed; waking the sleeping tiger into arousal so he’d already be wild, biting and clawing as he climbed on top, riding his lover hard and fast only to pass out again when finished.

It perfectly explained why he was so tired and why Yuuri was so shaken. Happily so.

“Should... should I not do that? Wake you up like that?” Yuuri asked, timid despite Viktor’s amusement.

“No. You can. Once my hamstring isn’t killing me…”

“Y-yeah.” Yuuri took his hands back to cover his mouth again. The guilt was no longer shameless. “Very... enthusiastic movements.”

“That’s the biggest problem with that... so easy to get injured since I’m still half asleep.” Viktor stifled a yawn with his shoulder, then went back to rubbing the poor, swollen muscles in his leg.

“I can rub it. Give you a massage. Make it better?”

Yuuri sounded so hopeful. It’d make it easier to force them to take a break this way.

“That would be great. I’ll need some ice, too. Maybe a wrap or KT tape.”

“I can get it for you! And you wanted to shower, right? Would a soak in the tub help?”


Yuuri nodded, determined to set things right like the hard-working Pyatachok that he was. Viktor tried to move again, but was stopped when Yuuri scooped him up into his arms and got to his feet, holding Viktor to his chest. Bridal carry style.

“O-Oh! Yuuri!” Viktor threw his arms around Yuuri’s neck, very suddenly doe-eyed and chest full of flutters. “You’re... you’re strong!”

“Good,” Yuuri said, sounding pleased, looking embarrassed. But that didn’t matter. Viktor was giddy all the same.

“So strong, my Yuuri!” he cried, and collapsed against Yuuri’s neck with barely suppressed giggles. His Yuuri, carrying him around! Like a princess, no less! Yuuri took him to the bathroom and cleaned him up, touches gentle, caring, then drew him a bath. When it was ready, complete with bubbles and bath salts, Yuuri lowered him in and knelt by the side of the tub, chin on the edge, to pet his head. “I’ll go get whatever you need. You just relax, okay?”

It was so terribly romantic, Viktor was sure that he was going to die. “Okay, Yuuri~”

“I’ll bring breakfast, too.”

So much attention! So much tenderness! Viktor gave his prettiest, sparkle-eyed smile. “Whatever
Yuuri kissed the top of his head and went to get ready. “I’ll be back soon, Viktor!”

“Mmm-hmm~”

Soon, Viktor was alone with his thoughts and the warm, sweet-scented water around him. Being taken care of… he almost felt guilty about it, but Yuuri was so insistent. How did he ever get so lucky? So blessed? It was really a shame that his leg hurt so much; he had plenty of new ideas for things he and his enthusiastic lover could do. But, letting Yuuri pamper him was… really nice, too.

He sighed and sank deeper into the tub, letting the heat soothe the aches. Maybe this is what Chris had meant by give and take and the natural order of things. Love and be loved.

It was so much better this way.

11. The Nine Battlegrounds

“At first, then, exhibit the coyness of a maiden, until the enemy gives you an opening; afterwards emulate the rapidity of a running hare, and it will be too late for the enemy to oppose you.”

The attempts at skating throughout their trip had been sparse. Only two times could really have been considered ample practice, too distracted by temptation. While going to the rink downtown did require a taxi and time to do so, moving into the study area for floor exercising did not. If Yuuri wasn’t going to get the skating training he was supposed to be doing, he at least could keep his body toned in this way. He could have argued with himself that sex was plenty exercise, but then he’d have the same problem as skating.

After reps of stretching, pushups on the ground and wall, and burpees, he lay on the ground for sit-ups. The hotel carpet was almost too plush for the traction he needed … he would just have to make do.

Yuuri saw Viktor come from his peripheral vision and take a seat on the sofa. He’d been in the shower, and Yuuri had expected him to list the day’s agenda while he sat, which would likely get vetoed in favor of something that involved not leaving the room. It wasn’t until Yuuri finished his rep and rested on the floor as he came down that Viktor spoke.

“I’m going to order some tequila.”

Yuuri wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “A little early to be drinking, isn’t it?” Was drinking Viktor’s plan for the day?

Viktor didn’t answer and reached over to the phone to dial the club desk and ordered a bottle of tequila, packets of salt, and a couple of limes. “It’s never too early for good ideas, Yuuri. How familiar are you with body shots?”

“Vaguely. I had a roommate before Phichit that went to parties who was into it. Caps and beer pong.”
“Well, watching you move up and down like that... I couldn’t help but picture myself licking salt and alcohol off of that exquisite body of yours.”

Since becoming a couple, Yuuri had been subjected to various forms of flattery. Try as he might, he wasn’t anywhere close to being used to it. He blushed. “Uh. If you want…” What was the point of giving permission, now? Viktor already ordered the supplies for it. His own morning shower would have to wait.

When the knock at the door came, Viktor answered it and tipped the delivery service then came back to Yuuri on the floor with a basket in tow. “Here we are.” Viktor set to work with cutting the lime into wedges and loosing the cap of the tequila.

How often had Viktor done this?

Viktor caught the curious look. “In my early twenties, I attended the same kind of frat parties your roommate went to. It was a show for the media to convince them I was being the playboy they wanted. It didn’t last long as once word caught on I went, there wasn’t a point to continue. Tabloids only care so much about when celebrities get smashed at parties, anyway. I’m just thankful all that didn’t ruin my taste for tequila.”

Yuuri recalled his mental backlog of magazines of a photo of Viktor with a woman on his arm, and a glass in the other. He wore sunglasses, then, which Yuuri had thought were possibly to avoid the paparazzi, but maybe it was to cover his expression of not enjoying himself. His eyes were usually what gave his emotions away. With each tale of his past, everything Yuuri had come to know and feel about Viktor was coming together.

Tearing open a packet of salt, Viktor adjusted on his knees. “And now I have someone I’d very much like to do body shots on.”

“Are you going to be okay being down like that?” Yuuri asked, eyes traveling to his clothed thigh.

“The KT tape will do its job. Besides, I can’t waste the opportunity.”

“It’s not like you can’t ask me to lay down later.”

“But you’re already here, Yuuri,” he frowned.

And he already got everything. If Viktor insisted, that’s all there was to it. “Okay, okay.” Yuuri laid flat on his back and angled his head to watch Viktor lick around his navel and pour salt around to stick.

Carefully Viktor placed the lime wedge in Yuuri’s mouth, which Yuuri alternated between holding in his teeth or lips for easier later removal. Viktor poured a shot for himself, holding the glass outwards while he leaned in to run his tongue over the salt.

The warmth of his tongue and texture of the salt was a pleasant combination, Yuuri couldn’t hold back a small gasp.

Amused, Viktor downed the shot, then put his hands on either side of Yuuri and came in for the wedge, sucking on the juice long enough for juice to escape into Yuuri’s mouth. He pulled away and finished the wedge off and put the peel aside. “Mmm I think I need more Yuuri involved.”

“How so?”

The reply was a touch of two fingers at his throat and at the bone of his clavicle, then down into
his abdomen, examining any sort of crevices in his body. Humming to himself, Viktor took the bottle of tequila and carefully left little puddles where Viktor believed Yuuri’s anatomy could hold it.

For the most part he could, as long as he held still, droplets streaming down and onto the carpet with his breaths.

Two packets of salt were ripped open and he sprinkled around the alcohol. A new lime and Viktor was ready for more. Shot glass no longer in the playing field, Viktor started at Yuuri’s navel, dipping into his belly button, lapping quickly as he moved higher up the trail he’d set. Viktor plucked the lime, took a suck, and let it fall to the carpet in favor of kissing Yuuri.

Alcohol, salt, and lime all mixed together in Yuuri’s mouth as Viktor slid his tongue inside.

Had his goal to see how long it took to get drunk? Off the tequila or Yuuri himself?

Yuuri smirked into their kisses, because he was pretty sure he was winning over the alcohol. It did take a lot to get Viktor drunk.

“Would you like to try, Yuuri?” Viktor said, lips barely leaving his.

Try what? Oh. He opened his eyes, and lifted a hand to brush fringe from his face that was sticking to his cheek with acidic juice. “Nah, you look like you’re enjoying yourself.”

He pulled away at the acquisition, realizing he really was. His eyes darkened, reaching for the bottle without letting his gaze leave Yuuri’s. Taking a swallow from the bottle itself, Viktor returned to Yuuri’s body, sticky in tequila and sweat, but it didn’t deter his tongue or free hand.

“Actually… can I have some?”

It took a moment, but understanding dawned. Viktor held the next swallow in his cheeks and transferred it into Yuuri’s mouth. Before Yuuri could express his thanks, Viktor took another drink, capped it, and then abandoned the bottle completely. He was going to quench his thirst in ways liquor never could.

12. The Fiery Attack

“If it is to your advantage, make a forward move; if not, stay where you are.
Anger may in time change to gladness; vexation may be succeeded by content.
But a kingdom that has once been destroyed can never come again into being; nor can the dead ever be brought back to life.”

Yuuri slid his “hideous” blue tie out of the collar of his suit that hung in the closet, anything to prevent a heavy ironing during the skating season abroad.

He wrapped the silk around his own wrist. It was soft enough, it shouldn’t hurt, right? He wasn’t going to make it tight, but with two wrists inside, it could be. Nothing else in the room would work, and there was no way he was going to go purchase something when he wasn’t entirely sure of what was best or worked or if either of them would like it.
That’s all it was - an experiment.

And a curiosity. Yuuri had read enough to wonder about it.

Viktor was waiting for him on the bed when he returned with what he needed, ankles crossed, legs pulled to the side, smile coy.

Yuuri crawled towards him and gave him a quick kiss before reaching for his hands.

“Are you still okay with this?” Yuuri asked.

“No need to be so cautious, Yuuri. Just a necktie and only my wrists.” Viktor splayed and wiggled the fingers of his outstretched hands.

“If you’re sure…” He looped the tie around one wrist and then the other and pulled them together and made a knot. “Too tight?”

He closed his hands into fists and wiggled against the tie. “Perfect.”

For a moment more Yuuri held his gaze. Maybe he was worrying too much. It was a very light restraint. He had his partner’s permission and he seemed comfortable even as he lowered onto his back, voluntarily raising his hands above his head, slightly elevated with the pillows there.

He was ready.

Seeing Viktor looking up at him like that, Yuuri had to admit it was thrilling. Consent to do what he wanted, but also a trust to keep him safe. Suddenly he gained a new appreciation for his books for preparing him for this moment.

So as not to make Viktor impatient, as he often got when Yuuri got lost in his head for too long, he situated himself to straddle on his hands and knees and came in for a kiss.

A moan vibrated against Yuuri’s lips and he pulled away to look at Viktor. That hadn’t been his usual pleasurable sound. Before he could ask, Viktor lifted his head to kiss him on his own.

There was that impatience. Had it been his imagination?

Yuuri brought a hand to his stomach and immediately felt it dip from his palms with another questionable sound. He ceased kissing and pulled away again to see Viktor squeezing his eyes closed. Gently Yuuri palmed his chest and he could see the shudder of his body and Viktor gasped with a staggered breath.

This wasn’t okay.

Yuuri tore the tie from Viktor’s wrists, tossed it as far as he could, and forced him to sit up right. “Viktor. Viktor?”

By the fourth call his voice had reached him and he slowly opened his eyes. Viktor blinked, coming back from wherever he had gone, then bit his lips to hold in a cry.

“It’s okay!” Yuuri pulled him in for a hug. “We won’t do that again, I promise. I didn’t mean to scare you. I’m so sorry.”

Viktor shook his head in his arms - forgiving him? - and held onto him, shoulders shaking.

Whatever had spooked Viktor hadn’t just happened in the last few minutes. Why had he been okay
to go through with it at first? Had he been trying to push through some trauma for Yuuri’s sake? Yuuri wondered, but knew it didn’t matter in the long run, because he’d never be trying that again. It wasn't worth seeing him so shaken.

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13. **Intelligence and Espionage**

“Now this foreknowledge cannot be elicited from spirits; it cannot be obtained inductively from experience, nor by any deductive calculation. Knowledge of the enemy’s dispositions can only be obtained from other men.”

Tomorrow evening, Viktor and Yuuri would be boarding their plane bound for Moscow. Nine days of solitude would be coming to an end and they’d have to return to the real world. The reason for the secret retreat took on many forms of “training.”

Leaving their lavish hotel didn't mean that they had to stop their education, of course; they could still enjoy a few more lessons together.

Yuuri settled himself between Viktor’s legs, them both on their stomachs. Yuuri kissed at the small of his back, lips melding to the shape of Viktor’s curvature. One hand caressed his side while the other busied its fingers inside him, brushing and teasing the delicate gland that drew the most delectable of sounds from his lover. Two spots at once. He only hoped it was just as much heaven for Viktor as it was for him.

His Viktor was vocal and enthusiastic and he loved it. At first he wondered if he couldn’t control it or he was doing it to encourage Yuuri. After a week together, the results varied, and maybe he’d never know for sure, but getting Viktor to wriggle under him, tense at his touch, and moan his name… he really couldn’t complain.

When Viktor injured himself, he apologized on behalf of their sexual leisure, but Yuuri assured him there were other ways to make it interesting without him having to strain himself more than he had that night. One crazy night had been worth the creativity streak. Though Yuuri did hope Viktor would look out for himself better if it were to happen again. For now, using his hands like this was good. Very good.

Yuuri’s hands continued until the pleasurable pain was too much for how Viktor’s legs instinctively tensed at his ministrations. Turning him over to on his back, Yuuri released all the built pressure with a sure hand and cleaned him up with ready tissues. He really had made a mess of him.

“Wow…” Viktor breathed, exhausted. He hummed as Yuuri wiped at the sweat on his face.

“Thank you, Saucy Books…”

“D-do you really need to call them that?” Yuuri blushed.

“Phichit’s words, not mine. Oh, ow , my poor hamstrings!”

“Here, hold on.” Yuuri sat on the bed from his heels and took one of Viktor’s legs to peel back the KT tape and began to massage the pulled muscle.
Viktor hissed, toes of his raised foot pointing up, and then he settled into the rhythm of Yuuri’s hands. He glanced from his face to between Yuuri’s legs. “Oh, I should take care of you first…”

“I’m okay. Worry about it later.”

“But you’re so distracting.”

“Later,” Yuuri said again with a chuckle and pressed his thumbs into the tender flesh, letting Viktor’s voice and body guide him to where he needed to be.

The injured sighed and moaned while grasping the sheets, and Yuuri wondered if it was completely involuntary or he was trying to tempt him to other things. He’d figured Viktor would be exhausted after several prostate climaxes, but it wouldn’t be the first time he misread him like that.

And not just in their intimate life.

Facades and nuances were stripped away one by one with each passing day. What the media presented was a hollow form of him. Viktor was hard-working and dedicated and charismatic. Everyone was in love with him as a figure.

But the Viktor with Yuuri was warm and playful, seeking the comforts and pleasure of love, and pushed him to better himself as a person, not just an athlete. A better person for Viktor.

It was a notion that happened often in Yuuri’s books and one he had found deeply romantic, yet something he never expected he himself would experience. Same could be said for many of their moments together. Love was surprising

Lost in his thoughts, he couldn’t stop the sudden admission "I've never felt this way with anyone but you.”

With the leg not being treated, Viktor rubbed his foot up Yuuri side. "That's quite the honor."

"I thought maybe I was being weird and obsessive.”

"No. Maybe you're what Chris calls a one-person lover and you happened to fall for me. He says I'm the same way..."

He took a moment to consider that, a fond smile on his lips. “Soulmates, right?”

“We were supposed to find each other.”

"You're different than what the media said. Even different than my... headcanons."

Viktor tilted his head at that. "...Headcanons?"

"Fan theories? I, yeah, it's stupid. Had, by the way. Not anymore!"

“I hope I've not been disappointing."

"I think I was afraid of that when you first came. My vision of you would be wrong."  

"Were you...? Wrong, I mean?"

"What I read and what I saw never quite added up back then.” It was all things he’d thought about over the last several months, coming more and more to terms with who Viktor was as he became more comfortable in his presence. Maybe he’d been obvious enough with them coming together he
didn’t need to say anything, but telling Viktor felt liberating.

"Like the time they said I was engaged to that popstar?" Viktor snorted. “That was ridiculous.”

"I didn't believe that marriage for a second!"

“I didn’t even know who she was at the time.”

Yuuri nodded. “I was wrong, but that's okay. It's not right for me to expect you to be a certain way. I was doing what the media does to you.”

"You probably thought I was more serious.”

“A little. I tried to make you too perfect. So that if...” Yuuri’s grip on his leg tightened. “-maybe if I didn’t get to the Grand Prix, or made a bad impression, I could move on easier.”

Viktor frowned, "In your defense, I always have my game face on for competitions."

"Then I lost and gave up all that hope."

"Well, lucky for you, I'm kind of an idiot, so..."

"In the best of ways. It's pretty relieving!"

He frowned more, but didn’t correct him. “You don't have to feel bad around me. I've been there, done that - lived to talk about it. I'm glad you knew I was different than what the media said."

"I'm happy to be proven wrong. If you were like I wanted you to be... I wouldn't be able to talk to you. Too intimidating. Well, you can be, but it only lasts for a little while, which is good.”

“Hey now…”

Finishing his massage of the injured leg, hands sliding down his thigh and to his knee where small and thin incision scars marked surgery from years ago, Yuuri let it rest on the bed then leaned in to give Viktor a kiss before taking his other leg. It was risky, but if he was going to continue to be honest, may as well offer something incriminating. Couldn’t be worse than what he told him he thought about during Eros at the Cup of China. “This is much more satisfying than touching a poster. Better than I imagined.”

There was a brief pause, and then a chuckle. “Did you really? Did you kiss it?”

“When I was younger! And I wasn’t being…” Dirty? Just weird and pathetic, really. Wishful thinking?

Viktor didn’t pry further. “I wish I had a Yuuri poster these last few months… Hmm. I should check eBay.”

“B-but why? You have the real thing…”

“You haven’t thrown your merchandise out, have you?”

He blushed. Caught red-handed! “I guess that’s fair…”

Satisfied, Viktor reached to pat the closest hand to him. “I’ll be the highest bidder!”

Never had Yuuri thought about Viktor owning merchandise of him! In another world, could Yuuri
have been the successful star, and Viktor the struggling skater? Now thinking about it, there was one photoshoot Yuuri was particularly proud of, and he couldn’t help but wonder if Viktor would appreciate it. Would it be vain to send him a link to auctions?

Viktor, a fan of his student and lover? It was sweet. Everyday he was more and more to him.

“Do you remember that day on the beach when you asked me what I wanted you to be to me?”

“And how you rejected me?”

“...What? No I didn’t.”

He raised a brow, not entirely convinced, but let it be dismissed it with a surrendering smile. “What about that day?”

“Friend, lover, coach… you’re all those things, but I meant what I said about you being you. Still do.”

Viktor sucked in a breath and outstretched his arms, inviting Yuuri in for a hug.

He did so without a word and Viktor pulled away just enough to give him kiss.

“Thank you, Yuuri. That means more to me than you’ll ever know.”

Chapter End Notes

Chris: Why hasn’t Viktor texted me to tell me my package arrived?
Baz: Maybe it hasn’t?
Chris: It’s possible... According to tracking it got there two days ago.
Baz: If it possible he didn’t like your gifts?
Chris: Excuse you, I give the best gifts! I made sure it would get it there while he was at home before heading to Moscow. I can’t imagine he and Yuuri being that busy to not pick up parcels on the porch.
Baz: He’s been awfully quiet on Instagram since Beijing.
Chris: ...You’re right! Something must have happened! Lost or broken phone? No, he would have purchased another.
Baz: Have you texted him rather than waiting for him to text you?
Chris: I try not to be a pest, but yes I have.
Baz: Leave him be, mon amour.
Chris: He’s such a fragile soul, I’ve been trying to check in on him! I get worried...
Baz: It’s been years since he’s had someone. He’s allotted some privacy. If he doesn’t show up for the next event, then I’d worry.
Chris: ...Fine.

On the next Gay Skate 90210:
Head first into battle! / SUCH EROS!!! / Sudden tragedy?! / But the spice...!!!

Please look forward to it!
Chapter Summary

After their intensive training in Shanghai, Coach Nikiforov and his student are more than ready to take on Moscow and all of Russia at the Rostelecom cup. But even a flawless performance and impressive show of patience does little against the hands of fate when circumstances fall out of a general's control. One man can only do so much... even a five-time consecutive champion.

#teenage stupidity #panic attack #some spice #MAKKACHIN NO #20k chapter why

Chapter Notes

Gabapple: We lied about no more 20k chapters. Whoops. Anyway, welcome to all of episode 8 and like 45 seconds of episode 9. Ignore Viktor, I love JJ.
Mamodewberry: We don't mean to lie, it just happens. The plot demands! Oh and brace yourself... Non stop feels from here on.
Gabapple: yeah, we're getting closer and closer to... *shudders* Barcelona.
Mamodewberry: BARCELONA

(/^\^)/*: ’ ’ ◇ The 25k Hit Giveaway!
Okay so we hit 25k hits a while ago but shh. To celebrate, we're going to give away 25 sets of (6) buttons that we did art for. They're super cute. Check out the progress images here: [https://gogoichirin.tumblr.com/post/167674961208](https://gogoichirin.tumblr.com/post/167674961208) / and the finished art (as they're posted) in this twitter thread: [https://twitter.com/gabapple/status/933182695382794240](https://twitter.com/gabapple/status/933182695382794240)
To enter, all you have to do is leave a comment on this chapter using "#steamedbuns" by the time I get home from work on 11/27/2017 (that'd be approx 6:30pm MST). Then we'll gather up all of the names, plug them into a spreadsheet, and let random.org do its thing. I'll pay for shipping to anywhere in the world, the only requirement is that you be 13 years of age or older.
...Also don't read this fic if you're that young, yikes. :Oc

Bonus Stories!
- [Vitya Diaries 11-15](https://www.mikasa-bakugou.com/post/167674961208), the next installment of teen Viktor's adventures!
- [Satin Ribbons](https://www.mikasa-bakugou.com/post/167674961208), a spooky Valentine's story about 18 yr-old Viktor that I wrote for HALLOWEEN...
- [When the World Breaks Your Heart](https://www.mikasa-bakugou.com/post/167674961208), not YOI but Mamodewberry recently posted ch 4 of her adorable FREE! AU, so go read that, too.
- [Viechan's Wish](https://www.mikasa-bakugou.com/post/167674961208), Makkachin's PoV to Episode 8!!! I wrote this back in February but this comes after this chapter! **READ THIS AT THE END OF THE CHAPTER** if you haven't already!

Also!
I got into the Dark Horse zine for Otabek and Mamodewberry got into the Born to
Shine zine for Yuuri! We wrote super cute stories for them (Otabek, #1 rat dad; Yuuri and Phichit go to Denny's) so go look them up. :) I'll post links if ao3 gives the okay.

New Art!
- King Chris from chapter 20's fairytale segment illustrated by Andy (commission)
- Viktor and Yuuri from chapter 21 (NSFW!), illustrated by Pirta (commission)
- Viktor's favorite salt & pepper shakers from chapter 12, illustrated by Clover (commission)

Recommended Listening:
- Battle Without Honor Or Humanity, by Tomoyasu Hotei
- Ochi Chiornie (Dark Eyes), as performed by Leonid Levin
- Rez (Bassnectar Remix), by Underworld
- Dark Eyes, as performed by Red Army Choir
- Pas de deux, by Cirque Éloize - ID

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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Colorado Springs, Colorado - United States

Viktor (15 years old)

“You did well, Sasha. With a lead like that in the short program…”

The twenty four year-old had to laugh. “Coach, after what Viktor did this afternoon, I bet the last thing you want to be talking about is my free skate.”

The older man scowled. “Now just one minute, Sasha, I-”

Sasha took him by the shoulders and shook him once. “World record. As a junior. Number one highest short program score. In the world. Your Vitya. Our Viktor.”

Yakov’s face softened. A little. “Yes. Well.” He cleared his throat and scanned the stands for the boy, who was probably about ready to drop by this time of night. Viktor’d been running around all day, and the last time he’d seen him, he’d been casually drooling over the men’s figure skaters by the exhibitor entrance while Georgi was being interviewed. Vitya had been boy-crazy lately, even with a boyfriend. But then, he’d always been weak for strong boys… He turned back to Sasha. “Where’s he gone off to, anyway?”

Letting his hands fall away, Sasha took a glance, and frowned. “I’ll look for him.”

He found him backed against a wall with Wei Bin towering over him- an impressive feat, given that he was only five, maybe six centimeters taller than Viktor at most. That didn’t seem to matter, because Viktor was clearly losing whatever battle for dominance was going on; shoulders hunched, body locked, eyes huge and frightened. The sight was so pitiful that it made him angry.
If he’d waited a moment, he could have heard what they were talking about, sure, but it didn’t matter. He didn’t care. “Hey, Bin!” he barked, drawing the other man’s attention as he approached. “Do you have an issue with my junior here, or with Russia?”

Wei startled, but his pride had him straightened up in no time. “Does it make a difference?”

“I’d say so.” Sasha sized him up, sidling up to Viktor against the wall. As a 180cm adult athlete, filled out and healthy, he looked enormous by comparison. “If it’s Viktor you have a problem with, take it up on the ice. If it’s Russia…” He cracked his knuckles. “You can deal with me.”

Wei looked between the two of them, and stood down. “I should have known that the little girl couldn’t even fight her own fights.”

Sasha laughed. “What is it that bothers you more, Bin? The fact that he’s better than you or that he’s prettier? Really, I can’t tell.”

“Yeah, sure. We’ll see about that next season.”

Friday was the day they had off, reserved for other disciplines to do their thing. They’d done breakfast and scheduled practice as a team, then split after that to break until later that afternoon. Lunch and snacks were available for all participants at the hotel; that was on the ISU, so no one was surprised when Viktor opted to take a nap instead of mingling. The only thing Yakov asked was that he be ready to go to dinner with the group that evening. Otherwise, the rest of the afternoon was free for his skaters to do what they wished.

For Georgi, that meant watching the ladies, pairs, and ice dancers; for Sasha, it was getting some time in the heated indoor pool at the hotel; and for Yakov, it was catching up with the other coaches without having to worry about his students.

Sasha finished getting ready at a quarter to seven, freshly showered from his swim and subsequent working out. Although a large portion of the hotel had been booked by members of ISU’s staff or competitors, there were still a few regular guests that had managed to squeak in reservations. Whether that was by accident or by design he wasn’t sure, but there had been more than a few ogglers poolside.

...not that he minded all that much, really. It was just a little irritating. On or off the ice, he couldn’t get away from the camera. The Ice King of Russia was so, so ready to retire. Maybe settle down. Try to find a steady girlfriend for once. He nearly had his Accounting degree, of all things; maybe he could actually go back to school and finish. Get a real job.

Yakov was waiting in the lobby for him. Georgi joined them soon after.

But no Viktor.

“Still napping?” asked Georgi.

Yakov sighed. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“Want us to go get him, Coach?” Sasha asked, even though it earned him a side-eye from Georgi. Waking Viktor up was probably the last thing his junior wanted to do, but the less stress they put on Yakov, the better.

The old man sighed again, took out his wallet, and sank into one of the leather armchairs. “Fine.
“Coach is... a little on edge,” Sasha explained once they were in the elevator. “I just told him that I’m planning to retire at the end of this season.”

“Oh.”

“I haven’t made an official announcement yet, but there’ve been rumors for a while.”

Georgi frowned at him. “The Olympics…”

“They might ask me to submit my name for the team, yeah.”

Once Worlds was over, they’d know how many Russia would be able to send. That was still months away. Sasha watched the way Georgi scuffed the carpet with the toe of his sneaker, amused. It’d be his junior’s first experience as an Olympian if he were chosen. What a treat. Sasha thought again about how he really couldn’t wait to get out.

The elevator doors chimed as they came to the floor, then to the room their coach had specified. When they arrived at the designated room, they knocked, but there was no answer, so Sasha used the key card. Inside, they found the lights on, the beds empty, but the bathroom door closed and shower running.

“Maybe he’s just running late,” said Georgi.

“Maybe.” Sasha knocked on the bathroom door. “Viktor! We’re waiting for you!”

“Maybe you should just let him finish.”

“It’s a quarter past, now. Coach is going to get cranky.”

“He’s already cranky.”

Sasha knocked again, louder that time. “Even more reason.” He put his ear to the door.

“Is he in there?”

“Yeah… he is. I think.” He wasn’t entirely sure, but he thought he heard sobbing underneath the running water. Sasha tried the doorknob, but it was locked.

“Is he okay?”

“Good question.” He stepped back and looked the door over. “Viktor, we’re coming in, okay?”

“Wait, we’re doing what?”

“Inside doors are usually hollow,” Sasha tapped the door once more. “This is no exception. It shouldn’t take much to break down…”

Georgi stared at him, eyes wide. “What?”

“Well, we can’t just pick it, it isn’t that kind of door.” Sasha frowned. “God, I keep forgetting how young you are. Okay, stand back.”
“You’re not really going to break it down, are you?!” The barely-a-senior skater squeaked.

“Only a little.”

“A little?!”

“Yeah. Stop yelling. You’re so dramatic.” If Sasha were honest, he’d have to admit that he were being a little dramatic, too. If Wei had done anything else the night before, he definitely would have laid him flat. An excuse to break down a door now was a little excessive, but perfect.

They could send him a bill later.

Besides, getting to show off for Georgi was kind of fun. How often did someone get a chance to kick a door down for their impressionable juniors, anyway? One solid kick next to the lock was all he needed to break the slim material that held it in place, and the door swung free.

“Viktor?” Sasha stepped in and yanked back the shower curtain, blocking the view from Georgi. What he found wasn’t what he feared, at least; just the naked boy huddled against the wall, wet and gasping, staring down at the drain. Sasha shut off the faucet, and the absence of running water left them in an eerie silence, broken only by Viktor’s rasping whimpers and stuttered breaths.

Georgi tried to push past. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know.” Sasha touched his shoulder, his face, his hand. Viktor didn’t respond to him, just continued to shake his head, muttering to himself. He squeezed his arm. “Viktor. Viktor, come on, snap out of it.” He didn’t. “Shit. Okay. Get me a towel, Georgi.”

He did, and Sasha wrapped it around Viktor as best he could, then hefted the teenager up and out of the tub.

“The door.”

Georgi held it open, and Sasha carried him to the bed. There, Sasha held him in his lap, arms around tight, dragging blankets over.

“Can you get into his suitcase? See if he has that stupid unicorn or whatever. Dammit, Viktor.”

“Yeah! Uh, let’s see...” Georgi pawed through the clothes as quickly as he could. “Oh! There’s a Makkachin toy! Where’d he get this?”

“Makka- oh, the dog, that’s even better. Okay, bring that here.” Sasha took it and shoved it into Viktor’s hands, closing his fingers around it, and shook him again. “Viktor, pay attention. Just focus on Makkachin, okay? Makkachin’s fur. Pet him, Viktor.” He took Viktor’s hand, forcing his hand over the stuffed animal, then turned to Georgi. “Go get Coach, Georgi.”

“U-Uh okay.”

“But you need to be careful. You have to be calm. Don’t run. Don’t act like anything is wrong. Just go tell him that I want to talk to him, okay? Can you do that, Georgi?”

Georgi hesitated, then nodded. “Yes, Sasha.”

“Good. Go on, then.”

“Okay.”
By the time Yakov and Georgi returned, Viktor was responsive, but in tears, clutching the plush dog tight. They got him dressed in poodle print pajamas and tucked into bed with Yakov close by. As far as they could tell, he’d been in the shower for over an hour, and while they didn’t have to worry about hypothermia with the hotel’s hot water supply, the massive panic attack had left him utterly exhausted. Viktor wasn’t going anywhere, and since they couldn’t leave him alone, neither were they.

They ordered room service.

“Is he going to be able to skate tomorrow?” Georgi asked, watching Viktor sleep from the opposite bed, a cold sheen of sweat on his forehead.

Yakov frowned. “It’s difficult to say without knowing what triggered it.”

Sasha set down his hotel hamburger. “Did he mention that he had a little stare down with Wei Bin yesterday?”

“No, he did not.” The old man rubbed the sleeping boy’s shoulder.

“I didn't think much of it, myself. But you know Bin. Honor and all that bullshit that he can't even back up with a decent program. Guess it shook him up pretty bad.”

“And Makkachin’s not here…” Georgi had good reason to be concerned; there’d been a huge difference since Viktor had gotten Makkachin. Even before being attacked on the street, the depressive episodes had only been getting worse, and Makkachin had changed everything. But taking a dog, even a service dog, on an international tour was impractical at best, and the media didn’t need to ask any more questions than they already had. So far, Viktor had dealt with the stress of competition just fine; he’d always performed well under pressure, but this…

Viktor couldn’t skate like this.

They also couldn’t let him pull out of the competition this late in the game without major penalties, either; score, rank, monetary, not to mention pride…

“What he needs is an anchor,” said Sasha, fingering the ring he kept on the chain around his neck. “Something to keep him grounded and focused. A token?”

Yakov nodded, looking down at the stuffed dog on the bed. “Ah. I know.”

He sent Sasha out for vodka, a six pack of beer, a strawberry yogurt, a pair of scissors, a stapler, and a standard-sized box of tissues. Georgi sipped his one offered can of Miller Lite, watching in horror as Yakov and Sasha gutted the plush dog to retrofit it for the tissue box, dropping the polyfil stuffing carelessly to the floor between sips of their own drinks and jokes. They stapled the hell out of it, stretching it here and there, only for Georgi to point out that the hotel’s flat box would have fit better, and for them to re-gut it and do it all over again.

It wasn’t pretty, but when they were finished, it was functional. Assuming Viktor wasn’t horrified by what they’d constructed between the cheap, American liquor and long evening, they were in business.
Viktor woke up again just before midnight, groggy and dazed and for all the world confused as to why everyone was in the room with him. Weren’t they supposed to meet in the lobby? But the memories trickled slowly back and, coupled with context, Viktor pieced together a rough and ugly portrait of the evening fairly quickly. Before he could get too upset, though, Yakov put his arm around his shoulders and presented the tissue box.

“Here, Vitya. For tomorrow.”

Viktor leaned against his coach and blinked down at the box- his plush, transformed into a practical little carrier. He took it and turned it over in his hands. “You guys butchered it.”

“Hey!” Sasha said through a yawn. “We did the best we could, brat!”

“I’m gonna have to redo it when I get home. Geez… you guys don’t know anything about how dogs or plush animals work.” Viktor stroked the ears of the tissue box, then turned to hug his arms around Yakov’s middle.

“Of course Coach gets all the thanks. Eat your yogurt, Binktop.”

Viktor blinked up at Sasha as the little container was shoved at him. “Bink… Binktop?”

“If you don’t understand yet, you will when you get to the senior division.”

The next morning, it was almost as if the attack had never happened. Only Yakov and his skaters knew differently, picking up on the things that the cameras and competitors didn’t. It was the little tremble in Viktor’s hands before he gripped the edge of the bench; the moments of hesitation just a half second too long; the way he couldn’t focus on what Yakov was telling him until the tissue box was in his hands. And even then, it took the gentle, squeezing of his coach’s hand on his shoulder to really bring him back to the present. Just nerves. It only looked like nerves.

Maybe it had been.

He went last for the Juniors, and after one last pat to the plush Makkachin tissue box, Viktor went out to the ice and brought home another gold for Russia.

Kazan, Russia

Viktor (16 years old)

“So tonight’s the night, right Coach?” Sasha ribbed the old man, brows wagging. “Or should I say, Papa?”

“Sasha, for the last time, don’t-” Yakov cut himself off with a sigh, stepping into the elevator. “Yes, I’m taking him drinking. Like I took you. Like I take all of my skaters when they turn sixteen. It’s a rite of passage. It’s not…”

Sasha didn’t buy it. Not for a moment. He smirked, patting the old man on the back. “Pops, then. And you’ll take Georgi tomorrow?”

“When we get back to Saint Petersburg. Georgi is competing this weekend.”
“Oh right, of course. How could I forget?”

He hadn’t forgotten. Yakov was just being so silly about it. Coach wanted to take Viktor out on his birthday. Not just for their little breakfast thing; they’d already done that. But this… this, Sasha knew, was different. When Coach had taken Sasha, it’d been with his guardian a week later. Because Sasha had been busy the day of. With his family.

But with Viktor, Coach was his family.

More to the point, Viktor was Yakov’s, even if he wanted to grumpy about admitting it.

“So which pub do you think you’ll hit?” Sasha asked once the elevator reached the designated, letting them cross over to the room. “Are you going to start him off with vodka? I bet he’s a lightweight.”

“Sasha, is there a reason that you’re following me?”

“Hm?”

“This is a private party. You’re not going to crash it.”

“Oh, Pops, no. I wouldn’t dream of it. I’m just here to capture the moment you tell him where you’re taking him tonight.” Sasha produced a slim digital point-and-shoot from his pocket. “See?”

“…Sasha.”

“No one else is documenting this stuff.”

“You are looking forward to retirement, aren’t you?”

“God yes.”

Yakov shook his head, unlocking the door and stepping into the room he shared with their junior rinkmate. The room, however, was empty. “Where is Vitya?”

“This sounds familiar…” Sasha shrugged, the holding the camera aside. “Well, last I saw, he was with that boyfriend of his in the stands. Maybe he’s running late.”

“Niko is here?”

“If that’s the kid’s name, yeah. Didn’t Viktor tell you?”

Yakov shook his head and frowned, picking up a slip of paper from the bedside table. “Ah. He left a note: ‘going out, don’t wait up for me, signed Viktor.’”

“Going out? But… didn’t you tell him that you had plans?”

Yakov took a seat on the edge of the bed instead of replying.

“So is he with this Niko kid? And ‘don’t wait up for me’? Are you okay with this?”

“Sasha,” Yakov rubbed his eyes with a tired and resigned sigh. “I will remind you one last time; am not Vitya’s father, I am only his coach.”
“You sure you know what you’re doing?”

“I think so. Yes. Just sit down.”

“I can’t. It’s… it’s snowing.”

“Of course. It’s winter.”

“My heart is beating so fast. It’s like a little deer, bounding through the woods. You know what I mean? Or maybe a rabbit.”

“Mishka…”

“Do you think Coach has seen the note yet?” He smiled over his glass, lips red from gloss and kisses and Chateau Lafite. “I thought about going without, but I didn’t want him calling the police or breaking down any doors…”

“He has your phone number.” Niko slid the silver curtain of hair away to kiss his neck. “You didn’t even leave the hotel.”

Viktor hummed, musing at that, and drained the rest of his glass. Finished, he handed it back. “More, please.”

“You’re going to go through the whole bottle too fast. You’re supposed to savor it, Mishka.”

“It’s really good, though.”

“It’d better be for how much it cost.” Niko took the glass and went to refill it. “Sit on the bed at least, and take off your crown so it doesn’t get ruined.”

Viktor did sit on the bed as asked, but remove his red and white flower crown he did not. “No way. Do you have any idea how long it took me to make this? It’s my birthday. I’m wearing it. And besides,” he sighed, taking the refilled wine glass as Niko brought it back to him, leaning in to kiss the other boy in thanks. “It’s not like we can get married, right?”

“...N-no.”

“But you do love me, don’t you, Niko?”

“Yes…”

“So this is as close as we’re going to get to any kind of ceremony, and I want to wear a flower crown.” He took another sip of wine. “Mmm. Ahh. Perfect. Thank you.”

“Fine then. This article says it’ll be easier if you’re on your hands and knees…”

Viktor glanced over at the rolled magazine in Niko’s hand, one brow rising, then looked away. “Where are you finding this stuff, anyway?”

“Just… you know,” Niko said, shrugging. “Around.”
Things had gone so fast over the past four months. From their first kiss to this moment, it’d been a non-stop whirlwind. Viktor wasn’t even competing in the Russian Nationals, but Niko had come to see him, anyway. For his sixteenth birthday.

They spent the night together, and in the morning, Viktor woke Niko up just long enough to say goodbye. Then it was off to his shared room with Yakov, a spring in his step, a smile on his face. Maybe it had been awkward, and sure he was sore, but he was an adult now. He’d slept with his boyfriend. That was a big deal. A huge deal! An eating-him-up-from-the-inside-out kind of deal, and he was just bursting to tell someone about it! He wasn’t sure how to feel, exactly, except that he did, and he felt a lot of it. And his coach was the only one, if anyone, in the whole world that he could discuss it with.

He got to the room and let himself in, practically skipping over to the bed by the window, plopping down with a sing-songy, “Hi, Coach!”

But Yakov wasn’t smiling. He didn’t even look up from his newspaper. “Did you have a nice night out?”

“Yeah!” Viktor tried to stay cheerful, despite the chilly atmosphere. ”Did you get my note?”

“I did.”

Viktor’s smile faltered. “I… stayed with Niko.” Why hadn’t he just put that on the paper? Why hadn’t he just told Coach in the first place?

Yakov still hadn’t even looked at him. “Is that where you were.”

“I’m sixteen now, you know,” Viktor said, chewing on his lip. Somehow, it all seemed so small and stupid, now. Foolish. Not that impressive at all.

“Ah. I see.”

“He came for my birthday. And, uh-”

“Vitya, I’ve been thinking…” Yakov finally folded the paper, carefully creasing the edges back along the inside edges to lay flat across his lap. “Perhaps it is time you had your own room.”

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Moscow in November was not Viktor’s favorite time to visit, but it was routine at this point, so at least he knew how to make the most of it. The frigid dark was so utterly Russian that he couldn’t help feeling a tug of belonging in spite of himself the moment he and Yuuri took their first steps out of the Sheremetyevo International Airport a full day and a half ahead of schedule. They took a taxi to the Star Hotel, checked in, and went on what Viktor called ‘Viktor’s Moscow Skating Tour of LOVE!’ despite being somewhat jet-lagged and very cold.

“Yuuri, it being cold is the point. The rinks aren’t usually open this early in the season, and you haven’t lived until you’ve skated at Moscow’s famous rinks. Come on, we’re doing Gorky Park first!”

“But Viktor, aren’t you still injured?”

“Shh, none of that! Niko never wanted to skate! I want to skate!”
So skate they did. At the five top skating rinks, one after the other, with a taxi ride and warm, mulled wine between each. And plenty of selfies, because they were no longer ‘dark.’

“We want them to know that we’re alive and in Moscow and that you’re going to win!” yelled the pink-faced Russian, wheezing and collapsing onto a the bench of the rink at GUM’s. He held out his phone. “Here, you take one. Give me a moment.”

“Viktor…”

Laughing, Viktor took the end of his scarf and wiped his face down with it. Too much wine, maybe. That was one way to stay warm in winter. Haha. “We just have one rink left!”

“Look! There they are!”

It was only a matter of time before they were found. Viktor turned a big smile at the onlookers. Ah, reporters. The media.

“It’s Viktor!”

“Vitya! Welcome back!”

Viktor reached for Yuuri’s sleeve and pulled him down onto the bench with him, one arm snaking around his shoulder. “Yuuri, say hi!”

“Uh. Hi?”

“Hi!” Viktor waved with his free hand. “We’re excited to be in Moscow for the Rostelecom Cup. I can’t wait for you to see what Yuuri has in store.”

They sat for a few more photos, then made their escape, grateful for the ice beneath their feet. Viktor claimed it was part of his plan, though Yuuri was doubtful of that. Either way, by the time they reached VDNKh, he was practically clinging to Yuuri like a shaky, baby deer.

“You, I can’t skate anymore.”

“I told you.”

“Help me.”

“People are staring.”

“I’m your coach. We can just tell them I’m injured. Which I am.”

“Because you’re not listening.”

“...Yuuuriii…”

“You’re the five time consecutive world champion, Viktor…”

Viktor hung on him anyway. “And look how far I’ve fallen… how sad.” He sighed. “Okay, let’s head back. I could probably use a massage. And painkillers. And more KT tape.”

“And a hot bath. I know.”

“Right.”
It was so entirely different than the last time he’d been with a lover in Moscow. Of course, that had been Niko, because Niko had lived in Moscow. Probably still did. Most of the time Viktor had spent in this city had been with him, sometimes running around, but mostly it was in and out of hotel rooms. That was all they’d had time for and because they couldn’t be seen in public together. Not much. Not like that. It had been so hush hush, so scandalous. Sightseeing or skating together was rare if ever with Viktor being the recognizable person that he was. But even in those hotel rooms, Niko wasn’t one to agree to give massages when Viktor would make demands after being stupid. Yet, here they were. Yuuri was humoring him yet again, and with a smile at that.

Viktor bought him apple cider, since he didn’t want wine, and looped his scarf around his neck because he couldn’t kiss him, but he was too sweet to do nothing.

“Uhm, thanks?”

“You’re welcome, Yuuri. I’ll get us a cab.”

After the massage and the bath, the tape, the painkillers, and all other kinds of TLC, Viktor huddled up against Yuuri with a cup of tea, draping his head against his shoulder. “Can you believe that it’s already time to go back to the real world tomorrow?”

“I guess we had to eventually.”

“Mmm.” Viktor sought the tendon at the side of Yuuri’s neck, melding his mouth to it, then to the underside of his jaw. The TV in the corner played music through its shoddy speakers, unnoticeable and quiet. There was little point to playing Soaps in Russia and he was hardly in the mood, anyway. As long as it wasn’t silent, that was enough. “We’ve made camp in enemy territory,” he murmured. “And the others will be arriving tomorrow.”

“That’s true…”

“Are you ready?”

Yuuri kissed his damp hair. “After all the training we’ve been doing?”

Viktor laughed.

“I mean it! Maybe it was a little… different, but I feel pretty confident!”

“And that, my darling Yuuri, was entirely the point.” Viktor smiled at him over his mug, took a sip, and offered it for Yuuri to do the same.

He blushed, and drank the lightly sweetened chamomile tinted with a hint of vanilla chapstick—something they’d picked up when they were out that afternoon—and handed it back again. “Are we doing more sightseeing tomorrow?”

“No… we’ll practice in the morning. A few more runs to make sure that you’ll be ready for the media. Being out in public was one thing, but they’ll be watching us closely every moment… that kiss in Beijing was a very bold move on my part, we’re going to have to be careful.” Viktor closed his eyes, sipped the tea, then let it rest in his lap. “Everything we do is part of the performance, so we’ll stay in a bit longer.”

“Okay. Good call.”
“Besides…” Viktor smirked, nuzzling into his shoulder. “I’m not ready to give up my time alone with you yet.”

“It’s almost like we’re the only ones left in the world, right?”

Viktor blinked up at him, the little memory from the tail-end of summer traipsing back to mind slowly at first, but then bright and warm as the campfire had been. “Ahhh… yes. Yuuri. Yes. Just us.” He settled back against his shoulder again.

“You getting sleepy, Viktor?”

“Mmm…”

“It’s cause it’s dark, huh?”

“It’s always dark in winter in Russia… all the time…”

Yuuri kissed his head again. “Let’s get you to bed.”

The morning and most of the afternoon was spent in the hotel room as promised, neither of them letting their last hours of privacy go to waste. Viktor went over The Art of War once more over breakfast, and the rest of the time was spent divided between Yuuri’s program— the performance aspect; movements, facial expressions, arm and hand positions—and how they would conduct themselves in public together. Viktor would be handling most of the press in Moscow, given that he knew the people, the language, and that he had them eating out of his palm, already…and Yuuri would simply do his best to be polite, but above all, confident. A Japanese ambassador.

Whatever Yuuri was to Viktor and whatever Viktor was to Yuuri would be up to everyone’s individual interpretation and speculation. That was how Russia worked. That was how the media was supposed to work. They didn’t ask, and they wouldn’t tell. It would keep them safe while allowing them make their statement and showing the world that they had been there. That Viktor and Yuuri, whatever they were, were.

That was something Russia couldn’t take from them, so long as they were careful.

Viktor would let them deliberate and debate. Let them fight over Internet forums over whether he and Mr. Katsuki had something between them or not; if their kiss in Beijing had been real or if the camera angles and the fuzzy footage proved it enough for their liking or not; let them worry if he was too old, or if he had ulterior motives, if he was using Yuuri, if he was doing any number of ridiculous things. He’d read so many theories over the years, so many rumors about his own life. Alternate histories, fake interviews, wild accounts that he hadn’t even the most tenuous grasp on—that he just didn’t care. It wasn’t worth it.

They would believe what they wanted to, no matter what evidence was presented to the contrary, or not. And that was fine. None of it changed what he and Yuuri actually had.

That was between them, and them alone.

Viktor could hardly wait to show the world, even just a small taste of it.

After a final thorough practice round of kissing up Yuuri’s leg that led to, of course, other things,
and then more, followed by a shower and an extended nap, the pair went down to the hotel’s cafe for a pick-me-up before getting ready to go out for dinner before the opening ceremony.

Viktor yawned around the cup of espresso. It was too hard to stay awake with all of the exercise, even with the nap. Winter was so tough. “I told Chris that I didn’t know how to ski, but you know how he is… ‘You’ll figure it out, Viktor,’ he said.”

“So what happened?”

“I fell. A lot.”

“Even though you were the number one skater in the world at the time?”

Viktor laughed. “How many times have I had and lost and reclaimed that title, anyway? At what point am I just.. permanently the best?”

For a moment, Yuuri began to count on his fingers, but then smiled to show he was joking - and turned to his own coffee. “You are, Viktor. Don’t worry.”

“Ha. Thank you.” Another long sip, then another yawn. He shook his head. “Either way, it didn’t seem to translate to skiing. I was sore for days. But the resort had a hot springs, too.”

“Oh, like ours?”

“Kind of! Though, it was Swiss, so it was more of a…” Viktor trailed off, gaze drawn by the small group in business casual attire talking to a young athlete trying to check in at the reception desk. The paparazzi had arrived.

He glanced back at Yuuri, still dressed in his comfy sweats, hair unkempt, glasses slightly askew. He was adorable, but not exactly the way he dressed down for formal events. Which had been fine for coffee. Maybe not so fine when meeting the media. One quick glance at himself told a different story entirely; he was prepared for the wolves in his broad-shouldered, stiff leather jacket and designer jeans.

“What? What is it, Viktor?”

“Wolves,” he said simply. “Reporters. If you’d prefer to go back to the room, I can distract them. Keep them away from the elevator.”

“Oh. Uh. Yeah. Yeah, that’d be great. Thanks.”

Viktor stood, pulled the black shades from his breast pocket out, and slid them into place with a single nod to Yuuri. “Leave it to me.”

For three solid seconds, Yuuri stared at him as if he couldn’t decide whether or not he were being serious, then shook himself free of the daze, crumpled his empty cup, and took off for the elevator.

Viktor rolled his neck, put on a smile, and went out to greet the press. The caffeine was doing its job, and he felt nicely relaxed and ready to face anything they could throw. Not that he really had anything to worry about; they were thrilled to see him, just as the others had been.

“Viktor!”

“Viktor, welcome back!”

He tossed his head, carding fingers through this hair, smile turning just wide enough to show a
flash of teeth- and that really made them happy. Which, in turn, made Viktor happy. It would make his job much, much easier if they were so eager to be complacent.

Their hero was home. He looked good. Comfortable. Confident. They loved that look on him. It made Russia look good in turn, which made them look good, feel good. It put them at ease. He answered their questions without hesitation, laughing, shrugging, that smile never leaving his lips. This competition, like any other, would be a breeze for a champion like Viktor, and by extension, his chosen delegate.

“How do you feel about returning to Russia?”

It was more of the same.

"When will you return to skating?"

Viktor had answered this and all the rest several times over already. Partial answers, deflections, refocusing, more smiles. And he would continue to do so as many times as it took, consistent and immovable until the point was driven home. “Until the Grand Prix Final is over, I won't comment on any future plans. Right now, I see a lot of potential in Yuuri Katsuki's skating. I'd like you all to focus on Yuuri at the Rostelecom cup.”

Firm, straightforward, decisive. Or, completely diplomatic. He wasn’t going to give them what they wanted, which might have been an answer in and of itself. So much depended on the results of the Grand Prix Final, but not in the way that they thought… and he wasn’t going to give that away.

"If the skater Yuuri has that much charisma, don't you want to face him as a fellow competitor?"

Viktor considered the question, well aware that his brows were rising with interest, but… again, he couldn’t give anything away. If things with Yuuri hadn’t gone the way that they had, if they weren’t lovers, if he had been, in fact, rejected and they had parted ways after the Grand Prix Final, then perhaps he would be returning to the ice as a competitor.

Viktor Nikiforov as Yuuri Katsuki’s rival would be easier to accept than Yuuri Katsuki’s coach and lover, anyway. It was a fair theory for them to speculate on, even if he would prefer the latter.

The voice recorders and notepads pushed closer, waiting for his response, and Viktor’s gaze wandered until it fell upon a familiar sight: a scowling, slouching, slinking little Yuri Plisetsky. “Hey!” Viktor pointed, grin splitting into a wide smile. “It’s Yuri Plisetsky!”

"He's right!"

"It's Yuri Plisetsky!"

Viktor slid between the crowd and put his arm around the wide-eyed boy. Leave it to Yurio to be the perfect diversion. “Did you all see the short program I put together for Yurio?”

Viktor had been calling him Yurio at every given opportunity since he’d arrived in Moscow, and although the press hadn’t adopted the nickname, they’d all come to accept and appreciate the charm of it. There were murmurs from the little crowd and photos being taken as Viktor pressed his cheek to Yurio’s head, an affectionate gesture that he realized might have been taking a little too much liberty with someone that might have been a little bit angry with him a moment too late, when the teenager knocked the coffee cup right out of his hand and pulled away from him.

“Quit acting like you’re still the top Russian figure skater!” he snapped.
The press gaped at him, at Viktor, at the spilled coffee on the marble floor.

Yurio continued with a growl. “I’m the star in this event!”

It was a challenge. The journalists were already whispering between themselves, flipping pages, tapping out their next angle. Viktor Nikiforov vs Yuri Plisetsky. Protege? Rival? Would he announce his successor? Ally or enemy?

Viktor kept the smile frozen in place with an almost maniacal glee to see that fire alive and well in his junior, blazing just as he remembered. That it was turned toward him was to be expected, yes, even predicted, even though it hurt. Was that according to design or simply reasonable given circumstance? Did it matter? Not really. Yurio was strong. He was going to be just fine, with or without him.

“What?” He spat. “Aren’t you going to say something, Viktor?!”

The journalists looked between them, curious. Eager. Yes, aren’t you?

But instead of saying anything, at least at first, Viktor laughed, tucking his sunglasses into his breast pocket. “Yurio…”

“Yeah? What is it?!”

“It’s not me you’re skating against, you know. If you recall from the Hot Springs on Ice tournament, Yuuri Katsuki might surprise you.”

It was a bit of a low blow, and had the press chattering immediately.

“That- that didn’t…”

Viktor shrugged. He wasn’t playing around. Not in Moscow. There wasn’t any room for mistakes. He was top dog and Yuuri was untouchable; he would make sure of that, no matter what.

“Oh, it’s Coach Feltsman’s team!”

The squabble between himself and the little tiger was nothing in the face of the cold wind that blew from the heavy double doors when the Russian team— all that would be coming to Moscow—swept through on their way through on their way to the the front desk.

“Coach Feltsman!” the wolves went after them.

“Coach Feltsman, how do you feel seeing your former student go head to head against you in the Rostelecom Cup?”

“How do you think Yuri Plisetsky will fare against Yuuri Katsuki?”

“Do you think Viktor Nikiforov has done well as a coach this season?”

“Will Viktor be returning as a competitor soon?”

They blocked his path, putting themselves between Yakov and the desk. Lilia tried to push her way through, but they had questions for her, too. The assistants stopped, their expressions bored and only somewhat irritated as they set their heaviest loads down to wait. This was nothing new to them; they were always getting stopped by the media for questions.

“You will have to ask them about all of that,” Yakov said with a grunt, finally giving in as he
turned his attention to them with a deep-set frown with Lilias withering gaze not far behind. “I’m not Viktor’s keeper. And Yuri…”

They looked around, then, but Yuri was nowhere to be found.

When one knew how to create a diversion, one also knew how to take advantage of another just as easily. Viktor smirked, rooted where he stood, and regarded the crowd once more. He couldn’t leave, not until the hierarchy of dominance had been settled. Seeing Yakov on his own hadn’t been part of his plan, but it was also inevitable. He looked from the men to Mila, who smiled at him, then to Lilia, whose cold gaze drew nothing but an icy stare right back. Compulsively, he reached for the sunglasses again, flipped them open, and brought the tip of the earpiece to his lip, thoughtful. Then he looked to Yakov.

The old man looked, well, old. Older than he remembered him looking, each line of frustration etched deeply into his weathered skin. He didn’t like that look on him; the way the red of anger colored his face, forcing the pale blue of his eyes to stand out like an ice chip in a cure for a hangover. Worse yet, he wouldn’t look at him. Refused to see him. Saw right through him. Looked at the wolves, saw them. Spoke to them. But didn’t see Viktor. Wouldn’t acknowledge him.

Viktor’s smile faded to a line like a wire between two telephones bearing the weight of a snow-laden tree.

Any moment...

“Viktor, Coach Feltsman said that you were were a third-rate coach in Beijing, do you have any commentary on that?”

...the pressure could become too great...

“Is this part of a publicity stunt?”

...and it could all....

“Is Coach Feltsman aware of your plans for next season?”

....just...

“Viktor, is it true that you and Coach Feltsman are not speaking?”

...snap.

“Coach Feltsman, are you-”

“Viktor!”

Viktor looked up just as Mila threw her arms around him, red hair tucking under his chin. He blinked in surprise, startled. “M-Mila!”

“Mila had always been strong and she’d always been a hugger, but Viktor wasn’t used to her being quite so affectionate with him. But, then, the last time she’d seen him was the day Yakov had sent
him home for being underweight. She was probably sizing him up. *Clever.* He laughed, hugged her back, and tousled her hair, just a little, like he used to... a long time ago. A really long time ago.

“Mila,” Yakov barked. “Get your things. It’s time to check in.”

“Sorry, Coach Yakov,” she said, and backed away from Viktor with a smile- one part apology, one part regret. “We’ve missed you, Viktor.”

“Mila!” That was Lilia. “Now!”

Mila jumped back to order, hurrying to join the rest of the group as they moved on. Now that the power couple were angry, the press had dispersed, some leaving to go after the other skaters that were arriving, some lingering to watch, though there wasn’t much point now. They had their answers as soon as Yakov had called them to order: Viktor wasn’t welcome with the rest of the team.

Yakov had rejected him, and the others would follow suit.

...

“Hey, I’m just about ready... thanks for holding them back.”

Viktor said nothing as he came into the hotel room, simply letting the door pull his hand until it slid closed, catching the automatic lock with a soft click. The bright whites of the bathroom tile against the strange coral accents bothered him, especially set against the taupe-colored carpet. It felt like marshes; too warm to be the coast, too wet to be winter. It didn’t feel right. But then, neither did he.

One look in the mirror told a story he didn’t want to hear. Viktor wore no makeup, not even mascara, and while he looked so much healthier than he had before, he still looked *naked.* But the sleepy-eyed stare those pale blue eyes gave him belonged to a face decidedly male; his jawline was fine, but strong, his shoulders broad, especially in his carefully chosen jacket, the posture intimidating, confident. Fierce.

He was a wolf with waiting jaws, ready to strike at any given moment. A man, just like they wanted.

“Viktor?”

He turned to Yuuri, who slipped in behind him to find the comb for his hair. “Hm?”

Yuuri gotten ready, clothing-wise, and was just putting on the finishing touches to go out.

“Everything okay?” Yuuri asked, running the comb under water, then through his hair with just a few quick swipes. It didn’t have to be perfect, just good enough to get them through the evening.

Viktor watched him a moment, the dark eyes in the mirror, really considering the question. Did he need to tell him about Yakov? Was there a point? He forced a smile small smile. “Yeah, sorry. I’m still waking up, I think. Let’s go.”

“Okay.”
They went somewhere close for dinner, and Viktor barely touched his meal. Part of it was from an incredible lack of appetite, but the other was constant interruption from fans. Most days, figure skating would be one of the furthest thoughts from the minds of the citizens of Moscow. But when the Rostelecom Cup or Russian Nationals happened to come near, the tourists flooded and the craze hit strong and hard as if everyone were a born fanatic.

Figure skating mania. The athletes were celebrities. Gods. Idols. Heroes.

In Russia, Viktor was especially, and Yuuri by extension.

Had they come three months prior, Viktor would have been recognized by a handful of people, sure. He might have even been asked to sign an autograph or two. But Yuuri would have gone by unnoticed. Being there during the weekend of the Cup, so close to the official hotel, with all of the ads playing on television and radio and in the newspaper and on every local internet site, it was impossible to see Viktor, and Yuuri with Viktor, and not know who they were.

“Viktor Nikiforov! Oh my god!”

“Five time national champion!”

“He’s taking a break this season to… oh, to coach Yuuri Katsuki!”

Within seconds of seeing Viktor, anyone with access to the internet could also be filled in on the entire drama of the last year with just a few keystrokes. It was incredible. And, with a few more seconds to transform into awkwardly bumbling fans, anyone could offer trembling scraps of paper to have signed by the smiling Russian and his Japanese companion.

“Please support Yuuri Katsuki tomorrow,” Viktor said each time he passed an autograph back to his fans with a signature wink, new and old alike. “I’m depending on you.”

“Of course, Viktor!”

They had to leave with most of Viktor’s meal unfinished in order to make it to the opening ceremony on time. “I’ll just get something later, don’t worry about it,” he promised. Their room didn’t have a mini fridge. “Let’s just go.”

The initial opening ceremony was held in the conference room of the hotel instead of the events center. It wasn’t so much ceremonial as it was a reminder of rundown of the schedule, regulations, policies, and introductions to the ISU’s on-duty staff for the event, but it was nothing new for Viktor. He’d been to thousands of these meetings, and they were all the same: it was an event sponsored by the ISU, they were all invited guests and as such, were expected to follow certain rules of conduct. Any violations would be reported to their country’s reps and from there to their coaches, then dealt with accordingly- usually in way of penalties and fees.

The ISU was paying for their room and board, sure, with economy flights and continental breakfasts in all their glory. But disqualification or failure to meet contractual obligations meant being financially responsible for the balance of all amenities, including the fees for on-site medical staff and the biased judges. If there weren’t any winnings to pay for it, the funds came out of a skater’s own pocket. Not that the ISU expected that to happen, no, of course not; they just wanted everyone to be aware. For legal reasons. And, of course, in way of thinly-veiled threat.

It had been outlined in the event packet, as always, but they went over it every time anyway. Viktor rubbed his eyes. No one was really paying attention to the lecture, but everyone was in mandatory
attendance. That was the real draw to the ceremony. Once the fine print was out of the way, the socializing could begin. Old friends leaned in or behind, giving each other significant glances. The time for gossip was close at hand.

These competitions were the only time many of them even got to see each other, and the opening ceremony was their meet-and-greet reunion. Since Chris wasn’t there, Viktor had no reason to pay any attention.

...even when Chris was, Viktor never liked to linger. These meetings made him anxious. He didn’t mind the crowds so much as the reminder that they were there to make people money. That’s what it came down to. That wasn’t what they said but that’s what it meant. It’d never sat well with him.

He’d been called idealistic by many people throughout his life, and troublesome by many more, and the whole thing had left him bitter.

Fortunately, Yuuri made no contest when Viktor suggested they leave the moment they were dismissed. Neither one of them was young enough to be unjaded, and glass hearts inherently understood the need for a hasty retreat.

It was late by the time they got back to the room and Viktor was tired. He dropped his lanyard and badge on the dresser, shed his jacket, mumbled something about bureaucracy, and only then realized that Yuuri hadn’t moved from the door. “Yuuri?”

Attention captured, Yuuri locked the deadbolt and smiled.

There’d been no prior discussion, but there didn’t need to be; they had an understanding about wants and needs and meeting them for each other. In four footsteps they were doing just that, finding comfort in that familiar hunger. Yuuri was insatiable; Viktor would do his best to keep up.

Kissing, not talking, they made their way to the beds, mattresses offset to bridge the gap between them. It wasn’t comfortable, but hotels bolted beds to the floor- who knew? -and the luxury of sleeping together was one they weren’t willing to give up, even though their room was anything but luxurious.

Viktor fell upon the the stiff sheets and dug his fingers at the duvet, scooting back, making room for his lover crawling after him. Yuuri had become so adept at the removal of clothing; no button was safe when his nimble fingers were near, and he kissed and kissed from collar to belt buckle.

There were rules, of course- Viktor had made that clear in China -he would do nothing to compromise Yuuri’s ability to skate well. He didn’t explain why other than citing personal experience, but Yuuri hadn’t asked, which was appreciated. It left them plenty to do, anyway, and direction besides.

He gasped when his body was left open to the cool air, sighed when Yuuri continued his kisses, moaned when his hands worked their magic… and wondered if the pattern on the walls were wallpaper or a spackled texture. Either way, it was bizarre, especially when paired with the taupe of the carpet. The ugly, ugly carpet.

He’d never liked this hotel. Never, in all the years he’d stayed there.

Other rooms had forest green floors. The decor didn’t make sense. None of it matched the grand lobby. The facade out front was old, the parking lot cracked and tarred. Their room wasn’t even facing the courtyard- not that it mattered, since the pool was covered for winter. Still, it might have
been nice.

Occasionally, when they’d shared a room, Yakov had gone for suites, opting to get his own room instead of taking what the ISU offered to pay for. Those had been quite nice. Not as nice as what he and Yuuri had had in Shanghai, but certainly nicer than the thin, springy mattress tossed onto the twin bed of this tiny box of a room.

“Vitkor?”

He looked up, blinking.

“Viktor… hey, are you okay?”

Viktor let go of the sheets, coming back to focus again. “Yeah, of course, Yuuri…” He smiled. Yuuri was in the habit of checking with him whenever he got distracted, which was sweet, but he couldn’t always help it. “Sorry. Please.”

Yuuri cupped his cheek, thumb caressing the contour of his face. “Viktor, I want you here with me.”

“I’m here, I’m here.”

The heat left him as Yuuri sat up, and the mattress sagged underneath him between the beds. “We don’t have to do anything if you’re not feeling it...”

What might have been a threat from anyone else came as sweet concern from Yuuri. And it burned. One part pain, one part desire. Viktor followed after him, pushing up from the bed, reaching for those heavenly, denim-covered thighs. “Yuuri…”

His plea was met with the gentle hair petting of Yuuri’s clean hand and another soft smile. “Really. Besides, tomorrow I’m going to show everyone my *Eros*, and I know what that does to you.”

Viktor buried his face against the crease between Yuuri’s legs, hands on either side rubbing up and down, face burning. “*Yuuri...*”

“I can wait.”

Did he want to wait? Did he want to go? It was so terribly romantic… and that got him weak. But did giving in mean he had been manipulated? He hadn’t said no in the first place. What was Yuuri’s angle? Had there ever been an angle?

“...are you making things too complicated again?” Yuuri tapped the spot on his head, then laughed when Viktor reached back and squeezed his backside. “Hey!”

“Hey, *you!*” Viktor growled, digging feet against the mattress to take his lover down to the mattress, going after his belly like the wild tiger he was.

“I said no raspberries! Viktor! Vikto-AH!”

They fell in a heap when the mattress slid, barely enough room to be stacked on top of each other, limbs tangled, furniture cradling them.

“Ow.”

“This is why we stay in nice hotels, Yuuri.”
“Viktor…”

Things had cooled by the time they managed to get free, and being half naked was more a novelty than anything. Yuuri fixed their makeshift bed, Viktor sat in the corner arm chair, massaging his leg.

“You’re so pretty like that, Viktor.”

Viktor looked up.

“I mean, you always are, but…”

Viktor had his injured leg extended, toe pointed, while his other leg was tucked behind. He supposed he could see it; the pale skin of his long leg against the dark carpet, arched with the rest of his limbs in an almost ballet-style pose. He was delicate like this. Pretty? Yuuri thought he was pretty… It made him blush and shyly turn his head. “Where’s the remote?”

“Hm? Oh, do you want some music?” Yuuri found it and turned on the television, flipping through the channels. He stopped it on one playing Spanish guitar, looking back with a grin. “How’s this?”

It wasn’t silence, so he nodded. “Okay.”

“And your leg?” He asked, setting the remote on the dresser.

“It’s okay. I just need to tape it up again.”

“I’ll help with that.”

“Sure…”

Viktor was sure that he would never get used to it; the soft touches, the tender smiles, the reassurance. It seemed too good to be true. He was supposed to be coaching Yuuri, helping him with his confidence, not the other way around. Yet Yuuri was the one kneeling at his feet, fingers so gentle as he first massaged the injured muscle, then taping it as he had so many times over the past few days. Even if his touches hadn’t strayed to his inner thigh, or lingered, or brushed so innocently between his legs, Viktor would have been in trouble.

There was no one in the world that he was weak to like he was for Yuuri. No one that had broken through his walls and defenses, had learned his nuances and masks so well. It was so terrifying and empowering, he loved and hated it all at once.

So he kissed him, keeping him close with both legs wrapping around his waist. He kissed him hard, breathless and wanting with a spark that burst like a splitting log on the fire. His hands found the smooth skin of his bare shoulders, dragged down to take hold of his shoulder blades, pressed closer, gasping into his mouth.

“Viktor-“ Yuuri pulled away to get the words out. “We don’t have to. We can dance instead.”

Dance? Viktor glanced up at the TV screen, the track name of some song he didn’t recognize, the music and rhythm that matched the way his heart was beating. Maybe the interruption was part of their usual game, or maybe he was being serious, but Viktor didn’t want to hear it. He slid his hands up into his hair, took an experimental tug, and pulled him closer. “We already are, Yuuri.”

With one more kiss, they fell back into each other again; the same fervor, the same passion, focused and present. Although the armchair was no match for Yuuri’s strength, the position let him
get deeper and press closer while only leaving some marks against the wall. At least it wasn’t the squeaky box springs or rattling headboard, though none of that stopped Viktor from moaning as he raked his fingers down Yuuri’s back, desperately trying to remember to keep his nails out of the equation.

The tracks had changed four more times before Viktor was calm again, hips aching in that familiar way, back sore from staying bent like that for so long. “Yuuri,” he asked, absently stroking Yuuri’s hair.

“Mm?”

“Are your knees rug burned?”

“No.” Yuuri kissed his chest. “I’m fine.”

“Is that why you kept your pants on?”

He pressed his smile to his skin. “I didn’t want you to worry.”

“You’re so sneaky, Yuuri.”

“You’re so cute, Viktor.”

Viktor frowned, mouth clamping shut. That wasn’t fair. He looked up at the ceiling, then at the TV when the track changed again, lulled by the quiet between them. “Yuuri?”

“Mm?”

“Will you carry me to the bed?”

Yuuri pulled away, slow and careful, equally sore, and gave him a tired grin. “Yeah.”

“I love you.”

“Me, too.”

“Mila, don’t be late to practice.”

“Yes, Coach Yakov…”

“And don’t keep Yuri up too late.”

“You’re worrying too much.”

“Mila.”

“Yes, okay.” She sighed. “Goodnight, Coach Yakov.”

“Goodnight.”

Mila hung up and tossed her mobile aside, turning to the teenager on the bed in front of her. Yuri had his back to her, but she could tell that he was rolling his eyes just by the way his head was tilted. He had a certain aura around him that made it really, really obvious.

“So?” he asked, tone as irritated as she expected.
“So,” Mila continued, picking up the brush from earlier and going back to working on his hair. “I think your hair is still too short to braid it right.”

Yuri snorted. “Lilia can do it- ow! Stop yanking on it!”

“You’re the one that-” Mila stopped herself when Yuri went still, behaving once more, then went on brushing, smoothing the silken blond strands flat. “That’s better. Now, what was that, Yuri? Or should I say, Yurio?”

“Ugh, that’s not my name. Don’t ever call me that!”

“Oh just admit it, you miss him, too!”

“I do not, you stupid hag! OW!” Yuri pulled away from her, hopping off of the bed and to his feet, rubbing the back of his head. “What the hell? Don’t hit me with the brush!”

Mila sat back against the headboard and looked to the window with a frown. “He looked good, Yuri. Coach won’t admit it, but he looked really good. Tense, but… I think he’s happy. A lot happier than he has been in a long time. Don’t you think so?”

“…kind of hard to say. We only saw him for a few minutes.”

Dropping her head to her shoulder, Mila turned her gaze back to him with a sideways glance. “He’s different. He’s filled out. I know things aren’t good with Coach but…”

“Hey, I’m still pissed at him, too!”

“Yeah, but that doesn’t really mean anything, Yurio.”

“That’s not my name!”

She laughed, partly because it was so cute when he got angry, partly because the fact that he’d even gotten a nickname from Viktor was just so absurd in the first place… Mila had never gotten one. Had always wanted one, but never received one. Or earned? Was that how it was? The added layer of Coach Yakov’s team rules made things difficult.

Either way, Yuri and Viktor were close, even if the former wasn’t going to admit it.

“Oh, calm down, Yuri…”

“No way,” he said, coming back to the bed, hand out for his brush. “I’ll do this on my own, Mila.”

Sighing, Mila handed it back to him, handle first. “Fine, you big baby. Go back to your room, let Lilia do it tomorrow.”

“I’m going to!”

“You’ll have straw hair.”

Yuri glared, but Mila’s glare was stronger, so he rolled his eyes and backed off. “Whatever.”

She watched as he shouldered his leopard print bag, amused at the swagger he rolled in such a slender form. Even as small as he was, he still managed to radiate such intensity. So much aggression. “Hey, Yuri?”

The teen stopped at the door, hand on the knob. “Yeah?”
“Do you think Coach will ever forgive him?”

Yuri hesitated for several long seconds, not moving, then shrugged. “Would you?”

Mila shrugged back, hugging her arms around herself. “Yeah, I think so. Love’s a good look on him, you know? It’s hard not to.”

“...tch,” was all Yuri said, with one glance back over his shoulder, shaking his head, before he let himself out of the room.

There were voices… smiling faces in the stands. Bright flags and banners waving. Screams of Viktor, Viktor, Viktor! Dazzling strobe lights on the ice, his blades, the shades of pavonine as he took his place at skating position, one arm stretching high, high above his head, each feather-patterned sequin spread from wrist to tailcoat, sparkling.

_Breathtaking…_

He took a breath and the dream was gone.

The morning came early and still too dark for Viktor.

Not in an ice rink, but a hotel room. Not eighteen, but twenty-seven.

The contrast of that those dark jewel tones on his pale skin had been so elegant, so captivating, He’d been such a beauty, so unaware of what lay ahead. All the wars and terrible, terrible nightmares still in store.

Snow fell past the window in fat flakes, slow and drifting ghosts in the muted outside world.

There was the sound of breathing… the slow, rise and fall of the chest of the man next to him, sleeping on, unaware, still dreaming. His precious Yuuri, Yuuri, Yuuri. Viktor pressed closer, sneaking a toe between his ankles to tangle their legs and a hand under his sleep shirt to palm the soft, warm skin of his belly. Yuuri was real and alive and _here_ , perfect and his.

Not crumbling and defeated, but a rising champion.

Not like he was a year ago. Just eleven months prior, 1,600 kilometers southerly in Sochi. Almost a lifetime away, when Yuuri Katsuki was only a name and a profile photo, some statistics and footage, a passing figure in the hallway.

One dance had changed everything, shaking the stagnant waters of his life forever.

And now, he lay awake in the early morning hours before their next battle. It wasn’t the Grand Prix Final, but in some ways, it was more important. Without winning in Moscow, they wouldn’t be going to Barcelona at all, and they would have a difficult conversation that Viktor didn’t want to have. But he knew it wouldn’t come to that; Yuuri had worked too hard, had gotten too good. He would podium for certain. Gold, maybe.

No, this battle would reveal what had become of Viktor Nikiforov and force people to decide for themselves whether or not they could accept him as he was, whatever that meant, or leave him. Yakov had already made that choice, and he couldn’t do anything but let him be. It was safer that way. But the media? The other skaters? The people of Russia?
What he was doing was dangerous. Yes, he was a celebrity, but that only went as far as their little world was concerned. Outside of their circle, who cared about Viktor Nikiforov? That had been the entire point of all of their threats; everything was so fragile, so tenuous. They didn’t like being challenged. They didn’t like being shaken. If he’d miscalculated, if he’d been wrong about Yuuri, and everything fell apart, he could be dooming them both.

There was so much at stake and very few would ever know or care.

Viktor tightened his hold around him, nose and mouth to the back of Yuuri’s head, cheek nestled in the dip of his pillow. This close, he could see the start of one or two silver strands at the roots. Natural grey hairs, buried among the thick, lustrous black.

Breathtaking...

It was madness to drag him through all of this. They could have just gone through the competition like anyone else; a coach and competitor with other things on their minds and in their lives. But Viktor was an obsessive general with a vendetta, wasn’t he? And he couldn’t look away, couldn’t turn his back from the wolves that howled and howled whether he was awake or asleep or thousands of miles away from it all.

He closed his eyes, breathing deep, whispering a helpless sigh of private worry. Good generals always had secrets.

His was fear.

But he’d never, ever let Yuuri know.

—

The Rostelecom Cup brought winter sports fans out in droves despite the weather, lining up for any and all festivities offered by the whirlwind weekend event. It was something that the sponsors counted on. The athletes that weren’t warming up or doing practice runs were busy with photo ops, meet-and-greets, interviews, paperwork, and pep talks. The crowded center was full of energy and everyone felt it, anxious, excited, ready, ready ready.

Viktor took it in with a smile. It was so familiar to him. He’d lived for the thrill of competition for so many years, it was hard not to get a little hyped about it. The exhibitors had their game faces on, just like his- er, Yuuri’s -fellow competitors, the coaches were tired but trying not to show it, and the fans were losing their minds at every little thing. It was ridiculous and he loved it.

Cupping Yuuri’s shoulder, Viktor stepped away from the wall that they’d found to camp out at after open practice and canted his head. “Going for more water. Need anything else, Yuuri?”

Yuuri smiled back at him, rolling his shoulders back against the wall. It was meant for Viktor to feel just how strong he was, those muscles pulling away under his gloved hand. “Nope, I’m fine.”

Beautiful.

“I’ll be right back. Take care of Makkachin.”

“I will!”
Viktor waded through the crowd of athletes in their various states of preparation for the day’s events, soaking it all in. Yes, he was tired, and yes, he’d wanted to quit, but there was nothing quite like the first day of the competition, especially not when the stakes were so high. God, he loved it! It was almost enough to make him forget the rest. Almost.

He flashed smiles to the people he knew, friendly to some, apologetic to others, and flashed his badge at the water table to procure fresh bottles. The girls at the table blinked in surprise as they handed them over- “Viktor? Viktor Nikiforov?” -and he corrected them with a gentle shake of his head, tapping the badge again. “Coach. Coach Nikiforov.”

It was on his way back to Yuuri, his athlete, that Georgi called after him. He might not have stopped if it hadn’t been such a familiar voice. The other calls of Viktor were from the other side of the ropes or curtains, by fans or the press, and he didn’t have anything more scheduled for them but more waves and smiles. Words would have to wait until after Yuuri’s performance.

But Georgi…

Viktor hesitated, his smile faltering just a touch, just enough that he allowed the other man to catch up with him. Why he was there, he wasn’t sure. Georgi wasn’t competing in Moscow. He’d failed to place high enough in the Trophee de France as predicted, so he wouldn’t be continuing the circuit, but then, Moscow was such a short flight from Saint Petersburg…

He would know.

“Viktor, sorry, do you have a moment?”

It was one thing to ignore Georgi at a private function, or even just between the two of them, but in a semi-public space with so many watching… Viktor considered the request for only a second or two before he shrugged, letting his smile relax. It would be fine. He and Georgi went way back, and the other man was harmless. There was nothing his old comrade would ask of him that could be too compromising. Georgi knew the rules. “Sure. Walk with me.”

Georgi nodded, and the two of them left the crowded area and all the prying eyes, stepping out to an empty hallway. It would be used for overflow to direct traffic once seating began, but for the moment, they had it to themselves.

“Come to support Team Russia?” Viktor asked, settling against one of the walls. He uncapped one of the bottles and took a drink.

Georgi waited until he was finished, smile soft and cautious. “Didn’t see a reason not to. Mila and Yuri both here… And you, too, with Yuuri.”

Viktor took another sip, then dug into his coat pocket for another bottle, tapping pills into the palm of his hand which he took without comment.

“Painkillers?” Georgi asked.

“Pulled my hamstring.”

“Ah.” Georgi looked him over. “You were limping.”

Viktor shrugged again and put the bottle away. “It’s not bad.”

“No. It’s not.”
Viktor stretched out his leg, twisting his ankle from side to side to test the pain, then set his foot under him again. “What do you want, Georgi?”

“I was wondering if you two were going to come to Saint Petersburg after the Rostelecom Cup… if… you had changed flights or if you’d canceled plans, entirely.”

The answer to the question was simple; they had, in fact, canceled their flights. And then, somewhere along the way in Shanghai, Viktor had been coerced into booking new flights from Moscow to Saint Petersburg. It had been so cheap, it’d seemed like a crime not to book them. And Yuuri had seemed so convinced that they could smooth things over with Yakov that he couldn’t say no. Yakov had always caved to him before, so why not?

The change fee from Moscow to Saint Petersburg and the dates was a little more expensive, sure, but there could spend Yuuri’s birthday on holiday and he could spoil him some more. There were so many cultural gems in the city he’d grown up in, Yuuri was sure to love it. Absolutely sure to. It was going to be perfect.

Except...

“I’m only asking,” Georgi continued in Viktor’s silence, “because I thought we could get together. Just coffee, even, to catch up before you return to Japan.”

It wasn’t like Georgi to request something like this. Get together? Catch up? Since when had he cared? Viktor frowned, turning to look at him and found a matching frown on his former teammate’s face. He was uncomfortable, too. So why was he even asking?

Viktor looked ahead, back toward the edge of the hall where the competitors were. “Do you mean catch up with me, or… with Yuuri, too?”

“Whichever you prefer,” Georgi said quickly.

Too quickly for Viktor’s liking. Giving in too easily was such a weakness. Georgi had always been so… so wishy-washy. So eager to please whoever had the upper hand. It was frustrating. It made it hard to trust him. It was why-

“I’d like to get to know Yuuri,” Georgi cut into his thoughts. “And I have no problem being a third wheel, but if it’s easier for you if it’s only us… I understand. I just want to find out how you’ve been, Viktor. I can only glean so much from Instagram.”

Oh.

Viktor gave himself a moment to reconsider the request, buying time with another drink. By the time he recapped the bottle, he had his answer. “I’ll talk to him, see what he thinks…. and I’ll let you know.”

Georgi, like anyone on Yakov’s team, was accustomed to playing things down when he needed to. But also like any of them, failed miserably. There was a brightness in his eyes and relief in his smile, but he kept it low-key by forcing a sort of frown with his nod immediately after. “Perfect. I think I know a place you might like that we can go.”

Viktor wasn’t sure about that, but he smirked anyway. “Okay.” He pulled away from the wall. “And I think you’ll like Yuuri… he’s actually worth knowing.”

“I’m sure that he is.”
“Cheer for him, da?”

Georgi laughed through his nose in the way that he did, nodding his head to get back into game mode. Their conversation was winding down; they were going to be rivals again, vulnerabilities and walls closed. His cool guy smile slid back into place, and he held out his hand. “Of course, Viktor. Good luck.”

Blinking, Viktor looked down at the offered hand, the gesture of goodwill and sportsmanship not at all lost on him, and took it for a good, firm handshake. If nothing else, to do that without reluctance was an immense relief and a sure sign of good to come in the day ahead.

The roar of the crowds had everyone cycling through their pre-program routines; pacing, practicing, warming up, checking programs, checking phones, goofing off, wandering. There was still more than an hour to go before the Men’s Short Program would begin, leaving the Ice Dancers to command everyone’s attention. It’d been a long day, but the afternoon was progressing along nicely, keeping both Viktor and Yuuri in fairly decent spirits despite the pressure.

“And that last blogger person, she asked what my inspiration was behind my programs for the season. How is she supposed to run a blog if she’s not even watching the cups?” Viktor asked, laughing.

“I think we’re all still a little surprised that you’re not competing this season, Viktor.”

“Even you, Yuuri?”

Yuuri shrugged, his guilty smile sweet and sincere.

It won Viktor over every time. “Well… either way, she should have known by my suit that I was a coach. Or at least my badge. Don’t I look like a coach, Yuuri?” It wasn’t the first time he’d shown Yuuri his lanyard and badge, and it wouldn’t be the last. “It’s almost like they don’t think I can do anything but skate. You know, at Vaganova, they teach any of us that reach the final levels of the program how to teach choreography and practical business, but no, everyone thinks that all I’m good for is being a pretty face. I think I’m a lot more capable and astute than they give me credit for, and-” he paused at the insistent tugging on his sleeve from Yuuri, gesturing at the cameras pointed in their direction. Gathering footage for later, he guessed, or for a behind-the-scenes peek. Nothing was ever really private, not even behind the curtains in the exhibitors-only area.

By the time the cameras had turned away, Viktor couldn’t remember where he had been going with his soapbox. It was just as well, though, as Yuuri excused himself to use the restroom, anyway. Maybe it had been an excuse, maybe not. Either way, it left Viktor alone to enjoy the relative peace and tranquility of their chosen waiting area, which was perfect for him to gather his thoughts.

That was, of course, when JJ arrived.

“Hey Viktor! Long time no see!”

Viktor Nikiforov was many things, but ‘easy maker of friends’ did not make that list, and for very good reason. Four things happened the moment he heard JJ’s voice:

1. His body tensed from the base of his spine to the top of his head;
2. Which put pressure against his eyes, starting the beginning of a headache;
3. Bringing to mind memories of the previous years’ interactions with the young man, adding a twitch at the corner of Viktor’s grimace, and therefore
“What, are you not happy to see me?” Jean-Jacque Whoever asked, his bright and obnoxious smile far too cheerful to be anything normal.

Viktor hoped that his cold and silent stare would give him the message plain as day, but alas, it did not. JJ, for all of his Kingliness, did not understand even the basics of human interaction. Social grace was not his specialty, and did not, apparently, even begin to fall within the borders of his kingdom. For all of his men and his horses, King JJ had never even heard of such a thing as reading body language cues or taking hints or anything like that at all.

Often, when Viktor had the misfortune of running into such individuals, it only took one or two corrections to put them in their place. Setting boundaries kept everyone happy. You stay on your side, I stay on mine. He’d had to do that with more than enough fans to not be shy about it when it became necessary and not take it personally, and yet, despite Viktor’s attempts to keep him away, JJ persisted.

As he did now.

“Aw, Viktor, you’re not still sore about last year, are you?”

Still, Viktor ignored him, looking straight ahead.

“It was just banter, you know!”

Viktor took a sip of his water.

“That kind of thing is good for you, eh!”

Still, Viktor did not engage.

“You know, you Russians are funny. You take things so seriously. Maybe that’s why you’re ignoring me… because you know that I’m going to win this year, right?”

Viktor knew his fingers were tightening around the bottle, but he used every ounce of skill he had not to let anything else show. He couldn’t give in.

“Nothing, huh?”

Viktor screwed the cap back on the bottle.

JJ sighed. “C’mon.”

Brows pinching, Viktor looked around the room. They were alone. No other athletes. No cameras or press. No Yuuri. And… oddly, no coaches. He frowned. “Where are your parents?”

“Oh,” JJ kicked out a heel, arms folding back behind his head like a little boy lost in the grocery store. “They’re watching the Ice Dancers, since they were famous Ice Dancers back in their day, you know.”

“Yes, I’m familiar,” Viktor said, though he honestly wasn’t sure if he’d known that already or not. He thought he’d read that somewhere. Probably while researching JJ himself, and maybe not until his more thorough research for Yuuri.

“They gotta relive the glory and everything. It’s pretty great that they get to still do that. Glad that I can give them that opportunity again. I think they miss it.” His smile grew. “It’s probably the same
It took Viktor several seconds to understand what JJ meant, and even then, a startled “What?” escaped him before he managed to parse it, flooding him with instant regret.

“You know,” JJ said, sweet smile turning sly at the surprise on Viktor’s face. “Since you’re all old and retired now, you’re getting to relive the days of competition by being here. It’s almost like you never left! It was a pretty smart move to retire right when I really started getting good, I gotta hand it to you there, Viktor.”

Viktor, for all his experience in snappy responses, stared in semi-open mouthed silence for a good three seconds before shaking his head. “That’s… not… I’m not…”

“A wordless retreat from the ice to coach Japan’s golden boy that couldn’t measure up last year? Is your kindness protecting him from my reign?” JJ asked, now completely in his element, all fire and full malice in his maniacal glee. “Or is he shielding you from me?”

“I…” Viktor tried to think of something, anything to combat him with, but the audacity, the absurdity, the gross misconduct and complete misinformed… wrongness of all of it was just so entirely upsetting that he couldn’t get the words. All he could do was stare in shock and frustration while JJ laughed. Laughed.

“See?” JJ said, clapping him on the shoulder. “Now you’re getting it! This is fun, right?”

Fun was the absolute last thing that it was, Viktor thought, but there were no scathing comments near devastating enough to give to JJ that were even remotely appropriate for an event. Anything he could do would probably just… destroy the boy and then he would have to be responsible for ruining his career and it just wasn’t worth it, so he’d just have to suck it up and pretend that none of it had happened. It was always best just to ignore JJ. Pretend he didn’t exist.

JJ was the worst. The absolute worst.

“Viktor!” Yuuri called, coming through the doorway. “Sorry that took so long. I ran into— is everything okay?”

“Yuuri Katsuki!” JJ held out a fist for Yuuri to pound, which he did as if it were the most natural thing, and laughed some more like nothing was wrong at all. “Everything’s great! Viktor and I were just talking about you.”

“Oh, hey JJ.”

Viktor looked between the two and the utter betrayal, then dug into his suit jacket for the bottle of painkillers. He could take two more for the maximum dosage, and he would need them.

Yuuri’s smile faltered when he saw the bottle. “You okay?”

“Headache,” said Viktor, turning away from the others.

“That’s too bad,” said JJ. “It’s probably from the crowd. They’re just going crazy out there!”

No, thought Viktor. It’s you, it’s you, it’s YOU.

There was no relief for Viktor. Not then, and not for the next hour as he resigned himself to
babysitting the other skater, though the presence of Yuuri helped some. So, too, did the presence of others as they filtered in and out of the little back area behind the stands. The performers went on, the crowd cheered, the announcers did their thing. Yuuri and JJ had a friendly little chat to which Viktor pointedly paid no attention. The divisions changed. Seung-Gil went first, then Emil.

“Did you hear that?” JJ asked. Why he was still hovering, Viktor didn’t know. “Emil landed a quadruple loop, too!”

Could anyone be so dense?

The audience screamed.

“We should cheer for him, eh!” JJ said, clapping his hands together.

And now JJ was giving them orders? Viktor wasn’t sure how much more he could take.

Yuuri pulled out one of his earbuds, blinking. “Oh, sorry. Didn’t catch that!”

Viktor nearly extended the confusion to Yuuri - why was he being so friendly with the enemy, anyway? And JJ of all people? - but he didn’t get the chance as JJ pushed past Yuuri (rude) and into Viktor’s face (ruder still) with that same, too-wide smile.

“Viktor did that same jump in last year’s exhibition. I want to see that again!”

If Viktor had been any less of the stoic, well-bred, finely tuned machine of a man that he was, he might have smacked the pup that was JJ right across the face right then and there. But he was, in fact, a stoic, well-bred, finely tuned machine of a man, and he managed to steel himself, arms kept tightly folded, and instead, offered a quiet, but irritated, “I don’t recall,” in retort.

“Awwww!”

With nerves this frayed, Viktor wasn’t sure how well he would be able to perform in front of the camera. He was being tested, that was for certain. Why JJ? Why in Moscow? With a sniff, he checked his wrist where a watch was not, and nodded. “If you’ll excuse me, I need to get my athlete ready.”

“Ha ha, good luck, Viktor. You’re gonna need it.”

Viktor said nothing as he made himself scarce, sweeping to Yuuri’s side to lead him to the rink side. It was time to show Russia what they had prepared for them.

The ice beyond the curtain was near blinding, which matched the deafening cries of the crowd. One swift glance showed that they weren’t alone; Yurio and the rest of his team were there, but Viktor couldn’t concentrate on that. He had to focus on his student and nothing else. And Yuuri… Yuuri moved like a man who knew exactly where he needed to be, what he needed to do.

Their training had been exactly what Yuuri had needed. No one could touch him.

Viktor stole one glance back at Yakov before he knelt at Yuuri’s feet there at the barrier, submitting himself to tighten his laces. So much for being selfish. Russia’s national hero, bowing to a dime-a-dozen Japanese failure? Just what was true, Yakov?

What do you really believe?
Viktor looked up at Yuuri, who nodded at him, the fight well and alive in his eyes. Yes, he was ready. He was prepared. His soldier wanted to fight.

And oh god, it was driving him crazy.

In the years that he’d spent fighting, devising strategic maneuvers and battle plans, programs and performances to bring the audience to their knees, he’d never had the chance to involve another person. Not like this. Viktor couldn’t help but wonder, following Yuuri to the edge of the barrier, taking his guards, if it was just the start of something dangerously addicting.

The crowd was already on fire, already screaming. And why shouldn’t they? Yuuri was amazing. He was amazing. Russia was his home territory. He had brought them a new champion. He had won their love and respect time and time again, brought them gold, earned their devotion. There was no reason not to!

And they were screaming his name.

Viktor! Viktor! Viktor!

He looked back, mouth splitting into a wide smile, and he waved, as he always did. As he was supposed to. They screamed louder. Yes! I’m here! This is your new champion! Look! Look! Viktor is here, with Yuu-

Yuuri pulled him back to reality by the tie, and spoke low and warm against his cheek. “The performance has already begun, Viktor.”

All at once, the warm, pleasant haze of idol worship gave way to a different kind of heat, and that craze took hold of him by the throat. Or, he realized, just tightened his grip a little. “You’re right,” he whispered back.

“I’m going to go out there and show my love to the whole of Russia.”

It was a promise, just as Yuuri’s the night before, laden with oh so many sweet and succulent mysteries that he just couldn’t wait to unravel. He shivered, and then Yuuri was gone, skating out to starting position for all the world to see his - Eros.

Viktor didn’t bother to look at the audience. Not at Yakov, not the judges, or anyone else. It didn’t matter. He knew that they were all paying attention. If not from the yanking of his tie, or the kiss that he blew without any hint of hesitation, then it was the perfect performance that left Viktor- and many others, he was sure -utterly breathless.

There was the mistress of the mountain, to be certain; she had her claws in him the moment Yuuri began to move, but the thrill of it- of everyone watching what Yuuri was doing, what they had planned -was so much more. It was the young man and the princess, racing over the countryside, through snowy fields with he on the wolf’s back, or he taking her hand as they picked their way across the narrow, man-made bridges. It was the nights that they spent, huddled close with him buried against the thick fur of the wolf’s neck, or together in the rooms they shared when they stopped for the night.

She shyly turned away from his compliments, combing the brambles from her long, silver hair. He came to her, kissed her neck, touched her face, pulled her to his chest. Every day they fell deeper and deeper into each other’s hearts, and soon they weren’t just sharing rooms, they were sharing beds, making love, desperately happy.
As he grew stronger, she taught him everything that she knew of how the world and magic worked. They faced many beasts and tyrants, those who used others for their own gain and ruled with cruelty and fear. She’d spent so long watching the knights in her own kingdom growing up, getting to know those in her father’s guard, studying ways to defeat those who would oppose them, and this knowledge she gave freely.

“And the firebird, how will we defeat it?” He asked, stroking her cheek in the moonlight.

She’d studied that extensively, too. The firebird had only come twice more since the burning of the village, and each time, she had been closer and closer to losing herself, and losing him. They were getting closer and closer to the tower, but he had to be strong enough to withstand her attacks or it would all be for naught. “I’ll tell you when you’re ready, my love.”

He trusted her, and for that, she was grateful.

It wouldn’t be much longer before their entangled fate would be decided; whether he would kill her or find a way to remove the curse. Either way, she would be set free.

These last few weeks of happiness and passion were so precious to her…

When they got back to the room, Viktor would have to ask Yuuri to kiss him like that; along his neck, up to his ear. Perhaps whisper his name. Say such sweet things again. Call him beautiful while caressing his thigh, touching his hip. Murmur professions as he sucked on his throat. Yes. That would be… very, very nice.

And music, too. That had been such a nice touch.

Yuuri was brilliant.

Brilliant and perfect and all his.

His beautiful, passionate dark-eyed Yuuri. The one that had consumed him with his dance, who would now engulf all of Moscow in his flames, and Viktor would not be satisfied until all of Russia was singing his name.

"Another flawless performance following his last short program in the Cup of China! The crowd's giving him a standing ovation!"

He delivered, just as planned, leaving Viktor breathless and riled on a power trip as he swept to the barrier entrance to greet him. “Yuuri! That was perfect!”

Had Russia not been watching, had they been alone in Hasetsu, there would have been no stopping Viktor from taking Yuuri the moment he stepped off of the ice. Whether Viktor would have stayed on top would be debatable - perhaps even unlikely - but it was a moot point. When their eyes met, they understood. It was only a matter of time before they’d be back in the room, making good on that promise, finding new ways to ruin the mattress. All they had to do was finish the rest of their perfect plan.

“Out of my way, pig.”

The sexual tension went on pause as Yurio cut between them with a sneer, toting Agape in full force. Viktor didn’t fail to notice that Yuuri exhibited the same excitement that he felt as they watched him go.
“Looks like he’s… found his agape!”

They looked at each other, laughing. “Finally!”

It was a proud parent/older brother/mentor/uncle moment if he’d ever had one. And he had. The ache in his chest from that night on the beach so many months ago came back with a different sort of feeling of hope. He wasn’t sure how things would go with Yurio, but he had Yuuri now, and he’d almost given up once there, too. Maybe in time, things could be smoothed over. He could get Yurio back, too.

After all, they were not all that different from each other. Watching Yurio skate over to Yakov and Lilia, even angry, was just like watching his younger self from afar. He would forgive when he’d cooled off. He loved deep. Held grudges, too, but he cared.

He had to...

“Come on, Viktor.” Yuuri’s smile was a mile wide and the best thing he’d ever seen. Right. It was time. The moment that would put them center stage as coach and student.

They took their seats, pleased and confident. Ready. All of the training that they had done did not go to waste. Viktor put his arm around Yuuri’s shoulders and they both smiled, calmly waiting. No visible jitters. Casual. When the scores were read, Yuuri looked pleased, adorably so, but not self-conscious. He had grown. He accepted his winnings, beating his personal bests, taking it with pride and composure.

Viktor knelt at his feet, just as they’d practiced, and pressed his lips to the side of Yuuri’s boot for the world to see. Yuuri tensed, but didn’t kick him; blushed, but didn’t lose his composure. It went so much better than he’d anticipated.

“Oh my. Overcome with happiness, Nikiforov kissed Katsuki’s skate!”

If anything, it was their observers that were more affected. He chuckled at the thought, and obliged in posing for photos for the press, his best playboy smile on display with gloved hands at Yuuri’s ankle.

*Oh, if only they really knew…*

“Yurio! Davai!”

Viktor looked up at the red faced and bristled teenager going on- the ‘usurper skater of Russia’ - and waved. “Good luck, Yurio! Ganbaaa!” There was no reason not to cheer for him. If anything, it just made everything a lot more amusing, especially as it seemed to make his protege even more irritated.

He’d have to work on that. An unrestrained temper was a dangerous thing. Viktor knew all too well.

When they had finished with photos and interviews, all of which Yuuri aced- even though many of the journalists were more focused on Viktor than Yuuri -the pair moved on to the viewing area to watch the final competitors for the evening. As much as they wanted to abscond to their room and get right to business, getting the lineup for the next day was important, and making a good impression by showing some sort of restraint was probably a good idea.
"The next jump is a mega-jump that not even Viktor Nikiforov ever attempted in the second half, a quadruple Lutz. He did it!"
That idiot. He could skate, sure, and he had his own entourage, but JJ was nothing to Yuuri. Top of the world? Nonsense. There was a reason that Viktor didn’t do those kind of jumps in the half, quadruple Lutz or otherwise. Someone like Yuuri could handle it because he had the right build, but JJ was likely to blow out his knee, and then where would he be? Quads weren’t something that an athlete could just drop into a program anywhere.

“Mr. Katsuki.”

Viktor glanced aside as someone called Yuuri away, then looked back at the television to watch the young wolf skate to his own, arrogant theme song. Backup singers? In the audience? Who was this guy?

Most of the others in the viewing room seemed either mildly interested or at least unbothered by JJ’s antics, so Viktor kept his mouth shut, shaking his head. It was times like this that he missed Yurio most. Commiserating had always been one of the teenager’s strongest suites and fondest pastimes. He loved complaining, and though Viktor didn’t like to indulge in that with anyone but Makkachin, it was fun to do with Yurio every once in a while… even though, in the spirit of good sportsmanship, it was perhaps not the kindest thing to do.

He sighed and looked for Yuuri. Maybe he would understand in a less spiteful way. That, or he’d help him forget all about Jean-Jacque. Yes, that was much more likely and far more fun. He had a promise to make good on. No, Yuuri hadn’t won gold yet, but there were some things that were just too good to wait.

And with how he was feeling, riled and hungry and fresh from the fight, Viktor really, really didn’t want to. No, it was time for Yuuri to show him his Eros … really, really show it to him.

Where had he gone off to, anyway?

Viktor didn’t have to go far to find him; just around the corner on his cell phone, eyes wide, face palid. Something was wrong. “Yuu-”

“Viktor! Go back to Japan right now! I’ll face the Free Skate tomorrow on my own!”

“What?” Viktor stopped short. Ordinarily, he’d contest that look of determination- Yuuri mostly wore it when he was being cute while putting his foot down -but he was so commanding in his presence now that it left him shaken. “Yuuri, what are you talking about?”

“It’s Makkachin, Viktor!”

Blinking again, any sort of curiosity and theories about it being a game drained away.. “What happened, Yuuri?”

“Mari just called. Makkachin’s at the vet. You have to get back there. Get on the first flight to Fukuoka. Yuuko can get you from the airport.”

Fukuoka? From Moscow? “Now?” Viktor took out his phone to look at the time, trying to recall flight times and time zones and the Rostelecom schedule all at once, and- and Yuuri… “Yuuri, what even happened? What’s wrong with Makkachin?”

“He got into the steamed buns. He choked on them? I don’t really know, they just said that he’s in surgery, they’re not sure that he’ll make it.”
More hard blinking. It was harder to breathe, harder to think, but Viktor forced his way through it. Objective. Be *objective*. He closed his eyes. Choking on a steamed bun… caught in his throat… surgery… Something like that, an animal either made it or they didn’t, there wasn’t anything halfway about it. The surgery would be successful or it wouldn’t. His presence wouldn’t affect it whatsoever. Even if he got a flight right then and there, Makkachin would be dead or he’d be fine by the time he got to Japan.

Makkachin was getting old; standard poodles didn’t live that long, either. Twelve years? Thirteen? He’d had him for… *God… God, oh god, oh god, Makkachin*. 

No. He couldn’t think about it that way. Not now. Not right now. Not in Moscow. Not with Yuuri. Not at this moment. Not when they were so close. Not with so many people watching, and there were *people watching*—competitors, people with cameras, others, just watching, waiting, enjoying the drama, and he had to stay calm, he had to fight through it. It was Makkachin, yes, *his Makkachin*, but this was also his Yuuri. And this was Moscow. This was Russia.

This was the Falcon.

Viktor groaned. “Yuuri…” he looked down at his phone, fingers trembling as he tried to unlock his phone. Maybe he could look at flights, but it would be useless, *so useless*. It was pointless. It didn’t make any sense. “No.”

“No!"

“No. I’m staying here.”

“You *have to be with Makkachin!*”

He could hear the desperation in Yuuri’s voice, and he knew why. There were so many factors at play, so many, many layers all competing at once. Any fan of Viktor Nikiforov knew that Makkachin was his best friend. His world. His Instagram was flooded with photos of the poodle, and the *only* fan correspondence he even bothered with these days were when they were addressed to the dog.

Makkachin was everything.

But so was Yuuri.

And if he was a rational, practical, logical human being, staying in Russia with Yuuri was the responsible thing to do, even if it meant letting Makkachin down.

Even if it killed him.

Even if he would never forgive himself.

*Oh god.*

“No, Yuuri.”

“But you have to go back!”

“Like I said, I can’t.” Viktor rubbed his temples, ran a hand through his hair, tried to stay calm. If he lost it now, if he gave in to *this*…

“What’s going on with them?”
A familiar voice… Yurio… And where there was a Yurio, there was a Yakov.

“Yakov!” Viktor dropped his hand, relief and fear flooding him all at once. It meant waving the white flag. It meant giving in. It meant begging in front of everyone and taking the risk that the man who he had loved all these years, that the Yakov he knew was the Yakov that stood there, frowning, not the Yakov that everyone believed he was. The big bear man that looked angry but did what was needed. He had to trust it. He had to. “Thank God!” He couldn’t run, but he could walk quickly, leg stiff, near limping. “You’re the only coach for me.”

The old man laughed, drawing back as Viktor practically threw himself at him. “What, you want to come back?”

It was an embarrassing display, with Yurio and Lilia at his sides, staring in shock with the rest of the gathered bystanders.

Viktor shook it off, taking hold of his former coach by the arm. “Can you be Yuuri’s coach tomorrow? Just for one day?”

“How?” Yakov asked, more than a little taken aback.

He wasn’t the only one, and Viktor fought back the urge to fight them for it. He was asking for help, yes. He was coming back to Yakov after declaring war to ask for a favor, and that wasn’t something that was done. He was well aware of the daggers being glared and the haughty glances of smug superiority mixed with confusion. But none of that mattered.

Yuuri loved him enough to want him to be with his dog, despite how important the competition was for them, for Yuuri’s personal goals, his reputation, for all that they’d worked for. He cared about Viktor so much that it trumped everything else, even having Viktor there with him as his lifeline, to help him get to the Grand Prix Final, to get gold, his life’s dream. Viktor mattered more.

Viktor had to do this for Yuuri because Yuuri had to do this for Viktor.

“Viktor,” Yakov began, laughing off the shock as he recovered. “Why would I—“

Viktor steeled himself again, swallowing pride. He could do it for Yuuri. “Makkachin is dying, Yakov. Yuuri has asked me to go back to Japan to be with him. Would you be Yuuri’s stand-in coach tomorrow?”

Yakov fell silent, as did everyone else in the room, for several long seconds. The mocking smiles faded, turning to hard, straight lined frowns and shocked stares.

“Please,” Viktor added, careful to keep his tone gentle, respectful.

The old man looked at Viktor, then over at Yuuri, hesitating, then turned away. “Get your flights arranged… meet me back here in fifteen minutes; I’ll track down the representative to get the paperwork signed.”

“Thank you, Yakov.”

“Go.”

Viktor nodded, and turned on his heel, retreating to Yuuri, mobile back in hand. “I don’t know what flights I can get, but uh, let’s… go over the… itinerary. Not here.”

“Sure, yeah, okay Viktor.”
Shaking, Viktor searched flights while they walked, looking for somewhere private. “We can get
your flight changed, too… Moscow to Fukuoka…”

“Um. Right.” Yuuri said, shaking his head. Too much, too fast. “Another fee…”

“Hey, wait!” Yurio yelled, jogging to catch up to them. “Wait, so what’s going on with the Piggy?
You’re still coming to Saint Petersburg, right?”

Viktor frowned, looking from Yuuri to Yurio, then back at his phone. “I don’t think there’ll be time
for me to come back, with the flight times and Barcelona soon after…”

“Assuming I make it,” Yuuri added with a nervous laugh.

Both Viktor and Yurio looked at him. The former took his elbow, the latter rolled his eyes.

“We already made plans for Saint Petersburg,” Yurio explained, cheeks pink from the admission.
“Georgi has a cafe picked out. Mila has ideas, too. You already bailed on us once, Pork Cutlet, you
better not do it again.”

Viktor rubbed his head again. He understood the disappointment and how difficult it must have
been for him to confess his interest, but… “Yurio, he can’t just go to Saint Petersburg without me…”

“First, that’s not my name, Viktor. Second, why not? He doesn’t need a babysitter.”

“No, but he was going to stay with me in my apartment. I was going to give him a tour. Show him
the sights. What is he going to do if I’m not there?”

“First, give him your keys, let him stay by himself, and second, he can do everything he woulda
done, with or without you. What, you think Yuuri can’t handle being in Russia on his own? You
think he’s a big baby or something? Geez, Viktor, you’re a really controlling coach.”

Viktor frowned. “I’m… not…” He turned to Yuuri. “Am I?”

“No…”

“See?”

Yurio’s glare could have bored holes through Viktor if he’d tried hard enough, he was sure, and he
set his jaw much the same way Viktor did when he got really, really stubborn. “This is stupid!”

“It’s not, Yurio. It’s just practical…” Viktor scrolled through the flights on his phone, dismissing
the teenager to get back to matters at hand. “I’m sorry. Okay, it looks like there’s a flight that
leaves at 8:55pm that will get me to Fukuoka at 2:30pm tomorrow with only one layover in
Korea…” He glanced up at the wall clock, squinting. “Thirty minutes to the airport, security,
international… we won’t have much time…”

“Do it, Viktor.”

Viktor bit his lip, studying Yuuri for a moment or two, but there was no waver of confidence. He
was firm. With a nod, he began the process of booking the flight. “Now, for you, ah, I can cancel
both of our flights from Moscow to Saint Petersburg, and Saint Petersburg to Fukuoka… book a
new flight…”

“Let me be his tour guide!”
They turned to the blond again, who had both fists clenched in his jacket, green eyes blazing. Furious.

“We don’t have time for this,” Viktor sighed. “Yurio…”

“But—”

“I said no.”

“Actually…” Yuuri spoke then, clearing his throat. “It doesn’t make sense to change both of our flights again, Viktor. We’ve already had to pay so many change fees.”

Viktor gaped. “Yuuri?”

He smiled, soft and gentle, taking Viktor by the wrist. “Really. It’d be nice to see your hometown, and it’s just for a few days. I’d be back with you in Hasetsu before you know it with plenty of time to prepare for the Grand Prix Final.”

“But…” Viktor frowned, looking down at his phone, tapping the next button in checkout to secure his overnight flight. When he looked at Yuuri again, there was nothing but warm reassurance there.

“It’ll be okay, Viktor. Really.”

“Yeah. I’ll take care of him, Viktor! You have my word.”

It was what he’d wanted. His little brother, his Yuuri, getting closer, but in these circumstances? And only with him leaving? With Makkachin dying? Viktor wasn’t sure his heart could take it. He felt like he was being torn in a thousand different directions at once.

But it didn’t really matter, did it? Yuuri was his own person. Viktor had no control over any of what was happening. It was all just…

…all just…

“Viktor, come on,” Yuuri tugged on his arm. “Yakov is waiting.”

“Oh. Right,” he shook out of it. “Ah. I’ll get the paperwork taken care of… then we’ll head back to the hotel if you’ll help me pack?”

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you need, Viktor.”

Whatever he needed.

What did he need?

His world was crumbling all around him and he was helpless to stop it. All that he could do was try to make it through the next three hours without falling apart completely.

Viktor shook his head and forced a smile. “We’ve got a lot to do, let’s get moving, da?”

Yakov was waiting for him at registration with Lilia, two irritated officials, and paperwork, which they handed over along with plenty of disclaimers. Viktor submitted to everything, skimming the legalease, releases, searching for the lines where his initials and signatures were required. It was just necessary for insurance and tidy paperwork, he knew, but it was still a frustrating part of the
whole business. Still, doing it sooner than later would avoid so much headache and, heaven forbid, penalties.

The last thing Yuuri needed was anything that compromised his reputation on top of everything else. Viktor wasn’t in good standing with the Russian skating federation, and that was fine, but things had gone smoothly with the Japanese representative so far and he intended to keep it that way. He had played by all of the rules to the letter, much to the surprise and delight of the ISU.

“I don’t know why he’s agreed to help you.”

Lilia, standing at his left, kept her arms folded as she watched the two men pour over the documents. Viktor glanced back at her briefly, then went back to it, shaking his head. He had nothing to say. He was grateful and humbled and terrified to say anything in case the old man changed his mind.

To his right, Yakov said nothing, just shifted uncomfortably and flipped to the next page, nodding as one of the men on the other side of the table muttered something about change fees and reiterated the ISU’s regulations. As temporary acting coach, Yakov would be able to make executive decisions in Viktor’s stead regarding Mr. Katsuki where needed, and the ISU would be communicating with the skater through Coach Feltsman. This, they both understood, and Viktor assured them that Yuuri did likewise and had given his consent.

The pages began to blur as Viktor ran through them, trying to keep track of all of the text and everything going on, words swimming on the page with his thoughts.

“Can’t believe he’s letting you… you should have contingencies in place, Viktor…” the woman muttered. “It’s not our fault, and Yuri shouldn’t have to suffer because you weren’t prepared.”

He knew. Of course. She was right. And it would be Lilia there to point it out and needle him about it, right when he needed it the least. She had waited for this moment for years. Her revenge. Her moment.

Yakov’s face was hard, frown stretched tight over his teeth. He said nothing, set upon his task, concentrating, shutting them out. The both of them. He hated when they fought. He always had. It had always hurt him so much.

“All you do is take, take, take…” Lilia shook her head.

He deserved this. He deserved every biting word, every dagger in his back. It all made sense. Why Yakov hadn’t replied to his letters, why he’d refused to speak to him. Why he’d burned those bridges.

It was Lilia.

The moment Viktor left, she’d swooped in, roosted, made sure that he couldn’t come back. To protect Yakov. Like Viktor had.

Because this time, he was the one who had broken Yakov’s heart, not Lilia, and she’d been the one to take care of him.

“All this,” she began, long nails tapping on her coat sleeve. “You’ll be lucky to so much—“

“Lilia!” Viktor hissed, lifting his pen from the ink splattered sheet. His hands shook, body tense, and he steadied himself on the edge of the table before whispering. “Please… for the love of God, I’m begging you… let me get through this… just this once, and then…” Asking a favor of the
Queen of Stone Hearts was near a death sentence, but he felt like a dead man walking already.
“And then I’ll go.”

The woman stared at him in silence looking insulted but feeling, Viktor knew, secretly pleased. She had won. Viktor was backing off. Retreating. Giving in. He had lost and he was leaving with his tail between his legs, just like she’d wanted. She sniffed, huffed, and shrugged. “I’ll save you a seat, Yakov,” she muttered. “If you finish before Opening Ceremonies are over.”

“Thank you, Lilia.”

She left, and the room itself seemed to breathe a collective sigh.

Without her there, Viktor found his voice again, though it took several moments to gather his courage to use it. “Yakov,” he said, voice quiet.

Yakov grunted to show that he was listening, all while skimming the next document. If they didn’t have to take turns, it might have gone faster. Or if they could have worked together… No, there wasn’t time to worry about that, either.

“Yakov,” Viktor said again, gaze flitting up at the officials, who had started their own conversation on the other side of the table. He continued in Russian, keeping his voice low. They were in Moscow, yes, but the staff from the ISU were from several locations. “Yuuri suffers from some sort of anxiety disorder. I’m not sure what the diagnosis would be, exactly, but he can handle it. He’s an adult, a professional— inasmuch as is permitted by the ISU—athlete, and will perform under pressure…” He took a deep breath, calming himself. Viktor knew he was rambling, that his hands were shaking, that it was obvious that he was cracking under the pressure. It wasn’t good and it wasn’t something that he wanted Yakov to see, even under the best of circumstances. “He will succeed, Yuuri just needs someone to…” He hesitated as Yakov stopped writing, waiting for him to continue. Viktor sighed. “Just handle him like you’d handle me if you… weren’t mad at me, and he’ll be fine.”

There was no response to that. No movement. Yakov simply stood, stock-still, hand poised with the pen over the paper as if he were still waiting for something. What it was, Viktor didn’t know.

Across from them, the officials were making stealing glances. They’d noticed the change in tension, but were giving them a few moments of privacy out of professional courtesy. But moments couldn’t detangle months of misunderstanding or years of pain. There wasn’t time.

So Viktor took the paperwork and marked another spot with his initials, then slid it back into place under Yakov’s pen. “I trust you, Yakov. Please take care of him.”

Maybe Yakov would never forgive him; it hurt, it hurt like hell, but that he could live with. He had for months. But he wouldn’t be able to take it if his stupidity cost Yuuri the chance to achieve his dream. It all came down to what he was willing to sacrifice.

“You will, won’t you? Yakov?”

There was another long stretch of silence before Yakov added his last signature and turned away, sliding the papers back across the table to the waiting men. “I’ll take care of him.”

“Thank you, Yakov. I-” Viktor stumbled over the words, caught himself, and set his jaw. “If that’s everything, I’ll get packed.”
The officials began flipping through the pages in the packets, nodding. “Just a moment and then you can go. Thanks for your patience and cooperation.”

“Sure…”

There were footsteps, light and dragging, from behind them. “Ah, Coach Feltsman! Are you almost done?”

Viktor didn’t need to turn around to know who it was, so he didn’t. He found his coat pockets and tucked his hands inside, locking eyes with the dwindling stack of pages.

“Yes, just about.”

“Good. It’d be a shame if you missed it.”

“I’ve seen many opening ceremonies before.”

“So have I.”

The two men laughed, voices deep and tired, worn with understanding.

“Okay, you’re good to go. Thank you for waiting, Viktor- er, Coach Nikiforov, Coach Feltsman.”

“Thanks,” said Viktor, turning to leave without a second glance.

But the man wouldn’t hear of it. “Vitya! It’s good to see you again.”

It had to be him. It just had to be him. Viktor slowed, turned, and looked back at the tall, greying man that stood next to Yakov wearing the thin smile and scarf the color of freshly spilled blood. Abram Voronin. The representative for the Russian skating federation. He held out his hand and for a moment, Viktor considered running. But it was Moscow. There was press. It would be noticed. It would cause problems.

He walked the last seven steps back and took the man’s hand, though their handshake was weak until Abram’s other hand folded over them both for a tight squeeze. “We’ve missed you.”

Viktor held his gaze, then pulled away. “Sorry. I have a flight to catch.”

“Oh?”

“I’ll explain,” said Yakov. ”Show me where Lilia has saved our seats, Avram.”

“Of course, of course.”

Viktor waited until they turned away before he left, and once he did, he didn’t look back.

“Viktor, your shaving kit.”

“Oh, right. Thank you.”

“I think that’s everything of yours from the bathroom…”

“Are my oxfords still in your suitcase or did I get them back?”

“I put them in yours already.”
“Okay.”

“I think I still have your other tie, though.”

Viktor looked up from his half-packed suitcase, which was a cobbled mess for how he normally travelled, then to Yuuri, who had systematically been emptying his own onto blankets between the two mattresses. Why they’d started mixing luggage items was anyone’s guess. Maybe it felt safer that way, somehow; some small sign that they were a couple even though they couldn’t show it any other way, ridiculous or not.

Separating them now so he could leave was killing him.

He took the offered folded tie and packed it away, rearranging clothes and toiletries to fit more neatly for the long flight ahead. “Here’s this…” Viktor offered Yuuri a pair of boxer shorts, and a small, half-hearted smile. “Though maybe I should keep it.”

Yuuri rolled his eyes and took them, dropping it into his own suitcase, then smiled back. “Viktor, it’s going to be okay.”

“Yeah.”

“I mean it.”

“I know.”

Yuuri reached across the suitcase for his hand. “Viktor.”

“Yuuri.” Although he matched the rhythm, there was no heat or sternness in Viktor’s voice, just weariness. He laced their fingers.

“Look at me.”

“Oh, now I get a pep talk?” Viktor was teasing, but when he met Yuuri’s gaze, those dark eyes made him weak all over again; fiery, passionate coals of the same stubborn spirit that kept all Russian men in their place. He simmered.

“You, Viktor Nikiforov, trained me. I’m going to go out there tomorrow and face the Free Skate on my own and I’m going to prove to them that you’re not just a great soldier, but a great general, too! Right?!?”

Viktor gave a small and helpless laugh. “Right.”

“Viktor,” he whined. “It’s not supposed to be funny.”

“No… no it’s not. I’m just… Yuuri…” Viktor tugged him closer, wrapping his other arm around to keep him there. He kissed his hair, he squeezed him, he said a silent prayer- please, Mama, take care of him. Get him safely back to me. I love him. I love him.

“Viktor…”

Shaking his head, Viktor stepped back, pushing a new smile. “Right then. I’ll finish packing. I need to give you my key, and I’ll call my superintendent to let him know that you’ll be coming so there aren’t any surprises. Yurio can translate… let me get those addresses for you…”

“Just email them to me.”
“Ah, good idea.” Viktor dug for his wallet and keys and handed over the one for his apartment. “I’ll get everything typed up for you before you even leave Moscow. Oh, and for expenses…” He brought out a credit card.

“No, Viktor.”

“For emergencies?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“To keep on hand, just in case? Just… just… I don’t know.”

“I’m fine, Viktor. I may not be as wealthy as you, but I’m not penniless.”

Viktor frowned and stuffed the card back in his wallet. “Sorry. I’m just nervous.”

“That’s okay… but remember, I lived in Detroit for five years? On my own?”

“With Hamster Boy.”

“Not the whole time. Either way, I took care of myself. Like Yurio said, I can do this, tomorrow and Saint Petersburg. It’s going to be just fine, Viktor.” Yuuri sighed, taking Viktor by the arms. “Stop worrying.”

“Okay, okay, okay, Yuuri. Fine.” Viktor took a deep breath, made a show of counting with nods of his head, then let it out with a sigh. “But if you’re not going to let me help or anything, then let me do something else…”

“Like what?”

Pulling away, Viktor went back to the suitcase and dug around to the bottom. When he came back, it was with a red and white bundle, which he tossed at his curious, but unsuspecting boyfriend.

Yuuri caught, and almost dropped, the once carefully-folded garment, uttering a tiny gasp in shock. “This is your official Team Russia-issued Bosco Olympic jacket!”

“That’s right. Take it with you… just don’t let anyone catch you with it or they’ll know we’re together for sure.” Viktor tapped his lips, watching the scene unfold as Yuuri did, spreading the jacket out, petting it, rubbing the fabric between his fingers. It was endearing. Cute. If so much else weren’t going on at the moment…

“You’re really letting me-? I can’t…”

“Just do it, Yuuri. Take it. Please. For me.” Viktor busied himself with packing again to move the conversation along; end of discussion. “It’s like a letterman jacket in high school or something. Yuuri, your boyfriend gave you his jacket. Wear it with pride. In… secret.”

“Viktor’s jacket…” he whispered.

“Yes. That’s right.” Squinting, Viktor looked around the room again. “Have you seen my socks?”

Then it was Yuuri sniffling, holding the jacket to his face, though Viktor couldn’t tell if he was crying or smelling it, and he frowned.

“Yuuri?”
“Yeah.”

“Are you okay?”

“Jacket.”

Viktor sighed, abandoning his quest for socks to pull Yuuri out of the jacket cave. “You’re going to have to give this back to me, you know. Bring this back with you to Hasetsu. I expect it in perfect condition.”

“Of course!”

“Good.” He squeezed Yuuri’s hands, which refused to let go of his new acquisition, then kissed him. “Take good care of it.”

“I will!”

Another kiss. “Not even a scratch or a scuff.”

“Never!”

The devotion was darling, even if Viktor couldn’t tell whether Yuuri knew what he really meant by all of it or not. But he supposed it didn’t matter. If Yuuri brought the jacket back, safe and sound, that would mean that Yuuri was, as well. And Yuuri was good at keeping his promises.

Viktor cupped his face with both hands and kissed him again, warm and deep, until Yuuri surrendered one hand to wrap his arm around his waist.

“I’m going to miss you, Yuuri.”

“No.”

When Viktor was finally packed and ready, and the customary five minutes had been waited next to his suitcase, Yuuri went down with him to the lobby to wait for the cab that would take him to the airport. Their words were brief, but lingering, like the few kisses they’d shared in the room, and they hugged tightly before Viktor went out into the blustery night.

*If you're in trouble, or you're lost, or don't understand, just hug Yakov, and he'll help you.*

*I'm sorry, Yuuri. Even if I'm not here, I'll always be with you in spirit.*

---

v.nikiforov: boarding now
v.nikiforov: i love you
v.nikiforov: thank you

Yuuri.K: That was quick. I'm glad.
Yuuri.K: Be safe
Yuuri.K: Text me when you land
Yuuri.K: I love you, too. So much
Yuuri.K: 愛しています

v.nikiforov: there's a layover in korea; i'll let you know when we get there and when I'm in fukuoka
The ride to the airport had been smooth and quiet, check-in was easy, and security had been a breeze. It always was for a seasoned traveler like Viktor. Even when there was trouble, if he threw enough money at something, most things could be worked out. Gavrik would have been so pleased to know.

But money didn’t bring people back from the dead. Money didn’t mend broken hearts. Money didn’t fix things between papas and sons. Money didn’t let Viktor be in two places at once.

He sat with his head against the window in his first class seat- the only thing that had been available on the overnight flight -and watched the snow hit the tarmac in the glow of the airstrip. It didn’t feel real. To be leaving Yuuri in Russia, alone and unprotected— no, he was with Yakov, with Yurio, and yet…

“Sir, can I get you anything?”

The woman’s face was pinched in concern, but she smiled so gently that he felt guilty for hurting so much.

He considered. Was there anything she could do? She couldn’t save Yuuri or Makkachin. Couldn’t help with Yakov. But then, all of these were well beyond scope, too. With a sniff, Viktor looked to the front of the plane. “Could I get a blanket?”
“Of course, sir.”

“Thank you.”

She returned with a thin navy thing that was vaguely wooly and handed it over with a warmer smile. “Let me know if you need anything else, okay? And thank you for flying Aeroflot.”

The blanket wasn’t one of his luxurious comforters in Saint Petersburg or in Hasetsu, but to its credit, it did hold in some heat. Better still, it offered some feeling of privacy. Not that his section of the cabin was very full, anyway. In fact, once they’d taken off and left Moscow behind them, with nothing but the black of night outside the window, he felt completely and utterly alone in the world.

It wasn’t the same as being alone with Yuuri, which had become a comfortable thing. A preferable thing. It was empty. Cold. Quiet.

They dimmed the lights for the duration of the flight, leaving Viktor to his thoughts and to his heart, isolated in the soft chair that was too big, too lavish for just him with no hand to hold and no one to share it with. He missed Yuuri already. Of course he did.

And he was scared for him. Worried.

For Makkachin, too. And guilty that he didn’t feel moreso. But he could do nothing for Makkachin. Being there wouldn’t change the outcome one way or the other, but being there for Yuuri would. Yet he’d left. He’d left.

He’d been a terrible general. He’d taunted Russia. He’d flaunted their love in the face of the falcon and then left Yuuri to the wolves. If anything happened…

No, no, nothing would happen.

He would skate well. Yakov was the best coach there was. Yuuri had trained hard. They would take care of him in Saint Petersburg. He would have a good time. They would miss each other, but Yuuri would come home to Hasetsu, safe and sound, and they would be together.

And then they would never be apart again. Never again.

Never, ever, ever again.

Viktor tried to keep his tears silent, and the years of practice did not fail him entirely, but the torment circled back and forth with fear and anxiety biting at the heels of any rational logic that he tried to apply. He had no Yakov to hug, no Yuuri to hold hands with, no Makkachin to lean into, no Makka tissue box to pet. Just the blanket, the empty night, and far too many memories that were happy to supply his worried mind with any number of nightmares.

_The tiger had warned them, carrying news that Baba Yaga was angry, but the wolf turned his face to the wind and ignored him. Of course Baba Yaga was angry; he’d left the tower and was doing just what he’d set out to do._

“No, you don’t get it… you’ve shown yourself to people. Your true self. Do you have any idea how dangerous that is?”

_The wolf huffed. “Leave us. I can handle it.”_
“Baba Yaga saved you once, but if you keep this up…”

“I know what I’m doing.”

The young man hadn’t figured it out. He knew that the wolf was really a lovely maiden, but that was it. She had been sent to help him, she knew so much, she was mysterious, but that didn’t make her a princess. That didn’t make her the princess. And if he didn’t know, there was no reason to believe that others would. It’d been years since anyone had seen her in the kingdom. She was simply a girl travelling with a boy. They were a pair of young lovers. He was her guardian, her protector. Her salvation.

It was so nice to be outside of the tower, walking among people again. Freely. Even more than before everything with the firebird had happened. If she was going to die- which was a very real possibility -she wanted to live her last days as fully as possible. Was that so wrong?

They stopped at an inn not one week’s journey from the tower in a town where there was rumor of problem with dire rats. The vermin would be no problem for a champion and his giant wolf companion, and the young lady would enjoy the spoils of their victory in celebration when the work was done.

The first day, the young man interviewed the townsfolk and the wolf gathered rumors from the animals in the stables. The stories were the same: the rats attacked the same time every night, always preceded by a mysterious song carried by the wind like that of the whistling dead, and were gone within an hour.

“A piper,” the princess told him that evening over dinner. “With a flute carved out of bone. The dire rats are spreading his death, and he collects the souls every night…”

“How are we going to stop him?”

“The rats should be easy enough to kill, but he’ll just get more. To stop him, we just need to break his flute.”

“Can’t he carve another?”

She considered this. “He could, except that it’s infused with his very soul; that’s what makes it work. Baba Yaga was the one to help him do it.”

The young man nodded, raising his cup to her. He had no idea how she knew so much, but he was grateful all the same. His mysterious lady…

The princess smiled, bringing her cup back to his. “Tonight?”

“Tonight.”

They waited up, enjoying each other’s company until the mayor came to fetch the young man. The whistling had started. He would go first, and she would sneak out and join them in a moment as the wolf to aid in the fight. Rats were dangerous, especially ones such as these, but as the wolf, she could handle them and fight by his side as she had been.

Once the men had left the courtyard, she left the window and went to the door, tip-toeing as quietly as a mouse.

“Oh, dear princess.”
She stopped cold and looked back. Standing in the window was the bent and broken figure of Baba Yaga, moth-eaten rags like the drape of a weeping willow.

“Baba Yaga?”

“Yes, dear.”

“What are you doing here?”

“You’re in danger… I’ve come to warn you.”

The princess laughed, pulling her cloak tighter. “The tiger already told me that you were upset. I’m following through with my plan.”

“It was foolish of you, you know… to expose yourself like this.”

“No one knows. I’m getting along just fine.”

The old woman shook her grizzled head. “It was one thing when it was just a boy and a wolf; unusual, perhaps, but nothing that would have caught my attention. Not like a lovely, silver-haired maiden.”

She shrugged. “You knew where I was.”

“And with the firebird, well, there was no question of who you were, my dear.”

“Who I…” The princess stilled, searching the dark for Baba Yaga’s features again. “Wait.”

“Ah, and now you’re beginning to see the truth, my sweet, naive little princess.” The haggard creature stepped away from the window, back lengthening, posture straightening, rags falling away like curtains of dust to reveal mottled grey feathers.

The princess stepped back and met the closed door. “Oh, God… no.”

“It’s been years since I’ve visited you by window, hasn’t it? You remember those nights, don’t you?” He advanced slowly, taloned claws scraping against the wooden floor with each step, slow and deliberate. “I’ve missed you so.”

She groped for the handle, but he took her by the throat, cutting off both her escape and any screams before she could even open her mouth. His claws pressed lightly, his palm and fingers held tight, and he brought her flush against him.

“You escaped the last time with that old woman’s help… but she has abandoned you, now. You’ve found a champion, but he’s out there, while you’re with me. Tell me, my love, is he ready to face the firebird?”

She whimpered, pulling weakly against him, but his grip was as strong and cold as iron, and the claws dug deeper still until pinpricks of blood budded at their tips.

“Shall we find out?” he asked, and tucked the hook of his beak into the part of her hair, preening it. “You’re so beautiful when you’re golden…”

Chapter End Notes
Christophe and Bastien settled on the couch to watch Rostelecom Cup events.

Chris: Baz...
Bastien: Hmm?
Chris: Call me crazy...
Bastien: There are moments, but I wouldn't call you so.
Chris: Thank you, love, but doesn't Viktor look like he's limping?
Bastien: Anything to do with why they were so quiet after Beijing?
Chris: Oh I'd say so. Perhaps I'll make a phone call. Or two. Give them some... tips.

WHATCHA MEAN, NO GAY SKATE?
The saddest of lovers! / A difficult free skate! / Moscow Nights! / SWISS. MEADOWS.

Please look forward to it!

PS: Don't forget to read Vicchan's Wish!
Yuuri sends Viktor off to Japan to be with Makkachin and continues the Rostelecom Cup without him. Will that be an added pressure to war or not?

#tears #deers #fears #I've been waiting a year(s) for this Chris moment

In this chapter:
Mamodewberry: HEYO! We are back! Look! No 20k chapter. A small victory! Thanks for your patience, as always.

This chapter is pretty solemn, and that's partly why this took a little longer as well. This is the first time Yuuri and Viktor have been apart since Viktor arrived in Japan and it's sad. These two are sad. They need hugs. Please hug them. And cheer Yuuri on!

Gabapple: WEHHH I'M SO SAD FOR YUURIIIIII!! But this chapter is beautiful, and the next one is already already underway! And the buttons will be mailed out this week, so watch out for those, prize winners :) Heyoo

Also!: I know we JUST had our 25k giveaway, but, looking at the numbers, we are going to be hitting 50k! AS WELL AS NLA-Anniversary! To celebrate, we'll be doing a Drabble Giveaway!!
To enter, leave a comment with a question for any character in NLA, canon or OC, and we'll pick 5 to answer with a drabble up to 600 words!
*The questions may not necessarily be answered to satisfaction but we will do our best 😊

New Art!
Princess Transformation, illustrated by Moose (commission)

Recommended listening:
King, by Lauren Aquilina
Resilience, by Thomas Newman
Distance Between our Hearts, by Tatsuya Kato

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Celestino Cialdini: Why do you want to change coaches? Is it because you're moving?

Katsuki: I don't think my current coach is right for me. I’ll be moving to have a new coach.

Celestino Cialdini: Can you elaborate on that? It's helpful for me to know

Katsuki: He's really friendly and attentive as long as I'm doing well. Praising my abilities and talking me up. But then I slip up.

Celestino Cialdini: And he can't seem to handle that?

Katsuki: No. It's like he can't believe I'm not flawless. Doesn't believe in me

Celestino Cialdini: You wouldn't need a coach if you were flawless

Katsuki: Yeah...

Celestino Cialdini: I appreciate your honesty. I’ve seen your programs before, you show a lot of potential. You want to be in control of your destiny.

“The Italy’s Celestino Cialdini is going to be your coach… that’s really cool, Yuuri!”

Yuuri sat with Yuuko and her family in the main hall of the onsen. It was for a going away party his childhood friend insisted on throwing. Mari and his parents were busy in the kitchen making a feast and Minako would be by later to join the celebrations. “He’s coached a lot of great skaters in the last fifteen years, and Wayne State’s a good university. Probably means something that I was able to get both?”

“Destiny!”

From his lap, the pile of triplets chimed in unison: “Destiny, destiny, destiny!”

They didn’t know what that meant, but he smiled at their enthusiasm all the same. “Or easy and convenient.”

“Don’t you start that,” Yuuko chided. “It’s okay for good things to happen.”

“Yeah, stop being such a downer,” Nishigori said with a kick to his foot under the table. “Killing two birds with one stone? Sounds like you’ve got it made. Don’t complain.”

“I’m not-” Yuuri sighed. He deserved that.

“So you’re going to study music? Oh, Lutz, don’t touch that!” Yuuko reached over to take the furikake shaker from her.

Yuuri beat her to it, and pried her little fingers off it. She gave a lot easier to him than their mother, which she often pouted to him about. He had a way with them. For some reason.
Axel bounced in his lap, which Loop decided was a good idea, too.

Nishigori looked too pleased that he was the one holding all three of them.

“Yeah. I’m interested in the history and process, mostly. Having access to a real piano will be good great.”

“Yuuri gunna play the piano?” Loop asked, stopping her bouncing.

A magic word and all three girls were jumping on, demanding him to bring out the keyboard.

“Maybe after dinner?”

They frowned their biggest frowns and sat themselves down in a heavy huff. Axel right onto his tenders, and Yuuri did his best to hold in a yelp. He appreciated the sympathetic grimace Nishigori shot him.

“They’ll miss you, Yuuri. You’re really not coming back for summer and winter break?”

“I’m going to use all that extra time for schooling and skating practice. It’ll just be easier. Skype?”

“Aren’t you nervous about leaving home at all ?”

Yuuri looked to the two-year-olds in his lap, eyes large and expecting, to his childhood friends, then to the sounds coming from the kitchen.

It was difficult to pin the emotions he felt to a single one. A tug of war with his mind and his heart. For four years he’d be away from the onsen, his family, and comfort. He’d miss things, of course, but now that he was eighteen, he felt he was ready to leave the nest and do more for himself than his skating career. Everyone around him had their own lives, why shouldn’t he start living his own?

“Not really,” he answered.

The front door opened, the sound of wood and metal clanking together echoing through the genkan. Patter of footsteps and Minako was joining them.

“Damn, that’s a lot of sake, Minako-sensei.” Nishigori marveled at the sacks in both of her hands.

Minako raised the bag with two bottles, “To share, and-” lowered it, and raised the single bottle, “-not to share. And I’m more than happy to drink what’s not gone from the shared bottles.”

“Going to drink the whole thing? Lush.”

“Hey, it’s a going away party and I’m not emotionally prepared to deal without it.” She carefully set the bags on the table, far out of reach from the triplets.

“You’re all acting like I’m not coming back…”

“Four years is a long time to be gone, Yuuri. If you were in the country it’d be a lot different. Just let us have this night. Get over it.”

“Fine, fine.” Yuuri smiled in defeat; it was an endless loop.

Soon his mother was bringing out bowls of katsudon and miso with the help of Mari and his father, each one noting the alcohol on the table with disbelief.
Words and laughter were shared over the meal. Loop, Lutz, and Axel did not want to leave his lap and they shared a bowl with three pairs of chopsticks while he did his best to maneuver over them for his own. His father turned on the recording of the Junior Championship from March. He’d received gold and that would serve him well graduating into the Senior division.

Hugs and tears were shared after the meal. Yuuko battled with her girls even after they each got their own hug until Nishigori pulled them away. After his wife, he then gave Yuuri a hearty hug as well. On their way out the door, the Nishigori family gave Yuuri an electric kettle to use for his dorm life.

Not to be outdone, even with slurred words, Minako presented her own gift of a rice cooker. “An absolute essential.”

In the morning with his final packing, he opened a box from his family of a brown coat and blue scarf and gloves. It was a touching gift as his last jacket had worn through and he knew for sure it wouldn’t last him his stay in the states.

“I almost got you ‘Nikiforov’ specially embroidered on the scarf,” Mari teased.

“I’m glad you didn’t.” Secretly, he was disappointed and he hated that Mari probably knew that.

The Katsukis plus Minako piled into the car with Yuuri’s two suitcases and backpack in the trunk. Minako clung and cried most of the way to the airport, and Yuuri was certain that would have happened regardless of her being hungover or not.

At the drop off, they all got out with him for more hugs.

His father slipped a wad of yen notes into his coat pocket. “Emergencies.”

“If you forgot anything, we’ll mail it to you as soon as we can,” his mother said beside her husband. “Give us a call when you’ve landed.”

“And when you’ve got into your dorm,” Mari added. “I want to see it.”

“Sure.” Yuuri looked to each of his family members, all doing their best to not make it hard on him by crying and being worry-warts at the drop-off curb. They wanted this for him, too. Minako, however, wasn’t as strong-willed, but he was pretty sure that was more the sake talking.

His mother touched his cheek, and waited until he was looking right at her before speaking. “We love you, Yuuri. You’re going to do great.”

The tail lights of the taxi cab vanished into the winter night. Satisfied for seeing Viktor off as much as he possibly could, Yuuri toed off the snow from his shoes and headed back to the room.

He’d watched him leave, the sight of only his own luggage in the closet alcove shouldn’t have made his chest heave. Yuuri slipped off his shoes and walked further into the room to find their hodgepodge bed still intact.

Proof that he had been there. And had been together.

The jacket…
Yuuri sat on a stable portion of the mattress and took the red and white jacket into his lap.

It was fine. Everything would be fine. The Flight. Makkachin. Tomorrow…

Yeah. That, too.

He just couldn’t let himself think about it. Yuuri felt the remote at his feet and bent down to pick it up.

The television flickered on to Russian news. If he flipped through enough channels he’d eventually find something he could understand. News, news, game show, dubbed over sitcom, infomercial, sports broadcast-- and ISU coverage.

“...our national hero, Viktor Nikiforov, unexpectedly had to leave for a family emergency concerning Makkachin, the standard poodle and fan favorite who has been Viktor's constant companion for the past several years.

“We're unsure of the exact circumstances of the medical issues that poor Makkachin is facing, but I'm sure all of Russia and, indeed, the skating world is feeling an ache in our hearts for him and for Nikiforov tonight as we anxiously wait for updates.

“Meanwhile, here at the Rostelecom Cup here in Moscow, figure skater Jean-Jacques Leroy from Canada has organized a prayer circle on Makkachin's behalf and has invited competitors and fans alike to join him in wishing Nikiforov a safe trip back to Japan and a speedy recovery to Russia's favorite canine.”

The feed cut from the anchorwoman to JJ kneeling on a bench in the stands surrounded by a cluster of his fans - JJ’s girls - other competitors and ISU representatives and native Russians.

“Join me, my friends. Take my hands!”

“Excuse me, Leroy,” the anchorwoman managed to step over a few people that were also kneeling between the risers. “Isn’t it true that you and Nikiforov are not on the best of terms?”

“It is true, but also not important. Sharing the ice creates a bond between all of us skaters. No matter the animosity, when one is in need we must be there for him. Seeing as he is not here, we must support him from afar!”

A cheer rang up from the crowd.

“You there, sir, hand me that stack. Thanks. Look! The moment I heard about the fallen pooch, I told my darling girlfriend about it and she immediately drew up these posters. Save Makkachin!”

“That’s quite the turnaround… and with the time zone!”

“I know! Isn’t my Bella amazing? I’ll have these up around the rink for the performances tomorrow for all to see. Will you be joining the circle?”

“Oh, um… I’m just providing coverage.”

“A prayer in your heart, then! Now, come together my friends.” JJ then made a show with his hands, gathering the group closer.

For a moment Yuuri considered leaving the room to join the circle, at the very least thank JJ for his thoughtfulness and involvement of his god, but…
The press would find him and he wasn’t up to handling that. He’d let JJ encourage the sympathy Makkachin deserved.

Would Viktor be upset when he found out about the prayer circle? What had happened between them? JJ had always been friendly with Yuuri even after they weren’t rinkmates anymore. He was young and eager to make his mark in the skating world as much as any skater on their way to becoming a senior where it counted. Yuuri felt a kinship with him as he ultimately left Ciao Ciao like he had Ito for a more suiting coach for his own personal goal, JJ Style.

Tomorrow. He’d deal with the press tomorrow. How do you feel about your coach leaving you at such a crucial point of the season?

It had to happen this way. Yuuri couldn’t bear the thought of Viktor not being there for Makkachin whether he pulled through or not. He had to be there. Like Yuuri hadn’t been for Vicchan. Viktor was reluctant to go, no doubt thinking by the time he got to Japan it’d be too late, so why leave? Why leave at such a crucial point of the season?

Maybe it was a foolish decision, but at least Yuuri could rest in good conscience.

He’d gotten this far with Viktor… it had to be enough to push him to the finals.

His fingers had been absent-mindedly rubbing the fabric of the jacket material back and forth that eventually the friction had moved the sleeve off his hands and he was rubbing at his own skin. Adjusting his hold, he brought it to his face, soft and cool on his cheeks he hadn’t realized were warm.

Lost in his thoughts, Yuuri missed the actual prayer, the feed now on commercial. The interest in trying to distract himself gone, he turned the television off and fell back onto the mattress.

This was the first time they’d been apart since Viktor had come to Hasetsu, other than that night Yuuri flew to Tokyo for the season kick-off press conference. Their love had been a flickering flame, then. Nothing compared to the days of physical and emotional contact in every sense since the Cup of China. A furnace. The separation was sudden, no time to fully process the weight of absence.

Yuuri curled onto his side.

Would Viktor be okay traveling alone? He was used to it before, right?

No, that wouldn’t make it easier than realizing that after all that time together, Yuuri would have the bed to himself. For days. Viktor would at least have Makkachin…

If the jacket smelled like Viktor, would everything else?

He pulled at the sheets and the comforter, bringing them in clumps of cotton and polyester, reached for the pillow they had shared, and surrounded himself. Head on the pillow, jacket in his arms like a stuffed toy, and blankets mostly over his shoulders, he breathed in Viktor’s scent - rosewood and winter nights with sweat from their love making.

It was a small comfort, though didn’t stop the tears, but it would suffice until Saint Petersburg.

Yuuri reached over to the nightstand on impulse to silence his phone. When his hand found nothing, he realized the sound was coming from somewhere in the sheets. Why was his--
Oh. Viktor called during his layover.

… And Yuuri was too out of it to say or remember much of it.

Ashamed, he checked his text messages to find Viktor good-naturedly remarking he’d passed out on the phone, not to worry, he’d call again when he landed in Japan and that should be a more decent hour.

Looking at the clock, it’d be soon. Eleven hour flight, taxiing to the terminals, customs…

Needing to be ready for morning practice, and the possibility for Viktor wanting a video chat, Yuuri got out of bed and headed to the restroom for a shower.

Alone and quiet.

He made quick work of routine as much as he could and was still dabbing at his hair with a towel when his cellphone rang.

It only had to ring once. “Viktor!”

“Yuuri!” Viktor chuckled, voice hoarse with fatigue, but otherwise didn’t sound too concerning. “The flight went well. I’ve landed in Japan and gone through customs. I’m waiting on my luggage.”

“Good. That’s good. Were you able to get in contact with Yuuko, yet?”

“I’ve… actually arranged for a cab.”

“Oh.”

“I didn’t want to impose. I considered the train, but a cab will be much faster.”

“Yeah. That’s true.”

“I’ll stop at Yu-topia long enough to drop off my luggage and I’ll go with Mari to the vet. I’ll call you with the news.”

“Good news.”

“Yes, of course. Oh I see my luggage. It was good talking to you while coherent, Yuuri.”

“Y-yeah. Sorry about that. I’ll talk to you later, then. I love you.”

There was a brief pause before Viktor responded with “I love you, too,” voice cracking in another way and hung up.

Soon… they’d be together soon.

Once he ordered his breakfast of egg whites, toast, and tea, Yuuri sat at a table to eat and inserted his headphones. He had to get in the zone and stay there. Have a smooth morning practice. Stay out of Yakov’s way and let him tend to Yurio, his actual student. Don’t do anything to damage Viktor’s reputation in his mother country.

Yuri on Ice! in his ear… over and over again. His and Viktor’s story.
Fight the battle his general had to flee.

On the rink, Yuuri did his best to avoid the sympathetic glances of his fellow skaters. They all saw what happened in China; Viktor and Yuuri were much more than coach and student. But that didn’t mean he wanted to talk about it. Even if they asked about Makkachin, he didn’t know if he could keep it together.

*Focus. Focus. Focus.*

It wasn’t the best of practices, but it was something he could work with. Even managed to land his jumps.

He stepped off the ice to find Yakov standing near the barrier gate, arms crossed.

Had he done something wrong or was that his perma-frown? Yuuri didn’t have a lot of time to decipher the differences before he became his stand in coach. Not wanting to be rude (completely, he still much preferred not talking), he offered a smile and a nod. Before Yuuri could walk away in the clear, Yakov called him over.

Gulping, Yuuri slipped his guards on and clunked over. It was difficult to not bow his head in submission. This was the man that coached Viktor… he knew everything! Trained the best skaters in Russia! How could a conversation with him not be terrifying?

“Yuuri.”

He tried to take note in the slight difference between his and Yurio’s name so he could answer smartly if he was ever called again. “Yes, Coach?”

“Drive your left shoulder forward-” he held up his old, heavy hand, creating a space between his thumb and index finger, “-more to counter the rotational force of your right leg.”

Viktor had never mentioned that before. But for Yakov to say it… “T-Thanks! I’ll do that.”

As grateful as he was for the valuable advice, he didn’t want to inconvenience Yakov by needing to be coached him. Viktor was still his coach.

At the sound of Yurio’s voice behind him, Yuuri walked faster, not wanting to be in the way at all.

Unfortunately his retreat was met with a gaggle of media behind the curtain of the breezeway, lenses and notes pads at the ready.

“Katsuki, any word on Coach Nikiforov and Makkachin?”

“Will he be returning to Russia once he knows the condition of his beloved dog?”

“Was his departure a shock to you?”

“With Rostelecom being the deciding factor to your advancement to the finals, will his absence affect your performance in any way?”

Yuuri’s eyes darted from one reporter to the next. Could he answer any of these questions? Was he allowed to?

“Would you say the display at the Cup of China was a representation of your theme this year?”
He opened his mouth and then quickly shut it. If there was one thing that would be incriminating, it would be giving them anything on that. If Viktor were here, he’d be able to use his natural turn of phrases to their advantage. His training lacked in this department.

“Members of the press!”

All in attendance turned their heads to the boisterous beckoning.

“It’s… JJ STYLE!” JJ struck his signature pose with a wink that seemed to be more at Yuuri than any of them. Had JJ just… Yes, he was saving him from the wolves. The only one not being able to see him sweat a mile away were the ones two feet in front of him. Or they had noticed and were attempting to take full advantage of it?

Oh.

“JJ! Can we talk to you about your prayer circle last night?”

“Yes, yes, please more details.”

One by one, the press moved on to their next target like moths to the flame. Yuuri wasn’t talking, anyway.

“But of course!” JJ said, putting his hands back down, welcoming them closer.

Yuuri then took the opportunity to sneak away.

Weaving around people throughout the venue, Yuuri eventually made it back to his hotel room. There were a few hours before the Men’s free skate participants had to be present. If Viktor were here, he’d have spent the time sightseeing or lost in each other’s arms.

What had he done before?

At the Cup of China he was on easy terms with the skaters in his group. Here, not so much. Nothing hostile, just a lack of connection. Other than JJ, but he was already campaigning for his sympathy. Yurio, maybe, but again he didn’t want to intrude.

Staying in the room was the best plan. Besides, when Viktor called, he wanted to be alone.

He fished out Viktor’s jacket from the bed that he’d kept in a bundle to conserve the scent while he was away, and draped it over his shoulders. A Viktor blanket. Scooting back to on the mattress to the headboard, he retrieved his phone from his pocket to catch up on his feeds from the last few days he’d been occupied with Viktor.

The RSS was packed with varying headlines of “Viktor Nikiforov bowing out as coach at Rostelecom Cup.” Yuuri didn’t need to read the articles to know how sick it would make him, whether the words be true or false. Quickly, he deleted them in the queue, as well as others further down asking where “Coach Nikiforov and Skater Katsuki had disappeared to after Beijing.” “Hiding?!” Yep. “Scandal?” Depended how you looked at it. Was it scandalous when it was mutual?

He settled on reading the coverage of the NHK Trophy and Trophee de France. A soldier never stops studying their enemy, right?
As Yuuri was about to click on a related article on What Christophe Giacometti did During the This Year’s Off-Season, his phone rang. Minor fumbling with holding it in his hands and pressing the right button, he answered. “Viktor!”

“Good morn-ah, no, afternoon, my Yuuri.”

He sounded happier - relieved - but groggy. Worse than earlier. “Hey. So how is he?”

“Makkachin is alive. Recovering. I’ll be taking him home soon. Once the anesthesia has worn off and the vets are satisfied.”

“Was it only him choking?”

There was silence for a moment, and then a sigh. “I’m very tired, Yuuri. I can give you more details later. After I’ve slept? Just know that Makkachin is going to be okay and I’m taking him home.”

Normally Viktor was a sweet and affectionate tired man, so the curt responses were a little surprising. So much had happened in the last fourteen hours, he hoped when they were together again Viktor would be more himself. “That’s fine. Uh, I guess after my free skate it’ll be kind of late over there…”

“I’ll try to stream it live on my phone.”

“You can watch it tomorrow after you’ve rested.”

“I just might. I’m sorry, Yuuri.”

“No, it’s okay. Makka’s okay. I’m okay. Now you need to get okay, too.”

“Thank you. I’ll work on that. I love you, Yuuri.”

“I love you, too, Viktor. Goodnight. Say hi to Makkachin for me.”

“I will. Goodnight.”

The phone call ended, room falling into silence.

Makkachin pulled through surgery, that was good. Viktor would be taking him home. Home… he said home? Was Hasetsu home to Viktor? The thought brought a giddy smile to Yuuri’s face despite the circumstances.

Would Yuuri be the one to tell the press Makkachin was well? Or could he just tell JJ and he could spread the news and credit it to his efforts in prayer?

It wouldn’t reflect well on Viktor, so he quickly dismissed the latter idea. Although, it wouldn’t hurt to do both.

Soon it was time to get ready to head back to the rink. He took a quick shower to freshen up and wet his hair for slicking back with a comb.

The makeup pallet was rolled up neatly on the bathroom counter. It felt like forever since he’d done his own makeup. His Free Skate was a simple and natural look, but for the gala…

Even if he podiumed, would he be invited to the gala without Viktor present? Maybe Moscow wouldn’t like Japan’s skater skating their hero’s program that won him the gold last year.
Today. He had to get through today first.

Like practice, he kept to himself, even from the other skaters. Not that they probably weren’t used to that from years past. Ciao Ciao had had other skaters to tend to, and when he spoke to him it was all simply business, which was fine as Yuuri needed the space to get in his head. Viktor had been slipping into that space since the qualifiers. And now that he wasn’t here, it was back to the old days - closed off and razor focused.

Gradually the preparation room cleared, leaving Yuuri with mostly the pairs and ice dancers that wouldn’t be going on until later. The fanfare of the competition sounded and the judges began their opening spiel.

Emil was the first in his group. He scored decently in his short program, utilizing the skills from Viktor’s assessments. His steampunk stood out amongst against what everyone else was doing by way of love and sex appeal. His form held up until the last half, lacking in the stamina department as Viktor said. Still, his quads were impressive and his music selection was a crowd pleaser. Going first meant his score would be the one to beat.

Michele went next with a moving performance on unrequited love. His costume was purple and sparkly on the shoulders a lot like Yuuri’s. So casual from his short program’s knight motif. His lutz/loop combo racked up the points and Yuuri knew he had to be cautious of that.

Seung-Gil’s free skate crashed and burned in the second half and Yuuri’s chest ached, seeing himself in him from over the years. Those tears of frustration he knew so well. At least it was one less rival soldier in this season’s war.

And then it was Yurio’s turn. The moment the music started and how quickly his stance changed, Yuuri knew he was in trouble. Agile and light like a primadonna, very much like Viktor in his junior years.

Yuuri left the confines of the prep room, abandoning his stretches to watch Yurio with his own eyes.

Even with the miscalculated rotations and tiring towards the end, he was a typhoon on skates. Yurio doubled over after his finishing pose, the crowd going wild.

How did Yuuri stand a chance against that? It was just like Viktor had said, Yurio was definitely the one to look out for.

“Youuri.”

The sound of his name was like a chamber echo. He looked up to see Yakov, expression stern as usual. Shouldn’t he look just a little impressed that Yurio had this competition in the bag? Wait, he was here instead of at the kiss and cry with his skater?

“You’re up.”

Oh, right. It was his turn. The not-student’s turn. Had to skate. Somehow.

As he unzipped his jersey, he caught Viktor’s scent, and for a moment he expected him to be standing there, but it was Yakov who took his jersey and folded it over his arm. His own heat left with it, the chill of the rink surrounding him instead.
Before he was on the ice, his vision was blurring, heart rate picking up. He stared at his skates in starting position, breathing through his nose. His mind fog cleared just enough to hear the first cord.

Raising his arms, he used it to control an inhale. And then with the drop, an exhale.

_I don’t want people to think that everything Viktor’s taught me so far has been a waste. I have to prove myself by winning. If I fail here, everything is over._ The prayer he’d written at Tanabata was for the strength to not waste Viktor’s time and efforts. Orihime and Hikoboshi had answered him thus far.

Transition to a quad toe loop and-

_I popped it!_

Under rotation of a double, turned into a single-

_Dammit! Calm down, calm down. How do I recover from this?_

His thoughts brought him back to Hasetsu at a practice with Viktor. “_I notice you tend to flub your jumps when there’s something on your mind, care to share?_”

His mind wasn’t shutting up now, so that explained it. Minimize the jumps? Save until the last half? _Somehow he seemed to know how I felt. Until Viktor came into my life, I never went around saying I was going to win gold. But whether I said it or not, it’s what I was skating for._

Like Yakov advised, he drove his shoulder, and yet he still under rotated! The tightness in his boot held against the sudden impact, though the edge of his insole stung. He pulled into a camel spin, arms tucked behind him, world blurring in motion.

_Honestly I wanted to win gold at least year’s Grand Prix Final, too._

The rush of cold, stale air against his exerted skin reminded him of the ocean breeze of that day. “_You aren’t a weak person, Yuuri. Nobody who knows you would ever think that._”

He rounded the rink into a smooth step sequence, a twist and take off into a triple to loop. It was a clean landing, but both feet touched. Keep going, keep going. _I made it this far because Viktor believed in me! What happens if it ends here? If I don’t make it to the grand prix final? No! Stop it… don’t think right now._

The music slowed into the bridge. He transitioned into the Ina bauer to stretch his body, breath pulling out of his body.

_Yurio looked like that last three-jump combo was going to kill him. That idiot. He doesn’t have as much stamina as I do._

Pride in his capabilities swelling, he adjusted his tempo with the music, pushing through the motions that had become second nature.

_Whether Viktor’s here or I’m alone, it’s still just as difficult._ He wasn’t here, but he could still be here in spirit, just as he said before he left. He wasn’t alone. _I just need to keep it simple. This program is me. Nobody else can skate it the way I can._ Simple, simple, simple. Once more he utilized Yakov’s advice, this time successful in his axel, loop, salchow sequence! Triple Lutz. Toe loop.
Viktor and I created this program together and I love it so much it hurts! I’m not finished yet. I won’t be done until I get the gold with Viktor.

Panic into resolve, Yuuri found his rhythm. The commentators voices becoming more than tinny sounds, but actual voices, static noise becoming applause. His hand touched the ice, moisture, palm dragging across the surface until he was able to straighten. Could everything else he’d done in presentation make up for the technical mistakes?

Final spin and he was face coach position, arm outstretched to Yakov, though not nearly as long as he’d hold it out for Viktor. Even if he were there, he still would have locked up and collapsed onto the ice.

That’s the hardest I’ve ever pushed myself to complete a program.

Would it be enough?

Taking a few moments to collect himself and some plushies, Yuuri stood and skated towards his stand-in coach. They went to the kiss and cry without a word, though Yakov did offer him a water bottle with straw. Setting the plushies down in the extra seat, Yuuri sipped his water while they waited. He half didn’t expect Yakov to say anything as he had his arms folded as usual.

“Hey!”

Surprised, Yuuri turned to give Yakov his attention.

“Vitya designed that program for you, yet you failed to take advantage. You’d been better prepared if you practiced with the possibility that you might lose. Viktor never did, either. I guess he never learned differently as a coach-”

A lecture at the kiss and cry. This is where Viktor learned it. Yakov was red-faced and yelling… Yuuri supposed he should have shown he was recoiling at taking the words to heart, but honestly he was so tired. He could only stare and marvel at the parallel.

The main display flashed Yuuri’s score, but it wasn’t until the announcer spoke that he registered. “Yuuri Katsuki’s score is 282.84! He is currently in third place. He may yet advance to the grand prix final, but we won’t know until the end.”

Third? Third?!

“Eh you got a higher score than I expected.

After not doing so well, it was more than Yuuri expected as well, but it wasn’t what he had hoped for. All that was left was JJ.

“What’s wrong?” Yakov asked as Yuuri had been too busy staring off into space.

Dropping his water bottle, Yuuri leaned forward to hug his coach’s coach. “Spasibo!” he choked into his shoulder. This close he could smell dill, soap, and rosewood and he wondered if Viktor adopted the cologne from Yakov.

JJ took the ice before Yuuri could vacate the kiss and cry to a group of waiting reporters. The song was a lot different than his short program - lyrics to instrumental - but an anthem all the same. Out of all the skaters, he had the highest difficulty, and watching from the sidelines was intimidating. His program was flawless. JJ had come a long way since that year they skated together.
Yuuri kept his answers brief to the reporters, they mostly understood he was tired and it was heavily insinuated not having Viktor here was difficult. When they shifted to questions about Coach Feltsman stepping in, it was a relief.

Off to his right, score counters stared at a screen.

“That seals the deal - he’ll take first.” He must have meant JJ.

“Yuri Plisetsky will take second and Michele Crispino will take third.”

“Fourth is Yuuri Katsuki.”

“When you total both competition scores, Crispino and Katsuki are tied.”

Yuuri knew before they could continue in their conversation; they were tied in points, but Yuuri would squeak into the finals due to taking second at the cup of China. Which meant he, JJ, Yurio, Christophe, Otabek, and Phichit were the final six.

Thank you, Orihime and Hiroshi.

The single skaters cleared the rink and filed into the breezeway and prep room.

Yuuri stood off to the side in thought. He should be happier than he was that he was advancing. He felt a little bad for Michele that he took his place for a technicality, but that’s how things went, so that couldn’t be the reason for his off-ness. Anxious about the finals? The finals meant he’d get the chance to win gold with Viktor!

Viktor.

Oh.

That’s what it was. He missed him. He wasn’t here to congratulate him and hug and … other things.

Sara approached him with Michele not far behind, congratulating him on his win, which seemed a little insensitive with the guy he beat standing right there. The need for human touch was too great, so Yuuri acted before he could talk himself out of it and hugged her with thanks.

Michele screamed. Yuuri hugged him, too, and he screamed more.

Overhearing, Emil entered the room and he was more than happy to accept Yuuri’s hug without question.

Seung-gil not so much, who was stiff and ready to run at once.

JJ came down the hall with his parents and Yuuri took him by surprise with yet another, which immediately shut him up from whatever he was talking about.

Yurio started running the moment Yuuri turned on him.

It was no good, it wasn’t the same. He needed Viktor.

Did Viktor end up streaming his free skate after all? If he did, it would still be past his bedtime in Japan. For someone that liked to go to bed as early as he did, it was remarkable how well he functioned with all the travel he had to do throughout his career.
Actually, it was fine if he hadn’t livestreamed it. As hard as Yuuri pushed himself, it wasn’t his best and he was sure to get a lecture from his real coach about it. What would Viktor think about him just barely getting to the finals. Did he expect more of him?

“There you are.”

When Yuuri looked up, it was at a dead-end wall. Had he really gone from hugging everyone and walked himself over here? At some point he’d stopped himself as he hadn’t walked smack into it. “Sorry. What is it Coach Feltsman?”

Yakov grunted and lifted his hat with one hand, running the other across his bald head, then returned it. Was he nervous? The lines in his face softened just a little. “The officials want you to participate in the gala tomorrow.”

“But I didn’t…” Podium? The ISU could ask any skater to perform their gala piece regardless of medals. Moscow was really okay with an outsider skating their hero’s program?

“I know, but the Russian people will appreciate Vitya’s work being further showcased.”

Skating Viktor’s heart song without him here…

Yuuri didn’t have much of a choice unless he wanted to pay fees to withdraw. Something like that wouldn’t make his or Viktor’s reputation look good. Or Yakov’s. Yet the way the elder Russian came to him, cautious, he knew this would be difficult.

“I’ll do it.”

Yakov looked relieved at that, then patted his shoulder and walked towards the official’s booth to confirm his skater would be participating.

From the inside of his duffle, Yuuri could hear the buzzing vibration of his cellphone. Unzipping it, he fished for his phone to see a text from Viktor:

[Text me when you’re able to talk~]

With all the interviews and official business taken care of, he could talk to Viktor in peace the rest of the night if able.

[Yeah, just heading back to the room.]

[Call when you get there, please <3].

Shouldering his bag closer, Yuuri headed for the elevator and hoped he’d be able to get back without interruption. The wait for the elevator was so long, he almost considered taking the stairs. But after pushing himself so hard, he was glad it showed up when it did. The ascent to the eleventh floor was another agonizing wait and eventually he was exiting the hall to his room. Small fumble with the key card working on the second try, he entered the room and kicked off his shoes and removed his jersey. Once seated on the bed, he dialed as he sank into the mattress.

A half a ring and Viktor was picking up. “Yuuri~ Hey, are you alone?”

How did he manage to sound more tired? “Yeah, I’m in our room by myself.”

“Okay…” He took a breath. “I love you, first of all. Second; the livestream kept cutting out, but I saw most of your skate. I don't know what Yakov said to you, but I'm sorry I wasn't there to
support you. That said, you did well... you should be proud, Yuuri. We're going to the Grand Prix Final, da? To Barcelona. You're going to get gold, Yuuri.”

“He gave me some advice this morning, and that's really all he said to me. It's okay that you weren't here. It couldn't be helped. You're where you needed to be.”

Viktor chuckled. “I saw him lecturing at the kiss and cry, but don't worry, he's just a big bear - scary on the outside, soft on the inside. I hope his advice was good.”

“Yeah, really helpful! I’m sure it helped with my points.”

There was a hum, something Yuuri would identify as fond. With how Yakov kept saying ‘Vitya’, why were they still fighting? “Thank you, Yuuri... for sending me to be with Makkachin. Mama Katsuki told me what happened with Vicchan. I had no idea.”

“O-oh. I just... Couldn't let you not be there for him.”

“He'll be okay now. I'm sorry for not explaining earlier. Things got a little more complicated and required anesthesia, which is always more dangerous for an older dog... but he'll be just fine, Yuuri. I'm here for him, he's recovering, thanks to you.”

“I’m glad. Makkachin taking it easy?”

“I've been carrying him around. Up the stairs. I think he likes that.”

“To be pampered? Haha I bet!”

Instead of a verbal response, he was greeted by rustling of sheets and a whumph of a pillow? Then quiet for several long seconds.

“You still there, Viktor?”

“Mmn? Oh... Yuuri... yes, sorry...” More rustling and then a sigh. “Anyway, don't worry about the free skate. We're going to the Grand Prix Final, that's what matters. Oh, did they ask you to participate in the exhibition gala?”

“Yeah, they did. Asked Yakov, actually, and then he asked me. Not like there’s a choice.”

Viktor muttered something in Russian that sounded like cursing, voice dropping lower in his native tongue, the warmth and fatigue from earlier, gone. “Of course they did... I was wondering if that might happen.”

“Yeah, me, too. Definitely if I podiumed, sure, but...”

“The Russian people would want their national hero's student to perform, I'm sure... but more than that, I'm sure it's a statement.”

“A statement?”

“A message that they won't let go of their hold that easily - they still have control... they're still in charge. I took you to win the war and...”

“It was partial victory? I made the finals despite not performing my best.”

“I've let you down. I failed you.”
“Huh? No you haven’t!”

His retort was interrupted by heavy sniffing.

“Makkachin, stop- he says hello.”

The poodle gave a “whuff” and Viktor groaned as he did when Makkachin put his weight on him.

Yuuri smiled at how easily he could picture them on Viktor’s bed in the banquet hall. “Hey Makka. Glad you’re feeling better!”

Thump thump went his tail in reply.

“He’s been sleeping... I guess I woke him up.” Viktor yawned along with his dog, though didn’t end on a high pitch like Makkachin’s. “We're looking forward to you coming home, Yuuri.”

“Yeah, me, too. I... I really miss you. I kind of embarrassed myself today by hugging everyone.”

“I'm jealous, but that’s good; my Yuuri needs hugs. You know I would hug you right now if I could. And kiss you.”

“I think Emil's the only one that hugged back, actually. I could do with Viktor hugs and kisses right now.”

“Aww is that so? They don't deserve you, then. Except Emil, I guess. I will still think well of him.” He paused for another yawn. “Do you still have my jacket?”

“Of course I do. I’m actually holding it right now…”

“Good. Still in good condition, I hope?”

“Not sure what you think I'd do to it in the time you've been gone.”

“I don't know... put it on and go running through the streets screaming about how you're the five-time national champion and then jump in the pool?”

“... Did you do that before?”

“No, but I know Christophe Gaicometti, and he's nuts. He’s not allowed to wear my jacket.”

Was that something that had happened or was it a sleep-deprived induced idea? “Okay, well, no, that was never in my plans. I've been holding it mostly.”

“Yuuri, I'm teasing. I know you would never do that.”

“I figured.” That answered that.

“I wish I could curl up with you- and the jacket -right now.”

“More than anything...” But they were seven thousand kilometers apart and would be for another week. “We’ll do that when I come home, okay?”

“Please,” Viktor said so quietly, that Yuuri almost didn’t hear.

“I’ll let you go for now. I’ll talk to you tomorrow after the gala?”

“Definitely. I love you, my Yuuri.”
“I love you, too. *Oyasumi.*”

Viktor hummed and then the line went dead.

Yuuri let the phone slide from his hand to the bed. With each call the distance was physically felt. Would it get worse once he was in Saint Petersburg or would he be used to it and content? And Viktor…

The clock on the night stand read 19:50. Too early to sleep, too late to-- he wasn’t sure, just a sense of restlessness. Yuuri rolled on the bed to his feet to rummage through his luggage for jeans and a sweater.

Minutes later Yuuri was in the elevator with his heavy coat, scarf, and beanie heading out into the Moscow night. The snow had let up from earlier, light and sparse, but still cold as ever.

With no particular destination in mind, he decided to stay within a few blocks of the hotel. It was too cold to go much further, anyway.

The snow crunched under his tennis shoes, the top layer fresh from the night before over layers of frozen from previous days. Out of anywhere the Grand Prix series had him, Russia seemed less inclined to sidewalk plowing.

Talking to Viktor after his Free Skate should have cheered him from his screw up, yet all he felt was gnawing anxiety. There was no scolding, but Viktor didn’t exactly praise him, either. Not like he usually did, anyway - ‘That was amazing!’, ‘You were so beautiful,’ ‘Took my breath away, Yuuri!’ with loving adoration. Was he trying not to make a scene about it for Yuuri’s sake, or was he that tired or merely going through the motions of coach duties?

Or… he blamed himself for Yuuri’s low score. Which was ridiculous. What good was a skater if he couldn’t survive without his hand being held by his coach? He had to be a soldier willing and able to improvise in the arms of war and a downed general.

Maybe the competition was getting to both of them. All the Art of War stuff was a good concept for motivation and keeping one’s head in the game, but could it be taken too far?

Wolves…

Viktor had been riding a lot on the Rostelecom Cup. Makkachin’s untimely need was unfortunate. He hadn’t failed his student. Life was always more important than skating, wasn’t it? Being asked to participate couldn’t be a vicious statement against Viktor. What reason would there be for that? He was their reigning champion. He’d complied to what the RSU wanted years ago. Yuuri knew and accepted that he lacked in the emotional stability department, but Viktor’s paranoia was oftentimes concerning.

Yuuri stopped his in his stroll to lean against the guardrail of a busy street. Cars drove by with their bright lights, the sound of their tires muted in the hazy winter.

*I’m this close to the end of my competitive skating career. I really want the gold now. The grand prix final will be my last chance. Even if I don’t take first place, I’ll have Viktor step down as my coach after the final. And then--*

Suddenly Yuuri went flying sideways into the snow, a pain at his side from the impact of whatever had hit him.
“There you are pork cutlet bowl! Been looking for you.”

Yuuri rotated on his side to sit up on his hands and look up at the assaulting teen. Why’d he have to kick him? Was he that out of it? For that, he couldn’t really be mad at him. “Oh, hey Yurio…”

“What was with all that hugging earlier? Stop creeping me out! And your Free Skate was pathetic! You get to make the excuse that you didn’t do your best because Viktor wasn’t there, but I was in top form skating out there and earned a new personal best only to lose to JJ again… You have no right to be more pissed off than me, okay?!”

A bag was tossed into his lap.

“It’s for you. It’s almost your birthday, right?” Yurio grumbled.

Touched that he remembered, though not sure when if/when he told him, Yuuri unrolled the top of the brown paper and peered inside. “Huh? Pirozhki?”

“Eat.”

“What, right now?”

“Yes. Now!”

With one hand, he braced himself on the ground and stood up onto his feet. Removing his gloves, he pulled his face mask to his chin and fished out a piroshki for, taking a bite. Doughy bun and—

“Hey, there’s rice in here. Pork and egg, too. Wait, is this—”

“Da! Grandpa made them. They’re great, right?” Yurio beamed at him with the biggest smile he’d ever seen him have. It was sweet, really sweet. Thoughtful of him, too. And his grandfather.

He couldn’t help smiling back, appreciating the gift of warm food and company. “Yeah! They’re vkusno!” Yuuri turned his back to the railguard to lean against it as he continued to eat the pirozhki in his hand. He’d had pork buns of course, but a katsudon bun? It was amazing and he was sure to smile and make appreciative sounds towards Yurio, who was more than pleased about his present being well-received. Yuuri ate two, realizing he hadn’t eaten dinner, and offered one to Yurio.

The silence while that ate was companionable, but once Yurio finished his, he spoke; “You okay, pork boy?”

Yuuri picked a piece of rice off his cheek, considering. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“...I get that.”

Since he didn’t press more, maybe he did get it. Teens were perceptive.

It was quiet between them again for a time, again, something Yuuri couldn’t complain about. It was nice, having felt alone moments before, now having Yurio with him.

Yurio tapped his sneakers on the snow, the slickness of it making a small squeak. “JJ sucks, he’s such a dick.”

Had Yuuri still been eating, he was sure he would have choked. “You don't like him, I take it?”

“No, I don't like him! He's an asshole. What, do YOU like him?”

“I don't have a reason not to. We were rinkmates for a little while.”
“Well he's one of your boyfriend's enemies for one.”

“Enemies?” That was going a bit extreme. Maybe Yurio was on the war thing, too?

“...Okay first; you didn't even react when I called Viktor your boyfriend. How do you expect to survive in Russia? Second; yes his enemy. Don't you know anything? I thought you were supposed to be his number one fan or something.”

“Am I supposed to get mad that you called him that? I just figured Viktor didn't like him cause of personality or something.”

“You should probably deny it, pig boy... I obviously don't care but other people will.”

“Isn't denying suspicious?” How many names did he have picked out for him?

“If you do a shitty job it is, but so is ADMITTING IT.”

“Right…” He frowned. Yurio was right. This was Russia, after all.

“You gotta act kinda irritated, like you get accused of it a lot, but it's just the same old, same old. Roll your eyes and shrug it off.” He demonstrated for him, tone and rolling of eyes, though it wasn’t any different to how he was on a day to day basis.

“So if I pretend I’m you…”

Yurio snorted at Yuuri’s smugness. “I don't think you could pull it off, but you could try. It'd couldn’t hurt. Maybe make you a little cooler.”

“Sure, I'll give it a shot next time.”

“And have a line ready. That's what Viktor does. Say like: ‘He’s not my boyfriend, he's just my coach' or whatever. It doesn't matter if it's true if you sound like you know what the hell you’re talking about.”

“I'll go with that. Thanks, Yuri- is it really okay if I call you Yurio or does it bother you?”

The blond boy scuffed the snow with the toe of his shoe, smile crooked, cheeks pink from the cold and embarrassment. “Nyet, it's fine. Just don't tell Viktor.” He grumbled something and stuck his foot flat and looked back at Yuuri. “Anyway, about that shithead JJ!”

Yuuri pulled his facemask back on as a chill passed, waiting for Yurio to continue.

“Look, I get competitive. I'm competitive. Viktor's competitive. But JJ, he's not... a wolf like Viktor talks about but he's almost as bad. Yeah, I see that face you're making, I guess he's told you about the wolves, too, right?”

“Yeah...”

“When it gets competition time, that's most of what he talks about. If it's not skating, it's being paranoid about the wolves. Especially last season.”

“I thought the wolves and skating were connected. You mean the rumors of retiring?”

“What I mean is he's fine at the home rink and then really high strung at competition. The rumors are where JJ comes in. Viktor's kind of dumb. Dunno if you noticed.”
Though his mouth was covered, he hoped his flat look was obvious.

Yurio cleared his throat. “...Yeah, see, they were interviewing Viktor at Skate Canada and asking him the usual questions and then that dickhead showed up. Crashed his interview, made some suggestion that Viktor was old and going to retire anyway, and the press just ate it up and asked him if it was true. I guess Viktor hadn't even considered that possibility, so he didn't have any fancy lines ready. Before he knew it, everyone was talking about it as if it he’d made a press release.”

“Wow... But that sounds like a big misunderstanding. I'm sure JJ didn't mean to do that. Awful circumstance, but-”

“Misunderstanding my ass!, Viktor was wrecked! He had a full-on existential crisis meltdown in front of everyone.”

With Viktor being so sensitive, it made sense. “JJ probably feels bad about it. Was that a reason for the prayer circle?”

“Tche. I doubt it. He probably just wanted to use Makkachin to show off how ‘charitable’ and ‘great he is... I wouldn't put it past him. Stupid, fatass ego.”

“JJ’s loud and has an ego, but he's not mean. Competitive like you.”

“Yeah, well, believe what you want, but I don't forgive people who hurt my-” he hesitated. “Who hurt Viktor. And you shouldn't, either.”

Naturally Yuuri wanted to take his lover’s side, yet he was also familiar with how the other side was. It didn’t seem fair, but arguing with Yurio wasn’t going to change anything on either side. If Makkachin was an attempt at redemption, Viktor, like Yurio, would probably see it as an egotrip, too. “I guess you're right.”

Satisfied, Yurio folded his arms over his puffed chest. It didn't last long as a sneeze ceased him. “We should head back. You'll probably catch your death out here, piggy. You're not used to Russia's winters.”

Used to, no, but he felt better prepared to it than his younger friend who stood shivering in a zip-up hoodie. His Russian friend. All he could do was smile.

“Yakov says you're skating in the gala. You better get some sleep so you don’t screw up Viktor's program, da?”

“Da.” Carefully Yuuri straightened and tightened his scarf and started the few block walk back to the hotel. How long had Yurio been looking for him before he found him?

“Hey, I don't know what you had Viktor had planned for Saint Petersburg, but we should go to the Leningrad Zoo. You'd like it.”

“He had a list, I think it was mostly his old haunts. I do like zoos, though!”

“Oh I know most of those, anyway.” The confirmation of liking zoos awakened a passion in his green-blue eyes. “There are tigers and they're so cool. It’s right by the rink, too!”

His energy was contagious and a reminder that he wouldn’t be in Saint Petersburg alone. “I look forward to it. Show me around.”
“It’ll be even more fun than if Viktor were there!”

Had it not been for Yurio, Yuuri was sure he wouldn’t have been able to sleep that night. On his own he was too vulnerable to his thoughts, so Yurio served as a good distraction even after they’d returned to their respective hotels and got ready.

However, the ease he’d felt then wasn’t present when he woke up in the morning. There were hours before he had to be at the rink to check in for the gala proceedings… he just hoped he’d be able to get in a good headspace before then.

Yes, yes he would. There was plenty of time.

He reached for the remote and turned it on to the music channel from the last night he and Viktor were together. Something to focus on, grounding before it could get worse.

After a hot shower, he ordered room service, something he did his best to not do, but after so much time with Viktor, it really was convenient for time and cases of social aversion. Thirty minutes later his breakfast of fried eggs and sliced kolbasa with a side bowl of oatmeal and fresh berries arrived.

Once done eating, he set the plates outside his door, then tinkered on his phone through five songs and then lowered to the floor for stretches. Long stretches of his spine and limbs.

His phone pinged with a text from Yakov telling him of check-in time. Yuuri checked the schedule to confirm that was the time or there was a change. It was the same. Nice of Yakov to care enough to remind him when he didn’t need to.

Soon he was adorning his costume, slipping into it with more care than usual, asking it and all it stood for for him and Viktor to help him get through this performance. It wasn’t for points, but Yuuri would never be able to forgive himself if he did badly. Gently, he twisted the sleeve seams into place, adjusting the collar and hem and then stepped into the bathroom at the vanity.

With his hands, he rewet his hair, unscrewed the cap of the hair gel to dab his fingers into, and set to forming his hair into place, scalp to ends. The hair was the easiest part.

Next came the makeup. He unrolled the pallet and selected the brushes from memory. He very easily could have checked in at the rink and had the makeup artists have their way at him, but after Viktor started doing it, he didn’t want anyone else to. It was something so routine to many, yet Yuuri considered it a part of their intimacy and he wasn’t going to betray that.

On his own, he was left with guessing and unsteady hands.

Placing the brushes down, he examined himself in the mirror. It wasn’t a perfect job - eyeliner uneven on one side, mascara not extending some lashes - but it would have to do. Any more time spent on it, he’d ruin what he’d done.

Turning the lights and TV off, Yuuri pulled his jersey jacket from the hanger in the closer and slipped it on over his gala costume. Pants as well. Checking for his skates, towel, and water bottle, he zipped up his sports duffle.

Just as he reached for his phone, it pinged with a text from Yurio:

[Here yet?]
He looked at the clock and he still had a good thirty minutes before he needed to be there. Yurio was just that eager to see him from last night. Smiling, he sent a reply

[On my way.]

Victory ceremonies for the exhibition gala was an abbreviated version of the event opening ceremonies and was generally more casual. The showcase of the event’s winners drew a bigger crowd.

Yurio made sure he didn’t sit by himself, despite Yuuri’s weak protests of being in the way.

“Yakov is your coach right now; we sit together!”

No use arguing that; he just hoped the rest of Team Russia, Georgi include, was good with him sitting with them. At least until the first ceremony ended.

After the ice cleared from the opening, all those that podiumed took to the center to receive their medals. Music and fanfare.

Then came the exhibitions. The ice dancers were first. Then the pairs. Then the ladies.

Then it was the men’s.

Yuuri shed his jersey and shoved it into his bag with nervous energy. Since he was invited to the gala, he’d be going first.

Yakov returned to the rest of the team with Mila, last of the ladies exhibition skaters, handing her jacket. The old man then turned to Yuuri, an arm raising to invite his temporary skater forward, and walked with him to the barrier entrance. He placed a heavy hand on Yuuri’s shoulder, mouth set firm, but eyes wishing luck.

Applause emitted in anticipation of what was to come as Yuuri skated out onto the ice in position, sequins catching in the low lights.

Two beats into the aria, Yuuri gave himself to the music and memory.

Don’t think, don’t think.

Rotate, forward, raise of the hand.

Muscles and skates heavy, heartbeat in his ears.

The ice in front of him transformed into the cold forest like it had before. Although, the deer was much more sure in its steps - its search for love, the love it had found, but were now separated.

Quad turned triple.

A hoof to the wet underbrush, a sniff to the air, tracking. Scared, but determined.

-non te ne andare-

Leap over a ravine, back hooves slipping in the moss.

-Ho paura di perderti-
Yuuri fell onto the ice, cold seeping through his costume, ceasing the breath out of him.

-Le tue mani, le tue gambe-

Viktor’s hands, Viktor’s legs… entangled with his own. Their hearts blending together as one. Viktor’s heat, his skin, his scent. Their bodies connected.

Another ravine…

Hands reaching out… to nothing.

He missed the set up for the last quad only to become a double. A clean landing, but he couldn’t stop the tears from welling.

This song brought them together.

Yuuri was ruining it.

Sun peeked from the gray clouds as the deer looked into the distance.

-Partiamo insieme-

Would Viktor forgive him? Was he watching the livestream and sham he was making their love out to be while they were apart? He was stronger than this, he knew he was, love made him this way and yet he felt himself crumbling.

Yuuri closed his eyes into the camel spin, lids holding the stinging tears inside.

At the finishing pose, arms folded across his rising chest, a sob overcame him, so strong it quaked his body to his knees.

I’m sorry, Viktor. I’m sorry.

Eventually, he was able to pry himself off the ice and back to his seat in the stands. Yakov, Yurio, maybe even Mila AND Georgi tried to be of comfort, but he couldn’t look them in the eyes or bring himself to say anything to them. It’d come out as more crying anyway.

He’d humiliated himself enough for one day. If the RSU was wanting a statement, they may have just gotten it.

Yuuri watched the medalists from his group, eyes fixed straight ahead. He wanted to escape to his room, but after making his fellow competitors deal with the emotional mess he was on and off the ice, he owed it to them to watch.

Michele’s program was related to his theme of love and chivalry, costume looking something native from Italy. Italian royalty, maybe. The song was regal and nice. Less jumps and technical work, more dance like.

Yurio’s costume reminded Yuuri of a softer version of what Viktor wore for his Firebird program years ago; red bodysuit with white flames, connecting his Agape costume and his free skate together. The program was fast and lively, like his free skate.

JJ wore fitted casual jeans and striped shirt with a jacket and skated to an indie pop song with high energies. He must have saved his band music for his competitive pieces.
Yuuri didn’t want to go to the banquet. He wanted to go back to the hotel and not leave. Avoid the press or anyone for awhile. Yurio frowned at that, but offered to walk him back to his room to make sure he got there okay. It wasn’t far, not like anything would happen to him, but he allowed the teenager to escort him anyway.

“I liked your gala piece,” Yuuri finally said once they were standing outside his door.

“Yeah? Thanks,” Yurio accepted, quietly. “When is your flight out?”

“Afternoon.”

“Oh, so probably after ours. Email me the time. We can wait for you at the airport.”

“Thanks.”

“And… if you need me later, text me. Or whatever.”

“Sure.” He waved and let himself in with his keycard.

Yuuri dropped his bag in the entryway, slipped off his shoes, fished out his phone from his jacket pocket before slugging his way to the bed, in which he collapsed face first into.

It wasn’t long before his cell phone started vibrating and ringing. He was sure he stirred everyone watching the livestream with his crying, so of course people he loved would call with concerns. The banquet met face to face, the calls gave him a small, comforting filter. One by one the calls came, having to be cut short to answer another one waiting.

The first call was from his mother, but really it was collectively his father and Mari as well.

“You did great, sweetheart.”

“We were cheering for you, did you hear us from here?”

“Get some sleep after that.”

Second, Alondra:

“I can’t believe my song is taking you to the finals, Yuuri! And your gala performance was stunning, too. I cried, okay.”

Third, Minako:

“YuuuuUUuUuri OH MY GOOOOOD.” - lots and lots of sobbing.

Fourth, the Nishigori household:

“You did so well, Yuuri. Don’t worry, okay. I’ve never seen anything so beautiful in my entire life.”

“WE LOVE YOU, YUUR!”
“I hate you for making me cry!”

Fifth, Phichit:

“Hey man, are you okay? I saw your gala piece; it was different then last time, but don’t sweat it! It was still really, really good… Even the hamsters were crying, so don’t feel bad about that, either. Oh and I’m supposed to get you to call Alondra when you have a chance.”

Sixth, Christophe:

“Congrats on your performance, moving indeed. More importantly, though; you should watch those Swiss Alps of yours. Viktor’s poor maiden meadows…”

And then after the barrage of calls stopped, Yuuri put his phone down, disappointed that the one he wanted to talk to the most wasn’t in the long string. Until he noticed a text message had come through. He opened it, seeing a polite message of

[Please call me when you have a chance]

Viktor must have heard his family and their excited voices. Or had he been in the room when that happened and excused himself from joining them for wanting to call Yuuri in private later.

Whatever the case, Yuuri pushed the phone icon and dialed.

Two rings and Viktor picked up:

“Yuuri.” Again he sounded worse.

“Viktor … Good to hear from you.” It was a stupid thing to say, but Viktor hadn’t offered anything else.

“You called me, Yuuri.”

“Well you asked me to,” Yuuri countered back, tone light.

“…right.”

He frowned at the pause that followed. “I could try calling back tomorrow?”

“No, no… Yuuri. Yuuri, it’s not that late,” Viktor insisted. He cleared his throat. “Oh! I had a thought.”

“What’s that?”

“If we turned the mattresses sideways, perpendicular to the frames, they wouldn’t slide at all… that might work better for sharing the bed in hotel rooms like that.”

“That’s a good point!”

“Would you like to try it? Let me know how it works out?”

“I think I’d know if it worked better if you were here…” Yuuri trailed, looking at gap between the
vertically set mattresses.

“Well, it's just an idea in any case.”

“I'll try it. Though, I'll be in your bed, soon.”

“That's right... It's a nice, big bed, too. Far too big for one person.”

“I'll pretend you're with me.”

“I'll do the same.” Viktor allowed some silence before he spoke again. “Yuuri. The gala...”

His heart stopped for a moment. That's why Viktor had been stalling. “Y-yeah. Um... What about it?”

“I want to talk to you about it when you get back to Hasetsu. It was beautiful, but it hurt so much that I couldn't be there. I have... some ideas to propose. We can discuss when you get home, okay?”

“I’m so-- yeah. When I'm home.”

“Don't be sorry. I wasn't there for you. I still felt all of the emotion you put into it...”

“I’m... I'm glad you were able to feel it.”

“I was... You skated a truly broken heart, Yuuri. There wasn't a dry eye in the audience. It was an honor to have such a tribute made in my name.”

“I’ve skated it so much better before. You deserve more than that.”

“Technical skill is one thing, but it's the story and the heart and soul that you put into it that matters more, Yuuri. You know that. You laid yourself bare. I don't think I could ask for more. I love you, Yuuri. Thank you for skating it.”

Viktor was right... The story and composition were what he excelled at, typically. Had it been for technical, it would have been a low score, but there was no score. Heart and music. Making people cry wasn't the goal. Move them, sure, but how he felt and all the tears... Their love wasn't tragic. Viktor's dog was sick. They'd be back together soon. There physically or not, it shouldn't have mattered, because Viktor was always with him. “I love you, too,” Yuuri said after his own unwanted silence. "If you felt it, that's what's most important.”

“I did and I do. It's the one thing I'm sure of.” He let the sentiment linger for a moment, and then his tone changed. “Oh, and Yuuri. One other thing.”

"Yeah?"

"I... was wondering if you'd humor me a little. It's late, but I wanted to read to you tonight." He laughed, light and a little embarrassed.

"Like a book?” Random, but Yuuri was curious. Stalling again?

"Yes. A bedtime story."

“Mm. Sure.” Yuuri adjusted the pillow at his back to get comfortable. How long was his story going to be?
"Okay. Are you ready?"

"Yes!"

"...I'm pretty sure that I'm the one who will fall asleep after this, but that's kind of beside the point. Anyway, here we go." Yuuri heard the sound of pages being flipped. Had he had it in his lap the whole time?

"I'm pretty tired, myself. It's okay."

"Oh, well good then! Hans Christian Andersen's The Wild Swans. Are you familiar with it at all, Yuuri?"

"Don’t think so, but it’s Andersen, so there’s… that."

He laughed again, understanding. "There’s actually an animated film from the Soviet-era, with crows instead of fairies and- well, there are differences, and I actually prefer it over the book, but I can’t show you a film right now. We’ll have to watch it later." He cleared his throat once more and started to read.

A King and Queen were parents of twelve children, eleven boys and one girl, but when the Queen died of a ‘mysterious illness,’ the King remarried a woman who turned out to be a wicked step mother, as these things often happen. She turned the eleven princes into swans and casts them out - “Have you ever met a swan, Yuuri? While beautiful, they’re not very nice!” - tried to curse the princess and murder her, but the swan brothers saved her. Fairies then told princess she could break the curse on them if she took a vow of silence while knitting sweaters from stinging nettles - “Hans had a thing for mute girls. And those sweaters don’t sound comfortable.”

The story continued with the love of a king despite the silence, an accusation of witchcraft, the lack of a voice to defend herself, and an order of death by fire - “What is it with people getting burned at the stake in these stories? Once Chris made me read Hugo's The Hunchback of Notre-Dame and it ruined me for days!” - but fortunately, the swan brothers came to her rescue, even though one of the eleven is left with one wing from the unfinished shirts - “Which wouldn’t be the worst fate in the world, honestly; feathers are quite fetching.” - but when all was said and done, he stake burst into flowers, the king catches her and proposed to her.

"And thus the princess was married off to a rich and handsome prince - or king, depending on the version - at the young age of fifteen or so, so perhaps it all worked out in the end... set up for life, happily ever after. With too many siblings. The end!"

He’d probably read the story verbatim for the most part, but was definitely more and more ad-libbed and paraphrased the more Viktor went on. What was the real story like? Was it as strange as Viktor made it out to be?

“Wow… that was really weird.” Honestly Yuuri would have been content listening to him read the dictionary. It was nice doing nothing but listening to his voice as he relaxed in bed.

“This hard copy version I have is amazing. I’ll have to show you the gorgeous illustrations. I wonder if this collection of fairy tales is like the one the princess has in the tale that costs half the kingdom.”

“I sure hope you don’t have a book that expensive!”

“There’s a mouse in here that looks like-” he yawned and took a moment to come back “- Makkachin. All the swans have little crowns. Watercolors... Beautiful. Happily… ever after. Did
you like the story, Yuuri?"

Like most Hans’ stories, they were dark and twisted, and little was left to wonder why the Disney retellings were always happier. *The Wild Swans* was weird, but did have a happy ending. Yuuri wondered if Viktor was trying to use the story as some sort of allegory for him. What it was was anyone’s guess.

“Good... it’s a cute story..."

How it was cute, Yuuri wasn’t really sure, but didn’t comment.

The book closed on the other end with a padded clap. "That’s all for now. Your flight is tomorrow for Saint Petersburg, yeah?"

“Yeah, at 1pm.”

"Okay. You have all of the addresses I emailed you, phone numbers for the superintendent and things. If you need me to book you an earlier flight home let me know..."

“Got them. I'll be fine, Viktor.”

"Don't let Yurio push you around. Ah, I just remembered, there's another good cafe not too far from my apartment. I'll find the address.” He yawned again. "They have... what's the word... Biscuits... cookies... something with..."

“You can tell me about it later.”

"Almonds, I think. Mmm, okay.” Another yawn and a pause. "I love you, my handsome prince.”

Yuuri felt his cheeks warm at that. A prince…

Wait.

Princess!

Christophe said Viktor liked being called a princess - was that what Chris was getting at with his weird euphemism? - or was that what Viktor had been getting at with the bedtime story?

He took a breath. “I love you, too, my princess.”

Viktor took a breath, then said... nothing.

Yuuri waited.

And waited.

“Viktor?”

And then he was answered by the sound of more soft breathing on the other end.

His princess had fallen asleep.

Like precious cargo, Yuuri rolled Viktor’s Olympic jacket into a bundle and tucked it in between his shirts. With the last thing packed, he zipped his suitcase closed and wheeled it upright.
The ‘Do Not Disturb’ plaque had been on the door since Viktor left to preserve the position of the mattresses and the nest he made. Now the he was leaving, he supposed he should fix them to not alarm housekeeping. Hoisting and scooting, he put them back in place.

One final sweep of the room for his or Viktor’s stray belongings, Yuuri flipped off the switch, closed the door, and headed for the lobby to check out.

Would this be the last time he’d see Moscow? If he stuck with his plan of retiring, then as a skater, yes. As a visitor with Viktor Nikiforov? Maybe, but it would be nothing but horrible memories.

Yurio had texted after he’d gotten out of the shower that he and the rest of team Russia were about to take off and would be waiting for him to arrive. With taxing and luggage claim and wiggle room for any delays, he hoped they wouldn’t be waiting too long. Was Yakov really okay with that, or did Yurio assume? Or was just Yurio going to be there for him? Guess he’d find out when he landed.

Yuuri climbed into the taxi.

At the airport drop-off, he handed the driver the rest of the Russian currency he had, and wheeled his luggage inside.

Spoken and written languages all around him, Yuuri located the airline check-in by symbols. The last time he’d been to a foreign airport without a coach by his side was when he went to America - young and facing the unknown, but necessary.

It was fitting.

Chapter End Notes

Vicchan: Psst.
Makkachin: Mmff?
Vicchan: Makkachin-sama, is your Person asleep?
Makkachin: …yes, finally. Poor thing. He’s exhausted.
Vicchan: Indeed. And are you all right?
Makkachin: I think so. Viktor said I’ll be fine.
Vicchan: Good, good… Did he say anything about Yuuri-kun?
Makkachin: They talked on the phone. Viktor misses him.
Vicchan: He’ll be back soon enough.
Makkachin: One week.
Vicchan: A week?
Makkachin: A whole week.
Vicchan: N-no…!
Makkachin: Yep. :’(
Vicchan: Kuso… Taihen mōshiwakearimasen!
Makkachin: what
Vicchan: ‘Oops.’

The Gay Skate is Out There
A broken champion! / Snowventures! / All that glitters! / Makkachin!!!
Please look forward to it!
Chapter Summary

Returning to Hasetsu alone is difficult for Viktor, even though he's grateful for Yuuri's sacrifice. With Makkachin in recovery, and Yuuri still a week out from returning home, Viktor's left alone with his thoughts and much too much time on his hands to worry... which is never good for someone with wolves of anxiety nipping at his heels.

#the sad Viktor chapter #LOTS of moping #service animal Makkachin on the case
#Mama Hiroko's here, too #Chris makes a cameo

Chapter Notes

Gabapple: ALL RIGHT, MY FRIENDS. Today is an important day. It's the NLAVERSARY and/or Viktor's birthday, depending on when this actually posts and what timezone you're in. That's right, we've been posting NLA for a full year now... which is crazy. I thought for absolute certain that we'd be done with the fic by now, but nooooo sir, we still have twelve chapters left after this one. Which seems crazy. Plus there's the rest of Vitya Diaries (more coming soon!) and we're gonna be writing a Mafia AU, and Mamodewberry is writing a Chris side story that goes into his romance with MR. MANCAKES aka Baz... and we have about a billion one shots to write... goodness, we're never gonna escape YOI! I guess we're going to be trapped in ice skating hell forever. Oh well! ~__(spiracy)~/
But, this chapter is done, which means we're headed now to SAINT PETERSBURG... which includes one of my very favorite scenes in ALL of NLA. I'm totally stoked. I hope you guys are, too!

Mamodewberry: A year... time is such an insane thing. As is life, hence why we have not completed the fic to our original plan. Plus, we added two more chapters to our original length. Either way! Thank you for those that have been with us from the beginning and those that have joined us on along the way. Yes, I'll be writing about Chris and Mr. Mancakes. It'll be titled Man on a Wire, or MoaW. So if you see me talking about it on Twitter, that's what that's about :> Ice skating Hell forever indeed. Sometimes it melts into a pool and there's Swimming Hell. Either way, boys and their water sports.

Giveaway updates: The buttons have all been mailed out! Please watch out for those in the coming weeks. For the drabble giveaway, we're taking those until New Years, to please make sure to comment here or hit us up on Twitter with your questions or prompts for any character in NLA, OC or canon, and we'll add it to the pile! We're looking for a lot of diversity, so feel free to enter more than once. :) Thanks for your continued support, guys! You're amazing!

Recommended Listening:
*I Know I'm A Wolf* - Young Heretics
It was the night before the exhibition, and Viktor, Jr. World Champion, was standing outside of Coach Feltsman’s door in poodle print pajamas, frowning. He’d been debating whether or not he should knock for five whole minutes. But just when he was about to raise his hand to the door, Yakov answered, staring down at him with an unamused frown.

“Yes, Vitya?”

“...How’d you know I was here?”

“I could hear you pacing outside the door.”

“Oh.”

“What is it?”

Viktor wrung his hands together, then peered back into the hallway left, then right. No one was there. But most everyone had probably gone to bed like sane people. It wasn’t like a senior championship where people went out to party. He looked up with a pout. “So. Uh. I was wondering if I could come in. To talk.”

Instead of verbally responding, Yakov stepped back and let the teenager in, shaking his head. Once Viktor was in, sneaking past like some sort of ferret, Yakov closed the door and followed after him, returning to his bed. “And what did you wish to talk about?”

“Oh, you know.” Viktor took the seat on the edge of the bed. “Stuff.”

“Stuff?”

“Yeah.” Viktor pulled a leg up onto the bed, both hands wrapped around a socked foot. “Stuff.” His attention turned to the TV, which was on some news channel with the volume down to a near unintelligible level. “No soap opera...”

“Is your boyfriend not here?”
“Huh? Niko?” Viktor laughed, giving a shrug that was nothing short of exaggerated. “Nah, not him. He isn’t going to be coming to competitions anymore, in fact. Probably ever.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, I kind of… Well, you know how he was at Jr. Nationals?”

It would have been difficult to forget, but Yakov didn’t say that. Instead, he nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, after that whole thing, I sorta told him that I didn’t want to share a room with him at competitions anymore. At least I told him that I wasn’t gonna, uh, sleep with him before competing, and he…” Viktor looked away.

So did Yakov. “And he wasn’t okay with that?”

“I might have been kind of mean about it. I think I hurt his feelings.”

“Eh, only because he’s guilty and doesn’t want to admit it.”

“Maybe…” Viktor rubbed his foot again, lips pursing. “But I told him that if he touched me with his greedy paws again that I was gonna show him how sharp my skates really were, so uh… yeah, he’s not gonna come to competitions anymore.”

“O-oh…” Yakov took a moment to look his student over then; poodles and all, then continued. “Well. It’s important to be open about your feelings. Put men in their place.”

“Yeah. That’s true. Stupid boys.” Viktor sighed, but let it roll off him after a beat, leaning back. “So, hey, uh… can I work on some stuff in here for a little bit? My room is too quiet. It’s kinda spooky.”

To that, Yakov smiled. “Yes, that’s fine.”

“Okay!”

Just as quickly as Viktor had run into the room, he was gone, out the door and down the hall. But only for a few minutes. He was back in short order with a pile of papers and notebooks, which he spread across the floor with a set of colored pencils to work with upon. “Oh, I forgot to knock again! Sorry, Coach!”

It wasn’t worth worrying about, so Yakov moved on. “What are you working on, Vitya? Next season’s programs?”

“No way. Not yet. I’m working on something even better. THIS,” he said, quickly gathering the papers in his arms to bring to the bed and fan them out for Yakov to see. “THIS! Is a fan zine!”

Chuckling, Yakov looked at the mess before him. “A what?”

“A fan zine! Like a magazine but for my fan club. See? It’s going to have all of my opinions for all of my favorite stuff. Like skating and Saint Petersburg, Makkachin and ballet. I even have a tiger in here.” Viktor pointed to the fearsome drawing of a roaring tiger, claws and stripes out.

“‘Ice Tiger of Russia?’” Asked Yakov.

“Yeah! Cool, right? I can make a bunch of copies of the Viktor Nikiforov fan book and mail them out to everyone. I want to make a new book at the end of every season!”
“This... sounds like a big project, Vitya.”

“Well, yeah.” Viktor flipped through the pages, admiring the world he’d done thus far. “But I’m awesome, and this will set me apart from all of the other skaters. I already collected a list of names at Jr. Nationals in Odintsovo, so I can start small for the first volume.”

“...well if that’s what you’d like to do, I will support you, Vitya, but...”

“And don’t worry, I’m gonna use some of my prize money to pay for it! Plus I can do most of it myself. And Niko can help, too. He already said he would.”

“Okay...”

Viktor beamed at him. “I can make an extra copy for you, if you want.”

“Yes, I will want one. I’m curious if I’ll make an appearance...”

“Well that depends on how nice you are, Coach.” Viktor thumbed through the pages. “Books gotta be done in pages counts of four, after all, so it gets kind of expensive.”

“Oh, is that how it works?”

“...yeah, but I’m just kidding. Of course there’s a Coach appreciation page!”

“Then I’d better let you work on it. It sounds very important.”

“It is!”

After Nationals, Viktor had been sure that things between he and Yakov had been ruined. But, as usual, his coach had pulled through. No one could come between them. Especially not some dumb boy.

Yakov let him work on his ‘fan zine’ until he was falling asleep, then let him curl up on the sofa in the room. It seemed pointless to send him back that late, especially if the boy’s room was ‘spooky.’ Besides, it was just for one night, and Vitya wasn’t the only one who had missed the company.

The layover in Korea wasn’t very long. By the time Viktor got through customs and found the terminal for his connecting flight, it was almost over. He got coffee, some bread that looked like rye, and called Yuuri. Although it was barely after eight am in Moscow, he answered after only three rings.

“Hey. I’m in Seoul.”

“Viktor...”

Yuuri sounded like Viktor felt; tired, weary. No, he sounded exhausted, and in every sense of the word, not just from lack of sleep. But sleep would help. He forced a smile to ease his voice. Keep it level and calm, maybe even cheerful.
“I’m boarding soon for the last leg to Fukuoka, I just wanted to let you know that everything is going okay.”

“Okay.”

Viktor put a hand over the receiver as his smile morphed into something more genuine. It was easy to imagine his sleepy-eyed lover, groggy and trying to unsuccessfully focus without his glasses. “Go back to sleep. I’ll call you when I get to Japan.”

“Okay,” came the mumbled response, and then, “Have you heard anything about Makkachin?”

“Nothing on my phone from Mari… and you?”

“I haven’t checked since last night…”

They lapsed into an uncomfortable silence for five or six seconds before Viktor cleared his throat. “Text me if you hear anything. I’ll be in Japan soon either way.”

“Yeah. I will.”

“Thank you.”

Viktor called Yuuri again when he landed in Fukuoka, but his message was more or less the same: everything’s fine, I’ll let you know when I get there.

He took a cab to Hasetsu instead of the train or calling for Yuuko for both speed and privacy. It felt a little more active. Every moment stuck waiting was torture. It all felt wrong, too. Familiar, with the Japanese countryside and mixed urban developments that breezed past the windows, but strangely foreign under the blanket of snow. It’d been so long since he’d first arrived in Hasetsu to coach Yuuri, bringing a sudden winter storm in the midst of spring, and he didn’t like the reminder now.

Hasetsu was a warm, summer place. A sweet spring and autumn paradise. Seeing the snow, feeling its chill- even though it wasn’t nearly the same as Moscow’s -felt like he was starting over. Wiping the slate clean.

Losing Yuuri all over again.

If he lost Yuuri… if he lost Makkachin… like he’d lost Yakov already… like he’d lost… what would he--?

No. No, he couldn’t think about that. Not right now. Not now.

He pushed the thoughts down and away and focused on the tasks at hand. Hasetsu. Hotsprings. Drop off luggage. Go with Mari to see Makkachin.

Then he could reassess.

Then he could fall apart.

Maybe.

Viktor made it to Yu-Topia and asked the driver to wait for him, accepting the offer of help to bring his luggage in. At the genkan, he bowed to Toshiya, hugged Hiroko, and thanked them both
for their help without coming further inside. It would have taken too long to properly remove his shoes and put them back on, not in the time it took Mari to get on her coat and take him by the arm.

Neither said much on the drive to the veterinary office, but neither needed to. Mari was good for companionable silence. She spared him the occasional glance, concern on her tired face, but otherwise let the anxious energy sit between them like a bubble that neither wanted to burst. If he wanted to talk, she was there. If not, that was fine, too.

She’d been up all night, too.

Although the vet office felt like any other, Viktor realized that being able to read the writing on the wall was only going to be a figure of speech the moment he got to the front desk. “Please, where’s Makkachin? Excuse me, a poodle? Uhm… boku no inu… wa…”

Mari touched his trembling arm, looked him in the eye, then took over.

It was more efficient that way.

“They say he’s looking pretty good and they think we should be able to take him home soon. They want to know if you want to see him.” She made a face. “It’s not like you flew back overnight from Russia or anything. Right?”

“Yes. Please.”

Vet technicians took them back through the secured doors down a long, narrow hallway that smelled of antiseptic and animal. It led into the recovery room lined with kennels. Makkachin was in one of the three large cages at ground level. Even before he lifted his head, slow and groggy, Viktor knew it was him. He’d know that brown fleece anywhere.

“Makkachin!”

The poodle wagged his tail weakly. He was alive, at least. Whatever had happened, he was alive. The technician opened the door for him and Viktor dropped to his knees, half crawling into the cage to get his hands on the dog to feel for himself, gentle petting, searching, assessing. “I was so worried. I told you not to—oh, Makkachin!”

Makkachin licked his cheek, nuzzled and headbutted him, tail thumping against the blanket in the cage.

Other than the lack of energy and being really out of it, Makkachin was looking pretty good, which was a relief. Viktor kissed his muzzle, then sat back on the floor, criss-cross, and looked up at the vet, Mari, and the technician. “May I see his chart?”

Mari translated and retrieved it for him, but he couldn’t read most of it. The basic statistics he could make out- it looked like Makkachin had gained a little weight since they’d come to Hasetsu, which was something they would need to address -but the diagnosis and procedures were still only theories.

Frowning, Viktor passed the clipboard back, only for Makkachin to take its place in his lap, draping half in, half out of the cage. Viktor gently pulled him the rest of the way and began massaging his shoulders. “What happened?”
It took another two hours before they were able to take Makkachin back to Yu-Topia. Mari was patient with him, but there were so many questions and so many things lost in translation. If it had happened back in Russia, Viktor would have been able to communicate with the vets effortlessly; he’d been on top of every single exam and vaccination for Makkachin, every little abnormality and issue since day one. He knew the poodle inside and out, and took better care of Makkachin than he did himself. Proper poodle care and feeding was something he took very, very seriously.

But the language barrier presented certain challenges that left everyone exhausted and frustrated. Not to mention the paperwork. In the end, Viktor came to understand that the issues were caused not just by the choking, but the plastic wrappers from the steamed buns, getting trapped in the small intestine in a way that required endoscopic surgery for their removal. That required anesthesia, which was a very high risk for an older dog like Makkachin.

There had been some moments that were very touch-and-go, but Makkachin had pulled through, largely due to his otherwise excellent health.

They went over potential complications, symptoms and warning signs, and the instructions for Makkachin’s recovery at home. All that remained was to wait for the poodle to recover enough from the anesthesia to show that he could drink some water and walk a little, and they’d let him go home.

Somewhere in there was a phone call to Yuuri, too, with Viktor stepping out into the cold afternoon air for some privacy behind the vet’s office. They had a run for the dogs with gravel, which was strewn with half-melted snow. He let Yuuri know what was going on, just the basics, then went back in to return to Makkachin’s side.

There was still so much to do before he would be able to stop and rest.

Viktor carried Makkachin into the cab back to Yuu-topia, though the driver was wary of the whole affair. If Mari hadn’t been there to explain Makkachin’s status and situation, there might have been more trouble, but as it was, they got him home just fine.

“Mama Katsuki,” he called from the genkan. “I’m going out… please watch Makkachin while I’m gone.” He toed off his shoes and carried the poodle in past the other patrons, giving nods, and came to the dog bed in the lounge area. Once in the bed, Viktor ruffled his ears, then tapped the end of his nose. “Makka, stay. Don’t leave this bed.”

“Vicchan, where are you going so soon?”

“Just to the grocery. I’ll be quick. Don’t let Makkachin eat anything, please. I’m putting him on a special diet.”

“Of course, dear.”

“Do you need me to come with you?”

Viktor looked Mari over, who was probably twice as tired as he was, and shook his head. “No… you’ve done enough. Thanks. I think I can do this, at least.”

“Okay. Call if you need something.”
It didn’t take long for Viktor to wish he had brought her along. The little shop wasn’t far away, but in the cold and with how jetlagged and exhausted he was, it felt like forever. Even if the words had been written with cyrillic characters, Viktor wasn’t sure that he’d be able to make much sense of them. Fortunately, chicken and rice were easy enough to identify, and he only had to ask for help with the sweet potato. Then it was back to the onsen, shedding shoes once more and finally- to everyone’s relief -his coat.

Makkachin wagged his tail from the dog bed, obedient and relieved.

“Mama Katsuki, I need to borrow a pot and the stove, please.”

“Oh Vicchan! I didn’t know you cooked!”

“Just for Makkachin.” Viktor brought the shopping bag with ingredients for ‘Makka-Get-Better Meal’ to the kitchen entrance, but Hiroko stood in his way with a sweet smile. He blinked at her.

“If you would give me the instructions for the meal, I would be happy to prepare it for you while you rest, Vicchan.”

Viktor stared at her, blinking again. He’d always made it for Makkachin. It was his job. His duty to cook for his dog. He took care of Makkachin, no one else. He looked at the bag in his hand, plastic handle crinkling between his fingers. “No, that’s all right, I can…”

“I would be grateful for the opportunity to help.”

He frowned. “Thank you, but-“

“And I can’t let you into the kitchen at this time.” Her smile went just a little broader before she bowed, revealing amusement and a hope for understanding.

Viktor understood at once. She was being kind, yes, but not just for Makkachin’s sake; she wanted to spare his feelings, too. He hadn’t slept, shaved, or showered yet. He was exhausted and a mess from international travel around thousands of people. He’d also just been crawling around on the floor of a veterinary hospital with a dog. Of course she wasn’t going to let him go into Yu-Topia’s kitchen; that was her business.

Flushed, he held out the bag and bowed, himself. “Uh- right, yes. Thank you. Gomen, Mama Katsuki.”

She took the bag with one hand and waved him off with the other. “Never mind that, Vicchan. Just tell me what to do so you can get to bed. You only have a few hours to rest before the Free Skate.”

Viktor went over the recipe and its three simple ingredients with care, and though he was still quite concerned, Hiroko assured him that she would take care of it all. Rice flavored from the boiled chicken, which was shredded, and chunks of sweet potato, soft- but not too soft. No seasoning. No extras. It was meant to be bland, but nutritious. Good for upset stomachs. Lean and easy to digest. Viktor knew how to make it just the way Makkachin liked it; would Mama Katsuki?

He didn’t have a choice but to trust her as she shooed him away from the kitchen. Viktor scooped Makkachin up from the bed and took him to the side yard in case he needed to relieve himself, but the poodle simply wobbled in place and sniffed at Viktor in question, so soon they were back inside and headed to the banquet room.
Moments after that, they were nestled together under the blankets of the dark and empty bed, much too large for one person, even with a big dog to spoon.

Viktor took his phone off of silent and set it close at hand in case Yuuri tried to call, attempted to give his messages one more glance, but the text blurred together in one streak of grey, then buried his face in the fur of Makkachin’s neck.

Makkachin huffed.

Viktor pulled him closer, one arm over his ribs, tucked under a leg to wrap under his chest like the vest he used to wear. “Makkachin,” he mumbled.

The dog blinked to show he was listening, one ear flopping back.

“I’m sorry.”

Makkachin stretched, pressing his back against Viktor’s stomach, his head against Viktor’s face. Forgiving him? As if Makkachin knew what he’d been thinking earlier. Being objective. Rationalizing not leaving. Not being there for him, his best friend, his loyal companion, the one who had been there for him time and time again, through everything and anything, no matter what.

Makkachin, who had never once yelled at him or refused to speak to him. Who never embarrassed him for any reason other than not understanding the nuances of the human world. Who always knew when he needed to be held and comforted, like Yuuri seemed to, and did so without a word.

Maybe he would have been fine without Viktor coming back. Maybe not. But who would hold and cuddle Makkachin in his recovery if not for him? Who would carefully monitor his condition for the next few days if not for the one that knew Makka as well as Makka knew him? Makkachin loved people, and he’d grown so fond of all of the Katsuki family—especially Yuuri—but Viktor was still his person. His charge.

They belonged to each other.

Of course he needed to be here.

“I love you, Makkachin.”

Makkachin wagged his tail. He knew.

“Mfmllo?”

“Oh, I woke you up. I’m sorry.”

“Huh? Is… Chris?”

“I’ll give a call back when you’re more coherent.”

“Mncoherent. Whaddyo do for season?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“…”

“Viktor?”
“...prepare yourself! Chris!”

“For?”

“For... For...”

“Well, you can tell me if you remember when I call you later.”

“Huh? ...oh, Chris. Bonjour.”

“I’ll call you tomorrow afternoon, Viktor~”

“Oui, yes, tomorrow is better. Gomen.”

“It’s all right. Thank you for picking up at least. This time.”

“Uhmm... huh.”

“Goodnight.”

“Oyasponochi...”

“What? Oh, nevermind.”

Hiroko tapped on the door at 10:00 PM, an hour after Chris’s check-up call and three hours from when he crawled into bed in the first place. He’d only been in Hasetsu for about six hours.

“Vicchan, Yuuri will be going on soon. Can I make you something to eat?”

Viktor forced himself to sit up, body aching, and checked his phone. Like before, there were dozens of notifications, most of which he planned to ignore. But was there anything from Yuuri? He squinted at the blurred time in the dark. The Men’s Free Skate had already started; if he didn’t get up right then, he might miss Yuuri’s performance.

“Vicchan?” She knocked again.

“Sorry, we’re getting up.” Viktor rubbed a hand down Makkachin’s ribs and the dog looked at him with a grin, mouth falling open to pant. He looked even better than earlier. “Do you think you could eat?”

Makkachin wagged his tail as he did earlier, rolling toward him with a headbutt to his chest.

“Ow- okay, okay.”

The onsen had just closed, with the last few patrons filtering out by the time Viktor carried Makkachin out to the genkan, setting him down to slip on shoes and coat so he could take him outside.

“I’ll warm up some of the Makkachin meal, too,” called Hiroko, picking up a tray from one of the recently abandoned tables. “You two can eat together.”

Viktor looked back at her, considering how to tell her that he wasn’t the least bit hungry, but as soon as he met her soft brown eyes, he couldn’t. Instead, he nodded, grateful and flustered. “We’ll just be a minute... thank you, Mama Katsuki.”
“Of course, dear.”

Outside, Makkachin wandered a little, steps unsteady, but nose to the ground. He was curious; that was a good thing. They didn’t go far, but it took a few minutes. Makkachin had nothing but a little water to get rid of, but it was a mark of success and a sign of good health. While he waited, Viktor pulled up the live stream on his phone to make sure he wouldn’t miss anything. Not that it did much good; the connection was terrible, servers overwhelmed by the digital turn out for the event.

“Makkachin, they’re talking about you…”

The poodle ceased investigations to blink at him, head cocking sideways as Viktor crouched to show him the phone. Between the skates, a clip of Yuuri played, reiterating the same highlights of his career that they’d been using all season with a new addition- Viktor’s disappearance and a poster of Makkachin with all of the prayer circle headlines across the top and #savemakkachin emblazoned across the bottom. Jean-Jacque Leroy’s handiwork, of course.

Viktor took the phone back at Makkachin’s confused snort and offered one of his own at the brief clip that followed, with JJ himself leading a crowd of eager followers in prayer for his and Makkachin’s health and safety. It was sweet. And appreciated.

But still…

Sighing, Viktor freed one of his hands to rub Makkachin’s ears. “I think it’s telling that he has not one, but two Js in his name, don’t you?” He asked. “He’s a soap opera all on his own.”

Makkachin wagged his tail in agreement, mouth parting in a panting smile.

“Let’s go in.”

The pair settled in at the low table in the private banquet area next to the kitchen, phone propped against the open laptop in case cellular data worked better than WiFi. Neither was stellar, but the feed was broken in different ways, so between the two fractured videos, they were able to view a more complete performance.

Mama Katsuki brought a warm, pre-portioned bowl of Makka Meal for Makkachin and a bowl of miso for Viktor with a single rice ball on the side. She must have been expecting his argument about eating, because the look of surprise on his face just made her snicker as she settled down at the table next to him and Toshiya to watch the performance.

“There now,” she said, patting his arm. “Eat.”

Viktor blinked at her, then at the little meal, then at the screen. He couldn’t find any reason to argue. On his other side, Makkachin was already tucking in to his easy-to-eat dinner… which was, he noted, perfectly cooked as he’d instructed.

Well, if Makka could eat, he guessed he could, too. “Itadakimasu.”

She smiled. “I’m happy to see that he’s doing better. Yuuri must be so relieved.”

Viktor nodded, watching Makkachin lap at the rice that was sticking to his whiskers. “He really loves Makka…”

“Well, and after what happened with Vicchan,” Toshiya said, pouring himself a glass of beer. “It
was like last year all over again.”

“Last… last year?”

“Oh, yes, our little Vicchan died while he was in… which was it? Sochi?”

“Yeah, the Grand Prix Final, I think.”

“Right.”

Viktor stared at them both in silence.

“We wanted to wait to tell him until after the competition, but Mari always put him on the line to wish him luck… Vicchan liked to bark at the sound of Yuuri’s voice, and we couldn’t lie to him about where he was, after all. You know how he doesn’t like to be coddled.”

“No… he certainly doesn’t.” Viktor turned his attention back to the screen. Yuuri’s dog had died just before the competition in Sochi? How was he supposed to compete after that? No wonder he’d been so adamant about Makkachin.

“But Makkachin is okay, so that’s good. We’ll have to think of something else to use as an offering.”

Makkachin looked up from his bowl, licking his lips in what Viktor hoped was a very guilty conscience.

Then Yuuri went on.

And it was painful to watch.

Viktor had always been able to empathize with other skaters well enough; they were all denizens of the ice that ruled them. But he’d never been so invested in anyone as he was in Yuuri before. When Yuuri was going to miss a cue, over rotate, or fall, Viktor felt it before it happened. He knew, as if he were the one skating. Was that how it was for Yakov, too? All throughout his career, he’d always taken his performances on his own shoulders; everything he did was up to him, not his coach. His own failures, his own mistakes, but now…

Now it was different.

Viktor ate what he could of the offered meal, nibbling the rice while Yuuri salvaged what he could of his skate and their chances at continuing on to Barcelona, and with it, their reputations. It had all fallen upon Yuuri, with all of his anxiety underneath all of that stress and the pressure. How was that fair?

He didn’t show the same energy as he had been during the short program; the normally clean execution and height in his aerial maneuvers suffered, falling short, turning sloppy. Not that Yuuri had ever skated Yuri on Ice perfectly in competition. He’d had less time to practice it as he had the mastered Eros, and there’d been some external conflict to interfere before each and every Free Skate so far. Their little fight at Qualifiers, their bigger fight in Beijing, and now this… which, for a skate based on their story, their love… He didn’t want to think about what might be in store for them in Barcelona, if they made it. Fortunately, Yuuri found his bearings and recovered during the bridge, but he always did.

With a few minor missteps, he finished, ending the three minutes and forty-one seconds by collapsing to the ice. It wasn’t his best performance, but there was no denying his passion. Viktor
could only imagine the night he must have had, or the morning. He should have been there. But he hadn’t been. If only he’d…

Hiroko sighed, relieved, and Viktor tore his eyes from the screen to look at her.

Both Mama and Papa Katsuki wore strained smiles as they watched their son on the screen. They may not have understood the scoring system like he did, but there was the unmistakable wince behind it all that showed that they knew how Yuuri must have felt, lying there on the ice at the end. But as much as they might have wanted to scoop him up and coddle him, they stayed kneeling, proud and waiting for him to pick himself back up. They knew he wasn’t weak. That Yuuri would do what needed to be done, no matter what. And they had so much love and respect for him, for what he was doing, what he wanted to do, that they would never stand in his way.

Viktor blinked back tears, reaching for his glass, hoping the water would loosen his constricting throat.

“Do you think he’ll advance?” Hiroko asked him.

The scores flashed on the screen. 109.97, for a total of 282.84 points. Rank 3.

“He’s in third,” Papa Katsuki said. “That’s good, right?”

“Bronze!”

Viktor sipped from his glass, then set it down. “Jean-Jacque Leroy is going next; he’s likely to push Yuuri from the podium unless something happens in his routine, but…” he took a deep breath and leaned back on the heel of his palm. “Given where Yuuri is in overall points, he’ll qualify, yes.”

“Not podium… no medal?”

“That’s right. But the medals are really only a prize; it’s the points that are the most important. That’s what a lot of athletes fail to realize. Every program is important for that reason… it’s what makes the difference in these competitions, which is…” Viktor bit his lip, considering, then nodded. “Which is exactly why Yuuri will be going on and Michele Crispino will not. The difference between a good skater and a true champion.”

Hiroko took his arm, eyes wide. “So you’re saying that our boy is champion material, Vicchan?”

“Yes, Mama Katsuki. I truly believe that he is.”

She squeezed his arm. “Ooh, I knew it!”

“Good job, Yuuri!” Papa Katsuki raised his glass. “That’s my boy!”

On the screen, Yuuri was hugging Yakov as Viktor had done many, many times in his career. The relief of a hard-fought battle won was something he could relate to, and Yakov really did give the best hugs, even if he wasn’t actually participating in them. If he couldn’t be there for Yuuri, he was grateful that Yakov was, at least. That was something.

Viktor reclaimed his phone to send a text. He could already see Yuuri being crowded by the press, so it would be a little while before they could talk, and the last thing he wanted to do was add more pressure to Yuuri’s plate. For all he knew, it was already cracking.
“Are you going to call him now?” Mama Katsuki asked, giving him a sly grin.

“Soon, I hope. He’ll be busy for a little while, but I’m going to get ready for bed once we have the final results.”

“That’s a relief, you look like you’ve barely slept at all.”

Viktor frowned at her, but she only smiled back. “I didn’t know you had such a fine sense of humor, Mama Katsuki.”

She reached up to pat the top of his head. “You’ll learn, Vicchan.”

Toshiya laughed.

When Viktor’s predictions were confirmed, with Yuuri’s position in Barcelona assured, they cleaned up the little table and set about the nightly routine while Viktor retreated down the hall.

“Oh, Vicchan,” Hiroko called after him. “Will Yuuri be doing the gala again?”

Viktor turned back to look at her, Makkachin in his arms, blinking. He hadn’t considered that, but it made sense. Even if Yuuri hadn’t made the podium, the ISU could still ask him to perform his gala piece for the exhibition. It would be especially appropriate at the Rostelecom Cup. And if Abram wanted petty revenge like Lilia, it would be the perfect way to hurt him.

Yuuri wouldn’t be able to refuse.

“I’ll ask,” he said.

She nodded, smile cheerful. “If he is, we can have a viewing party for him.”

“Yes… I’ll let you know.”

Viktor brought Makkachin to his room- the unused banquet hall -and slid the door open. With the bars of light from the hallway, it looked foreign. Uninviting. He’d lived there in a time when he and Yuuri weren’t so close. Getting closer, yes, but they were still words and worlds apart then. He looked around in the dark for a moment, then stepped back into the hallway andshouldered the door closed again.

“We’re going upstairs,” he muttered to Makkachin, who just wagged his tail at him again.

As long as Viktor was carrying him around, he didn’t mind where they went.

So Viktor carried the poodle quietly back down the hall, around the corner, and up the stairs. Then it was down another hallway and to the closed door at the end of it, shifting Makkachin in his arms so that he could free his hand.

Months ago, he’d knocked at that very same door, begging to be let in, and Yuuri had yelled at him to go away. Each time that he’d come back, he’d tried a different tactic, and gradually, Yuuri had
let him get closer and closer.

Now, as he tried the knob, it turned without resistance and let him in.

Viktor slipped into Yuuri’s room and closed the door behind him, taking Makkachin to the bed. The poodle stretched out immediately, familiar with the surroundings, and looked up with a guilty smile.

“Oh, so is this your room while I’m gone?” Viktor shook his head. “Of course.”

He left the light off and got undressed in the dark, using what came in from the window to guide him, and got under the covers. The sheets had been washed, he could tell. The room was clean. Everything was soft. But the pillow still had Yuuri’s scent. Everything did, even if it had faded some. It was such a small bed it was like being back at the Academy. That was comforting, too, somehow.

Makkachin crawled over to him and Viktor pulled the blankets out from under him to drape over, bringing his phone around.

While he waited, he watched replays of the Free Skate.

What should he say to Yuuri? Was he supposed to play Coach? No, he wasn’t playing; he was Coach, wasn’t he? So should he offer advice or a lecture? Yuuri already knew what things he needed to do differently. Yakov had already barked at him. If Viktor had been there, it wouldn’t have played out that way. What good would yelling at him do?

They were going to Barcelona. They still had a shot at gold.

That was what mattered, wasn’t it?

Yuuri had done his best with what he had.

Stop spiraling. Look ahead.

Even with the mistakes, the performance had been beautiful. So raw. Just like Yuuri was, himself. He always picked himself back up, every time.

Yuuri always fought…

God, he missed him so much.

And that costume, the trim and the color, was so perfect for him. Elegant. Princely. But not too masculine, either. There were so many touches here and there that spoke of something more; the balance that was so Yuuri without being too much. The filigree, the dark sheer at his back and the wrap around, the deep v-cut neckline with the dark undershirt and collar… the cut of the back to accentuate his perfect assets.

Viktor paused the video on a freeze frame to admire his form; the way the ballerina in him stretched out through his posture and the arc of his arms, and…

He frowned.

The way the filigree had been laid out on the costume… Perhaps it was just the overwhelming tired, but it almost looked like a bird in that shot. Had it always looked like that? Wings outstretched, long tail trailing behind as it left the burning ash and took to the starry skies, reborn.
It was Yuuri’s design. Was that what he’d intended? A firebird…

His birthright, there, right on his back, for the skate of their story. His curse, their love, but what…?

Yuuri.K: Yeah, just heading back to the room.

Viktor nearly dropped his phone when it vibrated in his hands, and hurried to type his reply.

v.nikiforov: Call me when you get there, please <3

They would talk soon. Everything would be fine as soon as he heard Yuuri’s voice, he was sure. They were good at comforting each other, being each other’s strengths. That was what a relationship was, wasn’t it?

He hadn’t doomed Yuuri to the same despair.

Things would be okay.

Just as everyone kept saying.

Forced to transform into the firebird once again, the princess destroyed the village and anyone who got close. The falcon herded her movements; a dark shape against the torrent of fire that spread through the stables and wooden houses with a greedy hunger. The two birds circled each other, darting in and out in a sort of frenzied dance, though none of the survivors could say just what it meant.

“The firebird- it came back, it attacked us, but this time it came with its shadow!”

“The shadow cast by its flames, just as dark and just as thirsty as the firebird itself.”

“Two demons to contend with!”

None of them knew that it was the firebird’s master, so much stronger than he had been before, fueled by years of anger and jealousy. He wouldn’t let her go again. She wouldn’t escape this time. No matter what he had to do, she would be his forever.

When the skies were shrouded in a blanket of smoke, the falcon dragged the firebird higher, razor talons buried deep to keep her in his grasp. She couldn’t move her wings, she couldn’t move her head. The fire flickered out and she became human again, which only made it easier for the falcon to carry her to his nesting place.

They left no trail, no glowing feathers, just two shapes soaring through the dark night into places no one travelled. His tower, dark and looming, was made of bone and painted with blood and stained with ash. No one stopped the Falcon. No one saved the princess.
He carried her to his chambers and chained her to the wall, stroking her cheek with the promise that he would let her go if she could behave. It had been a while since she had, but surely she would remember how.

All those years ago, he’d come to her window, asking to be let in. A strange, misunderstood creature that many thought was evil. Many did not trust. But the princess had shown faith. Had decided to care. She had invited him in time and time again. Allowing him to learn the guards’ schedules. The weaknesses in their kingdom. Her own weaknesses.

“And now, my sweet princess, you’ve trusted another and it’s exposed your hiding place. You’d think you would have learned.”

She said nothing. She couldn’t; her voice had left her.

“I wonder how that champion of yours fared against the fire.”

It hurt to think of. The memories of the attack were fragmented at best, but if he’d been anywhere near her when she’d started setting fire to everything...

“Shall we look?” He asked. “I have a bauble. Let’s find out.”

He showed her the town in ruin, rubble and ash, with twisted skeleton and dying animal where the few remaining structures were still burning.

“Hopeless,” he whispered against her neck. “You belong to me.”

Though, hopeless as it was, she would never belong to him.

She simply could never trust that she would be free.

Real life wasn’t a fairy tale, anyway.

...

Her fingers were like the legs of a spider. Papa had said that on more than one occasion in jest, whispering right against her head before sneaking a kiss and dashing away to avoid getting smacked. He never meant anything bad by it; just that her hands were small and nimble, her fingers long, and her poise precise. The way she threaded her fingers through her hair, letting the tresses fall in a shimmering silver curtain against her neck and back, was something like he’d imagined a spider might work with her silk tapestries.

When Mama did the same for little Vitechka, it was even moreso. She held him in her lap on the sofa, nails lightly playing at his scalp, drawing the strands away, changing his part. It was heaven. He leaned against her, half asleep, watching the warm haze of green summer beyond the front room window.

She tucked a lock behind his ear, but it slid out again, too short to stay in place...

...and he woke up to a frosted window, more than twenty years and 7,300 kilometers away.

The air was cold, the house quiet.
Since the onsen didn’t open until 10am and the restaurant an hour after that, Viktor let himself cry. After all, it was too early for patrons, but too bright for anyone to still be upstairs. Mama Katsuki would be prepping for lunch service; Papa Katsuki would be taking note of needed repairs; and Mari would be doing her rounds in both sides of the bath, making sure everything was clean and stocked for the day.

It wasn’t summer, it was winter.

Ice crystals dotted the window pane of Yuuri’s room like diamond snowflakes, frozen in place by Grandfather Frost. As the sun rose, the fractals thawed, freeing the prisms inside and leaving dozens of tiny rainbow-colored sparkles in their wake.

They melted and slipped from their stronghold, then disappeared beyond where Viktor could see.

Makkachin stretched. He was hungry. He wanted to go outside. He touched his nose to Viktor’s shoulder, and Viktor pet him along the ribs. Makkachin first, then Viktor.

Viktor dragged himself away from the poodle and out of Yuuri’s bed, put on the clothes he’d worn the night before, and stumbled back to the bed for Makkachin. “Come, Makka.”

The poodle crawled to him, tail wagging, panting out a smile. He was really feeling a lot better, but Viktor scooped him up anyway, and carried him out of the room, down the hallway, the stairs, and out into the cold.

“Vicchan, your coat!” Hiroko called after him.

Viktor was too tired to listen, just set Makkachin down in the side yard. At least he’d put his shoes on. It wasn’t the first time he’d taken the dog out to do his business while he was bleary eyed and half dead, and he was sure it wouldn’t be the last. Responsibility came in the shape of a teddy bear cut.

When all of that was done and cleaned up, Viktor took Makkachin back inside, asking him to wipe his paws on the mat, and let him walk with him to the kitchen.

“Is he ready for breakfast?”

“I think so, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Not at all. What about for you, Vicchan?”

“No… not for right now, thank you, Mama Katsuki.”

“If you’re sure.”

“I’m sure.”

Viktor waited while Makkachin ate, then carried him back to Yuuri’s bedroom and underneath the covers again. Duties fulfilled, he wanted nothing more than to sleep. The gala wasn’t until that evening and he wasn’t sure how to fill the day without Yuuri.

Makkachin seemed to be doing well enough, and Viktor hadn’t even been able to cook for him. Was he just supposed to be useless? It seemed that way. But he wasn’t good at that.

All he could do… was wait.

So he slept to pass the time.
It was sometime around two in the afternoon that a knocking at the door woke Viktor again. He lifted his head, groggy vision blinded by the bright sunlight reflected off the snow in the window, and groaned.

“Hey Viktor.” It was Mari.

He sat up quickly. Was he allowed to be in Yuuri’s room? Would they think it was weird? Bad? Did they have any idea what their relationship was? What was he supposed to do? Viktor coughed.

“Yeah?”

“Mom says she has lunch for you.”

“Oh… uh, I’m… not…”

“She says you’re not allowed to say that.”

Viktor squinted at the door, frowning. “Hey, how are you holding up?”

“I’m fine. I’m working.”

He went quiet.

“Anyway, you better come down and eat something.”

“I’m really not feeling well.”

“Oh huh. Okay. I’ll pass that along.” He could hear the eye roll in her voice as she walked away.

Viktor sat back in the covers, nervous and flustered. Makkachin rolled over to look up at him, amused.

“Don’t give me that look, Makkachin.”

The dog slid a paw out to drop against his leg as if to console him.

“I haven’t even showered yet. I can’t go down there… and I just… I don’t want to…” He sighed. Yuuri’s room was a safe harbor. If he could sleep all week, Yuuri would be back in no time. But if he had to deal with people, he would have to deal with it.

Makkachin blinked at him.

“You’re being awfully judgmental today, Mr. Makkabre. You’re the one doing dangerous things. You don’t see me choking on steamed buns, do you?”

The dog turned his head away, looking guilty once more.

Viktor pulled back the covers and rearranged the pillow. “Just a couple more hours and then maybe we can get up,” he muttered, only to pause when there was another knock at the door.

This was a gentle tapping.

“Vicchan?”

Mama Katsuki.
He couldn’t ignore Mama Katsuki herself.

Viktor dragged both hands down his face then through his hair, which was nothing short of a mess, and whimpered. “Yes?”

“I have lunch for you. The tray is quite heavy, please open the door.”

He hurried to his feet and to the door, hopping at the stiffness in his bad leg. At least sleeping in his clothes was good for something. “Sorry, Mama Katsuki…” Viktor opened the door for her and tried to take the tray, but she pushed right past and into the room, coming to set the tray on the bed where he would have been trying to curl up again.

“There now. I know you’re hiding in here, but you can still eat. I brought your favorite!”

Viktor looked down at the bowl as she pulled the top off revealing—what else—fresh and steaming katsudon. It looked and smelled amazing as it always did, but he couldn’t help the twisted knots in his stomach at the sight of it. He stayed at the door, standing helpless.

“Vicchan, don’t tell me you don’t like it anymore?”

“N-no, it’s not that…”

“I made it especially for you!”

“Thank you, Mama Katsuki, I really appreciate it, it’s just that…”

“And part of our agreement is that I cook for you. You coach Yuuri, I cook.”

Viktor slumped against the wall. “I don’t… I don’t deserve…”

The flat stare she shot him was just short of withering, though she covered it with a smile immediately after. “Oh, Vicchan, not you, too.”

He looked up from the floor, confused. “What?”

“Yuuri always says that he can’t have katsudon unless he gets gold, don’t tell me that you’re going to start saying the same thing.”

“Well, I… I wasn’t there to coach him, so…”

“Vicchan you don’t want to make an old woman cry, do you?”

“Wh-what?”

“You heard me.”

“Uh…”

“Eat.”

Viktor looked from her, to the tray of food, to Makkachin, who was inching closer and closer to it. He gulped, then pulled himself from the wall and sat on the edge of the bed, shooing the dog away.

“You don’t have to eat all of it,” she said once he’d picked up the chopsticks. “Just do what you can.”
He nodded, picking through the pork and egg. It was beautiful. The presentation was always so lovely, and Mama Katsuki always put such care in the work.

“Yuuri needs you to be strong for him, Vicchan.”

Viktor picked up a piece of cutlet, and nodded, tears in his eyes. “Itadakimasu.”

He only managed to eat about half before Hiroko took pity on him and let him stop. It was still more than he’d eaten in a while, would keep him going for some time. Katsudon was good for that. Warm and full, and feeling comforted, Viktor accepted Hiroko’s parting hug and then curled back up for another nap. The emotional exhaustion was getting to him all over again. He needed to recharge.

...and then the chiptune polka began.

Chris.

Viktor sucked in a breath. He should have expected him to call. There had been so many notifications since word got out that he’d be leaving the Rostelecom Cup, why wouldn’t Christophe Giacometti be among them?

What would it be this time? Words of comfort? A lecture? Viktor was never sure what to expect with Chris, which was probably why he couldn’t resist reaching past the grumbling poodle and taking the call.

“Chris?”

“Viktor! You’re more awake this time, good.”

Right, he’d tried to call during the night. Viktor vaguely recalled something about discussing next season. For some reason. “Right, sorry.”

“Never mind that. How are you feeling?”

“Fine…” As usual, there were few things further than the truth. But by definition, that made it true, right? At least for him. “You?”

“Viktor, please talk to me. And be honest.”

“I am talking.”

“But you’re not telling me the truth.”

Viktor pressed his face deeper into the pillow, eyes squeezing shut. “What do you want me to say?”

There was a sigh on the other end, and Viktor wondered if Chris was going to hang up on him. It’d happened before, but Chris wasn’t usually one to give up so easily.

“Viktor.”

“What?”

“Have you spoken to Yuuri?”
“Since I left Moscow? Of course.”

Makkachin rolled over in his arms, turning around to lick his face, which filled the beats of silence for a few moments before Chris continued.

“It’ll be nice to see you in Barcelona. The Grand Prix Final wouldn’t be the same without you.” If it had been a comment to bait him, it worked splendidly. Viktor cleared his throat with a tense cough. “We’ll be there.”

“Of course. Yuuri did well.”

“He did.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Viktor went quiet again, fingers curling into Makkachin’s coat.

“Don’t tell me that you blame yourself for him getting fourth.”

Viktor bent his head, kissing Makkachin between the ears.

“Viktor, that’s ridiculous.”

“It’s not just that.”

“Oh? Is there more to the agenda of your pity party?”

In another circumstance, Viktor would have been the one to hang up then, but he deserved the criticism and the punishment, so he took it with a quiet sigh. “I left him to the wolves, Chris.”

“The wolves.”

The skepticism in his voice did nothing to ease Viktor’s fear. He continued. “I taunted them, I flaunted our love, I made a spectacle of their traditional values and threw it in their face as if I held all the power and then… I left. I left him right in the jaws of the enemy.”

“Viktor, I don’t think it’s quite as bad as you-“

“He’s in Russia, Chris. I practically painted a target on his back in Moscow, and now he’s going to be spending a week alone in Saint Petersburg! I won’t be there to protect him. What was I thinking?!“

“Viktor…”

“I declared war and then left him behind. If anything happens… oh god, if…”

“He was with Yakov the last I saw him. Surely he’ll be looked after, won’t he?”

“Yakov hates me, Chris.”

“I doubt that. Don’t you trust him?”

Makkachin nosed his chin and Viktor looked down at the big brown eyes staring back at him. Did he trust Yakov?

That was a stupid question.
“Of course I do.”

“Then stop worrying.”

“Fine, then Yakov will protect Yuuri…” He still had his doubts, as there were still so many variables, so many things that could go wrong. Yakov couldn’t be with Yuuri all the time, and he shouldn’t be. Yuuri was too independent for that. Even with Yurio there… And that aside, there was an even bigger issue. Something deeper-seated. “But who will protect Yakov?”

“I’m certain the mafia will.”

Chris said it as if the answer were obvious. Simple. Like everyone knew and Viktor were silly for not thinking of it sooner. It made him choke- on both a laugh and a sob all at once. “Chris!”

“Have you never considered how he and your team have always been this unstoppable force?”

“I’ve heard the rumors, but my god… we’re not-” Viktor slicked his hair back, dragging tears through the matted strands of grey. “Our wins aren’t built on blood money!”

“Well, then he’s got something on the ISU.”

“We win on our own merits, Chris!”

“I know. I really do.” He was laughing. But even if it was at Viktor’s expense, it was such a nice sound. Comforting, somehow. A relief.

Viktor sniffed. “Can you see me as a gangster? With a gun? An assassin for the mafia?”

“Oh, don’t tempt me with that image.”

Viktor hiccuped. “At least I’d make it look good.”

“As long as someone assisted you in your fashion choices, yes.”

“I have Google.”

“Yes, yes, so you say. Now stop pouting and get out of bed. Or don’t and give your beau a call. Have some sex over the phone. Live a little.”

“Chris!” Viktor hissed.

“Lighten up, perhaps, while you’re at it.” He chuckled. “What? It seemed the golden solution for how you were limping on live broadcast at the Rostelecom over those Swiss Alps of your Yuuri’s.”

“I was not! Makkachin, close your ears, Chris is being terrible.”

“Oh, as if he understands.”

With a huff, Viktor pulled Makkachin close against him, glaring at the wall in the direction of Switzerland with as much force as he dared. “I’ll have you know, Christophe Giacometti, that Makkachin understands everything, and that he’s recovering from surgery so you’d better be nice!”

“Pardon… I don’t mean to make light. Is he all right?”

“I’ll ask. Makkachin, how are you feeling?”
The dog blinked up at him, nose twitching, then licked his face from chin to nose.

“...he says recovering, and that he’ll forgive you if you send a gift basket.”

“You mean it hasn’t arrived yet? I’ll have to have a word with the post.”

“Good.” Viktor sniffed. “And anyway, phone sex is boring.”

“Boring?” Chris groaned. “Don’t tell me...”

“I got really good at faking it, but he would not stop bothering me, especially during finals. It was the least sexy thing in the world, moaning his name while I was trying to memorize the key points of social-political commentary in Raphael’s *The School of Athens* so I could write my essay on the test.”

“Viktor.”

“I got a good grade on that one, though.”

“Viktor.”

“What?”

“Imagine if you had the right partner. Yuuri, for instance. Someone you actually liked. Someone you missed. Someone you... wanted.”

Viktor frowned at the wall past Makkachin’s head. “That’s enough of you, Chris.”

“It’d be something to experiment with, at least!”

“I just pulled my hamstring, that’s all.”

“If you insist.”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, as long as you’re not moping, that’s what matters, I suppose. It’s nice to see you happy after all these years, Viktor. I don’t want you to spiral again.”

Viktor laughed, the sound quiet and hollow with breath that didn’t quite sustain it. “But don’t you love the drama?”

“It keeps me from getting bored, it’s true, but I love you and I’d prefer you to be doing well.”

Somewhere downstairs, a group of patrons burst into laughter and excited, muffled chatter. Ladies speaking in Japanese like little birds on a telephone wire. They were probably drinking tea, perhaps trying some of Mama Katsuki’s excellent katsudon. Among their voices was Hiroko’s, dismissing their praise.

At least, he thought that’s what he heard.

“Viktor, if that’s a shock to you, then shame on me!”

Blinking back to the conversation on the phone, Viktor frowned again. “No... no, it’s not.” He just didn’t know what to say.
“Good. Remember, you’ve been through worse. And you’re Viktor Nikiforov, are you not?”

“Right.”

“Watch for that gift basket. And, oh…”

“Hm?”

“I sent the other gift on to your apartment in Saint Petersburg.”

“You… What other gift?”

“From Beijing.”

Chris had promised him something, but… “If it’s perishable, I’ll have Yuuri take care of it. Otherwise… uh, I guess he can just set it aside for me later.”

“Oh, it’s definitely perishable. You should have him take care of it right away.”

“What did you send?”

“Your weakness.”

Viktor frowned. “Which is?”

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“I’m hanging up now.”

“Fine, fine! Calm down. It will be okay. Just remember that, Viktor.”

“I heard you the first time.”

“Make sure to get out of your head.”

“You don’t need to remind me.”

“Oh course. I’ll check back again later, Viktor Nikiforov.”

Rolling his eyes, Viktor pulled the phone away from his cheek. “Goodbye, Chris.”

“Àu revoir, Vikt-“

Boop.

Viktor set the phone on the window sill and dropped back against the pillow in a huff, which Makkachin matched with a woof. With hands free, he buried them back into the poodle’s fur and swept back through the conversation.

Everyone kept telling him that it was fine, that it would be fine. But no one knew what he did. None of them had been through what he had.

Get out of his head. That’s what Chris had said. That’s what Viktor had told Yuuri, too. And what Yakov had told him years ago. Several times. Focus on others. Look to the future, not to the past. The next generation, not the wolves. Hope, not despair.

Viktor Nikiforov didn’t run from a fight defeated and hide in the corner, whimpering and crying.
He fought, tooth and nail, to the bitter end. He didn’t give up. Even when his body was at its limit and his heart was broken in pieces, his spirit burned through the winter and kept burning out of spite, stronger and harder, enduring through anything and everything that was thrown at him.

He handled it all alone. He melted away the impurities, the weaknesses. He let the world beat him, refine him until he was stronger for it. The perfect machine. Bent and refolded and put back into the fire as many time as necessary.

Viktor didn’t cave to pressure and run home to mama and hide in his bed with the comforts of katsudon in the cold, dark, lonely months. He starved himself. He fought through it.

And he did it alone.

Makkachin licked his chin, nuzzled his neck, and settled in for another bunny nap. It was a good idea.

Viktor pulled the blanket, thick and warm and smelling vaguely of Yuuri, over them, creating a cave of heat and comfort, and closed his eyes.

He was tired.

He was so, so tired.

He missed Yuuri. He missed not being alone.

He didn’t want to fight anymore.

When Makkachin needed to go out again, Viktor finally left Yuuri’s room to pretend to be a real person again- temporarily, at least. He took the dog out, avoiding all contact with other human beings by taking the staff hallways, and snuck back to the banquet room as quickly and quietly as he could afterward.

Makkachin, though put out by not being carried anymore, was content to go through Viktor’s suitcase as he laid it out on the bed, digging through for his shaving kit and other toiletries that he’d need to take with him upstairs. As much as he preferred the onsen, he was sure that the marks Yuuri had left on him were still there in some places, and he wasn’t up to explaining them to the other patrons. Not that they’d ask, but he just couldn’t handle that.

It was private, between he and Yuuri, no one else.

With his effects and a clean set of clothes, Viktor went back upstairs, leaving Makkachin in the room with orders to stay here, don’t sneak out. He didn’t know if Makka would listen to him, but he could make an attempt. It was better than dragging him into the shower, at any rate.

He showered and shaved and brushed his teeth, examined the bruises and love bites that were gradually healing. It’d still be several days before Yuuri could replace them. And he’d gotten so used to being touched; holding and being held. He didn’t like sleeping alone. At least he had Makkachin, though it was hardly the same.

Once his hair was combed and he’d gotten dressed, he left the little family bathroom and went back down the hall. Now he could relax until the gala without feeling quite as awful. As he tiptoed down the stairs, he listened to the voices in the eating area, noting the familiar patrons as well as the others… the Nishigoris?
“Viktor!”

“Hey, Viktor, welcome back!”

He froze. Damn, he’d been spotted!

“Come over here!”

Viktor froze in place at the mouth of the hallway, peering up to the eating area where they were sitting around a large table with a blanket draped over the top. If he made a break for it, he could make it to his room and get the door closed before any of them could reach him, that was for certain. But, they’d know where he was and it would be very rude. He was caught. Shifting his dirty clothes into his free arm, he scratched his neck. “Me?”

“Yes, you! Who else would we be calling?” Yuuko laughed. “Come on, they set up the kotatsu!”

The goblin trio popped up around her, leaning against the table.

“Have you ever heard of a kotatsu?”

“Have you ever tried one?”

“Would you like to?”

Viktor took a step backward, into the hallway. “Yes, no, maybe later?”

“Aw!”

“Come on!”

“Please!”

“Please!”

Takeshi pulled one of his girls off of the table. Even at six(?), they were non-stop. “We’re gonna play a few rounds of Go before the gala. Minako-sensei’s gonna join us, too. You should sit with us, Viktor.”

“There’s gonna be snacks!”

“And a ¥500 cover charge!”

“Girls! What did I say about that?!”

“That ¥500 is way too little to be charging for a private event?”

“You’re so right, Mom.”

“That’s not what I said at all!”

“But we got the TV hooked up to the laptop! That’s totally worth charging for!”

The chaos was, in a word, charming. Normally, Viktor would have been interested to join in with them, trying this bit of culture, feeling the love, but at that moment… all he wanted to do was escape. He put on his most apologetic smile. “Sorry, I’ve got to get back to Makkachin. He’s still recovering from surgery, you know.”

“Makkachin,” said the purple-wearing triplet. “You mean *this* Makkachin?” She lifted the blanket
and Makkachin stuck his head out from under the table, looking guilty as ever.

“Makkachin!”

He woofed in response. “Bruff.”

Betrayed, Viktor glanced helplessly back into the hallway.

“Come on, Viktor.”

“Sit with us, please?”

“It’ll be so fun!

Mari came in then with a tray of the aforementioned snacks and set them on the table, casting a crooked smile at him to match her crooked brow. “Hey, Viktor.”

She didn’t need to say anything else to make her thoughts clear. She thought he was lame for trying to back out of it, like he had with lunch earlier. Having to get Mama Katsuki to bully him into eating was weak. He knew that. Having the others forcing him to socialize was another tactic, too.

Were they all trying to prevent him from spiraling further?

Why?

Was he?

Viktor shrugged it off. “Let me go drop this off, at least.”

“Yay!”

The girls were ecstatic. So much so that they followed him to the room to make sure that he wasn’t going to ghost on them. But he dropped off his things, retrieved his cell phone from its charger, and went back out with them to the kotatsu, where they found a place right in the middle of them.

Viktor didn’t say much, and he didn’t do much, either. He appreciated the ingenious design of the kotatsu, yes, and admitted that he’d always wanted to try one- though he’d thought that it’d be with Yuuri. The thought of that made him sad. There were so many things to experience in Japan, things he still needed to see and explore, but he wanted to do that with Yuuri. He wanted Yuuri to be the one to show him.

He’d wanted to be the one to show him those kinds of things in Russia, too.

What use was he if he couldn’t surprise and delight Yuuri? Those first experiences were one of a kind… they held a certain kind of magic, didn’t they?

Viktor checked his phone while the others played Go, checking messages and clearing notifications. It was late morning in Russia, still a little while before the gala, though he was sure that Yuuri was getting ready. Would he text? Or call?

Should he?

Hiroko brought him tea and Viktor thanked her, wiping sleep or something like it from his eyes before he indulged in it. Matcha. He loved it. But still nothing from Yuuri.

Makkachin slithered between two of the girls to rest his head in Viktor’s lap and he pet the dog’s
head absently with one hand, leaving the other free to check notifications every few minutes. For the rest of the time, he simply sat and waited, attention drifting between the conversations happening around him. Minako joined them at some point. Other patrons—some he recognized, some he didn’t—stopped by to ask questions or offer encouragement. It wasn’t a competition, the gala wasn’t worth points, but most of them didn’t seem to realize that.

That was fine, he realized. The triplets explained it for him. Yuuko kept them in line. Takeshi laughed it off. Minako yelled. Most of it happened in Japanese. That made it so easy to tune out, and the kotatsu made it so easy to stay still. So he did nothing.

And still, no word from Yuuri.

He thought about texting, himself. Or calling. But since it wasn’t a competition, what could he say? Would he just be adding pressure? Their conversation from the night before had been so… awkward. Viktor wasn’t especially good on the phone, he was much better in person. It was always easier to communicate how he felt that way.

In the end, he decided to let it be. Viktor didn’t want to be a pest; if Yuuri needed him, he would reach out. Then Viktor would leap to attention, answer his call, do whatever Yuuri needed him to do, say whatever he needed him to say. But until then…

...until then, he would wait.

It took forever for the gala to start, and sitting through the proceeding programs was tedious. Viktor usually loved watching what his competitors and the other divisions had to showcase, but all he could think of was Yuuri Katsuki, skating the winning free skate from the previous season of his coach, Viktor Nikiforov, national hero of Russia… who couldn’t be here tonight.

“You know, it’s kind of funny…” said Yuuko, voice soft and dreamy enough that even Takeshi was looking at her with raised brows. “This is so opposite.”

Viktor looked away from the screen where Yuuri was taking his starting position, to the woman with her hands clasped together at her cheek.

“Yuuri watching you here, while you were in Russia… Or, wherever you were in competition, anyway.” She sighed, dropping against her husband in a swoon. “And now you’re here and he’s there!”

Minako held up her sake. “I think he looks a lot better in that costume if you ask me, though.”

Takeshi joined her. “That’s for sure.”

Viktor looked back at the screen.

“Sorry, Viktor,” added one of the goblins, clinging to his arm.

“We love you,” said another.

“But Yuuri’s still our favorite,” finished the third.

“That’s fine,” Viktor said, even as his heart was ripped out and torn to pieces. It wasn’t from their preference of Yuuri over him— that didn’t bother him at all—but the scene unfolding on the screen as Stammi Vicino began. “That’s how it should be.”

No one said anything once Yuuri started to skate, just watched in awe. For all the relief that caving
into social pressure had given, Viktor wished he hadn’t, then. Watching this with others was
difficult to say that least. Seeing Yuuri suffer on the ice; the tears, the frustration, the absolute
agony on is face, cut through him like a shashka.

In that moment, Viktor wanted to run. It hurt more than he could bear, and showing that weakness,
his tears, in front of others, it-

There was a sniffle at his side. Then a sob.

As Viktor looked around him, he realized that everyone present was in tears. The young girls, two
now clinging to their mother, were bawling; the third, still clinging to Viktor, was trying to stay
stoic like he was. Minako was crying on Mari, Mari was crying on Minako, and while Takeshi’s
jaw was set, he wasn’t faring much better. Mama and Papa Katsuki wiped tears in their quiet,
serene way, but they, too, were moved.

Makkachin paced behind them, trying to offer comfort to everyone in way of licking and shoulder
bumps, but there was no way to love on all of them at once, he was just one dog!

“He’s so in love,” cried the pink goblin.

“You can FEEL HIS SUFFERING!” The blue one wailed.

“Oh my GOD! YUuuUuurri!” Minako took the place of the purple one, who buried her face
against Viktor’s shoulder.

No one noticed that Viktor was crying, too. He didn’t think that they would blame him if they had.
Honestly, he could have keeled over the table, openly weeping, and they probably would have
hugged him, maybe rubbed his back like Yakov used to do when he was too tired to hold back his
emotional outbursts any longer.

Maybe they would have liked it if he’d done that; shown comradery of feeling instead of quietly
letting the tears slide down his cheeks, just one after another, a slow beading and trickle each time
the tension broke. But as fond as he was of all of them, none of them were Yuuri, and he wasn’t
ready for that.

He wiped his eyes and his face with careful breaths, blinking to clear his vision so that he could see
that the audience, too, had felt the same emotion.

There couldn’t be any doubt about what Yuuri Katsuki and Viktor Nikiforov were to one another
after this performance, could there? Viktor couldn’t see how.

As soon as Yuuri was off the ice, Viktor excused himself from the table, and no one stopped him.
They knew.

He went to the banquet room with Makkachin at his heels, and slid the door closed behind him.
Now that he was out of the room, the others were free to discuss him and them if they chose, but if
they did so, he wouldn’t understand anyway. Their voices came in snatches of muffled
conversation in Japanese down the hall, and he tried not to pay it any mind, instead sitting on the
side of his bed, sucking in breath after breath.

It was an attempt to stay calm when all he wanted to do was scream and cry and… and…. he
wasn’t sure. Run. Skate. Work out. Do something until his body couldn’t take it anymore. Wear
himself completely ragged and into the ground. But he wasn’t in competitive shape. His hamstring
still ached. He was already so tired.
Viktor scooped up his pillow and buried his face against it, holding it tight to muffle any sound, but when he tried to scream, nothing came, anyway; just the harsh push of breath and a ragged gasp when he repeated the process. Silent screaming. Pain. So much pain.

What was he doing?

Makkachin nosed the pillow away and wedged his head under Viktor’s arm, forcing his way into his lap. He was too big a dog to be doing this, but that had never stopped him before, and it certainly wasn’t going to stop him now. Viktor let go of it, arms falling away to accommodate the poodle that took its place, and instead buried his face in the fur of Makkachin’s neck.

“Makkachin,” he whimpered, voice breaking.

Makkachin licked his cheek, then pressed his head against Viktor’s, nosing his hair to mess it up. He pushed all of his weight, leaning hard against his chest, waiting for Viktor to wrap his arms around him. When he did, they stayed that way until Viktor was calm again. At least, calm enough that he was breathing fine again.

Viktor rubbed his fleecy fur up and down from shoulders to haunches and let Makkachin lick his face once more, then slid him back onto the bed. “Okay… okay, let’s text Yuuri.”

v.nikiforov: Please call me when you have a chance

“That’s probably too formal, but I don’t want him to think that I’m too needy or anything…”

Makkachin cocked his head to one side.

“I’m not too needy, am I?”

The poodle tilted his head the other way.

“You’re not helping, Makka…” Viktor set his phone aside and pulled himself from the bed. With a clearer head, it was time to strategize. He needed a plan for talking to Yuuri. Yuuri had cried for the world; what could he say to comfort him? What did Yuuri need? What did Yuuri ever need? He was capable. All he ever wanted was for Viktor to… to stay by his side and never leave.

And he’d left.

He’d left him in Russia. Gone back to Japan.

Makkachin bumped against his leg and Viktor blinked down at the dog, who looked expectantly up at him. He was spiraling again.

There was a lot of danger in that.

Viktor took a steadying breath. Look to the future. Barcelona. The gala there. Right.

He got to his knees and reached under his bed, pulling out the box that Fifi had sent so many months ago. Most of its original contents had been removed- Yuuri’s Free Skate costume and the blue version of the princely attire for Stay Close to Me -but one garment bag still remained at the bottom, untouched except for when Viktor had verified its contents to confirm receipt.
He pulled it out now, laying the bag across his bed and unzipped it to look at the artistry before him. This costume was much like his original from the season before, but there had been several important adjustments. Not only were the measurements different- Fifi had assured him that it would fit him so much better now that he was a ‘full-grown tree’ -but what was once white was now black, just like Yuuri’s, and the soft pinks were now purples, like everything had been given a watercolor wash from Yuuri’s blue.

Fifi knew Yuuri had changed him, completely and to the core. It was reflected in the piece he held in his hands, and it was beautiful.

He set it back in the bag, brushing fingertips over the silver, and zipped it again for safekeeping. A pair skate for an exhibition piece may not be approved by the ISU, but there were ways that they could get around that. At least once. He had the music, he’d already worked on the routine. If Yuuri was willing to show the world their love, then… then he would never have to skate Stammi Vicino alone again.

They could skate his heart song together.

He had a week to fine tune the choreography while Yuuri was away.

But he would have to wait until Yuuri returned to Hasetsu before he talked to him about it. For now, Yuuri probably needed a distraction. They both needed a distraction.

Viktor slid the box back under his bed and moved over to his row of bookshelves, leaning against the marble bust for support while he searched. Which one, which one? Ah- The Wild Swans. He showed it to Makkachin. “Do you think he’ll like this one, Makkachin?”

Makkachin sniffed at it, tail wagging.

“Me, too. Let’s go back to Yuuri’s room and wait for his call, da?”

When Viktor woke up the next morning, it was much earlier than he would have liked. Makkachin was feeling much more like himself and was ready to join the world of the living. Viktor got up, took him outside, asked for Makkachin’s perfectly portioned breakfast, then let him stay out among the people while he, himself, went back to bed. Someone in the Katsuki family had thoughtfully put out signs that asked the patrons not to feed the dog in both Japanese and in English (or at least he was pretty sure that’s what it said), so he felt safe enough to let him roam.

He was only just getting comfortable, nestled in a spot where he could pretend to be up against Yuuri’s side, when there was that gentle tapping at the door that filled him with instant fear. Mama Katsuki.

“Vicchan?”

Viktor huddled under the covers. Oh no.

“Are you awake?”

He peeked up over the pillow and to the door, wondering just how damning it would be to ignore the question of such a sweet woman by pretending to be asleep, and decided it wasn’t worth tempting fate. No, not with Mama Katsuki. Viktor cleared his throat. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry to bother you, Vicchan, but Mari isn’t feeling well today…”
Viktor sat up, blanket draped over his head, and leaned closer to listen.

“...and I could really use your help, if you’re not too busy.”

Too busy? Viktor frowned. It was true that he’d planned to go to the rink at some point, but otherwise, he was planning on sleeping. Sleeping and moping. Maybe even putting off going to the rink until the next day. After all, Yuuri was going to Saint Petersburg, and being six hours apart by time one, they would be further apart than ever. Would Yuuri even remember to call him?

Yurio probably had all sorts of fun things planned. Assuming that nothing horrible happened. Just thinking about it made him even more exhausted.

“Vicchan?”

Viktor gulped. “Uh. Right. No. Of course I’ll help. Just give me a few minutes to get ready, Mama Katsuki.”

“Thank you, dear.”

“Any… any time.”

Once he was dressed, Hiroko made him eat breakfast and then set him to work. There was plenty to do, and though he was shy about it, it didn’t take long before he fell into the groove of things and put his back into it. Viktor wasn’t a stranger to hard work, even though he didn’t have to do all that much these days, but it came with a comforting kind of numbness that he liked without the self-destruction that he usually sought.

With that came some degree of socializing, too, between that Katsuki family and the patrons of Yu-Topia. He carried things, organized, did dishes, helped with the lunch rush, ran laundry, and swept. Every part of the onsen, restaurant, and common areas needed to be maintained, and Mama Katsuki had tasks for all of it.

She fed him, gave him breaks, walked him through the process of anything he had questions for, and sat with him when it came time to fold all the laundry at the end of the day.

“I had no idea we went through so many towels,” he said, watching her demonstrate how to fold them so neatly.

“Yes, and we want every guest to have fresh, clean towels each time.”

Viktor redid the first towel from his pile, and added it to their joint stack. The afternoon was wearing on and Toshiya was taking care of dinner preparation. It probably wouldn’t be a big dinner service since it was a week day. “Robes, too.”

“That’s right.”

It was a wonder they stayed afloat when the town’s tourism division was still suffering so much. He folded another towel, taking extra care to make it perfect. “And you three keep it going… just you three.”

“And Yuuri, when he’s here.”

“Amazing.”
“Ohhh, it’s not much… but we make it work.” She folded another towel then reached for another, but came to a stand still. “Vicchan? Oh, oh Vicchan…”

He wiped fresh tears away, small smile on his face as he shook his head. “Sorry, I just… I see where he gets it from. Thank you, Mama Katsuki… I…”

She reached for him, one arm for his arm, the other for his head, and pulled him down to rest against her shoulder. “Shhh… shh.”

It didn’t matter that he was a grown man much bigger than she was; Hiroko was a mama and Viktork desperately needed one. He went quiet, leaning against her, and after a little while she went back to folding towels. She didn’t make him leave, didn’t get annoyed, didn’t ask anything at all of him; just let him stay there, close and quiet.

When she was done, she patted his head and asked him to help her carry them to their proper cupboards.

“And tonight, Vicchan,” she said, when they were finished with all of that. “You should really soak in the onsen after we close. I think it would do you a world of good. Listen to Mama Katsuki.”

He promised her that he would.

He ate with the family and helped clean up afterward. Mari said she was ‘feeling better’ and came down to help, though she looked so smug about it, Viktor was fairly sure it had all been a lie in the first place. Not that he could really blame any of them. He knew he’d been acting off, and without Yuuri to be a buffer, what choice did they have?

Once everything was closed up, he went out to the baths and went through the ritual scrub down, grateful for the privacy. The hot water on his pale skin made even the faintest marks even more obvious, and he was supposed to relax, not be even more stressed.

Clean and naked, he crept from the house to the spring in the near dark, tip-toeing over the flat stone path that they kept clear for their guests, and sank into the blessedly hot waters of the bath. He’d bathed alone many times before, here in Hasetsu, and it was always a wonderful experience. Not as nice as having Yuuri’s company, sure, but there was something so tranquil and perfect about it all the same.

The snow-covered landscaping and chilly air was so much like that first day that he’d come, it was hard not to think about it. He’d been so tired then, so ridiculously out of it. What was he thinking, standing up in the bath and introducing himself like that? Of course Yuuri had been shocked.

Yuuri would probably just laugh if he did that to him now, but back then… back then, everything had been so different.

His entire life had changed in just these few months. In less than a year.

Viktor closed his eyes and leaned back, sinking deeper into the mineral water that soothed those aches and pains from the past few weeks. He’d forgotten just how nice the baths were. How good it was for him. How much he missed this.

The hot springs were the best things in the world- besides Yuuri, of course.

Mama Katsuki had been right. But then, she always was.
She knew just what to do to stop that spiral.

Like Yuuri, she seemed so unassuming at first, so humble, yet so industrious. So effective. Like a squirrel. A Siberian Flying Squirrel, perhaps? Those were cute. He smiled at the thought. Just the perfect sort of companion for a princess in need...

The princess woke to the sound of scraping metal, followed by a soft little click, click, click! And turned to see what it might be. There, crouched next to the chains of her ankles, was a little white squirrel with a set of tools. Needles of all sorts—sewing needles, pine needles, crochet, and hook, were set out for the squirrel to pick between as she worked at the lock, one by one.

“Little squirrel,” the princess asked. “What... what are you doing?”

“Why, I’m helping you,” she replied. “Of course.”

“But why?”

The squirrel blinked at her, then went back to work. “Why not?”

“It’s hopeless, little one... the Falcon will come back, he’ll kill you if he finds you. You’d better run and hide before he does. Please don’t waste your time on me.”

But the squirrel only flicked her bushy little tail. “Tut tut. It’s never a waste to help someone, and you’d better not give up hope. If you ask me, that’s the waste.”

Viktor stretched out in the bath, reaching out to pet Makkachin’s head, laughing. “Can’t you just see Mama Katsuki being a squirrel? One with a little apron? I think she reminds me of Miss Suzy, anyway... don’t you?”

Makkachin blinked to show that he agreed, and leaned into the petting.

“I wonder if she’s ever read that book. I don’t think it’s very common. Perhaps we can track down a copy for her. Do you think she’d like it?”

This time, Makkachin set his chin on Viktor’s hand for chin rubs, which was met with compliance.

“I think that’s a good idea.” Viktor looked up at the sky, where clouds hung low and heavy with snow, then sighed. It was so nice, just soaking in the bath. It was so rare to get to sit and soak with Makkachin, though. He’d never done that bef- “Makkachin!”

The dog looked up at him, wet ears lifting just a little.

“When did you get here?! You’re not supposed to be in the bath!”

Once Viktor had captured and hauled Makkachin from the bath, put on a robe, and brought the offending poodle to the Katsukis to demonstrate their very best Japanese dog eza, he was surprised to be met with not anger, but laughter.

“He got into the baths again?” Papa Katsuki asked.
Viktor glanced at Makkachin, who got even lower to the ground. “Again?”

Makkachin grinned at him, guilty.

Mama Katsuki sighed, smiling. “Well, I guess I know what chore you’ll be doing tomorrow, Vicchan.”

It was going to be a long week.

Chapter End Notes

Yurio: I'm going to be taking him to Vaganova when he comes to visit.  
Lilia: Oh, is that so?  
Yurio: Yes. I just said I was.  
Lilia: Why is that?  
Yurio: Because I think he'd like to see it!  
Lilia: But why would he want to see a ballet academy?  
Yurio: Because he did ballet! Like me and Viktor! And because Viktor went there!  
Lilia: Then he should come by my studio, instead. That's far more interesting.  
Yurio: That's the biggest load of bull shit that I've ever heard.  
Lilia: Yuri, language!  
Yurio: Everyone knows that Vaganova is a prestigious school! It's a historic icon even if Viktor hadn't gone there! And besides, he's a huge Viktor fanboy, so I'm sure he'd want to see where he went to school.  
Lilia: ...Viktor went to my ballet studio, first.  
Yurio; ...  
Lilia: Even before he went to Yakov's rink. Right, Yakov?  
Yakov: Da.  
Yurio: Fine, we'll go to your studio, too.

See You Space Gay Skate...  
Saint Petersbourg Adventures! / Junk Food! / Revelations! / Sightseeing!

Please look forward to it!
The Russian Experience

Chapter Summary

Yuuri goes on to Saint Petersburg alone and learns a lot more than what he expected. History and some tidbits about Viktor? Sure. But will there be more mysteries uncovered?!

Chapter Notes

LAYS DOWN. I am sorry. So very sorry for the delay in this chapter. January is always a horrible month. And then my boss went on maternity leave as my work acquired another company, so I’ve had to be acting manager for 8 weeks and I am SO exhausted. My brainmeats... still, I worked on this a little at a time and here it is. Finally. Thank you so much for your patience. It has been a trip.

This chapter in particular is... well 24-28 are chapters where the boys are separated and it's really fun to see how they are without the other and their varying ways of dealing with it. Ch25 is Yuuri seeing Viktor's homeland and it's SO SOFT. Lots of touristy things that I hope ya'll still find interesting to read as well as some answers and more secrets!! Yurio! Team Russia!

Gabapple: Things have been busy on my end, too. Not AS insane, thankfully. 50+ hour work weeks are definitely not conducive to writing, but we're finally here. Mamodewberry worked so hard on this chapter, guys, and it's incredible. Some of my very favorite moments of all of NLA happen here, and she has done an amazing job putting it all together. I am so shook. ;A; Please appreciate and love on it like crazy. It's been so much work to outline/research/write/etc the "Saint Petersburg Chapters" and all that goes into them, and we hope that you enjoy. I even got to do quite a bit of writing on this one, too... and not just because I'm Yurio and Lilia's supervisor either :)))

Yes yes yes there is a special treat from Gabapple :) 

Although ch25 took some time, I did do a Yakov one-shot taking young Viktor out for his 16th birthday! you'll read more about it in Vitya Diaries, but here's some Yakov POV! Lift Up the Glasses
Gab also wrote another Vitya Adventure during Valentine's piece! Vitya and the Cupid Conspiracy.

Got a fantastic commission done by MissJamieKaye from Ch10! of the firefly scene. Another Lovely piece by Hana-tox of a sad Viktor from Ch24.
Also from Ch24, Quel did some cute art for us Viktor and Mama K doodles!. Chibi commission by Toratoramin that's kind of a St. Petersburg arc-piece! So cute.

Recommended Listening

1. No. 7, by Mrs. Green Apple
2. Nocturne No.4 in Db, by Yiruma
Getting his parents to agree to Wayne State was easy. Phichit delivered his proposal via PowerPoint presentation and was met with all the success he expected. At the time, he'd been seventeen years-old, graduating from compulsory with one year of his Biochemistry major already under his belt, and oodles of charm to go along with his compelling bulleted lists. Why shouldn’t he count on it?

“Yuuri Katsuki? Phi…”

“He’s the proof that my theory works, Su. Wayne State is the right choice. Besides, guys like us have to stick together.” He frowned at her. “Do I have to show you my presentation again?”

“No!” Sunan, sixteen months younger and every bit as stubborn, stuck out her tongue and leaned on his suitcase. It was the same argument they’d been going over for months. Now eighteen, accepted and enrolled, he was finally leaving. “But America? Really?”

Phichit shooed her away and dropped another folded shirt inside. “I need to broaden my horizons. Learning about life. Improving my English. Training under a better coach. Celestino seems pretty great!”

“Phi…”

“And besides, it’s not like this is my first time in America.”

“Sure, but you’ve never left for years and years.”

“I’ll be back before you know it. Wayne State is great for international students and it has a really good liberal arts program. Just think about how that could help my performance! All the different styles I can incorporate into my programs, the fundamentals I can learn…”

“On top of Biochemistry?”

“Yeah!”

She sighed. “Are you sure you’ll come back?”

“Whaaaaat? Sunan!”

“I don’t know, you might get distracted by The Lion King on Broadway or something.”
Arching a brow, Phichit turned away from his wardrobe to peer at her. “That’s New York, not Michigan. They’re nowhere near each other.”

“They’re in the same half of the country.”

“Over 1,000km away.”

“Fiiiiine. But I already lost one brother, Phi. I don’t want to lose another.”

Phichit pulled a blue and green paneled umbrella from the shelf and added it to the pile with a grin. “You won’t. I’m tough!”

“You’re not, Phi. Not at all.”

“My new best friend Yuuri will look out for me, then!”

“You haven’t even met him, Phi!”

“No, but I know it’ll work out. Have a little a little more faith in people, Sunan…” Phichit took out his phone. “Look, I’ll document everything so you never have to worry.”

“…and by that you mean take more selfies.”

Phichit shrugged. “It makes it easy for you to stalk me, doesn’t it? Let’s take one now!”

“You’re so dumb. I’ll miss you.” She came in close, and put on her best game face, which was rivaled only by her big brother, who smiled wide for the camera.

“I’ll miss you, too.”

Phichit arrived in Detroit a week before summer semester began and got set up in the campus dorms, just as planned. Also as planned, he met with Celestino and got the grand tour of the Detroit Skating Club, and went over the the strategy for getting him up to speed with Cialdini’s methods. It was a nice place, and there was a lot that they had to offer one another. Celestino (who quickly came to be known as “Ciao Ciao” in the photos he sent to Sunan) saw a lot of potential in him, and was eager to get to work once he got settled.

But there was no Yuuri to be found.

“What, your best friend isn’t around?”

“No, I haven’t seen him at the rink, or around the quad. I don’t know which dorm he’s staying at, either. He might be in an off campus apartment somewhere.”

Sunan snickered on the other end of the video call. “Did you ask Ciao Ciao?”

“Pft. I don’t want to sound creepy, Su. I’m not really stalking him.”

“Riiight. So how are classes going? Do you miss us yet?”
Classes were going great, and though Phichit missed his brother and sisters a lot, it wasn’t enough to stop him. He had a dream, and that was worth a little self-sacrifice. After all, the titular Skater in *The King and the Skater* only came to realize his dream when he left all that he knew behind and explored a brand new world.

That was what he had to do.

And, really, he was having a pretty good time of it, too.

Detroit wasn’t Bangkok by any stretch of the imagination, but it was interesting and diverse in its challenges. Like the constant onslaught of stereotypes. But there was nothing to do about it other than to smile, shrug, say *mai pen rai*, and move on. It was America. What else could be expected?

But it was starting to get a little lonely. He made friends in his classes easily enough, but none of them really understood what he was there for, or what he was trying to do. He needed another skater. His other team mate.

“Oh, Yuuri?” Celestino asked, looking up from his clipboard. “He asked to be scheduled after closing hours… We had to pull some strings, but it’s supposed to be a temporary thing for the summer camp season, so…”

Phichit turned from his shrugging coach to the rink, where dozens of other students were practicing their drills and routines with their own instructors. “So all this time I’ve been trying to catch him and there’s been no way?”

“What? You’ve been trying to…?” He laughed, deep and loud, and thumped Phichit on the back of the shoulders. “No, Yuuri’s an odd one. If you want to catch him, you’ll have to come at night.”

So he did.

Phichit came back two days later when Yuuri was scheduled for practice and waited behind the bleachers until he heard Ciao Ciao’s barked orders to creep out and take a seat. There, sitting in the dark, he watched Yuuri skate and skate, working through all of the steps of some routine. His short program from the previous season, it looked like.

The critique was painful. Phichit took photos.

When the private lesson was over, he made himself known by calling out to them while he hopped down from the bleachers.

“Hey, Yuuri!”

Ciao Ciao watched the Japanese skater trip over the barrier, then handed over the skate guards with a chuckle. “Ah, Yuuri. Meet your new rink mate, Phichit Chulanont.”

“Huh?” Yuuri’s startled stare swept across the rink, then back to his coach and the newly arrived Phichit. After returning a Japanese version of the *wai*, he gave in to what looked like a nervous tic-rubbing the back of his neck. “Were you... watching the whole time?”
“Nah, not all of it, just the last fifteen minutes or so!” Phichit waved off the brewing anxiety in the air with a hand and a smile. “You were so cool!”

“I… I was?” Yuuri’s surprise was too shocked to be suspicious.

“He was?” Ciao Ciao’s wasn’t. He frowned.

“Yeah,” Phichit continued, not wasting a moment as he slid up to Yuuri’s side, slipping his arm around his arm around his shoulders. “It’s no wonder you had to have a private practice.”

“H-huh? Why’s that?”

Ciao Ciao arched a brow.

“Well, with moves like that, you gotta keep ‘em secret from the rest of the world. It makes sense, trust me. Anyway,” Phichit held up his phone, camera mode on. “Smile for a selfie, new best friend!”

“Wait, what did you say?”

That was the start to their friendship, and what a relief it was. Ciao Ciao explained that he was new to the States, was his new rink mate, and that Yuuri should try to be friends with him.

Su.Chu: And then what?

Phi+ChuChu: Well, you saw the photo, Su.

Su.Chu: He looked terrified.

Phi+ChuChu: He looked in awe at such an important moment in his life, you mean.

Su.Chu: Uh huh…

Phi+ChuChu: Anyway, it’s on film now so there aren’t any take backs.

Su.Chu: it’s digital, though, so that doesn’t really count, Phi.

Phi+ChuChu: whatever. I told him that we went to the same school, and he agreed to show me around!

Su.Chu: but you’ve already had the tour

Phi+ChuChu: well yeah but he doesn’t need to know that. Besides I bet he knows a lot of secret places that are really cool

Su.Chu: okay sure

The tour was actually really boring. At least, the campus part. Yuuri, though, was fascinating. He knew a lot, that much was clear, but he didn’t want to show it off to the point of downplaying every little thing. But, as with most things, Phichit came prepared, and found his opening by asking
Yuuri about his being a Liberal Arts Major with an emphasis in musical composition.

From there it was a discussion about music, then musicals (he’d seen *The King and the Skater*, but not in its original English language track - which was a crime as far as Phichit was concerned), other movies, and a walk around the conservatory’s halls. Yuuri wouldn’t play piano for him, but he did admit that he *could* play, which was a step in the right direction.

But then the tour was over, and Yuuri’s small, polite, and utterly fake smile didn’t even waver when Phichit tried - and failed -to hint at wanting an invitation to see his apartment. So Phichit invited Yuuri.

Su.Chu: so did he take the bait?
Phi+ChuChu: no :( 
Su.Chu: sorry Phi
Phi+ChuChu: I’m not giving up!!!!

Classes continued and so did Phichit’s skating with Ciao Ciao, with Yuuri’s appearances few and far between. Despite what he’d believed to be a genuine connection on campus, it wasn’t until the Skating Club’s Independence Day party that he got a chance to spend any real time with Yuuri again.

It was a barbecue held at one of the coach’s homes in the suburbs, with the other coaches, their families, and a mixture of students- those just there for the summer, and those part of the more permanent roster. Ciao Ciao drove, and once he’d introduced him to several of the other coaches, let him go free to mingle. That was something he could easily do- Phichit was friendly to a fault - but nothing would stand between him and whatever his goals were.

In that case, it was to make Yuuri his friend.

When he found him, Yuuri was standing in the triangle of shade cast by the house, gaze wandering from his phone to the table of food, the grill, then back again. He looked… not uncomfortable, exactly, but disinterested, maybe? Bored? Like he’d been guilted into coming and was only trying to fulfil a social obligation long enough before he could leave.

Phichit excused himself from the group of summer campers and snuck over with his iced tea, putting on another one of his award-winning smiles. “Sawasdee khrap! Yuuri, it’s good to see you again.”

Yuuri returned the bow. “Same to you… Phichit?”

“Yeah, that’s right! Phichit Chulanont.” How Yuuri could have nearly forgotten his name, Phichit didn’t know, but it didn’t really matter. He moved over to lean against the brick next to him. “So the fourth of July.”

“Yeah… “ Yuuri said with a sideways glance, waiting for him to continue.

“What do you recommend I try?” He asked, nodding to the food. “I’ve been to the states before, but most of what I’ve eaten since I’ve been here is what they have on and near campus, and none
of that is exactly…” Phichit mimed searching for the word so that Yuuri would supply it, which he failed to do, pushing up his glasses instead. His smile faded. “Thoroughly American?”

“Oh. Well the barbecue would be a good thing to try, I guess.”

Phichit leaned in. “You don’t say.”

“Sure. Hamburgers, hot dogs, cheap beer… they have all of that stuff.”

“Great!” Phichit looped his arm around Yuuri’s and dragged him away from the house. “Show me everything!”

They didn’t end up eating burgers. Or hot dogs. Or even the cheap beer. But they did share chicken vegetable kebabs and lemonade while sitting in lounge chairs on the big patio deck in the relative shade, making idle commentary while they observed the others. Phichit got him to talk about his home in Japan, what kind of dog he had (a cute toy poodle, as it turned out), and they shared photos of their families. After complaining and reminiscing about sisters (Yuuri only had one to Phichit’s two, and no brothers to speak of), Phichit dragged Yuuri inside to play some rounds of Smash Brothers, which turned out to be the universal equalizer (Yuuri wasn’t bad as Pit, even though the Pitchichu kept thunderbolting him right out of the air) and went on for more than enough time for night to fall and the fireworks to start.

“ONE MORE GAME!”

Phichit smirked, biting down on his lower lip to keep too much of his amusement from getting out. “But Yuuri, I wanna watch the fireworks!”

“My strategy’s going to work this time.”

“Uh huh…”

“Just one more game.”

“Okay, Yuuri, okay. One more.”

“Okay.” Yuuri scrunched his nose, shoulders hunching as he readied himself, determined. Laser focused.

“…I’m still gonna beat you, though.”

Su.Chu: so what was the final score?

Phi+ChuChu: I think it was something like 1/50,000

A.Chuuu: omg Phi

Phi+ChuChu: :3c it’s not my fault, he should know that flying is weak to electric

Somchai.Chulanont: you nerd :)
Phi+ChuChu: here are the other photos though. The fireworks didn’t really turn out but look he’s actually smiling!!!

A.Chuuu: I guess you’re winning him over after all

Phi+ChuChu: like you ever doubted me :)

A.Chuuu: never

Su.Chu: what’s the next step?

Somchai.Chulanont: are you going to get him to invite you over?

Phi+ChuChu: yeah I need to assess his living space… see if I can find out what movies he’s seen. I’ve raided his social media but he doesn’t have many accounts and they’re all, like… empty. I think he uses them to follow people, not post

A.Chuuu: sounds like the perfect job for you

Su.Chu: don’t encourage him Anong. Phi’s STILL BEING A STALKER, LET’S NOT FORGET

Somchai.Chulanont: he’s just being a friend

Somchai.Chulanont: you’d do the same Su

Phi+ChuChu: awww you guys are the best <3

A.Chuu: just don’t forget to do your homework :)

Phi+ChuChu: hey it was part of my proposal. I’m sticking to it!

Su.Chu: we miss you, Phi

Although he didn’t get an invitation to go to Yuuri’s apartment, he did get an invitation to go with him to the rink one afternoon the following week. Ciao Ciao wanted to work with both of them on the same drills so it only made sense, and they had classes ending around the same time, so…

Yuuri(BFF): meet you by the bookstore at 4?

Phichit.Chulanont: sounds good! :)

Finally, he’d get to learn the ins and outs of Yuuri’s secret commute to the club, his strategy for maximizing time, and the best bus routes to take. Since Yuuri’d been in Detroit for two years, he’d probably learned all of the tricks to make it a much easier and less confusing time than Phichit had struggled with in the past month. What a relief!

Yuuri was waiting for him when he got there. Together, they walked to the bus stop, got on the 462, and started on the same, long, boring, straight-shot commute that the transit maps had all suggested. One hour on the bus, during which Yuuri read some novel that he kept trying to hide against the window, and then twenty minutes of walking to the rink itself.
Phichit could not even.

Skating with Yuuri was great, though. He worked hard, he took falls well, and he didn’t try to make excuses for his shortcomings, which was always something Phichit could appreciate. But when they were done, it was that same long walk—which took even longer going back—and another hour back to campus, before splitting up for the night.

“Do you really do this every time?”

“What?”

“Take the bus?”

Yuuri shrugged. “Yeah.”

Phichit stared at him, long and hard.

“It gives me time to read and do homework.”

“Right…”

Yuuri only shrugged again, unapologetic and unphased.

They rode together more often as the summer skating camps ended and summer semester kicked into high gear. Phichit’s schedule was packed between classes and an ever-growing list of group projects that required more and more time on campus.

He looked for alternative ways to get to the rink, but there weren’t any that really saved much time or effort—or funds, for that matter—so he was stuck riding with Yuuri on that long and arduous trip via bus, and then walking, watching him read, read, read. He never wanted to talk or anything, just read. It was so boring that Phichit couldn’t use the time to study or sleep or anything else. He had to know.

“What are you reading, anyway?”

“Books.”

“Riiight… obviously…”

“It helps my English.”

Phichit tried to get a look at the name on the cover, or even the spine, but Yuuri kept it from view. “Yuuri.”

“Hm?”

“Pleaaaseee teeeell mee what you’re reading!”

Although he was generally better at presenting in person, it wasn’t hard to get help setting up a video conference call with his parents using the on-campus facilities- he’d already charmed his professors and TAs into helping with whatever he needed, and it was a simple request. He wore his best suit and included all of the necessary data for financials, the time saving benefits, safety, and the approaching winter season.

Yes, of course it was just a loan, he would be paying them back.

Yes, he would have a mechanic inspect the used vehicle beforehand, even after such an exhaustive search for something practical and safe in a reasonable price range.

Yes, he intended to sell it before leaving the states and coming back home. He had no reason to take a car back home to Thailand.

Yes, it would be safe to drive- he’d gotten his license and learned to drive in Bangkok, who did they think they were talking to? And yes, he’d talked to several others and consulted a local station about his license; no one in the states would care that it was temporary class and not technically valid for international use. This was America.

It would provide heat in the winter, some protection from the FOREIGN UNKNOWNS since walking back and forth at any given time was probably not the safest thing ever, and would, most of all, save him time.

Precious, precious time.

And be a benefit to his Asian friend, too, who for too long had been content just taking the bus.

Why oh why?
Well no more.

With the assistance and consent of his parents, the Bug Mobile was his.

The next time they planned to meet to head to the rink, Phichit took his car and pulled up to the curb. “Hey!” He called, leaning over the passenger seat to yell out the window. “Get in, loser, we’re going shopping!”

It took Yuuri a moment of blinking before he recognized him, but he must have because he came over, slowly putting the book away. “Where’d you get this car?”

“It’s mine!”

“You can drive?”

“Obviously! Get in!” He pushed the door open, and Yuuri hesitantly slid into the seat next to him.

“Are we really going shopping? Celestino wanted to go over—“

“Don’t you worry about Ciao Ciao. I was quoting Mean Girls, anyway.” Phichit sighed. “Don’t tell me you haven’t seen Mean Girls.”

“Uh…”

Putting the car into gear, Phichit pushed his lips into a pouting duck face. “We have so much work to do… put your seatbelt on.” He waited until Yuuri did, then started up his mp3 playlist for being in the car, which was an eclectic mix of all things fun to drive to. “Welcome to the Bug Mobile and to the rest of your life, Yuuri!”

It was the first of many changes. The car meant that they had more time, yes, but also more freedom in scheduling practice sessions. Yuuri, despite missing his book-reading time, seemed to like getting chauffeured from apartment to rink, so they spent a lot of time practicing together. That made Ciao Ciao happy, because they could help each other. Competition was good for them both. So was comradery.

It also meant that a whole new world of food options was open to them, which Ciao Ciao was not so pleased about.

“Phichit, he’s on a diet.”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what I hear, but I wanna try it! Look, I have an entire list of hotdog-specific restaurants that are Must Tries right here!”

“I really shouldn’t…”

Phichit groaned. “What’s the point of being in a foreign country if you don’t live a little? Come on!”
“Don’t tempt him, Phichit.”

“Fine.” Phichit shrugged. “We’ll go when Ciao Ciao’s not looking.”

“I’m right here, Phichit. Listening. To you. Right now.”

“Uh huh.”

Yuuri was stubborn. More stubborn than most people Phichit knew. But that was okay. Driving him around meant that they got to talk a lot. It also meant that he got to drop him off at his apartment.

And then, one day…

Su.Chu: So you actually saw it?

Phi+ChuChu: yes. Yes I did

Su.Chu: and???

Phi+ChuChu: it looked like a hotel room

Su.Chu: what do you mean

Phi+ChuChu: I mean it looked like his roommate has a college apartment and is sharing it with someone that doesn’t actually live there

Phi+ChuChu: he had some packed boxes in the corner

Phi+ChuChu: but mostly he was living out of a suitcase

Phi+ChuChu: keep in mind that he’s lived in that apartment for two years

Phi+ChuChu: no decorating

Phi+ChuChu: no personality

Phi+ChuChu: nothing at all to indicate that it was Yuuri Katsuki’s space until he plugged his phone into its charger and then it was ‘oh look it’s Yuuri’s phone’

Su.Chu: so he’s a private person. I think you knew that by now

Phi+ChuChu: HE’S LIVING SO REPRESSED

Phi+ChuChu: I CAN’T

Su.Chu: phi

Su.Chu: what are you planning

Phi+ChuChu: I’M GOING TO RESCUE HIM

Phi+ChuChu: AND MAKE HIM WATCH MEAN GIRLS
Su.Chu: he hasn’t seen Mean Girls?

Phi+ChuChu: NO. Or like any of the John Hughes movies or ANY of the musicals I brought or omg Su it’s bad

Phi+ChuChu: it’s so bad

Phi+ChuChu: I’m crying

Phi+ChuChu: picture me crying

Su.Chu: done

Phi+ChuChu: he told me he’s seen the Matrix

Su.Chu: that’s something

Phi+ChuChu: what has he been doing all of his life


Su.Chu: like you should be

Su.Chu: right now

Su.Chu: instead of meddling

Phi+ChuChu: I can do both :)

Su.Chu: sure but do you really think mom and dad are going to let you move so soon after they helped you buy a car? You are getting to be a real pest, Phi

Phi+ChuChu: not a pest, I’m an ~investment~

Phi+ChuChu: besides they already said yes

Su.Chu: what???

Phi+ChuChu: I had some time before class and drafted a proposal to compare the cost of living expenses. It’ll pretty much pay for the car over the next two years

Su.Chu: you’re kidding

Phi+ChuChu: living with a roommate is a lot cheaper than living by yourself and the places I’ve been looking at are off campus

Su.Chu: off campus

Phi+ChuChu: which means hamsters

Su.Chu: more hamsters?! I thought you were done with hamsters

Phi+ChuChu: never done with hamsters. I just put off getting more because it would have been hard to take them out of the country. But now that I’m here… :3c

Su.Chu: you just have all of this worked out, don’t you?
There wasn’t a lot of time before the end of the semester. Soon, campus would be crawling with returning students and brand new freshmen. Changing apartments so close to the start of the academic year- and breaking contracts as part of that -was insane. Trying to move on top of cramming for and taking finals was even more so. So when Phichit brought the brochures to a handful of apartments that actually had a few rooms left for rent by some miracle, he fully expected Yuuri to be skeptical. Critical, even.

But before he could even launch into a thorough introduction of his presentation, Yuuri was looking through the pamphlets, noting the circled floor plans and numbers, and running numbers in his head. Phichit watched him, stopping mid-sentence, and slowly took a seat on the bleachers next to him.

“I knew someone that lived in these ones,” Yuuri said, shuffling it to the top of the pile. “It’s by the Asian market.”

“Yeah,” said Phichit, grinning. “I like that one, too. What do you think? You seriously need some pop culture education… and it’d make it really easy for me to drive you around all over.”

“Sure.” Yuuri folded it up and handed it back. “Especially if it gets you to stop nagging me.”


Yuuri rolled his eyes, and took out his phone. “When do we move in?”

“Ha… we can’t until after finals, so it’ll be the weekend between semesters.”

“Okay.”

“Also I want to get a hamster.”

“Like the one on your phone?”

“Yeah!”

“Do they allow pets?”

Phichit coughed. “They won’t ever find out.”

Yuuri grinned. “Okay, Phi.”

+guang-hong: are you really moving in with him?
+guang-hong: the Japanese skater that won the junior world championship a couple years back???
+gaung-hong: omg phichit I look away for two seconds and you already have new friends and a new life and you’re just ??? What are you doing
Phi+ChuChu: we have to stick together!!! It’s great!! Soon he’ll be all of our friends, don’t worry
Phi+ChuChu: tell Leo
Phi+ChuChu: maybe I can convince him to go Colorado next summer :3c
+guang-hong: what if we don’t do the summer camp next year though?
Phi+ChuChu: yeah right like you would skip out on seeing Leo
Phi+ChuChu: ;)
+guang-hong: hey >////<

In the weeks leading up to the move, Phichit assembled a moving team composed of other skaters and his classmates from school. He knew he couldn’t count on Yuuri to rope people into it, which was fine; it was his idea, so he was willing to shoulder that burden.

“Wow, you’re moving right after finals?”

“Phichit, are you nuts?”

“Didn’t you just move in?”

To all of these, he shrugged and smiled and waved a hand. “Yeah, but my rinkmate and I decided to be roomies. It’s gonna be great- once we’re all done. The moving part is gonna suck, though neither of us have much stuff; you wanna help? There’s gonna be pizza!”

No one could say no to him, and when moving day came, they had more than enough people to help out.

“Hey, I think I recognize some of these people from my classes…”

“Yeah, Yuuri. I made friends with the people you should have made friends with in the first place.” Phichit patted him on the shoulder, and handed him a little copper-colored key. “But now they’re your friends, too! Tada!”

“Um. Yay.”

“That’s the spirit!”

When the dust settled and all of the moving boxes were in place, the pizza boxes in trash, and their helpers gone, Phichit insisted that they each put up at least one decoration a piece to make their new place home. For him, it was setting up his little shelf shrine, with a wooden vitarka mudra Buddha, bowl, and cups- he’d get flowers tomorrow, and open flames weren’t allowed in the dorms. And for Yuuri…

“Is that Viktor Nikiforov?”

“Yeah.” Yuuri stood back to make sure that the poster was level, head tilting one way, then the other, then nodded his approval. “It’s my favorite one.”
The poster was of the Russian skater in two different poses, each showing off his form and the subtle differences in his costumes for the season—-one black, the other a deep sapphire, though it was hard to tell with the frosted effect of the poster’s design.

“It’s from his epic come back a couple of years ago, right?”

“Yeah…” Yuuri sighed, soft and wistful. “When the world thought Viktor Nikiforov was done with skating, that he’d never come back. Like he would let an injury stop him. And now he’s better than ever before…”

Phichit looked it over, then looked at Yuuri, who was still admiring it with such a sparkle-eyed stare that it would have been impossible not to notice. “Let me guess, this one is your favorite because it shows off his butt, right?”

“Wh-what?! No!”

“Uh huh.” Phichit believed him, but he wasn’t going to let on. “But it’s okay, Yuuri. If you want to put up posters of your skating idol all over, I don’t mind.”

“...really?”

“Sure, why not?”

“O-okay!”

“I’m probably going to put up one my cheesy Explore Thailand posters, too… Oh, and you don’t mind the shrine, do you?”

“Nah, we have one at home, too.”

“Great!” Phichit hopped down from his bed to dig through the communal apartment-approved wall adhesives while Yuuri pulled out a set of posters from a cardboard tube and spread them out across his bed. “Wait, Yuuri…”

“Huh?”

“Just how many of those do you have?”

Yuuri’s face went pink. “...a few.”

Phichit snapped a photo of his room-and-rinkmate’s blushing face and showed it to him. “Hey, I heard there was a great Russian restaurant nearby. Wanna try it out? I’ve heard borsch is pretty good in the summer!”

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Ph+ChuChu: in his defense, they were in different languages
Ph+ChuChu: and not all of them were duplicates
Ph+ChuChu: but still, half of our dorm is now plastered in Viktor Nikiforov
Su.Chu: you wanted him to stop being repressed
Ph+ChuChu: yeah :)
Phi+ChuChu: and now he’s exposed himself for the gigantic nerd that he is

Su.Chu: so are you saying that I don’t need to worry about him dragging you to wild college frat parties?

Phi+ChuChu: lol

Phi+ChuChu: I just told him what you said and he asked if i wanted to go to one

Phi+ChuChu: so i said that i didn’t drink

Phi+ChuChu: and he said that he didn’t like parties

Phi+ChuChu: so I don’t think you need to worry

Phi+ChuChu: besides

Phi+ChuChu: we’re getting a wii

Su.Chu: o m g Phi nO!

The flight from Moscow to Saint Petersburg was just over an hour. The debate between using that time for extra sleep or reading further in one of Yuuri’s ‘Saucy Books’ was decided once the plane leveled and his head hit the back of the seat.

He woke up when the plane touched ground.

Yawning to awareness, Yuuri waited for all patrons to file out before reaching for his duffle in the overhead bin, and then followed the herd through the tunnel to the terminal and on through baggage claim.

Before making the turn towards luggage, there was a large poster of Viktor on the wall across the hall, reading in English: Welcome to Saint Petersburg! Home of Five-Time Champion, Viktor Nikoforov! He was wearing his Stay Close to Me costume. Yuuri wondered if that welcome had been replaced yearly.

Still, flutters came to his chest much like they did when he landed in Sochi for the Grand Prix last year. Posters and ads all over, just ready to greet the fanboy that he was.

Once he found his bag on the conveyor belt, he exited the terminal and checked his phone to see if Yurio had a location on where to meet.

The call of “Hey, Pork Bowl!” was Yuuri’s answer, and he walked towards the teen, Yakov and Lilia still with him and their bags on a cart.

“Pork Bowl?” Lilia asked, quirking a thin eyebrow.

“Yeh, it’s a nickname,” Yurio said with a wave of his hand.

Yuuri shrugged when both coaches looked at him for some sort of verification. “Thank you for waiting for me. I’m glad everything was on time.”
“Da, not a problem,” Yakov said. “I’ll take you to Vitya’s place from here. Did he give you the key and all the access codes?”

He nodded, patting his jean pocket for effect. “Codes and things I need to know, he’s sent me an email.”

“Good. Let’s head out.”

Yurio offered to put Yuuri’s suitcase on the cart and helped hoist it on top.

Yuuri fell into step with them as Yurio and Lilia were accustomed to Yakov’s lumbering, pushing the cart along. They took the airport tram to the parking garage and exited to find the car.

Yakov’s vehicle was old and rusted, probably a more vibrant of a yellow back in its prime. The size made Yuuri question if they’d be able to fit all their luggage inside.

The old man opened the passenger side door for Lilia, who stood expectantly. He then opened the driver’s side and pulled at a latch for the seat to lean forward and told the two boys to get in the back. Yuuri opened his mouth to help with moving the luggage, but Yurio tugged at his arm.

He wasn’t sure how, but within minutes, Yakov had Tetris’d everything into the trunk. Years of experience didn’t expand physics.

Once inside and seatbelt adjusted, Yakov turned the ignition and heat and Frank Sinatra entered the car. The car was quiet of conversation until the airport was behind them and Yakov and Lilia spoke in Russia to each other, Yurio piping in every once in a while.

Even if he wasn’t so tired, focusing on their voices wouldn’t help him to understand. With any free time he had in Viktor’s apartment, maybe Yuuri could start learning.

The car came to a stop at the curb of what Yuuri imagined was Viktor’s apartment building. Icicles dangled from the high roofs and protruding window bays, patches of snow on the small plot of grass between the sidewalk and front steps to the building, stairs and walkway clear, though grainy with rock salt.

Yakov got out of the car, moved his seat up for the boys, and rounded the car to open Lilia’s door for her. Then, he opened the trunk and took Yuuri’s suitcase and bag from the top and handed them to their owner.

“Drop me off here, too, Yakov.”

“You have school tomorrow, Yuratchka.”

“I know, I know. I’ll take the metro home.”

Yakov stared at Yurio, mouth a thin line, Lilia huffed, unconvinced. It wasn’t like either of them could stop the teen from what he wanted to do, so Yakov got his much smaller suitcase, compared to Yuuri’s, out as well.

Closing the trunk, Yakov fished out a keycard from his pocket.

He had an extra one?

An elderly gentleman with hard lines on his face nodded towards them with recognition as they approached, and held the door open.
“Orlov, this is Yuuri. He’ll be staying in Viktor’s apartment.”

He grunted at the unnecessary reminder. “I’ve been informed, Yasha.”

Yuuri noted to not inconvenience the doorman in any way...

A tall man with dark, close-cut hair and full beard was at the front desk to receive them. He stood from his seat and rounded the desk to embrace Yakov in a hug. They spoke in Russian like old friends. Occasionally, both would glance Yuuri’s way and he’d hear Viktor’s name. Lilia nodded. Yurio tapped his foot impatiently.

“I told Khomka to call me if you have any problems,” Yakov said, patting the man’s shoulder.

“Foma Sokolov, but yes, call me Khomka. Pleasure to meet you, Yuuri Katsuki,” Khomka said in a very thick Russian accent. “Don’t hesitate to phone the lobby for anything you need.”

Yuuri found himself wishing he had an RA in Detroit that was so accommodating and looked like they’d keep their word. And kill anyone if they didn’t pay their rent. “Thank you.”

“I’ll let Yasha show you where to go tonight.”

He nodded and pulled his suitcase after Yakov’s heavy steps and filed into the elevator with Yurio and Lila and two other residents. The elevator went up and let the residents out on the fifth floor and then they got out on the sixteenth – the top - second unit on the left.

"Try your card,” Yakov said, stopping at the door and making way for Yuuri to move forward.

Taking his hand off the handle. Yuuri found the keycard in his pocket and held it towards the fob. It beeped and the lock sounded, Yakov grunted his approval and turned the knob to let them all in.

Lilia’s heels clicked on the tile entryway where she stayed surveying, even as the boys wheeled their suitcases into the living area. “Nothing’s changed, has it?”

“He hasn’t been here since April, Lilia,” Yakov reminded her.

“I know that, but it hasn’t changed since the last time I was here, either.”

All present waited for her to expand, but she didn’t.

Yurio sighed and shook his head. “That means you have no reason to stay, right?”

“Excuse me?” Lilia asked, arms folding.

“You and Yakov. Nothing has changed, so you don’t need to look around Viktor’s place. You got the piggy here from the airport. Now let me do my job of looking after him!”

“Is that your job?” Yakov asked, straightening a photo on the wall.

“I made promises to Viktor, too, okay!?”

“Kicking us out, how rude, Yura!”

“Yeh, well, we’ve got a million things to do before he leaves in a week, so...”

“Come Lilia,” Yakov said, taking her arm, amused. “We’ll leave them to it for the rest of the day.”
She muttered something in Russian and turned her head towards the door.

The playful expression on Yakov’s face didn’t fade as he explained her offense. “We’d like to see you more than today, Yuuri. We’ll make further plans later.”

“That is not what I said!” And then the pair were bickering in Russian as they showed themselves out.

“They’re always like that...” Yurio groaned. “Let’s see, we should probably put your stuff in Viktor’s room, da?”

“Yeah, that’s a good idea.” Yuuri took hold of the handle of his suitcase once more, and waited for Yurio to show the way.

But then he didn’t move.

“Uh, Yurio?”

“I think it’s this way!”

It was a small place, there weren’t many directions to go. Yuuri followed after the blond down the short hall and sure enough-

"I guessed right!"

“You guessed?"

He pocketed his hands in his jacket. “I... actually haven’t been further than the living room.”

Yuuri blinked at him, confused. “I thought-”

“Well, you thought wrong! There was ... never a reason for me to come in. Quick grab Viktor for practice or airport and leave. He never invited me over or anything.”

“And now that he’s gone you can come in and look around.”

“Don’t act like you’re not excited to be here, too, Pig Boy!”

“Guilty...” Yuuri waited until Yurio’s back was towards him before smiling. He was excited. The home of his idol and lover. It was a dream come true. In front of Yurio, though, he needed to keep it all on the downlow. Though, knowing he also was excited to have access to Viktor’s private world was reassuring.

“Okay, so here is the bedroom, you’re welcome!”

Like the living space, the room was clean and free of dust despite the time Viktor had been away. Viktor had mentioned that the superintendent would have been in to dust and leave his mail for him. No obvious clutter. Shelving for books and minimalistic decor.

Yuuri set his suitcase alongside one of the walls by the bed.

"I don’t know about you, but I’m starving! Think there’s even anything in the fridge?”

“I haven’t eaten anything since breakfast. Food sounds great.” Though he doubted there was any food left. If the superintendent was pro at his job, he probably would have tossed anything perishable out long ago.
Yurio rushed back out the hall, stalled for half a second, and took off to the kitchen. “Damn, nothing but beer. We should probably get food for the week, can’t have you starving. Lilia will feed us sometimes. I’m sure we’ll go out to eat a bunch, too.”

“I’ll need to go and get currency exchanged, too. I can use my card for tonight; banks and things like that are probably closed for the day.”

“Oh! There’s a grocery story on the lobby level of this place. We should go check it out.”

“That makes it easy!” Yuuri wondered if that was a reason for moving here; getting his essentials in a little more private of a setting, avoiding the media.

"Yeh, let’s go!"

The pair made their way back down the elevator and followed the sign for the market store. After wandering a few aisles, Yuuri concluded this store was very much for rich people that were into health food.

“What the hell even is this shit?” Yurio asked, scrutinizing a bag of organic dried fruit. “We’re going somewhere else!”

“Yes, please. These prices are ridiculous.”

“I thought I wanted to be fancy like Viktor, but now maybe I don’t. Maybe this is why he hardly eats; I don’t even know what any of this is.”

Yuuri knew what a lot of it was, just wasn’t overly enthused about spending thrice the price for things he paid for back home if his rubles to yen conversion was right.

“Let’s go, Piggy; let’s get a bus.”

The bus let them off at a grocery story that looked a lot more humble and familiar, and Yuuri was instantly relieved.

Yurio grabbed a cart and Yuuri walked behind him, trying to spot the familiar. Mostly produce. The Cyrillic on packages and boxes he couldn’t read, but could identify by picture. And then there were those that no matter the image, he couldn’t figure out what it was or what flavor. Or what brands were good or- okay, the brand probably didn’t matter. He picked up a box of rice. Rice was rice.


“Hey, Yurio. Can you help me find soy sauce?”

Yurio came from around an aisle with an arm full of colorfully wrapped things.

“What’s all this?”

“Food for me,” Yurio answered, dumping them into the cart, packages crinkling with each thing that fell. “Hey! Don’t worry, I’ll pay for it.”

“But that’s nothing but-” Yuuri picked one item up that looked like chips. Another like cookies. “-garbage.”
“I spend my money how I want! I’ll leave them at Viktor’s place for when I’m over. Here; a gift for you,” Yurio showed him an odd-sized package with bears on it. “It’s Russian chocolate wafers. You should get some sausages and some dough, too. For sausage rolls. I’ll show you how to make them.”

It wasn’t Yuuri’s place to tell him what he could and couldn’t eat. He envied how Yurio would likely eat many of these in a sitting and not gain a kilo. “I’ll try my best to make you katsudon while I’m here.”

Instantly his eyes grew bigger. “Really? You will?”

“Yeah! You just... gotta help me find the soy and something I can use for sake and mirin.”

Between the two of them, they managed to lug back all the purchased groceries in several sacks. Yurio kept to his word and bought all the junk food in the cart (and helped find the Japanese cooking essentials).

Orlov let them in, questions in his eyes, but allowed them passage. He was a doorman, it was his job to watch for anything suspicious. A Russian teenager and foreigner staying in a resident’s place while he’s away would fit the bill even with forewarning.

Yuuri let them in with the key and they dumped their purchases on the granite countertops of the kitchen. The pair rummaged through the bags for perishables and placed them in the fridge, then tucked everything else into the cupboards that seemed logical locations.

“Viktor has a huge stack of mail.”

Yuuri looked from his task of wadding the plastic sacks together to where Yurio was. A tall side table stood against the wall adjacent to the dining table. Several carefully sorted piles lay on top; mostly letters with sparse larger envelopes and one larger box.

“This one has your name on it, too.”

“... Too?”

“Yeh. Yours and Viktor’s. Wonder who it’s from. You should open it!”

“But it’s Viktor’s mail. I’m pretty sure that’s against the law.”

“It has your name on it, too. Didn’t you hear me, Pork Boy?”

“Oh.” Sheepish, Yuuri took the box in his hands, looking for a return address or anything to indicate where it came from. The shipping label was printed, so he couldn’t identify handwriting. Seeing ‘Viktor Nikiforov & Yuuri Katsuki’ made his chest light. “Okay. Hand me a knife.”

Yurio tossed him a set of keys instead.

Working away at the sealing tape, Yuuri opened the box to find a smaller oblong box with Chinese characters on top and an even smaller box beside it. He went for the smaller one first and made quick work of the tape on the edges to reveal chocolates. A gift from a fan? The lid on the oblong box came off with ease, and inside was a pair of black high heels.

The two boys looked at one another for an explanation. Chocolates seemed a normal gift to
receive, but shoes to two men? How could those be for both of them for that matter?

It was obvious they wouldn’t fit Yuuri’s feet, so they’d have to have been meant for Viktor, wouldn’t they? Yurio was just as confused, even curious, as him.

“Let’s… put these in the bedroom for now,” Yuuri suggested.

“Not the chocolate!” Yurio swiped the small box out of the bigger one.

“It doesn’t have your name on it.”

He stuck his tongue out at him.

There was no harm in sharing. Viktor didn’t care for sweets and Yuuri didn’t mind. They wouldn’t eat the whole box. Maybe.

Yurio followed Yuuri into the bedroom and flipped on the light. To the right was a walk-in closet that opened into rows of clothing, tops and bottoms, casual and formal. Shelving lined the walls at the top of the rods that held the clothes on hangers. Tucked against the wall near the door, a variety of women’s shoes were set and arranged by color on the built-in shelves. He might have missed it if he weren’t already in the closet himself.

Yuuri had never seen so many shoes in one place before. His parents combined, or even Minako didn’t own this much. Getting closer, he noticed many still had the pricing stickers and tags. Those that were without, looked brand new or gently worn like they’d never left the house before. To the side, what looked like an unopened stack of additional boxes of still more shoes.

“Wow… Viktor really likes shoes,” Yuuri observed, touching the toe of a purple pump. It didn’t solve who the package was from, though. Not wanting to disrupt the organization of his collection, Yuuri set the box on the floor in front of the rest.

Feeling the prickle of being watched, Yuuri turned to Yurio. The teen was frowning at him, eyes intense like he was analysing an opponent.

Yuuri shrugged. “I had no idea Viktor liked shoes. I wonder how long he’s been collecting them.”

The answer softened the teen and he shrugged, too. “Yeh. I don’t get it, but at least the old man has a hobby.”

Could skating still be considered a hobby as well as a profession? Viktor had a collection of books and knick knacks in Hasetsu, too.

What other treasures were in this closet? Was this invading too much? Viktor had said that his home was Yuuri’s home… but did that include going through his things?

At the end of one of the clothes racks, almost hidden by a jacket sleeve was a small, emotional dog support vest. Yuuri ran a finger over the paw print patch and the block letters next to it spelling ‘Makkachin’ in Russian.

“Makkachin… was a service dog?”

“Is a service dog,” Yurio corrected him with a huff. “You didn’t know?”

It never came up in conversation. Without the vest to tell the story, how was he supposed to know?

The teen sighed at the silence. “You know he’s depressed, though, right?”
Also something they hadn’t talked about, but there were signs for that, at least. Signs he recognized in himself. Yuuri nodded. “I never considered that Makkachin could be an ESA, but, given how long he’s had him and how important he is to him, it makes sense.”

“Wait, so that wasn’t the reason you insisted he leave you in Moscow?!”

“No… I had a dog that passed away while I was away at competition. I didn’t want Viktor to have to go through that, too.”

All those times Yuuri witnessed Viktor getting lost in his head, would Makkachin have been able to snap him out of it immediately? How many times had he felt anxious in private and his poodle was the only comfort he had? With Yuuri right down the hall…

How was he right now? The tired panic in his blue eyes had been so piercing. Makkachin pulled through as they both had hoped, but their calls since then… there was relief, but a weight that never left. Viktor had almost lost his anchor.

“You miss him, don’t you Pigboy?”

When anyone back in Detroit would ask if Yuuri missed his family, he admitted he didn’t. He never felt the homesickness or the need for his mother like his fellow students that were away from home as well. It wasn’t due to his lack of love for his family, of course, just his independent lifestyle.

At Yurio’s question, Yuuri expected his reaction to be the same as it was years ago, but he paused. They had been apart less than forty-eight hours and yet…

He couldn’t stop the tears from forming. Nor the breath he took in.

“W-whoah, hey, Pork Bowl…”

“I… I do! Viktor…” Yuuri knew they’d see each other in a week, and yet his stupid brain and heart made it feel like longer, or maybe never. Why was it always Yurio that saw him like this? Trying to suppress a breakdown and then the dam comes crashing. Whether it was to support or mock him, it was so easy to do either.

As the tears increased, a comforting hand or jeer never came, but a shove into the clothes rack.

A sleeve helped Yuuri catch his balance. He righted himself, still holding the sleeve in his hand, long and gauzy as it partially came off the hanger. Wedged between clothing, Viktor’s scent was all around him. It was calming.

From behind him, he could hear Yurio’s muffled voice. “Huh?”

“I said I can’t believe that worked!”

“What wor-- Oh.” He had stopped crying. Yuuri adjusted the shirt back in place and noticed the cut of the neck of the shirt and how flowy it was. A ladies blouse? He took a step back and pulled the sleeve out for the garment next to it; a long cowl sweater. More cowl sweaters of various colors were next to it. More shirts like the flowy one, tunics, loose straight fits, batwing, and loose-fitting tops. At first Yuuri wondered if they were all from Viktor’s junior days when he wore girl’s clothing, but the sizes told otherwise.

Yurio had that scrutinizing look in his eyes like he did with the shoes.
A feather boa hung with several scarves, mostly sheer, on a tie rack next to an actual tie rack, followed by a collection of suits and sportcoats, many of which looked brand new just like the shoes.

Investigating further, Yuuri could identify some of them from photo shoots in ads he’d seen in the magazines he collected. He’d kept the clothing as part of compensation for the shoots, but looked like he hadn’t worn them otherwise.

“What’s the point of all this if he’s not even going to wear it?” grumbled Yurio. He nudged a pair of discarded silver heels. Then he started toeing off his sneakers, looking from one side of the closet to the other as if Yuuri weren’t there, and slipped his left foot in the heel, then his right. Carefully he found his balance in the too-big shoes and managed to take a few steps before proclaiming them death traps and stepped out of them.

“Can I try them?”

Yurio blinked at him, finally taking notice of him. “Sure. Knock yourself out,” then slid a pale blue and white feathered boa around his neck, tossing one end over his shoulder with cinematic inspiration.

The heels were also too big for Yuuri, but he found he had more mobility in them. He came over to Yurio and petted the boa. “Wow that’s really soft!”

“Yeh, but stop petting me, that’s weird!”

“Sorry, sorry. I couldn’t help it.” Yuuri let the teen be in favor of grabbing a shawl and wrapped it around his own shoulders.

It was a shame all these clothes hung in here nearly abandoned. Would Viktor mind? Not that they haven’t already been helping themselves…

“Hey, Yurio?” Yuuri began, hesitating behind the shawl. “Want to have a-”

“-fashion show?!” Yurio finished, eyes sparkling at their apparent mind link, then fished out his phone from his hoodie pocket. With fingers that could rival Phichit’s, Yurio scrolled through his phone and soon music was coming from his phone. “Runway Radio.”

Yuuri grinned at the contribution to the ambience and set out to choose his outfit.

Every article of clothing imaginable left its hook into a pile for sampling. No matter what, everything would be too large on both of them, but it didn’t matter. Sleeves hanging over hands, necklines drooping. Belts at least helped hold up pants.

Once Yurio found a pink leather jacket, the pointiest pair of flats with studs, and skinny jeans (though weren’t tight on him at all) to go with his boa, he announced he was ready. After taking a few selfies.

Yuuri secured a pair of dark, fitted slacks to his waist, a powder blue, loose-fit cowl neck that he pulled back more onto his shoulders with the shawl from earlier. He then opened the box of the new shoes with his name on them and decided to try them out.

The two were a ridiculous sight, but they were in their idol’s home, wearing his clothes, and having fun together.

From within Yurio’s pocket, the music got louder as they moved to the long hallway from the
bedroom back to the living area. Yuuri flipped the hall light on and they began their amateur catwalking, which became more like attempting to skate on the hardwood floor more than anything.

Halfway down the hall, as Yuuri twirled around, heels clicking, he stopped at what was hanging on the wall. When they’d gone down the hall earlier, they hadn’t turned the light on and had missed the various framed photos, awards, and medals.

Viktor’s entire career was laid out for them in a single place.

Photos of young Viktor in ballet slippers with Lilia and his parents. Recitals at the academy and at the theater. With Yakov at the rink. First time he podiumed, holding his medal so proud, and next to the frame, a hook for a ribbon to hang from, but no medal. Makkachin as a puppy and in his service vest. Fifi. More photos of Viktor with his long hair and Yakov at competitions and banquets that Yuuri could only make guesstimations of which ones they were. Medals hung here and there with some blank spaces and framed certificates. Graduation from the academy? The photos of Viktor once he cut his hair were just like the ones in Yuuri’s magazines he collected; smiles reserved and eyes cold. That also seemed to be when Yakov’s hair went distinctively thinner, too. Photos with Chris. At the Olympics. More photos of Makkachin weaved between the skating.

Yuuri could stare at the wall forever and still not fill in all the mysteries that revolved around his boyfriend. Looking over at Yurio’s awed expression, he could do the same.

Slowly Yurio took a side step and reached up the wall and plucked a silver medal from its hook. It was next to a photo of Viktor the year he wore the Agape costume. White and sparkling like a star in the night. Yurio put the ribbon over his head, thumb running along the grooves of the medal.

As he’d hoped, Yuuri found the year he won the Junior Championship wearing the Eros costume. The costume he first saw him in. The photograph in the frame must have been the original as had a certain realness radiate from it with the medal won hanging beside it. Like Yurio, Yuuri too removed the medal from the wall and placed it around his neck.

*Gold.*

It was tempting to take more from the collection to wear, but the pair came to a silent, mutual agreement that doing so may disrupt the balance and reverence of the wall. With the ones they did wear, they felt a certain sense of ownership and connection to Viktor.

They continued to stare up at the legendary wall until Rihanna’s *Freakum Dress* ended. Yurio pulled out his phone to look at the time and cursed. “I gotta get going. School in the morning.”

“Oh. Right.” Of course their fun had to stop. Carefully Yuuri took the medal from his neck and placed back up on the wall. “Help me put the clothes up?”

He rolled his eyes, but complied, anyway, turning the volume down on the music and returning his medal as well. “We’ll meet up after school, though. I can take you to the rink to see everybody. Then we can go to the zoo after. It’s right there.”

“Sure. That sounds great. I’ll probably… just hang out here before then.”

“If you want to be boring.”
The plans of being boring also included calling Viktor. He and Yurio had been so distracted by Viktor’s home and clothes that actually calling him had slipped Yuuri’s mind until it was too late in both countries. As he he crawled into bed, Yuuri emailed Viktor letting him know that he arrived at his apartment and would talk to him at some point tomorrow. They’d made an itinerary before plans changed, and he was curious as to what Viktor thought were must sees and places he’d insist they go to together the next time they were both in Russia.

Once Yurio left the apartment, Yuuri opened his suitcase and only got out what he needed to ready himself for bed. He’d burrowed into Viktor’s bed with the Olympic jacket and was able to fall asleep easily being surrounded by Viktor’s scent and exhaustion from the day.

Waking up in the bed of his boyfriend would have been more exciting if he were in it with him. Would Viktor have the same thought from Yuuri’s bed? Viktor wouldn’t complain about Yuuri’s small bed, especially if they were sharing it. He smiled at the image while he stretched himself up into sitting position.

No matter the timezone, Yuuri was never a morning person. The few times he had been to Russia for competitions, he always enjoyed the prolonged dark mornings.

Holding the jacket around his shoulders, Yuuri got out of bed to relieve himself in the bathroom and then made way to the kitchen for breakfast.

Yawning, he started to open cupboards in search for a cup and bowl. Eventually he opened a door to nothing but salt and pepper shakers. Small porcelain, ceramic, and glass figurines or varying colors, shapes, and themes lined the shelving within. Each pair was perfectly placed together to magnify their connection. There was some space towards the front, which Yuuri imagined was where some of the shakers Viktor brought with him once were. His favorites?

Soon the penguins from the aquarium would join the collection.

Three doors later, and Yuuri found the mugs. One more over and he found the bowls.

Grateful that coffee pots were fairly universal, he boiled water for his tea and instant oatmeal for breakfast. While they steeped, Yuuri found the drawer Viktor told him would have a list of phone numbers and codes (if he forgot) as well as the wifi password. There was also a stack of takeout menus.

Yuuri input the wifi credentials with success. It’d make calling Viktor easier, too.

Japan was six hours ahead of Saint Petersburg, which meant it was 4:23pm there. How worried was Viktor having not heard from him, yet?

Removing the tea bag and stirring his oatmeal, Yuuri pulled up the videocall app and dialed.

It rang and rang and dropped.

Maybe he was busy…

Then his phone was ringing back!

Yuuri held the phone away at a distance so Viktor could see him when he appeared.

The camera settled and the image of Viktor came in focus. His silver hair was a little disheveled, cheeks flushed, eyes bright. “Yuuri!”
“Viktor! Good morn--., uh, afternoon.”

“ *Ohaiyo* ! Sorry I didn't answer at first, I was helping Mama Katsuki with something. Did you make it there okay? Safe and sound? Sleep well?”

“Sorry my email was pretty vague. I made it fine. Yurio, Yakov, and Lilia picked me up at the airport and brought me here.”

“That's okay. Travel is overwhelming, and with Yurio, and everyone else... it's fine. Thank you for sending that email, though. I'm glad I didn't have to worry, and grateful that they took care of you.”

“Were you worried when you were waiting?”

“I just thought you were busy... and then I was busy... or asleep.”

He didn’t sound completely truthful at that, but Yuuri couldn’t blame him and smiled anyway.

“Okay, good. Yurio was here with me last night for a while. It's okay that he's here, right?”

“Sure, I don't see why not as long as he doesn't make a mess. Or at least cleans up after himself. He's never seemed interested in hanging around before, but I guess with you there…” Viktor shrugged.

“I think you'd be surprised how much he's wanted to .”

“Yuri Plisetsky, a Viktor Nikiforov fanboy?”

Yuuri offered a shrug of his own with one shoulder while sipping his tea. He wouldn’t out the teen and ruin what reputation he had.

“Just don't let him leave dishes in the sink, please. Or wrappers in the seat cushions!”

“I'll leave it as clean as it was when you left.”

“I'm not worried about you , Yuuri; I trust you . But I've seen Yurio's bedroom and you shouldn't have to clean up after him.”

“Oh I won't clean up after him. I'll make sure he cleans up after himself.”

Viktor swelled with pride at the offer. “Thank you. Oh! Speaking of cleaning, I had to clean the big bath out this morning in the onsen.”

“That's kind of a big task.... why did you have to that? Offer to help out around the onsen?”

“I've been helping with chores, yes, but Makkachin decided to join me without asking last night.”

“Vicchan liked to get in, too!” Yuuri laughed. The little poodle always wanted to be where he was.

“ *Dogs* . Mama Katsuki says he can come in with me before I clean the *ofuro* later. But that means I guess I'll be cleaning that, too.”

“At least it's easier to clean.”

“That's good to hear!” Viktor chuckled and looked away, nervously. “It took forever to clean the other one…”

Yuuri sighed and slumped in his seat. “That's one chore I don't miss having to do.”
“It’s good to stay busy, though…” He continued to look off to the side, small glance to the screen with a careful smile. “So do you have big plans for Saint Petersburg today?”

“I think I may stay close. Then go to the rink when Yurio gets out of school. And probably the zoo.”

“I love the zoo. I hope the apartment is comfortable enough. Sorry that it’s kind of a mess. I left in a hurry.”

“Your definition of a mess should never meet mine…”

Viktor brought a finger to his lips. Not a good sign. “I don't know. Your room is pretty tidy.”

If Yuuri weren’t guilty of the same thing, he would have protested. “You’re in there, huh?”

“I missed you.”

“We’re both sleeping in each other’s bed, so it's safe to say we're missing each other.”

The finger remained and a smile spread behind it. “I haven't confessed to that yet.”

Blush prickled his cheeks and neck. “... oh. Well I did. So…”

“Yuuri~ Did you like sleeping in my bed~?”

“It’d be better if you were here, but for now it's what I have.” After everything they’ve done together, it was ridiculous to feel shy about sleeping in his bed.

Viktor softened, reading his honesty, and smiled. “Of course I slept in your bed. Makkachin did, too.”

Yuuri felt relief over surprise. “Makkachin was sleeping with me before you were.”

“I know. He kept sneaking out. Not that I blame him.”

“You don’t have to worry; you're still my favorite. But I'm glad that you slept in my bed. Neither of us could ask first, huh? Or maybe we just assumed?”

“I didn’t think that you were going to sleep on the sofa.”

“Okay, you're right; it doesn't make sense!”

Makkachin snuffled onto Viktor’s shoulder and peered down at the phone Viktor was holding. He tilted his head and gave a small bark at recognising Yuuri.

To quiet him, Viktor pet his head. “I hope you don’t mind that I didn’t ask... I don’t have a Yuuri jacket”

“... I didn't even think about it! I kind of need my Japan jersey now. Maybe I can get another one?”

“It’s okay. Maybe I’ll raid your closet later.”

Viktor was teasing, and had it not been for Yuuri’s adventures with Yurio last night, he would have left it at that. His face grew warm once more. “Uh... um. You. You can. If you want.”

“Ooooh? Really?” Viktor’s eyes flashed in awe, looking around the room from his position on the
bed. “Well I wasn't going to, but…”

“You... weren't?”

“No.” His expression fell flat. “I remember how you screamed the first time I tried to get into your room. You've always been a very private person I actually feel pretty guilty for not asking first before coming in here.” He wasn’t the only one feeling guilty. “Um... well. Then it was because I had a bunch of posters of you on my wall and if you came in and saw how much of a fanboy I was... I was embarrassed.”

“Oh!” The teasing tone returned.

Yuuri dropped his head to the table in shame.

“So if I look in your closet, am I going to find a collection of Nikiforov memorabilia?”

“As much merchandise as a Japanese boy and his friends and relatives could get with their limited Russian and resources,” his voice carried from his face in the table.

“I can't wait to see what you've gotten your hands on.”

Suddenly he remembered the state of his closet, and lifted his head to look at Viktor, who was watching him. “Careful when you open the door…”

“Oh, it’s like that? I’ll use gloves, if you like.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. It's not super organized as it was kind of shoved in there in a panic. I haven't moved it much since that day you tried to come in.”

“I guess you didn't need them with the real thing there.” When Yuuri only responded with a nod, Viktor continued. “I won't if you're really not comfortable with it.”

“No, no, it's fine!! It's just weird is all. Being on the phone with you while you do it. After we hang up you can?” It was only fair since Viktor wasn’t present for his raid.

“I wouldn’t want to embarrass you or anything. I’ll try not to pry too much.”

How much prying was too much? If Viktor was going to discover Yuuri’s not-so-secret secrets, it wasn’t right for Yuuri to be dishonest. “There was a package waiting when I got here with both our names on it.”

“Oh? Oh... that’s probably from Chris. He said he was sending something. Not many people have my home address.” He bit his lip in thought. “He mentioned that you should take care of it right away, so if you haven’t opened it already…”

“Yurio's a bad influence... Sorry, I did.”

“No, it’s okay. It had your name on it, right? What did he send? I bet it had something to do with chocolate.” There was a pause, and then he looked worried. “I hope that’s what it was if Yurio was with you.”

“There was chocolate. And shoes.”

A nod at the chocolates and then Viktor froze, eyes widening. He blinked, and laughed. “Black high heels?”
“Yeah. I wasn't expecting it!” Unexpected, but not a bad thing. Yuuri hoped that came through in his voice.

Viktor’s smile was strained and calm. He shifted on the bed to show more of him petting Makka on the head. “Oh, Christophe,” he finally said as if that explained everything.

“He likes sending shoes to you?”

“Sometimes. He’s funny. And he thought we’d be there in Saint Petersburg together, but.”

“So it’s a running joke?”

“You could say that.” Viktor looked away and kissed Makkachin’s head.

He was trying to dismiss it, but there were so many shoes… it had to be more than that.

“Something you’ve had for many years?”

“Yuuri?” Viktor looked back at the phone, quizzically, though asking his name in such concern, it twisted the knife of guilt in Yuuri’s chest.

“I wanted to put the shoes away - they are too big for me - so I took them to your closet.” The moment Viktor looked away, Yuuri continued. “I’m sorry! I shouldn't have gone in there.”

“Well, if you’ve already raided my closet, then I’m definitely going to raid yours, now. And I’ll look for kiss marks on the posters, too.”

He deserved frosty response. All of it. “That's fine. It's only fair.”

“And I’ll go through your drawers. Makka, what kind of secrets do you think Yuuri has?”

The poodle tilted his head at the question much like Yuuri’s.

“S-secrets? I don't think I have any outside my merch, but you’re welcome to go through anything you want.”

“Thank you, Yuuri. It’s all right. I trust you. Besides, I think you’re enough of a mystery on your own just as you are. Which is just how I like you.”

“I’m mysterious? Wait.” Yuuri took a large breath. As much as the playfulness back in his voice was appreciated, he couldn’t let him gloss over the matter at hand. “Viktor. Is it really okay that I went in your closet without permission?”

Viktor went quiet again, watching his own fingers pet his dog. The same strained and practiced smile eventually came to his lips. “My home is your home, Yuuri. Just please try not to make a mess.”

Even though he said that, Yuuri still felt like he broke a promise, tread somewhere he shouldn’t have. He sighed once more. “Your invitation is still really open. I don't want to step where I’m not allowed. Is there anything I shouldn't touch?” He’d frightened the deer away and he had to gain its trust back.

There was only a moment’s hesitation before Viktor responded. “The only thing off limits is the top shelf in my closet. Everything else is... fine, as long as you’re careful.”

Yuuri thought back to the top shelves he saw. It was mostly unlabeled boxes, but he’d do what was asked. He would not touch, look, or think about them anymore. “When you go through my closet,
you can have whatever piece of clothing you like.”

Immediately Viktor perked up, eyes bright at the offer. “Really?”

“I don't know how much it'll smell like me or how much a significance you'll find, but please help yourself.”

“We can trade back when you come home!”

Yurio texted at lunch time to give Yuuri the directions to the rink and to meet him there with his skates. Nothing complicated. He could take the bus and metro or walk. There was time, so he opted to walk. It’d give him an idea of the area and he didn’t mind an over two hour journey on foot. Getting to take Viktor’s routes was exciting.

He packed his skates and warmups in his duffle. Yurio invited him, but did that mean it was okay with Yakov and the rest of the team? The last thing Yuuri wanted to do was impose. If it got too awkward, he could leave…

For now he’d go by Yurio’s plan.

Yuuri laced his shoes, wrapped his scarf, fixed his beanie, slung his duffle over his shoulder, and headed out the door.

The apartment hallways were quiet, as was to be expected on a Tuesday afternoon. However, when Yuuri reached the lobby, Khoma and Orlov were as hardworking as ever. Khoma looked up from his paperwork to acknowledge him with a nod. Orlov watched him leave without a word.

Once he got to the bottom of the steps, Yuuri double checked the direction on his phone, then looked both ways before entering the icy, though mostly shoveled, sidewalk.

After pocketing his phone and taking a few steps, Yuuri couldn’t help but feeling like he was being watched. One glance behind. One to the left and one to the right and--

On the right side of the street was a tall man in a fur-collared jacket, seated on a bench by a newspaper stand. Dark hair hung in his face under his ushanka. When he realized Yuuri had noticed him, he got up and walked in the opposite direction, but not without looking back at him.

Yuuri wondered if he stood out more in this country than he thought.

From there Yuuri entered the nearby park. In warmer temperatures, it would be alive in color, but there was still a quiet beauty to the frost-bitten trees and frozen ponds. Once out of the park, he crossed the street for a time to another one, walking towards the Neva River.

Viktor spoke fondly of it like a friend.

According to the internet it, it would help Yuuri in his travels today as it was an easy marker and had less car traffic and a great view of the city across the way that he’d eventually cross to. Tall buildings under construction. Majestic, historic buildings and cathedrals.

The surface of the water was frozen in chunks and the daylight danced across them. Gulls cried overhead like they did that day on the beach in Hasetsu. Yuuri could see the similarities now. Hear and feel them, too. There was no sand for them to sit and watch the waves and the water would be too cold to dip their feet in, but a backdrop for serious conversations.
They’d come a long way since then. He smiled thinking back to their phone call this morning and how he’d owned up to his shortcomings.

Yuuri stopped on the bridge and took out his phone to take photos of the breathtaking panorama. He knew his selfie skills were mediocre, but he also knew Viktor wouldn’t care and would enjoy getting a photo from him. Posing with a hand up in a wave, he took a picture.

Along the rest of the way, Yuuri’s phone lit up with notifications for what was nearby. He stopped to research and bookmarked them for To Visit.

When he got to the other side of the first bridge in his journey, he looked for lunch. It didn’t take long to find a place that looked tourist friendly. He’d save the authentic Russian experience for when he was with Yurio later.

As a fan of Viktor, looking up pictures Saint Petersburg and its landmarks was something Yuuri was versed in. Now that he was there in person, the camera lenses didn’t do it justice. Though the buildings were coated in ice and snow, the vibrant colors of the baroque architecture popped against the grey.

Yuuri continued on inland as his phone lead him on safe and direct path, passing more and more iconic landmarks. He crossed a second bridge, walked passed the Leningrad Zoo and the rink came into view - The Sports Champions Club.

He didn’t stand outside in awe of how many great Russian skaters had trained here for long, as Yurio was calling for him with another pig name.

“Afternoon, Yurio. How was school?”

The teen shrugged in response and pulled his backpack and sports bag tighter over his shoulders, then tilted his head towards the entrance. “Let’s go inside.”

The Sports Champions Club made Hasetsu’s Ice Castle look like a cottage. Framed photos in the lobby told the story of its renovation over the years, expanding it to host basketball games as well as concerts on top of its known ice sports.

Yurio walked ahead like he owned the place, paid the fee for both of them, and almost left Yuuri staring at the wall by himself.

“How long were you outside?” Yurio asked as he picked a locker to begin changing into warmups.

He assumed the color on his cheeks was giving him away. “Not quite three hours.”

Yurio pulled his head out of his shirt, and turned to Yuuri who had taken the locker next to him. “Wait, did you walk here? I gave you instructions to the metro, you’re crazy!”

“I know, I know. I just really wanted to get a feel for the area. I’ll take the metro on the way back. Promise.”

“You’re lucky it wasn’t snowing today,” Yurio muttered in his trying not to care tone. “Just don’t pass out on me during practice.”

“I’ve put my body through worse.”

“I don’t even want to know. Hurry up, Pork Bowl!”
“How did you get dressed so fast? H-hold on!”

Yuuri finished dressing and shoved his back in the locker and grabbed his skates and followed Yurio out to the rink.

Yakov was barking orders in Russian to who Yuuri recognized as the country’s top ice dancers. Since the figure skating team was sitting on the benches, did that mean they were waiting for the ice dancers to exit?

“You mostly know everyone, but I’ll introduce you,” Yurio said, tugging at the wrist of Yuuri’s sleeve, tearing him away from watching the dancers.

One by one he was introduced. ‘Knowing’ was subjective as he only knew their names and a rough idea of their rank in competitions. Shaking hands and making eye contact and thanking them for the warm welcome did bring some comfort to Yuuri.

Mila immediately hugged him, but then just as quickly backtracked. “Can I lift you? It’s how we say hello. You’re bigger than Yuri, but I think I can do it.”

“By we, you mean you, you hag.”

“I asked permission!”

“Only AFTER you tried. And I’m not small, and neither is he!”

“Um…”

The pair ceased their bickering to look at Yuuri.

“If it’s how you greet, I don’t mind.”

The smile on Mila’s face looked like she’d just been told she’d won a million yen! Or rubles? Mila took a step forward and put her arms around his middle and picked Yuuri up enough that his feet didn’t touch the ground.

Yurio rolled his eyes.

At the end of the bleachers was Georgi, who seemed to have distanced himself from the rest in purpose to concentrate on the book he held in hand until practice officially started.

“And lastly, Georgi. When Yakov’s done I’ll introduce you to the dancers, too.”

Yurio’s explanation faded as the cover of Georgi’s book caught Yuuri’s interest. The words were in Cyrillic, but the illustration on the cover was the same as the one he had on a shelf at home and on his phone.

“That series is really good.”

Georgi looked up at him, startled at being spoken to, surprised and mildly confused at the interest. “You read... Perry Q?”

“Y-yeah…” Maybe Georgi didn’t want anyone to know about the types of books he read. Yuuri didn’t exactly advertise it, either. And yet… he couldn’t help himself from pressing further. “I think the second in the series is my favorite.”

The book he held in his lap closed, and he grasped at the spine as he bit his lip to contain himself.
“‘Candlelight’? Ahhh ‘Shudder’ definitely hit me!”

Yuuri relaxed. “So you've read all four?”

“This is my second read through!”

“R-really?” Yuuri couldn’t believe it… someone else knew about Alex and Jullian’s adventures? A fan just like him?

“Oh my god, there are two of you!” Yurio groaned.

“You’re too young to understand, Yuri,” Mila teased and ruffled his hair until he batted her hand away. She then turned to Yuuri. “I think it’s sweet. No wonder Viktor likes you.”

Yuuri paused from his fanboying at the compliment to blush. “Because I read?”

“No, because you're such a romantic!”

“Oh. I guess so?” Was he really? He liked reading it, but didn’t find himself very romantic.

Georgi stroked the cover of ‘Forbearance’ and then set it beside him on the bench with a sigh. “There was a time I thought Viktor would share my joy in this type of literature, but alas. A kinship with his lover is a good sign, so I’ll take it.”

“You mean when he was younger?” Yuuri asked, sitting on what was left of the bench on the other side of him. Georgi and Viktor were only a day apart and they trained together for so long, it was baffling why they weren’t on more friendly terms.

He didn’t answer for moment, looking out across the rink, then to each in his company with a nod. “He used to be more outspoken and idyllic. Then after therapy, he was never the same.”

Mila nodded like she had heard the story before. Yurio made a ‘tch’ sound and looked at the ground.

They all knew something he didn’t. Something important. And reading the air around them, none of them were going to tell him about it.

Before Yuuri could open his mouth to make an attempt or change the subject, Yakov was calling them to the ice.

Yurio made a quick introduction of Yuuri to the dancers like he promised before the figure skaters began their slot. Yurio skated over to Yakov for a word and came back to inform Yuuri that they couldn’t linger and had to leave immediately to have time at the zoo before it closed.

For the next hour, Yuuri skated with the Russian team like he was one of them. It was something he hadn’t experienced since Detroit and it was nice. He never considered skaters from other countries as his ‘Enemies’ like Viktor did. Though shy and generally lost in himself, he had eaten meals with other skaters and played games after events. Not quite friends, teammates would be from his own country, so maybe the correct word would be colleagues?

They were Viktor’s teammates, thus they were important to Yuuri.

When the clock struck four, Yurio came to a halt, announced his exit with their visitor, and dragged Yuuri off the ice to get dressed.
“It’s not a very big zoo, but it’s the best because it has cats,” Yurio bragged for the third time since Moscow. According to the plaque at the entrance, it was the oldest zoo in Russia. Best being up for debate.

Leningrad was small and dated, but the enclosures were clean and had a decent variety of animals on display. Due to the winter, most animals were taken into indoor exhibits. The tigers not being among them, much to Yurio’s delight.

These excited moments were reminders to Yuuri that he was only a fifteen-year-old boy. Here, and last night as they paraded around the apartment. It was nice having a sibling. Like he and Mari all over again.

“Look at her coat… so cool!” Yurio admired, leaning as close to the cage as the caution signs allowed. “Georgi says he saw tigers in the wild when he lived in Siberia.”

“Not up close and personal, I hope!”

“He’d probably be dead if that were the case. Georgi is a marshmallow. Still, seeing them outside of these bars would be…”

Amazing? The best? Whatever he was going to say was lost as the teen became to engrossed in the female tiger clawing at a toy.

The pair stayed inside the zoo until closing time then made their way to the gift shop, Yurio insisting Yuuri needed a tiger plush to take home. Yuuri wasn’t one to refuse a gift and didn’t have the heart to start, so he walked out of the shop with a tiger’s head sticking out of his sport duffle. Yurio got a slightly different plush - a cooler one - and zipped it up in his jacket.

Pulling out his cellphone from his pocket, Yurio pulled up a bus schedule. Just as he found the right route, a yellow car pulled up to the curb.

“Yakov? What are you doing here?” asked Yurio once the the window was rolled down enough.

The old man sighed like the situation was out of his hands. “Lilia has requested that you boys come to dinner tonight.”

Yurio seemed to understand and didn’t argue. “Fine, I guess I’ll take Piggy to Yat tomorrow.”

“Maybe not tomorrow, either.”

“Haa? What else does she want? She can’t hijack all my plans!”

“There will still be plenty of time to spend with Yuuri, Yuratchka.”

“Tch!”

“Like Coach Feltsman said,” Yuuri place a hand on his shoulder, “We’ve still got time. It’ll be okay. Besides, this won’t be the only time I visit.”

He frowned to keep the disappointment known, but his eyes brightened, regardless. With a huff, he opened the car door.
Lilia Baranovskaya’s home was up there with the hotel in Shanghai with the fanciest places Yuuri had been to that weren’t a national monument. High ceilings, ornate moulding and millwork, white walls with gold accents. Pottery, figurines, and framed photos all kept to a crisp and uniform aesthetic.

Yurio led them to the dining room where the table was set with fine china and crystal.

It wasn’t the first time Yuuri felt underdressed in his life. But with Yurio in his sneakers and hoodie and Yakov still in what he wore to the rink, he supposed it was fine to take a seat with them.

One by one, Lilia brought serving platters from the kitchen to place them on a tiered stand. Yuuri recognized the large ceramic bowl held borscht. Something to the side of it looking like a potato salad. A platter of dumplings. And the largest dish held a loaf of meat.

“A taste of Russia from my family,” Lilia said, untying her apron strings and laying it over the counter. “Enjoy.”

Yuuri quietly said an *itadakimasu* to himself and awaited for the food to be passed to him. As they came around, Yurio explained what was in each dish; the salad was similar to what the Russian food he’d tried in the states, but more cucumber and dill seasoned based; dumplings - pelmini - ground beef and pork and dill spiced; and the main course meat was Veal Orloff.

“Wow… this is delicious!” Yuuri said once he’d taken a bite out of everything on his plate.

Lilia dabbed at her mouth with a corner of her napkin, looking pleased. “You have ballet background, correct?”

Was this her avoiding the compliment? “Yes, Ma’am. I did ballet when I was younger. Then I took up dance classes at university in the states.”

“It shows. You have good form. Who was your instructor in ballet?”

“Minako Okukawa.”

Her calculating eyes widened for a moment. “That explains it,” she responded behind her glass of wine, without explaining anything at all. “Do you have plans tomorrow evening?”

“We did until Yakov said you’re making us do something!”

“Mind your tone, Yura; we’re at the dinner table. Also, did you bring a nice suit with you?”

If she asked Viktor’s opinion on that, he’d say no. He at least now had a new tie from Shanghai. “It’s one I wear to banquets.”

“That will suffice. Yakov and I have have extra tickets at The Mariinsky tomorrow. If you really want to get a feeling for Saint Petersburg, that should be part of it. Especially if you want to see what Viktor’s life has been like.”

Yuuri dropped the fork he held to his mouth with a piece of veal, a clink on the china.

That’s when Yurio chimed in. “Yeh! The Mariinsky is where Viktor performed when he was a student. We’re going to go to Vaganova sometime this week, too.”
Yuuri moved to pick up his fork again, but fumbled, feeling his eyes glaze over in a daze… the academy where Viktor spent his youth and learned all his fundamentals… The venue where countless greats have performed…

“Yeh, he gets like this when you talk about Viktor,” Yurio snorted with amusement. “The piggy is ultimate Viktor fanboy.”

Looking around the table, Yuuri knew wasn’t the only one, but wondered if he was the only one that was aware of it.

By the time dinner was finished and the table was cleaned up, Lilia asked Yakov to take the boys home. As much fun as Yuuri had with Yurio for the day and wanted the grand tour of the house, he was exhausted and ready to collapse.

“Fine, you’re coming over on Sunday for your birthday, anyway. I’ll see you tomorrow before the Mariinsky, da?”

“Da.” Yuuri yawned and got out of Yakov’s car, thanking him as he passed the driver’s side.

Orlov watched him approach on the walkway and opened the door for him.

In the elevator, Yuuri played with the keycard in his pocket. It was dawning on him that he was coming back to the apartment alone. Which was silly since he left it this morning alone. Maybe it was being out all day being in Viktor’s world and the people around him. And that the apartment that was much too big for one person.

Yuuri flicked the lightswitch on at the entrance, illuminating the dining room and giving a soft glow to the hall of fame he now knew was there. He toed off his shoes and lowered his duffle to the floor and set to getting ready for bed. He changed into his pajamas, then rummaged through his suitcase to find his garment bag with his suit to hang it up on the door. In the morning he’d look for an iron.

Once his face was washed and teeth brushed, he crawled into bed, his feet feeling the stress of the day.

Viktor’s jacket was still tucked into the sheets. He brought it to his chest, rolled onto his side towards the closet. With its closed door and the mysteries behind it.

There was so much he didn’t know or understand about his lover, but he would respect his wishes no matter how close the answers were to him.

The greater temptation was asking others what they knew.

If Makkachin was an ESA, it made sense that Viktor would have gone to a therapist for his depression. With what Georgi said, it sounded like he’d stopped going. Changed him to be more mature or something? Talking about mental illness wasn’t an open subject in Japan either.

Then there were the shoes… why had that mattered so much and why was Chris in on it?

Taking his phone back from the night stand, he opened a new message to Christophe Giacometti:

[Why did you send Viktor shoes?]
No, that was too accusational.

He deleted the ‘why’ and left it at ‘did.’

Yuuri didn’t speak much to the Swiss skater, but he was always responsive when he did. Quickly, Yuuri checked the time difference; Switzerland was two hours behind Saint Petersburg. Yuuri usually was more of a night owl, but he felt himself slipping and couldn’t wait for a response.

Yuuri awoke to his phone in his face and dark skies. Motion woke the lock screen to read it was 7:23am. There were also two messages. The first was from Viktor:

[Call me when you wake up! I want to hear about your day <333 ]

The second was from Chris, but he dared not open it. Yet.

Stomach grumbling, Yuuri rolled out of bed. If he was going to call Viktor, he had to wake up first. Passing out so early, he thankfully felt rested. He padded out to the kitchen to put tea on and find a skillet to make eggs, and retrieved bread from the pantry for toast. When all was finished, he sat at the table, looking out the balcony where lights from the surrounding buildings and street lamps below were still on.

With the last bite, he dialed Viktor.

“Good morning, my Yuuri!”

He didn’t look or sound upset at all from yesterday. Things were still okay between them. “Morning,” he smiled.

“I’m surprised you’re awake with how dark it still is.”

“Believe me, I am, too!”

The sound of Viktor’s soft laugh was so beautiful to hear first thing in the morning. “What did you end up doing yesterday?”

“I walked from the apartment to the rink.”

“That’s quite a distance! Didn’t want to take the metro?”

“I won’t do it again, but I really liked that I did. It was a good way to see things. Don’t worry; I’ll take the metro when I go out today.”

“Good. Don’t wear yourself out. Did you meet Yurio at the rink?”

“Yeah. I skated with teammates for their time, and then Yurio took me to the zoo.”

Viktor hummed. “He loves that place. I’m pretty sure he has a membership.”

“I think he had some kind of card he flashed when he bought tickets.”

“That Yurio… What else?”

“He was going to take me to his favorite restaurant, but Yakov picked us up to go to Lilia’s instead.”
“Lilia’s. Really? Odd.”

The bitter, yet curious, tone didn’t go unnoticed. “She’s a really good cook. I got to try some Russian things I hadn’t had before. Then Yakov drove me back here and I went to bed. Walking and skating after... I was so tired!”

“But a good day it sounds like. And what about today?”

“I’ll be doing some sightseeing on my own. Part of that is figuring out how to use the metro. Oh and tonight...” he was trying to be sensitive to whatever dislike Viktor had of his coach’s ex, but he couldn’t help how excited he was. “Lilia invited us to go to the Mariinsky.”

“I’m surprised that she’s being so accommodating... but that’s quite the treat! That’s definitely one of the places I want to take you. I’m anxious to know what you think about the theater and the performance. Ahh I wish I could be there with you!”

“I’ll text you the moment I can, all fresh with feelings!” If it weren’t impolite to have ones phone out during a performance, he’d probably give a play by play. Not that he’d answer, cause time difference. “So what were you up to yesterday? I see you’re still in my room.”

Viktor ducked his head, sheepish. “I spend a lot of time in here. It’s warm and still smells like you. But yesterday I did go through your impressive collection. Many things I forgot were even made. I didn’t find the one thing I was looking for, though...”

“What were you looking for?” A nostalgia trip?

“I was hoping to find the letter I wrote you.”

“Oh! That’s-- Mom has it. She made ‘Skating Memories’ scrapbook. She thought something like that should be somewhere safer than a drawer or closet. If you ask her, she can show you.”

The delight on his face was palpable. “I can tell you where yours is!”

“You... kept mine?”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“Because...” Because Yuuri wasn’t his only fan. There wasn’t anything memorable about the letter. They weren’t together then, so why would it be special?

“Go into the second bedroom. You’ll find it there, my little Japan Skater.”

He blushed at the name, sending him straight back to the time he received the responding letter. Yuuri hadn’t been in the second bedroom yet, the door slightly ajar. He felt around the wall for the switch.

What first caught his eye was a corner desk, then the sofa next to it, and the treadmill in front of it. To his right was a digital piano. He couldn’t help himself and touched it while he looked over to see a bookcase in front of the treadmill.

“It’s on the bookshelf. In the small storage box with flowers and Eiffel Tower on it.”

With phone in hand, Yuuri maneuvered around the piano bench and treadmill to the bookcase. He reached up to a higher shelf for an old box with dented corners and flower print. Vintage stamps and stickers where the adhesive had mostly worn off were on the lid and outer walls. There was a
label on the front of it in the same handwriting that matched Viktor’s letter.

“Go ahead and open it,” Viktor said, confirming that this was the box he was searching for.

Yuuri tuck the box under his arm and took a few steps to move the piano bench out and opened the box on his lap, putting the lid next to him.

Inside was a pile of letters and loose envelopes with some corners missing, yellowed with handling and time in different shapes and sizes, written in many languages addressed to Viktor. Some were bound with ribbon. Next to the stack was a small white bunny plush, a ziplock bag of stamps that were cut off from envelopes and one with crushed flower petals. It wasn’t a large box, so if he had to thumb through the pile, it wouldn’t take too long.

“Your letter should be against the side in a protective sleeve.”

His letter held more significance than he thought! Yuuri felt around the edges and found the familiar stationery and-- the letter was held together by tape inside the plastic as if it had been ripped. The photo Yuuri sent of himself was also creased.

Yuuri frowned and showed the letter to Viktor and quietly asked, “What happened?” Viktor never came across as someone to destroy things from fans. He wouldn’t tell him where to find it if he was going to mock him. There had to be something to it.

By how Viktor was suddenly averting his eyes, maybe he had forgotten. "Oh. Well. That... was Niko, actually."

“Niko went through your mail?” Yuuri asked, setting the phone on top of the piano, angling it so Viktor could still see him, and opened the plastic.

"Not exactly... I was reading my letters one evening when he was with me, and he got upset. Jealous, really. Yours wasn’t the only casualty from that night.”

Yuuri found more letters on the edges in protective sleeves, all taped back together. One was in French, two more in Russian, and one in English. “Jealous of your fans?”

“Yes. I used to get a lot of love letters.”

“O-oh…” Yuuri purposefully didn’t volunteer that he once drafted a love letter himself.

“Not that I knew any of them. It was really funny to me at the time, but he didn’t think so.”

“Upset that anybody was liking you at all.”

“Right. Even though I never paid attention to anyone else, he got really possessive. I guess it was my fault, though. I was teasing him. We got in a big fight after that, and I kept my letters far from him.”

Yuuri placed the other letters back inside the box. “Did you fight a lot?”

“Yeah... but look-- I kept it! And you can still read it, right?”

He nodded and looked over his young handwriting. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to bring him up.”

“No, it’s fine, Yuuri. I should have remembered the state of things. Anyway, that’s all in the past now. My Little Japan skater.”
Smiling, Yuuri took his phone back in his hand. “I still can’t believe you kept and remembered it at all.”

“It was one of my favorites, of course I did! It was so cute and earnest. Just like you!”

Had he kept his phone where it was, he could have hid his embarrassment at the compliment.

“That box of letters isn’t the only thing of interest on the bookshelf you know.”

More treasures of Viktor’s past? He looked towards the bookcase while Viktor chuckled in amusement at his obvious intrigue.

“All of my idea books are there.”

The thick-spined books with Viktor’s writing on them, that had to be what they were! Viktor’s entire skating career in their early stages… he could spend hours in this room. The rest of the trip if he really wanted to.

Viktor hung up soon after, leaving Yuuri in the second bedroom office to grab the first idea book. Pages of rough sketches, clippings from magazines and fabrics and pages of notes that Yuuri couldn’t read. By the time he got through the second book on the shelf, sunshine came through the window. He couldn’t let the day get away from him, so he patted the next idea book in line, promising to look through it later.

Walking out into the hall towards the kitchen, a photo of a younger Viktor and Chris reminded Yuuri of Chris’s unread text.

Exhaling, he tapped on the little envelope, fighting back the regret of his impulsive messaging.

[Oh good, you got my package :) Technically they are yours, too. ]

That was anticlimactic. It confirmed he was the gifter, but not why. [They don’t fit me.] Would that get Chris to tell him more? Biting his lip, he sent a second text: [Can you call me later?] The time difference was a blessing and a curse.

Putting his dishes away from breakfast, Yuuri returned to the bedroom to get in the shower when his phone rang. So much for a time delay. Or a concept of later.

“G-good morning, Chris.”

“You’re the one that asked me to call, don’t act so surprised, mon ami. To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“It’s about the shoes you sent…” Now that he was on the phone, Yuuri abandoned his plans for a shower and walked back to the wall and to the living room while Chris answered.

“I’m glad you opened it!”

Yuuri felt a bite of offense. “You didn’t think I would?”

“On the contrary, I was counting on it.”

"Oh. So do you usually send Viktor shoes?"
“Is that what he told you?”

He could hear the smile in Christophe’s voice and it made him a little uneasy. “Yeah. A long running joke?”

“Of course.” Chris sighed. “Yes I do purchase shoes for him. Poor boy hardly indulges in anything. Viktor is operating on habit is all. Don't take it personally.”

“Habit?” Yuuri leaned against the back of the sofa to look at the bookcase. Unlike the one in the office with the large project books and photo albums, this one had classic literature, children’s books, biographies on composers, architecture, and coffee table books on the shelves.

“Blaming me is how he gets by. I don’t mind if that’s what gets him up in the morning.”

Before Yuuri could question that statement, Chris continued.

“Did you like the shoes? And the chocolates?”

Yuuri raised an eyebrow, despite Chris not being able to see him. “Like I said, they didn’t fit me.”

“But did you like them?”

What was he getting at? “They were nice. Probably look good on Viktor.” He hit his heel on the rug, remembering how they were on his feet. “There’s so many in his closet…”

It was quiet for a moment and Chris changed the subject. “And the chocolates?”

“I had a few with Yurio - I mean - Yuri. They were good!”

“I’ll be sure to send you more! Or bring a box with me to Barcelona. Which reminds me, we really should get together. Make it a double date, even!”

A date with Christophe and Bastien? Would Viktor go for something like that? “That sounds like fun. I’ll have to run it by Viktor.”

“Certainly. I’ll do the same. I don’t quite recall the itinerary around the competition, so I’ll get back with you. One more thing before I go, though?”

“Sure?” Yuuri waited for Chris to leave him with some new information… some kind of wisdom to impart--

“I have a book I need to send your way. I picked it up over the summer in Amsterdam. It’s an excellent read as well as beneficial exercises.”

“Exercises? Okay, that’s not where I thought you were going with this.”

“And where would I be going?”

“I… nothing. Nowhere.” Yuuri’s face burned and he knew Chris knew it.

“Yuuri~ I could send you that type of thing, if you’d really like.”

“No!” rolled onto the sofa. “It’s fine. Yes. Send me the book you actually were talking about. Pole dancing, right?”

“Oui! And we really should keep in contact during the upcoming season.”
“Yeah. That’d be fun.” Yuuri honestly thought it would be. He just had to remember and not be shy to reach out about it.

“Perfect. Well, I best let you be on with your day and me with mine. À bientôt, Yuuri.”

“You, too.”

The line went dead. A moment later, Yuuri’s phone vibrated with a text from Chris.

[Just love him.]

Although the call left him with more questions than answers, Yuuri admittedly felt satisfied. Viktor liked shoes and maybe he was embarrassed and Chris was being protective of him and that’s all there was to it.

After Yuuri showered, he saw a text from Yurio about the evening’s plans. Originally they had planned to meet at the rink again, but with Lilia in charge, the plans changed. Even though the text was in Yurio’s words, he could picture Lilia saying them.

[Lilia says it’s impractical to make you come all the way to rink and have to go all the way back to Viktor’s to get ready. We’ll pick you up at the station at 5. Don’t be late!]

[I won’t] Yuuri texted back.

The sights on his agenda for the day were all within a mile of each other, he’d have plenty of time. And with the metro, even better.

Looking at Yurio’s instructions and Google, Yuuri head out the door for another day.

Once he reached the station, he located a kiosk for a rechargeable metrocard. Referencing the posted route and translations on his phone, Yuuri followed the signs to the correct line, admiring the beautiful and ornate interior of the station looking more like a museum with its pillars and chandeliers than an underground station.

He boarded his train when it arrived and took a seat on a nearly empty cart.

Being underground, there wasn’t much to look at it, so he busied himself with reviewing the sights he’d be visiting.

When the train came to a stop, he followed the exit signs to the surface street.

Winter clouds had parted from the morning, bringing the sun to light the day ahead.

The Church of the Savior on Spilled Blood was his first destination and he didn’t have to walk long along the canal before it came into view on the horizon. The majestic, 17th-century cathedral towered over the city with its colorful onion domes and exterior mosaics.

Yuuri followed the sign for tours and gathered with a group of tourists outside, then picked up an audio guide in English at check in. He stopped at each mural and mosaic to listen to the history and the depiction, taking photos where allowed. The natural light on the artworks from above and the general hushed tones of the tourists was calming. When he exhausted the audio tour, he took a moment to observe the church without commentary.

He exited where indicated and made his way on foot to the State Hermitage Museum grounds.
Across the canal, past the Imperial stables, and along the Myoka river, he arrived at the grand front doors of the white and teal building. Paying the fee to visit all buildings in the Winter Palace complex, Yuuri followed the path towards the bulk of his activity for the day.

What once was the home of Tsars, was the second largest art collection in the world. Egyptian, Classical, Romantic, Renaissance, fine art from Germany, France, Switzerland, antiques, jewelry, sculptures and ancient pottery lined each room. Gold ceilings and accented millwork, staircases - some renovated, some original. Yuuri even caught a few glimpses of the ground’s resident cats.

The hours he planned to spend were not enough, unfortunately. He wanted to wander the halls and take in more of the atmosphere and rich history, read every description, but he had to go back to the apartment to get dressed for the Mariinsky.

Leaving one dream sight for another.

Although, he had room in his schedule the rest of the week to come back…

With that prospect in mind, he returned the audio tour at the front desk and headed to the nearest station.

To the minute, Yuuri left the station to the surface to see Yurio dressed in suit and tie. He’d seen him at banquets before, but Lilia must have been serious on about looking ones best - crisp and clean, hair tied back and styled in place. He hoped doing his hair like he did for his free skate would meet Lilia’s approval.

“Let’s go, Pork Bowl. Yakov and Lilia are waiting in the car.”

With a nod, he fell into step beside his younger companion. Despite clearly not enjoying the formal attire, there was a spring in his step that he was excited for the evening.

The old couple were parked on the curb like Yurio had said. Lilia watched them approach through the passenger side window.

Yakov got out and lifted the seat for the boys to crawl in the back seat. Once buckled, Yakov shifted the car in drive and turned Tchaikovsky on the radio. This reminded Yuuri that he never bothered to ask what ballet they were seeing. He’d find out very soon and be grateful for whatever it was.

They didn’t drive far before they were pulling into the parking lot of a restaurant called The Repa.

“We like to eat here before a performance. Or after, depending on the run time. The cast occasional come here for meet and greets,” Lilia explained as she unbuckled her seatbelt.

“Presenting our tickets also gives us discounts,” Yakov offered, to which Lilia slapped his arm.

“He means their Russian cuisine is exquisite and they treat Mariinsky patrons well.”

Yurio rolled his eyes at their banter and Yakov got out to let them out and cross the front of the car to open Lilia’s door.

Judging by the stream of well-dressed people they joined on the way to the entrance, Yakov and Lilia weren’t the only ones that had the same idea of coming to The Repa before the show.
The walls of the restaurant were covered in ballerina paintings, hardwood floors, and colored-themed tables. Classical music filled the air. Despite the high number of patrons, they were seated quickly.

If it was a place someone like Lilia frequented, Yuuri’s hopes were high for the food quality. When Yuuri received his duck breast marinated in beetroot, the portion was smaller than expected, but the taste was heavily made up for it. Yakov offered to buy him a shot of vodka, but Yuuri kindly had to turn him down.

With the theatre being so close, they opted to leaving their vehicle at the restaurant and walked. Yakov helped Lilia into her coat and offered his arm to her. She took it, and they walked like that the whole way. Yurio may have rolled his eyes at them (again), but Yuuri couldn’t help but find it sweet.

Then he thought about walking to the theater with Viktor in furs and heels and Yurio had to break his trance by asking why he had a dumb smile on his face.

In the lobby doormen took their coats, jackets, and scarves, and the ushers showed them to their seats.

Once the four of them were seated on the second balcony, Yuuri looked the ballet pamphlet over to finally know what it was they were seeing. He couldn’t read the words, and the image of a man and woman didn’t make it obvious, so he turned it towards Yurio.

“Oh, I grabbed one in English for you.” Yurio flopped the English pamphlet in his lap.

*Sleeping Beauty*. Yuuri was about to watch Mariinsky Ballet company perform *Sleeping Beauty*.

The curtain rose with the dimming lights and the first act began with the Introduction Fanfare.

Yuuri couldn’t look away the entire time. The costumes and backdrop and the orchestra and just… *being at the Mariinsky* where ballets and operas had been performed for nearly two centuries. *Viktor*, the living legend, trained and performed here and Yuuri was sure he cried at least three times throughout the ballet thinking about it.

*Apothéose*’s last note rang through the theater and it wasn’t until it dissipated that the audience offered a standing ovation, Yuuri being among them. He knew Yurio was snickering beside him and he didn’t care.

“What a beautiful performance…” Lilia dabbed the corner of her eyes with a lace kerchief. “Varvara Fedorov was breathtaking.”

The woman who played Aurora was amazing.

Everything was amazing.

Once they were out of the theater, Yurio insisted they take a selfie. Lilia sniffed and insisted they have someone take their photo with his phone instead. Grumbling, Yurio complied and asked a couple to assist. The girl recognized Lilia and was more than happy to.

On the way back to the car, Yuuri texted Phichit first. Telling him he went to the Mariinsky and it was incredible and like a dream come true with lots of exclamation points to get his excitement across.

When the message sent, he started another one to Viktor, going into more specifics about the
ballet; forms of the ballerinas and the music and the costumes and favorite scenes. Capslocked and gushing.

“Texting Vitya?” Yakov asked, adjusting the rear view mirror.

Yuuri clutched his phone to his chest, eyes bright from the back seat. “Da!”

“Why don’t we drive by Vaganova on the way home?” Lilia suggested.

“We’re going there tomorrow,” yawned Yurio. “It’s dark now, it’s not like he’d see anything.”

“Yuuri may like seeing the distance relation between the academy and the theater.”

Yuuri couldn’t find his voice, so nodded. From the window of the car, Yuuri watched the night-lit buildings come into view.

Tomorrow couldn’t come soon enough.

Morning came and Yuuri woke up to responses to his post-ballet texts. Phichit’s contained a lot of laughing emojis and congratulations on getting to walk in the footsteps of his lover.

Viktor was similarly amused and asked for details over their morning call.

Yuuri went into the second bedroom and sat at the piano after breakfast to call him.

“It was incredible, Viktor. Did you ever freak out when you were there?”

“At first. Mostly at practices. Then I got too caught up in making my positions perfect. Had I stuck with ballet, it would have been different. It was vital to my skating my career.”

Idly Yuuri tinkering away at the keys.

“What are your plans for the day?”

“Marble Palace, Faberge Museum, and Saint Isaac’s Cathedral. Then I’m meeting up with Yurio for a late lunch and we’re going to Vaganova.” He tried to suppress a giddy giggle, but it didn’t really work. “After that, Yurio wanted to show me Yeliseev Emporium.”

“Wow. All good choices.” Viktor winked. “I’ll leave you in Yurio’s hands.”

“He really likes showing stuff off. Getting to impress me.”

“Well he is a teenager. Yuuri… is that The Lilac Fairy you are playing?”

Yuuri stopped his hands with a smile. “It might be.”

“Play it for me from the beginning,” he practically wiggled. “This time I’m paying attention!”

“Okay, okay.” Yuuri adjusted his phone to stand more securely to could play with both hands. The song was significant to the both of them, of course it was of the few he could play by heart.
The Marble Palace was similar to Winter Palace in basic design, though smaller, with fewer paintings, more sculptures, and redundantly marble, though no less stunning and beautiful. When he finished there, he walked through The Fields of Mars to follow along the Fontanka river to his next destination.

The Faberge Museum was celebrating its third anniversary. It was the newest attraction on Yuuri’s list, but the small and intricate gifts to past Tzars were a curiosity he wanted to see. The collection was less extravagant, but worth the price of admission.

Taking the metro from there, Yuuri went to Saint Isaac’s Cathedral from there. It was the largest Russian Orthodox church in the city, as well as the most unique that stood out among everything else with gold accents, columns, and pilasters. There were some mosaics, though less hodgepodge than Savior on the Spilled Blood.

Just as he was finishing up, Yurio was texting him that he was on his way to the meeting point at the rink. To save on time, Yuuri suggested he meet him at the cathedral and they leave to Yat from there. Naturally, Yurio claimed that was his idea from the beginning.

Yuuri waited outside on the southside of the square for his companion to arrive. He only had time to play with his phone for fifteen minutes before Yurio arrived.

“Are you sure Yakov’s okay with you skipping practice?”

“It’s not skipping when I have permission,” Yurio huffed. “We don’t have a whole lot of time to eat since Lilia booked us an appointment with the madam at Vaganova, so let’s get going.”

The pair took the nearest metro north to Yat.

Yurio’s restaurant of choice was a family-friendly buffet. Themed alcoves and tables. Some wood paneled walls, some wallpapered, some plastered with painted designs with carpet runners on the floor gave off a homey feel. It was a an opportunity to try more Russian food. And dessert.

He lost track of what he tried, but everything tasted like something his mother would make if she were Russian. Even the rich and moist cake.

Full and lethargic, the boys left the restaurant and caught the surface bus to the academy.

Vaganova loomed just as impressively at day as it had at night. Two-hundred seventy five years of ballet started here. As they approached the front doors, which were humble by comparison to the soft yellows and whites of the rest of the buildings, Yuuri could feel his chest tighten.

Not just ballet’s start, but Viktor’s, too.

A woman who looked like she could be Lilia’s sister was waiting for them in the lobby on the other side. She wasn’t interested in small talk and began the tour.

Yurio looked around, but didn’t seem like he was listening, as if he’d taken the tour several times. Probably had. If her accent was too thick, he’d try to catch Yurio’s ear to translate.

She showed them the dance rooms where ballerina’s stood en pointe on bars and Yuuri could very easily picture a young Viktor doing the same. The academy was extremely competitive, it was hard to believe that only half of the girls in the room would make it to graduation. Statistically, anyway.

“Viktor Nikiforov had a lot of potential as a danseur,” she said out of nowhere, passing a wall of photos of outstanding students. “It has benefited his skating career as he wished.”
Yuuri nodded, trying to recognize the faces on the wall to little success.

“He auditioned to be in the yearly production of The Nutcracker, but due to scheduling of the figure skating season, he never was able to be in a performance. A pity.”

It really was. Yuuri would die on the spot seeing that.

Clean and pristine floors and walls. Classrooms with desks. Recital rooms with pianos

They walked past the dorm halls, boys and girls under the age of eighteen played and gathered in their friend cliques, though hushed when they caught eye of the madam.

She lead Yuuri and Yurio out an exit to the courtyard, concluding their tour with thanks and good evening.

On their way to Yeliseev Emporium, Yuuri stopped to take a photo from across the street of the Alexandrinsky Theatre, and then take a detour through Ostrovsky Square.

Crossing the street, they arrived at the corner shop. Figures made of fondant and bread were in the display windows, as well as showcasing a sample of the sweets and trinkets inside. It was just like Yurio to take him to a place like this.

The teen caught his skeptical look. “The food hall is around the corner. It’s really cool, okay!”

When they walked in the doors, ‘whimsical’ would have been more of the word Yuuri would use. An old-time gourmet sweet shop with specialty wines, vodkas, and souvenir trinkets. So quaintly touristy.

By the time they checked out, Yurio had a brown paper back filled to the brim of baked goods and weighed sweets, while Yuuri a box of tea cakes and a Khokhloma pig figurine.

For dinner they wandered into the food hall of Nevsky Prospekt. The rest of it was shopping and nightlife, neither of which interested the pair, so they took their leftovers and purchases and took the metro back to Viktor’s apartment.

“So what haven’t you done yet?” Yurio asked, stuffing his face with a pastry, their spoils spread on the dining table.

“I’ve done the major things I think. Wondering if I can go to a symphony performance.”

“Like the Philharmonic at Grand Hall or something?”

“... Sure? I’m really at your mercy.”

“I’ll look into it.”

“Thanks. I didn’t spend enough time at the Hermitage Museum, so I’d like to go back to that, too. There’s a few places that would be a day trip, but I don’t know if I’m up for something like that. Cathedrals and theaters that would be nice to see the outside of at least. Maybe the library? A bookstore.”

“Books is Georgi’s department. I’m sure Mila may have some things suggestions, too. Hey! What
if we all went out on Saturday? They usually don’t work on weekends.”

“Really? That’d be great!” Spending more time with the team actually sounded fun. He didn’t mind doing things alone, but the idea of their company was nice.

“Other than dinner on Sunday, you should think of something you want to do on your birthday.”

A knock at the door cut off Yuuri’s response.

The boys looked at one another. Neither were expecting anyone. Maybe it was Orlov returning something they dropped from their outing on their way through the lobby.

Being the temporary owner of the home, Yuuri got up to answer it. He unlocked the knob and chain, and pulled it open, hoping whoever was on the other side knew English. “Can I help you?”

A man taller and stockier than Viktor stood at the door, with dark hair and piercing eyes. “I am looking for Vitya.” English, yes. But under a heavy accent. “Is he here?”

Yuuri shook his head, gripping the handle out of view. “Sorry, he’s not.”

He huffed. Disappointed. “Do you know when he will be back?”

“I don’t. I’ll be sure to tell him you stopped by, Mister…”

The man didn’t offer a name, but took a step inside the door, and Yuuri moved to block his path. Immediately, Yurio was at his side. Taking his step back, the man looked down at them both, mostly Yuuri, amused. “You are Yuuri Katsuki, da?”

“Da? And you are?”

Again he avoided answering. “I will stop by later.” And with that, he turned on his heels and walked back down the hall to the elevator.

“Who the hell was that?” Yurio asked once the door clicked closed.

Yuuri shook his head. “I don’t know, but I think I saw him the first day I left the apartment, across the street.”

“Eh? Really?” Yurio looked thoughtful a moment, then shook his head. “Anyway, about tomorrow.”

Yuuri hummed and joined Yurio back at the table.

Chapter End Notes

Chris: He's going to hate me.
Baz: Viktor?
Chris: How did you know :O?
Baz: Since I'm not mad at you.
Chris: Aww... comforting. But yes, he will be. I meddled, but it's for the greater good!
He'll thank me later.
Baz: Then all is well.
Chris: Speaking of; double date in Barcelona?
Baz: With the new lovebirds?
Chris: It sounds like fun, doesn't it!
Baz: you forgot our plans, didn't you?
Chris: ... I did not :) I'm sure we can adjust.

Next time on Gay Skate: More sightseeing / Surprise encounter / secrets / family bonding time
The Tower
Chapter by mamodewberry

Chapter Summary

Yuuri's time in Russia is drawing to a close. Each day sheds more light on Viktor's past and those around him, but what is true and what is false?

#TheBoy #Brief Spooky Moments #It'll be okay #Team Russia #Yurio Backstory
#SASHA

Chapter Notes

I assure you two months between chapters isn't going to be the thing weh. Thank you for the patience and support on Twitter. It means a lot!!

Regardless of the wait, here's part two of Yuuri in Russia. I hope you all have enjoyed Yuuri finding out things about Viktor for you. They will be together VERY soon and all this will greatly improve their relationship. Or WILL IT? Indulgent stuff happened in these two chapters, I hope I remembered them all. Thank you to Gab for taking on the flashback again. Can't say no to more Phichit!

Gab: aaah my heart. Now that we are in the final quarter of the fic (yes, we're 75% of the way through!), many of the threads that we've been weaving from the past 18+ months are beginning to come together... and it's looking beautiful. Forgive me for gushing, but Mamodewberry has done a great job with Yuuri here... *_*;; ♥ Plus I got to write more Phichit! YAY!

While I've been working on 26, Gab has pumped out a few projects:
- Chapters 16-20 bundle of Vitya Dairies. Please read for teen Viktor and further connecting of threads and omg further understanding Georgi. READ ME.
- A super sweet post-nla cookie tax ficlet READ ME.
- And a super dark and depressing canon end of series/a route we considered for NLA READ ME.

New art!:
Quel did up the dress-up scene in Ch25! NGL, she was the artist for the job from the beginning! Here
A beautiful stained glass-styled fairy tale illustration by Misa! Here

Recommended listening:
Good to Be Alive (Hallelujah), by Andy Grammer
Once Upon a December, as performed by Moises Nieto
Dancing With the Bear, by Jan A.P. Kaczmarek
Witchcraft, as performed by Frank Sinatra
Detroit, Chicago

Phichit (18 years-old)

Su.Chu: she’s very cute, phi

Phi+ChuChu: isn’t she though???

Su.Chu: how does Yuuri feel about her?

Phi+ChuChu: um he thinks she’s amazing??? Obviously since he helped me carry all of the tubing home!!!

Su.Chu: are you setting up a network?!

Phi+ChuChu: there’s not enough room to set up an extensive empire but we’re making it work.

Phi+ChuChu: it's helping to fill the void of his poodle

Phi+ChuChu: I’m still not over how he named his dog after viktor omg

Phi+ChuChu: here, I’ll send you some more photos of the hamster tunnels

Su.Chu: omg phi that’s

Su.Chu: …

Su.Chu: impressive

Phi+ChuChu: i know right

Su.Chu: mom and dad need to cut back on your allowance

Phi+ChuChu: excuse u, I got most of these from freecycle and craigslist

Phi+ChuChu: people just throwing their hamster stuff away

Phi+ChuChu: perfectly good, just needed a little vinegar

Su.Chu: Craigslist?! You’re going to get killed!!!

Phi+ChuChu: nah that’s why I have Yuuri!

Su.Chu: neither of you would survive if anyone tried to fight you omg, phi please, you’re scaring me

Phi+ChuChu: America isn’t THAT bad, Su

Su.Chu: I’m sending more Buddhas
For all of his sister’s worrying, life was good and comfortable. Phichit and Yuuri settled into a routine that worked for them both and revolved around the balance between skating practice and getting their degrees. It was busy, but the time at the apartment was spent in commiseration over studying and catching up on American pop culture kept them both sane despite the rush.

Additional Buddhas arrived in a care package and decorated the apartment with the hamster tubing, and new Viktor Nikiforov posters, which Yuuri rotated out every couple of weeks.

“To keep them from getting dusty,” he said.

“Uh huh.” Phichit wasn’t convinced. If Yuuri was trying to avoid looking like he was obsessed, he was doing a really, really bad job.

But that was okay. He didn’t mind. At least Yuuri had something.

Actually, he had a lot of things.

He was quiet, tidy, fun to watch movies with, knew how to make rice, was game for trying out new restaurants (even though he complained about his diet every time), and had even taken to playing with his buddies online.

+guang-hong: he sounds like the perfect roommate
Phi+ChuChu: he really is
+guang-hong: like a housewife
Phi+ChuChu: that reminds me
Phi+ChuChu: did you know that there is a movement for feminist pole dancing?
+guang-hong: what no way
Phi+ChuChu: for real! And it’s not just for women obviously
+guang-hong: are you doing it?!?!?!
Phi+ChuChu: i don’t have the time to pick up another class but it looked fun, ngl!
+guang-hong: omg phichit
Phi+ChuChu: it’s supposed to be really empowering! And it’s a great form of exercise. You’d have to be strong to do it, just think of that core strength right??
+guang-hong: my parents would kill me if i even considered
Phi+ChuChu: your parents won’t even let you pick your own programs for your skates ;)
+guang-hong: shut up!
Leo.Leo.Leo: hey it’s okay
Leo.Leo.Leo: is pole dancing something Yuuri is doing, Phi?
Phi+ChuChu: mmmmmmaybe
Phi+ChuChu: but you didn’t hear it from me
+guang-hong: :/
Leo.Leo.Leo: i could see that. He’s really a pretty cool guy and doesn’t afraid of anything does he?
Phi+ChuChu: nope
Phi+ChuChu: he sure is not
+guang-hong: wait isn’t that a meme, Leo???
+guang-hong: right??
Leo.Leo.Leo: :)
+guang-hong: yessss
Phi+ChuChu: omg you guys
Phi+ChuChu: anyway he says it’s to work off all of the food I keep “making” him eat
+guang-hong: you’re a bad influence
Phi+ChuChu: no I’m the BEST influence :)
Leo.Leo.Leo: i can’t wait for summer skate

Since Phichit didn’t qualify for the GP that season, he was free to focus on other academic pursuits while Yuuri stressed himself out. It made for an interesting balance; Yuuri getting barked at by Ciao Ciao while Phichit took photos, then Phichit running back and forth between activities while Yuuri lounged with his books. His saucy, saucy books.

“They’re not that saucy.”
“Uh huh.”
If Yuuri’s red-as-Sundays face weren’t enough proof, the Amazon reviews clenched it. Yuuri Katsuki was all about the trashy romance. At least the premises seemed sweet. Other than the ratings, they weren’t all that different than his own musicals, really. Phichit couldn’t blame him. But it didn’t stop him from teasing him any chance he got, either.

“So are you saving yourself for Viktor?”
“Wh-what?! What are you talking about?”
“I’m just saying, the way you gaze up at his poster… and rewatch his skates… and talk about him… It’s kind of like you’re in love with him.”
“I’m not. He’s just…”
“Your idol, right?”
“Yeah. I guess.”
Phichit set his little grey hamster on Yuuri’s shoulder. “You’ll get to skate with him soon, Yuuri.”

He relaxed, reaching up to pet the little creature between her ears. “You think so?”

“Yeah! And Lotus thinks so, too.”

“Is that right?”

Lotus sniffed his face, then slid down his shirt in an attempt to escape, but was thwarted by careful hands that offered her back to her owner.

“We can watch The King and the Skater again, if you want. To inspire you.”

“Or because it’s your favorite?”

“That, too!”

“Didn’t you say it was banned in Thailand?”

“They just didn’t allow it to be filmed in Thailand, but it’s not really Thailand, so it’s fine.”

“If you say so.”

That was the thing with Yuuri. He was good at calling Phichit out on his crap, too. Even though they spent a lot of time watching movies, playing games, eating junk food, and avoiding people, they kept each other on target. If Phichit started to get distracted by too many projects, Yuuri kept him focused. If Yuuri started to get too wound up and self-conscious, Phichit helped him relax.

Relax and experience a bit of the life that Wayne State University had to offer.

“Do you want to do the Global Festival? #YouAreWelcomeHere!”

“What’s that?”

“It’s where we make food from our home countries and sell it to all the Americans so they can pretend they’re cultured for the day.”

“Huh.”

“You’ve been here for two years, Yuuri! How do you not know about this?!”

“I’ve been busy?”

“I’m making curry. Come on, there’s a farmer’s market on campus every Wednesday.”

“Phichit, does it look like we have a kitchen to you?”

“...no, but I know someone who does.”

“Of course you do.”
Su.Chu: How did the curry go over?

Phi+ChuChu: great! It killed a bunch of people

Su.Chu: let me guess, you didn’t give them a spiciness level to choose from

Phi+ChuChu: no i did!

Phi+ChuChu: but they didn’t listen

Su.Chu: they’re white, phi!

Phi+ChuChu: not everyone was white and besides

Phi+ChuChu: IT WAS COCONUT CURRY

Su.Chu: still

Phi+ChuChu: anyway, Yuuri knows how to make a good curry, too!

Su.Chu: japanese curry… can’t relate

Phi+ChuChu: you should try it next time you’re in japan

Su.Chu: I’m still in high school phi

Phi+ChuChu: sounds like a personal problem

Phi+ChuChu: imagine it, though. We were next to my indian friend, who also had curry. So it was curry, curry, curry.

Phi+ChuChu: curry day

Phi+ChuChu: best day

Phi+ChuChu: the brits loved it

Su.Chu: omg ?

“Okay, that should be it for the division of assignments…”

Phichit squinted at his list, then at the others in his group, Devin, Candace, and Blake. School in Thailand had been different than in America, where the sitcoms were actually somewhat true to life, so a group project didn’t necessarily mean that everyone was going to do their fair share. So far, he’d had to do a handful of these kind of assignments, and many of his peers were all too pleasant to let the token Asian deal with the brunt of the work.

He wasn’t amused.

Not that he was going to let it show, of course. That wasn’t his way. He always had a smile for every person and every occasion, and in the spirit of mai pen rai, he had to let it go. At least, he wasn’t going to be a jerk about it.

But that didn’t mean he was going to be a doormat.
“When do you guys want to touch base?” Phichit tapped out his password, then brought up his calendar app. “Tuesday?”

“Uhh…” Devin had already shoved his list into his book, and then into his backpack, joining the others in the shuffle out of the room. None of them looked ready for this conversation. “The project isn’t due for a month.”

“Yeah, but regular check-ins will mean we’ll be less likely to fall through the cracks. What time works for you guys?”

The three other biology students reluctantly looked at their phones and mumbled out a variety of excuses, but Phichit wouldn’t hear any of it, pushing on with that same smile.

“It’ll be great. We can work together and get it out of the way well ahead of deadline.”

“Where are we meeting? Some cafe? A diner?”

“No, that’s too noisy. Let’s use Phichit’s apartment.”

Phichit’s smile almost wavered, but he was prepared for that. “Sure! I’ll get pizza. It’ll be fun.”

Free food turned out to be all the persuasion they needed.

Except that Yuuri wasn’t thrilled about the company.

“It’ll be fine, Yuuri! You can hide if you want.”

“Where?”

Phichit looked around their tiny dorm room. The two bed, one bath apartment was plenty of space for them, but that was literally all it was: a room with two beds, two desks, and an on-suite bath. Half of the room had posters of Viktor plastered on it, the other had tourism of Thailand and hamster tubing underneath the shrine. “I don’t know. Your wardrobe?”

Yuuri wasn’t amused. “I’m not going to Narnia, Phi.”

Most of the time spent in their room was either on their bed or on the floor, where they had a comfortable rug and a collection of pillows right in front of the TV that they shared. The TV was there for the Wii.

It really wasn’t that good a place for studying in a group.

“Just try to make it work?”

“Uh huh…”

It wasn’t nearly as fun when Yuuri was saying it.

As it turns out, bringing outsiders to the cool skating club lair was a Mistake. Not because there hadn’t been enough room- that had been fine, because none of the others were used to having tons of room, and they were fine with sitting on the floor or on beds, and they thought it was kind of ‘exotic’ -but because they liked it oh so much.
“Hey Phichit!”

“Candace, sawasdee khrap! What’s up?”

“I love when you do that, that’s so cute!”

“Thanks! It’s hello in Thai.”

“Oh my god. Perfect. Ugh! I just love all of that Asian stuff.”

Phichit turned his gaze to the Tour Thailand posters on his wall and breathed deep, fingers rubbing down the back of his little hamster buddy. “So what can I do for you, Can?”

“And a cute nickname, too?!”

“Yes. Everyone gets one around here.”

“Can I call you Phi-chan?”

“Mai pen rai. What’s up?”

“Right. I was calling to ask about Yuuri.”

“Yeah? What about him?”

“It’s… well, do you know if he’s dating anyone right now?”

Phichit’s gaze travelled from Thailand to the dark silhouette of Viktor Nikiforov above Yuuri’s bed, where just the highlights of his muscles were prominent in black crushed velvet against the ice, and bit his lip. “I don’t think so, but-“

“Really?!”

“-but I don’t think he’s your type, Can.”

“No?”

“I’m not his keeper or anything, so you can ask him, but I think he might have his sights set on someone already.”

“That’s okay. I like a challenge. Thanks, Phi-chan. That’s great!”

“Sure. Hey, have you done any work on your part of the group assignment?”

“Sorry, I gotta go. Talk to you at the next group sesh!”

Of course.

Su.Chu: so what did you do?

Phi+ChuChu: I told him the truth

Su.Chu: and what did he do?
Phi+ChuChu: came up with a billion excuses to not be at the dorm when I had my next study group
Su.Chu: smart man
Su.Chu: she’s the blonde one, right?
Phi+ChuChu: right
Phi+ChuChu: problem is, she’s decided that we’re friends and she’s in drama
Su.Chu: so what? Once you’re done with this class, you’re done with the rest of your generals right
Phi+ChuChu: but I want to be in drama too :’(
Phi+ChuChu: they’re doing the Theater at Wayne Tour this month and she’s one of the volunteers to guide it so if I want an in I have to network it’s the best option
Su.Chu: mai pen rai
Phi+ChuChu: mai pen raaaaaaaaiiiiiii
Phi+ChuChu: so what’s new with you?
Su.Chu: oh please

“Yuuri, Ciao Ciao, I have an important announcement.”
The two of them looked up to the bleachers where Phichit stood, addressing them with camera held out, squinting.
“Get down from there and get your skates on. We have a lot of work to do, Chulanont.”
Celestino, ever the skeptic, turned back to his clipboard, but Yuuri stayed watching him. Because he was a good friend.
“I’m going to start writing for The South End.”
“The student newspaper?” Yuuri leaned back against the barrier. Curious, but not as surprised as one might expect. Just like he’d been with the apartment move. “Don’t you have enough to do?”
“Maybe.” Phichit hopped down to join him. “But it’s a good excuse to pad my curriculum vitae, and I need more Instagram fodder for Su. Plus spying. And for being conveniently busy when I need to avoid certain people.”
“How is writing for the paper going to help you with a career in biochem?”
“I’m going to be writing lots of papers as a researcher, Yuuri. That’s the point. But more importantly… my parents will probably finance a new and better phone if I can come up with a good enough reason or it. The newest model iPhones have such good cameras in them these days. Who needs a bulky digital SLR? Especially for a student publication that’s mostly on the web?”
“…so it’s for a free phone.”
“It’s not free. It’s still working. A business expense. And we can check out lots more things on
campus! And do features on you! And me! Get more support for figure skating!"

Celestino looked their way again. “Maybe it’s not a bad idea… you could use some more support, Yuuri.”

“...really?”

“That’s the spirit! Oh, and speaking of, can I bring some friends to the rink some time to watch practice?”

Yuuri paled. “What?”

“I don’t see why not, so long as they stay on the bleachers. Some good pressure might help with Yuuri’s performance in the upcoming season.”

“Yeah! Perfect!”

“Wait, Phichit… Celestino… can’t we talk about this?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t bring them unless I absolutely have to, Yuuri.”

“How does that even make sense?!”

It didn’t have to. Phichit had plans.

Plans for later.

Leo.Leo.Leo: that party looked fun
+guang-hong: i thought you said you didn’t drink
Phi+ChuChu: I don’t! It was diet Mountain Dew
+guang-hong: what if it was spiked
Phi+ChuChu: from a CAN
Leo.Leo.Leo: was it your first college party?
Phi+ChuChu: yeah, we just poked our heads in and took some photos, then left
Phi+ChuChu: some of Yuuri’s-friends-that-are-really-my-friends-but-we-call-them-his-friends were there and invited us so I wanted to get us some fresh air
+guang-hong: is Halloween really like that over there?
Phi+ChuChu: it’s crazy! There are dances and mixers and parties all week long!!! And a zombie parade!!! There haven’t been this many activities on campus the whole time I’ve been here and I looked on the calendar and it doesn’t look like there will be after omg
Leo.Leo.Leo: yeah, Halloween is cool :)
+guang-hong: are you going to a party, leo?
Leo.Leo.Leo: I’m taking my sibs trick-or-treating
+guang-hong: oh

Phi+ChuChu: awwww make sure to take photos!

Phi+ChuChu: I still can’t believe yuuri was a ghost

Phi+ChuChu: laziest costume ever

+guang-hong: he should have been a member of the yazuka or something

+guang-hong: that would have been cool

+guang-hong: with tattoos

Phi+ChuChu: no that’s way too much effort for Yuuri

Phi+ChuChu: he’s such a lazybones he shoulda been a skeleton

Yuuri.k: I’m in this chat you know :V

Leo.Leo.Leo: hi yuuri

Phi+ChuChu: he he :3c

Yuuri.K: i can see you laughing from across the room

+guang-hong: omg

+guang-hong: don’t kill him yuuri

Leo.Leo.Leo: unless it’s in the game.

Phi+ChuChu: speaking of… anyone up for another round?

“I can’t believe you guys left the party so early the other night. What did you do, take snacks and run?”

“What? No!” That was exactly what they’d done. “We just have a lot to do with skating. Yuuri has the Grand Prix”

“Oh yeah, when is that?”

“He left for Canada this morning.”

“Oh… your dorm room feels so empty without him.”

“Yeah, it does.” Phichit couldn’t deny that. Even with two hamsters and several Buddha to keep him company, it wasn’t the same without Yuuri. “But he’ll be back soon; just in time for Halloween!”

“Do you guys want to have a party?”

“Uh. I don’t think Yuuri’s really the partying type, Can. We’re probably just going to do homework and watch a dumb horror movie.”
Devin and Blake shifted their papers uncomfortably. “So about the essay…”

“Yeah, about the essay.”

“Oh come on, it’d be fun. Besides, I want to hear all about this skating stuff. You said we could come see you guys at the rink some time, right?”

“I dunno…”

“Maybe I’ll just stop by and drop off a treat for you two, then.”

“Sure…”

It really was lonely with Yuuri gone. Phichit watched the skating events between 20/10 homework sessions and party dance mix study breaks, but it looked as though Yuuri was just as miserable.

Skate Canada was not going well.

“Hey, man, it’s okay. Your step sequence was awesome!”

“Sure…”

“And you never know! Lots of people go from last to first.”

“Uh huh…”

“Just remember your goal! Keep your intent front and center, Yuuri! You’re a Warrior!”

“Right…”

Yuuri came home, defeated. He still had Paris at the end of November, though, and if he managed to make it into the final from there, he’d go on to Sochi, and reaching his goal of facing Viktor Nikiforov on the same ice.

“No problem, right, Yuuri? You can do that!”

Yuuri buried his face in the pillow and mumbled something that sounded to Phichit like a string of Japanese curses.

Phichit made him do the zombie parade in hopes of cheering him up, caked in makeup and walking through campus with the slow and eerie droning moan of the crowd. “Isn’t this fun?”

“No.”

“You look like you’re having fun!”

Yuuri’s glare probably could have killed a man, but it only lasted a couple of seconds before he groaned and continued on, dragging his feet every step of the way.
Halloween night found the pair in the room eating a depression diet of pizza, Cheetos, and soda to soothe Yuuri’s woes, surrounded by papers and textbooks, while The Ring played quietly on the TV behind some spooky internet radio.

“Wait. Yuuri. I think I’ve got it.”

“Hm?”

“I think I know what Dub is.”
Yuuri rolled his eyes. Dub was the pronounced name of ‘W,’ the Wayne State University’s athletics mascot. The dark green and gold muppet man monstrosity had been torturing the Thai boy ever since his arrival, but how that related to his biochem homework… “Okay?”

“Bear with me here… it’s a warrior chameleon- since we’re the Warriors, you know -with its tail cut off. Since it was in battle. That’s why it has the Roman helmet and the crazy eye things and the pattern on its arms and back and stuff. Look, see?”

Yuuri looked at the diagram that Phichit had drawn.

“Great, right? Exact match. I’ve solved the riddle!”

“I guess I can see it… but I’m pretty sure you’re the only one who’s been worried about this.”

“No way!”

Then there was a knock at the door, and both of them froze, looked at each other, then at the door.

“Were we being too loud?” Yuuri asked.

Phichit got up from the floor, taking a bag of snickers with him. “Maybe it’s trick-or-treaters…”

“Phi-chan!” came the sing-song voice from behind the door that filled them both with dread. “I’m here with treats, just like I promised!”

“Phi-chan?” Yuuri whispered, horrified.

Phichit looked back with an enormously helpless shrug, then back at the door. If he invited her in, she would definitely never leave. Especially since Yuuri was there. But it was rude to not invite her. And they couldn’t just pretend that they weren’t home, right? He grimaced.

She tried again. “Phi-chan? Yuuri? I have cupcakes!”

Cupcakes… Phichit reached for the door knob, but then Yuuri was on his feet, pushing him out of the way and turning off the lights.

“Candace?” He said once Phichit was out of sight, opening the door a crack. “Hi. Sorry, Phichit can’t come to the door right now.”

“Yuuri! Hi!”

“He’s sick.”

“Happy Halloween! I brought cupcakes!”

“So we can’t have any company.”

Phichit coughed in the background for effect.

“I hope you like chocolate.”

“Uh. Yeah. Thanks.”

“Phi-chan said that I could come see you two skate some time.”

Yuuri looked back into the darkened room, then back at Candace with half a smile that was
probably not very convincing. “Oh.”

“Let me know when your schedule is. Here are the cupcakes. Are you sure I can’t come in?”

“Yeah. Phichit is sick. Like I said.”

Phichit coughed again. “S-sorry, Candace!”

“That’s okay. I’ll see you guys at the rink!”

Yuuri locked the door as soon as it was closed, and brought the cupcakes back with the lights still off, setting them on the floor in the soft glow of the TV. Then he turned to Phichit.

“She’s the one coming to watch us skate?”

Phichit crept back to the safety of the textbooks. “That was some pretty quick thinking, Yuuri. Keeping her out of the apartment.”

“Phichit…”

“Hey, did I ever tell you about the time I had to shave all of my hair and eyebrows off? I couldn’t even laugh the whole time because I was living at the monastery. It was pure torture. Pretty funny, right?”

Yuuri arched a brow at him, then settled down on the rug with a resigned sigh. “You without your eyebrow game is a terrible thought.”

“I have photos! You wanna see?”

“You would have photos.”

“Really! I was thirteen. Bug-eyed cutie pie.”

Yuuri ignored him and picked up a cupcake. “Do you think these are even any good?”

“Unless they’re poisoned or something, yeah! Probably.”

“If I die, at least I won’t have to lose in Paris…”

“You! Omg!”

November brought on the cold. Hard. Which was horrible. It was already cold before, but Phichit thought he could handle it. He really, really thought he could. But then came the clouds. No more sun. The rain chill stuck. And by the end of the month, there was snow.

“It’s not going to even get bad until next month,” said Yuuri. “Just wait.”


“What do you want me to do?”

“Make it not winter!”

Yuuri made a show of wiggling his fingers at the frosty air. “No more winter.”
The snowflakes continued to fall, light and drifting, right onto Phichit’s groceries. “IT DIDN’T WORK! You’re a sham!”

“Gomen.”

“Lies! You’re not gomen at all!”

“I never said I had weather powers.

“How do you do it, Yuuri? You’re not even wearing a hat.”

“I just got used to it, I guess.”

Su.Chu: and that’s why you got him a beanie

Phi+ChuChu: a reversible embroidered beanie

Phi+ChuChu: a BINKTOP beanie

Su.Chu: ‘binktop’ because that’s his ‘fiancé’

Phi+ChuChu: right

Phi+ChuChu: he loved it. best Thanks-for-Giving-us-Yuuri Birthday ever

Phi+ChuChu: made him forget all about losing in France

Phi+ChuChu: and not being able to go to the final

Phi+ChuChu: he also ate so much that he went into a diabetic coma

Su.Chu: for real????

Phi+ChuChu: no just a regular food coma but he was really upset

Phi+ChuChu: poor guy

Phi+ChuChu: now all that’s left is finals and then Japanese Nationals!

Su.Chu: I can’t believe you’re going

Phi+ChuChu: Of COURSE I’m going!!!!

Phi+ChuChu: it was only $50 more to get a one way to Tokyo DisneySea after

Su.Chu: and Ciao Ciao is okay with this?

Phi+ChuChu: he can’t say no to me :3c

Su.Chu: what if Yuuri loses, though?

Phi+ChuChu: if he loses, it’ll cheer him up

Phi+ChuChu: if he wins, we’ll celebrate
They suffered through finals and survived with breaks for dancing thanks to Phichit’s extensive and eclectic playlists, and passed with a few minor headaches. Then it was off to Sapporo to watch Yuuri skate.

“You’re really just coming for Disney, though, aren’t you?”

“Pfft, no, I’m here to support you!”

“Who’s watching your hamsters, Chulanont?”

“The RA.”

“But I thought you weren’t allowed to have any in your apartment?”

“Maybe, but he said if this was the worst thing we had to hide, he was relieved.”

“...I don’t know if I should be relieved myself or disappointed. You boys are in college.”

“Your point, Ciao Ciao?”

“Never mind...”

Yuuri took gold at Nationals, just like Phichit said he would, and took a one-way flight to Tokyo for two days at Disney Sea immediately after. It was crowded and crazy, but with Yuuri’s win and the spirit of the holiday all around them, Celestino had to rein in their cheer. But only a little bit.

It was nice to see both of his students so happy and full of energy at the same time. Almost like having children of his own.

“You look so good in that Minnie hat, Ciao Ciao!”

“You really think so?”

“I do, I do!”

“Yeah, you look pretty great, Ciao Ciao.”

“Et tu, Yuuri?”

From Fantasmic to the Little Mermaid show, on a tour with the gondolas to the Mysterious Island, and even down to the Center of the Earth, the trio wore their trademark Mouse Ear hats and posed for all of the photos that Phichit took to commemorate their good time. And photos there were—thousands of them, many of which ended up on Instagram for everyone to see, fireworks and all.
“Phichit… why is my mom texting me about being in Japan?”

“Probably because you didn’t tell her about Nationals. IDK.”

“How does she know I’m at Disney?”

“Because I told her to follow me on Instagram.”

“Why are you talking to my family?!”

“Because they’re awesome and I needed to know your hat size for your birthday, c’mon!”

“You boys be quiet and go to sleep. We have to catch a plane in the morning.”

“Sorry, Ciao Ciao.”

The new year brought fresh snow and more complaints from Phichit, though Yuuri showed him how to make the most of it with snowmen and snowball fights, all of which he quickly became accustomed to and adept at.

“Ow ow ow stop it! Phichit!”

“Come back here, Yuuri! You coward! Ha ha ha!”

“Noooo!”

Even though it was cold, there was a lot of good coming their way. New classes, new friends, new opportunities, and more competitions. Phichit had worked hard to be ready for the upcoming heat, and he couldn’t wait to compete against his roommate. Right after the 4CCs was the Olympics, too, which meant that Yuuri and Celestino would be gone for a month. Sad, but he would use that time to really focus on his studies.

He wasn’t competing as often as Yuuri was, yet, which meant he needed to get in as many credits as he possibly could while he could. As soon as he made it into the Grand Prix circuit, his class schedule would have to take a side seat to his skating, because the ISU didn’t care what his professors had to say about homework or finals.

They weren’t about to move a competition just because he had an exam.

Then that summer, they had Summer Skate… finally, a chance for Yuuri to hang out with Leo and Guang-Hong and make friends outside of the occasional reluctant chat or competition.

Especially since Guang-Hong wasn’t going to be there in Osaka.

“Dear Viktor Nikiforov, I’m writing to tell you that my roommate is desperately in love with you. If you don’t believe me, please see the attached photos of our bedroom. I even had to name one of my hamsters after you.”

“Wait, what’s this?”
“I don’t know. Phichit’s writing some letter.”

“He’s what?!”

It was the end of January in Japan, only a month after their trip to Nationals, and Phichit was perched on the end of a hotel bed with paper in hand, scrawling out a letter while Leo looked on with a lazy smile. It wasn’t Leo’s room, but he was visiting Phichit and Yuuri, who stood at the doorway with a bucket of ice, frowning in confusion and growing mortification.


“He means Viktor,” Leo added, and strummed down on muted strings of his travel guitar. It was quiet without an amp, but that made no difference to Leo; he just liked to play.

“He’s not my— Phichit!” Yuuri closed the door with as much patience as he had remaining, and slammed the bucket of ice down on the dresser next to the TV.

“It’s almost Valentine’s Day, and you’re not going to write one, so why not?”

“Because he doesn’t have time for this!”

Both Leo and Phichit gave him a look at that, brows lifted, but Leo went back to his guitar with a bemused smile long before Phichit gave up the game.

“But Yuuri~! Your lover might want to know!”

“HE DOESN’T NEED TO KNOW ANYTHING!”

“You admit that he’s your lover, though~”

“I- I DID NOT!”

“You TOTALLY DID!”

“Dude, you’re ace! Why do you even care?!”

“I’m ace, not heartless. I can enjoy your love life without wanting one of my own.”

“He’s not wrong, Yuuri.”

“Yeah, just look how much fun it is to watch Leo and Guang-Hong!”

Leo blushed. “Huh?”

“Phichit, don’t send it.”

Phichit folded the slip of paper in half. “I heard that he doesn’t even check his mail anyway, Yuuri. But you know that he’s going to be at the Olympics next month, right?”

“....yeah, so what?”

“So you’re going to see him.” He folded it again, twice more, at the top corners. “You could spend Valentine’s Day with him.”

“I really don’t think so, Phi. Besides, Mari is going to be there, so…”

“So?”
“Don’t send it. Please? I’m already stressed out enough.”

Sighing, Phichit finished folding the airplane and tossed it at him. “I don’t have any stamps for snail mail, anyway. Geez, Yuuri.”

It hit Yuuri in the forehead, bounced off, and fell into his waiting hands. “Thanks,” he said, then sank down to the edge of the bed, gaze fixed on the letter.

Phichit looked at him in silence for a moment, then Leo began to play again.

“Don’t forget that we have the training camp this summer, so even if the Olympics doesn’t pan out, or Worlds… you’ll definitely make an impression next year.”

“Yeah, Leo’s right! Don’t stress about it. You’re Japan’s Ace and next year is definitely going to be your year.”

Yuuri’s anxious gaze began to loosen and he looked up, nodding. “You think so?”

“Yeah, for sure!”

“Don’t see why not.”

It was hard to argue with such positive thinking, even if none of them had any idea what really lay ahead...

“No worries, I’ll be here!”

Yuuri looked up from his pile of brochures he picked up from his adventures across the table at Yurio, who tilted his head, waiting for a response. “W-what is?”

“That creepy guy at the door. You’re tapping your fingers and keep looking behind me.”

“Oh.” Yuuri hunched forward, guilty. “Maybe. I wonder who he is, is all. Will he come back?”

Yurio propped his legs on the empty chair next to him, arms folding around his head. “Not if he knows what’s good for him. Anyone that knows Viktor would respect not coming into his place uninvited and unannounced.”

What if he did come back? Viktor wouldn’t be here if he did, so what would Yuuri tell him? ‘Sorry, Viktor is in Japan.’ There wasn’t a reason to explain his whereabouts to a stranger. Well, a stranger to Yuuri. Across the street or at the door, he was a suspicious person.

“I can stay here tonight if you’re worried.”

If he were back at home, it would be different. He may be staying at Viktor’s apartment, but he was in foreign territory and the encounter made him feel uneasy. “What about school?”

“Not the first time I’ve skipped. You fly back to Japan on Monday, so…”

...So spend more time with me!
Yuuri smiled. “If you want. Will you be okay? You didn’t bring anything to stay the night.”

“I’ll be fine for a night. If I stay the rest of the time, I’ll go to Lilia’s and pick up some things.”
Yurio turned his head toward the living room. “The sofa is good.”

“There’s one in the second bedroom, too.”

“Second bedroom?”

“More like an office, really. If you want more privacy.”

“I’ll test them both. And I’ll text Mila and Georgi about Saturday. See if they are free and if they have ideas.”

By the time the pair turned in for the night, Yurio decided on the office sofa. When Yuuri got out of bed in the morning, he peeked inside the partially ajar door to Yurio sitting cross-legged on the floor looking through a box of photos.

With all the history in the room, it was no wonder Yurio wanted to sleep in here. Still, he didn’t have to be so secretive about his discoveries.

With a yawn, Yuuri joined him on the floor. “Find anything?”

Brushing unruly blond bedhead out of his eyes, Yurio shoved a pile his way. “Lots of Vaganova photos. Looking at the costumes here, I think it was Peter and the Wolf. Heh, was there ever a time Lilia didn’t look old?”

Anyone past thirty would look old to Yurio, considering how he referred to Viktor, but Yuuri had to admit that Lilia hadn’t changed much.

The photos were in varying print sizes when the age before digital cameras were common practice. Several looked from the same moment as the ones on the wall outside the door.

Vaganova through Viktor’s eyes. So much yellow. The food in the cafeteria. Selfies with a unicorn plush. A boy asleep in a really uncomfortable position in the dorm rooms. Shots of the ceiling in the hallways, angled shots of the exterior of the academy. Saint Petersburg and all its beauty, including many of the places Yuuri had been to on his travels through all the seasons. Makkachin. So many of Makkachin. Flowers. Ballerinas and shoes. The rink and distant shots of rinkmates. Yakov eating cookies.

Riffling through the box further, Yuuri found an old polaroid camera and some undeveloped film rolls.

More photos of Viktor’s world with light catching just right for maximum colors. Photos taken in error, but kept for whatever memories were behind them.

And then there was a boy with dark hair and a broody face with a hood partly over his head, reading a book. Tinkering with a camera. Drinking coffee. Scowling. Attempted shots of getting him to smile in photos with Viktor.

“That kind of looks like the guy,” Yurio said after a long string of silence and Yuuri finding more and more towards the bottom.
It did.

And if Viktor’s smiles in the photos and how many he took of him and how this boy, now a man, came around asking for Viktor…

Could he be Niko?

Then there were some of Viktor that were drastically different from the others with Viktor as the focal point. Artistically framed and panned. Much more professional. Were these taken by Niko?

The pair was reflected in a mirror, shoulders and cheeks pressed, though Niko seemingly put out by it. Viktor smiling wide, Niko looking down at the camera.

“There’s writing on the back of that one in your hand. Let me see.”

Yuuri handed it over and Yurio translated: ‘Mishka- here is the photo you asked for, though I don't know why you need it. you have odd favors, but you'd even love a goat.’

“Mishka?”

“Means bear. A pet name. So, was this guy his boyfriend or something?”

“Has to be.” Viktor only spoke of Niko, and said he only had one boyfriend, so this had to be him.

A black and white photo of Viktor laying on top of sheets in nothing but a fluffy sweater, though the angle obstructed the view if that was truly the case, curled up with Makkachin, asleep. Soft and serene. On the back read ‘Mishka - this one is for you.’

Together they looked through more color and black and white photos. If Niko had anything going for him, he was a great photographer. He treated Viktor poorly, but he captured how beautiful Viktor was behind lenses.

After putting the photos back in their box and onto the shelf Yurio got them from, Yuuri went into the bedroom to retrieve Viktor’s jacket. It was colder this morning, and surrounding himself in his lover after all he’d seen seemed like the best thing.

Yurio shook his head at him when he found him in the kitchen.

“I’m making breakfast. I said I’d make you sausage rolls.”

That’s right, they did get ingredients the first night. “Need any help?”

“Nyet! You can do the dishes after, though,” Yurio said, tying up his hair from a hairband in his pocket.

“Sure.” Yuuri left the kitchen for the living room while Yurio rumbled for pots and pans.

The excursion in the office delayed the usual start of Yuuri’s day, but the sun was out and came through the windows of the unexplored sunroom. With it being so dark in the mornings and trying to rush out the door, he hadn’t gotten to go inside to appreciate it.

Light filtered through the haze to the room where there was a lounge chair and a dog bed. Books that were left on the table had their covers sun-bleached from the months Viktor had been gone. One a novel he couldn’t identify had a bookmark in its pages. Two were coffee table books on the
Sagrada Familia Cathedral in Barcelona.

Had Viktor been to Barcelona before or was this research for the Grand Prix Final for the coming year?

From here, Yuuri could see some of the cityscape of the surrounding buildings, the park across the way and the river not too far in the distance. It was beautiful this high up.

With Yurio making breakfast, it was a good time for his ritual call with Viktor. Pacing along the window, he pressed dial.

“Ohaiyo,” came Viktor’s cheery voice.

Yuuri laughed and responded in his best Russian. “Dobroye utro. Sorry I’m a little late.”

“That's okay. Your accent is so good!”

It probably wasn’t. “Really? I’ve been trying to work on it since I'm here. Still glad Yurio has been around sometimes.”

“Good. Glad to hear it. I know it can be a challenge. Mari’s been quite the help with my Japanese. And your papa! Did you know that he speaks fluent English? Of course you'd know, but I didn’t…”

“He deals with a lot of the customers up front. He's probably as good as me! So you've been hanging out with them?”

“And your mama, too. But tell me about your day! Did you end up going to Vaganova? Are you exhausted from all of the sightseeing? Ready to come home, yet?”

“I went to the fabriege museum and Saint Isaac’s. Met up with Yurio for lunch and went to Vaganova. Ahh. Viktor. It was amazing. Seeing where you went to school and trained.”

“You're such a fanboy.”

“Sorry… If you were there with me, I would have been worse.”

“If we were there together, I'm sure I'd be lectured by the teachers the whole time. It might lose some of its effect.”

“Even after you've graduated? Wow.” The madam who showed them around looked like she would have enjoyed lecturing Viktor on the spot. Sparse piano keys interrupted Yuuri’s thoughts. “Are you… playing my keyboard?”

“They never stop being your teacher.” The piano tinkering stopped. “Maybe.”

“Yeah, true. Minako still gets on my case. I knew you could play.”

“Not really. Not like you, Yuuri~” Viktor went back to picking at the keys.

“I've had more training is all. You still very much have the ability. Are you playing my free skate?”

“Trying to. Feeling it out.”

“See? If you weren't good, I wouldn't be able to figure it out.”
“Playing by ear isn’t the same as really knowing how to play…” Viktor laughed again in spite of himself. “Anyway, have you tried out the sound system yet?”

“What sound system?”

“In the living room; one of the upgrades I made in more recent years. There’s a remote on the TV stand. You should be able to navigate to the music library and play anything. Go and try it!”

Curious, and getting a sparkle in his eyes, Yuuri got up and went back into the living room. He found a smaller remote next to the TV one and pressed the power button. A light flickered above the TV in a cabinet and the screen turned on. Like on a mobile device, a music library appeared. Thousands of songs at Yuuri’s fingertips. Viktor’s personal collection at his fingertips.

He pressed shuffle, and Debussy’s Claire de Lune started. Gradually Yuuri increased the volume, drowning our Yurio shuffling in the kitchen.

“Do you like it?” Viktor eventually asked, amused.

“I do... I wish I would have known this sooner. I could have had music all this time!”

“I should have pointed it out, I’m sorry. What are you doing today? You could enjoy it now.”

“Yeah! Oh, Yurio stayed over last night. Wants to spend more time with me.”

“He slept over? Huh. Hmm.”

“Spent all day together and he couldn't get enough.”

“I think you have another fan, Yuuri!”

“Really?”

“Don't you?”

“I just thought he likes hanging out with a fellow fan?”

“A fellow fan?” Viktor snorted. "Of who, me?"

“Of course!”

“Yuuri... no, I think he's your fan.”

“You don't see how excited he gets being at your place, though.”

“He can be fans of both of us. And we can be his fan, too. Like we were in Moscow!”

“O-okay fine. As long as he's still your fan.”

“I just like acting surprised because it bothers him. He’s fun to tease.”

“Yeah, I can confirm that,” Yuuri smiled fondly. It was like he and Mari when they were younger. “I’ll keep the music on while we eat breakfast.” Yuuri purposefully didn’t mention Yurio was the one cooking.

“Perfect. And speaking of, I should go help get things ready for dinner.”

“I’m sure Mom has enjoyed the help.”
“Maybe. I think she just likes having someone tall to boss around.”

“...okay, you're probably not wrong.”

They chuckled together, and Yuuri really liked the sound of it.

“Hey Piggy!”

Yuuri looked up to see his Russian brother leaning against the dividing wall with arms folded and flour up his arms, cheeks pink with embarrassment.

“Breakfast is ready,” he grumbled.

How long Yurio had been listening wasn’t certain, but it was apparent he had and wasn’t going to bring it up and would appreciate it if Yuuri didn’t either.

The kitchen survived Yurio’s cooking and the fruits of his labor were delicious. It was similar to what Yuuri had in the states, but bigger and heartier. Seeing Yurio pleased that he was eating his cooking was worth the mess. Yuuri cleaned up as promised, then the two of them got ready, Yuuri packing his skates, and left the apartment for the day’s adventures.

Taking in what Yuuri said he already had seen, Yurio decided he needed to visit Lazarus and Tikhvin cemetery. Not only were the greatest composers, architects, writers, and poets buried there, the tombs, graves, and monuments were impressive to look at. “And probably haunted,” he said with a grin. If they were going at night, maybe Yuuri would worry.

Passing Alexander Nevsky Monastery, they entered the gates with a small fee. All around them were stone busts, statues, and headstones of the ones who died or symbolic angels - each one more elaborate than the next - black iron gates, and tall, ancient trees. There were signs that pointed to the famous Russians that rested and it was clear that fame was a requirement for being buried here.

Yuuri took a photo of Tchaikovsky's grave.

“Did you want to see Viktor’s parents graves?” Yurio asked as they walked the path to the exit.

For a moment Yuuri thought Yurio was implying they were buried here. As far as Yuuri was concerned, they should be.

“It’s a little bit of a detour,” Yurio continued when there was no answer, “but I thought you’d want to.”

“How can we get some flowers?”

He smiled. “Yeh. There’s a shop nearby.”

They took the metro south a little ways and emerged on the surface, then walked straight to a flower shop where Yuuri purchased a small bouquet of lilies and roses. Yurio purchased two bouquets; one with delphiniums and lilies and another bouquet of tiger lilies and wildflowers of yellow and orange. One for Viktor’s absence and one from him.

Unlike Lazarus and Tikhvin, there were no signs pointing to who was where, but Yurio walked straight to them like he visited often.

Yuuri got to his knees and laid the flowers on the stone. He couldn’t read the inscription, but he
didn’t need to to know their presence.

Once Yuuri stood, Yurio took his turn to lay the bundle of delphinium and lilies and then joined Yuuri on his feet. “Viktor’s never come here.”

That was surprising. “Ever?”

Yurio toed at the snow on the border of the grave and path. “According to Yakov, anyway. Not since they were buried. I asked Viktor to take me here once to pay my respects and he got weird about it and refused to. So Yakov brought me instead.”

“Any idea why?” Viktor was young when they died, so maybe it was something he decided back then he couldn’t do and never got over.

“Yakov said Viktor knows they aren’t really here.”

Honoring the dead was something so integral to Yuuri’s culture, it was hard to imagine not bringing flowers or having a photo at home. It was true their spirit wasn’t here, but Yuuri got the feeling that’s not entirely what Viktor meant. He brought his hands together and bowed his head to offer a prayer of gratitude and ask for their blessing on he and Viktor.

When final respects were paid, Yuuri and Yurio got back onto the metro bound for the Hermitage Museum. As tempting as it was to revisit his favorite parts thus far, it was better to visit the halls he hadn’t explored. Yurio wasn’t all that interested in the paintings, but he liked the antiques and the clothing throughout time on display.

They’d just barely made their way through the last exhibit before Yurio had to remind Yuuri that they had to get going to the rink.

“Skipping class but not practice, huh?” Yuuri teased.

“Shut up. I’m taking this seriously even if you’re not, piggy.”

They barely had a chance to get their skates on before Mila and Georgi were approaching them at the barrier entrance.

“Yuuri! Yuri!” Mila was the first to greet with a hug to each. “Work was cool enough to let me take tomorrow off. It’s a little early in the season, but we should go down to Catherine’s Palace for a troika ride!”

“Troika?” Yuuri asked.

“Horse-drawn sleigh in the snow. It’s a lot of fun. We can take a tour of the palace, too.”

“Yeah, that sounds good to me.”

“Great! I’ll figure out our rendezvous point. It’s about an hour metro ride from downtown.”

“And after we get back,” Georgi chimed in, “My cousin got us tickets for the Tchaikovsky tribute at Grand Hall.”

Each day was a new Russian experience, and Team Russia was eager to share it with Yuuri.
“Wow… your cousin is generous, Georgi.”

He shrugged, smile modest, but pleased.

“What are you four doing?” Yakov asked, spooking them all as he came up from behind. “Get ready for warm-ups.”

“Oh, Yakov!” Yurio braced himself on the edge to hoist himself above the other three. “Georgi and Mila are coming to dinner on Sunday, too, right?”

The old man smiled at the teen’s enthusiasm. “Yes, yes. Sasha and his family are also coming.”

Yuuri blinked. “Sasha? As in Sasha Markov?” The legend before Viktor…

“Da. He’d like to meet you, Yuuri.”

He didn’t understand, nor had Yuuri imagined he’d be so welcomed.

After a grueling, though appreciated practice of the season’s programs, the skaters hit the showers. Yuuri and Yurio waved and parted ways with with anticipation of tomorrow’s tentative plans.

“I’ll stay over tonight, too,” Yurio informed without room for debate.

Yuuri didn’t mind. The company was nice and would probably be easier for meeting up in the morning.

Yakov took them to Lilia’s after he closed up his office for the night so Yurio could grab a change of clothes and toothbrush. Before Lilia could invite the pair to dinner, they escaped for the metro to Viktor’s apartment and picked up Chinese take-out on the way.

Turning on the sound system from the living room, they grabbed napkins and settled on the floor to pour over the bookshelves for more secrets of their idol. Viktor may not answer questions or say much about himself, but his home was a window to his soul.

Countless books on architecture; guides and histories, form and order, styles and countries, many on just Saint Petersburg, but others like Paris, Rome, Brasilia, Budapest, Chandigarh, Florence, and more – including another two or three on Barcelona and the Familia Sagrada. Cookbooks from around the world, which struck Yuuri odd since the kitchenware looked hardly used at all. Yurio translated a few of the covers Yuuri couldn’t make out. Fairy tales, so many books on fairy tales and lore. Gardening and flowers.

Yuuri looked around for a flower box and found none and wondered if that was something Viktor would like.

As the last book they took out was shelved, there was a knock at the door.

Instantly they looked at each other, mutually coming to the same conclusion; it had to be Niko.

They got to their feet and went to the door together, and Yuuri took hold of the knob.

“Is Vitya back yet?” Niko asked, looking down at both of them.

For knowing Yuuri’s name, he’d have had to have watched television, so how was it he didn’t know where Viktor was? “No, he’s not. And I still don’t know when he’ll be back.” Yuuri said,
doing his best to stand tall. It wasn’t a complete lie, cause he really didn’t know when Viktor would be back to Saint Petersburg. “Sorry.” He couldn’t let on he knew who he was; best not be too defiant.

With Yurio right beside him, Niko didn’t try to shove his way in again, though looked like he wanted to. Instead, he stretched his neck above them to glance around the apartment. Did he not believe Viktor wasn’t there? He then looked to both of them before he reached into his heavy overcoat for a clasp envelope. “If that is the case, give this to him when he comes back.”

Yuuri could smell liquor on his breath as the larger man stooped down to shove the envelope with something written in Russian across it into his hands.

Thick brows covered most of his eyelids as he fixed Yuuri and an intense gaze. “Tell him it’s a reminder, kroshka.” Niko straightened and adjusted his coat, then took his leave.

Yurio stuck his head out the door and cursed after him down the hallway.

It wasn’t quiet hours yet, so hopefully they wouldn’t get a call from Khomka.

Satisfied to have the last say, Yurio closed the door and locked it twice. “So what’s in the envelope?”

“What does ‘kroshka’ mean?”

“Breadcrumb. It’s a pet name… like ‘baby,’ because you have baby piggy face. He was being an asshole and degrading you, it doesn’t matter!”

Yuuri supposed it didn’t.

“What did he mean by reminder, though? Are you going to open it?”

For a moment Yuuri considered. While Niko did say to give it to Viktor, being his ex, it was Yuuri’s job to protect him. What if this gift was something hurtful like the reminder was of something terrible. He looked to Yurio and nodded. “Did he write ‘Viktor’?”

“No, the creep wrote ‘Mishka’ on it.”

Prying the brass fastener open, Yuuri reached inside the envelope and brought the contents to the table. By the way Niko looked at them, this was a reminder was for them as well.

They were photographs, mostly black and white of Viktor when they were dating. Viktor at a mirror, looking shyly in the reflection where a portion of the lenses could also be seen. Pulling a cowl neck to his chin, eyelashes perfectly curled and filled with mascara. Profile shot of him shirtless with a messy bun and pouty lips and blurred background. Back turned, holding up his hair to show off his spine, bed sheet wrapped around his waist, though little was left to the imagination.

The next photo flashforward to years later with Viktor and short hair. Early twenties. A long shot across the street in Paris, unsuspecting. Sitting down at a cafe in wait of someone. Photos shot between branches, fences, and windows.

Were these…

Was he...

Yuuri flipped to the next photo and nearly covered Yurio’s eyes.
It was Viktor younger again and in heels and lingerie, hip cocked just so.

He turned his back to Yurio to shield him from what he himself wanted to look away from, huddling forward despite Yurio’s protesting. The seemingly innocent photos were gone… each one more suggestive than the last, Viktor appearing more reluctant, less willing. It was making Yuuri sick.

Quickly he skimmed past them, looking for anything out of the ordinary and then he stopped at a photo of himself.

In Viktor’s jacket.

In the sunroom from the sixteenth floor.

From this morning.

Niko had stalked him.

Yuuri dropped the stack of photos, the force causing them to slide off one another and a few flopped to the floor.

“What the hell, Piggy?”

“H-he… h-he’s watching us.”

Yurio stomped to the separate stacks and saw the photo that scared him. “I’m calling Yakov.”

Back away from the pile, Yuuri sunk to the couch.

Niko was reminding Viktor that he was watching. That Viktor still belonged to him.

From the hallway, Yurio was yelling frantically into his phone in Russian to Yakov. Orlov, Khomka, Niko, and Viktor were the only words Yuuri could pick out.

Yurio came to stand in front of him and said something about luggage and Yakov and jacket. Moments later Viktor’s comforting scent was around him and he curled into it while Yurio made noise in the bedroom.

He wasn’t sure how long he was on the couch in his shock, counting his breathing, but it was Yakov’s heavy, withered hand on his shoulder that brought him out of it.

“Let’s get you to the car, Yuuri.”

Yuuri managed a nod and took his hand, leaning into him to stand.

In the entryway, Yurio has brought Yuuri’s suitcase, sports duffle, and coat. Yakov pulled at the sleeve that draped around Yuuri’s shoulders and handed it to Yurio to put away in the luggage. As much as Yuuri wanted to keep it around him, it would draw too much attention if someone saw them.

Before leaving, Yakov checked all the rooms for anything he knew didn’t belong to Viktor, then closed and locked the door behind them.

Once out into the lobby, Yuuri looked over to Khomka over the front desk who was on the phone and avoided eye contact with Yakov. Did he get reprimanded for letting Niko get in? That was the point of this apartment… strict security. Guarded.
Maybe he’d been trying to get in for years and finally succeeded only for Viktor to not be around?

Yakov opened the door to his old car, letting his hand off of Yuuri’s shoulder to let Yurio into the back seat, and helped Yuuri into the passenger side while he loaded up the trunk.

The engine, heater, and radio sprung to life at the turn of Yakov’s key and they were on their way.

Yuuri leaned against the window, watching the evening snowscape of Saint Petersburg pass by. The knot in his stomach had loosened, but his head was still swimming. From what Yuuri had just witnessed and what Viktor had told him, it was confirmed more and more just how abusive physically and emotionally Niko was. Did Viktor know that Niko had followed him to other countries? Would he have told Yuuri if he did?

Like anything else, Yuuri had to respect Viktor’s privacy. He promised him.

They pulled up to Lilia’s house and got out.

“Yuri, take Yuuri to the dining room while I put his things in your room,” Yakov said with a bag in each hand.

“Da.” Yurio ushered Yuuri inside as instructed and removed their shoes and coats.

Lilia’s tall, and usually well-lit home was dimmed. Yurio led him down the hallway to the dining room where Lilia was setting tea at the table. She wore a light sweater over her nightgown and Yuuri wanted to apologize for keeping her up, but one look from her stopped him from saying anything.

Soon Yakov was joining them. “Are you all right, Yuuri?”

He took a sip of the offered Russian Caravan tea, letting it do its job of warming comfort. Carefully Yuuri set the cup back on the saucer and looked glanced briefly at all of them. “I’m sorry.”

“You were seriously scared, porkchop!”

Scared, sick, and confused.

“Khomka will be increasing security. He hold me the ‘gentleman in question’ was an occasional visitor to a resident on the sixth floor and hadn’t realized it was Niko. It’s possible he’s never made it to Viktor’s until now. But he won’t be going past Orlov anymore.”

If that was the case, why did he come for them?

Yakov sat straighter in his seat only for something to clack against the back of it.

“Did you honestly …” Lilia rolled her eyes.

The old man frowned almost guilty, and stood to remove his sweater, revealing a shoulder holster with a gun! “He’s not the brightest boy, but the sight of me always got him running.” He looked proud at that as he unclasped the holster to set it on the sofa as casually as a throw pillow, and put his sweater back on.

Was Niko really that dangerous? Would Yakov have shot him?

“That makes him smart to run if you ask me,” Yurio laughed, unphased by the concealed arms.

Yuuri did his best go not feel… weird about it. He wasn’t sure how well it was working.
“You two will be staying here the rest of Yuuri’s stay. It’s for the best.”

If Yakov was toting a gun, Yuuri would take his word. It’d make tomorrow and Sunday’s plans easier at least.

“There is a guest bedroom that I’ve prepared for you.”

“Wait, I want him to stay in my room!”

Lilia rolled her eyes. “I’ll let you two work it out, then. Anyway, you’re welcome to whichever you choose, Yuuri.”

“Thank you.” Yuuri looked down into his tea, bronze liquid still steaming. “Can I… ask something? About Niko.” When they didn’t answer in his definition of immediate, he regretted asking. Maybe they were just in the dark about Niko as he was. And that thought made him sad.

“What would you like to know?” asked Yakov.

Grateful it was Yakov to answer, Yuuri wondered how to to put it. He didn’t want to call Viktor a liar. Selective truths, if anything. It felt a little dishonest to go behind his back to confirm, but he needed more than what he’d been given. “How long were Viktor and Niko together?”

Yakov hummed and reached for the tray of cookies. “Three years, I believe.”

The length checked out. “Did he cut his hair when they broke up?” So many risque photos when he had his long hair, Yuuri wondered if Niko was the type to cut it himself. He shivered at what his own mind supplied.

“No, they separated a couple of months prior.”

Viktor had said Niko loved his hair, so maybe cutting it was a way to steel the resolve and keep Niko away. But if he’s been stalking his apartment and other countries, it wasn’t working.

“He was living in Moscow last I knew. Him lurking around the apartment is surprising. Although, with the Rostelecom Cup, he probably thought Vitya would be home for a time. Don’t worry, Yuuri; Vitya has been done with Niko for years.”

“I… I know. That’s not what I’m worried about.” Viktor’s loyalty was never in question. Just his physical and mental safety.

Yakov reached for the sugar cubes and dropped a few in his tea, teaspoon tinking the edge of the cup. “Vitya couldn’t stop talking about you, Yuuri. I couldn’t believe he’d taken interest in someone again.”

“God! He was obsessed with you for MONTHS,” Yurio groaned, but not without a tinge of amusement. “It was so annoying. You were all he could think about. All sighing and staring off into space!”

“Vitya... I knew you were desperate the first time you found love, but…”

“I wasn’t around for that, but with Porkchop it was ‘Weh weh Yuuri K this, Yuuri K that…”

“I contacted Coach Cialdini for him to get your number, but Vitya refused the offer. Then he saw the video you posted and he took off with hardly any notice.”

“Even though he promised to help me with my debut!”
“We were all abandoned.”

Yuuri watched and listened to the two share the story, equal parts flattered and guilty. And confused. What were they talking about? “...I'm. Sorry?”

"No need to apoligise, Yuuri. We've forgiven. Right, Yuratchka?"

“Yeah it's not your fault that Viktor's such an idiot. For a while we wondered if you were a witch. Remember that, Yakov?”

“He certainly seemed bewitched by you.”

“Lilia said it was just like that one song.”

At the mention of her name, she glanced up from her cup at the end of the table.

“Ochi Chyornye?” Yakov asked.

“Yeah, that one; the dark eyes that bewitched him and ruined his life~-” The teen snorted.

“A Sinatra song always came to mind as well.” Yakov scooted his chair out from the table to stand.

“Which one?” Yurio asked, all watching him walk towards Lilia.

“Witchcraft.”

“Right! Like when he's watching Porkchop's Eros. Bleh he’s always swooning during the Short Program.”

Yuuri wondered if he should be offended at being called a witch, but even now he could see the sort of power he had over Viktor. And having others see it too...

Lilia raised a brow at Yakov’s offered hand, then briefly glanced at the skaters. Hesitating? It wasn’t until Yakov started to hum, deep and gravely, that she took it - bewitched by some spell they undoubtedly shared. He lead her to the adjacent sitting room, walking past the gun on the sofa, in front of the fireplace, taking a closed dance position. Yakov tapped his foot to the beat and started to move, Lilia’s cold walls crumbling at the romantic gesture.

“And although I know it’s strictly tabooo... when you arouse the need in me, my heart says ‘Yes, indeed’ in me. Proceed with what you're leadin' me~”

Yurio made another gagging sound. “Just when I thought you two couldn’t get worse than Viktor and the piggy.”

“Someday you’ll understand, Yura,” Lilia sniffed like this was all in the name of a lecture and not her own pleasure.

It was a good thing Yurio had no desire to be a fly on the wall; many times Yuuri and Viktor had danced in the various stages of their budding relationship. Dance was something important to the both of them. At the bookstore after their meeting with Fifi, Viktor confessed to his parents dancing at the fireplace. Watching Yakov and Lilia, two important figures in Viktor’s life that were practically his parents, Yakov’s imperfect pitch and all, was endearing. No matter how on and off their relationship was.

It was all too easy to picture he and Viktor old and grey dancing to old music in the comfort of their own home someday.
Ballet and dancing…

Russia made him nostalgic for the future and it was the perfect distraction from the past.

“And why do you keep calling him pig names? It’s so inappropriate!”

“Because he likes it! Pork cutlet bowl is his favorite food and Viktor is the one who started it first. Why don’t you get mad at him?”

She folded her arms. “Yuuri… you don’t like being called piggy, do you?”

Yuuri shrugged. “I don’t mind. He’s not saying it to be mean. It’s a nickname.”

“Well… pig is usually a demeaning way to refer to someone. Unless Japan is somehow different.”

“No, it’s the same there. Viktor made me not mind so much, is all. He-” he couldn’t help the grin on his face. “-said I was like Pyatachok.”

“Ah, he was always Vitya’s favorite,” Yakov chimed in, hand at Lilia’s waist.

“Well. As they say; when one doesn’t have enough trouble, one gets a piglet. So I suppose that’s Viktor in a nutshell. But if you don’t mind, I suppose it’s okay.”

“Yeh, see ?!?”

“Yuura, take him to his room, it’s getting late.”

“I was going to, and then you gave me another lecture!”

She raised a thin brow, but didn’t object, then turned towards Yakov so his arm was around her and continued down the hall to what Yuuri could only assume was her bedroom.

“Anyway, I’ll show you around a bit.” Yurio got up and stepped into the living room and flipped on another light to illuminate the path to a small curio cabinet stacked with books and ornate bookends. Yuuri followed after and watched him grab the spine of one and joined him on the second sofa, away from the gun, to look at it.

A photo album.

It took all of point five seconds to realize who the small child with Lilia was. It was Viktor. Four or five years old. Hair to his chin and frayed and toothy grins, the grace he’d have as an adult not yet developed. He was adorable. Holding his parents’ hands in beginning ballet positions and practicing tying on shoes. Little Viktor mimicking Lilia’s stance on the bar. On stage in costume for a solo rehearsal. So cute.

“What happened to make them hate each other so much?” Yuuri asked, album now in his lap, flipping to the next page. “For her to have so many photos of him, they must have been close.”

“Can’t say,” Yurio frowned and slumped. “There’s a lot that Lilia and Yakov won’t talk about. Lots of stuff about Viktor. Whenever I ask, Lilia gets mad and says things like he’s selfish. She probably didn’t change the subject at dinner ‘cause you’re a guest. What’s weird, though, is that I didn’t even know that Lilia existed until after Viktor left… I mean, I knew of her, but I didn’t know who she was or that she had anything to do with Yakov or Viktor.”

“Wow, a huge falling out.”
“Some kind of territorial fight over Yakov, I guess.”

“Really?”

"It's the only thing I can think of. But why Viktor would want to keep Lil'ia away from Yakov I don't know, either... or Yakov keep Viktor away from Lil'ia?” He shrugged, frowning, “They really hate each other now, though, which I don't get, because any good qualities Viktor HAS are from Lil'ia.”

“Fighting over Yakov,” Yuuri considered before registering the insult. “Hey! That's mean.”

“I'm serious! I didn't realize it before, but after training with Lil'ia, I can see it. His coaching style is a blend of her and Yakov. At least, the useful stuff. I don't know where he gets his touchy feely tufta from, but they complain about the same stuff. They even talk the same way, sometimes. And they're both stupidly stubborn. It makes me kinda sad.”

“That last one I can definitely see.” Yuuri wasn’t sure how to feel about Viktor being compared to someone he was at odds with. Yes his no-nonsense coaching style and air of professionalism were useful, but not the only things good about him. The touchy-feely ‘tufta,’ for example. Childish inquisitiveness. His smile. His strength. His beauty.

“Viktor’s mom and Lil'ia were friends, though. Lil'ia kept photos from all of his ballet performances and the programs, and some of hers, too.” He pointed to a wrinkled program tucked and preserve behind a plastic sleeve. “Here’s a photo of him and more of his relatives.”

The Nikiforov family was posed outside a home, Viktor younger than the ballet photos in his mother’s arm, hand part way in his mouth. Viktor and his mother stood out among the rest.

“I asked if he was an albino or a vampire or something, but Lil'ia got mad at me for going through her stuff... Imagine if he had the dark hair and eyes like the rest of them. Or like Lil'ia.”

Yuuri tilted his head, having never considered his palette was out of the ordinary. Viktor was just ethereal.

“His mom was a unicorn, too.”

Fifi had said the same thing. He smiled.

Something rubbed against Yuuri’s leg and he looked down to see a cat. Now with attention caught, it mewed up at him.

“Nata came out to say hello!” Yurio picked the cat up and set her in his lap to stroke her head and kiss it. “Nata, this is the piggy we're always talking about, Yuuri Katsuki.”

That was the first time Yuuri had ever heard the teen say his name not in anger. He was so surprised, he almost didn’t hear him ask if he liked cats. “Oh, I like them fine. I have more experience with dogs, though.”

Yurio let Nata out of his hold and she walked onto Yuuri’s lap, ready for pets from the visitor.

She purred at Yuuri’s fingers between her ears and hand running along her back. “She’s really pretty!”

“Da! She’s the best.” Yurio scooped her up and booped her nose with his own. “Come, I show you the rest of the house before Lil'ia starts nagging again.”
Nata crawled from Yurio’s arms to drape over his shoulder to watch Yuuri walk behind them, starting with the hallway Lilia and Yakov did not go down.

“Here’s more photos showing that those two are worse than you and Viktor.”

There was a fondness to his voice that time, and Yuuri stood to look at the framed photos on the wall of them much younger and dancing together. A dance competition or wedding reception, maybe? They looked happy. A lot like tonight, Yakov more open with his feelings and Lilia not so reserved. Next to it was a photo of Lilia crying in what Yuuri assumed Yakov’s arms as his face was mostly out of view.

“She won’t tell me what that one is about, but from Yakov’s stories, I’d guess it’s when he came back from the war.”

Yakov was a war veteran. That explained some things.

Separate portraits of them, then several of Lilia alone earning awards through her various ballet achievements as a dancer and instructor and then Viktor came into her life. Similar ones to what were in the album were framed and one with him cuddling a doll of Cheburashka.

Why was he so cute?!

“Yeh, I thought you’d like that one,” Yurio grinned.

He then took Yuuri to a small parlor with another cabinet full of nicknacks and books and a window to the backyard.

“There’s a pond out there that we aren’t allowed to skate on. Don’t try it because you’ll get yelled at.”

Yuuri sensed there was a story behind that, but didn’t ask. Instead, wondered how long it took Yurio to exploring of Lilia’s house had to be done in secret.

They backtracked down the hall and entered a room which was a stark contrast to the rest of the house. Schoolwork, trash, dishes with food stuck on them, and magazines were spread across the floor and bed. In the corner by the closet, Yuuri spotted his luggage. Back in Detroit, Yuuri and Phichit were generally cleanly, but there were times during finals their place would reach a similar state.

But they’d at least made a path in their mess.

Yurio stepped on and over things without a care, proud of his den. “This is my room. Sit where you want. I’ll get a sleeping bag out later.”

“Wow, you have a lot of stuff!” He sounded more impressed than he actually was, but it was the response Yurio was looking for, pleased smile and chest out.

“Yeh. Is comfortable!”

Yuuri nodded and took a seat on the bed, the easiest and cleanest place to sit without disrupting the chaos. On the wall against the bed were photos of Yurio with family. His grandpa and younger siblings from the looks of it. An older cat. The ice rink. Next to the collage of photographs was a small posted of Viktor from a couple of seasons ago, one that Yuuri also had. He smiled at it and their shared merchandise.
Nata leaped onto the bed and padded over to Yuuri’s lap.

“That's Potya, my other cat,” Yurio explained, pointing to the photo of the cat on the wall. “He lives in Moscow with Dedushka - ah, my grandpa. They told me I couldn't bring pets to the dorms, so I had to leave him behind.”

“So you got Nata when you moved in with Lilia?”

“No. I got her as soon as I got to Saint Petersburg. Smuggled her in and paid off the RA. First thing I did with my government allowance.”

“O-oh. Government allowance?”

“Yeh. I'm here studying under Yakov on funding from Russia. They cover all of my expenses. As long as I keep winning, they send money home, too. Sponsored.”

“That makes sense. Nice deal, yeah?”

“Da. I'm not going to lose!” Yurio shifted his gaze significantly to the photos.

“Are those your siblings? They in Moscow with the rest of your family?”

“Da... Half brother and sister. Danya, Lena. They're close to my grandpa. I visit when I can.”

“Sounds like you get along, then.”

“Yeh, they're good kids. Grandpa has dinner with them every Sunday and says they work hard in school and actually listen to their parents.”

“Oh... I assumed they were with your grandpa.”

“Nah; I went with my grandpa, they went into foster care cause they were too young and he's getting too old. He has Potya, though. And a fat dog named Roman. Here; I show you photo.” Yurio reached into his pocket for his phone and scrolled through his camera roll until he found an old basset hound mutt. He had the same tired and kind smile his grandfather did.

“What a good dog. So do Danya and Lena watch you skate? Think you're the best?”

“Of course they do! They're my biggest fans, always watching. I have to do the best, make them proud.” He beamed, then looked at the wall again, face softening once more. “And I show them how to be strong, no matter what. Which is why I don't get how you can give up so easy, pork cutlet bowl. You have to show them strength, too. People look up to you!”

Yuuri blinked up at him. “I’m not giving up?”

He took a moment to study him, eyes narrowed, then he straightened. “...Good. I don't want to find you crying at the Grand Prix Final again. Especially after Viktor ran off to train you.”

“I made it to the finals! I haven’t lost, yet.”

“Good! Now make sure Viktor's time was worth it and fight me for the gold!”

“Hope you're ready for it,” Yuuri challenged with a grin.

The teen took the bait. “Oh, I'm ready! YOU better just be ready!” A moment of posturing, and then Yurio was looking towards the poster of Viktor. “Thanks for taking care of him.”
Once more the shift in tone surprised Yuuri. He waited for him to expand. “I'm doing what I can. I'm sorry that he-” “When he first left, I was... I was PISSED... but,” Yurio cut him off. “also worried it was gonna be like my mom, too. They're kinda similar, in ways.”

“Your mom?”


All those did sound like Viktor… all Yuuri could do was nod.

“At least Viktor wasn't a girl. The last thing we need is more Nikiforovs running around, yeh?”

Yuuri choked on nothing. “Y-Yeah.”

“He didn't end up in jail ever as far as I know, either, so there's that.” He sighed at the small victory, then shrugged in Yuuri's direction. “At least he listens to you.”

If Viktor had gone to prison, Yakov and Yurio would be the ones to know, but Yuuri was fine not knowing. “Sometimes, anyway…”

“I tried to get him to coach me over and over and over again and he just ignores me.”

“I don’t think he’s purposefully avoiding you. How have you been asking?”

“Telling him he should coach me? Getting him to agree to choreograph my senior debut?”

“Well, you didn’t exactly ask him. You were more demanding and expecting him to. Hmm maybe he just thought you needed to earn it or something? Although, technically, didn't he do that? Your Agape at Ice Castles…”

“I won the junior world championship TWICE and he still left to coach you!”

There was no getting through to Yurio. The three of them all had stubbornness in common. Instead, Yuuri addressed what was now obvious. “Like you said... he was bewitched! It was a surprise to me, too.”

Yurio opened his mouth then clamped it shut. Huffed through his nose and rubbed his eyes. “How are you both so stupid?”

“W-what?”

“Nothing, nevermind... ugh. Let me show you something.” Yurio scooted off the bed and onto his feet.

Nata purred in Yuuri’s lap while he stroked between her ears and back in preparation to defend he and Viktor being supposedly stupid. “Viktor was calling for someone and I answered him, so… he came to me for that more than the coaching. His heart song…”

“So I’ve HEARD. More than once.” Yurio groaned and rummaged in a pile by the bookshelf in the corner. “Congratulations or whatever. Are you planning to keep him or what?”

“Why wouldn't I?” Being accused of that was more offensive than being called stupid! “I love him.”

“Just making sure that I'll be the one representing Russia from now on. Unless he pulls some stunt
like coming back for nationals.”

Nata meowed at Yuuri’s hand stalling.

Would Viktor return mid-season? Doing crazy stunts wasn’t beyond him, but…

The silence left Yurio suspicious. “He's not, is he?”

“As far as I know, no.” He hoped not.

Or did he?

Sighing, Yurio returned to the bed with what he’d been seeking - leopard print binder - and came to sit next to Yuuri. “I wouldn't be surprised if he's planning something, though... he's always got three or four backup plans. Probably worked on extra programs while he was in Hasetsu just in case, right?”

“He's ... been working on something, yeah.” All those times he’d shown up to the rink early and stolen glances at Viktor working on a secret program. Could that be it?

“Tche. Figures. Always one step ahead.”

“Um, what was it you were going to show me?” Yuuri asked, nodding towards the binder and resuming petting Nata.

“Right…” Yurio put the binder square in his lap and flipped to the back with pockets and plastic sleeves of mini posters, ticket stubs, and old programs. Carefully he removed a signed, glossy photo from its place. A very young Yurio looked at the camera partially excited, but partially scared as Viktor smiled with his signature charming heart-shaped smile, crouched with an arm around his little fan.

“You were so tiny!”

Yurio blushed, unsure if it was a compliment or not. “Grandpa took me to see him for Russian Nationals in Moscow.” He slipped the photo back and flipped it over and immediately Yuuri recognized the memorabilia.

“The second volume of the Viktor Nikiforov fan zine! I wish I was able to get the first volume…”

“Wow, so few were made. I’m surprised you got the second one at all.”

“The internet is a good place.”

“True.” Yurio hummed nonchalantly and slipped once more and volume one of the zine Viktor released was staring back at him.

“C-can I see it?”

“What? The zine? Can’t you see if fine from there?” Yurio eyed him suspiciously as if he hadn’t brought this upon himself. “They’re really rare. Only fifty were made. I only got it because I was a subscriber.”

“If I was a Russian citizen, I’d be, too. Please, can I see it,” Yuuri asked, borderline pouting.

“...Fine. Be careful.”
“I will, I will!”

Gingerly Yurio removed the small thirty-two page booklet from its protective sleeve and handed it to Yuuri, after calling Nata to his own lap, watching him like a hawk.

Yuuri took hold of the cover with delicate fingers and flipped it over. It was all in Russian of course, but the first page was a dedication and table of contents, doing its best to mimic a published book.

The zines were made by Viktor himself, using a lot of the techniques he did with his idea books: magazine clippings and rough sketches and photographs. All the text was advice that Yuuri could never read.

“That page he talks about how ballet takes up too much time,” Yurio pointed, a ballet slipper sketched beside a paragraph.

Advice or blogging about his everyday life. So many treasures for Yuuri to look at.

“Are you still taking ballet?” Yuuri asked.

“Me? Yeah, are you kidding? Lilia is always on my case about it.”

“Yeah, dumb question.” Lilia was both Viktor and Yurio’s instructor, it made sense.

When Yuuri finished looking through volume one, satisfied for being able to touch the rare artifact, Yurio put it away, then asked:

“... are you gonna tell Viktor about the photos?”

Swallowing, Yuuri halted his thoughts from going further than the question itself. “I don’t know how I could tell him. He was upset we - I - went through his closet.”

Yurio nodded, thoughtful.

“How would I even bring it up? Do you think he’s known Niko’s been stalking him?”

“Eh... I dunno. Maybe that’s why he's been so antsy. But Yakov took the photos from you and said things were taken care of, so I guess maybe ask him? He knows what to do.”

“I don't want to keep things from Viktor. But if he knew, he'd be upset.”

It was quiet between them for a moment as they stewed over that fact. Yurio soon sat back on his hands and straightened his legs, forcing Nata out of his lap. “Well, I did what I promised and kept you from harm! And you protected his apartment... and Yakov looked after you, too. So nothing really happened.”

Yuuri considered and agreed with a nod. “It’d be senseless worry, wouldn’t it? Other than I know something he probably doesn’t want me to?”

“What good would it do to tell him when he's all the way in Hasetsu?”

“And if Yakov took care of it, even when Viktor comes back, Niko shouldn't be, right?”

“If he knows what's good for him!”

“But if I'm to keep my promise and take care of Viktor... Then me not telling him is protecting
him, right? Or… no, he needs to know eventually. I just know what I need to protect him from.”

Yurio snorted. “Yeh, he left Russia, so this is your mess to fix.”

“Get rid of Niko for good?”

“You're gonna have to kill him, I guess.”

Yuuri stared at him, horrified. “I’ve never killed anyone before! Maybe I need to scare him away! Like he was trying to do to us.”

Not convinced, Yurio shrugged. “You should probably talk to Yakov. Y’know, the one with the gun.”

“Yeah… I'm not very threatening.”

“No. You aren’t.”

“Rub it in… I do think you're right, though; this is my mess. Yakov shouldn't have to fix it.”

“But he practically adopted Viktor. I think he enjoys it.”

As true as that was, Yuuri couldn’t rely on his love’s coach to fix everything.

“It’s time to initiate you into the family, Yuuri.”

Yuuri followed Yakov’s gaze around the corner of the bar. Completely dark all except for a single beam of light from a lone street light, a figure silhouette standing unsuspecting. Tall and wide, a stream of smoke puffed from their target’s mouth.

A heavy hand on his shoulder lead him to the parked vehicle on the street, trunk open with an assortment of arms inside.

Yurio stepped out of the car, popping the brim of his hat with a grin.

Lilia emerged from the passenger side, fur coat, heels, rouge lips, and a jade cigarette holder held delicately between two fingers with ease.

“I-initiate? You mean-” Yuuri sputtered.

“This is your test. Kill that man and you’re one of us.”

“Wait… you’re legit in the mafia? All this time I’ve thought that was a stereotype.”

“Where do you think the stereotypes come from?” Yakov smirked. “Here; take this crowbar.”

The long, thick metal was placed in his hands, palms sweaty with nerves.

“Spill his blood. Make me proud.”

Yuuri jolted awake in his sleeping bag.

The sudden motion also woke Yurio. Sleepily he sat up, rubbing at his eyes. “What is it, Piggy?”
It wasn’t necessarily a nightmare. Disturbing at best, and something his subconscious and limited world view had wondered since seeing Yakov’s gun. Apparently. Silly, but he had to know. Just for the peace of mind. “Um. Yakov hasn't asked you to kill anyone before, has he?”

Yurio blinked at him. “... no? Not lately.” He then stopped in thought. “At least not seriously.”

Even in jest, Yuuri wasn’t sure if that would shake his stupid brain.

“You’re at Lilia’s? What is she up to, now?”

Ever skeptical of his ballet instructor, Yuuri had to disappoint Viktor. “She’s not up to anything. Yurio wanted me to come over and see his room and meet his cat. We’re meeting with Georgi and Mila today. Then tomorrow there’s going to be a party for my birthday.”

Viktor didn’t have a comeback for that and huffed. “I see. Sorry you didn’t get to stay at my place the whole time.”

“It’s fine. I enjoyed my time. I… learned a lot about you just by what was on the bookshelves. So many books. Your idea books were just as incredible as I imagined.”

He was quiet. Whether it was out of wait to expand or nervous about seeing too much, Yuuri wasn’t sure.

There was no way he was going to talk about the box of photos he and Yurio went through. Or that his ex was a psycho and that’s why he really was at Lilia’s.

“Oh, and don’t worry; we left the place clean,” Yuuri continued. “Is there anything you needed me to bring back to Japan with me?”

“Hmm not that I can think at the moment. Thank you for keeping things in order for me.”

“Sure. I’ll miss your stereo system I found out about too late.”

“And I’ll miss you playing the piano for me. I guess Lilia has one, doesn’t she? A real one…”

“Yeah. I haven’t played with it, yet, but maybe I can!”

“We’ll see. Best stay on her good side.”

She was harder to read than some people, but Yuuri was pretty sure he was on her good side. What happened that Viktor was not? Or was Lilia not on his good side? Another thing Yuuri hoped he’d get to know. Someday. “Yeah. Hey, I’ll be flying home on Monday.”

The reminder caused a cute audible sound from Viktor on the other end. All grievances of Lilia, forgotten. “Yes! You will. I can’t wait.”

After hanging up with Viktor, Yuuri and Yurio finished getting ready, taking care to pack an extra layer for windchill, to go meet up with the rest of Team Russia. Georgi and Mila were waiting at the station for them, both waving at them as they approached. Bright eyed and cheery for the morning, they boarded the line going south.

Mila took it upon herself to share what history she knew of the station(s) they transferred to on their
journey and any landmarks they could see from outside the windows that passed them by. Yuuri admittedly had most of his studies be for the central portion of Saint Petersburg, so he appreciated the commentary, no matter how bored Yurio seemed. Georgi was content to be in company, idly listening to the conversation and scrolling his phone at once.

The minutes flew by and they were de-boarding at Sadovaya Station among the passengers they’d picked up on the way that had the same idea. Clouds had rolled in since their journey began, but thankfully did not seem to threaten snow.

Together the four walked the rest of the way to Catherine’s Palace and waited in formed line for entrance.

Blue, white, and gold made up the exterior of the impressive Rocco building, the colors popping out under the overcast and surrounding snow mounds. Once inside, Yuuri marveled at the high ceilings, tall windows, and gilded gold stucco. Mila took the role of tour guide, Gerogi adding his own comments when necessary, through the ballroom, amber room, chapel, and agate rooms. Gaudy, yet elegant.

Camera roll filled with a hundred plus more photos, Yuuri followed his Russian friends back outside to the palace courtyard.

Children played in the snow. A couple in formal wear and a camera crew were setting up for a photoshoot.

Yurio pointed at the sign for Troika rides and the four followed after.

Mila paid the fee for them all despite their well-meaning protests. “It was my idea!”

They climbed into the sled - Mila and Yuuri in the front, Yurio and Georgi in the back - their driver at the ready. At the click of his tongue and a tug at the reins, the driver sent the three horses into their canter.

In the open air at forty-five kilometers an hour, Mila clung to Yuuri and laughed and hollered. Her enthusiasm was contagious and Georgi and Yurio joined her in her merriment. Yuuri couldn’t help it and was doing it, too, winter rushing through his hair.

Multiple times throughout the laps of the course, their driver had to remind them to keep their hands and arms inside the sled in case of low hanging branches. Miraculously, their ride didn’t end prematurely for the ruckus they made together, but their driver was glad to be rid of the group at the end.

Hot chocolate and cider was served at a stationary stall at the exit to the grounds. Georgi treated and they stood off along the backside of the stall, sipping from their steaming cups as the sun started to set.

Yuuri blew on his hot chocolate, glasses fogging and clearing up. He knew about their skating careers, but he didn’t know much else about Georgi and Mila. Starting with the reason they were spending time together was a good start. “How did you two meet Viktor? Yurio told me some of his story. If that’s okay.”

“And what story would that be?” Mila smirked at their youngest companion. “Little Yuri Plisetsky, prodigy, mirror image of Viktor himself?”

“No way! I am better than Viktor! I will beat his records-- without his help!”
“Except it's already too late for that, Yuri... or, right, Yurio ~”

“I TOLD YOU TO NEVER CALL ME THAT, HAG!”

She ignored his retort and continued. “In any case, I think it was the same for me as it was for Yuri... I came to the team a fan of both Viktor and Georgi, like any Russian skater.”

“I'm not his fan!”

“Or any skating fan, really,” Mila corrected herself and gestured to Yuuri. “I wondered if I'd get a chance to practice with them, but Viktor often booked private sessions. I hardly ever saw him at first. Then Coach Yakov surprised me by asking him to help with my jumps. I thought he was going to be cold and mean, but he was actually very sweet, and took me under his wing. We skated together for a long time, I actually started to get a crush on him! Of course, who doesn't have a crush on Viktor Nikiforov at some point, da?”

Yuri stuck out his his tongue, Yuuri looked down, guilty, and Georgi denied it all together.

“I knew he was gay, but I was allowed to crush anyway. Harmless, you know? I thought we were becoming good friends, too, but then suddenly... he stopped.”

“When was that?” Yuuri asked looking up from his drink.

“Just after I made my senior debut. It was like he got me to my goal and that was that. He went back into hiding. And then Yuri came along…”

“Like setting a bird’s broken wing and setting them free,” Georgi added dramatically.

The group was quiet for a moment, considering their friend’s words.

“I wonder what that means for the piggy, then,” Yurio offered, breaking the silence.

“What do you mean?” Yuuri asked, hoping his feigned ignorance was convincing enough. It was something he’d thought about and had tried not to think about for some time. Push it to the back of his mind. It couldn’t be true. He wasn’t someone broken that needed fixed only to be abandoned.

Yurio stared at him, but didn’t press.

“I think... Viktor is frightened of showing his true self,” Mila said instead.”So when people get close, he pushes them away. Another thing you and he have in common, Yuri.”

“What's THAT supposed to mean!?"

Yuuri smiled to himself. He, Viktor, and Yurio were all so similar.

“Viktor and I used to be close, too,” Georgi interjected above Yurio and Mila’s squabble, swishing his cup, that same bittersweet nostalgia he had when speaking about Viktor. “Well, not at first. When I was recruited to the team, I thought he hated me. But after addressing that, we had a summer where we spent a lot of time together. I helped him nab his first boyfriend, though at the time I thought he was a she.” The smile he bore faded. “Then I found out the truth and Viktor became cold and avoidant. I was young then, I’d never known anyone to be gay in my corner of the world, so I didn’t know how I was supposed to react, but I tried - I tried - to still be his friend. But he pushed me away, his deepest and darkest secret no longer kept.”

He was a frightened deer even back then. “I’m sorry, Georgi,” Yuuri said. “He was… just scared.”
Georgi nodded, frowning at the remainder of his cider. “We haven’t been able to patch things up even in adulthood. I wish we could go back to simpler times, but Viktor is still my comrade, and I am happy that he has you now, Yuuri. He truly looks happy.”

“It’s so sweeeet,” Mila cooed.

Yurio gagged.

“I can’t tell you how many times I wanted to put a curse on that ex of his! But alas, I must have permission from the one I am doing it on behalf of to do so.”

Georgi’s pout was so serious, Yuuri wondered if he truly could perform spells. And also if he knew just how bad things got between Viktor and Niko. Was it worth it to ask? No… he didn’t make the rift between Viktor and his teammates worse.

The intermission of changing clothes and freshening up was all of an hour before the four friends were meeting back up at the station. Grand Hall was near the Mariinsky, giving Yuuri a sense of place in the grand scheme of things. Like Yurio, Yuuri had seen Georgi and Mila dressed nicely at banquets, but in their own country for such a formal outing, they dressed to the nines.

Four young people, friends - one Japanese and three Russians - going to the symphony did draw a few heads as they made their way up the inside to check in their coats.

Red carpet, seat cushions, and curtains accented white pillars and the crystal chandeliers from above. A beautiful and regal venue.

Georgi found their seats and waved them in passed the two couples seated before them.

Lights dimmed and the sound of the symphony tuning synced with the stage lights over the performers, conductor with his baton at the ready. A few measured swings and the musicians started into Tchaikovsky’s *The Voyevoda* Overture. Being in the birthplace of one of the most renowned classical composers and hearing his work live in a historic building was overwhelming, Yuuri got misty-eyed like he had at the Mariinsky. Or even in Beijing because music was so important to him. Every skater in his company had a love and appreciation for music, too. It was the life and heart of their performance, and seeing as moved and engrossed in the performance as well was validating.

At the end of the two movements, they stood and cheered and took a photo together to commemorate their time together.

With the morning still dark, Yuuri awoke to the soft ring of his phone at his ear. He’d silenced notifications, but left his ringer on just in case Viktor or his family called. It was more likely Viktor. Yuuri rolled onto his side, body more sore and groggy than he’d anticipated from yesterday’s activity and accepted the call.

Viktor didn’t let him have the first word. “Yuuri! Good morning!”

He took a moment to give an amused sigh at his boyfriend. If they were in bed together, Viktor would sound just as awake. “Mmmorning.”

“Zhelayu tebe Dnya Rozhdeniya takogo zhe osobennogo kak ty sam!”
“... Happy birthday?” Somewhere in there...

“Yes! I wish you a birthday that is as special as you are, Yuuri, my love.”

”Aww!” Yuuri curled in on himself a little, feeling a warmth in his chest. “That’s very sweet. Thank you, Viktor.’

“I'm sorry that I couldn't be there with you today, but this is just the first of many to come, da?”

“Of course! It's... my first birthday away from you, next year will be our first together.'

“You know, it's funny; your family hasn't had you for your birthday in five years... and being separated from you now, it's like I'm truly one of them.”

“I hadn’t thought of it that way. I guess so.”

“When I see you, I'll give you twenty-four kisses for your twenty-fourth birthday~”

“Twenty-four? That’s a lot of kisses.” Then again, he’d never counted during a love session before.

“There'll be a lot more, too... as soon as I get you back in my arms.”

Yuuri loved the insinuation that was happening and got up and out of his sleeping bag and quietly shut the door behind him. “Twenty-four kisses... Everywhere?”

“I'll be very thorough.”

“Do I get to reciprocate?”

“Of course.”

“Then I'm on board!”

“There's a lot to look forward to, Yuuri…”

His face grew hot at that. “Oh? You have other surprises?”

“Isn't that what Viktor Nikiforov does?”

“How could I forget?” Yuuri switched the side he was leaning on. “I’m really looking forward to coming home and being with you.”

“Me, too, Yuuri. I can hardly stand it... I have so much to tell you.”

“Yeah... Me, too.” Did Viktor plan to expand on what Yuuri had already come to find out?

“Oh?” Viktor asked. “That's right... how was your time yesterday with everyone? I hope Lilia hasn't been spreading rumors.”

“I didn't see a whole lot of her yesterday for her to do so. Went to Saint Catherine's and did a troika ride with Yurio, Georgi, and Mila. It was a lot of fun. Have you been down there before?”

“It’s been a while, but yes I have.”

“It was nice. Oh, then we went to the symphony. Georgi’s relative got us tickets. Works there, I think. I really want to go to all these places with you someday.”
“His family has a lot of influence... Yes, we'll have a chance to, Yuuri. I plan on it. There's plenty of time.”

“Yeah. There’s going to be a party here tonight.”

“That's good! Will they be making katsudon for you? Mama Katsuki will be making it here. Though, I guess she does that every day...”

“Like you said, I haven't been home for my birthday in five years. Didn't know a lot of people in Detroit and often I was skating, so... first time someone has really thrown me a party. Phichit tried to, but it was always over Thanksgiving break. I think Yurio is going to help Lilia in the kitchen and try to make it. She’s already told me I’m not allowed to help!”

“It’s your birthday, Yuuri! For once I agree with her. Ohh.... I wish I could be there! Will Yakov try it? I wonder what he'll think.”

As always, his voice got so fond when it came to Yakov. “I’m sure he will. He likes Lilia's cooking.”

“He always did. I really wish I could be there. Or you here. I miss you.”

“I miss you, too. So much. I’ll see you, soon.”


“Yeah! Tomorrow night.”

Yuuri’s time in Saint Petersburg had flown by and dragged all at once. He’d loved his time learning about Viktor and exploring all the city had to offer. As much as the attention startled him, being with Team Russia and Lilia was something he’d always be grateful for.

How different would his time had been if Viktor had been able to come with him as planned? They’d probably have spent a lot more time in bed.

He’d been so lost in his head, Viktor had gone quiet. “Oh, sorry. Viktor? It's okay. I-I’ll be home tomorrow.”

It took a moment for Viktor to respond, and when he did, his voice was soft and distant at first, coming back from wherever he’d gone. “I know... I can't wait to see you. To hold you. You still have the jacket, right?”

“I do. Did you find something of mine you liked?”

“I think so. Maybe more than one thing...”

Viktor was so cute when he was sheepish. “Yeah? Or is that part of my surprises waiting me?”

“Perhaps. You’ll have to wait and see.”

Yuuri could hear the wink from across the ocean. “Okay, you sneak!”

“Let those thoughts keep you company today, my Yuuri. I hope it's wonderful. I'll make it up to you, I promise.”

“I'll tell you about it in the morning. When I get to the airport?”
“If you can get a moment alone.”

“Sure. I love you, Viktor.”

“I love you, too. Feel free to send photos... I want to know how things are.”

“I will! Don't stay up late for them, okay?”

“I feel so distant from you. It's hard to be so far apart... hearing from you only once a day.”

“I know. It'll be over soon.” Thankfully. Yuuri wasn’t sure how much more of this melodramatic pining he could take and was grateful Viktor waited until his last day in Saint Petersburg to be like this.

“Yes. It will. I'll look for photos. Have the best day, my Yuuri. I'll eat katsudon in your honor, and think of you all day.”

“Can I have a photo of you, too? Eating the katsudon? Just at some point today before it gets too late.”

“I'll send you some from dinner!”

“Thanks. I look forward to it.”

And exchange of kissy sounds and I Love Yous later, Yuuri eventually hung up and held his phone to his chest.

Tomorrow night they’d be together again.

They’d have to spend Viktor’s birthday together.

Somehow.

Feeling his birthday could rightly start after the call with the love of his life, Yuuri tended to the notifications on his phone of birthday wishes from family and friends. Going by timestamp, Phichit was the first, as usual. How he managed every year, he would never know. Yuuri took a moment to text him thanks and a few photos from his trip, to which Phichit suggested he should totally write a fan blog about being in Viktor’s backyard.

He’d think about it.

With the sun now out, Yuuri could see the frozen pond in Lilia’s yard from the kitchen window after breakfast. It was the perfect size for leisurely laps, and really was tempting. Yuuri wondered the story behind Yurio’s warning.

“It’ll be hours before people show up for the party,” Yurio said, sidling up beside him. “Want to go skating?”

“But I thought you said-”

“No! Not there - at Victory Park. I’ll see if Mila and Georgi want to come, too.”

“If they aren’t sick of me…”
For a moment Yurio stared at him, then kicked at his shins with a Tch. “Get your skates, pork bowl.”

Mila met them at the park entrance an hour later with skates tied over her shoulder. Georgi had family obligations to attend to.

Moskovsky Victory Park was a public park transformed from World War II through the Soviet era. A mismatch of recreation and history. The ice rink was a frozen over pond and of the few things that required a fee, though minimal. Sunday morning left the three friends nearly to themselves.

When he and Viktor were in Moscow, it was just the two of them being as romantic as they could through Viktor’s injuries. Sharing scarves and skating side by side. Not laughing and rough housing like he had many times with Phichit at casual outdoor rinks.

If only both of them were here, too, he’d have the perfect birthday.

The doorbell rang at a quarter past six. Lilia grumbled about young people not being prompt, but Yakov reminded her a party was casual. Coach Feltsman being so laid back was a continual surprise.

Mila was the first to arrive. Once her shoes were removed, she lept towards Yuuri and lifted him into a hug and wished him happy birthday with a kiss on his cheek. Then she was off to terrorize Yurio who was finishing up food preparations.

Georgi was next. He apologized for missing skating that morning, saying he practically had to beg to come to the party instead of their Sunday dinner. Yuuri thanked him for coming and was presented with a new book to add to his collection, The Frost and the Flower. “The couple in it remind me of you and Viktor if your roles were reversed.”

Yuuri was happy to have new reading material for the plane home.

The last to arrive was Sasha. Sash Markov. And his family. He’d been retired for since Viktor’s rise in his senior days, but it was surreal to see one’s heroes with a wife and children.

Yakov let them in, giving Sasha and his wife, with a baby boy in arms, hugs, as well as daughter, bending down as best as he could for her.

“Dedushka!”

Spending a whole week around Yakov, Yuuri figured he was a paternal figure to all his skaters.

“So you’re Yuuri.” Sasha extended his hand to Yuuri, who sat on the couch with Georgi in wait of the final guests to arrive.

He stood and took his hand, trying his best to not look too stunned by it. Before Viktor, Sasha was the top in Russia. “Yeah. Um. I’m Yuuri.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve read up on you.”

Read about his skating career? His life? Neither of which would be impressive to someone like him…
“I didn’t get it at first, but I think I know why Viktor’s so taken with you.”

“Yeah?” Yuuri looked up at him, hopeful for him to expand.

Like Viktor, he didn’t. Minus the finger to his lips in mischief, the way he looked at him, daring him to ask, but wouldn’t tell anyway, had the same effect.

A few beats passed, and in the same teasing tone—“Relax, Yuuri! I’m not here to fight. You and Viktor both... so worked up!’

His wife sidled up beside him, rolling her eyes like this was an everyday thing. “That’s because you’re teasing him, Sasha.”

Teasing seemed to be a Russian thing to do.

“Ah! Yuuri, let me introduce you to my beautiful wife, Zhanna, whom you may call Zhanka... and our son Anton, or Toshka.”

Zhanka bounced Toshka in her arms.

Yuuri nodded at both of them with a hello.

Mila came from around the kitchen and spotted Sasha’s family. “Toshka! I haven't seen him since things were finalized! Zhanka, can I hold him, please?”

“Of course,” Zhanka said, carefully handing the wriggling bundle to the younger girl while Yuuri wondered what ‘finalized’ meant. “He’s getting strong!”

Mila cooed at Toshka for a moment and asked where Alyonka was, taking Yuuri’s place on the sofa.

Zhankah waved her hand toward Yakov who was disappearing down the hall, holding their girl’s hand. “With Dedushka. She’s so fond of him.”

“Yes, yes, she is…” Sasha mused, while Zhanka excused herself with a warning look to her husband to go to Lilia. “So Yuuri. Makkachin’s recovered, yeah?”

“Oh, yes, he has. He’s doing just fine!”

“That’s a relief. Alyonka was so worried. Have you enjoyed your time in Saint Petersburg?”

“I really have. It’s a beautiful place. Everyone on the team has been so nice, too.

“That's good to hear. I was a little concerned at first with how you took Viktor away. I never thought he'd retire so early. Skating has been Viktor’s world ever since I’ve known him... to give up all his hopes and dreams, everything he’s worked so hard for in his whole life, you must be very special, yeah? But after your displays in Beijing and Moscow... it would appear that your feelings are sincere.”

So the intimidation Yuuri was feeling wasn’t strictly idolship but a sense of protectiveness. And if Yuuri didn’t answer accordingly, Sasha would... what? “Does it count as ‘taking away’ when he came to me? I’ve never felt this way about anyone else. I’m pretty sure.”

Sasha put an arm around him, and Yuuri instantly felt smell. “Who can say? Regardless of who's at fault, quite a few people are angry.”
Yuuri couldn’t help feeling a jab at his pride. “I’m not going to stop loving him because of that.”

“I never said you were. I just wanted you to be aware of the potential danger that could come your way.” Sasha leaned in closer, lowering his voice. “This isn’t the first time Viktor’s run headfirst into trouble.”

“I’m not Niko.”

His brows raised at the proclamation, then turned from surprise to amusement. “Ah, that’s right. You know about him.”

Yuuri nodded.

“Viktor told you before, or did you only find out when he paid a visit?”

“Some things. Others I’ve found out while I’ve been here.”

The Russian legend made a non-committal sound.

“I’m too nosy for my own good,” Yuuri clarified.

“Then I take it you’ll know what I mean when I say that Coach has been through enough... and I’ll take it personally if you make him watch Viktor go through that again. The past is best left in the past.”

“You don’t need to worry.” Yuuri found it strange that Sasha seemed more concerned by Yakov’s inconvenience than whatever happened to Viktor. What else was he missing?

Alyonka broke the tension as she rounded the corner of the sitting room, calling for her papa.

Sasha crouched down to her level while she said something in Russian. He smiled at her, then to Yuuri. “Alyonka has informed me that it’s time to eat and that I need to stop torturing you, I guess.”

It was like having an old brother.

Sasha patted Yuuri on the back, the force jarring his stance. “Happy birthday, Yuuri. Let’s make sure to go skating next time you’re in Saint Petersburg, yeah?”

“I’d like that! I’m sure Viktor would, too.”

“If he can be convinced I’m not dead, sure.”

“What, why?”

Yurio came in the room as a second rounder of food being ready, wiping his hands on an apron. “Yeh, Viktor thinks that because he's retired, he's dead for some reason.”

“He only lives like 15 minutes away,” Mile sighed.

“That’s Viktor for you, never reasonable.” Shasha picked up his daughter, ruffled Yurio’s hair and followed him into the dining room.

The Russians plus Yuuri all fit around the expanded leaflet table to a meal of beef stroganoff and cabbage rolls, rye bread, and honorary katsudon, all courtesy of Yurio’s internet guidance.
It wasn’t his mother’s, but it was just as special.

Zhanka provided a ptichye moloko cake for dessert, which Sasha was sure to praise her about.

Yuuri took out his phone and took photos of the spread and all that were there to send to Viktor.

They spent the evening talking about the skating season thus far, making plans for a return trip to Russia that hadn’t been decided on when, and talking about Viktor as if he were there.

Since Yuuri’s flight was far before the metro started to run in the morning, it was good he was staying in proximity to his chauffeurs.

Yurio complained about the early hour, but he would have complained more if he didn’t get to say goodbye. He helped him pack after the party ended the night before and everyone else went home. Yakov and Lilia had convinced the teen to stay and get more sleep so he could go to school when it was time. Grumbling, he accepted.

“See you in Barcelona, Pork Bowl. It was fun.”

“Thank you for being my tour guide and spending time with me. See you in a week.”

Had Yurio not swayed in place, catching himself to return to his room, Yuuri might have initiated a hug.

Lilia emerged from her room in nightgown to see them out the door.

Yuuri gave her half bow. “Thank you for letting me stay. And for all the meals you made. And the party you held. I really appreciate it.”

“Don’t be a stranger, Yuuri. It was good to have you.” She hid a yawn behind her hand, then smiled at him, turned away and said something in Russian.

Yakov nodded to her phrase but wasn’t kind enough to translate. “Let’s go, Yuuri.”

Once in the yellow car, Yuuri tried not to doze off from the heat from the vents and generally not a functioning person until at least 10am. Yakov was a good sport about it and let him rest until he pulled into the drop-off.

After retrieving his luggage from the trunk, Yakov opened Yuuri’s door and gave him another shake.

Suddenly the thought of the long flight ahead was leaving him anxious, but he wouldn’t let Yakov stir him again and got out to stretch.

The old man stepped with him to the curb.

“Thanks, Coach Feltsman. For everything.”

Yakov shook his head then clasped Yuuri’s shoulder for a moment and then was bringing him into a hug. “It is you I should thank. For taking care of Vitya.”

With how affectionate he’d been with his skaters, the action didn’t surprise Yuuri all that much. He was an honorary member of his mafia -er - team. Yuuri let his forehead fall on his shoulder, hugging him back for himself and Viktor. Somehow he’d get the two of them to make up. It was
clear neither of them were really mad at each other. Just hurting. “I’ll keep doing my best for him.”

He pulled away, clapping his shoulders at arm’s length. “Be ready to face Yuri at the finals, too.”

Now that sounded more like coach advice. “If he’s ready to face your star student’s student.”

The challenge brought a smirk to the old man’s face. It was a good response. Even if Yakov probably didn’t believe he could take gold away from Yurio, anyway.

Yuuri slung his duffle over his shoulder and extended the handle on his suitcase, waved at Yakov as he drove off, then entered the airport to check in.

Once through security, Yuuri looked around for something to eat before boarding his plane. He settled on a cafe and ordered a blini, yogurt, fruit, and tea. Something light for his stomach and enough to get him going. He snapped a photo and sent it to Viktor.

[Last meal before I’m in the air!]

Yuuri scrolled through his sent messages from the party. Viktor hadn’t sent him a photo of him eating katsudon. He probably got busy or embarrassed.

Soon his phone vibrated with Viktor’s response.

[Vkusno! Enjoy your flight. I’ll talk to you when you get home~!]

Guess that confirmed he didn’t need to call? More to tell in person, at least!

The first boarding call sounded over the intercom and Yuuri finished his food and walked to his gate to get in line with sleepy passengers. Shuffling along the jet bridge and through the aisle of the plane, Yuuri took *The Frost and the Flower* from his duffle before shoving it under the seat in front of him to sit down. Placing the book in the seat pocket, he settled into his seat with the provided blanket, grateful the early flight left the seat next to him empty.

The screen in the headrest in front of him displayed English subtitles with the Russian audio of flight safety and features onboard.

Once airborne, Yuuri looked out the window, the sun just barely peeking out through the cloudy cold morning, Saint Petersburg and its surrounding waters becoming less and less visible.

Goodbye, Russia. For now.

Would Viktor still want to come back? To visit or come home at all?

If he didn’t come home… what was Viktor’s plan after the skating season was over? He got Yuuri to the finals, that was their arrangement. So whether the Broken Bird analogy was true or not, where did that leave Viktor? If things aren’t patched up with Yakov and he didn’t return to skating, then… what?

Knowing that Niko was lurking, was it safe for him to go back, even if he wanted to?

All the burned bridges with his team and the RSU, too…

Although, with how receptive they were to Yuuri, it had to be because of Viktor. They wouldn’t have been so welcoming and accepting if they weren’t happy for their teammate and loved him.

They loved Viktor.
Even after Viktor was cold towards them when they got too close. Shutting them out. Running away. Acting like he had nobody in Russia that cared about him.

Viktor was wrong. There were a lot of people that cared. His teammates that have been there for so many years. A coach and ballet instructor that had been there for him nearly his entire life.

Viktor has family in Russia. A support system.

Just like Yuuri did.

Viktor wasn’t alone. He didn’t have to hide in a tower. If only he’d utilized what he had earlier on in life, maybe his demons would have been smaller. Maybe things with Niko wouldn’t have gotten as out of hand as they did.

Maybe he wouldn’t need to give up on his dreams just to stop feeling so alone.

Everyone knew about Niko to varying degrees, and it didn’t matter who had the full story, but every single one was protective of Viktor because of him. If Niko was still waiting, there needed to be closure. Yakov taking care of it didn’t solve it.

Unless he killed him… he wouldn’t, would he?

No, that was ridiculous.

Still. Yakov, Lilia, Yurio, Mila, and Georgi; they all were happy that Viktor found Yuuri and that they were good for each other.

There was family waiting for him. Russia was Viktor’s home and Yuuri needed to prove it to him.

Chapter End Notes

Mari: It'll be good when Yuuri's back.
Hiroko: I miss him, too.
Mari: Not as much as /that/ one.
Hiroko: Hehe of course not. Aww you'll miss sitting on the back porch with Vicchan during your smoke breaks in the evenings, won't you?
Mari: Who said anything about it stopping? Yuuri's going to join us.

**There's not a lot of skating happening, lately, but NEXT TIME:**
Viktor is a sad pine tree/ Cooking / Gazing into the Distance / Secrets / Reunions on Fire
Tadaima

Chapter by gabapple

Chapter Summary

The week that Yuuri was away in Saint Petersburg is both trying and... enlightening for Viktor, who is faced with some very difficult decisions. However, it seems that destiny is on his side this time around...

#BACKSTORY #brief violence #roller coaster of emotions #ends on a very happy note, don't worry #I'm SO SORRY IT'S SO LONG

Chapter Notes

I'm so sorry that this chapter A) took so long, B) IS so long, C) may hurt a bit. It does, however, wrap up episode 9, which includes the infamous airport reunion! FINALLY, after months and months, our boys get to be back together. Thank goodness. :A; Now we have all felt a bit of the pain they've gone through... Now we just have one last chapter before we head on to BARCELONA. Prepare yourself!

Mamodewberry: They are back together again ;_; I think we are just as relieved as they are sob. Thank you all for your patience in the delivery of this chapter. Like Gab said, some pain, so prepare that. Think of it as practice for Barcelona :)

Gabapple: Special thanks to Mamo for writing a bit of Yuko PoV for this chapter (as well as being the ever-helpful consultant and supervisor for ALL of the Hasetsu crew), and for patiently holding my hand while I coaxed Viktor into giving us all of the goods. Seriously, I'm exhausted. But it's done. I'm so relieved.

Oh yeah, and we're involved in a bunch of zines right now... make sure to follow our joint tumblr to see which ones! [https://gogoichirin.tumblr.com/](https://gogoichirin.tumblr.com/) - many of our stories are written in the NLA universe!

Writing!:
- **Tiger Swimming**: [https://archiveofourown.org/works/16110773](https://archiveofourown.org/works/16110773)
  A short story about young Vitya and Coach Feltsman brought to you by Quel and I!
- **NEW Vitya Diaries** bundle, chapters 21-25: [https://archiveofourown.org/works/11799600/chapters/36091455](https://archiveofourown.org/works/11799600/chapters/36091455)
  Read this if you want to know more about our Viktor's backstory! It goes into WAAAAYYYY more detail about his relationships with Yakov, Lilia, Georgi, his aunt and uncle, Niko, Makkachin, etc!
- **The Best Man**: [https://archiveofourown.org/works/15349497](https://archiveofourown.org/works/15349497)
  A short little story that I wrote for Mamo's birthday in which Viktor gives the best man speech at Chris and Baz's wedding :)'
- **Father of Apples**: [https://archiveofourown.org/works/15007145](https://archiveofourown.org/works/15007145)
  My piece for the Dark Horse zine, all about Otabek and rat daughter, Alma. This is part of our NLA canon!
Comfort Food: https://archiveofourown.org/works/15066515
Mamo’s piece for Born to Shine zine, which features Yuuri and Phichit college adventures! PLEASE READ THEY GO TO DENNY’S IT’S AMAZING

ALSO, Mamo updated her super cute coffee shop/music Free! AU, so go read that, too: https://archiveofourown.org/works/10374069/chapters/22914603 ...it's adorable and I beta it and love it so go support it because it's part of the gogoichirin network, just like NLA. :)

Art!:
Adi did a commission of Sasha, Vitya, and Georgi from the GPF in Colorado Springs from ch 22!!! SO CUTE.
Silana drew Yuuri, Yurio, and Nata from chapter 26! PRECIOUS FRIENDS. Thank you!
Andy did birthday art for me that just happens to... be from THIS CHAPTER. Young Vitya and Chris at the Worlds Banquet!!!
Adi ALSO did birthday art for me?? from this chapter?? Young Vitya getting a letter from a CERTAIN LITTLE JAPAN SKATER!
Plus then Quel sent me a custom NLA mug with this art on it, which basically sums all of this up perfectly, and I cried all day.
Please let me know if I missed anything!!! I am so overwhelmed. Thanks, guys ;A; As always, please go look at the Never Look Away and Vitya Diaries art galleries on twitter for more incredible art from the fandom! ALL THE GOODS <3

Recommended Listening!:
Flower Duet (From "Lakme")- Claire Jones
The Lion's Roar- First Aid Kit
Take Me Home, Country Roads- Roch Voisine
Put the Fire Out- Courtney Marie Andrews

Thank you, please enjoy :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Saint Petersburg, Russia

Viktor (16 years old)

“I’m not your chauffeur, you know.” Lilia stole a glance at him in the rear view mirror.

Viktor shifted uncomfortably in the back seat, pulling Makkachin closer. “I know,” he said. It was customary to argue with his former ballet teacher, but he didn’t. “Makkachin doesn’t fit in my lap anymore.”

“I see.” Lilia turned her eyes back to the road. “He’s not wearing his vest.”

“Avram says it’s bad press now that I’m a national hero.”
“Ah. I suppose I should congratulate you on the silver in Beijing. You made quite the impression.”

“I made enemies, if that’s what you mean.”

Wei wasn’t likely to forget being pushed from the podium in his home country. He and Viktor had never gotten along to begin with, but to be dethroned by someone making their senior debut?

“Why isn’t Yakov driving you?”

Viktor’s thoughts snapped back to the present. “Uhm.”

“Or your boyfriend, for that matter.”

The forests that flanked either side of the road swept by in a hazy blur of dark sea greens and blacks marred by patches of snow. At least she hadn’t brought up his aunt or uncle. “Niko is in Moscow…” Even if he weren’t, Viktor wouldn’t have enlisted his help with this.

“And Yakov?”

Viktor sighed again closing his eyes to shut out the scenery. “I’m skipping practice for this. He thinks I’m resting, too worn out from the final.”

It wasn’t entirely untrue. They’d only just gotten back the day before, and Viktor was already back in classes. But it was more than that. He wanted to spare Yakov the feelings that he wished he could spare himself. Papa bear wasn’t very good when it came to getting emotional, and Viktor didn’t want a scene. Not today.

“Are you asking me to keep this from him?”

“Please.” Viktor’s eyes, light grey in the dark and so sad when he looked back at her brought to mind the tiny boy that had been coming to her home for ballet lessons and tea, not the nearly grown man he’d become over the summer. “You knew them.”

She sighed. “All right.”

They kept silent company the rest of the way.

Laskovyy Beach was a forty-five minute drive from the city. Asking Lilia had saved Viktor an hour via public transit and a good twenty minutes by foot, round trip. He’d seen the famous statue in photos before, with its web of arced fingers like an alien in stark contrast to the sand. In the snow, it stood on either side of the covered path to the shore.

Makkachin ran ahead, stopping every few feet to look back for his charge, ears blowing in the bitter wind. Lilia had warned him in the parking lot that he wasn’t dressed for the weather, but he promised that he’d only be a few minutes. He just needed to see this place for himself. To do something.

They’d loved it here.

His aunt said they’d taken him along once or twice as a baby to play on the beach. He’d seen the photos. Those showed his mama and papa here in summer time, young and in love. Alive. It had been nine years since he’d lost them, and it still didn’t feel real.

It was hard to remember what it had been like when he was so young, and being there stirred no memory. The salty air from the Baltic Sea was just as it was in Saint Petersburg, just a little more
lonely.

The ends of his scarf whipped about like ribbons, dancing in the wind. The sand crunched beneath the snow and ice crystals with each step, shifting against the frozen turf. It was too cold to be out, but that made for a private beach, which Viktor preferred.

Yahrzeit candles were supposed to be lit at sunset on alters or gravestones to remember the dead, and left to burn for a full day. Since Viktor could do neither, he lit his candle with a cigarette lighter, and carried the live flame in a little glass jar through the mist and to the edge of the sea. He just hoped it would be enough.

Makkachin waited for him at the water’s edge, pawing at a pile of stones and brush. It as if he knew what was needed.

“Good boy, Makka.”

Viktor knelt and dug out a hollow for the jar to sit, stones and snow protecting it from the worst of the buffeting wind. Bowing his head, and with Makkachin pressed close for warmth, he offered an apology for not knowing any real prayers.

Then he watched the flame dance at the mercy of the sea.

It was only when his ankles began to burn from the cold that he got up. Coach would never forgive him for being foolish enough to get frostbite right before a competition.

Leaving the candle there, he made his way back to Lilia’s car, stiff and sniffing, the pale skin of his ankles red from exposure.

“Viktor!” Lilia chided him in the rear-view mirror. “Was this really necessary? You could have gone with your aunt and uncle to the cemetery, you know. Don’t get snow on the seats.”

“They didn’t ask this time.” Viktor pulled Makkachin into his lap and closed the door. The poodle’s wet feet left icy paw prints on his trousers, but he didn’t care. He buckled his seatbelt and went slack against the seatback.

Lilia went quiet, then put the car into reverse, backed out of the parking lot, and out to the road. Back to Saint Petersburg. To the academy. And isolation.

“We’ll stop for dinner before I take you back.”

He said nothing, and she didn’t press; he’d gotten good at weeping in silence, but the wet tracks down his cheeks didn’t lie.

Oh, how Lilia admired him...

Sports Champion Club, Saint Petersburg

Three days before Russian Nationals
“Viktor!”

“Sasha?!”

It’d only been eight months since Sasha had retired, but he’d taken it seriously and made himself scarce. Yet even in the months off, he looked skating fit as ever. He made his way across the ice to Viktor with that sort of half smile of his, half amused, half annoyed, and carved a spray of fresh powder when he came to a stop.

“How’ve you been, kid?”

“Great!” The time and distance had done a lot to soften Viktor’s feelings toward his former rinkmate, and he couldn’t help but smile back. After all, Viktor was mature now. Nearly seventeen. In the senior division. “What about you? Enjoying college?”

“Yeah. Real life is pretty nice. I bet you’ll love it when you get there.”

“Ha ha. So what brings you back to the rink?”

“Tag?”

“Right now?”

Sasha sized him up. “You’re supposed to be taking over for me, right? Let’s see just how good you are.”

“You’re on.”

They played ice tag back and forth, each round more aggressive and competitive than the last, right up until Yakov caught them in the act and told them to knock it off.

“You’re supposed to be training for Nationals, not getting yourselves killed!”

“Yes, Coach!” Viktor laughed, breathless.

“Sure thing,” Sasha said, then turned his attention back on the teenager. “Had enough?”

“No way.”

He laughed. “I see. I’m gonna go talk to Coach. Keep practicing. Your turns aren’t tight enough.”

“You ass!”

Sasha left him on the ice to practice, though the games had left him more worn than he wanted to admit. Endurance wasn’t his strong suit, and Sasha was built like a tank.

The only thing to do about that was to keep at it, so Viktor worked his way through figure eights and counter-spins, wondering what was going on behind the closed office door. Was Sasha coming out of retirement? It wouldn’t surprise him, not with the Olympics right around the corner. That’d be just the sort of stunt the Ice King of Russia would pull.

Anyway, who could stay away from the ice? It was life.

But it also made sense. Coach Feltsman’s top men’s singles skaters were still pretty green in the senior division, even if Viktor was a proven champion. Russia could send two to Italy. He and Sasha were the obvious choices, but that meant Sasha would have to compete in the Russian
Nationals.

Which meant they would have to compete against each other.

Interesting.

Viktor took his time getting off of the ice and taking off his boots, hanging around until he heard the door to Yakov’s office open and close again behind him. When Sasha walked by him to the locker room, Viktor stole a glance and paused on the deadpan look on his face. “...That bad, huh? Guess you can’t be the king forever, Sasha.”

“Walk with me,” Sasha said without missing a beat.

Viktor got up and followed after, skates over one shoulder. “What were you talking to Coach about?”

Sasha held the door and ducked in after him, saying nothing even after checking to make sure they were alone. Instead, he made his way toward a locker, and began unpacking his things. Viktor leaned against the locker next to it. “Well?”

“Viktor, I’m…” Sasha considered his words carefully, brows pinching together. “...concerned.”

“About what?” Viktor laughed. “That I’ll beat you? Think you won’t qualify? I’m sure we’ll be the ones they send, Sasha. I don’t think you have anything to worry about.”

“You’re certain.”

“Well, yeah. We’re the top skaters in Russia.”

Sasha stripped his shirt and exchanged it for one in the locker. “And Georgi?”

“He’s good, but he’s not as good as we are, Sasha. You know that.”

“That’s not all that matters, Viktor. Not for Russia. Not for the Olympics.”

“What else could matter? Of course they’ll send their best. They’d be fools not to.”

“There are thirteen competitors going to Nationals, Viktor. Thirteen in the men’s senior division alone. Do you know what it’s like to compete against the other Russians?”

“Sure… I did in juniors, Sasha. I don’t see how this matters.”

“But not the seniors.”

“They weren’t in the final. I was.”

“And who put you there?”

“I did.” Viktor rolled his eyes. “Or were you not paying attention?”

“Tell me, Viktor. Would you use your same routines? The Lakme Duet?”

“I have a hundred programs just waiting… but it’s competitive. I would have taken gold at the final if it weren’t for-“

“Are you enjoying the attention? What people are saying about you?”
“What do you mean?” Viktor asked, but he already had a good idea. It had started when he was a junior, but exploded in his senior debut. People saw him as a symbol and an advocate, a voice. He hadn’t thought of it that way at first, but it was quickly becoming clear that there was no way around it. Boys didn’t have long hair, wear makeup, or dress the way he did unless there was a reason. Some people loved him for it.

There were a lot more LGBTQ people in Russia than he expected, and even more out there in the world. This was just the beginning.

Of course, it came with a fair amount of hate mail, too, but since he never confirmed or denied anything, and no one knew about Niko, so everything was just wild speculation.

Speculation that he didn’t exactly discourage.

“Viktor,” Sasha sighed. “You’re not just skating for yourself, you’re skating for Russia. Do you understand that?”

“I don’t see your point.”

“The RSU has… certain expectations of its skaters.”

Viktor pulled away, rolling his eyes. “Spare me, Sasha. I’m following all the rules.”

“On paper, maybe. But it goes both ways.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“The RSU can be your ally or your enemy, Viktor. They make or break your career. Trust me. I know. I—”

“Ugh. I know. You’re their perfect lap dog. Cooperative. I’m not you, Sasha. I’m not a King. I’m me, and I’ll get the gold my own way.”

“Viktor, they are the gatekeepers!” Sasha snapped. “You don’t want to mess with them.”

“Yeah, yeah, I heard you.”

But he didn’t listen.

Kazan, Russia

Russian Nationals

For the first time, Viktor wasn’t attending as an assistant, but as a competitor. He and Yakov still did breakfast on his birthday, but since he had open practice right after, Viktor didn’t eat much.

The other Russian seniors were large and fierce, eager to to prove their worth; of all competitions that season, this was the one that would ultimately determine who would be sent to represent Russia in the Turin Winter Olympics.
Viktor was confident.

*Good luck, babe. You got this.*

He read Niko’s text over and over again before he went on, skating to John Williams instead of his usual Tchaikovsky. It stood out among the others, but for all the wrong reasons. The judges weren’t impressed, nor were the sportscasters. Not with that, nor the French opera he used for his free skate, the pavonine feathers of the captured bird of paradise not speaking to them the way it had with the rest of the world.

“What is this? Has he turned his back on us?”

“He over rotated that jump…”

“Stepped out of that turn…”

He hadn’t. Not a chance.

“It just wasn’t as clean as we expected for Nikiforov.”

He’d broken records in the Grand Prix, but only barely managed to claw his way to the podium in Nationals.

Bronze. Beating out the skater from Yekaterinburg by half a point, losing to Georgi by a wide margin, and larger still to Sasha.

But it wasn’t like getting silver in other competitions. It just didn’t make sense.

“Coach… I *did* skate clean, didn’t I?’

“Mm.”

A fixed judge’s panel was nothing new to the old coach, and it wasn’t hard to see that they’d been generous with their points to everyone but his Vitya, who had penalized at every turn. Fans cried foul, and Yakov spoke to the RSU rep, but he was brushed aside. There was nothing he could do.

“No one likes a sore loser,” Avram cautioned, regarding both coach and student with a frown. “Good sportsmanship is essential to the Olympic spirit.”

It was announced that Sasha and Georgi would represent Russia at the Olympic Games for the men’s figure skating, having won gold and silver respectively. They were given a list of pithy reasons, none of which really explained why they were keeping last season’s Junior World Champion, the one who had broken the short program world record now three times over away, except… that they didn’t believe that he was *ready* to represent Russia, and all that that implied.

Paris, France

European Championships

With Sasha and Georgi training hard for the trip to Italy, Viktor went as the top Russian skater for the European Championships and took gold. At only seventeen, the other, older competitors found themselves both impressed and intimidated by how easily he claimed his victory. After all, he’d
done so well at the Grand Prix Final, but suffered at Nationals… there’d been rumors about being disqualified for the Olympics. What was his story, really? The press wanted to know. Why did he always go back to his room between practices? Why didn’t he socialize? What had happened at Nationals? Was he involved with the mafia? Drugs? Was there a scandal? Was he gay? What did his program mean? Was the RSU pressuring him?

They began to realize that, in the years that Viktor had been in the spotlight, they had gathered very little real information about him. He was beautiful and talented. Graceful and elegant. Poised and deliberate. No one quite knew what he was going to do.

That made him dangerous.

It also made him interesting… which only made him more popular.

Yakov did most of the talking for him, much to Viktor’s relief. He didn’t mind press conferences much ordinarily, but with as much conflict as there was about the upcoming Olympics, he didn’t want to end up saying something that he would regret. Sasha had been right about the RSU. They could take it all away from him at any time, no matter how little sense it made.

He’d worked so hard to get to this place; he’d won gold, he was a champion with sponsors that sent him chocolates and roses and came to his skates and cared about how well he did. Yet if he didn’t do what the RSU wanted, didn’t skate how they liked, they could simply… choose someone else to go, instead. It was their call.

How was that fair?

It didn’t make sense.

It hurt.

Like Mama and Papa going to Moscow and never, ever coming home.

Saint Petersburg, Russia

The Olympics came and went. Viktor tried to ignore it as best he could, concentrating on his studies, dancing, and skating on his own. It was fantastic for his ballet and his French, which he improved a great deal. Niko came to keep him company for long weekends, too.

“It’s just the Olympics, Mishka,” he said, doing his best to soothe him. “Who cares?”

Viktor wanted to argue, but changed his mind after a moment of thought. After all, Niko was just an idiot. How could he possibly understand something so important? It would just start another fight. Better to just take what comfort he could get and be grateful.

When the Russian team returned, victorious across the board, Viktor was waiting for them at the airport. He wasn’t the only one there to greet them, but he was as good as family. Misty-eyed, he hugged Yakov tight, then did the same with Georgi, and finally offered a handshake to Sasha, who took his hand and pulled him into a crushing bear hug.
“I have something for you,” Sasha murmured against his head.

Viktor looked up at him, wary. “What?”

Sasha just smiled and pressed something into his palm. Smooth, heavy, solid.


“That was before I retired. This one is for you.”

“Why?”

“To remind you.”

“Of what?”

He didn’t explain, but Viktor knew.

Calgary, Canada

Worlds Figure Skating Championships

“It’s like I told you before, Nikiforov.”

Viktor looked at himself in the mirror, face pale, jaw clenched. He only had a few minutes before it was his turn to go on, skating *The Lakme Duet* for the last time, and he couldn’t stop shaking. He needed to. Yakov would come looking for him any moment, and he had to be ready by then.

“You weren’t in Italy. Everyone’s been trying to figure out why, but I think it’s pretty obvious that they just didn’t know what division to put you in. You’re an embarrassment. You belong with the ladies.”

He tried to steady his hand, swiping the fresh blood from his lip again before concentrating on his mascara. There wasn’t time to worry about the rest. He needed his war paint. He was supposed to be a princess, trapped by the worries of his heart despite all the beauties around him. The song was literally about flowers despite the anguished undertones, god dammit, and he had to skate like that. Not actual agony.

“Is it because Markov isn’t here? Russia sent a little girl to take the place of a king? How pathetic.”

Wiping fresh tears next, Viktor steeled himself again. His eyes were glassy, his hair a mess. He slicked it back again, tucking in loose ends. It would have to do. He’d run out of time, and there were bigger things to worry about.

Testing the weight of his skate brought another spike of fresh pain in his left ankle, sharp and fiery. It was bad, but it wasn’t enough to stop him from moving. He’d stuffed paper towels in his boot to make it stiffer and tightened his skate. It would hold and it would hurt. Yakov would scold him for sure, but he’d make it work. He was *so close* to getting gold for his first senior year at Worlds. And even if he didn’t take gold, he wasn’t going to forfeit and take a loss of points or fee all because a wolf had gotten stupid right before the free skate.
Yakov couldn’t find out just yet. If he knew, he’d never let him on the ice. He had to hide it. Had to be strong and put on a smile. Wei was gone. He’d run off as soon as he’d pushed him. It’d been an accident. That was all. Not… quite, but it was enough to believe that for now.

Think about that later!

He shook the bottle of painkillers and poured a handful into his palm. Aches and pains were no stranger to a dancer, nor to a figure skater. Not any day, and especially not during a competition. If anything could help, these would. Viktor just needed to get through the next fifteen minutes or so, and then he’d be off for the season, screw the gala.

Surely he could ask that much.

“Vitya, you’re almost late! Where have you been?”

“No time, Coach. I’m ready to go on.”

Yakov knew that something was wrong the moment Vitya moved past him, shrugging his jacket off to hand it over without so much as a glance back. He usually waited for a pep talk, but this time, he raced to get the skate guards off and get to the ice. It might have just been that he was running behind, but he was different, too, in the way he moved; switching legs, incorporating more counter spins, changing jumps, mirroring his routine as if he’d decided to do it backwards. What was he doing?

And the acting angle… it was over the top. He knew his Vitya had always considered it a secret plea for release from some kind of emotional prison, but he looked as though he were going to break down in tears. Even for Viktor, it was too much, and costing him points. Sloppy.

What was wrong?

It wasn’t until the skate was finished, and Viktor was heading back to the barrier that Yakov realized that the pain on his face was real, face pale and streaked with tears.

“Coach!” Viktor cried as soon as he was within arm’s reach. “Help! God, help, help me get it off, help, I need it off now! Please!”

Pulling the gate open, Yakov reached for him, searching for the source of the trouble. “What, Vitya?”

“My skate, my skate!”

By then, the cameramen and other staff had made room and moved to assist. Yakov helped Viktor to the floor, unlaced the boot, and pulled it from his foot. Viktor hissed, digging fingernails into his thigh and calf, and groaned as soon as the skate was free. When Yakov removed his sock, exposing his swollen ankle to the cold air, he went slack.

“Vitya,” Yakov murmured, gingerly running his hands over his foot, to test the injury. He could already tell that Viktor had been hurt before skating, but how bad was the damage?

Wincing, Viktor wiped his eyes and forehead, dizzy. “That’s already a lot better. Help me up, Coach? I want to get my scores.”

He did, one arm under his student’s, where he sat and stretched out on the bench, trembling from
the pain. The paramedics stood by, waiting to assist.

“I have half a mind to let them disqualify you,” Yakov said to him, one arm around to hold on tight in case he fainted.

Viktor buried his head against his shoulder. “We can’t let the wolves win.”

“They win if you destroy yourself, Vitya.”

He lost gold by nine points, but took silver, pushing Wei from the podium. The medical team got him bandaged and medicated before the victory ceremony, then it was straight to bed, no exceptions.

“You’re lucky I let you accept your medal,” said Yakov. “You’re in trouble.”

That was fair, so Viktor didn’t argue.

The next morning, Viktor went with Yakov to the exhibition gala, though he wasn’t permitted to perform. It was an interesting experience... something he wasn’t used to doing. It actually was fun to watch. Being able to use Yakov’s shoulder as a pillow was a nice bonus.

It took a lot more convincing for Yakov to let Viktor go to the banquet that evening, but did, on the condition that Viktor nap for most of the afternoon, and promise to use the crutch that the medical staff had loaned them.

“I want you to stay off of that ankle, Vitya... I will come to collect you in one hour.”

“Come on, Coach. I have to prove that I’m not scared of them. I can’t just show up and run away.”

“One hour. You need to rest. We have a flight tomorrow.”

“I’ll be sitting the whole time.”

“It will be terrible for your ankle, and you’ll be back to ballet academy. How do you plan to dance on it, again?”

“Fiine.”

The banquet for Worlds was very much like the banquets for the Grand Prix and for the European Championships, only bigger. Viktor had never seen so many competitive figure skaters together in one place before. The hotel’s ballroom was filled with the competitors and staff, broken into clusters to mingle.

He hobbled among them, skirting between tables and groups of established parties to look for a good place to sit and observe. Though he’d come to show that he wasn’t scared- because he wasn’t -he was still in a considerable amount of pain despite the medication. Every step was a reminder that attendance was optional, yet here he was, proving himself.

Every once in a while, he was stopped and congratulated on the silver, or his previous wins, and many asked about his ankle, which was appreciated. Oddly, Wei wasn’t anywhere in sight, so
Vitor couldn’t give any dirty looks or subtle nods in his direction… but it seemed that he didn’t even need to.

Everyone knew without him having to say a word.

Just when Viktor found the perfect little table, he noticed Christophe Giacometti standing on the edge of a pack of older seniors. His large, green eyes were bright and eager, but every attempt to be noticed or heard in the conversation was thoroughly ignored; he was far too sweet and polite to be dealing with such wolves.

Viktor felt for him. The last time he’d seen Chris was at the European Championships two months prior, when he’d been surrounded by those big, bad wolves, himself. The seniors weren’t a very welcoming bunch. They were competitive, just like the dancers he knew. Just like most athletes.

Yet Chris had called to him as he’d come off the ice from the victory ceremony, those same eyes shining so bright with innocent hope and happiness… for him. That he had won. No ire, no jealousy. Just joy at his fellow’s success. It’d caught him so off guard that, for a moment, Viktor had nearly forgotten his own bitterness.

His offered rose and “See you at the Worlds!” was almost as sincere as Chris’s smile instead of a sarcastic remark on his not attending the Olympics like his comrades. Not that Chris needed to worry about that. Not then, and not now.

The Swiss Meadows boy that had saved Viktor from becoming a wolf that day, and it was the perfect opportunity to return the favor.

“Bonjour, Chris!”

Chris spun around, shock turning to elation with coloring cheeks. “Vi-viktor! Bonjour!”

“How are you this fine evening? Did you find the champagne?” Viktor kept up the French with a pleasant smile. English might have been the official language of the ISU, but for ballet, it was French, which meant Viktor knew it even better. If carrying on a conversation with the younger skater in his native tongue made him feel more comfortable, he would use it.

It did. Chris relaxed, turning to face him with a more genuine smile. “I’m fine. I had a glass earlier.”

“Oh good! Was it nice?”

“I’ve… admittedly had better!”

Since Chris was struggling with politeness, Viktor opted to snort, leaning on his crutch with a bit of a swagger. “Well, I won’t feel bad for not being able to have any, then.”

“Doctor’s orders?”

“Right. Not while I’m on painkillers. Coach wasn’t even sure about me coming tonight, but that was the concession. Which is fine. It’s never that good, anyway.”

Chris nodded with a sympathetic smile. “There are worse things, I think.”

“Yeah. I thought he was gonna kill me, to be honest. He’s so mad right now.”

“That’s…” the younger teenager frowned. “That’s, uh, definitely bad.”
Viktor waved it off. “But he didn’t! And I’m here.”

“Yay! Though… maybe you should sit down. You’re wobbling a little, Viktor.”

“Maybe you are right. Mine is not a happy ankle at all.”

“Best not keep putting weight on it. Here, I’ll get that chair for you… and get you some ice. Would that help?”

“Such a gentleman! *Merci*, Chris!”

The young seniors sat at the table Viktor spied earlier, with Chris running errands back and forth, attending to every one of Viktor’s needs. Although it was largely unnecessary, and unasked for, Viktor had to admit that it was charming. He’d never been waited on hand and foot before, even injured, and little Christophe was both eager and polite.

Fortunately, there wasn’t all that much to fetch, so Viktor was able to get him to calm after a little, and they talked, which seemed to settle the young skater’s nerves even more. It was his senior debut year, too, and though he hadn’t made the podium this time, or at the European Championships earlier, he was determined to make it there with Viktor soon.

Viktor also learned that his papa ran a sweet shop, his mama was an important Swiss dignitary, and that he had a younger sister, whom he adored. All in all, Chris was every bit the pure and innocent sweetheart that he’d thought. Far too precious for this world.

“And who’s your favorite skater?” Viktor asked, the fondness in his heart only growing. “If you had to choose one.”

“Oh, this might sound like an unfair bias since I’m Swiss, but… Stephane Lambiel, naturally.”

Viktor laughed. “Oh, me too!” Then he lowered his voice, leaning in to keep between themselves. After all, said skater was there at that very banquet. “I taught myself to do counter spins just like him.”

“Seeing you take the podium with him last night was incredible… oh, Viktor! How he held your hand!”

It really had been a dream come true. Beyond, even. Viktor couldn’t have skated out there himself with that ankle, and Yakov was nearly going to stop him from going at all, but gold medalist Stephane had stepped in and offered his assistance. If all Viktor had to do was balance on one foot while he was pulled along, that was no trouble at all… Reverse order. Bronze to Gold. What a gentleman!

Then they’d stood, side by side on the podium, Viktor with his trademark blue roses of the season, polar bear plush, silver medal, and his foot bandaged up in a splint. But it didn’t matter, because there was Stephane. *The* Stephane.

It was difficult to fight back a wistful sigh at the memory, but Viktor managed by giving a little laugh. “And all it took was breaking my ankle.”

Chris sighed for him, instead. “Yeah… you’re so lucky. He’s *so* cute.”

There was a beat of silence between them as Viktor blinked down at him, first in bewilderment, then in consideration, biting his lip. Switzerland was an entirely different world, clearly, but that open admission had been so naively trusting and honest… he honestly didn’t know what to do with
“Oh…” The younger boy hesitated, bright green eyes filling with uncertainty, trying to read Viktor’s expression. “I’m sorry. Was that weird to say?”

In Russia, it would have been. Actually, in most places in the world that he knew, it was. That sort of comment would have gotten a boy chased and bullied and beaten in some circumstances, and part of Viktor, deep down, growled a warning that he ought to prepare him for that. Show him what it was like so that he would know the pain early, learn how to deal with it, correct it, bury those feelings deep. So deep that no one would ever know or be able to accuse him or push him around. If he snapped now, maybe Chris would know how to keep his mouth shut when it came to people like Wei Bin or the RSU.

*To live with the wolves, we have to howl like a wolf…*

But why? He hated it. He *hated* playing their game. Their rules. It didn’t make sense. It didn’t need to be that way. He wasn’t like that. Chris wasn’t doing anything wrong.

And neither was he.

A true princess would never throw someone to the wolves.

“*Non.* It’s not weird. In fact,” Viktor said first, then leaned even closer dropping his voice to a whisper. “I think it’s just objective fact that Stephane has the best butt in the whole world.”

Chris gasped, one hand to his mouth, hiding his smile. “Viktor! You’re right!”

“Honestly, if I had to lose gold to someone, I’m glad it was him. Not just because he’s so dreamy, of course, but that helps.”

“Dreamy *and* talented.”

The pair of them scanned the room to find the man in question, then looked at each other, both relieved and excited. They were on the same page, and happy again. Not only that, but in confidence. A friend at a banquet in the senior division. Viktor had missed this; having someone to share things with. To… talk to. “Speaking of dreamy, Chris… do you want to hear a secret?”

“A secret?” His new friend’s eyes sparkled, cheeks flushing in excitement.

“Yes. It’s extremely important that no one finds out about this, though. Can I trust you to not tell anyone?”

Chris nodded, eyes wide. “Yes! I promise.”

“Okay.” Viktor dug out his cell phone and unlocked it, taking a few seconds to navigate to a photo, then slid it over to him. “You see this?”

More nodding.

“That’s my boyfriend. Niko.”

“A boyfriend…” Chris’s mouth dropped open in a little gasp and he stared, wide-eyed, taking the phone from him. “He’s so handsome. Luuucky!”

“I know, I know.” Viktor reached over to scroll through more, showing off the few that he had of them together, arm in arm, and some of just Niko by himself. “He lives in Moscow so I don’t get to
see him much, but…”

“How long have you been together?” he whispered.

“A year and a half or so?” It was so dangerous to talk about Niko, and he knew Niko himself would be furious if he knew, but he couldn’t help feeling pleased all the same. “But what about you, hm? Do you have a lover, Chris?”


“That’s okay. You’re still young. No reason to rush into it, non? One day, you’ll find just the one. The man who makes you feel so perfect… so complete.”

Chris looked up to him, eyes alight again with that sparkle of admiration, nodding. “That’s so romantic, Viktor.”

“Well. It should be. Love is the most important thing in the world. You should search and search and search until you find your soulmate, Chris. Don’t settle for anything less. Promise me?”

“I promise!”

It was important to pass that knowledge on, even if nothing else that they talked about that evening stuck— which was mostly about skating, cute boys, and other bits of dating advice. Viktor had hope for him. It wasn’t too late for Chris. He still had a chance to find happiness, even if Viktor had all the doubt in the world about finding it for himself.

. . .

Back in Saint Petersburg, just as Viktor was shaking off the season of skating in favor of preparing for his final exams and dance recitals- at least, as much as he could with a broken ankle -he received a letter that caught his attention. Normally, he took mail home from the skating rink and sorted it out on the unused bed in his dorm room, stacking them out into neat piles according to the kind of replies he needed to send. Most didn’t really need replies at all, but he liked to send little photos and thank you notes anyway, so those were the biggest stacks on the left side of the bed. Letters of controversy or hate were gathered in a pile to ask Yakov about, just in case there were legal issues involved. Then there were the love letters, which he had gotten used to writing polite, but firm, rejections for. Those he also included an autographed photo in, but with less personalization, and no hearts on the signatures— didn’t want to encourage anything, after all; he had a boyfriend. A jealous boyfriend, at that.

But then there was there was the occasional letter that was different. Like this. For starters, it was in Japanese, not Russian or even English. And it was long. But the most important part, Viktor thought, were the included photos. They were of a young boy and girl at an ice rink, skating.

Fellow skaters. Reaching out to him.

That was important.

Very, very important.

But he couldn’t read any of it.
Fortunately, he knew someone who could.

“Megumi, you’re Japanese, right?”

The girl, a full foot shorter than Viktor despite being a month older, stared at him before pushing up her glasses. They’d taken several classes together, even danced together over the years, but none of that had sunken in. Despite the momentary feeling of offense, she decided she didn’t care. Vitya was talking to her. “What else would I be?”

“I don’t know. Chinese, maybe?”

Or maybe she did care. Rolling her eyes, Megumi let out a sigh and went back to her book.

“Sorry! I’m sorry. I need your help.”

Megumi lifted a brow, but not her gaze. “What?”

“I got some fan mail from Japan.”

“So?”

“Could you read it to me? And help me write a reply? Please, look at these little skaters. They need my help.”

Megumi peered at the letter and the photo that Viktor put in front of her, blocking her view, then sighed. “They’re teenagers,” she said, and scanned the letter. “It’s the boy that’s writing to you. For skating advice.”

“See?” Viktor clutched his chest. “Megumi, you’re my only hope.”

“Fine.” She closed her book and set the letter on top of it. “I’ll help you.”

“Thank you, Megumi!”

“But I get to braid your hair.”

Viktor frowned, but nodded. It was a fair exchange.

They sent the reply in a stay flat envelope with photos, sparkly stickers, and a letter in Russian by Viktor’s hand with a Japanese translation courtesy of Megumi, along with an additional, personal note tucked on top.

“To wish him luck,” she said.

Yuuri-kun,
This is the translated letter from Viktor Nikiforov. I’ve done my best to capture his writing style, but it was hard to put that many exclamation points in the text, so please reference the original to get a feel for his enthusiasm. He’s letting me braid his hair in return for this, so thank you for writing to him and giving me this very rare opportunity. He never lets anyone braid his hair. The other girls are insanely jealous. :)

Ganba!
“When you go through my closet, you can have whatever piece of clothing you like.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know how much it’ll smell like me or how much a significance you’ll find, but please help yourself.”

“We can trade back when you come home!”

Not four days apart, and Viktor was losing his mind. When he first hung up with Yuuri after confirming he’d made it safely to his apartment in Saint Petersburg, he’d felt relieved. Yuuri was being taken care of, and all would be well. So far, no one had died, and many would say that he had nothing to worry about.

But Viktor knew better, and his relief teetered to despair once more.

Then anger.

He abandoned Yuuri’s bed, leaving his cell phone on the pillow, and padded to the previously prohibited closet. Reaching for the handle, Viktor braced himself for whatever mysteries lurked inside—then paused. Was this really the right thing to do? Just because Yuuri had stumbled on Viktor’s secrets didn’t mean that he had to intrude on Yuuri’s. It was all Christophe’s fault, anyway.

That meddling Swiss bastard. What was he thinking, sending shoes? He had to have known that Yuuri would see them.

Of course he knew. Chris knew all of Viktor’s secrets and wanted Yuuri to know them, as well.

Viktor sighed and gently dropped his head against the sliding closet door. What was he expecting, though? He’d given Yuuri a key to his apartment with no explicit instructions or boundaries.

It was possible that if he’d gone with Yuuri to Saint Petersburg, he’d have shown him, himself.

But that would have been different. His decision. His broaching the topic. Not caught off guard and having to explain from a million miles away without any help from body language for either explanation or reassurance. On either side.

What did Yuuri think? Was he… okay with it?

And what else, if anything, did he see in the closet?

Damn that Chris!

Makkachin nudged his fingers, then looked at at him hopefully. Dinner plans had been interrupted
by the phone call, but Viktor definitely wasn’t hungry anymore. He bit his lip. Yuuri said that he
could have a piece of clothing, at least, to snuggle with until he got home. That was okay. Not too
invasive at all. Maybe it’d help.

He slid the door open, and a pile of posters came tumbling out, unrolling at his feet in a bizarre,
patchwork timeline of his career. It was his life, from the first time he’d become of any note to the
public, all the way up to the previous season, in diamond-patterned holofoil.

Viktor frowned, brows creased as he bent to pick up the merchandise he’d been warned about, but
after carefully rolling it back up together, he found a box sitting right up top in Yuuri’s closet full
of others. “What’s this?”

Makkachin sniffed at it, tail drooping.

Setting the posters aside, Viktor stuck his head into the closet and worked the cardboard box out of
its rooted place in the closet, and sat down on the floor to paw through it. The box wasn’t full,
exactly: there was still some room, Viktor supposed, for Yuuri to add more treasure to his hoard.
Though, that assessment might have been generous. It was packed.

There were Viktor keychains stowed in Viktor coffee mugs and tumblers; candy wrappers with his
face, carefully opened, cleaned, and stacked; enamel pins still clinging to the cardboard backings
that they’d come in, or tucked in little plastic baggies in their absence; autographed hats, stacked
four or five high; a single signed skate that, though old and tattered, was well taken care of; a plush
polar bear with original blue neck ribbon still in tact round its neck in a bow; a sealed box of
Glacier by Nikiforov fragrance with invoice; a pair of ‘Nikiforov’ tennis shoes; and so many other
strange little things that Viktor had no idea what they even were, all held together with little poodle
soft toys in Makkachin-style, as if he were the perfect packing material.

Odd. So very, very… odd.

But charming? Yuuri was truly a fan. A super fan. Or at least he’d been very good at stowing those
firebird feathers away like a squirrel stores nuts for winter. That made sense, really. Gather the
artifacts of his idol to gain an understanding of him. A token.

Pushing the box aside, Viktor half-crawled back to the closet to look around for more, and found
another with a label with ‘VIKTOR’ in marker across the top. This had the magazines, the flattened
cereal boxes, the binder of trading cards, collectable sticker sheets and folded posters. There were
mass-produced photos with printed autographs, bizarre fan books and dubious-looking comics,
sheet music for his programs, and even the second of only two issues of the official Viktor
Nikiforov fanzine.

Further exploration into the closet yielded little more besides a few more (larger) posters and some
bins of what looked to be seasonal clothing items, but no letter.

Defeated, Viktor sat back on his heels, then shifted onto his hip to stretch out his still healing leg
with a little groan. He was sore from cleaning the onsen that morning and working out after.

Viktor looked around at the boxes he’d pulled out and the various clothes he’d found, strewn
around him, Makkachin at his feet. He’d made a mess of Yuuri’s room. No wonder he’d hidden it
all away when he came to Hasetsu that first day.

But Yuuri didn’t have anything to be ashamed of as far as he could tell. He’d once idolized Viktor,
sure, and had enjoyed collecting the silly merchandise that corporate sponsors put out for finding.
But that was all normal. No where did Viktor see anything suggesting a dark past, which was
probably why Yuuri was just fine with him going through it.

And why Viktor was struggling about his own back in Saint Petersburg.

The shoes were bad enough—god, he’d left so many, stacked and so easy to find—but his more personal things? Viktor had to believe that Yuuri would keep to his word and leave the rest of his closet alone.

His apartment in Saint Petersburg had been his sanctuary for so many years. He’d been safe there, alone and free to do what he liked and express himself however he felt. Having it laid bare for Yuuri and Yurio? Yakov? Lilia?—to paw through at anyone’s discretion but his own was harrowing enough, but there were certainly some things he much preferred to keep completely private. Even from Yuuri.

“Vicchan?”

A call from down the hall. Mama Katsuki.

Viktor froze, and Makkachin nudged him against the ribs to get him breathing again. “Ah, yes?”

“Is everything okay?”

Viktor rubbed his chin as he considered, thumb against his lower lip. His absence was probably suspicious. “Yes! Sorry. I’ll be back in just a minute.” Just as soon as he hid the evidence that he’d been going through her son’s closet.

“Is Yuuri okay?”

Better than he was, that was for sure. Viktor sighed, rolling his eyes as he got to his knees, putting boxes back where they belonged. “He sounds like he’s going great. There’s a lot for him to do.”

“Oh good!”

“It should be fun for a fan like him.” Sliding the door closed, he stepped back to admire the room, restored to its former glory. “You know, I knew Yuuri looked up to me, but I didn’t realize just how bad it was, ha ha… did he talk about me a lot, Mama Katsuki? Or was he secretive about his being a fan?”

Makkachin tilted his head, giving Viktor the who are you talking to stare, which Viktor felt was very undeserved until he opened the door to find the hallway empty.

Oh.

Taking one last look into the room, Viktor wondered how he was ever going to survive the week. Yuuri had idolized him. But over the summer, he’d become Just Viktor, whatever that meant. That’s what he’d said. But what did he think now?

His coach. His boyfriend. His lover.

What would he think at the end of seeing where that five time champion had come from? Or hearing the stories that his teammates and enemies could tell?

What version of Viktor would Yuuri want now?

Did he still want Viktor at all?
When dinner service was finished, thus concluding Viktor’s lessons in the kitchen for the day, he helped clean up, then slipped out of the reach of any further company for the evening. Staying busy helped for a while. Mama Katsuki was good at leading him through each step of the things she was trying to teach, but he’d been distracted from the distraction, which left him tired and frustrated.

He needed to be alone, and he needed to think.

The bar was pretty quiet, but Viktor got a booth to keep himself and Makkachin out of the way. He’d frequented often enough that the server brought him a bottle of vodka without needing to be asked.

“How’s the food?” That was the biggest variable. If he was at the bar, he usually got udon. If he had a booth, it was almost always just the booze. But she liked to be sure, just in case.

Viktor shook his head. “Nothing I didn’t expect. Thanks.”

Nodding, she briefly checked under the table to see if Makkachin was there so she could bring something for him, later. It was a good indicator that she’d need to keep the drinks coming, too. “Did Yuuri-kun do well, Coach? In Russia?”

“He did. And in Beijing.”

“How much did everyone in the city know? Viktor smiled at her then, taking a moment to peek under the table at the dog that was settled on his feet. “Getting there, yes. Thank you.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” She sighed, relieved. “I’ll come back to check on you in a bit.”

He nodded at her and watched as she left, mulling that over as he started on the bottle.

Viktor Nikiforov. Yuuri Katsuki.

Everyone knew them but nobody knew them. Neither did he. Or Yuuri. For all they’d discussed, Yuuri still didn’t know all of the twisting turns and secrets of Viktor Nikiforov. Couldn’t know.

The thought was comforting but lonely. He hated it. It gave him a headache.

He couldn’t change the past, and he didn’t want to relive it just so that every last detail of his life was cleared for full disclosure. He didn’t want Yuuri to have to do that, either. People were complicated; they changed. The Viktor Nikiforov that he was ten years ago, even five, or hell, just one year ago… was dead.

Yuuri wanted him now, didn’t he? That did matter.

But he was going in circles.

Oh, his head hurt.

“Is this seat taken?”

Viktor looked up from where he’d been staring down into his drink, blinking at the old man that stood at the table. “Ah, Papa Katsuki! Uh. No, it’s… please- er, douzo. Konban wa, Katsuki-san.”
Toshiya sank into the booth opposite him and laughed, nodding to the server girl for his usual. “No need to be so formal, Vicchan. We’ve been living under the same roof for eight months now.”

The server brought over a bottle of warm sake, and two cups, then left them to talk. Toshiya poured one for himself, then offered the bottle to Viktor, who accepted it with a grateful nod. He had a point.

“I’m sorry.”

“I know we don’t spend much time together one on one.”

“You’re very busy running the onsen.”

“Yes.” The old man’s smile was warm. “But I should take the chance to get to know you better, especially without Yuuri here.”

Viktor didn’t know what he meant by that, but watched him lift the sake up with a mumble of *kampai* before taking a drink, and took one of his own. He set it down and returned to his vodka. Rotating the drinks seemed like a good way to get pleasantly drunk.

“No, no… for daiginjo, you don’t mix. Take the aroma in, like this.” He brought the cup back to demonstrate. “Then savor it.”

Returning the vodka to the table, Viktor followed his lead with the sake, taking his time to more carefully appreciate its scent.

“Kanpai,” Toshiya said with an encouraging nod.

“Kanpai,” Viktor repeated. They both drank.

Now that he was paying attention, he could tell that it was different than the sake they usually shared at the onsen. Not that it had ever been bad, but this was sweet, and lacked the dry aftertaste that usually followed. But, like other sakes, it was still quite powerful.

Smiling wider, Viktor drained the rest and then set his cup down. “That’s really good.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Toshiya smiled right back. “More?”

“Yes. Thank you.” Viktor lifted his cup the way he’d been shown at the onsen, and Papa Katsuki filled it for him.

The unexpected company was… nice.

Suspicious, but nice.

“Did Mama Katsuki send you to watch me?”

Toshiya shrugged, holding up guilty hands. “You can’t blame her, Vicchan.”

He supposed he couldn’t. “I don’t mean to worry you. I’m really okay.”

“What did you study in school?”

The question caught him off guard, and Viktor stared at him blankly for a moment, blinking. “I went to a ballet academy. I thought Yuuri told you everything about me already.” He knew the Katsukis didn’t know the ins and outs of all of the figure skating specifics, but he thought Yuuri
had at least made Viktor’s basic history clear. Or was he not really that loud of a fan boy after all?

“He didn’t tell us everything. College?”

More blinking, then the sudden flush of heat in his cheeks and Viktor glanced aside with a shrug.
“...about a year and a half is all. A handful of semesters.”

“For dance?”

“Dancing.” Viktor drank what was left in his cup. “And, um. Architectural design.”

Toshiya poured Viktor and himself another, his calm smile never wavering, just nodding. “Oh, I see,” he said. “Why didn’t you finish?”

“I… got busy. It’s hard to do both school and a skating career.”

“Ah.” Toshiya took a sip. “Yuuri did both. He finished.”

Viktor rubbed the back of his neck. “He did, yes.” Not that Toshiya needed to tell him how amazing Yuuri was, but their situations weren’t exactly the same, either.

“Yuuri’s mom and I both went through college while working. Hasetsu Business College. Two years of training and a degree in business management. Tourism.”

“I had thought that your English was really very good…”

“If you’re retiring,” Toshiya moved right along, tone so casual. “You could go back to school. Get your degree. Teach ballet or…”

Viktor had to give himself a moment to truly process the suggestion, blinking hard. Maybe it was the alcohol, but it was enough that Makkachin stirred under the table, nudging Viktor’s leg to make sure that he was all right. It made him laugh. This was such a concerned parent lecture; he was touched. “I think you’re the only one in the world that wants me to quit and go back to school, Papa Katsuki.”

“Mind lasts longer than body.”

*That* only made Viktor roll his eyes. “I’m too old to go back, Papa Katsuki.”

“Too old?” The smile on Toshiya’s dropped to a frown. “Vicchan, how old are you?”

“Twe-twenty-seven?”

“I thought so!”

The smile returned, and Viktor felt the same chill that he did when Mama Katsuki looked at him. *Savage.*

Nervous, Viktor swallowed. “What?”

“I’m fifty-four. That means you would have to live your entire life over again to be as old as me. And I’m not even halfway through my life!”

Viktor gaped. That would make Papa Katsuki at least a hundred and eight by his count in the end. He couldn’t even fathom living that long. It’d always felt like the end was almost right *there,* so close he could nearly touch it, but…
“Think of how much you have accomplished in the twenty-seven years you’ve had, and how much more you can do in the next,” Toshiya continued in Viktor’s silence. “You have many years ahead of you. You and Yuuri both.”

Viktor’s face turned a darker shade of red, both from the alcohol and from talk of Yuuri, and went to drink from his cup only to find it empty. He set it down, thoughtful. Twice his life to get to Papa Katsuki’s age. Three more of his lives to get to a hundred and something… Or… the numbers were a little bit fuzzy with the sake, but it was something like that, anyway.

Regardless, he didn’t want to go through all of that again.

But then again, if he had Yuuri with him…

Of course, that’s not what Papa Katsuki had even meant, was it?

Toshiya refilled their cups, the sake bottle deeply sloshing. “Yuuri’s a good cook, too.”

Or perhaps that was exactly what he’d meant. Viktor looked up at him. “Yuuri never mentioned…”

The older man just waved him off. “He wouldn’t. But he has a good head on his shoulders and a good education… he’ll take care of you, Vicchan. I know my son.”

Sitting up straighter, Viktor felt the pull of the alcohol, making him sway a little, light-headed, but he fought through it to grasp at the offered words and the weight behind them like an anchor in the wave of emotion that crashed over him. He’ll take care of you. “Papa Katsuki?”

“Ha, ha! You know, Yuuri’s just about half his mother’s age, too. What a coincidence!” Toshiya emptied the bottle into his own cup and frowned. “I think we’re gonna need another!”

Viktor laughed, covering a snort with the palm of his hand, which conveniently let him wipe his eyes. He’d meant to drink vodka like he’d always done with Yakov, but this was nice, too.

Mari came to collect them a couple of hours later, and they stumbled home through the dark, arm in arm on the snowy sidewalks. Makkachin trotted ahead with the responsible sister, annoyed, but not nearly as much as Mari because at least Viktor seemed to be in a good mood.

“I don’t even feel cold,” the Russian said, face red from air and drink. “It’s so nice out, Mari! Isn’t it?!”

“I’m pretty sure this is the exact opposite of what Mom wanted you to do,” she muttered.

“What? Our Vichhan’s not depressed, see? I did good!”

Viktor laughed again, leaning on Toshiya until he nearly toppled, then straightening up and stumbling to the other side. “Noooo… we were talking about Tsukimi… Mari, can we have winter Tsukimi?”

“That doesn’t make sense, but sure. Whatever makes your gate squeak.”

More laughing. From both men. Which made Mari sigh.

“Do you know what else is made of potatoes beside the moon festival?” Viktor asked, beyond thrilled at the opportunity to set up such a joke.
Toshya had to stop walking to gasp, he was laughing too much. “Vodka?”

“Vodka!” Viktor confirmed, and they laughed and fell all over each other again.

“Oh my god.” Mari put a hand to her temples, but even she was grinning.

Just a little bit.

—

When morning came, Viktor realized that he didn’t remember actually making it back to the onsen or coming to Yuuri’s bed, but there he was. He had a bit of a hangover, too, but it wasn’t the worst he’d ever had by far. Drinking with Toshiya had been a wonderful distraction, and he had a lot to think about while his groggy head settled.

*He’ll take care of you.*

Yuuri was awfully protective. Practical. Level-headed. Independent.

He’d left home in the face of anxiety, moved overseas, and gone far enough in his skating career that he reached the the Grand Prix Final, all while earning a college degree.

He had friends, too. He got along with people despite being so introverted. Everyone who knew Yuuri Katsuki loved him.

Yuuri. His Yuuri.

Viktor dragged himself from the bed with Makkachin groaning as the warmth left, and padded back to the little room’s closet. Although his steps had been unsteady, his intent was sure, sliding the door open to dig through the clothes hanging there without even sparing a thought for the boxes of Nikiforov goods. The sweater he found wouldn’t fit him; neither would the button up or t-shirt, but he could cuddle with them until Yuuri got home.

He brought them back to show Makkachin for his approval, taking a moment to appreciate the faint scents as he buried his face in the soft fabric. His Yuuri would take care of him, and he’d take care of Yuuri. The thought was so… perfect.

Makkachin whined at his side.

“I know, I know, Makka… we’ll get started with the day in just a moment. Just give me this.”

Sighing, the dog rested his head on his paws. It wasn’t as if he’d been waiting all morning or anything.

“I miss him so much…”

His phone rang.

*Yuuri.*

Viktor stretched over to pick it up, blinking. “So early?” he asked aloud, then checked the time. No. So late! It was already two in the afternoon! Quickly, he shook out his hair, rubbed down his
face, and put on his best smile to answer the call. “Good morning, my Yuuri!”

There was no question: the morning was much better when it began with Yuuri.

—

After saying their hellos and filling each other in on their days, certain details omitted, Viktor let Yuuri hang up, and watched the screen go dark in his hands. His lover was having a good time, safe and sound, welcomed by Viktor’s former teammates and ballet instructor. They were going to the Mariinsky. These were good things, and offered relief, which stayed rooted in place this time around. At least as far as Yuuri was concerned.

But the letter... that was a little more complicated.

Viktor had remembered the contents of Yuuri’s letter easily, having read the translated version a hundred or more times after receiving it. But he hadn’t actually looked at the letter- the actual letter—in years. And for good reason.

When he made the decision to leave Niko, he got rid of most every trace of him in his life. To say that his was a Scorched Earth policy was not far from the truth— the princess wasn’t a firebird by mistake. It had been important to burn bridges completely, to never look back, to keep himself from being able to change his mind, that he’d gone to the roots of the problem and dug them out. Incinerated. Everything destroyed.

Almost.

There were still some places that he couldn’t reach. Some things that were too entangled. Things Viktor didn’t know how to let go of, that he couldn’t, or that he wasn’t strong enough to. That he was physically incapable of.

Like the memories. Or the feelings and names attached to them. The fleeting glimpses of hope for a life of love beyond skating, all contained in a few photographs in a cardboard box. Or a plush bear in his closet.

*Mishka.*

He’d been at this precipice before. Leave Yakov, his papa bear, for a new life. A chance at something more in Moscow. It’d been an act of desperation.

“*What?! No!*”

“*If I quit skating... Niko, we could get a place together. You and me.*”

“*You’re seventeen. This is crazy.*”

“*We can’t get married, but that’s okay. People could think that we were roommates!*”

“*No, Mishka.*”

“*But I love you! Don’t you want to be with me?*”

“You love skating.”
“They want me to change, Niko. I don’t think I can. Let’s run away together, okay? We could leave Russia!”

“No. Don’t be stupid, Mishka. We have a good thing going, just like this.”

“Like what? Long distance? I never get to see you. I never know what you’re doing! You could be doing anything, Niko… or seeing anyone behind my back, and I’d never know!”

“My friends think I have a girlfriend, don’t worry.”

“A… a girlfriend?!”

“Mishka, don’t cry.”

“What are we going to do when I retire, Niko? Are we going to be long distance forever?!”

“No… I’ll eventually have to find someone to marry. That’s what’s expected.”

“What?”

“You don’t have any skills to bring to the table once you retire… and you can’t be a housewife. I know you don’t cook. I doubt you clean. And even if there were a surrogate, with your problems, you shouldn’t have kids…”

“….you’ve given this a lot of thought, I guess.”

“I do love you. But we have to be objective. Think of our futures. You’re a dead end.”

A dead end. He’d been so naive. But Viktor had known even then what Niko’s answer would be, that there was nothing to sustain them. It had crushed so much of his heart that day. Slaughtered the already crippled unicorn in the woods. Forced the princess, who had always been a warrior, to don the skin of the wolf so she could fight just as savagely as those that hunted her.

“‘Viktor, my decadent flower! Come visit my villa in France. I’ll bring you to your knees in ecstasy!’ Wow, this is really inappropriate. Tee hee.”

Viktor had set himself up at the hotel room’s lavish vanity with a stack of fanmail in front of him to be sorted or reread. Niko was in bed and ignoring him again now that they’d properly ‘greeted’ each other for the start of the weekend, hunched over his laptop. His only response was an irritated huff.

“Oooh, they included a photo, too! Wow, he’s really cute, Niko. You should see him.” Viktor held up the little photo, waving it in the air.

“Mishka. I’m trying to read.”

“Sure, okay. I just don’t get it, though. What’s up with these love confessions lately? I just can’t keep up. What should I say this time? ‘Thank you for your interest, but I’m taken. I can’t explain by who or anything, but rest assured that I am totally occupied in that department.’ Mm-hmm.”

Another grunt from Niko, annoyed.
Viktor set the letter aside and picked up another. Not all of them were love confessions, and most
of them weren’t even saucy, but he couldn’t resist. “Dearest Viktor, It’s been a long time since
I’ve seen you, and I want you to know that when I watch you skate, I just imagine all the things you
could do to me, starting with—’ Oh. Yikes. Wow.” He gasped, holding it out at arm’s length.
“This probably isn’t even legal.”

“Do you have to do this now?”

“Don’t you want to know what people are sending your boyfriend?”

Niko set his laptop aside and sat up. “Your coach should be screening your mail.”

“Oh, but then I wouldn’t get to read stuff like this.” Viktor held up a handful of the letters, splaying
them out and then fanning himself with them. “Mmmm, expensive perfume.”

Niko got to his feet. “Mishka.”

“Look, people from all over the world love me. Not just Russia, either, but France and England,
Switzerland, the States, Japan, Brazil… Ooh, love from India, too!” He giggled and pressed a kiss
to one of the envelopes. “Muwah! At least they appreciate me. I wonder what this one says?”

In one swift movement, Niko snatched the letters from Viktor’s hands, then made for the ones on
the vanity.

“Hey!” Viktor went after his arm, just as Niko began to tear them, end to end. “Those are my
steamy love letters, get your own!”

Niko reacted before either of them quite realized what had happened; a backhand hard enough to
knock Viktor back into the vanity, right across the jaw. For several long seconds, they stood in
silence.

“Mi-Mishka… I… didn’t mean… Are you okay?” When Niko reached for him, Viktor slapped his
hand away.

“Don’t you DARE touch me!”

“Mishka, it was an accident.”

“Sure.” Viktor touched his cheek and lip, already tender and bloodied. “Screw you, Niko.”

“Mishka, please. I’m sorry.”

“No, don’t. I don’t want to hear it!”

It had been so stupid. All of it.

He’d cried, and Niko had been there to comfort him, even though they should have ended things
right then and there. The pieces of the letters were collected in bags and stowed. Viktor taped them
up and kept them hidden. He never brought them around Niko again. They were too precious to be
used as bait. Not when he had himself to bargain with.

So many mistakes and shameful secrets…

And what did he sacrifice it all for?
It was Makkachin’s cold, wet nose to his neck that brought him back to the present, and he blinked as the memory shifted out of focus.

“Oh, Makkachin. Sorry, I…”

The dog huffed, dropping his head to butt against him. It was nothing new, and Makkachin was good at his job. He sat back, tail wagging, and looked pointedly until Viktor followed his line of sight to the door.

“Is that a hint?”

The dog bruffed.

“All right. No spiraling.” A sigh. Trading his phone for the sweater that he’d picked out, Viktor buried his face in the fabric, seeking the warmth and any traces of faded scent he could get.

Yuuri will take care of you. Those had been Toshiya’s words. Not even Yuuri’s. And Yuuri loved him. Wanted to hold onto him. He’d said so, himself.

Could it be different this time?

He’d come this far… and Yuuri wasn’t Niko.

Viktor smiled. “Shall we find that letter?”

It didn’t take long to get ready for the day and find Hiroko, who was dutifully manning the kitchen in the quieter afternoon hours, preparing for dinner.

“Mama Katsuki?”

“Oh, Vicchan! You’re awake!”

“About friggin time.”

Viktor winced. “Hello, Mari. Sorry about…”

Mari waved it off. “It’s fine. But I’m not going to drag your butt home again, so if you’re really sorry, keep your drinking here.”

“Er, right.”

Hiroko came around from the bar, wiping her hands on her apron. “Never mind that, Vicchan. How do you feel?”

“Fine, I think. But I wanted ask something.”

“Oh?”

“Yuuri said that he had a scrapbook… Skating Memories? It has a letter in it that I’d like to see.”

The woman touched a finger to her lip in thought, then nodded, bright eyes folding with that satisfied smile of hers. “Ah, yes. I know the one.” She untied her apron and set it on the hook, moving for the staff quarters. “This way, Vicchan.”
She led him to where the family memories were kept, thumbing through the volumes until she pulled out a large, black scrapbook from the bookcase and brought it out to flip through.

Viktor joined her in kneeling at the low table, and was greeted by the start of Yuuri’s skating career; thick black pages decorated with photos that documented the journey from chubby little bean to Japan’s Ace. Neatly crafted Japanese characters detailed locations and events, Viktor assumed, along with other anecdotes in loving care beside each photo and attached artifact—a tattered shoelace, a pamphlet or program, a newspaper clipping. Photos, though, took the majority of the space. So practical and space efficient. Not like his own collections.

Those seemed so vain in comparison.

Then, Mama Katsuki came to what they were looking for: the letter from Viktor Nikiforov. Yuuri’s idol. On the preceding page, there was a photo of a young Yuuri holding the envelope, addressed by Viktor himself, with far too many Russian stamps clustered in the corner. A drawing of a skull and crossbones was barely visible under Yuuri’s little hand, which bore the warning ‘do not bend’ in block letters, both English and Cyrillic.

The next page was a plastic sleeve insert with the letter itself so both sides could be read with ease. Not that Yuuri could have read what he’d written, anyway, but the sparkly purple glitter pen, skate stickers, Makkachin drawings, and smiley faces must have conveyed any feeling that Megumi’s translation, which followed on the next page, may have missed.

**Hello Yuuri!**

*Thank you for writing to me! I was so excited to get a letter from a fan all the way in Japan, and a fellow skater at that!!! I had to look for a while to find someone to translate, but my friend Megumi (who is a very good dancer) said she would! She’s even translating my reply to make sure you can read it!!!! Thanks, Megumi!*

*Now! For the questions you asked:*

*It sounds to me like you might need to get new skates! Boots that aren’t properly fitted to your feet can cause a lot of damage, so you want to be careful! If they’re loose, your foot will move around while you’re skating and that can be very painful, especially when doing jumps. A lot of people break their ankles that way so please get it checked right away! A broken ankle means having to take a break from skating (and ballet!!!) and no one wants that. Trust me, it’s NO FUN AT ALL. You want something that is nice and sturdy to support your weight and absorb the shock of the landing. So try that! It’s always worth it to have really good skating boots.*

*As for getting nervous, of course I get nervous! I don't know any skater who doesn’t. Or any performer, for that matter. Anyone who says otherwise is lying. Even the really big professionals. Getting nervous just means that you really care about what you’re doing. It matters to you. That’s a good thing. If you really want this, you’re gonna get a little scared. That’s the adrenaline pumping in your blood to try to help you perform your best! The important thing is to not let the nerves stop you from trying, no matter what! Because even if you don’t win, at least you did your best, and that’s more than MOST people can say, and you can be really proud of that!!!*

*Oh! And another certified Viktor Nikiforov tip: I had a tissue box made to look like my dog, Makkachin, to remind me that I always have someone in my corner rooting for me! Maybe something like that would help? A token of some kind! I know some skaters that have a lucky sock or a necklace or a photo that they keep on hand for this reason!!!*
Speaking of photos, thanks for sending me the photo of you and your rinkmate! It looks like you’re having a lot of fun and that makes me really happy. It means a lot to know that I’m inspiring other skaters! I hope you keep skating so we’ll meet at the Grand Prix Finals soon… and then Worlds!!! You can do it if you keep it up!!!! I’ll watch for you!

I included a photo of me since you sent one of you! I hope that’s ok. :)  

Best,  

Viktor Nikiforov <3  

Oh and Makkachin says hi! Gav gav!!

It was good advice, Viktor had to admit, and part of him hurt for that young, hopeful skater that he’d once been. That Vitya hadn’t yet seen the worst of the world or what was to become of him.

He pressed his palm over the plastic sleeve, feeling the paper flat beneath it. The only creases were the ones from the folds that he’d made years ago. Yuuri had taken good care of the letter, preserving it to last through the years. Whereas Yuuri’s letter had been dog-eared even before it had been torn. But he couldn’t have guessed that his Little Japan Skater would come to mean so much to him, or play such an important role in his life.

That he would change everything.

“He loved your letter. We made a copy so he could take it with him to competitions,” Hiroko explained, her voice soft and fond. When Viktor pulled his gaze from the book to look at her, he found her gazing at a photo of her son standing in front of his growing Nikiforov Collection. Their smiles were so similar, each glowing with pride… and love.

The warmth was so close that it hurt. Viktor bit at a little smile on his lower lip. “Thank you for showing me, Mama Katsuki.”

“He’s always loved you, Vicchan.”

She was always feeding him… it was never just crumbs with her.

At Viktor’s side, Makkachin wagged his tail with a soft thump, thump, thump against the wooden floor. Yuuri had said as much in Shanghai. Had reinforced the sentiment again and again. There was tangible proof all around him, and Viktor’s heart ached from the weight of it.

He laughed, though it was barely audible at all. “Me, too.”

They were soulmates after all.

They’d always been meant for each other.

Viktor helped with dinner once they finished looking through the book, resuming his cooking lessons with his ever patient surrogate mother.

“Are you sure that you never cooked this before?” She teased him.
He flushed at her praise. “No, never. But I’ve seen a lot of cooking shows.”

“You’re a natural, Vicchan. Yuuri will love this.”

Viktor hoped so. Just like skating, cooking was an art. It had everything to do knowledge, experience, and the foresight to utilize both effectively. Sourcing the right ingredients, adequate prep and practice, then maximizing time and tools. Mama Katsuki felt out a dinner service like he did with an audience, and somehow knew how to anticipate and meet everyone’s needs, day after day, while maintaining that same passion and finesse.

“That’s right, those are ready. Take them out of the oil, now.”

“And we let them rest?”

“That’s right, Vicchan! We want to keep the pork cutlets as juicy as possible, so we cut them at the very last moment.”

He didn’t think he would ever match Hiroko in cooking, but he wondered if Yuuri would like katsudon from him as much as getting a letter, even if he wasn’t quite the idol that he’d been before. “And what’s next?”

“Help me with these bowls.”

When it was time for his own meal, Viktor ate with Makkachin in the private side room that he and Yuuri had often taken for themselves leading up to the Prix. Though Hiroko had done most of the work, he still felt pride and satisfaction in knowing that he had helped with it. That he was capable of more than just skating.

“We old dogs can learn new tricks, huh Makka?”

Makkachin looked up from his own meal, licking rice from his muzzle, and sniffed at the katsudon before leaning toward it, mouth opening wide.

“Hey, no! That’s mine!”

The poodle wagged his tail, shameless.

“If you keep this up, I won’t let you soak with me again.”

They were interrupted by the buzz of Viktor’s phone. He’d left on the table in case Yuuri decided to call or text him again. Unlikely, given how full his scheduled day was, but Viktor was hopeful. They’d only been apart a couple of days, but it felt like a month already, and things hadn’t felt right since he’d left Moscow. But then, how could they? The last year, all his thoughts had been turned toward Yuuri, and over the last few months, each day had revolved around him as if Yuuri were the Sun. Being without him felt aimless, as if Viktor were drifting out of orbit.

Even if Yuuri hadn’t found the shoes or any of his other secrets, Viktor was sure that he would have felt… lost.

Was Yuuri feeling it, too?

But it was just a message Chris.
Chris G: Bonjour~ I’m sure you don't want to speak to me right now, but I’ve just spoken with Yuuri.

Chris G: He's curious as I thought he'd be. Concerned. No, I have not said anything, but I did what I thought needed to be done. Let your prince find you, Viktor.

His Swiss friend had always been in his business, right from the start. Meddling, that’s what it was. Meddling.

Viktor set his phone down and sat back on his heels until his injury complained, shifting his weight a little. But it was his pride that was wounded more than anything. He hated that he was so vulnerable. Chris knew too much, and he used that information however he saw fit, without any regard for Viktor’s personal comfort or boundaries.

Of course, it was only because of Chris that Viktor had taken the risk that he had to go to Japan. Chris had known that Viktor would be ready to take that leap, then and there, just as he knew that Viktor probably would have hidden the contents of his closet from Yuuri in Saint Petersburg if he’d been able to. Just a little longer.

The knight, who had taken on the mantle of king, had seen through the wolf to the princess inside, and only wanted her to come home. That’s just the sort of person he was.

He supposed he couldn’t be mad at him for that. Especially not when the princess was willing to die just to keep her past buried.

Chris wanted him to live. As himself. Fully. And he didn’t want him to have to do it alone.

 Damn.

v.nikiforov: I'll have words with you in Barcelona, Mr. Giacometti.

He was still allowed to be mad, even if Chris’s schemes turned out for the best.

“Hey, stranger. What are you doing out here?”

Viktor slid the door shut behind him and came to stand against the wall with a sigh, letting his eyes fall half closed as the breath of his fog disappeared into the golden sunset. “I needed some air,” he said, and turned to Mari with the faintest of smiles. “And you?”

“Same,” she said, and returned the expression before puffing out a little cloud of smoke with a quiet whuu. It rode in the chill before likewise fading away, then she offered the cigarette between her fingers.

Viktor shook his head, though his smile grew when she shrugged and took another drag. No pressure; simply accepting of his decision. He loved that. It made it so easy to relax around her. Which was so different than the nettling of so many others. In a way, she reminded him of Georgi; easy-going, but without the dramatics.
“You ever smoke?” Mari was looking out to the wall as she asked, where the red and gold of the light playing with the retreating shadows at the smooth faces of cemented rock.

The question itself was probably harmless, but she’d asked so casually, there had to be more to it; Viktor was sure of that. A test? Perhaps he’d made a judgment too soon. He closed his eyes to think. “Only once, when an idiot ex thought it would be a good idea. It wasn’t. And Yakov would skin me alive if he ever found out.”

“It’s not good for you athletic types.”

“No, it’s not.”

“So you’re not gonna drag my brother into it.”

“Definitely not.”

“Good.” She tapped the cigarette, sending ash to the snow-covered gravel below. “You should really be wearing a hat or something, you know. It’s cold out.”

“Russians aren’t bothered by the cold.”

“That’s got nothing to do with being Russian, Viktor. You’re human.” She cut herself off for another moment with the cigarette. “Just like the rest of us.”

He hummed, considering as he turned his gaze to the horizon again. “I like the sound of that.”

Silence fell between them, but that, nor the cold, seemed to bother either. The breeze picked at metal chimes in the distance, and the hiss of a drag preceded a puff of smoke before Mari spoke again.

“Hey, are you really going to take Makka into the **ofuro**?”

“I think he’d like it.”

She laughed. “That’s wild. I hope so. You know, there are some onsens that have tubs just for dogs.”

“Really?!”

“Yeah. Heh, I knew you’d like that. You can quit the sparkle eyes, though. We’re not going to start that here.”

Viktor scuffed the rocks at his feet, pleased despite himself.

“You and Yuuri should go some time, though. They have capybaras, too.”

“Ooh, I like those.”

“I bet.”

When the onsen was closed, Viktor took Makkachin to the baths and scrubbed them both down, squeaky clean, and out to the **ofuro** tub. Makkachin was patient for all of it as he always was, calm and appreciative for all of the gentle attention of his master’s hands.
“Now we can’t stay in here for long,” said Viktor once they were in the tub. “I don’t want you to boil.”

Makkachin gave him a look, but said nothing, instead closing his eyes to fully enjoy the soothing bath. He was game to be pleasant company, but not if Viktor was going to spoil it with that kind of talk.

That left Viktor to his thoughts, which were many and complicated, but at least not lonely.

—

Despite the changing seasons, sunrise still came early in Hasetsu, which Viktor took full advantage of. It was bright and he felt good; not just from a good night’s sleep, but also from the texts that waited for him when he woke up.

Yuuri.K: it was amazing, viktor!
Yuuri.K: the Mariinsky! The ballet dancers! The acoustics! Everything!
Yuuri.K: I wish you could have been here with me
Yuuri.K: but I bet you’ve seen Sleeping Beauty a hundred times
Yuuri.K: I could imagine you on that stage
Yuuri.K: it was incredible

So cute. Yuuri’s excitement and enthusiasm, even hours later, was catching. Viktor found himself smiling as he typed out his reply, rolling out of bed to get ready in the process.

v.nikiforov: I’ve been a handful of times, yes… but I’ve always enjoyed it. I love the ballet.

v.nikiforov: we’ll just have to go again soon.

Cleaning the ofura the next morning didn’t take nearly as long as the big pool, so he was free to head to Ice Castle Hasetsu just after breakfast. He and Makka took the journey at a light jog to warm up, watching for ice across the bridge. Both of them knew how to navigate winter weather conditions through their years of experience, but it always paid to be cautious; neither of them could afford another injury right then, and Viktor was grateful that the pull in his hamstring was now only a dull ache. The hot springs were truly a blessing.

It was a Thursday, so the rink was nearly abandoned when Viktor arrived, but Yuko filled the quiet with her warm greeting, calling him over.
“Hey, Viktor! Long time, no see. Need to get some skating in today?”

It hadn’t been that long. “Yuko! Good morning. If that’s all right.”

“Sure thing. Takeshi’s just going over some drills with the girls.”

“The girls? Shouldn’t they be in school?” Viktor smiled as he followed Yuko back to the rink, Makkachin at their side until they got through the double doors. Once inside he made sharp left and trotted straight over to his basket for a nap.

“They convinced Takeshi that they had time before class to skate. Something about a ‘Labor Day Thanksgiving extension’.”

“...what?”

“Nevermind.” She laughed. “I should be getting them out the door, anyway.”

On the ice, the goblin trio were skating circles around their devoted father while he gave orders like the ringleader of a circus.

“Okay, your ten minutes are up, girls!”

“What? No way!”

“Mom, that’s so not fair.”

“What about our rights?”

Takeshi gathered one under each arm, which sent the third one scrambling toward Viktor taking refuge behind him.

“Don’t let him take me, Viktor! I don’t want to go!”

Peering down at the girl now firmly attached to his leg, Viktor blinked twice, then turned to her mother. “Yuko, what am I supposed to do about this?”

The woman shrugged. “You’re the coach, Coach.”

Immediately, the girl let go of his leg to take hold of his hand, yanking on his arm. “Oh, oh! Yeah! Coach me, coach me!”

That got the other girls still in Nishigori’s grasp squirming and chanting, too. “Yeah! Coach us, Coach! Coach us!”

“I don’t know that I’d be any good at teaching kids…”

“You’ll never know until you try!” The purple one, who still had his hand, dragged him backward with her toe pick.

“Besides, Yuuri’s kind of like a baby, so you have lots of experience!”

“You do seem to have a way with them.” Takeshi held one of his daughters up for Yuko to attach the skate guards, then the other, and set them down over the barrier, turning around to give a look at his remaining offspring. “Why not?”

Coaching Yuuri was one thing, but others? Yurio, sure, but he was a teenager, and someone that Viktor knew. He had very little experience with children. Having any of his own had never been in
the cards, and teaching them seemed so far out of scope that it was hard to even imagine. Yakov did it, he supposed. So did many coaches he knew. Hold a team of professional athletes for competition, then teach classes on the side. Summer camps. Private consultations. Skill set refinement. Choreography.

He’d never really given it much thought before.

But even Toshiya had suggested teaching. Full time coaching? Being like Yakov?

Like his papa?

“Viktor? You still with us?”

“Hm?” Viktor shook himself from his thoughts.

“I said, a lot more people are asking for lessons these days.”

“Especially the kids,” Yuko said with a happy sigh. “It’s such a nice change.”

“Yeah. You coming to Hasetsu has really stirred things up, Viktor. I mean, it’s not quite like when we were kids, but…”

“What do you mean?” Though he asked, Viktor had a feeling that he already knew. He’d heard it from a lot of the people in the town; business had been slow and declining over the past several years, dwindling slowly as fewer people came to visit the tiny resort by the sea. Less visitors meant less money. Less money meant fewer jobs, which meant the younger people moved away and the town got smaller and smaller, cut back on more and more businesses, and people had less and less reasons to visit.

Before Takeshi could confirm this, the girls groaned. “Don’t get all sad on us, Dad.”

“Yeah, geez.”

“Come on, we don’t want to depress Viktor.”

“Besides, it’s a lot better now, right?”

“Yeah, Yuuri has done a lot!”

“And Viktor, too!”

“I bet it’d be even better if he stayed!”

“Ooookay, I think you’d better get these guys to school now! I’m sure Viktor has some very important skating to do and it looks like you’re freaking him out.” If Yuko was trying to be quiet or subtle while shooing her husband off of the ice, she was doing a terrible job.

“Yeah, working off that loneliness, right buddy?” Takeshi laughed. “Come on, Axel.”

The purple goblin looked up at Viktor with a smile, squeezing his hand before letting it go.

“Actually…” Viktor pursed his lips, looking from the little girl to the family. “I was wondering if Yuko might help me.”

There was a gasp, and then a collective “Whaaaat?” from everyone except for Yuko, who went still, wide-eyed and blushing.
Viktor winced. “I’m trying to work out a pair skate—more of an ice dance, really—for Yuuri’s exhibition gala piece at the Grand Prix Final. I don’t know if he’ll go for it, but if he does, there’s not a lot of time to practice before we leave for Barcelona, so—”

“Oh, he’ll go for it,” Takeshi laughed. “I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

“WOW. So he’s a homewrecker after all!”

“The rumors are true!”

“Nikiforov, you dog!”

“Girls!” Yuko screeched. “No!”

The purple one turned back to Viktor. “Are you going to be our new dad, or how does that work with Yuuri involved?”

Viktor could only stare, helpless. “Uh…”

“That’s it.” Takeshi finally came to their rescue, though his laughter didn’t stop for even a moment. “Come on, girls, we’re going. Time for school!”

“Aw man!

“It was just getting good!”

“Don’t worry. Remember, this place is wired with security cameras. I’ll know if anything happens.” Takeshi might have been waggling his brows, but the meaning was clear.

“I’m… not…”

“I wasn’t talking to you, Viktor,” Takeshi said, giving a wink, which was followed by another screech from his wife.

“Okay, come on! Get out! I need to help Viktor!”

—

“Tighten a little right here—yes, just like that.”

They’d had the rink to themselves for the better part of an hour, and though he’d played the Duetto for her once, they practiced now with nothing but the sound of their skates against the ice and Viktor’s gentle instructions. Was this how Yuuri always felt? She was no Tinkerbell, but she understood how she must have felt, watching Peter Pan and Wendy now.

Never in her life did Yuko think she’d be able to have a lesson from The Viktor Nikiforov. She’d always been a fan, sure (who wouldn’t!?), but she didn’t fantasize skating with him like Yuuri did. As much as he denied it, he had a crush on Viktor like many girls at the skating club she knew. At some point, Yuko’s crush towards the Russian star shifted to a fondness towards Yuuri’s vision of him. More admiration of Yuuri’s admiration. Hence teasing and gifting him a lot of merchandise through the years.
She was a married woman now, and she couldn’t quite shake the giddy fangirl from within. Viktor was as incredible as ever. Flawless form and landings. Graceful and strong. Now being a stand-in for Yuuri, she got to experience all this up close… it was difficult to not lose herself!

Especially when he was so considerate of the fact she wasn’t a pro ice skater and omitted the jumps from the practice.

He was also off the market. To her dear friend that admired him for so long. The touches to her waist and back meant nothing more than the task at hand and safety.

The lingering touches had to be meant for Yuuri by proxy.

Wow, they were so in love!

She knew that even before they kissed on television. It was hard not to, knowing Yuuri as well as she did, and Viktor was less than obvious.

Waiting for Yuuri to come home to talk about all of this - his love life - was torture. Pure, evil torture.

“I think that should do it for today. Thank you, Yuko,” Viktor said as he helped right her onto her feet from the final dip of the program.

“S-sure. Happy to help!” She really, really was. And now she needed a bit of juicy details. “Oh, Viktor?”

He pivoted back to face, “Yes?”

“So. I have to ask. Who’s usually on top?”

There was a brief moment of understanding the question and then he was staring back at her, cheeks turning a little darker. “I’m not going to answer that. Kind of invasive, don’t you think?”

It was, but that didn’t help her feel any less disappointed about not knowing. She’d just have to ask Yuuri to satisfy her curiosity.

—

By the time Viktor left the rink with Makkachin, he was sore and pleasantly tired. They took their time, soaking up the sights, sounds, and smells of the early afternoon. It was nice to be outside and in the sun, walking together like they always used to in Saint Petersburg. So much of this was just like home, and so much of it was nothing like it at all.


At the onsen, Viktor ordered lunch for Makkachin, but declined for himself.

“Not hungry?”

“No, I ate with the Nishigoris.”

“Oh, that’s nice!”

Viktor smiled. It had been, despite their badgering and secretive smiles across the table. Honestly,
those two… they would probably get along very well with Chris. And likewise, they had good hearts. They cared. It was no wonder Yuuri was so fond of them.

With Makkachin fed, Viktor showered, changed, and helped around the onsen until there was the possibility of Yuuri being awake. Their once-a-day phone calls weren’t nearly enough, but Viktor didn’t want Yuuri to think that he was clingy. Especially not when he sounded so happy.

He was having fun in Russia, exploring the city, spending time with all of the people that Viktor used to know. Those that had once been close to him. That used to love him.

Climbing into Yuuri’s bed, Viktor cradled the sweater and t-shirt he’d selected and tried to pull what faded scents he could, pressing his face into the fabric and breathing deeply. Yuuri wouldn’t want him to moon over him. The Viktor that Yuuri knew was busy and productive, capable and sure.

He sighed, turning to the window. “What good is a princess that just waits around for their prince in a tower?”

Makkachin, who had settled in for a nap on Viktor’s lap, blinked up at him but said nothing. Viktor already knew the answer, so there was no reason to supply it. He closed his eyes again, and Viktor rubbed his shoulders, which Makkachin liked very much.

“Maybe we shouldn’t be waiting around for him to call. We could go on a walk?”

The dog sighed. He was comfortable where he was for the time being. They could walk later.

“Yuuri might be sleeping for a long time. Maybe they were out late.” Viktor thumbed through the notifications on his phone again. Though there was nothing new from Yuuri- and absolutely nothing on Yuuri’s social media feeds. He tabbed over to Yuuri’s Thai friend, Phichit. There was plenty going on there- it seemed that he was extremely active online -but very little about Yuuri. Which made sense since they were no longer rinkmates, and not everyone was obsessed with Yuuri Katsuki like he was.

Viktor frowned. “Am I obsessed?”

Makkachin nosed his elbow so that the phone nearly slipped out of his hand, but Viktor caught it in time.

“Hey!” Another sigh. “I guess that’s your answer.” He turned the screen off and set it aside again. “How about a nap, then? A nap isn’t waiting. A nap is… napping.”

The poodle wagged his tail. That sounded good to him.

They flopped back, getting comfy. But it was only thirty seconds into concentrated napping when the ringtone for Yuuri began to play, and Viktor sprung up, scrambling to answer.

“Yuuri! Good morning!”

He was ready for the highlight of his day.

It wasn’t that he was clingy; he just… didn’t want Yuuri to feel abandoned.

That was what he told Makkachin, anyway, once he got off the phone half an hour later.
“Don’t give me that look, Makka. I know what you’re thinking. Yuuri…” Viktor waved a hand in the air. He didn’t even know what he was trying to apologize for. Yuuri had been so cute on the phone, and everyone was taking good care of him, almost as if he hadn’t needed to worry at all in the first place. That didn’t seem possible, but then, Chris had said, as had Yurio, that they would be looking after Yuuri and he could take care of himself, and…

Another sigh.

He went back to picking out melodies on Yuuri’s tiny keyboard, a tiny smile on his face. Really, he needed a bigger piano. What was this? Something large… a grand? Viktor could buy it for him. Like the one that he’d played at the hotel.

Viktor’s fingers came to a stop over the keys and he glanced over at Makkachin, eyes suddenly sparkling. “Shall we go for a walk? On the beach?”

Makkachin got up and stretched his back half first, then his front, giving a full body shake before jumping off of the bed and trotting to the door. He looked great, strong and healthy. It was almost as if he hadn’t been in surgery just a few days prior.

“Sometimes I wonder if you got into the steamed buns on purpose, Makka…”

Immediately, the dog’s tail drooped and he looked away; an admission of guilt if there ever was one. At least it put them on even ground.

___

“Seriously, though, it’s not a bad idea. You staying in Hasetsu. I know Yuuri would like it. We would, too.”

“Yeah. You should think about it, Viktor. Let good things happen. You seem happier, too.”

Viktor listened to the water brush against the coast, pulling at rocks and sand while the wind rushed by, on and on. Makkachin trotted on ahead, looking for bits of interesting things dragged in by the current, just as he loved to do in Saint Petersburg. The ocean whispered memories that he had no name for, but he mulled over them, taking his time with hands in pockets, breathing in the salty air.

It was easy to imagine that he was back on Laskovyy Beach, with a stretch of black pines flanking his left. This beach was similarly situated roughly an hour from the airport and made up of miles of winding coastline. Islands dotted the horizon like giant sea creatures in the distance. The parallels were stunning, but then, he’d known for a while now that he and Yuuri were the same; tigers, atypical for their culture. Different. They worked hard to make themselves worth keeping around, but it never filled that void. Idolized was never the same thing as accepted. Worshipped didn’t necessarily mean valued.

Yakov had cared, but surely he’d known that Viktor was suffocating in Russia. The distance between him and everyone else had been necessary, but painful. To keep skating, he’d had to destroy himself. Without that, what was the point?
He was tired of fighting, tired of hurting. The paranoid war games hurt others, too. Being a wolf was never what he’d wanted.

In Hasetsu, Viktor found that same stretch of sand and tide, tree and sky, without those stipulations. He found friends and a family that was open and warm, wanted him around, and were willing to say it.

Love without conditional requirements.

It was a safe harbor.

They were right. Yuko, Takeshi. The Katsukis. Minako, too. Yuuri was just as much an answer to Viktor’s prayers as Viktor was to Yuuri’s, in every way.

Including Hasetsu.

*Country roads, take me home*

*To the place I belong...*

Back at Yu-Topia, Viktor and Makkachin shook off the cold as they came through the front door, wiping feet on the mat. “Tadaima!” he called, more out of habit than anything, reaching down to slip out of his shoes. He was so ready to get into his house slippers, and already thinking about how nice the onsen would be. It’d warm him right up.

“Okaeri!” Came several voices calling back to him from around the corner, loud and earnest.

The Katsukis, welcoming him home.

Home. In Hasetsu.

Viktor stilled in the *gekkan*, listening to the chatter that resumed while Makkachin trotted on ahead to join them.

“Ma-chan!” Mama Katsuki, greeting the poodle. They were probably having dessert together after hours. “Did you have a nice walk? You’re all cold!”

“Poodles are built for the cold, dear.” Papa Katsuki, correcting her gently.

“But Ma-chan is still recovering.”

“Give me a break.” And Mari, forever amused but pretending not to be.

Viktor took off his coat and slipped in to join them, smile soft and small. “I hope he didn’t interrupt.”

“Not at all, Vicchan!” Papa Katsuki patted the empty space next to him on the floor. “We were just watching some TV. Join us.”

“I’ll get you some tea. It’s no trouble.” Hiroko already had a cup for him, anticipating his arrival. She turned it over on the tray and poured it for him while he lowered himself to the floor. “There you go.”
“Thank you, Mama Katsuki.”

She just smiled.

—

The princess could do nothing but watch in wonder as the squirrel tapped away at the lock, working her way through each tool until it was exhausted.

“It's not going to work,” the princess said. “Please. I appreciate your efforts, but your life isn't worth this impossible task.”

The squirrel took a moment to clean her paws and wipe down her face, smoothing back her ears which had gotten a little ruffled in her exertion. “I'll get more help. Hold on. Wait here.”

Although she didn't have much of a choice in the matter, she said she would, and watched the squirrel scramble off into a tiny hole in the side of the tower wall.

It was quiet without her little friend. Darker somehow, too. The wind that always blew was colder, damper, and knew just where to touch to soak into the deepest parts of her bones.

It was miserable. How could she ever learn of her lover's fate? How could she go on in this torture? It would be better to be dead.

“Sorry that took so long!” The squirrel said, interpreting her thoughts. “They're not usually awake during the day so it took some time to get them.”

The squirrel picked her way down the tower wall and over to the princess followed by a family of tanuki- parents and three children -each carrying their own set of tools.

“We'll get you out.”

“Yeah, don't worry about it.”

“We're really good at this.”

“The best.”

The family set to work on the chains and locks, some filling, others picking, while the squirrel tended to the princess's hair.

“That Falcon hasn't been taking care of you,” she said, clicking her tongue, disappointed.

“He has no reason to, little one... he has me in his clutches. He doesn’t care.”

“All the more reason to get you free.”

The papa tanuki shook part of the chain free and whooped. “There's one! The rest should be easy!”

“Hush! He'll hear you!”

But the princess's warning came too late. The screech of the Falcon came with only enough time for the creatures to drop their tools and run, leaving the evidence behind.

He came from the exposed roof, landing where the tanuki had been moments earlier, which sent
the tools scattering. With one glance, he knew what they’d been attempting to do.

“My dear princess,” he hissed, coming to take her cheek with a clawed hand. “Escaping so soon? I don’t see why. You’re alone, now.”

The princess tried to shut him out, tried not to listen. He’d spent years filling her head with lies; it was so hard to sort them from the truth when everything felt like a nightmare and all she could see when she closed her eyes were the flames.

“I suppose you don’t remember what it’s like to be broken, do you? I can remind you…”

“Princess! No!” The squirrel cried from the hole in the wall.

She hadn’t left.

The Falcon turned his head to look for the voice, which was all the princess needed. She struck, hard and fast, taking the opportunity for every advantage it offered. It didn’t matter that the chains weren’t all loosed, or that most of the locks were still in place; it had been a start, and they all melted away as soon as the firebird had enough room to move her wings.

All that she’d needed was that hint of opportunity: a chance to truly be free. Perhaps not of her curse, but of her captor. The firebird called upon herself, tapping in to all of the fiery wrath and retribution that was owed.

She lunged at his throat with her beak, talons striking his chest and body, raking and clawing again and again while the fire engulfed them both.

Never before had she intentionally, consciously attacked someone as the firebird.

Never before had she so desperately wanted to be free.

He screamed, but his voice came in rasping wheezes, claw hands reaching uselessly for her arms and face, wings beating hard enough to send feathers upward in a blazing spiral. There was nothing the Falcon could do, though; not once she had taken control of her own life.

When she was done, his body was nothing more than a pile of bloody ash and singed feathers. She left the tower and took to the skies, climbing higher and higher until she was clear of the smoke, golden body bright against a night of velvet blue.

Free.

The firebird was free.

Long before anyone else in the Katsuki household was awake, Viktor slipped out of Yuuri’s bed and got dressed in the pre-dawn dark. It was quiet. Makkachin stayed in the warm spot that he left behind in the blankets, but only until Viktor crept out the door and down the hallway. Then he followed, shaking off sleep with each pawstep.

They went to the banquet room that had been Viktor’s coming to Hasetsu and slid the door closed behind them before turning on a single lamp. The room was too large and eerie in comparison to Yuuri’s cozy bedroom, and though it had Viktor’s scent all over it, Makkachin much preferred
Yuuri’s, now. He sat by the door, then slid down to the rug to wait for his master, resting head on his forelegs.

Viktor crouched at the dresser and pulled out the drawer, rummaging for a moment, then slid it back into place, only to do the same with two more before he stood and went to the closet. What was he looking for? A few minutes later, just as Makkachin had begun to drift again, Viktor returned with a shoebox, which he promptly dumped out onto the bed.

_Clink clink clink, ca-clink._

Makkachin lifted his head again. What was he doing? Sorting through… something. He sniffed the air. Metal. His medals.

He got up to investigate, finding Viktor pawing through the various discs on the comforter as he knelt at the side of the bed, sorting according to value- light to dark. Why was this so important in the middle of the night?

Makkachin touched his nose to Viktor’s arm to ask him, but Viktor only paused long enough to look at him before returning to his work.

“I don’t have a lot of time, Makkachin.”

That didn’t make sense. Makkachin sat next to him, frowning, and sniffed at the pile on the bed. There were a lot of gold medals there. Not as many as they had at home in Russia, he was sure - there had been _so many_ on the wall -but these were more interesting somehow. Different.

“I’m taking these to Kouki-san. A ring only takes ten grams of gold… each Olympic medal has to have at least six. They’re mostly silver. But I brought these… some of my more notable golds…” Viktor bit his lip. “I think it’ll be enough, don’t you?”

The dog blinked at the medals, then up at his Person, head cocked to one side. Normally, he could follow Viktor’s thought train at least somewhat, but he didn’t get where he was going with this at all.

“Yuuri wants gold. He’ll have gold. Well, he’ll… have me, anyway. Whether he wins gold at the Grand Prix or not, I’m staying with him, Makkachin. We’re staying in Hasetsu. Would you like that? I’ll be his coach as long as he’ll have me. No more skating. No more Russia. A new life. I’m going to...” Viktor had to take a moment, during which Makkachin set a paw on his leg to remind him to breathe. “...after the Final, whether he wins or loses, I’ll ask him to marry me. With a gold ring. I have some time to come up with a good line. We can have a small ceremony. Big ceremony. Go somewhere else. Stay here. I don’t care. Next month. Ten years from now. Whatever the case; I’m… I’m ready, Makkachin. To start living.”

The poodle considered this, taking in Viktor’s flushed face and misty eyes, and then the medals- which Viktor had worked so hard to get -and sniffed his approval. That made sense to him. Yuuri made Viktor happy. So did Hasetsu. If this was what his Person needed to make it official, he was in full support.

“Oh, Makkachin!”

Of course, that came with hugging, and Makkachin returned the gesture by leaning against him, tail wagging, and then licked his face for good measure.

“You’ll be our Best Dog, right?”
He wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Good. But we need to keep this a secret for now, because people will think I’m nuts, okay?”

Makkachin’s muzzle broke into a wide smile. It was a bit late for that, but again, he wouldn’t change a thing. He loved Viktor—everyone did. Just the way he was.

“Momotaru-kun! I’m surprised to see you again... and so early. How are you doing?”

“I’m fine, Kouki-san, thank you.” Viktor barely paused for breath, standing in the doorway of the shop that had opened not one minute earlier. He’d timed his walk to be there just as it opened; he had to be right on time. There wasn’t a moment to lose. But that didn’t mean that he could forget his manners, even as he eyed the threshold with a lingering sense of dread. “And yourself?”

“I suppose I can’t complain. Come in, come in, you’re anxious and we’ll let all the heat out. Is it the owl and the cat again?”

“No.” Viktor shuffled in, Makkachin at his heels. “Well, sort of.”

The old man closed the door behind him once Viktor was inside. “I see you’ve brought me a box.”

“Yes.” As he walked, the medals inside shuffled and clanked together, which made the secret all the more incriminating and harder to bear. “Kouki-san, I need to commission a ring.”

Of all the things that he could have been expecting, that hadn’t been one of them. Kouki-san’s shaggy white brows lifted high on his wrinkled forehead and he blinked several times before he continued his journey around the glass counter, coming to perch atop his wooden stool. “A ring, you say?”

“Yes. A ring. A gold band.”

“Like a wedding band?”

“Exactly like.”

There was a pause for several long seconds before the old man laughed. “Oh, so you’d like me to add a golden accent around the cat and the owl, like they’ve been married? I see, I see!”

“What? No!” Viktor set the box down on the countertop with a heavy clunk. “Though, that’s a great idea... no, no, I need a wedding ring. For…” he swallowed.

“For?” Kouki-san prompted, though by the look on his face, it was obvious that he already knew.

Viktor cleared his throat. “Someone. And I need it right away. How quickly can you make one? I have gold with me. Look.” He pulled off the lid and set it aside, then took out the medals to show him. “He... he’ll like a plain band best, I think, and there should be enough here to make one.”

One by one, he laid them out on the counter, until eight were on display. Three Olympic golds, two World Championships, two Grand Prix Finals, and one European Championship.

Through all of it, Kouki-san simply stared.

Viktor laid his hands on the edge of the counter. “Nothing fancy. I just need... I’ll pay whatever it costs. Please. Can you do it? I could go into town, I guess, but I think it’d be better if I got it here.
After another long pause, then Kouki-san took one of the medals, and turned it over in his hands.

“Viktor,” he began, brows pinching together. “You know that this isn’t solid gold, right?”

“Right. It’s 6gs.”

“Spread over this much surface area…” He sighed. “I have gold here. To work with.”

Viktor finally took a seat at the counter. “Oh.”

“It would take ages to get enough material out of these. Melting it down, getting rid of the impurities… it isn’t worth it. Not time or your money, and I’m sure he wouldn’t want you to destroy these, either.”

“I suppose.” Viktor reached for the medal closest to him and put it back into the box. “I guess I just wanted it to mean something, and I promised him gold. It’s symbolic.”

Kouki-san turned the medal over in his hands. “You’re excited. It’s all right. But let me give you advice: It already means something, and you must be cautious of sacrificing so much where it isn’t necessary. You may be in love, but you need to keep your head.”

Viktor, pink-faced, watched in stunned silence as the old man slid off of his stool and walked back to the work table. He knew a thing or two about sacrifice.

“Put those back in the box and come with me.”

He did as he was told, stacking the medals in the shoe box, and followed after where Kouki-san had taken the gold from the Sochi Olympics.

“Have you heard of the story of The Happy Prince?” Kouki-san asked, setting the medal aside and laying out his working tools. From this, he selected a pencil and a sharp metal wedge tool.

“Yes… I did my exhibition gala piece on it last season. What is that you’re holding?”

“A graver.”

Viktor came closer, clutching his shoebox of medals in his hands. “What are you going to do?”

“A compromise. I can incorporate a gold shaving into a new ring. You’ll keep your medal, but a piece of it will be infused in the gold band.”

“Ah…”

“Compromise is important in any relationship.”

Viktor opened the box again. “Actually, can you use this one, instead?” he said, fishing out the medal from the last Grand Prix Final. “It’s significant.”

“Of course.”

Kouki-san set to work, and got the details of Viktor’s order in the process. As he’d said, it was a plain gold band. That seemed to best fit Yuuri’s aesthetic. Simple, practical, classic. Beautiful.

“Do you know his ring size?”
“Oh, uh…”

Viktor hadn’t at the time, but Fifi did. She’d taken measurements of everything that summer for his costumes. Being woken up in the middle of the night hadn’t thrilled her, but when she learned what it was for, she’d forgiven him.

“I knew it would come in handy, Vitya.”

She’d been right.

After taking notes, Kouki-san asked his next question: “Would you like anything engraved on the ring? Some sentiment?”

To this, Viktor swooned and sighed and gave a dreamy, “No, not yet. I want to see if he’ll want a matching ring for me, too… then we could have a matching set. Have them both engraved. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

The old man agreed, but with a little less feeling. “You haven’t asked him yet, remember.”

“I know, I know.”

They left the shop a little while later with all eight medals and a receipt. Kouki-san thought he would have it done by Monday if all went well. Yes, Viktor would pay for making him work the weekend, but that was all right; it was worth it.

“Be careful when you choose to play the martyr, young man,” Kouki-San cautioned him when he’d left, handing back the medal with the newly engraved date. “Even if you are willing to give your life for someone else, you must consider their feelings on the matter. Self-sacrifice may be noble, but those you love are the ones that must live with your decision.”

The advice, though appreciated, seemed unnecessarily ominous. It wasn’t life or death; it was just the medals and a ring. Not like abandoning his home and career in Russia and flying halfway across the world to Japan in a day to coach someone he barely knew. This was easy in comparison, even if it was a symbol of so much more. Viktor never did anything halfway. It was always all or nothing.

But then there was that little seed of doubt that never quite went away. He didn’t know for sure that Yuuri would really still want him when he got back. He didn’t know that this was going to work out. And perhaps it wasn’t wise to jump all in.

Forcing love hadn’t ever really worked all that well for him before.

Neither had self-sacrifice, even for those that he loved.

Lilia’s methods of destroying himself again and again had only made things worse.

How much had he lost so far? How much could he lose again?

Be objective.

Yuuri was stubborn. Kouki-San was right. The gesture, though touching, was misplaced; he would have been upset if Viktor had really destroyed his medals for something like a ring. It was sweet, but impractical, not to mention significantly more weighty in terms of pressure.

The thought of Yuuri responding to a proposal with No no no no!!! Was too easy to imagine, and
Viktor cringed. He would have to think of something else.

Ah.

If Viktor proposed, it would be too much pressure.

It needed to be Yuuri’s idea and on Yuuri’s schedule. That was it.

So he wouldn’t. Viktor would simply wait. It was the perfect solution.

He’d wait and be prepared to meet Yuuri halfway, as always, ready for him when he was ready to move forward. Easy. Surprising. Yuuri would never suspect it.

Sure, it would take longer that way; maybe the end of the season. Perhaps a couple of years down the line. But Viktor could be patient.

He would wait as long as it took. Years and years, biding his time. It was safer this way.

It felt right.

As long as Yuuri wanted him, Viktor would wait and be ready, ring at hand.

The late morning sky was a bright blue for their walk back to the onsen and it was impossible to keep the excitement at bay. Even the possibility of marriage someday had him giddy. He’d never had a ring in his possession before, and knowing that he soon would had his heart fluttering.

Everyone noticed, but it would have been impossible not to. After dropping off his medals, Viktor hugged Toshiya and danced with Hiroko before skipping back out the door for skating practice, cheerfully greeting every patron on his way without explanation. At the rink, he was full of praise and compliments for both of the Nishigoris, who he now considered two of his very closest friends.

“Okay, and what’s gotten into him?” Takeshi whispered in a not-so-quiet way so that Viktor could hear.

Yuko smacked him. “Leave him alone! He’s happy, isn’t it nice?”

Yes, Viktor was happy. He had a plan. The future wasn’t an empty, bleak, blizzard; it was a beautiful meadow. He knew what he was doing and where he was headed. He had direction and purpose. He belonged somewhere and he had the chance to be loved and accepted for who he was in spite of everything.

How could he not be happy?

“Yuko, has anyone told you that you’re a wonderful partner?” Viktor asked, leading her through a spin, then laughed when she lost her composure in a fit of giggles.

“Looking great out there!” Takeshi yelled from the sidelines, taking time to give a loud wolf whistle before pausing and barking out an empty threat: “Hey, stop flirting with my wife!”

He clearly didn’t feel threatened.

“You come dance with her, then. I’ll teach you!”

“Yeah?! Maybe I will!”

While Takeshi removed his skate guards, Yuko squeezed Viktor’s arm, soft brown eyes sparkling.
“Sounds like you’ve been giving this coaching thing a lot of thought.”

“Yes,” said Viktor, grinning back at her. “Yes, I have.”

—

Filled with promise and purpose, Viktor was certain that the time left waiting for Yuuri would go by in a blur. There was so much left to do and so many things to research and plan for, and while he was known to be a whirlwind of productivity, he was only one person!

But, alas. Not so.

Skating took up a good deal of time between the rest of Friday and Monday, which was a godsend, but he could only skate so much. The same could be said of Yuko, who honestly couldn’t say she was used to such an intense workout, drilling over and over again, through all of the step sequences and lifts, spins and twirls. Even without the jumps and at half speed, it was an exhausting program. How did Viktor keep up with it?


There was also helping out at the onsen: running orders for Mama Katsuki, cleaning with Mari, carrying things for Papa Katsuki, and chatting with the customers. But since he’d been helping for the past week, there wasn’t all that much to do. Yu-Topia was built to be run by three people, and they’d had extra help for days now. Viktor wasn’t the most experienced in the service industry, but he was a hard worker, and that went a long way.

Makkachin needed to go out, too. They went on jogs, walks, took the occasional nap, and posed for Instagram photos to make up for their neglected social media feed.

But it still left too much time.

Viktor cleaned his room, reorganizing his storage boxes and clutter, ignoring the framed photo of himself on the shelf. He’d set it out in hopes that Yuuri would ask about it, but he never did. Instead, it became a constant reminder of his naivety, which seemed to be a good thing to stay aware of. Perhaps now that they were together, it would become a good joke. Especially since Yuuri already had that one— twice.

When that was done, he cleaned Yuuri’s room, taking out the Nikiforov museum and repacking it neatly, followed by general tidying up.

He played Yuuri’s keyboard, picking out notes from Yuri on Ice and other programs that he could recall, and checked his phone every few minutes in case Yuuri had any news for him. He didn’t.

At least there were meals, which Mama Katsuki seemed determined to keep Viktor on schedule for, eating up time and attention. Viktor allowed her to feed him, taking his time to savor each piece of every meal— anything to eat up the hours that seemed to drag and drag and drag.

Sometimes, the television was on during meals, and though Viktor had no idea what the patrons were watching, he tried to follow along. It wasn’t the Soap Opera Megaverse- they seemed to be some kind of cartoon, by the looks of it -but they were interesting nonetheless. Confusing. But it was better than going crazy.

And he was, in fact, going crazy.
How could he sit still, knowing that he had a ring being made, just waiting to tell Yuuri that he was staying in Hasetsu, while he was a million miles away in Russia?

He could have told him over the phone, but that wasn’t any fun.

No, it had to be in person and it had to be the right time. He had to wait.

But waiting was killing him.

He turned to research, letting his fantasies run wild as he looked at apartments in the surrounding areas. Surely, as much as he loved Yu-Topia, he and Yuuri would need their own place. The walls were much too thin here, and he really did need to buy Yuuri that grand piano, which would need a lot of space. Some place that they could plant a garden, with a tree.

Maybe they could get another dog.

There were some apartments that he was tempted to call on right then and there, just in case. It would have been so easy to go tour them, drop a deposit… but Kouki-san’s warning hung in the back of his head and he resisted. Just for now. After the season, then he’d see.

But he could look at job listings, meanwhile. And colleges in the area. Getting a degree hadn’t been high on his list of priorities, but if he were really settling down, maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea after all. He might have time. Take a few classes here and there. Wouldn’t Yakov be surprised?

...not that Yakov would ever know.

Yuuri could pass the information along, he guessed. And be the one to invite Yakov to the wedding. If he’d come. Viktor hoped he would.

There’d be katsudon.

They made it on Sunday, as planned, for Yuuri’s Birthday Party, Sans Yuuri, which Mama Katsuki said they’d had every year for the past five- now six -consecutive years.

“Yuuri would never ask for a party for himself,” Minako explained. “But that doesn’t stop us from wanting one!”

Hiroko agreed. “And it’s no trouble at all.”

“Viktor, you helped make this?” Yuko gestured at the pork cutlet on top of the steaming bowls. The ones that he’d made weren’t as perfect as Mama Katsuki’s, but they did look pretty good.

“Is it okay?”

“It’s great! Yuuri’s going to be so excited!”

“He fits right in, doesn’t he?”

Yuuri had asked him to send him a photo of the meal that morning, but somehow, Viktor couldn’t bring himself to. He hadn’t mastered it yet, and he wanted them to be perfect for Yuuri. And it seemed… odd, somehow, to be there with his family while Yuuri was in Russia. They were all celebrating Yuuri’s birthday, but…

“Viktor? What’s wrong?”
Viktor shook his head. “Nothing, I…” He frowned. “I just realized that you all haven’t had Yuuri for his birthday for five years and I had planned to take him away again… without even a second thought. He’s in Russia because of me, missing his party once again. I’m sorry.”

They laughed.

“Viktor, that’s just how Yuuri is. He does what he wants.”

“It just means you’re one of us, now.”

He supposed it did.

Truly.

“We’ll just have to do something when he gets back. That’s tomorrow, right?”

Viktor hummed. “Tuesday. Though…”

Minako’s expression fell flat. “Though?”

“I think I’ll bring him back Wednesday. We can have the party then.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I thought so.”

—

The next afternoon, Yuuri’s text came with a photo of his breakfast and a note about his flight. He was boarding soon. As much as Viktor wanted to talk to him, he knew that he would just be a mess, so he sent a simple reply back to wish him good travels.

When Viktor had originally booked the flights home from Saint Petersburg to Fukuoka, the short notice change had left them with little choice but a thirty-one hour flight with a layover in Moscow, and another in South Korea before finally reaching home. It wasn’t unlike his own first flight to Yuuri. That wasn’t intentional, just coincidence. It had even struck him as a little funny at the time that fate had played such a trick. Thirty-one hours was nothing in the company of the love of your life, but torture in their absence.

Yuuri would be back in his arms again the next evening. He could hardly stand it.

But first, he had something to do. Something he’d been putting off all day.

Viktor waited until the onsen closed for the night and Mari had gone off to bed, then asked Hiroko and Toshiya if he could speak with them.

“Of course, Vicchan.”

“It’s… important.”

“Oh.”

Neither of them could keep straight faces as they led him upstairs to their living quarters, though they might have made an attempt, and Viktor forced himself to think about Yakov’s mantra to keep himself calm the whole way.
Once there, Hiroko asked Viktor to get comfortable while she closed the door and took care of the lamps.

It felt so formal and tense despite how serene the setting and the couple were, kneeling side by side in front of him. They smiled while Viktor fidgeted with his hands in his lap.

“Go ahead, Vicchan, dear.”

Viktor took a deep breath. “I… I thought you should know that I, uh, had Kouki-San make a ring,” he began.

“So you can propose?” Toshiya asked, without even batting an eye.

“Oh, Vicchan! That’s so wonderful!” Hiroko clapped her hands together. “Welcome to the family!”

It was as if they had been expecting it. Which, as Viktor thought about it, shouldn’t have surprised him. They’d been hinting at it all week. Even pushing for it. He sat up straighter. “Er, no… I had it made for when Yuuri proposes.”

The pair deflated a little, confused, or maybe a little skeptical. As if they hadn’t heard him right. Or, more likely, that they weren’t sure how to explain to Viktor that he had gotten it wrong.

Viktor continued. “I wanted to tell you… I wanted to make sure that it was okay with you two for me to accept it, when and if he asks. That’s what this is about.”

The Katsukis looked at him, then at each other, as if they were discussing his concerns in the air between them with only nods and subtle eye movements. A moment later, they turned back to Viktor.

“But you’re having Yuuri propose,” Hiroko said. It wasn’t a question.

“That’s right.”

They both hummed. Maybe it wasn’t what they wanted to hear.

Viktor continued, uneasy. “I think it would be better that way.”

“Ah, so it’s like that, then.”

It was the Nishigoris all over again. “That’s not—”

“Well, it’s not like either of you are ones to follow tradition, I suppose,” sighed Hiroko, shrugging.

“I think he gets that from you, dear.”

The pair laughed amongst themselves.

“I was going to propose, myself, but—” Viktor struggled to come up with a way to explain that he didn’t want to frighten Yuuri, but didn’t think that expressing his desires to marry their son while also being prone to frightening him were well matched in the same conversation. “Er, this way, it’ll be like we’re proposing at the same time! That’s good, right?”

It seemed to work well enough. Toshiya dismissed it, laughing. “Our boy is a little skittish. I suppose that would be for the best.”
“As long as you take care of each other, that’s what’s important, Vicchan.”

“Right! Of course!” Viktor meant it. More than anything, he meant that, and they could tell.

They both came to hug him, and Hiroko kissed his cheek, making him blush. “Now show us the ring, Vicchan! We want to see it!”

—

Viktor and Makkachin left early the next morning, with a ride from Papa and Mama Katsuki to the train station. They apologized for not being able to do more, but Viktor assured them it was fine—he knew that they had the onsen to run, and he was looking forward to the train ride to collect his thoughts. There was another round of hugs from Hiroko, and a pat on the shoulder from Toshiya, who reminded him to take his time getting back.

“There’s going to be a party for Yuuri, of course, but we don’t expect you before dinner.”

“If Yuuri complains about it, just tell him you promised us.”

Viktor assured them that he would, and took his bag and dog into the platform to board the train to Fukuoka.

They had business in town before Yuuri was to arrive, and even before they could check into their hotel. The whole ride there, Makkachin napped at Viktor’s feet while he caught up on the outside skating world; something he’d admittedly neglected the past few days amid the distraction of everything else. The other finalists were getting ready for Barcelona in their own ways, and there had been no change in the lineup so far.

The competition would be tough and the margins tight. Yuuri did well when there was pressure against him, though, which put him at an advantage. As long as Yuuri didn’t psyche himself out, they’d be fine.

That in mind, discussing something like marriage was probably the last thing that Yuuri needed. It would be safer to wait until the season was finished before he even hinted at it. Viktor could handle that. His plan to wait was good. The long game was worth it, even if the ring that he’d commissioned, tucked away in his inner coat pocket at that very moment, burned. It was light, but if he moved just right, he could feel it against the thin fabric of his shirt, right against his ribs. A constant reminder. Just in case.

Twice, he snuck his fingers in to make sure that it really was still there, tracing the outline of it, but not daring to take it out of its hiding place.

He’d never been so excited for anything in his entire life.

All night long, he’d done nothing but gaze at it like some gold-hoarding dragon, dreaming and sighing until he finally drifted off to sleep. It’d only taken an hour or so, really-some things never changed—but he’d set it in his palm, tilting it back and forth to see how it caught the light. It sparkled the way Yuuri’s eyes did, and it was by far shinier and prettier than any medal he’d ever won. He couldn’t wait to give it to Yuuri. Keeping it a secret would easily be the most challenging-and best-surprise of his entire career.

It was easier to stop thinking about it once they got into town; both Viktor and Makkachin needed haircuts and had booked appointments in town. After dropping Makkachin off, as his appointment
would take more time, he stopped by the hotel to leave his bags at the front desk, then ran errands for the better part of the day. Haircut and fresh shave, lunch, and roses. Then back to pick up his perfectly groomed poodle, and to the hotel for check in. They got the room suitably comfortable, with flowers on the desk, and finally... took a nap until it was time to head to the airport.

“Are you ready, Makka?”

The poodle barked his affirmation, and the pair left the room, taking only wallet and keys with them. Traveling light to the airport would make things much easier, especially as they would need to take Yuuri’s luggage back with them.

It was a short distance to the Hakata station from the hotel lobby, and from there a ten minute train ride to the airport. They’d left with plenty of time, but Viktor walked quickly as they searched for the terminal mentioned in the itinerary. It was an airport that he’d become quite familiar with in the past several months. He knew where to go, and that Yuuri’s plane was right on time, but he couldn’t help it. For the last week, Viktor had wanted nothing more than to get Yuuri back, but now that the time had come, he was nervous.

Fear wrestled with anticipation, excitement warring with doubt.

Little by little, all of his hopes and dreams of proposals and weddings began to slip away. The airport was large; ceilings vaulted with exposed piping and support beams beneath enormous skylights. It moved a lot of people in and out very quickly, carrying the sounds of hustle with an acoustic that was all-too familiar. Like the arena of a skating rink.

The last time Viktor had walked through this airport, it was after he’d fled Moscow with his tail tucked between his legs. He wanted to leave Russia permanently, yes. His decision was firm. But was it because he was tired of skating or because he knew they would never take him back? His old teammates had been kind to Yuuri, but Viktor would never forget the way Yakov brushed him aside. The cold shoulder, those harsh words. Lilia’s gloating.

Viktor may have found a place to belong, but the price he paid to get there was immeasurable.

They waited on a bench that would let them watch the walkway, and Viktor checked his phone over and over again, watching the time, checking the flight for updates. The hum of heaters, cycled air, electronic doors, and announcements droned on and on, while time dragged his heart over miles of anxious thoughts like grains of sand on the beach.

He hated waiting.

Viktor was good at looking calm. The appearance of serenity was something he’d perfected long ago, but still the waters ran deep, and his mind was the ocean stretching to each and every continent.

There was still the distinct possibility- though very unlikely, Viktor reasoned with Makkachin’s head in his lap -that Yuuri wouldn’t want him after all. They were lovers, but that didn’t mean Yuuri wanted forever. They’d been dating less than a month. He’d been with Niko for three years. Anything could happen.

The young man might have loved the maiden, though he knew she was a wolf… but would he still feel the same if he knew that she was also the princess he’d been searching for? She had her reason for keeping these secrets, but would he understand?

Would he forgive her?
The firebird flew for three days, tracing the aerial landscape until she was certain she’d found the desecrated village. Though exhausted, she continued on as the wolf to dig through the debris. There was very little left of the town, neither building or person. There were, however, survivors.

“Yeh, I’ve seen your boy. Hurt, he was, but he survived. Moved on days ago, though.”

With no time to lose, the wolf began tracking, combing roads and fields, searching as close as he dared around other towns. If only he could find him, he could insist that they stop this foolish quest. The curse didn’t need to be broken as long as the young man was alive. That would be enough.

He searched for three more days, blindly following the trail with hardly any food or rest. It was only when he was close to running himself to death that he found him hiking along a mountain pass. Not only alive, but determined. Whole.

The wolf howled for joy, and raced to meet him, transforming as she—

“Bruff!”

The barking startled Viktor out of his thoughts, and he caught only a streak of brown out of the corner of his eye as Makkachin raced from his side to the dividing window. Time, which had gone so slowly until now, switched to loud, as each passing second thudded in his ears like the pounding of the temple’s waterfall against the rocks below. His chest ached, gaze travelling from Makkachin’s wagging tail to his dancing paws against the glass, and then, finally, to Yuuri.

His Yuuri.

With winter gear and face mask in place, Viktor could only see a portion of his face, but it was more than enough. He knew that figure. He’d memorized those eyes. He could feel him, even from across the room.

Trembling, Viktor got to his feet. Yuuri noticed Makkachin first, but when their eyes met, the rest of the world fell away. Nothing else mattered in that moment.

*Stay close to me,*

*Don’t go away*

*I’m afraid of losing you*

Viktor wasn’t sure who took the first step in their race, side by side along the glass. He just knew that his heart was bursting with every emotion from the past week all at once, and thoughts of Yuuri, Yuuri, Yuuri! were his only lifeline.

Yuuri’s eyes never left him and his pace never wavered, matching step for step past passengers until he was stopped by the gate.

Fear sunk its teeth into Viktor and he hesitated at the last moment, coming to a halt at the end of
the roped entry. He was facing the moment of truth; there was no going back. Yuuri now knew more than ever about his ‘glittering idol’ and the secrets that he kept. Perhaps more than Viktor was prepared to deal with. Did Yuuri still want him?

Viktor wouldn’t fault him for turning him away, or push him into making a decision. It was Yuuri’s choice to make. If he needed time, Viktor could give it to him. He could be patient.

But there was no hesitation; the moment there was clearance, Yuuri bolted from the doors, charging full force so that Viktor barely had time to open his arms before Yuuri was in them, nearly toppling him over with the force of his affection. Then Yuuri had his arms wrapped around him, face buried tight against his shoulder, clinging like a little bear cub. Shaking.

Viktor folded his arms around his shoulders to hold him like sheltering wings, close and protective. His scent was Yuuri’s mixed with things he recognized, but couldn’t place; distant and faint. Russia. He pulled him closer.

They stood that way for a moment, neither moving or saying anything, neither caring that people were staring. His Yuuri was tense. Anxious. Perhaps he was just as much in need of reassurance as Viktor was. He thought of the ring, but dismissed it. Too much, too soon. But there was something else that he could do.

“Youuri,” Viktor began against his ear. “I’ve been thinking about what I can do as your coach from now on...”

There was a tension shift as Yuuri’s arms tightened around him. “Yeah,” he murmured. “So have I.”

Viktor wasn’t sure what that meant. Yuuri wasn’t usually one to cut him off unless he was upset. After the disaster Rostelecom Cup, though, he supposed he should have seen it coming. Or, no; he was only being an active partner in their war game, supporting his general. He just needed to inspire confidence.

Yuuri didn’t give him the chance, squeezing him tight before pushing him away and holding him at arm’s length, out of reach. He caught his footing easily enough, but the look on Yuuri’s face was heated; eyes blazing, nostrils flaring. As if the moment of being swept up in emotion had passed and he had now remembered his anger.

Or was it disgust?

Viktor’s heart had been broken before, even shattered. But he wondered, briefly, holding his breath while watching Yuuri steel himself to deliver the killing blow, what it would be like to be utterly destroyed.

“Viktor!” Yuuri’s voice, cracking, but firm. He could only imagine how difficult this was for him, though already his focus was starting to shift. “Will you be my coach... until I retire?”

*Let’s leave together*

*I’m ready now*

It took several heartbeats for Viktor to process the words, each gear gradually slipping back into
place as the meaning became clear. Able to breathe again, he could place the familiarity of those words. Mama and Papa Katsuki, just the night before.

“I offered to help run Yu-Topia as permanent staff, and Toshi, dear thing, said—”

“I said ‘this is a family business,’ and do you know what she said? ‘I know.’”

“But don’t expect Yuuri to do the same. Our boy isn’t exactly traditional.”

“Right. So if you’re going to wait for him, I wouldn’t count it as a proposal unless there’s a ring, just to be on the safe side.”

He wasn’t telling Viktor to leave, he was asking him to stay. The very thing that Viktor had intended to offer had now been requested. Yuuri wasn’t mad or pushing Viktor away, he was just nervous; frightened of losing him.

Yuuri’s hands were trembling at his shoulders, his face tense with anxiety, waiting for Viktor’s response. It was the same thing all over again.

Stay by my side and never leave.

He could do that. As long as Yuuri wanted him.

Warmth took the place of apprehension and eased into a smile on Viktor’s lips. His Yuuri. Sweet, silly Yuuri. His parents had been right. Everyone had been right.

Viktor took the hand from his shoulder, folding it between his own, and brought it to his lips to press a kiss to the knuckle of the finger that he hoped one day to put a ring. The left, traditional for the Japanese. Caressing his palm to steady Yuuri’s nerves, Viktor gave him his sweetest gaze, mouth curving into a playful half smirk. “It’s almost like a marriage proposal.”

It didn’t matter that others were watching them; Viktor didn’t care anymore.

Oh, if only Yuuri knew about the ring…

He didn’t, but he was amused all the same blushing first after a stunned silence, then chuckling and stepping in for another embrace. They were okay.

More than that, they were in it for the long haul. Yuuri might have appreciated Viktor’s non answer, but it meant they were still talking about skating, not their feelings. That wasn’t enough. Not anymore, and he needed Yuuri to know that.

“In that case…” Viktor murmured, this time against Yuuri’s ear. It was his turn. “I hope you never retire.”

Yuuri didn’t say anything at first, but when he did, it was through quiet tears, voice shaking again. He was never good at holding back his emotions. It was something Viktor loved about him. “Let’s win gold together at the Grand Prix Final.”
They collected Yuuri’s suitcase at the baggage claim, walking close but not quite hand in hand. On the train from the airport to the central station, Makkachin sat in front of them, muzzle wedged between their knees as if he couldn’t decide who he most wanted to give affection to. It earned him pets from both, of course, and the poodle’s tail-wagging antics kept most eyes on him instead of the couple, for which Viktor was privately grateful. Though he’d decided not to care anymore, it seemed that it was going to take some time to get used to it.

Easing in was probably safer, anyway. Although not Russia, Japan still had its… issues.

“Oh, I hope you don’t mind, Yuuri. I booked us a hotel here in town for the night. Give you a chance to recover before seeing your family.” Among other things. Privacy in Yu-Topia was something he still hadn’t worked out, and neither of them had discussed it at length.

“That’s a good idea. I don’t think I could handle another train ride.”

It was probably the truth, but the sly sideways glance that Yuuri gave showed that his thoughts were traveling along the same line.

A hug and a kiss on the hand were one thing, but there was so much reconnecting to do. How would they feel normal otherwise?

It was dark at the station, winter night officially fallen with a blustery breeze that had them tugging at their coats.

“Are you hungry, Yuuri?”

“No really, no. We can eat if you want to, though, Viktor.”

Viktor shook his head. The thought of trying now made him a little queasy. He smiled. “I’m fine. Let’s head on to the hotel, then. We’ve already checked in and gotten it all ready for you.”

“Aww!”

“It’s just this way. I’ll get your things.”

Yuuri didn’t complain, indicative of how tired he must have been, but the walk to the hotel was short, so no one was put out. Within ten minutes, they were in the modest room, and Yuuri was turning a soft smile at the roses while Viktor took his coat.

“For me?”

Pleased and flustered, Viktor shrugged out of his own winter wear and draped them over the closest bed. “I’m sorry they didn’t have any camelieas.”

“No, it’s fine. I’m glad that we got to enjoy them for the week in Shanghai. These are great, Viktor. Thank you.”

“Of course.”

It was perfect to have Yuuri back and to be so close, all alone in a hotel for one night. He looked good; warm and receptive. So beautiful standing there against the desk with the flowers, like an enchantress, wild and untamed from their time apart. It may have been conditioning, but Viktor couldn’t help the stirring need to touch and kiss him. Everywhere.
There were two beds in the room for appearances. Would Yuuri mind? He stood next to their coats, willing himself to move, to close the distance between them, but he only managed a couple of steps. Initiating wasn’t his strongest suit. Viktor tried a different tactic, clearing his throat.

“Makkachin insisted on coming.”

“Oh, did he?” Yuuri pulled away from the flowers and crouched to give the poodle affection, which was appreciated with full-body tail wagging. “I’m so glad you’re okay, Makka!”

“Yeah, he’s perfect now. Doing great.” Viktor hesitated again. “Was your flight okay?”

Yuuri looked up from the dog, smug smile in place. “You asked me already.”

“...oh, you’re right.” So much for that idea.

“It was long, dull.” Yuuri stretched, patting Makkachin once more then getting to his feet, deciding to humor Viktor’s obvious indecision. “I slept and read. Georgi gave me a book.”

“Oh? I guess you two would share an interest...” It made perfect sense. They could have started a book club together. But none of that helped their situation now. “I’m sure you made friends with everyone in Russia.”

“Yeah, it kind of surprised me. They were all so kind.”

That was one way to put it, and certainly a way to sour the mood. Viktor rocked on his heels, taking a half step forward with one foot, and one step back with his other. “Ah. I’m glad that they treated you well… but I’m even happier that you’re home. You know, there’s a Russian saying: being a guest is good, but being home is better, da?”

At that, Yuuri paused, concern knitting his brow. “I’m sorry that we couldn’t be there together.”

The sweetness worked like a lure, drawing Viktor closer another step, then another, and he finally reached out his hand. “I missed you, Yuuri.”

Yuuri took it, coming to meet him where he stood in the middle of the room, sliding his free hand up his shoulder. “I missed you, too. So happy to be here with you now, though.”

“Me, too.” Without their coats in the way or anyone watching (save Makkachin), the warmth between them felt closer, more real. Viktor wound his arm around the small of Yuuri’s back, pulling him closer. They fit so well together; natural dance partners. Soulmates.

Sliding his fingers between Yuuri’s, palms pressed flat, Viktor thought again of the ring kept hidden away in his coat pocket, and squeezed his hand. Soon, he hoped.

“Viktor?”

Viktor leaned back only enough to be able to gaze down into those dark eyes, feeling for all the world like he was cursed anew, and smiled. He would willingly fall into this trap time and time again, til the day he died, drowning in Yuuri and nothing but. “Mm? Yes, Yuuri?”

The dopey, dreamy-eyed stare must have been what he was looking for, because Yuuri only laughed, and stretched up to kiss him. Hesitant at first, then deep and mouthy, with arms locking into place to hold him steady. Like prey.

Viktor laughed before kissing back, all previous tension bursting like the little bubbles at the edge of a babbling brook. “Yuuri!” he cried, pulling away from the continued barrage of kisses that were
in no way unwanted. “Wow!”

“I can’t help it!”

It seems that he couldn’t, and Viktor didn’t want him to. Neither of them were able to contain themselves, not from kissing or giggling, or letting their arms memorize the shape and weight of each other again.

Eventually, the laughter overtook the kissing in their relief, and when they came down from it, Viktor cupped Yuuri’s cheek to bring him back to focus. “Yuuri. You must be tired from all that traveling. How does a hot shower sound?”

“That depends… will you be joining me, or watching?”

“I want to get a good start on those kisses I owe you… I could wash your back.”

Yuuri’s smile softened, and he laughed again. “I think you gave me more than twenty-four already.”

“I believe the arrangement was twenty-four everywhere.”

“O-oh.”

Brushing from cheek to his ear, then sliding fingertips into his hair, Viktor kissed him once more on the lips, slow and languid, then pressed their foreheads together. There was so much that he wanted to say, so many things to tell him. But what mattered most in that moment were the fundamentals that everything, even skating, were based on. “I love you, Yuuri.”

“I love you, too.”

That unmistakable ache in his chest, coupled with warmth and longing. Home. He’d found it, right here, with Yuuri. Viktor was certain of it, and he’d never been more happy.

One more kiss, and Viktor scooped Yuuri up into his arms, laughing at the protesting yelp that followed— a much different reaction than his own. “Makkachin, be a good boy. We’ll be back soon!”

The shower was too small to be of much use.

Chapter End Notes

Pssst! Want to hang out and talk about YOI with other NLA readers? Or get news and snippets and drabbles from Mamo and I? Join the NLA Book Club discord server! It's right here: https://discord.gg/cHMX8QF

That's right; we've started a book club and you, devoted reader, are invited to join! We're trying to keep it small, so please let others discover it for themselves. Thanks for reading!

... 

Lilia: Yura, where did you get that feather boa?
Yurio: What boa?
Lilia: the one from the photo on your instagram.
Yurio: …three guesses :V
Lilia: Well I find it hard to believe that it's Yuuri's.
Yurio: yeeehhh.... so about that
Yurio: what can you tell me about Viktor's obsession with shoes?

**ON THE NEXT GAY SKATE:**
Anime! / Spice! / Music! / Makeup! / AAYYYYYYYYYYY

*Please look forward to it!*
Breakthrough
Chapter by mamodewberry

Chapter Summary

Viktor and Yuuri are home in Hasetsu before they head to Barcelona. Saint Petersburg filled in pieces of Viktor's past, but Yuuri knows there's still more. How much will Viktor say?

#spicy #nsfw #many kinks filled #Yuuri just wants everyone to know Viktor is cute #tiny workhorse Yuuri

Chapter Notes

Mamodewberry: Hello. I hope you are prepared for all the fluffy spice we have in store for you. This is the shortest chapter we've had in a while, but it's full of love and is perfect balm for the shit storm that will be Barcelona :D Please enjoy. Included is a scene I've teased Gab with for 1.5 years and now we're finally here. Can you guess which one it is when you get to it? ;)

Gabapple: This chapter is amazingly soft, sweet, and sexy. Mamo is so good at writing all of the spicy things that I can’t seem to, and she’s a master at economizing her words. I just don’t understand. I’m constantly in awe. I hope you all enjoy and appreciate what we have in store for you here; this sets up everything you’ll need to get through Barcelona… and we hope that you’ll come back to this when things get tough. :’)

Just a head’s up: before we head to Barcelona, we’re going to be doing some housekeeping for the fic. Most of this entails cleaning up chapter notes, hunting for typos, and adding missing previews, etc… but we’re also going to be splitting chapter 20 in half because we’ve noticed that we tend to lose most of our readers there. What this means is that the next chapter we post will be 30, not 29. So don’t get too confused! We’ll post patch notes with the next update to detail all of the things we changed. :)

New art:
Gab and I both commissioned Iru! One from Ch16 of Yuuri trying on his gala costume! The Window Scene from Ch21!
Quel spoils us again with The reunions scene from ch27!

Recommended listening:
Get to You, by Matt Wertz
Trust You, by Yuna Ito
The Tower, by Vienna Teng
Sunlight it Scatters, by Yiruma
Sochi, Russia

Georgi (25 years-old)

The Olympics, the most prestigious privilege of any athlete. An honor to be sent to represent one’s country, as well as to be the hosting country.

Sochi was a beautiful city that bordered the Black Sea and was very unlike the climates of Russia Georgi was accustomed to.

It was said to be the most expensive Olympics in history as well as the warmest. Good for tourism, but difficult for the athletes that relied on the ice and snow for their sport.

Regrettably, it would also become historic for the ongoing doping scandals.

Everyday there were screenings, men and women being escorted, no matter the age or nationality. Viktor was high on the list for suspicious use. His winning streak was not taken kindly even outside the Olympics, but with the world watching, they were vicious.

So his comrade was even more on edge, and not just for the accusations against him, but for his fellow Russians and his best friend, Christophe Giacometti.

The Swiss skater, usually a light in the fog of competition, had his spirits down. One so open about his sexuality was not safe in a place like this. To rule out rumors and prevent violence, Christophe distanced himself from Viktor and Georgi. Christophe even left his beau manager in Switzerland to protect him.

Georgi was used to seeing Viktor hide himself from the world, but not Christophe. He truly looked miserable.

The Olympics were supposed to be a symbol of global unity, not a divide!

Georgi knew he felt alone, he could only imagine what Viktor and Chris felt like.

Night was the only solace Georgi found. The temperatures felt more of what they should be and, if he wandered far enough, quiet. At the conclusion of the day’s activities, the athletes would be dismissed and Georgi couldn’t wait to escape the collectively heavy aura.

His escapes alternated between his room to curl up with a book or wandering the city under the streetlights until he was tired enough.

Georgi took the elevator down to the lobby floor. The mill-work of the hotel was immaculate, he took time to appreciate it everytime he left, but tonight he stopped at the sight of a woman seated cross-legged on a cushioned chair underneath the designated smoking area.

Japanese, he thought. Dark pants and hoodie, piercings all the way up both ears, and dyed hair. Out at a late hour and alone. A fellow creature of the night? A woman after his own heart!

Staying at this hotel, she’d have to be accompanying an Olympian, so the chance was high she’d at
least know English. Walking by without offering a shoulder was cruel.

“Excuse me, miss, but you seem to be upset. Boyfriend giving you problems?” Georgi brought a cupped hand to his mouth, lowering his voice. “Or girlfriend?” He’d learned his lesson for that to never be beyond possibility.

She gave him a crooked, easy smile. “Neither, actually. My brother.”

“Family squabble. I see,” he nodded. Having two brothers, he knew very well.

“And I’m not upset.”

“Troubled?”

A plume of smoke came with her sigh. “If you had to witness someone having a total meltdown, what would that feeling be?”

“Helpless.” It was a consistent emotion since witnessing an episode of Viktor’s many years ago, which resulted in the making of the dog tissue box he carried. Something good came of it, he supposed, but Georgi never stopped feeling helpless. At least they spoke easier over time, but it was never the same as the summer they spent together.

She raised a brow in consideration, then reached over to put out her cigarette in the ashtray. Uncrossing her legs, she pulled them up to her chest instead, making room for him with a nod.

Georgi accepted the offer, sitting down to watch her.

For several minutes she stared down at the hideous carpet. “I’ve always known my brother had something that made life harder for him. I thought he knew. But he wasn’t fully aware of it. Those closest to the issue don’t see it kind of thing.”

Exactly like Viktor. “A mental illness.”

“You’re pretty smart.”

“Not especially. We seem to have similar experiences, is all.”

“All right, so, how do you handle it?”

“I’m… no expert, but, since you’re family, your bond will help. You came here to support him, did you not?”

She placed her chin on her knees. “Despite how shitty his brain is to him, he made it here with his own hard work and talent. I wouldn’t miss it.”

“Being there for him when you can. Even when he doesn’t know it.”

“Mmm.”

“Everyone has their demons. Some are temporary, others never truly leave.”

“Sounds like you have control over yours.”

“Only at recognizing when they try to take control of me. Getting them to back down is the trickier part.”
She hummed again, considering. “You’re like one of those aura reader guys.”

“I’ve done a few readings. Mostly for friends.” Normally he wasn’t so open about his practices, but there was something about her that made her easy to talk to. No judgement in her tone at all. Unlike a lot of Russian women he tried to date.

“Explains a lot. That’s really cool.”

And so honest. He couldn’t help but blush a little at the compliment.

“I’m Mari.”

And she offered his name before he did?! And a first name only… “I-I’m Georgi.”

“Thanks, Georgi. I should probably get back to him. He passed out, but I need to be there when he get up.”

“I understand.”

Mari untangled her arms from her legs and stood up, Georgi only now realizing she’d been in slippers.

“Can I ask you something, Mari?”

She tilted her head up at him, another easy smile. “In exchange for your advice, sure.”

It was silly, but maybe someone like her would know. “Do women like it when men flirt?”

“Depends on the girl. We like sincerity.”

“I see. That makes sense.”

“Why? Are you flirting with me, now?”

Her tone shifted into teasing and he felt his ears burn at the sound of it. “Not at this moment…”

“Tell you what; next time I see you, we should grab dinner.”

“That would be wonderful!”

Another smile, more amused this time. “See you around, Georgi.” She put her hands in her pockets and walked towards the elevators, slippers sounding her steps.

It wasn’t until she’d stepped in and gone up several floors it dawned on Georgi he didn’t get her number!

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A comforting warmth radiated through Yuuri’s body as he woke. While they were in Shanghai, it had been something he felt for days, got used to. Then they were separated for a week and he missed it. How his body felt sore, yet satisfied. Hungry, yet full.

He rolled over to find that Viktor wasn’t next to him, nor Makkachin at his feet where he’d been as the pair was falling asleep after their romp.
How long had Yuuri been passed out? Then again, Viktor didn’t like to sit still too long, as anxious and sensitive as he was. Yuuri was glad he hadn’t waited around for him to wake.

Knowing now what he did about Viktor, he couldn’t help but wonder how difficult it had been to let Yuuri into his life at all. For Yuuri, it was a gradual opening of the door without him noticing until Viktor was already at the genkan.

The Russian wasn’t without his guards - no one ever should be. Trust was difficult to obtain, especially after the abuse Viktor had faced.

He was guarded even after the close of the hotel door; even while they made love. The time apart had given them both time to think and evaluate the uncovered secrets and what they were to each other. Had anything changed between them? Were they stronger now? How Viktor acted was a lot how Yuuri had been for their first time. With so much anxious energy in the mind and body, the easiest thing to do was move and act on it, ask questions later. Too vulnerable, otherwise. Be active and feel. It hadn’t been Viktor’s first time on top, not after everything in their post-Cup of China getaway, but there was something new there; strong and desperate to convey something he’d realized in their separation.

What that was, Yuuri couldn’t say, but he enjoyed the demonstration.

It had started in the shower, tentative, asking permission with hands and eyes on Viktor’s part, Yuuri encouraging with kisses and holding the touches in place. Bathing for the sake of feeling refreshed wasn’t the only thing Viktor had in mind. The spark caught flame and Viktor was bracing Yuuri against the slick wall with legs spread. Yuuri was cleaned thoroughly inside and out, riling Yuuri with his fond and deft hands. Coming in the shower wasn’t Viktor’s goal, so he stopped his ministrations and scooped Yuuri up in a towel, walked to the bed and laid him bare. Viktor lowered to his knees and pulled him to the edge to get between his legs with his mouth. The wet heat of his lips around him had Yuuri wriggling and whimpering. Once Viktor had him edged and begging, he finished preparing Yuuri with his fingers, condoms and lube following. Still at the foot of the bed, Viktor pushed himself inside, using his stance to fill Yuuri completely. Yuuri clung to him, arms around his neck and shoulders, legs around his waist giving Viktor access to thrust deeper.

Neither of them lasted long, but the message was clear -- only they could satisfy each other.

The lock clicked open with the keycard and Viktor stepped into the door, shedding his coat in the entry closet and stepping out of his shoes. Whatever Viktor went out for was placed on the desk.

Soon the sound of plastic bags rustling and Viktor hushing Makkachin came. “Yuuri may still be sleeping.”

With a smile, Yuuri rolled on his side and closed his eyes.

Yuuri feigned sleep even as the floor creaked under Viktor’s feet that came toward him.

A soft sound of fondness, a brush of a finger to tuck a lock behind his ear that didn’t stay long.

“Mm Viktor?” Yuuri squinted for blurry eyes,

“Morning, my Yuuri. Did you sleep well?”

If he suspected anything, he didn’t say. Yuuri reached for the hand that had been at his hair and
tugged. It didn’t take long for Viktor to take the hint and climb into bed with him.

“Not ready to get up I see.”

“Where did you go?” Yuuri asked, slipping his arms around him, tucking his face into his chest, and the rest of his naked body pressing against his clothed lover.

“Went out to get breakfast and a few other things. I thought we could spend the rest of the day inside before we head back to Hasetsu.”

Viktor wasn’t in a hurry to get back to the onsen either in favor of continuing their revisit of Shanghai activities. “I like the sound of that.”

The familiar winterscape of northwestern Japan passed outside the train window. Yuuri saw this part of his home country the most during competitions and it was nothing like Saint Petersburg’s vibrant colors that peeked beneath the snowy blankets. It looked cold and lonely.

Viktor sat close, allowing their ankles and knees to touch, while Makkachin made himself comfortable across their feet. A family of four were the only other patrons in their car and were too busy in themselves to notice them, but Yuuri followed his lead and remained discrete.

When it came to Viktor, though, it was hard to be discrete.

They’d spent a day together to get some of the heated comfort they’d experienced before returning to the real world once more. Shouldn’t that have relieved the itch?

Judging by how Viktor kept casting hopeful glances and edged his hand closer, it hadn’t. If Viktor weren’t so obvious or cute, maybe Yuuri would have been able to resist.

Addiction.

Yuuri reached up to loosen his scarf so the ends would fall on his lap. He took hold of Viktor’s hand and used the wool scarf to conceal their entwined fingers.

Simple acts of intimacy meant the most to Viktor. A touch or words of assurance and instantly the air around him calmed.

Japan wasn’t Russia, but Viktor had been conditioned to fear any sort of PDA despite wanting it so badly. At least the Japanese were fairly private people; if someone were to see them, Yuuri knew they wouldn’t be reported or ridiculed.

On the ice Yuuri would continue to show the world Viktor was his.

When they arrived at the onsen, the Katsukis and Nishigoris plus Minako were there to greet them.

Luggage and shoes left at the genkan, the pair were dragged to the banquet table for the prepared feast.

Yuuri tried to reason with his mother that he didn’t podium, so why the katsudon, but, as always, she wouldn’t hear of it.

“We’re pretty sure your gala program took gold,” Yuko added with a wink.

That day seemed so long ago.
As the meal went on, Yuuri observed how natural his family acted with Viktor. Teasing and nudge him while he laughed and looked bashful. The phone calls toward the beginning of the week had worried Yuuri, so he was glad his family had taken to taking care of Viktor. Just as Viktor’s family had taken care of him.

After dinner and the ridding of luggage in their rooms, Yuuri suggested a soak in the onsen. The smile on Viktor’s face said he’d been dying to ask since they got there.

They’d taken a shower together at the hotel only that morning, but there was still something so unique about taking the time to wash down one another in the bathhouse with rags and buckets, and padding outside to the natural hot springs.

“Come to think of it… this is our first time as a couple taking a soak in the onsen,” Yuuri said as he settled down into the bath.

Viktor nodded. “I’ve been waiting for you to come home. When I was cleaning it, I couldn’t stop thinking about us being out here alone together.”

“Even though we’ve been alone so many times before Beijing.”

“But not like … this.”

Yuuri expected him to take his hand or lean over to kiss him, but Viktor remained where he was, giddy smile on his face. Whether he was asking or not, Yuuri could tell he wanted something. So he leaned over, cupped his check with a wet hand, and gave him a slow and languid kiss.

Viktor didn’t pull away, but his cheeks tinted pink and his eyes diverted to the glass doors behind them.

It was an impulse Yuuri wished he could help him get over. “The onsen closed to the public hours ago.”

“Yes, but… your family…”

“It’s not like they don’t know.”

Viktor tightened his lips as he considered.

“Pretty sure they aren’t into voyeurism.”

“Y-Yuuri!” Viktor laughed at the thought. “Okay, okay.”

Satisfied, Yuuri lifted his arm for Viktor to come under and lean against him, hip to hip.

“This is nice,” Viktor said, just loud enough to hear over the ambience.

“Mm.”

“So cold, but so warm here…”

“You’re getting sleepy, aren’t you?” They both had full stomachs and a day of travel and catching up. And it was getting close to Viktor’s bedtime.

Viktor failed to stifle a yawn and snuggled into Yuuri further. “I want to do this every night before
Breakfast with the Katsuki’s was always served, eaten, and cleaned up before the doors opened to the public. It was a short window for someone like Yuuri who liked to sleep in when there wasn’t skating practice in the way. Today, he was in favor of sleeping in since it was their first morning waking up together at the onsen. As expected, Yuuri’s family said nothing as he was sure they knew they’d be sharing Viktor’s bed in the banquet hall. They were both aware of how thin the shoji walls were, and until they figured out what to do about that, it was good they’d spent a day in Fukuoka reconnecting.

When Yuuri awoke in the morning, Viktor was still in bed with him. It would have been surprising if Yuuri didn’t know how sentimental firsts were to him. Blue eyes watched him, waiting, and then grew into joy.

Why was he so cute?

Kisses were good and safe. Not that his family would walk in on them, but just in case, Yuuri kissed him, which sent Viktor into small giggles. Of course Yuuri knew what he wanted and needed. He wasn’t exactly subtle about it.

So, so cute.

Now that both of them were up, Makkachin wagged his tail a few times and hopped off their feet and to the floor. He’d been so patient with them.

Quickly the pair dressed and padded down the stairs with poodle in tow to let him outside to relieve himself.

“Good morning you two,” Hiroko said, as the closing door alerted her their presence.

“Morning,” Yuuri returned, while Viktor was bashfully quiet.

“Have a seat and I’ll get you your breakfasts.”

The pair knelt at the table, and waited for Hiroko to bring them a bowl of miso soup and rice with tamagoyaki. After the week of Russian meals, it was nice to come back to something familiar.

“Oh! Vicchan, Makkachin got something in the mail while you were getting Yuuri yesterday.”

Makkachin got mail?

Viktor did not at all find this strange and took the small, padded envelope with several Russian stamps on it from her, lifting enough on his knees to give her a kiss on the cheek. He then laid his chopsticks down on his plate and tore at the seal. Inside was a card with a poodle on it with a bandage and thermometer in its mouth and a small bag of dog treats and a plush toy. Viktor opened the card and smiled at the words inside.

As if on cue, Mari let Makkachin back in from the side yard and he trotted right over to them.

“Makkachin, look what your auntie and uncle sent you!”

Makka seemed to understand and sat down beside him. Viktor held the contents out for him to
sniff, which he did the card out of courtesy, then pawed at the treats for Viktor to open for him.

“As long as you still eat your breakfast,” Viktor muttered playfully, and then went back to his meal without explaining anything for Yuuri’s benefit.

If his mother knew, Yuuri guessed it was fine.

A familiar saxophone rift came from the TV across the room and Yuuri looked up to see Viktor looking at it curiously.

“The goblins - er, girls were watching this the other day.”

“It’s Detective Conan.”

“Detective… oh that explains a few things, but that seems a little dangerous for a little boy?”

“Well, it’s anime, so there’s some suspension of disbelief. Conan’s true identity is actually a seventeen-year-old high-schooler. He’s in a child’s body cause he gets drugged on a case and it forced him to de-age.”

“And now he solves cases like that? And the police take him seriously?”

“No, he knocks his love-interest’s dad out and speaks through him. He doesn’t tell anybody about it, cause if people know, the organization could find him.”

“That sounds…”

“Convoluted, I know. It was pretty good until a few years ago and then the creator stopped caring about the story and just let it keep going for the money.”

“He has a soccer ball.”

“He has a skateboard sometimes, too.”

“Anime is strange.”

“Most of it is. But sometimes endearing, too. We can watch some others later if you want.”

“Do you have a favorite, Yuuri?”

Yuuri paused with his last bite of rice. “No, but I’ve enjoyed a few off and on. I’ll see what Netflix has.”

“Please!”

Later came sooner than Yuuri thought. Viktor asked to watch anime with Yuuri that evening. The television was free from the rest of his family, so it was a good opportunity. Yuuri admittedly was curious what Viktor would think watching a form of Japanese entertainment.

Unfortunately for Viktor, there were only a handful of series available with English subtitles. Kiki’s Delivery Service, one Yuuri did claim was a favorite. Right away Viktor saw Yuuri in Kiki and that was something Yuuri had never considered before, but explained why he liked the movie so much.
“Maybe you need a cat, Yuuri.”

After spending time with Yurio’s cat, it wasn’t a bad idea. “We’ll watch *Whisper of the Heart* next time.”

The first day back to skating practice was spent going over the short and free skate programs of the season. Yuuri’s practice schedule had been inconsistent since China. If it weren’t for his endurance, he’d be in trouble. Having Viktor return as his coach was refreshing, even as he got back into his ruthless mode.

Together they walked back to the onsen to make it in time for dinner. Afterwards, Yuuri announced he was going to go for a run for extra training. Viktor or his family had no complaints, so he donned his sweats and hoodie and left the onsen.

Hasetsu was quiet at night, especially during the winter months. Now having visited the city of his lover, he couldn’t help but think of Saint Petersburg as he ran across the bridge.

Someday he wished to return and have Viktor with him. And on that day, he’d hoped to help Viktor reconcile the years of feeling alone and abandoned. Yakov, Lilia, Yurio, Mila - everyone - still loved Viktor. He’d built the tower too high for anyone to reach.

Cheeks flared in exertion, Yuuri wiped the mud and moisture from his shoes before removing them in the *genkan*. He passed his family watching the TV in the main banquet room and made his way up the stairs.

“Viktor, I’m coming in,” Yuuri said as he took hold of the handle of the *shoji*.

The door slid open to reveal Viktor sitting in front of the oval wall mirror, body stiff, face pale, and eyes wide as he looked back at Yuuri in the doorway.

A deer in the headlights.

With painted lips and a tube of lipstick in his long, slender fingers.

Viktor was the first one to break eye contact, attention darting anywhere else but at him and reached for the cloth that was kept with the makeup kit.

“Wait! Don’t…”

Don’t take it off, don’t look away, don’t be afraid.

He hesitated, but eventually let the cloth fall from his fingers in favor of biting his bottom lip.

Yuuri closed the *shoji* behind him with a subtle clack and took a step forward.

Viktor watched him approach, putting the lid back on the tube and set it down on the bed, only for it to roll off the edge. The motion diverted Viktor’s gaze for a moment, eyelids falling long enough for Yuuri to see his silver lashes had been painted dark with mascara. Then he looked back at him. Cautious, nervous, and embarrassed. Wanting to run, trying not to.

His eyes were so impossibly blue, accentuated by the mascara and the deep lipstick, which Yuuri recognized as the shade Viktor bought in Shanghai and for him. Now Viktor was wearing it, his ivory skin making him that much more striking and compelling.
Yuuri felt like he was thirteen all over again.

He rolled his bottom lip inside his mouth like he had when he tested the sensation of Viktor’s not so accidental kiss in the summer. "Viktor. I need to-- can I kiss you?"

Viktor blinked, nearly coming back to his usual composure, but then got shy again, head tucking into raised shoulders. “If… you want to.”

“But will that mess up the lipstick? Would that make you upset?”

Another series of blinks and a shake of his head and his voice. “I don’t need it for anything. I was going to take it off anyway.”

*Such a crime…*

“I’ve always wondered what it would be like. To kiss you. With lipstick.”

Color blossomed on Viktor’s cheeks like a rose rising from the snow.

Yuuri’s as well, which he was sure they both realized, was stupid to get flustered about. They kissed all the time. They kissed while Yuuri wore lipstick in Shanghai, smeared all over and everything … It shouldn’t make a difference if it was on Viktor.

But it did.

However, the silence wasn’t encouraging. “If it’s weird, we don’t have to.”

“N-no…” came Viktor’s careful retort. He forced a smile, pleased and bashful, then ran a delicate hand through his hair to unsuccessfully tuck his fringe behind his ear.

He was so cute and pretty, Yuuri questioned how he was able to restrain himself for as long as he had, caught between wanting to be gentle and *not so* gentle. It was a different side to Viktor he’d only seen in the early part of his career. So raw and open.

*‘He has the heart of a princess and must be treated as such. Call him Princess some time. It’ll no doubt have favorable results.’*

*[Just love him.]*

Chris’s words weren’t flippant. He knew the heart of his friend and what he needed. And what Viktor needed was to be loved— wholly.

It didn’t matter that Viktor was still in his sweatpants and grey v-neck, hair out of place from the day’s activities; he was just as inviting as if he were wearing a suit or nothing at all.

Yuuri finished the steps to the bed and sat next to Viktor, who seemed to tense now that he was so close. “Viktor?” he called, softly. He waited for Viktor to look at him again and cupped his cheeks to examine his face.

Beautiful… how could anyone not love him for who he was? Viktor was his… his princess and no
one else’s. Viktor didn’t need to be scared or ashamed, because Yuuri accepted all of him.

He kissed him once to test the waters, then another to assure, another to set a rhythm, and another to prove he wasn’t going anywhere for awhile. Slow and languid as he savored the new layer of Viktor’s lips, transferring the oil and wax between them.

Tentatively Viktor followed after with him, not quite giving his all to him, still so fragile for being discovered.

Coaxing Viktor’s mouth open with his own, he traced Viktor’s lips with his tongue.

A tiny gasp and a whimper was heard and felt. Yuuri pulled away. Maybe that was too weird. He’d never done that before.

They were both breathless and flushed as they stared back at one another.

Viktor had been startled, yes, but going by how his lips parted, lipstick smeared, and how blown his irises were, it was because he’d liked it. He’d been ensnared, under a spell like Yakov and Yurio had described. It was a little scary to have that much power over someone, but also thrilling.

Did Viktor trust him?

Viktor swallowed hard at the internally imposed question, eyes heavy with want.

Yuuri reached for him again for a kiss, which turned into several, and then he was lowering Viktor on his back.

He needed this, to show his lover how much he wanted and craved him. Parting from his lips, he pressed their foreheads together with a shaking breath. “P-please… I…”

Viktor nodded against his head with a small, committal sound.

Stepping back on one leg, Yuuri pulled away from Viktor to get into his mostly unpacked suitcase. In Shanghai a lot of their luggage got swapped and shared between them. Some were rearranged in Moscow when Viktor left, but some things were left with Yuuri. Like the condoms and lubricant, which he unzipped from the inside pocket and fished out. Backtracking to the bed, he spotted the tube of lipstick on the floor.

Their kissing had removed the color from Viktor’s lips. One look from the cap to Viktor splayed on the bed straining in wait made Yuuri shiver. A fresh coat on Viktor while looking up at him…

Biting his own lips, he returned to the bed and popped the silver cap off and twisted the stick up.

Little prompting was needed on Viktor’s part and he sat up on his elbows for easier application.

Yuuri had never put lipstick on someone before, but like always, Viktor was good at helping. Something so simple shouldn’t have been so sensuous. But it was and it was a struggle to put the cap back in place.

Before the tube could hit the floor again, Yuuri crawled onto the bed to kiss him, open and deep. It didn’t take long for the new coat to smear pigment or for either to run out of breath. Yuuri retreated to give Viktor a break and took to sucking his throat, leaving marks that weren’t just from the lipstick. While Viktor’s voice vibrated against Yuuri’s mouth in waves of pleasure, he reached down with his hands to lift up the hem of Viktor’s shirt. His skin was already warm and sensitive to his touch, and he wiggled at Yuuri’s hands. Eventually the shirt came up and over his his head,
hair falling in his eyes.

The sweat pants were easier to remove. A few tugs and Viktor maneuvering on his back, they too came off, along with his underwear, and were deposited on the floor.

Now free of his clothing and confinements, Viktor was on full display and he was a sight. The desperation was different than before. Submissive and open, no longer a deer trying to run or hide behind a mask.

Viktor Nikiforov was the most beautiful person Yuuri had ever seen.

Making quick work of undressing himself with Viktor watching with great interest, Yuuri returned to straddle him for more kisses, gradually lowering himself on top of him for a slow grind, pawing at the bed for the supplies.

Their contact broke so Yuuri could uncap the lid. It was too long for Viktor’s liking and he started to whimper and clench at the sheets with sweaty hands.

“I’m right here, shhh.”

His voice seemed to calm him, and Yuuri wondered how loud they’d be in a few moments. His family was downstairs; surely if they happened to hear from below or start to come up, they’d turn back around and not bring attention to it.

Honestly with how close they both were, he didn’t think they’d last long.

Yuuri ran a hand up Viktor’s shin to his knee, then shifted inward into his thigh, the other leg spreading wide. Slicking a hand with lube, Yuuri slid his knee under Viktor and pulled him up so he could bend over to kiss him while he inserted a finger. It amazed him how tight he’d gotten while they were separated.

“Yuuri… Yuuri please…” Viktor pled against his lips, fingers digging into his shoulders, pushing back on the one opening him up.

Usually prepping was something Yuuri enjoyed, but he was feeling really impatient himself. Was it okay? He was asking. Denying or delaying Viktor anything was the worst. It was worth it, Yuuri reasoned.

A minor struggle with the packets of condoms, Yuuri fit one on Viktor first and then on himself. He applied a liberal amount to his own length and Viktor adjusted to receive him, eyes heavy and full of need.

Needing something only Yuuri could give him.

One hand at Viktor’s waist, the other for guidance, Yuuri made his way inside, stopping and going at Viktor’s comfort.

Together they found their rhythm like they had come to do so many times. In Fukuoka it had been a fiery reunion after days of longing and realization. Tonight an emotional affirmation of acceptance.

*Your hands, your legs,*

*My hands, my legs,*
And our heartbeats
Are blending together

Beating hard and fast in their chests, melting and merging into one.

Stay close to me, don’t go away.

The climax crashed on them both so quickly, it was hard to know who was hit first. Eventually Yuuri came out of his daze and pulled out and did away with their condoms in the trash bin at Viktor’s bedside. He grabbed the box of tissues and cleaned up the worst of it before settling inside the covers with Viktor curling against his side to lay his head on his shoulder. Yuuri put one arm around his lover’s waist, and brought up his other hand to pet his hair.

Viktor exhaled, stream of peaceful breath tickling the heated skin of Yuuri’s neck. “Mm.”

“Younger me is really satisfied right now.”

“Hmm younger you?” Viktor nosed him. “For what?”

“I’ve wondered what it would be like for a long time. To kiss you like that.”

He snuggled in closer, lips stretching into a smile against Yuuri’s chest. “That makes me really happy.”

“That I’ve thought about you like that before I knew you?”

"That little you is satisfied. That you wondered what it would be like. That you wanted to kiss me... that you did ..."

“It was, um, a lot better than--” Yuuri sat up, bringing Viktor with him. “Actually, let me show you. I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you-- no, Yuuri, wait…”

Yuuri gave him a sweet kiss, then held his gaze. “Promise.” He slid out of the sheets and slipped on his jogging pants on his way out the door. The TV was still on downstairs, which hopefully meant his family wasn’t suspicious. Turning on the light of his room, he went into his closet and rummaged around for a box labeled ‘Magazines.’ The magazine in question didn’t take long to find, as he’d organized them by their spine and the one he was looking for was always at the front or end of the box. He couldn’t keep Viktor waiting longer by looking for more examples and returned to the banquet room.

To find that Viktor had sat up and pulled what blankets he could around himself, looking nervous again.

“I’m back.”

Relief was evident, yet there was still a hint of betrayal there.
“Sorry. I’m here now.” Yuuri crossed over to the side of the bed he’d left and carefully made his way back in under the covers beside him.

Viktor was more concerned about feeling Yuuri’s skin again than what he had in his hands.

The cover of SKATE Magazine had a torn corner and the finish was worn off in several places. Many pages were dog-eared, but the pages Yuuri wanted were marked with a Viktor-inspired bookmark that he and Yuko had made together. Phichit had called him out on kissing his Viktor posters for the once or twice it had happened, but his best friend didn’t know about this. Admitting it to Viktor was still embarrassing, but maybe it would help ease some nerves to be rewarded with a secret.

“As I was saying… kissing you with lipstick was a lot better than-” he opened to the page to a younger Viktor with his long hair cascading down his bare shoulders and full lips painted with lipstick. “-kissing a magazine.”

A beat of silence, then a tiny snort. “Magazines, too?”

“Y-yeah. When I was thirteen, I saw this ad, knowing it was you…” Yuuri suppressed a giddy laugh. “…I’d never seen anybody so beautiful. You’ve always represented both genders on the ice, and then when you’d do magazine ads, I really, really liked it.” He flipped to another page. “Oh, I’ve got another one somewhere I swear they photoshopped your lips on a woman once in the same magazine. I was so offended! You were probably paid to do certain things, but I was always in awe of how you pulled off anything so naturally. Your long hair made you look so feminine when you were younger... Then when you got your haircut, I wondered if it was by choice. Did your hair get in the way? Or maybe the long hair didn’t match well once your face filled out more masculine? I hoped you were okay with yourself whatever the reason. I know the reason now, but back then I didn’t. Actually, I probably threw away the one that was photoshopped. Young me was so scandalized!”

The tension Viktor was projecting vanished with the sound of his fond laughter and a gentle smile. “Yuuri!”

Yuuri tried to ignore the burning in his cheeks as he turned over the page to an interview spread he’d read the translation for a hundred times. He’d rambled too much!

“Did you kiss this page many nights~?”

“Um!” he was grateful that he’d turned the page to hide the physical evidence, though his non-answer was telling enough.

Viktor kissed his cheek, letting his lips linger before pulling away. “Thank you, Yuuri.”

“Thank you for showing me what it’s like.”

“Yuuri, I…”

Yuuri waited a moment for him to continue, and then Viktor shook his head, retracting the thought. Yuuri wondered if he’d overwhelmed him. It was a lot to confess in a night, with or without being emotional beforehand. Too much at once.

Instead of speaking, Viktor wiggled his way in the crook of Yuuri’s shoulder and neck to rest his head on and to give kisses.

He was soft again and wanting affection.
Makkachin got up from his corner and jumped on the bed with them and flopped mostly on top of Viktor once they both were laying down.

A bath would have to wait.

Sometime in the afterglow and cuddles, bodies and emotions spent, with Makkachin pinning them, they’d fallen asleep.

A series of hisses and low, sing-song calls of his name pulled Yuuri out of slumber, but he refused to open his eyes and groaned, instead.

“Yuuuuuuri~ time to get uuuup.”

“What time is it?”

“Time to get up.”

He groaned again at the unsatisfactory answer, pulling blankets over his head. If his body was feeling this sore, tired, and sticky, he couldn’t imagine what Viktor was feeling. Yuuri was the one with the stamina of the two!

The bed shifted, and Viktor’s feet padded on the tatami mat as he rounded to crouch in front of Yuuri’s face. “Today we’re going to work on your gala program,” he whispered, voice soft and sweet.

Out of the three, Yuuri felt he had that one down the best. Until he performed it at Rostelecom Cup. Oh. He’d wondered if Viktor was disappointed in him...

“We’re going to add a new element. Rules for gala programs are more lenient, so I’m sure we’ll be able to get away with it at least once... at the Grand Prix Final, we’re going to perform Stay Close to Me as a pair skate.”

“P-pair skate?” Yuuri’s eyes opened at that, to see Viktor with his chin rested on the bedside with a smile.

“More of a pair ice dance, but yes.”

Skating on the ice with Viktor. Really with Viktor! Was it possible? “How? When did you…”

“I was planning it out in my head on the plane when I first came to Hasetsu, Yuuri. And working on it in secret - new components and a duet version of the song. Then while you were in Saint Petersburg, I asked Yuko to help me as your stand in.” Viktor brought a hand to Yuuri’s cheek. “After you skated it in Moscow, I knew I didn’t want you to have to perform it by yourself ever again.”

“Viktor…” Yuuri moved his head to nuzzle his cheek against Viktor’s palm, then kissed it. “Okay, I’m getting up.”

Coach and student had a quick shower, then breakfast, before heading to Ice Castle. Yuko and Nishigori were finishing resurfacing the ice.

“Just about done, you two,” Nishigori said, with the remote of the zamboni in hand.
“No rush,” Viktor called back. “We’re a little late ourselves.”

Yuko winked at them.

Was she implying something or did she and Viktor now have secrets? Yuuri found it best not to ask.

Once the zamboni cleared, Yuuri and Viktor put on their skates while the ice finished freezing on its last section.

“We’ll leave you to it,” Nishigori said, pulling his wife by the hand who really looked like she wanted to be left behind. With a pout she relented. Watching them practice was something she often did, so what changed?

Viktor removed the skate guards from his blades and stepped onto the ice, holding his hand out for Yuuri to join him.

It was an unnecessary gesture, but Yuuri took hold of it anyway to be pulled into Viktor’s chest. “So this last summer, and that impromptu pair skate before you accidentally kissed me... you’d been thinking about this for a while?!” The question was probably too blunt, but Yuuri couldn’t help but smiling at the coloring of Viktor’s cheeks.

“We weren’t together yet... it was difficult to resist! Everytime you skated, it was torture in a different way than Eros.”

Entranced by a spell again. “It’s a good thing you couldn’t control yourself in the end.”

Viktor smiled at that. “We’re here now, after all.”

“Walk me through it for reals this time.”

“I’ve waited for so long, Yuuri...” Viktor squeezed his hand, then cleared his throat to get to business. “You’ll start on your own, beginning pose to the third flip, then I’ll join you right before the female vocalist joins the male. Let’s go to that point.”

“Yes!” Yuuri skated a little ways away to get into position and wait for the music to start. A new version of the song just for them!

The aria started with piano keys instead of strings, giving a softer, more melancholy feeling. Yuuri did as instructed, going through the motions until the third flip and Viktor came skating towards the predicted landing.

Yuuri imagined Viktor wearing his iconic pink costume and tears stung his eyes at the thought. They both seemed to be getting emotional about the same thing and took one another’s hands and leaned in for a sweet kiss.

When they parted, Viktor squeezed Yuuri’s hands, looking down at them. “Actually, that’s a good idea.”

“Stopping to kiss?”

“If only... No, just taking hands there before I lift you.”

“The music is still going...”
“Rough run through, Yuuri. It’s on repeat.”

Yuuri was aware, but it was fun to tease and hear Viktor’s justifications.

The duet version of Stammi Vicino continued on while Viktor led Yuuri in lifts and dips and synchronized step sequences. Ice dance regulations meant they weren’t allowed to break contact for too long, which meant a lot of hand holding. Brushing of cheeks. Holding shoulders and elbows. Long sustained eye contact. Without having to worry about jumps, it made focusing on the intimacy of the program’s meaning much easier.

The call of the deer would immediately be answered by its mate. Never alone. Together, they would dance in the meadow into the eternities. Yuri on ICE was the story of how they came together, Stay Close to Me was how they’d be forever.

Viktor had coordinated the program to suit both of their strengths of presentation and their desire to show each other off to the world. They took turns lifting and dipping each other, playing submissive and dominant, showing their love and trust in each other to the entire audience.

Coach and student. Fairy Godmother and child. Fellow competitors.

Prince and Princess.

After a few run throughs and working to focus on trouble spots, they waited for the track to start over to skate it in full. Viktor vanished from Yuuri’s sight to give him the ice.

The sudden isolation got Yuuri to thinking how similar they were. Traits like stubbornness and being sore losers were obvious from their early interactions. But they both were princesses in their towers before the other came along - hiding from the world, waiting to be set free without knowing.

When Viktor joined him again, Yuuri reached out with a hand to touch his cheek.

Yuuri had been rescued first. His tower was on the shore, of moderate size, easy to spot and climb.

Viktor’s was tall and hidden in the forest of mystery. Yuuri had scaled the tower and gained access, but the princess was not yet willing to leave. Chains broken, but unsure.

Lifting Viktor into the final pose, gazing up at him with the tenor voice ringing out across the rink, he vowed to himself he’d find a way to save him, completely.

After one more complete run of the pair program, Viktor called it a day. They had gone over their time limit, but as usual, Yuko hadn’t kick them out. It was the middle of the weekday, so it wasn’t like there was a queue.

Yuuri swapped out his shirt for a clean one from his duffle and was acutely aware of Viktor’s eyes on him. With his back still to him, he gave a little pop of his hip as nonchalantly as possible.

No catcall, but looking up into the locker mirror, that gaze immediately became more predatory. The hungry gaze of a wolf.

“You know Yuuri…”

“Hmm?” he turned to face him, smoothing down the hem of his shirt.
“Speaking of fantasies...”

“We did do a lot in Shanghai.”

“And yet we’ve only just scratched the surface, haven’t we? Yuuri?”

Yuuri blushed in spite of himself. Viktor was right. Lipstick wasn’t so much a fantasy as it was a curiosity. Or did thinking about it often enough make it a fantasy? Why hadn’t he brought it up during their week of bliss? Maybe he just needed to fully understand Chris’s words and be let into the tower first. Was Viktor now offering up one of his deepest desires? “Y-yeah, that’s true.”

Abandoning his observing perch on the bench, Viktor sauntered the space from there to Yuuri, taking a moment to toe his duffle bag on the ground oh so casually. Then he stepped closer, eyes darker than before—bedroom eyes that promised and begged all at once. The taller man leaned in to press their bodies together and dipped his head in to reach his ear, but not before Yuuri caught the blush on his face that he was trying to hide. “I’ve dreamed many times about you - so strong - pressing me up against one of these lockers...”

Heat radiated from Viktor’s cheeks and elsewhere. Who wouldn’t be embarrassed over such a bold request?! After taking him from behind against the window in Shanghai, Yuuri confirmed Viktor had a bit of an exhibition kink, even if it would have been near impossible for anyone to see them that night.

But here in Hasetsu...

With Yuko and Nishigori still on the premises.

A public area where anyone could walk right in.

Did he mean now?

“And then--” Viktor pulled away from his ears, eyes leveling with his, looking for understanding.

Yep.

Those lidded eyes. The low and sultry timber in his voice that Yuuri could never resist… he wanted this five minutes ago.

Or, whenever this fantasy of his began.

After a night like last night and then having to skate such a romantic program together, of course the need was strong.

For both of them.

Yuuri took hold of Viktor by his upper arms and swapped their positions, pushing Viktor’s back against the locker with a metallic rattle.

Wide, blue eyes stared back at him. Surprised, impressed, and searching, but Viktor remained still with a whispered, “Wow… Japanese kabedon.”

If Viktor was going to confess a fantasy, Yuuri was going to make it a reality.

To start, he pulled Viktor down by his shirt for a kiss.

And several more until Viktor turned his head away and held Yuuri back from continuing.
Hesitant, yet regret was heavy in his voice. “W-wait, Yuuri! We’re in public!”

“Then why did you tell me now?”

“Because the dreams always took place here, but… I don’t know! It’s fun to get you worked up.”

“...You’d make me wait?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time.” He winked.

Yuuri frowned. It was true. Even while in the midst of pleasing him, Viktor would have them stop to cater to his whims. What about Yuuri’s needs? How could he put such a tempting image in his head and not expect him to do anything about it? Frown turning into resolve, which got Viktor interested, turning a deeper shade and swallowing.

“Well, I’m not stopping.”

“B-but the cameras?” Viktor protested weakly, glancing behind Yuuri’s head at the corner behind them.

“They never check.” Yuuri didn’t wait for Viktor to be convinced and kissed him again, open mouthed and hard. If the tapes happened to be checked, or Yuko and Nishigori walked by, Yuuri was past the point of caring. Satisfying Viktor took precedence.

The unfaded marks Yuuri left in their lovemaking made for easy targets. Still tender from creation, Viktor moaned more lewdly than necessary.

Yuuri had barely gotten started.

He palmed at Viktor’s clothed chest, tracing the muscles and hardening nipples underneath until the throaty begging sounds persuaded him to go under his shirt. Skin hot and flushed at his fingertips.

Viktor was different here now than he had been the night before. Doe eyes and submissiveness was replaced with an eager hunger. Both kinds of eros hadn’t shown themselves in Shanghai - not exactly - and Yuuri wanted every side of Viktor. Bring it out, learn, and consume it.

And he’d wanted Yuuri to stop… Stupid Viktor.

Dragging his hands down from his chest, Yuuri came to the waistband of Viktor’s workout pants. His fingers didn’t have to linger long before Viktor was bucking up insistently.

Chuckling, Yuuri rewarded him with a feel.

Wow, this really was exciting for him!

Gently Yuuri trailed his hand from between his legs to the front of his thigh, then around his waist to the curve of his ass and to the spot he’d claimed his own. He let his hand settle there, teasing with a brush of a finger. It drove Viktor mad. Wriggling, panting, trying to get Yuuri’s hand where he really wanted it.

Thankfully Yuuri was more than happy to oblige.

Once more he ran his hand around a cheek, giving a squeeze, then moving that grip to his thigh, prompting Viktor to lift his leg, and Yuuri guided it to rest at his waist to hold.
Curious and compliant, Viktor waited for what was next.

Closing what little distance their bodies had left, Yuuri braced himself at the locker with a leg and pulled down Viktor’s waistband with his free hand.

After last night’s rigorous activities, opening him up again wouldn’t take much. Maybe there was lube in Viktor’s bag, the reason being why he’d called attention to it, but there wasn’t reasonable time to go for it.

With how Viktor sighed at Yuuri’s sweaty hand, he wasn’t going to complain about it.

And hopefully not regret it, either.

No condoms, either.

When one was desperate they got… desperate?

One finger and then two had Viktor moaning and begging.

Or maybe it was hurting?

The last thing Yuuri wanted was that.

He removed his fingers despite Viktor pawing at him to stand so he could reach back with a foot for the bag, ankle hooking around the strap to drag it towards them. Combination of lifting his leg and bending, he held it under an arm and dug inside until he found what he was looking for.

This would feel better for both of them.

Lube and condoms in hand, Viktor clumsily offered his assistance, tearing at the little packets and reaching to put a condom on Yuuri when they both realized his pants were still fully on. That quickly was remedied and soon they were back in the position they were before with proper supplies and dress.

Viktor shifted his weight from the locker and leaned against Yuuri instead while he worked him open. It was the perfect position for him to have at Yuuri’s neck, moaning and nibbling the skin around the syllables of his lover’s name.

It made it very difficult to concentrate. But that’s how it was with Viktor; wanting things at a moment’s notice and then making it a challenge for other parties involved like a game of worthiness.

But Yuuri liked a challenge.

“Viktor… lean back on the locker again. Please.”

He did as he was told and hinged back, sweaty hand on the locker behind him.

Taking hold of Viktor’s other leg, he put it at his waist, to which he locked them together at the ankles. In that position, Yuuri pulled Viktor’s pants a little further down his thighs for easier access, and dropped his own pants to his feet.

Was it enough?

Bending his knees, he slid Viktor down with him to lift one of his legs over his shoulders.
It would be easier to get in and deeper this way, too. Hopefully Viktor’s shirt was enough protection for his back. Yuuri would do his best to brace him.

Viktor bounced the foot by his head first, then his whole body rocked, giddy and pleading. If Yuuri didn’t have a good hold on him, he would have fallen.

One hand on his length and the other grasping the lifted thigh, Yuuri began to thrust his way inside. The angle was different than he was used to, but it really did make it easier. That, and recent events. Once completely sheathed inside him, Yuuri took a moment to soak up the heat inside and between them. Sweat sticking their clothing to them, bodies twitching at the new type of exertion.

They were really doing this.

Yuuri then adjusted his hands to Viktor’s waist and ass to brace himself and tested the hold with a rock of his hips.

The legs around him tightened and Viktor let out a shameless sound.

It was definitely enough.

Gradually Yuuri found a momentum, relying not only on his hips, but the power of his legs. His thighs were already warning him. Stamina was one of his charm points and he would take Viktor against the lockers no matter how much his body would hate him for it.

Viktor utilized his core and moved with him. Mostly. Maintaining a rhythm when ones body is bent in half with a force pounding into you seemed a demanding task.

He focused on the stifled cries of his name to guide how he needed to move and to gauge how far along Viktor was. The tension in the strong legs around him, and the hand in his hair. Although, he’d been desperate from the start.

Yuuri, too. From the initial request to Viktor’s voice, it had all gone straight to Yuuri’s lower regions, mind quickly working on how to make it possible. If Viktor had continued to laugh it off and use it as a blue balls tactic, Yuuri wasn’t sure what he would have done. Viktor wanted it and so did Yuuri. A test of strength. A new way to pleasure Viktor. Those prospects always got his blood pumping.

Partially clothed, public sex was something he’d read about in his books. If Yuuri were to walk in on a couple having sex it would be embarrassing! Reading about said couples was an entirely different experience. But if someone were to walk in on Yuuri having sex. With Viktor Nikiforov of all people…

He’d want to give a good show. Couldn’t embarrass Viktor by giving anything less than what he deserved in private. Viktor was his. No matter where they were. And now whenever he walked into the Ice Castle locker room he’d remember this moment. How Viktor’s body handled his thrusts inside and out, squeezing and pulsing. The sweltering heat. The burning ache in his muscles and the pull at his hair. How Viktor held onto him like a drug.

“Yu-Yu-”

A wanton plea, begging for release. Something only Yuuri could give him.

And Yuuri only wanted this with Viktor.

Wait, Viktor was ready?
Viktor’s foot hit the side of Yuuri’s head as he arched himself upward, shoulders pressing against the metal.

The feeling of the change in pressure on his throbbing length and the beautiful display in front of him was the last thing Yuuri remembered when he came to. His cheek was warm and sleek with sweat of his own and Viktor’s chest, which he realized he was now smooshed against, staccato heartbeat in his ear.

“My Yuuri… so strong.”

Yuuri smiled, lip sticking for a moment. Viktor wasn’t particularly heavy, but the repeated motions of lifting and thrusting, he supposed, was impressive.

They were a tangle of sweaty and aching limbs on the floor of the locker room and Yuuri was surprised that the sudden lack of noise hadn’t alerted Yuko by now.

“Did that live up to your fantasy?”

Fingers combed their way through his damp hair. “You can’t spoil porridge with butter…” Viktor said again, dazed and breathless.

He’d take that as a yes.

Their first night back in Hastetsu, he kept them both up by being giddy about sharing a bed together. Viktor’s bed in the banquet room was larger than the hotels they’d stayed at sure, but it wasn’t their first time sleeping together or sleeping together. Still, it was really cute how he’d exhausted himself and eventually fallen asleep over something so small. Now that Yuuri had answered Viktor’s fantasy of manhandling him in public, Viktor was bold and... handsy. Something he was so shy of doing even discretely, Viktor was now the one to reach under the table, sneak touches at the rink, and get ideas churning as they turned in for the evening.

Yuuri didn’t at all find it a bad change. He was still cute, even while stopping himself sometimes to stare at his hands and curse about “Greedy Paws,” whatever that meant.

Something had sparked in Viktor and it made him happy. The happiest Yuuri had seen him since he’d come to Hasetsu eight months ago.

From the soft glow of his dimmed phone screen, Yuuri looked to Viktor, snuggled to his side, asleep.

Would Viktor want to stay in Hasetsu after the grand prix was over? If Yuuri got the gold medal like he so eloquently vowed, should he finish out the season or just be done and go back with Viktor to Russia and help him sort out things with his family?

Had Viktor given thought at all about what he would do after the finals?

What they would do…?

The icon for pending application updates flashed on the toolbar. Yuuri clicked on it to view what was available. Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, games he hadn’t played since leaving Detroit (there was little point without Phichit around for some of them), and the music production app he used.

Everything but the games got their update with a press of Yuuri’s finger.
When the updates completed with checkmarks by their names, he opened the music app to view his drafts.

Many dittys and jingles, rough and unfinished with titles such as ‘whatisthis2.5’ and ‘wip42’ and ‘maybe7’ displayed. Yuuri reached for his earbuds on the nightstand and hit play all.

He toggled between them, some only receiving a few seconds chance before going to the next. Nine songs in he stopped at ‘horudo2232’, a one-handed E major tune. Quiet and andante moderato. It was a twenty second sample and one of the few that had a title that wasn’t nonsense or self-deprecating—he’d probably liked it enough.

The bed shifted and Yuuri looked over to make out Viktor looking back at him. He gave him a smile, soft and assuring.

“Yuuri…” he begged with soft eyes and with pouting lips.

Yuuri unplugged his headphones and darkened the screen and set it aside to search for Viktor’s lips with his own for a kiss.

Alondra,

I found this looking through my drafts from class from a year and a half ago. Do you remember if this is an early version of something I submitted and what it was called?

Hope all is well

“Yuuri, can I talk to you a moment?”

Yuuri looked up from his email to Viktor standing in his doorway. “Sure.”

Pressing send, Yuuri scooted out from under his desk at the moment Viktor closed the bedroom door behind him. Whatever it was, it was a private matter. It was the end of another long day of skating, and they’d somehow managed to behave. Together they walked to the bed and sat, Viktor placing a shoe box in his lap, both hands on top of the lid, sitting straight and serious.

“I want to show you something.” Viktor worried his lip, gaze fixed on the box like looking at Yuuri could change his mind.

Yuuri waited for him to be ready.

One slow exhale and Viktor’s fingers curled under the lip of the lid to remove it, revealing a pair of red heels.

Immediately, guilt pained in Yuuri’s chest. He already knew about the collection in Saint Petersburg and that Viktor wasn’t too happy about him finding out on his own, or with outside help.

“These… are my favorite pair, and the first that Chris sent me. We saw them together - in Beijing,
actually. I couldn’t bring myself to buy them. But you know Chris. He bought them on his own and sent them to me.” A soft laugh. “Stop denying yourself!’ he said. To this day, he sends me shoes. And I’ve… gotten a few myself. Here and there, over the years.” He tucked his chin, shy about the admission and anything it could imply.

Nothing was wrong with wanting or liking shoes, gender specific or not. Russia made Viktor afraid to embrace the feminine parts of himself and Niko had perverted them.

Chris hadn’t meant to sabotage Viktor’s opportunity, Yuuri was sure, only trying to help because Viktor was so used to hiding. As far as he knew, they’d be in Saint Petersburg together. Their Swiss friend had been right about everything so far, there was no reason not to trust him.

Viktor wanted to tell Yuuri about his shoes on his own terms even if he already knew. Wanted to know if he was okay with it with his own eyes.

Of course Yuuri was okay with it. Yuuri had been okay with everything about Viktor long before they met or understood how cruel the world was towards people that challenged societal expectations and normalities. Hasetsu was a safe place for Yuuri and his differences and he was glad Viktor was happy here, too.

But some things in Russia needed to be addressed.

His Viktor was beautiful and so many others knew it, too.

Anxious from being studied, Viktor turned his gaze to the shoebox in his hands. “Would you like to try them on?”

For a moment Yuuri considered, even as Viktor handed him one. The heel was simple and elegant, no external accent, and still looked brand new. The brand tag in the sole was the only evidence they’d been worn, oils from feet eventually fading over the years. Definitely his favorite.

Yuuri returned the heel to its owner. The offer had been tempting, but he couldn’t impose. And he wanted to hope that maybe he’d be able to see— “I think they’d look better on you.”

A hand went up to the longest pieces of his hair and tucked them behind his ear, then Viktor quickly put his hands back on the box in his lap, hair falling back into place. He cleared his throat, at what he’d just done of the task in front of him, Yuuri wasn’t sure, but watched him. “Okay,” Viktor finally said and stood from the bed, placing the two shoes on the floor in front of him, equal distance apart. He tried to make it seem like he hadn’t done this hundreds of times at home as he slipped one foot in after the other. At first he stood stiff as a board, but eventually slacked and gave proper posture. Once more a hand came up to play in his hair then self-consciously dropped it to his side. Standing. Waiting.

Yuuri joined him, standing, and took a moment to look at Viktor’s feet and how the tops of them showed from his pant leg with bright red shoe toe. He was about as tall as he’d be if he were on skates, if not taller. Taking a step forward, Yuuri hugged him, coming to his chest. Gradually he felt Viktor loosen and return the embrace.

“When I went to the ballet with everyone, I thought about us going someday. You in heels and furs and… lipstick.”

Hug tightening, curling more into Yuuri. “Really?” Viktor asked, with a soft and teasing laugh. “Wow.”

“Yeah…” Now it was Yuuri’s turn to be shy. He pulled away to reach for Viktor’s hands instead
and looked up at him. “And you’d be the prettiest one there.”

Viktor blushed with another small laugh, flattered and all too pleased. He even did a little leg pop, and rest on his toes before coming back down flat. “Yuuri~!”

His Viktor was so cute.

Rightfully softened, it took a little time to lure Viktor out of Yuuri’s bedroom for dinner. A hand in his and some coaxing of his mother’s cooking and soon they were headed downstairs. Viktor offered little to the conversation at dinner time, just content to be there and bask in the moments, Yuuri’s family thankfully reading the mood and didn’t press to get his attention.

The pair took their bath and cuddled together in the private setting, listening to the sounds of the night. If the bathtub was big enough, would they soak in Barcelona? Doubtful. If only more competition sights had hot springs to help aching muscles. Maybe there were; Yuuri just hadn’t cared enough to look.

From their bath, they padded to Viktor’s room and dressed for bed.

“My shoes are still in your room,” Viktor said, looking at a space Yuuri imagined was where he’d kept the shoe box.

“We can go get them.”

He shook his head. “Actually…” He pressed a finger to his lips. “Can we sleep in your room tonight?”

“The bed’s kind of small for the both of us…”

“Makka likes it better.”

Makkachin thumped his tail on the tatami mat. Agreeing or in on the reason Viktor wanted to be in there.

Either way, Yuuri didn’t mind, even though he didn’t think it would be all that comfortable, nor would he easily be able to play on his phone until he felt sleepy enough.

Yuuri closed the door behind Makkachin and they situated themselves on the twin bed, facing each other, legs already finding space between the other’s.

“Did you ever think of me in your bed, Yuuri?”

Oh. That’s what this was; an interrogation. Heat started at his cheeks and traveled to ears. “Um. A few times. I guess.”

Viktor chuckled at the poor answer, light and playful. Sure he’d thought about it, not soiled the sheets about. If that’s what he was getting at. Still embarrassing!

“They let me make another one of your fantasies come true.” Viktor pressed against Yuuri’s chest with a hand, pushing him onto his back and crawled over him into a straddle, blanket keeping over his back. “Like this?”

They’d done many things together in several different beds, but never in Yuuri’s. That made it feel different and it was almost annoying the more Yuuri thought about it, but then Viktor was
lowering in for a kiss and it wasn’t an issue anymore.

The feeling of Viktor’s lips was something Yuuri never wanted to get used to. Each time was new and exciting. Like blades on fresh ice.

Gradually Viktor let his body fall on Yuuri’s, a pleasant weight on him in the rising heat. And then Viktor was moving, rolling his hips up, slow and deliberate. A little clothed frottage before bed did sound nice. In Yuuri’s small bed in the dark with thoughts of naive and innocent years fading into the background.

It never took them long to find a rhythm together, timing their movements with their breaths, but Viktor seemed determined to let Yuuri breathe as little as possible. It was dizzying, but he didn’t want it to stop.

Even as he felt a light draft creep up his stomach, cloth momentarily catching on his chin and breaking lip contact with Viktor as he was undressed. It wasn’t until he felt the pressure of his groin lessen, fabric replaced by Viktor’s hands on his skin, that he allowed himself to open his eyes.

The curtains did little for letting the moonlight inside, but it was enough to make out Viktor looking back at him, eyes warm and glowing, hands busying themselves. Silver halo of hair merging with the dark blankets that covered them, containing their heat and, without his glasses, a blur of dark shadows between them of Viktor’s motions.

But he felt him.

Finger pads danced across his skin, dipping into crevices of Yuuri’s muscles, tracing the ridges of the prominent stretchmarks at his waist, brushing against the growth of his soft body hair.

He winced at an accidental pull of the coarser hair as Viktor made his way down.

For someone who preferred to stay baby-smooth, Viktor was sure enjoying playing in Yuuri’s au naturale state, petting at the long hairs at the base of his length.

Viktor continued to do so even as he leaned in for kisses again, then took Yuuri in his hand.

The whimper was muffled in the crash of their lips, body jerking up into him. Yuuri felt him smile, so satisfied with the reaction. Always the tease.

Thumb stroking the head, Yuuri wished Viktor would release his mouth to give him some reprieve to cry out. He could breathe through his nose, after much practice in Shanghai, but it was too suffocating. Too hot.

Something hotter then pressed against Yuuri’s throbbing need.

What was… Two hands? No, that wasn’t the right texture.

Viktor was rubbing it with Yuuri’s…

Wait. This was Viktor’s length.

He was rubbing them together. In one hand. His large and very talented and gentle hand.

Yuuri broke free from Viktor’s mouth and soon everything stopped.

What?
Why?
No, he hadn’t come. Yet.

He opened his eyes to Viktor staring at him, mouth parted in surprise.

“Why did you stop?” Yuuri asked, unsuccessfully not sounding irritated. “I didn’t say to stop!”

“Ah, you’re… we need to keep it down...” Viktor stuttered, caught between guilt and making a discovery.

“Viktoruuu,” Yuuri whined, searching for Viktor’s hand with a thrust.

“Y-you’re right. Sorry. I’m a fool.” Viktor’s hand returned to Yuuri.

And whatever sound tried to escape Yuuri was silenced by Viktor’s lips.

Breathing didn’t matter anymore, anyway; it was riding the pleasure out until neither of them could. Yuuri pressed on his heels for more traction, causing Viktor to squeeze them both just to keep a hold. Their bodies slick with sweat and their leaking members didn’t help, either.

When Viktor brought his other hand into it, cupping Yuuri’s sac.

The double stimulation was just what Viktor needed to bring him there.

With a cry, Yuuri arched, stilled, and collapsed onto the mattress, Viktor coming after and slumped on top of Yuuri in a wet and messy heap.

Now pressed and motionless under the sheets, it was hot and clammy, but neither of them could be bothered to do anything about it. Lips too bruised and lungs still gasping for oxygen, they cuddled in the afterglow. They’d clean up in the morning.

Strange how there was no penetration at it was just as intense. If not more so.

Makkachin whined somewhere below the bed.

Viktor patted the bed and the mattress shifted under the dog’s weight as he joined them, pinning the blankets on one side.

For the sake of air, Viktor was the one to finally fold the edge of the blanket over to their necks, finally rolling onto his back, and pulling Yuuri close.

Yuuri hummed and laid his head on Viktor’s chest, his beautiful heartbeat so strong.

“I’ll do my best to take care of you, too, my Yuuri.”

Had Yuuri not been so close to his throat, he wouldn’t have heard him. Did he mean in the morning with aftercare? Or in the way Yuuri wanted to take care of him? Both sounded nice to him as he fell asleep to Viktor combing his fingers through his matted hair.

Alondra,
Sorry to email again so soon after the first, but I added to the song sample. Please see this revised attachment instead.

Thanks!

The Grand Prix Final: T-Minus two days.

With so little time left, the happy lovers needed to bring the focus back to the ice. But with how Viktor favored his thighs, or when a hickey peeked its way out of a not so secure neckline, it was very distracting.

Yuuri would have to wait. They’d have to wait.

Yuko seemed to notice what was going on between them as she winked more than usual. There’d be plenty of time after the finals were over to get back to the cozy life they’d created here. At least, Yuuri hoped that’s what would happen. Maybe talking about things after an event that Yuuri hadn’t won was difficult for Viktor - he was here for this purpose! So… Later. They’d talk about it later with the gold medal in hand.

But to get that coveted medal, and have that conversation, Yuuri would have to win, first. And to do that against someone like JJ whose jump base alone was 5.22 points ahead of his own current personal record, he’d have to make changes to the jump composition.

Viktor observed him with a finger at his lips considering the suggestion, and not in his mischievous way. Thoughtful. “You want to change the jump to a quad flip in your short program? You’ve barely even landed that jump cleanly in practice.”

“Yeah,” Yuuri nodded, bearing a clenched fist and a serious face of his own. “But I still have time to improve the execution. Finding out how far I can push my limits to win will motivate me to fight through the final!” If he could convince Viktor he could do it, he could do it! “Don’t you want to see it, Viktor? To see me land a quadruple flip with a 3+ GOE?”

Like he’d hoped, Viktor met the challenge with wide-eyed sparkle and a brilliant smile that he couldn’t possibly hold back. Inspired and excited. “I DO!” he cried, arms spreading wide to pounce and hug, which turned to a caress and cradling Yuuri’s head with his hands.

Laughter bubbled in Yuuri’s throat at his love’s cuteness. The belief Viktor had in him was motivation, too. “Okay, turn the music back on. Time to practice that quad flip.”

“Davai! Davai!”

Alondra,

Sorry for another email before you could respond to the first one. I’m not being impatient with you, I swear! Just a little inspired, and not only in skating it seems.

I think I want to make this a song for Viktor.
When you get a moment can you listen? Let me know what you think.

The last couple of days Yuuri had tinkered with horudo2232 on his phone with headphones plugged in. Late at night when Viktor was falling asleep or during his afternoon naps. Somewhere in those quiet moments to himself in the project, the melodic increments started to build a story like Yuri on ICE. It was still young, but there were flashes in his mind. And maybe--

A pinging email notification sounded from yuuri’s computer and he sat up from his chair.

It was from Alondra!

Yuuri! Buenos días

It was such a surprise opening my inbox to three emails from you. That’s the most you’ve ever consistently spoken to me before, let me have a moment to take this in! J/K

Sorry I haven’t been around. Lots of projects were due before the winter break, so I put a strict social media restraint on myself. But I’m OFFICIALLY FREE!

I’ve listened to all three samples in order and I wonder; did you actually write these?

Yuuri frowned. She probably didn’t mean it to be insulting, but still. He typed out a reply:

No worries! That explains it.

And yes? Is it that bad?

To his left, Yuuri’s phone vibrated with an IM before his computer could pop open the chat window.

Songlark: Since you answered so fast, I’ll pop on here - this is the opposite of bad! Why the hell weren't you writing stuff like this in our course?

Yuuri.K: I was thinking of adding a string part. If this song is salvagable, that is

Songlark: Yuuri, I’d drop a piano on your head if I could.

Songlark: Yes this is /salvageable/ omg you're impossible.

Songlark: When you say thinking about adding a string part... I feel like you're missing a question there

Yuuri.K: Huh?
Songlark: You're not asking me to help you?

Yuuri.K: I wanted to know if you thought it was a good idea and then I'd probably overlay the violin on my program I have then… You’ve done so much for me already.

Songlark: You'll want a real thing and yes I'll do it

Songlark: Please let me help, Yuuri :v

Yuuri.K: You’re starting to sound like Phichit

Songlark: Be a part of this thing you're making for Viktor. And no it's not because it sucked, it's because it's great and I'm going to make sure you do it.

Yuuri.K: Okay… well… I was thinking along the lines of Yuri on ICE. Me the piano and Viktor the violin.

Songlark: I'll never get over how cool it is that I song I wrote is taking you to the finals! Gotta figure out where I can stream it. A N Y W A Y yes I will help you.

Songlark: So

Songlark: Song /for/ Viktor, huh? ;)

Yuuri.K: y-yeah…

Songlark: Didn’t know you were so romantic!

Yuuri.K: I’m not.

Songlark: Suuure. You’ve been crushing on this Russian skater since before I knew you and you’re together now… Gunna put a ring on that?

Yuuri’s fingers froze over his keyboard.

Ring? Like as in marriage?!

Admiration to idolship to coach to friendship to love to… what came next? Marriage. Were either of them ready for that stage?

Songlark: Yuuri? God, sorry. That was really insensitive of me! I know it’s not easy

Easy for two men, especially when one was Russian. A Russian who had spent his life repressing himself and was still trying to recover.

A ceremony couldn’t happen soon, but Yuuri knew he wanted to be with him.

The summer they spent together and the month they’d shared as a couple were things Yuuri would never change, awkwardness and all.

He loved Viktor so much. He wanted to promise himself to him, if he’d have him.
Neither of them wanted to be alone in their towers.

Neither of them had been in the first place.

Only Yuuri had realized this and he needed to help Viktor see it, too. Bring him home and make
amends with the family he left behind. Find the good in his country and make peace. Truly be able
to move on from the past, not forcefully shove it in a box with lock and key.

Heal. Leave the tower.

Yuuri.K: It’s fine. Took me a little off guard is all. Someday, though.

Songlark: You’re a regular casanova, Yuuri. You two are incredibly cute together, by the way.

Yuuri.K: Yeah? ^^

Songlark: Have you /seen/ the screenshots fans are posting?! Oh, wait, nevermind. You don’t really do social media.


Songlark: Yeah, yeah. Congrats on your future wedding. Please invite me.

Yuuri.K: You're definitely the first on my future invitation list.

Yuuri Katsuki was going to marry Viktor Nikiforov someday.

_Holy shit._

—

“Late smoke?”

Mari turned towards Yuuri from her perch on the porch. “Late creeping around?” she asked with a smirk.

“Heh, not for me.”

She shrugged her agreement and scooted over in invitation, old wood creaking under her shifted weight.

Yuuri took a seat next to her, pulling at the sleeves of his sweater over his hands to keep warm.

Mari took a drag of her cigarette, letting the plume waft into the chilly air. “I’ve never been to Spain before. I’m looking forward to it.”

“You and Minako are the same… using my skating career to give you excuses to travel and meet other skaters!”
“Well, why not? That’s the perks of being related to a celebrity.”

“I-I’m not really a celebrity.”

“You should ask the posters at the station.”

“You know Minako put those there!”

“Did she, though? Really, Yuuri; I am happy for you. Not being able to go with you to the prix last year sucked.”

“But I lost…”

“Still, I wanted to be there for you. Making it up this year. My dopey brother has grown up and achieved his dream.”

The dream had evolved and shifted in the last year, so Yuuri had to wonder which version of the dream she was referring to. Viktor wasn’t competing in the prix and she didn’t know they were planning a pair skate for their gala, did she? Not even Minako knew.

“So, do you think you and Viktor could keep it down? Not going to lie, I’m happy Minako and I will be in a different hotel than you.”

It wasn’t worth feigning innocence, so Yuuri blushed and huffed.

—

[I’ve booked us tickets at the Barcelona Teatre Poliorama for their flamenco performance. All of us are fans of dance, and what better way to appreciate the country’s signature style?]  
Yuuri looked up from Chris’s text and opened a new browser window and looked up the theater and the map of its surrounding area. It would work out nicely. [Oh, that’s a really good idea! Thank for doing that. How much do I owe you?]  
[Just that fine ass in the seat next to Viktor, I should think]  
[hehe sure]  
[We can grab a bite anywhere. There’s also a water fountain display that’d be nice to see. Oh and a Christmas market!]  
[Yeah, I saw that, too. We may or may not hit that the first free day.]  
[If you do, no worries. There’s plenty to do, you needn’t revisit on our account. Time is a bit limited.]  
[We’ll see.]  
[I don’t know about you, but we’ve got an early morning, so off I go! See you very soon, Yuuri. Prends soin.]  
[Jaa ne]
No matter the victor, Yuuri hoped he and Chris - and everyone - would remain friends. It wasn’t their first prix, and then it hadn’t changed either, but the stakes felt different this time.

Yuuri was a different skater now. Breaking his own records and adding new jumps to his roster he hadn’t had before. The success rate of landing the quad flip wasn’t the greatest, but it was what he had to work with. He’d land it at the finals. He had to.

Viktor wasn’t competing against him, but it was just as important that he skated his best. Had to show the world what he’d become with Viktor as his coach and lover.

While the competition was the main reason for going to Barcelona, Yuuri had additional plans in mind. He and Viktor were of similar dispositions and didn’t venture out of the rink or hotel beyond finding food like their fellows. How they dealt with pressure and the media was to be alone.

But Yuuri didn’t want that this time.

From the clues left in his apartment, Viktor loved architecture. And with all the books on Basilica of Sagrada Familia alone, it was safe to assume he was a fan of Antoni Gaudi. Barcelona was made of the Spanish architect’s work: Park Güell, Casa Mila, Battlo and Vicens, bridges, and crypts. It was perfect.

Yuuri wasn’t sure what made the Sagrada Familia so special to Viktor, but he wanted to make sure that Viktor saw more than just the war and the wolves, especially after seeing what the stress in Moscow did to him. They had time in the schedule to do some sight-seeing before the competition and a couple of days after. It was perfect.

And romantic?

After winning the prix, he wanted to propose there with something else that was round and golden. Yuuri was going to hold on to him for good.

“Ready to go, Viktor? Minako and Mari are outside with the car.”

Viktor gave Makkachin one final hug, stood his suitcase up on its wheels, and raised the handle. Then he took a moment to pat at the outside of his jacket pockets at his waist, then put them inside, smiling back at him in the doorway. “Yes, I’m ready.”

Taking a few steps, Yuuri met him and slid a hand inside his left pocket to join their fingers, imagining putting a ring on the fourth. “Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

Yuko: They were in the locker room for a long time…
Takeshi: You’re thinking of checking the security cameras, aren’t you?
Y: You’re curious, too!
T: Not as much as you :v
Y: If we watch, then we’ll /know for sure/!
Y: … … …
Y: …. Oh…. my
T: Damn! That’s my boy Yuuri. Look at him /go/!
Y: This answers so many things…
T: You’re leaking
Y: So are you, Takeshi!!

ON THE NEXT GAY SKATE, THE PAIN IN SPAIN:
Sightseeing / What's round and golden?! / A Fight?/ Communication, what's that?

PLEASE LOOK FORWARD TO IT
Chapter Summary

All that our heroes have been working toward is finally here - the Grand Prix Final. As they arrive in Barcelona, the anticipation of impending competition has everyone a bit excited. Emotions are running high and everyone wants the gold. But tension makes people act in unpredictable ways... and even the best of friends (and lovers) may lash out unexpectedly when they feel cornered. Or embarrassed. Or confused.

Or hungry.

#some icky backstory stuff #miscommunication #barcelona is a no fun zone #WHERE DID THE NUTS GO THOUGH?

Chapter Notes

Gabapple: WHEW. Thanks for your patience! We took a month break, took a month to outline ALL FIVE of our Barcelona chapters, took some time for the holidays, I got sick (twice!!), and then I was finally able to get this chapter out! Wow! I hope you all enjoy. I think we're in for a wild ride. ':)

Mamodewberry: This is it... We made it to Barcelona. It's been a long time coming/delaying and here we go :) will anybody be ready for this? Too late, cause here it is! This train won't stop!

HERE WE GO!

NLA Gallery (twitter)
Quel drew some lovely and somewhat spicy lipstick art from last chapter's Breakthrough. ;))
Also from last chapter, Iru illustrated that lovely magazine ad of young Vitya that Yuuri couldn't stop kissing lol
Our good buddy Parker was sweet enough to take on the task of doing this star-gazing scene from chapter 14, Star-Crossed, and we LOVE it so much ;o; Viktoria did two pieces for us recently, both GORGEOUS comics from ch 20/21... Viktor explaining Yuuri's nickname, Pyatachok and Yuuri performing Stay Close to Me at the Cup of China's gala - ghOSH
We got Rosie to draw a comic of Viktor and Makka in the onsen from ch 25-- it's TOO cute
And FINALLY, Cerise illustrated our best boys, Yuuri and Phichit playing Smash Bros from that flashback in ch 26 :D

Thanks, everyone!

NLA-Verse Side Stories
The Relevant Temperature of Betrayal — An AU in which young Viktor
Seung-Gil are best friends at a boarding school, until YUURI SHOWS UP AND RUINS EVERYTHING (because they both think he's the cutest boy)

**Sakura**— The first in our Sponsorship AU series, which is basically NLA without Niko. As in, Viktor meets a dashing older Yuuri that night at the sponsorship benefit dinner INSTEAD of Niko and everything just perfect and wonderful and magical instead of horribly tragic and canon. Also, Chris is the world champion? It's p great. There will be more to come.

**This Little Piggy**— POST SERIES, NLA-CANON. MINOR SPOILERS. This is a short, sweet fic that is all about Viktor and Yuuri living in Russia the summer after the series ends. It is technically a "foot thing" fic. It's also a collab with Andy, so there's SUPER cute art. GO READ IT, you won't regret it!

**Recommended Listening:** (NLA Playlist [youtube](https://www.youtube.com), [spotify](https://open.spotify.com), [google play](https://play.google.com))

- **Waltz No. 7 In C Sharp Minor, Op. 64/2, CT. 213,** by Frédéric Chopin
- **Barcelona,** by Ed Sheeran
- **Leningrad,** by William Joseph
- **Guilty,** by Russ Columbo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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**Moscow, Russia**

**Viktor (17 years old)**

“No one saw you, right?”

“I’m sure people saw me, Niko, but I don’t think anyone cares. Except maybe the cab driver. Can I come in?”

“Did he recognize you?”

With a sigh, Viktor pushed his way into the room, dragging a small suitcase behind him. “I’m all yours for four days. Let’s focus on that, instead.” He took stock of the room, then went to the closet. “Good choice. I love this style of suite.”

“I thought it’d be nice to spoil you a little, Mishka.”

“For our anniversary?” Viktor shed his jacket before turning back to him, letting his irritation go with it. “Niko. How sweet.”

“I thought you’d still be on crutches. I was expecting to have to take care of you. Massages and lounging around…”

It wasn’t hard to guess what he was getting at, and Viktor laughed, setting hands on hips. “I’ve been without them for several weeks, now. I’m even back on the ice, working on my programs for next season. I told you.”

“Must have slipped my mind.”

“Apparently. But I’m not opposed to resting.” Even if being in bed with Niko was anything but
resting. “Or being pampered. Are you really planning to spoil me?”

“I might have a few things…”

“Wine?”

“Don’t get too excited. But yes. Wine. And chocolates…”

“Mishka chocolates?”

“Of course.”

Viktor’s smile got wider with every detail and he made his way to the bed with a sway in his step.

“Hehe, and what else?”

“My camera.”

For four days, there was no skating, just the hotel. Just like other times, Makkachin was left at home with his aunt and uncle with the excuse that it was for business. In a way, it was business-related. Scandal was bad for his sponsors. The hotel let them avoid that. Viktor left once in a while to go for a run or to get some air, but otherwise, they stayed together and made the most of the time they had. Occasionally, Viktor would make sure to see Niko’s mother during his visits to Moscow to assuage the guilt, but that time, it was pure pleasure.

He did get some work done, though.

“Bonjour, Chris! It’s been a while!”

“Viktor! Bonjour! I wasn’t expecting you to call.”

“I know, right? Look, I’m in a hotel with my boyfriend- you remember Niko?” Viktor bit the end of his pencil, glancing over at the boyfriend in question, who gave him the most incredulous look in return. “Right. Anyway, I’m working on my free skate for next season, and I wanted to run it by you. Do you have a moment?”

“Sure! Yeah, I have as much time as you need.”

“Great. Okay. Wow, you’re much more enthusiastic than Niko is. Is your summer going well?”

“Hehe. Yeah, it’s really good. We just got back from Paris. You?”

“Oh, I have to go there soon, myself. Fifi wants me in some dumb fashion show.”

“Ooooh!”

“Really. Anyway, so my idea is vampires.”

“Vampires?”

“Right. But not just any vampires. I’m going to make Avram, the representative of the RSF, aka Mother Russia, aka the ideals of suppression sucking love and life from my soul- of all the souls of Russia --be Dracula.”
“Oh. Uh.”

“Which means I must skate as… dun dun dun…” Viktor paused for effect. “Alucard!”

There was silence on the other end for a moment, then a quiet, “Alucard?”

“Right. From the video game.”

“Which video game?”

Viktor checked his notes. “Castlevania.”

From the other side of the bed, Niko groaned. “You haven’t even played it. This is so stupid, Mishka.”

“Shut up. Anyway, Chris, Alucard is the beautiful, silver-haired champion, son of Dracula that will defeat the evil…. Which ties back to Tchaikovsky, who— did you know, was also gay and oppressed by Russian society despite being a national hero—”

“Breathe, Mishka.”

“In a minute! Since the original black and white film Dracula by Bela Lugosi used Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake as its theme, you see, it all ties together. And I basically look just like Alucard—”

Chris gasped. “Your silver hair!”

“Right! And it’s long, too. Just like the pictures.”

“Wow!”

“Yes! Right?”

“I still think it’s ridiculous,” Niko muttered. “You’re going to skate as a gay vampire to get back at Russia for being anti-gay? Why am I dating you again?”

“Because you love me?”

Niko sighed.

“It sounds brilliant, Viktor. I can’t wait to see it.”

“Thanks, Chris.” Viktor covered the receiver and stuck his tongue out at the other boy in the room. “Chris likes it. So there.”

“So what? He’s even gayer than you are.”

“Don’t be a jerk, Niko.” Viktor rolled off the bed, taking the phone to the vanity. “Sorry. He’s in a bad mood.”

“It’s okay… So uh, what does your coach think?”

“Oh… he doesn’t know yet. But I’m sure he won’t mind.”

Yakov didn’t mind too much, but he didn’t exactly get it, either. “What do you have against Dracula? What did he do to you?”
There was a clatter as Viktor dropped his fork, followed by a loud gasp, then another. “I can’t believe I have to explain this to you, Coach! Dracula! A vampire! Bad guy!”

Yakov shook his head. “I am familiar with Dracula, yes, but I do not understand the rest.”

“It’s symbolic! Alucard, son of Dracula, half man, half vampire, rising up to save the world from the evil oppression. He murders people. Makes them miserable. Puts them in thralls and enslaves them. You know, Dracula! Life ruiner? Sucking out the hope and joy?”

“Vitya, is your skate based on someone specific?”

“...maybe.”

The old man gave a heavy sigh and gave up pushing the food around on his plate. The occasional dinners they shared together in his home were always dramatic in some fashion or other, but not often so close to the heart. “Vitya, I know that Lilia and I are having trouble right now, but that doesn’t mean—”

“What?”

“I’m only saying that it isn’t nice to call her a blood-sucking vampire, even if it seems true sometimes, and basing a program on her is dangerous.”

If Viktor hadn’t already dropped his fork, he would have then, so instead he stared at his coach blankly for a moment. “What? No! I didn’t base Dracula on Lilia! Coach! Are you two fighting again?!”

Yakov only shrugged.

“What about this time?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes it does! You were wearing your ring again just last week!” Another gasp. “It’s gone! Coach?!”

“She doesn’t love me, Vitya.”

“Don’t say that!”

“I only speak the truth.”

“No!”

“Vitya… Sometimes people are not meant to be together. It’s something that you need to learn.”

“But you love each other!”

“Love isn’t always enough.”

Viktor scrambled to his feet, nearly toppling his chair as he reached for the bottle of vodka. “Oh no, don’t you dare!”

“Vitya, please.” Another heavy sigh. “Calm down.”

“You’ve had way too much to drink, Coach. I’m cutting you off. And then you’re going to call
Lilia in the morning and apologize.”

“Leave it, Vitya.”

“No. You know that you don’t mean it. You love her. She loves you. You need to make it work, whatever you have to do. Look,” Viktor said, lifting Yakov’s right hand for them both to see. “The ring indent is still fresh. She’s carved on you like a scar. Why fight it?”

Yakov pulled his hand away, and slid the evidence out of sight under the table. “How was your Moscow visit with Niko?”

It was a dirty trick, Viktor knew, but probably fair. He slumped back in his seat and retrieved his fork. “I still think you should talk to Lilia.”

“Who said anything about Lilia? I was asking about your love life.”

“It was fine.”

“Ahh, so I see.” Yakov let the silence lie for several measures before breaking it again. “Give the vodka back.”

“You’re wrong, you know. Just because things aren’t sparkles and rainbows doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t try.”

“Is that what you are doing with your boyfriend? Trying?”

Yakov was right. Trying was exactly what he was doing, though even Viktor wasn’t exactly sure why some days. Niko’s photos were only one thing on a very long list of problems between them, and Viktor knew it wasn’t going to last. He’d known for a while. It wasn’t that he didn’t care about Niko. He did. He didn’t lie about his feelings. And he was sure that Niko must have cared about him, too. At least a little.

They just weren’t right for each other.

Maybe Yakov and Lilia were in a similar situation. It wasn’t like Viktor disliked Lilia, either. Not at all. But she was so desperate to maintain control that being right was more important than anything else. Even Yakov’s heart. It made her cruel. Niko, too.

When Lilia left, the old coach was too broken hearted to do anything about it. Mooning after her. Throwing himself into his work and his skaters, waiting for her to get bored and let him come back.

If Niko left, Viktor wouldn’t pine for him… but it’d be too dangerous to look for love again. Not in Saint Petersburg. Not when so many were looking at him, watching his every move. Waiting for him to mess up. They wouldn’t even let him go to the Olympics; looking for a new love was out of the question.

Viktor had to be content with what crumbs he could find and, like his coach, throw himself into his work.

It was all that he had left.
At Vaganova, Viktor danced and learned to teach dance to others. It was his final year, and there were so few left from when he’d started; many had quit, but many more had been dismissed. Through injury and the pressure of competition, and despite the dismal outlook for the future of those who did make it, the small, final class was the proud and elite. Of those, only some would go on to join the ranks of Russia’s coveted ballet companies. And so, they were given other skills to survive in the world. Instruction. Lesson planning. Choreography. Business.

“Do you think you’ll keep dancing?” Gavrik was one of the only boys Viktor had known from their original class. They didn’t talk often; Gav was still too good for him, and Viktor mostly kept to himself, so the question surprised him.

“In general or ballet?”

“Both.”

Viktor sighed, stretching out over his toes, body bending in half to press against the floor. “I dance on the ice.”

“And… off the ice?”

“I don’t think one ever truly gives up dancing, Gav. Shut up and let me focus.”

In their secret hotel rooms, Viktor worked on his relationship like an artist trapped under contract in production hell. Love was an obligation on deadline. Planned visits; pleasant enough where, in brief moments, he could convince himself that things might just work, but then danced around a truth he didn’t want to face. Their time and energy wasn’t going to pay off but neither of them were willing to face it because they’d invested too much already.

Viktor’s reflection in the mirror was tired, but he ignored it, discarding his sweater as he moved straight for the shower in the corner of the little bathroom. It wasn’t the nicest hotel he’d stayed in; not by far. Hopefully the water pressure would at least drown out his thoughts.

The hot stream poured blessed relief, though it did little to clear Viktor’s mind as he let the water take over. Seeing Niko like this had always been a welcome getaway from the pressures of study and practice. But now…

He tried to shut it out, raking fingers through his hair, scalp to ends, which came away with tangled knots in his hands. Thinning again. Viktor rolled the clumps of damp silver in his fingertips and discarded them down the drain. Someone else’s problem. His skin looked patchy red under the scalding heat of the shower, ribs showing with each breath. Normally he was proud of that look, but those feelings were complicated, now.

What was he doing…?

The door opened, and within moments, the curtain, and Niko was beside him. Viktor didn’t move, only continued to watch the rise and fall of his own diaphragm as he breathed. Niko slid in behind him, running a hand over his side, then down onto the dip of his hip.

“I love this,” he said against Viktor’s neck, pulling the wet curtain of hair aside to kiss at his throat. “Your slender curves. How delicate you are.” He massaged down to the top of Viktor’s thigh, then squeezed where the thicker muscle began. “My pretty little ballerina.”

Viktor sighed. The reason for the complication. “Niko…”
“I’m sorry for hurting you.” He brushed his fingernails over his skin, showing the blunt edge. “Fixed. See?”

Another sigh. The desire had fled, but how could he deny his lover when he’d made amends?

Viktor nodded, closing his eyes. It was easier to give in than to fight, anyway. It was his part to play, and he’d be damned if he was going to let himself get crucified for being gay when he wasn’t even getting to enjoy it. Not this time.

On the ice, Viktor refined his next season with fervor, fueled by spite and the gnawing despair that he struggled to ignore. He would start with a deceptive short program set to Chopin’s Waltz No. 7 In C Sharp Minor, Op. 64/2 - and skate the story of the sweet, braided maiden who has come to start a life in a busy new city, hoping that no one will ask about the tragic past that preoccupied her thoughts. It was sweet with just enough dark undertone that those paying attention might begin to wonder if this maiden was really as innocent as she seemed… Indeed, she may have more up her petticoat sleeves than previously thought. But was it her haunted dreams that the citizens of Paris needed to worry about, or those that he’d targeted in his free skate?

That was where the vampires came in.

The Swan Theme/Suite op.20 from Tchaikovsky’s Swan Lake was the perfect score for a dramatic program in which Viktor played out his fantasy of revenge on the ice. But death was only part of it; one piece of his scheme.

The final was his exhibition gala piece, inspired by and set to a medley of Rimsky-Korsakov’s The Golden Cockerel. In this, Viktor became a jewel-colored peacock, filling the role of the would-be guardian-turned-arbiter. Judge, jury, and executor for the Tsar. Prophetic, yet so utterly beautiful.

It may have all been a little abstract, but Viktor was pleased.

He hoped the message would come through.

And oh, it did.

There were phone calls. Letters. Emails. Articles. Comments on forums and chatter in the stands. Rumors. What did the programs mean? Did Irena Lopyriova actually hate Nikiforov? What was Nikiforov’s angle? What was Russia’s plan? Why had they kept him out of the Olympics if he was so good?

“Russia’s Viktor Nikiforov started strong this season with yet another gold-medal performance here this past weekend at Skate America, nearly breaking another world record with that free skate of his. It doesn’t look like it’ll be long before he claims that title and many others, which is an impressive feather for Russia’s cap, especially for someone as young as he is- only seventeen years-old -though he’s shown promise for quite some time.”

“That’s right. Nikiforov has been a serious contender for a handful of years, well-suited to take the place of Markov as King of Russia’s Figure Skating, though some have speculated that he’d be better suited as a queen.”
“Or princess, for that matter.”

“Ha ha, it’s been said that there’s even some jealousy from the leading lady of Russia’s women’s category, which has historically had some trouble keeping up with the overseas competition unlike their male counterparts.”

“Not to belittle the ladies- we all love watching them skate -but there may be something in what Plushenko meant when he said that skating was a man’s sport.”

“Maybe Nikiforov should switch sides.”

“I think that might give him an unfair advantage, don’t you?”

“I think we’re all wondering what he would look like with a skirt. Would he still be able to skate?”

“I guess the playing field for the Men’s would be more even.”

“How do we get that arranged? Hey, Bob? Oh, they’re telling us to get back to the actual commentary. Fine, fine.”

“Regardless what side you’re on, this promises to be an interesting season as the competition continues to heat up, so stay tuned!”

Attention and press was normally a good thing. Even negative press meant something was moving, and for a sport that wasn’t as popular as others, they lived for anything they could get, but this was something else.

“Yasha, you know I wouldn’t bother you if it weren’t important.”

“I know.”

“You’re the best coach in all of Russia. We love you. You’ve trained our best skaters in recent history.”

“That is what the website says.”

“It is true, Yasha, my old friend.” A sigh. “And normally, I give you all the freedom to do what you wish because I know you can be trusted to follow the rules.”

“And has a rule not been followed?”

“Yasha. Your Vitya.”

“I know him, yes.”

“You must guide him… help him to show Russia in the best light.”

This wasn’t the first of their phone calls. Not by a long shot. At least, not about Vitya. Over the years, Avram had been good about leaving Yakov alone, it was true, but that blanket trust was wearing thin.

“Avram. He is… a rebellious teenager.”
“Maybe so, but he is the face of Russia to the outside world, and we are still trying to take our
place in the globalized world. I do not know if you believe in a higher power, Yasha, but it seems
that the stars have aligned and circumstances brought young Vitya to us for a reason. His
extraordinary talent, his gift, all of it—it’s bigger than he is, than we are, and can do so much for
Russia. Don’t you agree?”

“I do.” And Yakov did, but perhaps not for the same reasons.

“I’m glad we are on the same page. Honestly… I don’t care what Vitya does with his personal life,
Yasha, as long as it doesn’t come across my desk. Everyone has their secrets.”

“I will speak with him.”

“Good.”

Subtle correction was not something that worked on Viktor well. It wasn’t that he hadn’t noticed
what Yakov was doing- if he wasn’t going to be direct, Viktor was just going to ignore him
completely. And Viktor was good at ignoring things. So very, very good. Like the letters that were
piling in, the scale tipping any given day between which stack was heavier- fan or hate mail. Viktor
didn’t have enough time to reply to the haters, but he kept up with the fans as best he could. It
wasn’t worth it to waste any more energy on the negative. He got enough of that in the streets, on
the train, at the cafe, in class.

Especially at competitions.

Whether they thought he was too good or bad or beautiful or a freak, he was just beyond reach with
just a few notable exceptions. It was safer that way. He stayed busy. Ignored it. Pushed it aside.
Focused harder. Loved or hated for his success and statements, he was going to be the best he
could possibly be, and he was going to be himself every step of the way.

It was his choice. His decision.

If life was going to be a bitch, he was going to be an even bigger, badder, but much more elegant,
bitch right back.

As long as Viktor had his coach and Makkachin, he could get through anything.

“Vitya… the RSF is catching wise to your program.”

“Oh really?” Viktor laughed, wiping ice from his skates at the edge of the barrier. “I’m surprised.”

“Don’t antagonize them. I know you want to make a statement, but if it’s too strong…”

“What, they’ll stop me from going to the Olympics for no reason?”

There was so much more they could do, but Yakov wasn’t sure what good it would do to explain it
all to him. Not when they’d already tried before and it clearly hadn’t worked. “I’m not saying that
you have to change your entire programs, just…”

“Oppression, Coach. That’s what this season is all about. This campaign of mine. Fighting the
oppression. It’s revolution. That’s the only way anything is going to change. Right?”

Yakov frowned. “Vitya.”

“I’m their best. I’m breaking records. The world sees it. They can’t deny it, Coach.”

“I know, Vitya. But if you go too far, all of this will be in vain, won’t it?”

Viktor set his skate back on the ice and leveled a cool gaze on the man who he trusted and looked up to more than anyone else in the world. The person he would do anything for. Give anything for. And set his jaw. “Are you telling me to roll over, Coach? Bow down? Give up?”

“No, Vitya—“

“Should I cut my hair, too?”

“I said none of those things. I want you to have the freedom to be who you want on and off the ice, but—“

“But what?!”

“But what the RSF sees can take that away. I will do what I can, but please, at least, be… careful.”

Maybe it was because Yakov was looking tired, more tired than Viktor remembered seeing him in a while, or perhaps because he was feeling tired, too, but Viktor let it go. “Fine. I’ll try.”

Yakov set a hand on his shoulder, heavy, squeezing hard, but didn’t turn his gaze on him, staring off at the dark and empty windows beyond. “Thank you, Vitya.”

______________________________________________________________

_The princess didn’t talk about her captivity or the death of the falcon. The young man didn’t describe what it had been like to be nearly burned alive by the firebird and its horrible shadow. Upon their reunion, they simply decided that they were just glad they were together again._

“I thought you were dead,” he said. “I thought it’d killed you. When I couldn’t find you...”

“Shh, shh,” she cooed, stroking his cheek. “I’m fine. I got away. I’m sorry it took so long to get back to you. But I found you.”

“You did. And we’ll never be apart again.”

“No, never again.”

_They held each other, comforted by that fact._

_She was sure that she could leave all of the horrors of her past behind as long as he kept holding onto her._
The flight to Barcelona was just over twenty hours, including two connections. If Viktor thought their previous trips in economy class were long, this bordered on torturous— and not because of the missing leg room or lack of champagne. He didn’t mind being close to Yuuri. Now that they were lovers, the tight quarters were almost what he might consider cozy, maybe even cute, but that was exactly the problem.

Yuuri was close. Yuuri was cute. And Yuuri was dozing so peacefully right up against the window looking for all the world like he might have been snuggled up in the bed with him back in Hasetsu.

Viktor found himself watching Yuuri, just staring for long stretches of time, fascinated by every little detail of his beautiful face. Those long, dark lashes. His little nose. The curve of his resting frown. The way his hair framed his face. Was it getting longer? Oh, how he wanted to stroke it, and his cheek, and kiss him, and—

And then his thoughts would continue, moving to places not so safe or subtle for commercial airline flights, and Viktor had to pull himself back, sit up straight, and try to think of something else. Which was difficult. So, so difficult.

His Yuuri was just so… so wonderful.

And Viktor was so… so bored.

Bored and hungry. Which had never been a problem before. Even when he’d been with his ex, the mere suggestion of anything unsavory in public usually had Viktor giving him a hard shove to keep him in line. But with Yuuri…

The memory of the locker room was so fresh, it took no effort to summon the precise feelings and details that still had him sore.

The Grand Prix was going to be a challenge. They would need to behave for Yuuri to stay in top form. At least… mostly. It was only for a few days, anyway. Viktor could handle that, surely.

Travel was simply the first test.

And it nearly drove him mad.

By the time they arrived at the Barcelona Prince Hotel, got the keys to their two separate-but connecting -rooms (though they were only going to use the one; Viktor thought it was clever when they’d booked it, it now seemed unnecessary), and made sure their keys actually worked, Viktor was wired, but Yuuri was completely worn out. Luggage ended up against the wall and Yuuri on the foot of the bed, sagging. He had a lot of stamina, it was true, but traveling was one of the things that truly ran him ragged. Viktor was at least glad that they’d eaten before coming, though it looked like the rest of the evening was going to be a wash.

“Are you sure you don’t want to see Chris?” Yuuri said around a yawn while Viktor helped pull off his shoes. “I think Phichit said something about… meeting up…”

“I’m sure.” Viktor had told his Swiss friend that he wanted to have Words with him, it was true, but that didn’t mean that he wanted to have them now. “Anyway, there will be time for all of that later, and I want to cuddle before you fall asleep, Yuuri. Yuuri?”
But it was too late. Yuuri was already drifting off.

Cuddling, and anything else, would have to wait.

Sighing, Viktor helped him down onto the mattress, pulled the blankets up to his shoulders. Careful to only touch the frames, he slid Yuuri’s glasses out from the mess of dark hair, folded them, and set them aside before leaning down to kiss his forehead. “You’re a night owl every other time, Yuuri… except when I really need you to be.”

The only answer he got was the soft, even breaths of his sleeping beauty, which was just as well. Viktor didn’t know what he wanted, anyway. With so much pent-up energy, he was liable to do something reckless if he wasn’t careful… like get injured again. Or worse, get Yuuri injured. Or get impatient and propose before it was time.

Viktor sat on the edge of the other bed for a few minutes, back to Yuuri, and examined the little gold ring in his palm. He had to believe that it would be easier to ignore the temptation as time went on, to get better at being patient. Just like he was sure that it would be easier to ignore the constant inklings of thirst that Yuuri’s Eros brought out in him. Viktor had always been an impulsive person, sure, but only when it was appropriate. He liked planning his impulsiveness. The impulsive impulsiveness was difficult. It meant mistakes. He didn’t like mistakes.

Not this close to the gold, not when—

Looking over his shoulder again at Yuuri, Viktor felt the panic slip away so that other thoughts could take their place. Yuuri was so cute, lying there, peaceful and soft. It wasn’t fair that he was asleep. Viktor wanted to kiss him. Cuddle him. Maybe more.

Definitely more.

There were a lot of things they could do without getting into trouble, really. They didn’t even have anything scheduled until the afternoon...

No. No. No.

Viktor got to his feet, putting the ring back in his jacket’s inner pocket, then went to his suitcase. He needed to clear his head. Yuuri needed rest, not crazy hotel antics or distractions. What Viktor needed was a cold shower.

Or perhaps… a swim?

Viktor had stayed at the Barcelona Prince Hotel before, though he didn’t remember much about it since he’d spent most of the competition in his room. He did, however, remember the infinity pool on the 23rd floor. Swimming wasn’t something he did at every hotel; there were usually too many people around, and he preferred his privacy. The infinity pool was worth it, though.

Unlike the hotel’s other outdoor pool, the infinity pool wasn’t heated by anything other than the solarium. So at night in the middle of December, Viktor had it to himself. The cool water stretched from one end of the terrace to the other in a strip of blue, engineered to match the sea that lay just beyond the city streets beneath.

Lying on his back with his eyes unfocused only just enough to let the lights from the building blur his vision, the giant print of ‘PRINCE’ on the marquee faded away, but so did everything else. No stars. Not in Barcelona.
The city wouldn’t be sleeping for hours yet. Viktor probably wouldn’t, either. Not with the buzz of competition in the air. It’d make for a lonely night. That usually meant too much thinking, which wasn’t good for sleep. Not unless he could calm down.

Reflection was a start. A year ago, Viktor wasn’t sure that he’d even be at another Grand Prix Final again. He wasn’t sure what he would be doing at all. Now he had direction. And he knew what loneliness really was because he learned what he’d been missing all this time.

Yuuri had changed his life.

The chill in the water pulled at the heat of his core, sapping the urgency to leave him with the sentimental thoughts of life and love that he mulled over until he was simply… numb. Water had always been good for that. Calm, centered, refocused. Relaxed.

Ten, fifteen minutes like that, with the city drowned out just beneath the water’s surface, and he was feeling much better. He could probably even sleep now, after getting a nice shower. A hot one.

It was cold in December, even in Barcelona.

“I figured that the Russian would be the only one besides me stupid enough to get into the pool this time of year. I guess I was right.”

Viktor hadn’t heard his approach, but the purring tease in the Swiss man’s voice was unmistakable. So was the way he managed to look hurt, reproachful, and excited all at once. He stood at the edge of the pool staring down in a bathrobe too short for someone his height, hip cocked, mouth in a pout that only made the sunglasses he wore look even sillier. It was night. There was no sun and no one around. Not even the press. Not in the event hotel. Not the night before open practice.

If it hadn’t been for the single glass that accompanied the bottle of Freixenet Brut Cordon champagne in his hand, Viktor might have thought that he’d been looking for him, but the evidence spoke otherwise. It was a good cover. Chris had a knack for knowing where he liked to haunt… and how to avoid getting barked at for it.

Chris also knew how to read Viktor the way no one else did, so feigning innocence on either part seemed kind of pointless. Was he trying to be patronizing? Viktor couldn’t tell. It was all some sort of a game with him. Chris had to know how angry he was. So what was with the pretense?

But if he wanted to avoid confrontation, and those promised Words, so be it.

Forcing a little half smile, Viktor did his best to keep his voice light when he spoke. “Chris!”

“Hi, Coach Viktor!” Chris returned it with genuine cheer, all sweet and smiles as he turned a playful shrug. “And here I was hoping to go skinny dipping.”

The mock disappointment was nothing new, and neither was the stage pout. It was an excuse, and one he was sure that Chris meant to irritate him with.

Viktor shrugged under the water, forcing the plastic smile and the game a little further. “Don’t let me stop you. I’ll even take photos for you.”

“Oh, that would be fun!” Chris said, completely ignoring the chill in Viktor’s voice. “It’s been some time since we’ve done a photoshoot.”

That was true enough, and Viktor should have known better than to try to play chicken with Chris. It never worked. So, sighing, he dragged himself from the pool and settled down on one of the
lounge chairs with his towel and phone. “Ready when you are, Chris.”

“Really?”

“I said that I would.”

“Well in that case…”

It was harmless and fun enough. They’d done this sort of thing before, goofing off around the hotel or in the city when they needed some down time, and it was usually just like this… Chris his usual, flirty self, showing off since he did modeling on the side professionally, and Viktor playing it cool because he was trying to pretend he didn’t enjoy the company.

Viktor took photos of Chris in various poses by the pool, in the pool, coming out of the water, drinking his champagne…

“You could join in, you know. I’ll take some of you, too.”

“I’m fine.”

“Exactly! That’s why I’m offering, Viktor.”

“I’m a coach, now. I’ll leave the showing off to you skaters.”

Sighing, Chris leaned back in the chair beside him, draining the glass in his hand. “I'm one of the oldest skaters left now that you're gone... I'm a relic at age twenty-five.”

“Oh, is that why you’re upset that I stopped competing? Because it makes you look old?”

Chris poured himself another glass, brows rising in defense. “That’s not what I said. You always make me out to be so cruel.”

Through the lens of the camera phone, the hurt on Chris’s face almost looked real. Maybe it was. Viktor swiped the application away and let his phone fall to the soft towel hammock between his arms. “You knew I was going to be upset, Chris.”

“I didn’t know you weren’t going to be in Saint Petersburg.”

“I’d be upset even if I had been there.”

Chris pursed his lips, considering, and shrugged a third time. “Be upset. It was necessary. And it worked out, did it not? So you’re welcome.”

Yuuri had seen the shoes. Had been accepting of them. Of everything. So far, things had worked out, and he probably did have Chris to thank— in part. “But what if Yurio had seen? Or anyone else, for that matter?”

“Oh, so you must not have…”

“What?”

“Nothing, nothing, Viktor. Would you like some champagne?”

“Chris.”

“Instagram. I’ll ask Bastien to bring down another bottle of this and more glasses.”
While Chris called his manager-and-beau, Viktor caught up on the social media feeds, making idle commentary on each as he went. “It looks like Yurio is popular… The Ice Tiger of Russia, Russian Fairy, Russian Punk, Ice Shadow… fifty different nicknames, now. Wow. He’s worse than I remember. Yuri’s Angels? They’re scary.”

“Right?”

“He wanted to be famous. Yakov must be thrilled.” Viktor laughed. It was funny, even though it hurt. “Oh, that JJ guy’s engaged. Poor girl. Otabek is picking up a bike, of course… Yuuri’s friend Phichit is doing some sight-seeing… what am I looking for?”

“Go to Yuri’s feed.”

“How do I do that…”

Chris frowned.

“Fine, fine. Let’s see…” Viktor scrolled through the past week of posts, which were mostly selfies, skating rinks, close ups of dirty concrete buildings, and his cat, but finally found what he was probably supposed to be looking for: a photo of Yurio and Yuuri together dressed up in clothes that were definitely too large and too flamboyant for either of them. The feather boa definitely didn’t help. They were in a closet. His closet.

It was tagged #fashion show #skaters#wtf is this shit #yuuri katsucki.

The post had several thousand likes and so many comments that Viktor didn’t even want to start reading them. He stared for a few seconds, letting his eyes unfocus so the image shifted into a blurred mass of lights and darks, taking the faces of his lover and his little brother, and all of the complicated feelings, with it. Processing all of that in front of Chris was not what he wanted to do, so he clicked on Yuuri’s tagged name which, surprisingly, helped him navigate to Yuuri’s instagram.

Which was mostly empty.

“Did you find it?” Chris asked. He was being quiet. Cautious.

“I’ll take that champagne now.”

“Viktor!”

“What?” Viktor frowned. “I guess I haven’t been keeping up on social media. Yuuri doesn’t seem to think about it, so I haven’t been paying as much attention. Otherwise I probably would have…” Yuuri hadn’t mentioned all of that to him. If there’d been a problem, he would have, wouldn’t he? Then again, they hadn’t discussed much of Yuuri’s time in Russia.

Which was largely intentional.

“I noticed. We’ve missed your posts. But it’s good. Your attention has been focused on… other things.” Chris lowered his glasses, heavy brow rising, followed by the curve of his lip into a smirk. “Oh, and how is your hamstring these days, anyway? All healed up? I do hope Yuuri’s been taking it easy on you since we had our little discussion.”

Groaning, Viktor held out his hand for the champagne glass, which Chris gave up and refilled. “I’m fine now, yes. Thanks for your concern.”
“Glad to hear it, Mr. Greedy. You could have just waited, you know. Baz is on his way, and I asked him to bring enough for the three of us.”

“It’d better be vodka if you’re trying to get me to talk about my love life, Chris.”

“It isn’t.” Chris fell back against the lounge chair, rolling to drape his arm off of one side and watched Viktor drain the glass with that signature pout. “But I’ve waited so long to be able to dish about this with you, Viktor. It’s not fair. We both have beaus. Shouldn’t we have fun and talk like we used to?”

“You know everything already.”

“Surely not everything. How is that spark of yours? Enjoying it?”

Viktor gave the question some serious thought as he finished the glass. “It’s never been like this before.”

“Oh? In what way?”

“Greedy paws…”

“Yuuri?”

“No. Well, yes. But me, too. I’m distracted. Thinking about him and wanting and—“

“Viktor. You’re a repressed gay man finally getting to be with someone who loves you for who you are; of course the dam is going to break the floodgates wide open. It’s beautiful. Embrace it. Enjoy it.”

“So this is… normal?”

“Yes! I see it all the time in the students we work with at the youth camps… your spark, finally free to catch and blaze, like a wildfire! A raging inferno!”

Viktor frowned at the thought, offering the empty glass back to him. “You’re mixing metaphors. I’m getting confused. Is this a flood or a fire?”

“I suppose since this is your spark we will go with bonfire… you do seem rather contained still.”

“What is that supposed to mean?!?”

“Nothing, nothing… ah, here is Bastien now! Merci, mon amour! Viktor was beginning to get cold again.”

Chris wasn’t wrong.

Once out of the pool, the December air on Viktor’s damp skin was even colder, but Viktor was doing his best to ignore it. The drinks helped, though, and there were plenty to go around.

“I’ve got to hand it to you, Mr. Mancakes, you really came through. Another round?”

“Viktor…” It was Chris’s turn to be a little uncomfortable, but Viktor didn’t feel bad at all. Mostly because he knew that Baz would be a good sport about it, as always.
“It’s fine, Chris,” said Baz, though he was as mystified as always. “Of course, Viktor.”

“Thank you.” Viktor would use the stupid nicknames as long as he could get away with them. Especially since they were all he had over the otherwise too-perfect ISU rep.

“It’s a shame that Yuuri couldn’t join us this evening,” Baz continued. “Is he getting rest for tomorrow?”

“Yes… he’s jet lagged, I’m afraid. It was a very long flight from Japan for us and he doesn’t travel particularly well.”

“A shame.”

“Bastien,” Chris cut in. “Would you be a dear and take some photos of us? I don’t want the world to think that Viktor has quite given up on the skating world just yet.”

“I’d be happy to.”

“But Chris! I didn’t bring my Gucci shades to match yours… I’d look ridiculous next to you.”

“Here, take mine.”

“Bastien! How prepared!”

Within moments, it had become a full-on photoshoot, with Bastien directing. The Swiss pair took it very seriously, which only made it all the more ridiculous, and thus more reason to be serious, which made it even funnier. That was partly the alcohol, though.

“Legs up- higher, I know you can extend even more than that, very good!”

“You’re going to fall in if you’re not careful, Mr. Mancakes,” Viktor crooned, then went back to being model serious after a sharp look from Chris.

“This is a great shot, don’t ruin it.”

“I’m not ruining it. You’re the ruiner. You ruiner.”

Chris rolled his eyes, but Viktor couldn’t turn to see it—he just had to feel it. “Is this about the shoes?”

“What else would it be about?”

“I’m not sorry, you know.”

“You never are.”

Chris smiled after that, pleased as could be.

“Okay, I think that was a good one… let’s get one with Viktor in the water, Chris on the side of the pool.”

Viktor groaned. “I just want to drink, Baz.”

“Only a few more.”

It felt to Viktor like a hundred photos, but it always did. He was rewarded with more to drink, and
the three of them drank together until it was decided that the Russian had had far more than his fair share, and Chris should walk him back before he got into trouble.

“I’ll meet you back in the room just as soon as I return him to Yuuri, mon amour.”

“See you soon. Sleep well, Viktor.”

“Oh huh huh. I’m fine, Chris! Really I’m fine~!”

“Well you’re clinging to me with arms like an octopus, so you’ve left me with very little choice.”

“It’s cold!”

“You could wear your towel like a normal person instead of on your head.”

“I’m the Snow Maiden!”

“I don’t doubt that. Come on, back to Yuuri.”

Chris led Viktor to the elevator and verified the floor that they were staying on, one arm around his shoulders for balance, the other on his arm to keep him still. “Glad to know that you’re still with the rest of the skaters.”

“We have two rooms, though,” Viktor giggled, his lean heavier when the elevator began its descent. “Did you ever get two rooms? Sneaky sneaky~”

“There was never a reason, mon ami.”

“But it’s clever!”

“I don’t know about that, but Viktor, if you want to hear something clever…”

Chris followed after Viktor when the elevator doors spit them out at their designated floor, the flap flap flap of the Russian’s flip flops drowning out their owner’s excited wheezing as he charged down the hall. The longer Viktor spent in the temperature-controlled hotel, the colder he got, and the harder it was to think, and the more all he wanted to do was to get back to Yuuri and into the onsen. All of this made it difficult to pay attention to Chris’s story about measurements and the difference between metric and imperial systems, especially while Viktor was checking the doors—his was locked while Yuuri’s was not—but it must have been funny, because Chris started laughing when he reached the end of it. Viktor spared him one blank look to show that it hadn’t gotten through before turning back and kicking the door open to punctuate the final moment of silence. “Yuuri!”

The room was just as Viktor left it, only Yuuri wearing glasses and a startled expression. That was sort of an improvement.

“I’m freezing!” Viktor cried. “Will you draw a hot bath for me? I can’t feel my toes!”

Chris joined him, absently fishing for the light switch. “And while you’re at it, how about some coffee?”

“You were still asleep?”

Yuuri grasped for words, but nothing came. Not that he had much of a chance to think, for the moment Viktor decided to pounce, Chris followed suit, both men launching a full-scale attack on
the hapless man on the second of the two single beds. Fortunately for Yuuri, Chris’s elbow drop was expertly aimed for the first bed, allowing him to startle, but not injure, and then to hug, while Viktor’s more direct assault was ineffective in aim due to his inebriation— he ended up rebounding off of the bed and onto the floor, but scrambled back into place in seconds, clinging to his target with all four limbs.

Even though it was better than it could have been, though, none of it was what Yuuri wanted.

“GEEZ you’re like human icicles! Get off of me, both of you! I’m not your heating pad!”

“Heyyy Yuurii~”

“You two are crazy being at the pool during winter!”

“Be a good friend and warm us up, Yuuri.”

“We can do the onsen, right?” Viktor asked, nuzzling the back of Yuuri’s head. “I want a bath, Yuuri.”

“We don’t have a tub, Viktor. No onsen.”

“He could sit on the floor and pretend.”

“You’re mean, Chris. Yuuri, he’s mean.”

“How is that mean? I’m giving you a solution to what you don’t have.”

“It’s not fun, Chris! Go back to your Mr. Mancakes.”

“Fine, fine.” With a huff, Chris rolled off of the bed. “Have fun with your no bath tub.”

“Thanks for bringing him back, Chris.”

“My pleasure. I’ll have to ask about your trip later, Yuuri. Bon nuit~”

“GooOOOooo!”

“Yes, yes.”

When the door closed and they were left to themselves again, Yuuri turned back to his drunken companion. “I’m sorry we don’t have a tub. Did you still want a shower?”

“Yes please.” A pause. “You can shower with me~”

“And then it’s bedtime for you.”

“Okay~!”

Against all odds, Viktor woke early the next morning and without a hangover. He guessed it had something to do with sleeping and waking up next to Yuuri— a sort of ‘all is right with the world’ comfort that made everything better. He got up, stretched, dressed for the day, and went out to
retrieve breakfast for the pair of them from the ISU’s convenient assortment. Open practice for the men’s singles was scheduled for early that afternoon, so letting Yuuri get as much rest as possible beforehand would be to their benefit.

Yuuri was already awake when Viktor returned, though, half-dressed and still groggy. “Viktor?”

“Yuuri. Sorry, I thought I’d make it back before you got up. I brought you a plate so you wouldn’t have to go down.” Viktor slid the tray onto the bed and sat next to it, and reached for his cup of coffee.

“You didn’t have to. Thanks. Kind of surprised that you didn’t have a hangover.”

“I don’t usually get hangovers, Yuuri.” He smiled.

“Okay, okay. Was anyone else there?”

“No one I really knew. Not Phichit, if that’s who you’re asking about. Breakfast?”

“Right. Oh, hey Viktor…” Yuuri busied himself with the suitcase again, strain in his voice betraying his embarrassment.

“Mm?”

“I… forgot to give this back to you.”

What Yuuri had was the Bosco-branded red and white Olympic jacket from Sochi, neatly folded and held with both hands like something sacred.

“I took good care of it,” Yuuri said after a moment of reverent silence passed between them. “I promise!”

“I can tell… Yuuri,” Viktor said, giving a helpless sort of laugh. “Honestly, I forgot all about it, so why don’t you hold onto it for now? Keep taking good care of it for me?”

“Really?!”

“Really.” Viktor stretched, taking in a deep, grateful breath and barking out another laugh at the tail end of it. “Yuuri! It’s a beautiful day and we’re in Barcelona for the Grand Prix Final. I have a meeting at noon. Until then, let’s just eat, relax, warm up slowly, and enjoy ourselves. Sound good?”

“Yeah!”

“Great.”

The meeting went about as well as Viktor expected, with all of the staff- judges, medical personnel, assistants, coaches, ISU representatives, etc included - crowded into a meeting room to be lectured on the standard agenda items as previous opening meetings.

This time, however, the addendums came with much less sugar-coating since the athletes were not present. The final was the most important competition of the Grand Prix series, and the exhibition gala was, therefore, the most important of that. The real money maker. Also, since the junior divisions were in attendance, all staff were to keep their skaters in line accordingly. The juniors weren’t the big money earners yet, but they were highest liabilities. That message was clear.
A recent policy change, Viktor was certain.

Most of the staff looked as restless as ever despite the serious tone of the meeting, though. It was the same-old, same-old for them. So it must not have been too recent. Even Yakov looked bored.


Though Baz gave a courtesy wave at the beginning of the meeting, Celestino was the only one that actually spoke more than a couple of words to Viktor, clapping him hard on the back with a laugh while the crowd was thinning at the end.

“Viktor!” he said. “We should get a drink while we’re here in Barcelona, don’t you think?”

“Sure, Celestino! After the competition?”

“After? Is there any reason to wait?”

Viktor laughed and excused himself, relieved that the exuberant Italian had scared off any one else that might have otherwise tried to approach him. He needed to get Yuuri ready.

After eight months as a team, they were right at the cusp of being able to take the gold. The first practice would let the other final members of the final six see what they were up against, which would begin that stages of the war games. Everyone faced the pressure of the Grand Prix Final differently; some crumbled immediately, others further down the line. It would be important to keep Yuuri calm, focused, and ready to go.

They’d worked hard. It was time to reap the benefits. Win gold. Skate together in the gala. Continue on through the season.

“You ready, Yuuri?”

“As I’ll ever be, Coach.”

Practice was good. Maybe Yuuri wasn’t always the most consistent when it came to, well, consistency, but his skills had reached a level where technical ability and presentation were evenly matched as far as Viktor was concerned. He was proud. The focus was on the story, which is where it should be. Confidence came from his competence, the beauty came from his art. From that, he would win.

They did several run-throughs, most without music, and Viktor had him do some drills in between to keep him warmed up. During these, he watched the other skaters and their coaches- the ones that bothered to show up, anyway -and how they handled things. Viktor had never really paid attention to that before. He’d always stayed in his own little bubble for as long as he could remember.

The Grand Prix Final was a different challenge. The pressure that mounted here changed the way people acted. Many competent competitors choked where they had done so well before. Everyone seemed fine now, even Yuuri for once, but would that stay the same in front of the audience, when the gold was so close?

There were still things to work on, but they did have a little bit of time. The short program was tomorrow, and Yuuri had flawlessly skated in competition twice now, so Viktor wasn't concerned
about that at all. After that was a free day for practice, then finally, the free skate. The original composition wasn't enough to beat JJ's base score, even if Yuuri managed to skate it perfectly, so the aggressive plan he planned was imperative to edge out the competition. The quadruple flip was difficult for him, though. It was difficult for anyone.

That was why Viktor made it his signature move.

How to help Yuuri now? Avoid the pressure, keep him from getting stressed like other times? Yuuri had told him before not to protect him, just stay close to him, believe in him more than he believed. That was easy enough to do, but it wasn’t very active. What did the other coaches do?

What would Yakov have told him to do?

Rest, probably. And not do anything stupid. He’d also tell him that he was Viktor Nikiforov, and that he was to take what he wanted.

What he wanted was Yuuri. What Yuuri wanted was probably him. Nothing had happened that morning, and they did have quite a bit of free time that afternoon. If they were careful, it might not be such a bad thing. Maybe. A lot of other athletes unwound that way, after all. It was normal and healthy, and Viktor was his coach, after all. He had to look out for the health of his Yuuri.

A great plan!

So when Yuuri finished his last run through, Viktor waved him over with a smile, and once off of the ice, supported him while he changed into his shoes. “Yuuri. What would you like to do with the rest of the day? I recommend a good night’s rest to prepare for tomorrow’s short program.”

By good night’s rest he of course meant ‘spend the rest of the day in bed.’ It wasn’t exactly subtle, but sometimes that was necessary for Yuuri to get the hint. Beside, it sounded like a perfectly normal, responsible, coach-like thing to say and the last thing he wanted was someone like Yuuri’s friend Phichit to start inviting him out.

To his surprise, Yuuri scowled at him. “Don’t you go turning into a model coach on me now. This is my first time in Barcelona; take me sightseeing!”

It was a little harsh, especially in public, and Viktor stared at him blankly for a moment to try to determine how to react to such a demand. Was he serious? Was he angry? Had he said something wrong? Maybe Yuuri knew what he’d meant by going back to the room and he really didn’t want that. Which hurt and confused him.

But before he could stammer out any sort of reply, Yuuri laughed under his breath and gave a very obvious wink like he couldn’t hold back any longer.

He’d been acting.


That prospect was even better.

“Leave it to me!”

They went by the hotel to get changed and, while there, stopped by the concierge desk for
pamphlets on the various sights nearby.

“Is there anything you have in mind, Yuuri?” Viktor asked, splaying the glossy paper out for him to see. “Or something that looks nice?”

“Hmm… I think that one.”

“La Sagrada Familia? Really?”

“Yeah. Is that okay?”

“Of course, Yuuri.” Viktor folded the pamphlets up and stowed them in one of the deep pockets of his coat. “I’ll get us a cab.”

The afternoon was bright and cool, perfect for a December tour in Spain. Fifteen minutes in a cab through the crowded streets and they were let off in front of the even more crowded church. Tourists, all in line, waiting to get in. At his side, Yuuri scanned for the end of it, brows creased with worry.

“How are we going to get in?”

“We probably won’t, Yuuri… it’s the most popular tourist attraction in Barcelona. You usually have to book tickets in advance.”

“Really? Oh.” He sagged. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. It’s not the inside of the La Sagrada Familia at sunset, but we can still look around the outside, and that’s for free!” They gave the tourists a wide berth, strolling the perimeter to admire the structure from all of its sides while Viktor played personal tour guide. “Gaudi was obsessed with natural life… believing that God was the greatest architect, and never made mistakes, you know? I love that idea. You can see that here in the building. The honeycomb structures, the columns like bone or sand… so organic. Do you like it, Yuuri?”

“Yeah. You know… I saw the books at your apartment. On this place, and Gaudi.”

“I forgot I left those out.” Viktor hummed. He had a lot of books on famous architecture back at home; another one of the things that he liked to collect. “Is that why you wanted to come here?”

Yuuri shrugged, sheepish smile in place. “Tell me more.”

“Okay. Let’s see… I think I always liked Antoni Gaudi because… in a way, I felt like I could relate? Not to sound egotistical, I can’t compare accomplishments and his work is seen all over, but look at this here- the nativity facade. It’s a little overwhelming if you don’t know what you’re looking at, trying to take in the structure as a whole, but when you focus on the story, it becomes clear. It’s the birth of Christ. That’s what Gaudi really wanted. For people, even those who couldn’t read or write, to understand and feel something… The meaning transcends.” He turned from the church to Yuuri, curious. “That’s what we do, too. Or try, anyway. With our skates.”

Yuuri nodded at his explanation, watching him far more often than the magnificent sight that they’d come to see. Somehow, even though Viktor caught him looking, Yuuri didn’t turn away, just waited for him to continue. So he did.

“The audience doesn’t need to know how hard we work every day, fine-tuning our routines, or what our fitness schedules are. They don’t need to know how many points a quadruple flip is worth, or that you get a 1.1 multiplier by having jumps in the second half. They don’t need to know
who the composer of your piece is, or even the choreographer for your routine. None of them need to know that I left my career and flew halfway across the world to be your coach, and that we put everything we had into your program for eight months to know that your Free Skate is about love.”

Finally, Yuuri blushed and turned back to *La Sagrada Familia*, though he nodded again. “Yeah…”

“It’s the same way for all of my programs. It’s never been about the technical. We take care of all of that and skate our best for the audience so they don’t even have to think about it. Of course, if they want to spend time with our programs, or these buildings, look closer, understand the context, appreciate all of the little details… Yuuri, there are little stone snails up there, do you see them?”

Yuuri squinted. He couldn’t see them, but he believed they were there.

“It’s not even just things like the snails, or the donkeys, or the hundreds of other finely carved sculptures or even the towers and brilliant stained glass windows- it’s that it’s solid. Yuuri. His work is unconventional. It looks almost crazy with how complex it is, but it’s extremely logical. Grounded and strong. A beautiful marriage of all things art and science, tied together intrinsically the way good design always does… it makes sense.” Viktor sighed a wistful sigh, leaning toward Yuuri until he had to support his weight and right him again.

“Guess I never thought of buildings and things as a way of expression like skating is…”

“I think all creative things are like that. All things with passion. He gave his life for this, Yuuri… so much so that he never married. He died alone, hit by a train.”

Yuuri looked up at him again, brows lifting, and Viktor went on.

“The people that believed in him and his vision keep building, and they will finish *La Sagrada Familia* one day, the way he wanted. That is beautiful, don’t you think?”

“Yeah… it is.”

“If only our programs were as long-lasting as churches.”

“Be around to inspire millions that pass…”

“But we are not gods… I guess that’s the difference.” Viktor rubbed Yuuri’s shoulders, smile still warm and eyes bright. “Let’s take a selfie, *da*?”

After finding someone to take their photo in front of the the nativity facade, they went to lunch and mapped out other nearby Gaudi sites and famous photo spots. *Arenas de Barcelona* was convenient and fun, with a rooftop terrace and observation deck— and plenty of shopping options afterward.

Everything Viktor bought, Yuuri carried. Voluntarily. It was unexpected, but extremely sweet. It altered his plans somewhat, but that was probably fine; the *Casa Batlló*, another of Gaudi’s structures, was on their list, but the shopping in *that* area was expensive, and the Euro wasn’t as weak as it once was.

“I thought I was taking *you* out, Yuuri.”

“I’m your boyfriend,” he whispered. “And besides…”

“Hmm?”
Yuuri shrugged. “I’ll take care of it. You don’t have to worry.”


“I do.”

“Thank you, Yuuri.”

They shopped for a while, taking breaks here and there to duck into shops mostly to browse, and Viktor took his time doing so. It was nice just to be out with Yuuri, doing something neither of them usually did together. This was the sort of thing he might have done with Chris before, but sharing with Yuuri now was extraordinary. He’d said spoiled before, and he meant it. It was nice. Yuuri’s attention, like this, especially with what he knew.

That bit of context changed everything, like the stained glass windows casting a rose-tinted glow on the whole world. It was beautiful, and Viktor loved it.

“So why didn’t you finish school?”

“It was easier to focus on skating. When I dedicate myself to something, I like to put all of myself into it… so I would have been a poor student and a poor skater.”

“Ah… and having legions of fans didn’t have anything to do with it?” Yuuri teased.

“Fans I can handle, but not knowing who was a fan and who was a stalker was not something I wanted to put up with on a daily basis, no… Ooh, what do you think of this one?”

“It’s a nice scarf. Do you think you’ll ever go back? To school, I mean.”

Viktor took one of his gloves off to feel the cashmere between his fingers, then laid it out across the rack to admire the pattern. “That’s what your papa wants me to do.”

“O-oh. Yeah, that sounds like him.” Yuuri cleared his throat. “But what do you want?”

“Hmm… yes. I think I will get this one.”

“I meant about—”

Viktor gathered the scarf up and handed it to Yuuri, adding it to the other things he’d decided to buy. “I know what you meant, but I really don’t know, Yuuri. It all depends. Like I keep telling the press, I’m focusing on you right now, and I’m your coach until you retire. Remember?”

“Right…”

“Ohhh! This hat! Yuuri! Look!”

Once Viktor had exhausted all of the shops along the east side, they took a break to recheck the map and give Yuuri a moment to catch his breath. Then it was off to get Yuuri something—Viktor wasn’t about to let him miss out on the fun.

“I’ll buy you a suit for your birthday. Then we can burn the suit and tie you wore at that press conference,” Viktor said, tugging Yuuri along.
“Huh? Hold on a second… you don’t have to do that! And besides, I kind of like that suit! Viktor!”

It fell on deaf ears, but it wasn’t a problem for long. Even though the price tags had Yuuri blanching, Viktor’s coaxing words soothed him just as smoothly as his hands did, brushing over the fabric at his shoulders and waistline.

“You look very handsome in this, I think,” Viktor purred at his ear.

“...You think?”

“I do. And so strong.”

Yuuri had to appreciate that, taking a moment to evaluate his appearance in the mirror with Viktor’s approval in mind.

“Besides, I did say it was for your birthday. I never did get to treat you like I wanted to, and you’ll only need one good suit. Please, Yuuri?”

He couldn’t say no.

“Perfect. We’ll take this one.”

They had it sent to the hotel in a garment bag, which was an option in places with price tags that high, and went back out to enjoy the rest of their evening, peeking in at other shops, walking close together, nearly arm in arm.

“I’m starting to get hungry,” Viktor said, surprising them both. “Should we stop for dinner somewhere or- oh, let’s try those nuts we bought. Those sounded delicious.”

“Sure… uh. Oh no...”

“Hm?”

“It’s not here…”

“What’s not?”

“Oh no, oh no… the bag with the nuts!”

Viktor frowned, stopping to watch as Yuuri frantically pawed through all of the bags that he was carrying, panic rising with each second that passed. “I thought you had all of them.”

“I did! I don’t know what happened. I never even set them down! Or- wait! Maybe back at the suit shop!”

“I’m pretty sure we didn’t leave anything…”

“Let’s go and check anyway!”

Yuuri charged off, remaining bags clenched in his fists, with Viktor trailing behind, looking here and there for any trace of their missing bag. They retraced their steps, from the suit shop, to all of their window shopping places, the scarf place and then, finally, the bench where Yuuri had sat down just for a moment.

But there was no bag of nuts. They were missing.
Defeated, Yuuri uttered his apologies like he’d ruined the whole day. Or the entire competition. “Sorry. I don’t know where else to look. This was my best guess. I’ll go back to the shop and get another bag!”

It was almost as if he’d betrayed Viktor somehow, despair like a thick cloud despite all attempts to calm him.

“Don’t worry about it, Yuuri…” Viktor put on his most careful, pleasant smile. “The shop is probably closed by now. Let’s go. You’re tired, right?”

They couldn’t keep looking all night.

“Why are you just ASSUMING that I’m tired?”

The smile dropped. “Well I’m tired,” Viktor snapped, voice a harsh, but quiet snap like the closing of a clutch.

They both lapsed into silence after that.

It wasn’t like Viktor to posture. Not with Yuuri. Yuuri didn’t often bark at him, either. They were better than that, but still… they were human. They would hurt and be hurt.

The sting of vulnerability hung in the air for a while, both of them casting frosty, but tired glares at each other until Yuuri finally agreed that they could head back.

On their way to the metro station, they passed a little outdoor market that they hadn’t seen before—colorful string lights decorating the walkways, music playing, crowds of people walking about. It wasn’t exactly on the way, but it didn’t feel right heading back with hurt feelings, so in they went, soaking up the cheerful atmosphere.

Or trying to, anyway. It was a Christmas market, which had Viktor thinking. December was always a little tricky. The Final had always been a good distraction from particular anniversaries, but secular Christmas also meant his birthday. He’d spent it with Yakov at Russian Nationals for the past several years, but this year, Yakov wasn’t speaking to him, and he was planning to be at the Japanese Nationals with Yuuri.

Viktor didn’t regret becoming his coach. A lost bag of nuts didn’t change that. Not a chance. But losing Yakov was not something he needed a reminder of… and the sugar plum fairies weren’t helping anything.

“Your birthday’s coming up. It’s on Christmas Day, isn’t it?”

“Mm.” Thank god for the mulled wine.

“I’ll get you a gift while we’re here.”

Viktor took a sip, hoping the burn of the alcohol would take some of the ice from his voice with it. But the bitterness remained. “In Russia, we don’t celebrate before the actual day. And we don’t really celebrate Christmas, either. Not like other countries.”

“Oh…” Yuuri looked away, his hopeful smile slipping into a frown. “Okay.”

The disappointment in his voice was almost too much to bear. But it wasn’t like Viktor could change all of Russia. If he could, he would have done it already. Not for Christmas, but for many other things. Much more important things. Frowning, he offered his cup. “Would you like to try my
mulled wine?”

“No,” Yuuri pulled away, strictly disciplined as ever. “I don’t like to drink before a competition.”

Viktor took the offending cup back. “Oh… right.” It made sense, really. Yuuri’s drinking was an issue. Like the banquet one year ago.

The thought made him smile, just a little, recalling that night and Yuuri’s lapse in judgement, bent on revenge and a need to prove himself. How it had changed everything. How they were so close, now. How Viktor wouldn’t even be here, in Barcelona, if he hadn’t. He’d wanted to learn all about Yuuri Katsuki. His passions, all that kept him up at night, the things that really made his heart sing. The past year had been full of Yuuri Katsuki, and Viktor was all the better for it.

Even now, watching that sparkle in his eye, filled Viktor’s heart with wonder. What was he looking for, anyway? Nuts, probably. There were so many stalls in the market, people selling their various brickerbrack for the kind of Christmas that Viktor didn’t understand or care for, but Yuuri was on the hunt. Someone might have nuts, perhaps. It wasn’t an unreasonable assumption. Why he was so bothered by it, Viktor couldn’t say. Honor, probably. His pride as a boyfriend.

Viktor didn’t care all that much about the nuts, honestly. He would have been fine getting anything to eat as long as they could have gotten it sooner than later, and Yuuri not working himself into a frenzy was way more important than any snack. He really should have let it go. But there he was, searching.

Like a squirrel.

Funny, since Mama Katsuki was a squirrel in the story.

Oh, Yuuri.

But then Yuuri came to a sudden halt, stopping Viktor in his tracks, too, blinking at the alarmed squeak that caught in Yuuri’s throat. He’d never seen him look quite like that. Except maybe when Viktor had threatened to go into his bedroom before. The startled color that flooded his cheeks and ears was similar, too, but that didn’t quite make sense, either.

Was he okay?

Yuuri took off again, this time more like Makkachin chasing the squirrels that have the nuts, charging up to a storefront window and peering inside. He was frantic again, body trembling, shopping bags flailing with every jerk of his arms. “This is perfect! Yeah yeah— this could work! This is it! Let’s go in here!”

The store in question was one that sold jewelry. María Dolores. He’d never known Yuuri to wear jewelry before. It didn’t seem to fit. A watch, maybe, but even then, this wasn’t the right kind of place for his style. The only thing that did make sense for Yuuri was a ring, but Viktor already had one of those for him, safely stored in his coat pocket.

Unless Yuuri meant to get something for Viktor.

Yuuri went on ahead, marching through the store with the determined brow furrow and nostril flare that he always had when his mind was absolutely made up. A man on a mission. It was something that Viktor loved and admired and knew would not be deterred. He also didn’t understand.

There wasn’t enough time to really process it. Yuuri finding the showcase with the rings and calling an associate over, pointing out the ones he wanted to see.
“Can I look at these two, these up front?”

The store was bright. So bright. Glittering things everywhere. Viktor stood by, watching the scene unfold in a sort of helpless daze as Yuuri compared two different bands, side by side, and selected one- a plain gold band, just like the one that he had in his pocket, just like the one he had for Yuuri -to keep.

Yuuri set it on the counter. There was a shuffle with his wallet. A bill fold. The bright lights all around.

It was so warm. So, so warm.

“This card, please. I’ll pay in installments.”

A ring. A gold ring. Yuuri was buying a gold ring. Why was he buying a ring? Why else would he be buying a ring? But why now? So soon, so suddenly?

And so much money all at once. For him?

Was it really for him?

_Love. Viktor._

Yuuri shuffled them both out of the store, the cold December air a welcome change to the stuffy shop and mind fog. It only did so much to clear his head, though. All Viktor could do was stare, waiting for an explanation, some kind of an anchor. He didn’t want to make any assumptions. Not with something so important.

But Yuuri didn’t say anything. He just took Viktor’s arm, looked around the darkening square, and then pulled him toward the Cathedral of the Holy Cross.

**Chapter End Notes**

Yurio: Oh, hey. The old man liked my post.
Mila: Which post?
Yurio: the fashion show one
Mila: omg
Mila: do you think he knows?
Yurio: he's balding, not stupid
Yurio: ehh... maybe
Mila: You should have invited me. I want to see what he has.
Yurio: no way, you hag. It's private stuff.
Mila: You posted it to INSTAGRAM
Yurio: yeh and I don't you think regret it every minute of my life?? my fans think I love feather boas and sparkly shit now
Mila: it serves you right, you know
Yurio: whatever, just promise they won't find me in here!

**ON THE NEXT GAY SKATE, The Secrets in Barcelona Edition:**
Bling / Proposals? / Confusion / PRESSURE!!!
Please look forward to it!

(Also, want to meet up with other NLA readers? Join the NLA Book Club on Discord!)
Chapter Summary

Yuuri impulsively changes his plan to wait until after the prix to propose to now. But for better or for worse? Also, what banquet is everyone talking about?

#phichit and yuuri road trip #miss steaks #the banquet #wolves #miscommunication #otabek appears #lies #shocking #injuries

Chapter Notes

Second chapter of Barcelona…
First one wasn’t too bad, but this is where it starts to get not so happy cozy fun times :); It’s on the shorter side, for our sake and yours. This chapter almost covers the rest of episode 10, can you believe it?! It’s also the conclusion of the Phichit & Yuuri College Adventure flashbacks :( Please love it with all your heart.

Gab: gOSH... my heart... I just... I can only apologize for my parts in this. Mamo has done such a good job and we have both suffered immensely. Hold on. Take care. It's only going to get worse from here, as she said. ‘)

ALSO: we're going to take a break in April and May to work on our manuscripts for the workshops that we're going to... I guess we couldn't put off the agents and editors forever. Wish us luck! We'll get back to the fanfics right after that. Thanks for your patience!

**NLA-Verse Side Stories**
- **Man on a Wire** - Is my ChrisBaz love story I’ve been dying to write. It’s a WIP, so keep up on the lookout for those updates!
- **From Me to You** - Mine and Gab’s submission for **Ice Speculation**, a zine dedicated to the YOI movie headcanons and wishes.

**NLA Gallery**
- **JJ’s Prayer Circle Flyer** from chapter 24 by Mizo!
- **Yuuri taking Viktor back to the hotel** from chapter 19 by Dyeingdoll
- **Vitya Diary doodles and a poolside Chris** by Quel as she continues to spoil us.

Thank you, friends <3

**Recommended listening:**
- **Dracula Lá**, by Alexandros
- **Barcelona**, by Jim Brickman
- **Un’Anima**, by Andrea Bocelli
- **Beautiful Eyes (acoustic version)**, by Cliff Targum

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Detroit, Chicago

Phichit (almost 19 years-old)

Phi+ChuChu: yeah, I don’t know

Phi+ChuChu: he’s been like this ever since he got back

Su.Chu: i hope it’s not contagious

Phi+ChuChu: if it was, I probably woulda caught it by now

Phi+ChuChu: and ciao ciao hasn’t been lying around like a lump that I’ve seen. He’s still yell-happy as always

Phi+ChuChu: maybe he needs to see the doctor

Su.Chu: who, your coach or your roommate?

Phi+ChuChu: I was talking about yuuri. Ciao ciao would probably need a vet he’s so hairy he’s like a werewolf omg remember the photos from Disneyland

Su.Chu: y e s i remember

Phi+ChuChu: maybe cupcakes

Su.Chu: or Viktor Nikiforov merchandise

Phi+ChuChu: idk it was Russia that got him in this funk in the first place and i somehow don’t think he got to make a connection with his fiancé despite being there a whole month

Phi+ChuChu: I don’t want to make him MORE DEPRESSED

Su.Chu: it sounds like a mess :(

Phi+ChuChu: the Olympics, ruining sensitive athletes’ spirits since 1896

The curtains stayed drawn in a show of protest against the sun for days. Yuuri was only taking online classes that semester, so he only left the apartment when he and Phichit had skating practice, and even then, it was only by Phichit’s nagging insistence. Mostly, the Thai skater found Yuuri in bed, at his desk, or on the floor. Usually, he was staring off into nothing. Sometimes he was sleeping.

Either way, there was definitely something wrong.

“Do you wanna talk about it, Yuuri?”

Yuuri shrugged, which really meant no, not really.

“Do you wanna at least change out of sweatpants today?”
That time, Yuuri sighed. He wasn’t feeling up to it.

Phichit knew something had happened at the Olympics, and it was probably more than the epic washout. Was it the politics? Maybe. Russia wasn’t very nice to people who were different, but Yuuri kept to himself, so he doubted anyone was mean to him. The hostile atmosphere, though…

“I could put on a dance mix? Maybe turn on the light, open the window. We could party.”

Yuuri grunted. He wasn’t into that idea, apparently.

Rocking back and forth, Phichit considered his options. “Pizza and Anastasia? We can get a side salad and pretend it’s healthy, too.”

Finally, Yuuri looked at him, and everything about him was tired. That alone was nearly enough to break Phichit’s heart, but then Yuuri put on a little pout and Phichit couldn’t handle it anymore.

“Yuuri! Stop! We’ll get whatever you want! Please! I’ll even go get Japanese carry-out, just stop being saaaaad!”

“Katsudon?” Yuuri whispered.

“Yeah. I’ll go pick it up, you get the movie ready, ‘kay?”

“Thanks, Phi.”

Ciao Ciao didn’t say anything about Yuuri’s recent weight gain, though it was obvious that he wanted to.

“He’s mad. I know it.”

“Maybe. But hey, you’re going outside again! That’s a plus, right? Go Katsuki!”

“I guess…”

Phichit turned up the volume on the Bug Mobile’s sound system, cruising back to their apartment after a day of grueling practice. “And besides, you’re getting better at those jumps. You’ll do better at Worlds!”

Sighing, Yuuri pressed his cheek against the window, frowning out at the cityscape as it passed. “I don’t want to think about it.”

“But your lover will be there, Yuuri! Your beautiful fiancé. That Russian. You know. Viktor.”

“I know who you’re talking about. And he’s none of those things. Except Russian.”

“He he. But you still like him, right?”

Blushing, Yuuri nodded. “Yeah. Wait, I mean, shut up.”

They never did talk much about the Olympics; Yuuri didn’t want to go into it. In the end, Phichit guessed it was mostly about culture shock. There’d been a lot of sticky politics at the Sochi games, and Ciao Ciao had plenty to complain about when he got back. None of it sounded like the kind of
thing Mr. Yuuri “I Hate Confrontation” Katsuki wanted to deal with.

“What was your favorite part, though?” Candace had finally managed to weasel her way into one of their practice sessions, and she was giddy despite Yuuri’s colder-than-usual prickliness. “Was it watching the ladies skate?”

Phichit and Yuuri spared each other a glance before looking away. It was too funny. As far as Phichit knew, Yuuri had nothing against the ladies. He’d even seemed to appreciate the aesthetics of the occasional girl. But it was really low key. In fact, the only person Yuuri ever showed any real interest in at all was Viktor.

He’d joked about Yuuri being Viktorsexual on more than one occasion, which usually ended with getting something—pillows, books, food—chucked at his head. It was worth it, though.

Yuuri coughed. “That was pretty neat, I guess, but—"

“I knew it!” Candace shrieked with laughter. “You probably love their short little skirts, you perv!”

“Hey.”

“Lol, Can, he was probably too busy hanging out with his hero to worry about that.”

“Oh right, Viktor Krum or whoever.”

Phichit put a hand on Yuuri’s arm to hold him back from murder and flashed a smile at her. “Yeah, that’s right. Anyway, come on, Yuuri! Let’s show her what we’re working on. Can, you record us, okay? I need some good photos for the newspaper.”

“Oh okay! But don’t be hurt if I mostly take them of Yuuri.”

“That’s kind of what I thought you’d do, so great! C’mon, Yuuri.”

Candace was impressed. Really impressed. And she tried to hang around as often as she could. It wasn’t as often as she liked, but way more often than Phichit or Yuuri could really stand. They went to great lengths to avoid her and made up every kind of excuse they could.

Which was really unsuccessful, because she had her own car, and she quickly became friends with Celestino, who thought it was good for the boys to have a fan. Especially one that was a girl.

“It’s like I keep saying to you; the both of you need to live a little! As long as you can still skate.”

Phi+ChuChu: boycott

Su.Chu: that’s what you get

Su.Chu: besides, mom would probably like it if you got a girlfriend

Phi+ChuChu: 1) no

Phi+ChuChu: 2) mom wouldn’t like HER

Phi+ChuChu: 3) no
Worlds came and went. Yuuri was reluctant to go, but Ciao Ciao dragged him along to compete with the promise of seeing Viktor again. He didn’t make it to the podium, but he did qualify for the Free Skate, and skated in group two. Viktor was in group one. Phichit cheered him on from Detroit, and was ready with an end of season bash when he returned, complete with pizza, snacks, and every skating movie he could think of.

“How was it watching Viktor this time?” Phichit asked during the credits of *Blades of Glory*. It was almost three AM, but they still had another three movies and more ice cream to go. “Better than the Olympics?”

“Yeah. It was great watching him win Worlds for the fourth time in a row… Phichit, he’s amazing.”

“That’s what I hear.”

“I just wish…”

Phichit canted his head to one side, hamster sliding until he caught her with his palm and set her on his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“I still don’t feel like a competitor… like I deserve to face him on the ice. I don’t know. I haven’t earned the chance to see him skate in person. Is that stupid?”

“You don’t feel like a rival yet, is what you’re saying.” Phichit hummed. “You’re still pretty young, Yuuri.”

“I’m twenty-two! This could be my last year.”

“Hey! You better not quit until I have a chance to skate against you.”

Yuuri frowned. “Right…”

“Ooh! Isn’t he doing another ice show in Canada this year? We could go see it. Just as spectators. All sneaky like.” Phichit set another one of his hamsters on Yuuri’s knee. “That would be okay, right?”

“I guess…”

“Then you’d enjoy it.”

“I’m not asking for an autograph, though.”
“I think you have enough of those already.”

Leo.Leo.Leo: how was the show?
Phi+ChuChu: omg you saw my photos right???
Leo.Leo.Leo: yeah :)
+guang-hong: I’m so jealous! It looks like so much fun
+guang-hong: are you guys driving for summer skate?
Phi+ChuChu: yep!
Phi+ChuChu: it’ll be a big ol’ best friends ROAD TRIP
Phi+ChuChu: we’ll stop along the way and go on wacky adventures and see all of America and hopefully not die
Phi+ChuChu: I’ve already started working on the playlists for it
Leo.Leo.Leo: cool :) 
+guang-hong: too bad i have to fly in
Phi+ChuChu: it would take a really long time to drive from China lol
+guang-hong: i guess
+guang-hong: maybe Leo and i could carpool some time
Phi+ChuChu: ride off into the sunset on a motorcycle…
+guang-hong: omg phichit !111
Leo.Leo.Leo: haha

Yuuri.K: it was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen. Viktor’s programs were different than what he did the whole rest of the season. It was like he took things from his previous years, all the way back to before his first Olympics routines, and did remixes, but all set to different music? You could tell, though, from the step sequences. Almost as if he wanted to give the programs another chance to “win” and the stories be told. Giving them new life. His costumes were much more like his earlier years, too; probably because the ISU regulations weren’t enforced in the same way. I wish he could have skated the whole time, but it was still themed so perfectly and all of his skates went together like a storybook.

Yuuri.K: so beautiful
Phi+ChuChu: …
Phi+ChuChu: lol there he goes
Leo.Leo.Leo: wow
+guang-hong: a novel
Leo.Leo.Leo: glad you had a good time

Phi+ChuChu: he’s crying again

Phi+ChuChu: he was crying the whole time we were there

Yuuri.K: IT WAS SO GOOD

Phi+ChuChu: don’t be ashamed of your feels

Yuuri.K: I’M NOT

Leo.Leo.Leo: good :)

+guang-hong: how far is it from California to Colorado anyway

Leo.Leo.Leo: about 17 hrs?

+guang-hong: your country is too big

Leo.Leo.Leo: wait— china is huge

Phi+ChuChuChuChu: our drive is 19 hrs unless we take the fun route

+guang-hong: “fun route”

+guang-hong: that sounds terrifying

Somehow, against all odds, the two roommates survived finals. Then partied because, as Phichit said, they “deserved it.”

“Didn’t you have online classes this semester, Yuuri?” Celestino asked, standing with arms folded in front of the bleachers. Neither of them felt much like skating after their night of junk food. It had been an all-night carbo load that they were definitely regretting.

Thankfully, Phichit came to Yuuri’s defense, since he could only groan. “Just because it’s not in a classroom doesn’t mean it’s easy, Ciao Ciao. I’m taking some online courses, too.”

“On top of everything else.”

“Well, yeah. But I wasn’t competing, either.”

The Italian coach rubbed his temples. “Do I have to start enforcing some kind of party policy for you two? It’s almost like you’re not taking this seriously.”

“Noooo…” whined Phichit. “We’ll be good!”

“I’m sorry, Coach Cialdini.”

“Your party times are over, si? No more junk food. No more slacking off.”

“But it’s summer break. Even Viktor takes a break in the summer, right Yuuri?”

“Actually, no…” Yuuri sighed as he dragged himself to his feet. “He probably has three programs ready for next season already if the rumors are true.”
“There, you see? No more excuses!”

“But it’s not confirmed—”

“Too bad!”

Viktor Nikiforov kept Yuuri motivated to stay on Celestino’s good side for the next several weeks, which meant that Phichit was guilted into doing the same. When Summer Skate finally came, their coach made it clear that he expected them to make the most of it— not treat it like a vacation.

“It’s an Olympic training facility… I’ve trained there myself. And coached. I expect you two to come back much better skaters, capisce?”

They understood, packed up the Bug Mobile, left their three hamsters in the care of their RA, and set out on the road for Colorado Springs.

It was a long drive.

At just under 1,300 miles, the journey took them two and a half days. Phichit was the only one who both knew how to drive and had a license, so he manned the wheel while Yuuri kept track of the playlists and GPS- not that there were that many turns. It was mostly I-80 West and straight on til morning.

Yuuri also took photos to keep Phichit’s instagram updated when they had signal.

“Sunan will kill me if I die,” Phichit shrugged. “So you gotta keep ‘em rolling, Yuuri.”

“But I’m not that good at it…”

“Don’t worry, this is just so that she knows we’re not dead. No one’s gonna think that you’re me. Haha, Yuuri. Now get a selfie of us- hold up your amulet.”

“Fine…”

Su had sent them both protective amulets to wear for the trip. She trusted Phichit’s driving well enough, but she still didn’t trust America.

They stayed in motels with good ratings and free wifi, ate at diners, and saw more than their fair share of roadkill. They sang show tunes at the top of their lungs, talked about Yuuri’s dream wedding to Viktor, plans for the next semester, and what things they needed to work on at the skate camp.

“Are we there yet?”

“You’re the one driving!”

“Ugh why didn’t we fly?!”

“You wanted a road trip!”

“This is the wooooorst! We’re not going to be able to skate by the time we get there!”
Fortunately, they survived the trip and arrived in relatively good condition. A little stiff, a little sore, but safe, happy, and ready to skate. They were greeted by Guang-Hong, who was the first of their friends to arrive.

“I saw all of the photos on Instagram! It looks like it was a long trip… all of those fields. Wow.”

“Yeah! I can’t wait to stretch my legs. Guess I better check us into the room, huh?” Phichit waved his wallet, smile glinting. “Let’s go.”

They’d booked a two bedroom suite at the local Marriott Residence Inn, which had a little kitchen, a king, a queen, and pull-out sofa bed. That was more than enough room for the group of friends to share, and let them split the cost quite nicely. Phichit and Yuuri would take the king bed, Leo’s friend Otabek would take the sofa, and they would leave the queen bed for Leo and Guang-Hong.

“I mean, if that’s how you guys want to arrange it,” Guang-Hong said, shrugging. He was trying to act nonchalant, but there was no hiding that tell-tale blush on his freckled face.

Yuuri was oblivious to this. “Phichit and I are used to each other. It’s fine.”

“As long as you two keep a bible between you, anyway,” Phichit teased, which only made the blushing worse. “I think there are one or two in the nightstand drawers if you need them.”

“Phichit!”

“Hahaha!”

Leo and Otabek came along a while later, both hauling a suitcase and duffel bag. Guang-Hong leapt to greet him, anxious and tittering, while Otabek looked vaguely uncomfortable about the whole thing. Phichit and Yuuri showed him where to put his stuff.

“We came with my coach,” Leo explained, unpacking his suitcase so he could get to his travel guitar. “She’s Otabek’s coach for now, too. He’s doing some great stuff. But it won’t be long until he heads back to Kazakhstan, right?”

Otabek hesitated a moment, then nodded without saying anything.

Leo patted his shoulder and handed him the guitar. “Anyway, did you guys bring your laptops? Since this place has wifi, I was thinking we could cool down with some games.”

“You mean we could kill each other— around the dinner table?” Guang-Hong’s eyes sparkled with something that had to be more than love.

“Yep.”

“So cool!”

“I’m in! Yuuri?”

“Yeah!”

They worked hard each day at camp, each skater putting in every ounce of energy they had to refining their techniques and breaking down what wasn’t working. Some greatly improved. Others
caved under pressure. It was a lot to take in all at once, but none of them had gone in with the expectation that it would be easy. Competitive skating was tough; something they had to be passionate about if they had any hope of getting anywhere near that podium.

“I don’t know if I like your coach, Leo.” Guang-Hong whispered in the locker room after practice. It’d been a week, and there were still several days to go. “She’s tough.”

Leo’s touch to his back was soft. Reassuring. A circular rub to his shoulder blade before he pulled it away. “She just wants you to be your best.”

Guang-Hong stammered a blushing concession, then looked over to make sure that Phichit wasn’t taking photos. When they weren’t practicing, they were being teased. It was driving him nuts. But in a good way.

Maybe.

Phichit snapped the photo of Guang-Hong’s shock, and returned the glare with a broad smile. “You two are so cute.”

“Phichit!”

Leo just laughed. “Ignore him, Guang-Hong.”

“Huh?” Yuuri looked over, toweling his hair off from his shower.

“Nothing, Yuuri.” Phichit snickered. “Hey, let’s go see a movie tonight.”

None of them were what one might call ‘party animals,’ even Phichit, though he was the most outgoing of all of them. The five roommates made good use of their free time, resting, watching TV, playing co-op or PVP games, breaking out cards in the room, going out to eat, just hanging around in the room, doing their own thing.

Leo sat in the corner with his guitar; Guang-Hong nearby, glued to his laptop; Yuuri on his phone; Otabek with a book; Phichit with his own phone, documenting all of it.

Su.Chu: I’m glad that you found a group of friends all as boring as you to keep you out of trouble omg

Su.Chu: maybe i didn’t need to send those amulets after all

Phichit+Chu: naw they came in handy! I ended up giving mine to otabek, the guy from kazakhstan?

Su.Chu: WHAT?

Phichit+Chu: yeah, it turns out that he has a rat!

Su.Chu: omfg

Phichit+Chu: right? She’s super super cute
Su.Chu: no that’s not what i was omfging about phi

Phichit+Chu: fellow rodent lovers gotta stick together, though, right? And he talked a bit about his journey once he opened up a little, which took FOREVER, and I thought he could use it!

Su.Chu: and a thai protection amulet is supposed to help?

Phichit+Chu: it can’t hurt!

Su.Chu: what about you?! what about getting home?!

Phichit+Chu: Yuuri and I can share!

Really, Sunan didn’t need to worry. The drive back was almost intensely boring. After the goodbyes to fellow ice-loving roommates, Yuuri and Phichit hit the road, ready and relieved to be going home.

Yuuri slept or read. Phichit listened to music and watched the endless fields of wheat sweep by.

They went through Kansas and Missouri instead of Nebraska and Iowa, but they were both so tired that they couldn’t even really appreciate the differences.

“Road trips take a really long time...”

“I KNOW, RIGHT? I can’t even check my phone! What could be going on in the world?! I’m missing everything!”

“I was going to say that this was kind of nice.”

“Yuuri!!!”

The only excitement they ran into was one miscommunication at a hole in the wall pancake place that was probably some small-time mafia’s meeting spot, but it all worked out in the end.

Their apartment was just as they remembered; quiet, tidy, and full of hamsters. With Candace gone and no classes until fall, all Phichit and Yuuri had to worry about for the rest of summer was binging on netflix and preparing for the upcoming skating season. AKA, the best things in life.

All of that changed when the Canadian attacked.

“Welcome back, I hope your trip was good. Before we begin, I want to introduce you two to your new rinkmate for the next few weeks...” Celestino said, standing in front of the door from the locker room to the rink.

Both Yuuri and Phichit lifted brows at their coach. They knew that there had been summer camps going on, but having a rink mate skating with them was unusual. Did they need to be warned, though?

“His name is Jean-Jacques Leroy and he was supposed to be in my advanced class, but I had to pull him out for reasons. So I will have him skate with you two.” The tired Italian man grimaced,
considering how that sounded, then made an addendum. “That way, there will be plenty of rink to share.”

“Oh… okay.”

Out on the evening ice, there was only the one skater to speak of; a dark-haired teen with a bright smile and enthusiasm to spare.

Skates on, they gathered into a corner of the rink to watch his routine in admittedly impressed silence. The kid had serious skill and zero fear.

They observed him quietly for probably thirty seconds before he noticed them.

“HEY FELLAS!” Jean-Jacques called, waving an arm as he sprinted in their direction, blades cutting reckless scars into the ice. Once he was close enough to the group, he threw himself into a spin and pulled out with a flair that sent a spray of sparkling ice into the watching crowd. It left the teenager in a crouched finishing pose, thumb and fingers crooked into crooked Js. “I’m JJ, your worst nightmare.”

Celestino rubbed his temples with a sigh of true long suffering while Phichit and Yuuri only blinked, now fully understanding their coach’s concern.

Summer would not be restful after all. But at least they had their Fourth of July party (“Canada’s Independence Day is the REAL holiday!”), their friendship anniversary, plenty of parties on and around campus to avoid, and no one was going to take away their internet connection.

Really, though, JJ wasn’t all bad, either.

He was loud, he was competitive, and he was kind of a bully, but it was all in the name of a laugh. If they ignored him, he was quick to be put out. If they fought back— as Ciao Ciao often did—JJ only seemed to enjoy it more.

“He’s all about the reaction, I think,” whispered Phichit. He and Yuuri were sitting close together on the bleachers, listening to JJ and Ciao Ciao on another one of their yelling matches, the sound of both rising voices echoing on and on in the massive, empty space.

“I think you’re right.”

“Like a… Puppy or something.”

“A labrador.”

“Yeah, like a labrador!” Phichit grinned. “Do you think he’s just lonely, then?”

“Maybe.”

“Go be his friend, Yuuri.”

“I’m already his friend.”

“What? Since when?”

Yuuri shrugged. “He hasn’t tried to rob us, so that’s nice.”
“Wow, Yuuri. A real connoisseur of friendship.”

Leo.Leo.Leo: ok we’re here
Phichit+Chu: OKAY GET READY FOR THIS
+guang-hong: the daily jj
Phichit+Chu: all I said was ‘mai pen rai’ and he was like
Phichit+Chu: YOU MEAN MAI PEN BYE AMIRITE
Phichit+Chu: like he was some big boss on campus
Phichit+Chu: and we all just sort of stared at him because who does that right?
Leo.Leo.Leo: wow
Phichit+Chu: so then I said ‘nm let’s try hakuna matata’
Phichit+Chu: and you know what he does????
Phichit+Chu: HE LAUNCHES INTO HAKunA MATATA AND DOES A WHOLE SKATE ROUTINE RIGHT THERE AND THEN WITH aLL OF THESE VOICES and he’s actually a pretty good singer I was impressed
Phichit+Chu: I’M NOT KIDDING
Phichit+Chu: IT WAS AMAZING
+guang-hong: how come you guys get all of the interesting stories???
Yuuri.K: america
Yuuri.K: I’m still in shock
Phichit+Chu: super shook
Phichit+Chu: he was born to be on broadway
+guang-hong: what did your coach think?
Phichit+Chu: Ciao Ciao? They got into a big fight so he’s shipping JJ back to Canada to cool off.
Phichit+Chu: also summer camp is over
+guang-hong: oh
Phichit+Chu: what IS JJ style anyway? It sounds like a sandwich or some kind of hot dog topping
+guang-hong: omg
Yuuri: maybe a fighting style
Leo.Leo.Leo: i don’t think you’re wrong about that
The first week of August, Phichit packed a suitcase. “Take good care of them, Yuuri.”

“I will.”

“I mean it. You know they like their yogurt drops, but you can’t spoil them.” Phichit hesitated, plastic pouch of strawberry treats crinkling in his hands. “Well, maybe a little.”

“Don’t worry. Phi.”

“Okay.” He sniffled as he surrendered them. “Be good, my little angel babies… I’ll miss you!”

“I’ll remind them of you as I feed them sunflower seeds so they never forget. Oh, and I’ll take care of the shrine, too.”

“You’re the best, Yuuri!”

It’d only been a year and change, but it felt like forever since Phichit had been home in Thailand. Going back for a visit was long overdue, and there was a lot of catching up to do. His family met him at the airport and it rained and rained and rained from the moment they got home, pretty much until Celestino and Yuuri joined them weeks later for the Thai Nationals. But they didn’t mind; they were all used to it, and the hot, humid greens and gray mixed with the drumming of rain was comforting. Much better than the more temprid Detroit.

Thailand was home.

Especially with his best friend and coach there, too.

They returned to Detroit victorious. Phichit had done well; well enough to qualify for the prix! That meant his training was really going to ramp up.

“I can’t wait to compete against you in the Grand Prix, Yuuri! Finally!”

“It’s about time. Last year wasn’t nearly as fun.”

The pair jumped into their season preparation- and their academic studies -with as much enthusiasm as they had. Almost JJ levels of enthusiasm. But not quite.

“Yuuri, I was thinking. I want to do a program to Shall We Skate?”

It was one of those nights, after practice but before they were going to force themselves to do homework, with both boys, and hamsters, on Yuuri’s bed, the next skating season looming with possibilities.

Yuuri smiled at him, soft, waiting for him to continue.

“The leading actor in the movie is from Thailand, but no Thai skater has ever used the music in a program before!” This wasn’t new information; Phichit had explained it all a hundred times before to Yuuri, even outside of their rewatches of the film, but Phichit was a million miles away, and there, and nowhere all at once. The perfect, poignant moment. It was important; it needed to be said. He turned to look at Yuuri again, suddenly present once more, pulling him in with the glow of
his smile. “Some day, though, I'll skate to it at a major competition. And you'll be there, too, Yuuri!”

He nodded. Of course he would.

“I’m going to start working on it now… why not, right?”

“You’re pretty good, so sure!”

“Ha! Yuuri! What about you?”

Yuuri stretched out, taking the little plush poodle from beside him and pulled it into his lap, considering. “I’m not sure.”

“Whatever, you probably have it all worked out like your fiance does.”

“Phichit…”

“Just tell me.”

“Well… I was thinking maybe I could have an original song this time.”

Phichit gasped. “Like Viktor does?!”

Yuuri blushed.

“That’s a great idea!”

“Only…”

“What? What?!”

“I don’t think I can write it myself. I’m not… well, I think it would be too much…?”

“OMG SAY NO MORE. You have that friend of yours in class, right? What was her name…”

“Alo-”

“Alondra!”

“Yeah.”

“Ask her!”

Yuuri covered his face with the poodle. “I can’t do that! I’ll sound so dumb.”

“This is so stupid. Yuuri! Fine! I’ll ask her first. You hold the hamsters.” Phichit carefully set Lotus, Kanda, and Preeda on Yuuri’s shoulders and head. Then he got out his phone and set to rapid-fire texting. “Okay and done. Now we wait.”

“Uh… You had her number?”

“Yep.”

*Ding-chi-ding!*

“Is that her?”
“Yep. She says she’d love to meet and talk to you about your project. See? Nothing to worry about, Yuuri!”

“What did you tell her?”

Phichit scrolled back. “I said: Hi Alondra! Remember Yuuri, your fellow conservatory classmate? He wants to ask you to write him a song for his skating program, but he’s dumb and scared to because he thinks you’ll say no, so I’m asking on his behalf to shield him from the pain of rejection. Thoughts?”

Groaning, Yuuri buried his face again, which prompted Phichit to take his hamsters back.

Alondra was on board. She worked with Yuuri to get ‘song of his career’ together while Phichit and Celestino began to coordinate a grand debut for *Shall We Skate?*, which Phichit was over the moon about.

Candace agreed that both programs were going to be amazing. “But I don’t know how I’m going to choose a side to cheer for!”

“You don’t really have to choose a side, Can,” Phichit laughed. “You can cheer for us both!”

“Yeah. We’re competing but only one of us is on the ice at one time.”

The blonde hummed, pursing her lips as she considered that. “Okay. Well I still wish you both could win, though I think Yuuri’s is a little more original.”

“Considering that it’s a literal original composition? I mean, maybe, but mine is for historical significance.” Phichit sniffed. “Okay, Yuuri, is the camera set up?”

“Yep, it’s ready.”

They’d been working hard on their programs for weeks, but their first events weren’t until November, so they still had a little bit of time. That was the best thing about being in a senior-level competition, and made all of the other qualifiers totally worth it. Any spare moment that they weren’t doing homework, they were spending in the rink, doing drills and perfecting their more impressive moves. Scheduling extra sessions was the only way they were going to get any good.

Especially when their coach wasn’t around.

“Okay. So we’ve seen my attempt at the battery of quads- don’t laugh, Yuuri; I know where you sleep -but I think I can nail this one…”

Candace yawned from the bleachers. “Is it going to be Yuuri’s turn after this?”

Phichit and Yuuri both rolled their eyes. “Yes, Candace.”

“Oh!”

The Thai skater shimmied his shoulders as he maneuvered backwards to get some room, making sure that the shot would be perfectly framed for social media, grinned at the camera, and struck a pose not unlike JJ’s signature move. “This is Phichit Chulanont doing Backflips on Ice.”

“Woo!” said Yuuri, and angled the camera like the professional he was not.
Phichit kicked off the ice for speed and set up his jump, just as he’d practiced a hundred times, but instead of doing his regular, tried and true moves, when he turned a flip into an actual flip, went up and over and down—HARD.

The sound echoed in the frigid, staring silence.

Everything was black.

They walked close, passing stalls of food and wares. If there was another place selling the nuts out this way, Yuuri would buy them with his own money. Though actual food was starting to sound good, too. But a gift for Viktor… something special. Most of what was on display in the market belonged to a Christmas that neither of them celebrated. The atmosphere was at least romantic.

Soon they were approaching the edge of the stalls and a store that was stationary came into view. The lights from the streets and the awning from above shone on the glass window display.

Jewelry.

Yuuri stopped in his tracks, cheeks and ears burning at the realization.

Before Viktor could ask what the sound that came out of his mouth meant, Yuuri rushed to the window, searching the jewelry pieces. Necklaces, bracelets, earrings, pearls, diamonds, and--

“Ah, yes this is perfect. This could work, yeah.” Hands still on the window, Yuuri turned his head to Viktor, who still hadn’t moved. “This is it! Let’s go in here.”

Viktor followed after Yuuri into the María Dolores, but kept his distance. Yuuri didn’t blame him; it was a confusing situation even for him.

Before leaving Japan, Yuuri had it in his mind that he’d propose after the prix, a reward for victory. But seeing the rings, standing in the shop… what if Viktor wearing a ring was the strength he’d need to get gold? A reminder of what they were fighting for.

“Can I look at these two, these up front?” Yuuri pointed to two different rings once an associate took notice of him.

Both were simple, smooth gold bands; one having a slightly different finish than the other. Less flashy was for the best. Less attention grabbing, and, if there were too many options, they’d be in the shop all night or Yuuri would lose his nerve. Already his heart fought to break free from his chest.

Proposal. Gift. Good luck charm?

He’d always wanted one of those.

The associate’s English wasn’t the best, but she was good at reading Yuuri’s urgency.

Yuuri made his selection and with a shaky hand fished for his wallet in his coat pocket. After struggling to remove his credit card from its slot, Yuuri placed it inside the billfold, not even bothering to look at the total. “This card, please. I’ll pay in installments,” his voice much firmer.
and sure than he felt.

Holding the ring box in both hands, Yuuri came back to Viktor who stared at him with bewilderment. He’d just watched him purchase a ring, surely he knew what was going to happen next.

No point in prolonging it, now.

Pocketing the ring, he took hold of Viktor’s arm and led him outside. Fresh air awoke half of Yuuri’s senses - fortunately sight being one of them - and he looked from left to right. Where to go, where to go…?

*La Sagrada Familia* was out, but there had been another impressive cathedral they’d passed, just across the square. It wasn’t the same, but Yuuri hoped it’d be enough.

A choir from the Holy Cross Cathedral - or were they just carolers? - in Santa hats and antlers stood in front of steps that lead to a fenced off nook of sculptures.

Yuuri set the collection of shopping bags down at their feet, then straightened, relieved from the weight. The absence reminded Yuuri of how cold it was, his breath leaving a cloud.

The voices of the choir filled the silence, creating an ethereal echo around them in their impromptu sanctuary from the world. A safe place to ask the most important and life changing of questions. It was beautiful and peaceful, golden glow like the ring he held in his pocket. Yuuri was grateful for how the singing had allowed his mind to catch up with himself.

It was too late. He had to do this now.

“H-hold out your hand…”

Viktor looked at Yuuri, wide-eyed, almost a little frightened, but willing. After a moment’s pause, he lowered his gaze, and watched the rising of his own right hand.

Yuuri hadn’t specified which one, but Viktor must have understood. Discreet, but it still meant that Yuuri intended to keep him. A promise for someday, when they would be free to have a ceremony. At competitions, Viktor always wore gloves, so their love would remain safely hidden until then.

Yuuri peeled off Viktor’s glove. Placing it in the crook of his arm, he opened the ring box, then placed both glove and box into his pocket, trying to ignore the tremor in his own hands and the weight of Viktor’s eyes now on him.

He’d held Viktor’s hands so many times before now, but in that moment, much like many in the last week, it was so poised and dainty. Elegant at a moment’s notice. And Yuuri was a prince asking his princess to spend his life with him. Separating his pinky from his fourth finger, shakily Yuuri slipped the ring into place.

The cathedral bells tolled.

Yuuri found his voice when the bells concluded their hourly task, quiet and reverent like the church they stood outside of, keeping his gaze at their hands. “Thank you Viktor, for everything you’ve done. I… I wanted to get you something and this was the best thing I could think of.”

He paused and chanced a quick glance up at his lover who *kept staring, eyes now* focused on the ring. The silence and reserved emotion wasn’t encouraging. Did Viktor not understand what Yuuri was saying or was he just… shocked?
He couldn’t help feeling a little smug at being able to surprise Viktor to silence, but in this moment, it was odd for Viktor to be quiet for so long. Especially in what Yuuri thought was a romantic gesture, fulfilling a fairytale ending!

Maybe he really had screwed up.

“Anyway, I’ll uh, do my best tomorrow on, so… tell me something?”

Gently Yuuri let their hands fall as he awaited a response, cheeks flushed and body tense.

Waiting. The choir’s voices continued to surround them.

“Okay,” Viktor finally said, voice soft like the glove that reached for Yuuri’s hand and held it the way he had held his moments ago. “I’ll tell you something you won’t even have to think about.” With his bare fingers, Viktor held a gold ring and guided it onto Yuuri’s finger. “Tomorrow, show me the skating you can honestly say that you liked best.”

A ring? How did Viktor-- when did Viktor--

Tearing his eyes away from the ring to his lover -no, fiance- his once unreadable face now a bore smile, soft and loving.

He’d understood! Through all Yuuri’s abrupt actions and frazzled state, Viktor knew what he’d meant. Had he planned to propose in Barcelona, too?

Did he want to keep Yuuri?

Viktor never ceased to surprise him.

An emotional “Okay!” was the best Yuuri could give him. Too surprised. Too happy. Too overwhelmed. So many years of being teased about marrying Viktor, and it was going to happen.

Chest warm and being both light and heavy, Yuuri descended the steps with Viktor close behind him, but stopped after just a few. He looked to Viktor’s face - eyes bright and doe-like - to their entwined fingers, then he went up one step for a small height advantage to give Viktor a kiss.

Their first kiss as an engaged couple.

Viktor suppressed a giggle, his cheeks matching his rosey nose from the chill in the air.

Little nods and smiles from the small audience they hadn’t realized they had greeted them as they made their way down the steps. They saw everything, but Yuuri and Viktor were too happy to do anything about it then and put an arm around each other to head back to the market, sharing the load of the shopping bags.

“I’m getting hungry,” Yuuri admitted. He’d been hungry when the nuts went missing, but had forgotten all about his stomach as soon as his plans had abruptly changed.

“Let’s go grab something to eat.”

A quick Google search had them heading towards the south parts of town. As the restaurant came into view, they spotted two familiar women peering through the window.

“Oh, it looks like Minako and Mari are already here. What are you two doing?”
The women responded by pouncing and screaming in unison: “YUURI WE NEED A HUGE FAVOR.”

Yuuri understood how big of fangirls the two of them could be, but asking to convince Yurio, Otabek, Phichit, and Christophe to “have dinner with them” was a bit much. It was worth a shot, Yuuri supposed. They were all friends, and half of them were at the restaurant already. Yuuri sent Phichit and Chris a text with the location of the restaurant while the four of them went inside to find Yurio, who wasn’t thrilled to have his dinner be interrupted.

Otabek was a lot like Yuuri and Viktor in that he wasn’t one to socialize with the other skaters, so it surprised Yuuri to see him hanging out with his Russian brother. They did both needed friends.

Not long after Yuuri’s phone vibrated with confirmation of his Thai and Swiss friend coming, the pair showed up shortly after one another. The hostess moved their party to the covered patio area.

Minako and Mari expressed their thanks by sobbing onto the table.

“Way to play it cool, guys…” Yuuri sighed.

“Ugh, why do we all have to eat together?” Yurio complained for the third time since agreeing.

The table was kind of small, but with no reservation, it was the least that could be done to accommodate their large party. Menus were brought and the hungry skaters placed their orders. Despite the large group, their food arrived promptly.

“It’s kind of weird huh? All of us hanging out together like this before a competition. A lot different from last year.” Yuuri took a sip of his drink in his reminiscing. “I was always on my own then. The banquet, too. I didn’t even have the courage to talk to Viktor.”

To his right, Viktor did a spit take of his beer and clinked the mug on the table. “Yuuri, you don’t remember?”

“How?” Remember what?”

From Phichit’s other side, Chris spoke up, amused. “At the banquet you got wasted on champagne and started dancing. Everyone was watching.”

What?

“That was disgusting as hell,” Yurio scoffed. “I got dragged into a dance off, it was humiliating!”

“Dance off, you’re kidding! Say you’re kidding…” This all had to be a joke. How were they all in on this?

“It’s true, I danced with a pole and got naked. Well, mostly.” Chris was all too pleased about his confession.

What kind of wild night was it? Why was it allowed to continue? Holding his head, Yuuri wracked his brain. “Something happens when I drink… I go off the rails just like my dad does and things can get crazy. I try not to have too much.” Why didn’t anyone stop him? Was he the only one that didn’t know?

Viktor held up his phone. “I still have videos of what happened~”

Yuuri covered his scream with his hands. Viktor knew all this time and didn’t say anything? Had
been carrying evidence...

“Me too!” Chris flashed his phone to Phichit. “But they’re not for the faint of heart~”

Curious and cheeks flushed, Phichit took what was offered. “Are you serious? Yuuri that’s so dirty!”

This prompted Minako and Mari to peer over their shoulders. “Yeah, we’re going to have to see that.”

Out of anyone, them seeing whatever obscene thing he was doing was the worst. Yuuri uselessly waved his arms. “NO NO NO DON’T LOOK, I’M BEGGING YOU. PLEASE LEAVE ME MY DIGNITY!” If he had any left at all!

Viktor was showing Otabek his phone, but the Kahkzstanian was quiet in his observation, thankfully. “Isn’t this amazing?” Viktor was praising him, but--

“So what’s with the rings you boys are wearing?” Chris looked at them fondly, hand on his cheek.

Of course Chris would be the one to notice. With their right hands being their dominant one, they wouldn’t be the easiest to hide. At least Viktor--- wait, he hadn’t put back on his glove and had taken off the other one?!


“Since when do you wear jewelry?” Minako cocked a brow.

Clutching his fingers with his left hand, Yuuri tried to change the subject, sweating. He had to protect Viktor, his fragile deer! “Um. I don’t know what you’re talking about…”

Viktor, however, was more than happy to share. “They’re a matching pair!”

There was a beat of silence and then Phichit gasped, eyes wide, Yuuri almost thought he saw a lightbulb above his head. “CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR MARRIAGE!” he clapped enthusiastically.

It was sweet; Phichit knew Yuuri’s feelings since forever, but he didn’t want him to announce it to the world! “Wait… no-”

“EVERYBODY! MY GOOD FRIEND HERE JUST GOT MARRIED WOOHOO!”

The surrounding patrons clapped for them, saying their congratulations in broken English and Spanish. Otabek was the only one that clapped at their table. Yurio was in shock, Mari and Minako seemed confused, Chris was pleased, and Phichit was proud.

Yuuri’s efforts to keep their engagement underwraps was going horribly. He didn’t want the attention, not yet! The more people that knew, the more dangerous it could be for Viktor. “No, stop, really! It’s a good luck charm! And a thank you! You know, there are layers. YEAH layers! “

“Yeah, don’t get the wrong idea.” Viktor brandished his right hand with a flourish, gold ring catching in the light, though there was something dark in his voice. “This is an engagement ring. We’ll get married once he wins the gold medal. Right, Yuuri?”

“Um… what did you just say?”
Viktor was just excited, right? There was no way he’d suddenly be okay about being open about their relationship. Wait, did he just…

Yuuri’s body felt his body stiffen then creak like gears as he turned to face the thick tension that replaced the celebratory atmosphere.

Icy wolf stares, all hungry for the same prize. Viktor’s words set their fangs on him.

The pressure of competition Yuuri had been able to push aside for most of the trip came crashing back.

“You’re kidding me, right?” JJ’s habit of appearing when Yuuri really needed a distraction was becoming a godsend. “I’ll be the one winning gold and getting married. I hate to break it to you guys.”

“That’s right, JJ is obviously going to win,” his fiancee Isabella boasted, cuddling up to him.

“Sorey we can’t congratulate you. Guess the wedding’s off!”

It was the same tactic Viktor had just used, yet the others didn’t raise their hackles at him. Instead they stood up from their seats and started to leave, ignoring all of JJ’s calling after them to say it was a joke.

If only Viktor’s words had been.

The skaters parted ways at the street corner and headed back to their respective rooms. Once Viktor and Yuuri were alone, it felt colder.

“Let’s head back, too, Yuuri,” Viktor said, smile incredibly forced.

Why was Viktor mad? He wasn’t the one that had an hour or whatever from his life be kept from him. It wasn’t worth getting into it out in public. Yuuri fell into step with him for a few moments and then asked. “Can I see those photos from the banquet?” He tried to sound a careful amount of annoyed, but mostly curious and confused.

Viktor considered for several painful seconds and then started tapping on his phone through his photo galleries.

Would Viktor have kept this from him forever? What reason would he have?

Eventually Viktor found the gallery in question and handed it over, if a little hesitant.

In the first photo, already Yuuri could tell he was drunk. Cheeks flushed and eyes glassy and distant. Dancing in a crowd of people uninhibited. He’d danced in this college courses, yes, but to show off at an event like a banquet? At least with skating there was a barrier between the audience. How had he not seen any of this appear online? Skaters loved to tag each other at events. Maybe they knew how humiliated he’d be.

Yurio was trained in ballet, so he easily looked at home in some of these photos, but others, like break dancing, he clearly was trying his best to mimic. The teen was determined, but after spending more time with him, he also looked to be enjoying it.

The further Yuuri scrolled, the more viewpoints he saw. All that were at the banquet must have
sent their photos to Viktor. Did he request them or did they send them on their own? Or hoard them from their accounts when they were posted.

Dancing in a crowd of people with Yurio shifted to pole dancing with Chris with his “hideous tie” wrapped around his head and stripped to his boxers with his white dress shirt opened. Why was there a pole in a hotel?! Pole dancing was a passion he shared with his Swiss friend, but never would he have shown off if he weren’t drunk!

Then Yuuri - the drunken Yuuri from a year ago - was pressing himself against the front of Viktor’s suit.

They were dressed and dancing together, stances more refined despite how tired and hammered Yuuri was sure he was after all the previous activity.

Gradually Viktor and Yuuri’s dances got more and more intimate, which explained so much from the time they danced at the station and Minako’s studio. How dancing then felt so natural. Now it was like deja vu - seeing the photos of a life he didn’t remember living. But little by little Yuuri could recall some of that heat. The sound of the crowds cheering. The smell of Viktor’s cologne. The bile that threatened to vacate before passing out.

Yuuri handed Viktor his phone back without a word.

If Phichit were there, he wouldn’t have kept it a secret… would he?

What reason was there for Viktor to not say anything? Unless something else happened that night that wasn’t photographed. Drunk off his ass and dancing was embarrassing, but it was overall harmless, so why?

Viktor inserted the keycard and let them into their hotel, guiding the door to shut quieter at the late hour.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Yuuri asked, toeing off his shoes, and setting the shopping bags down at the entryway.

The fake smile Viktor had been trying to keep on his face finally dropped. Yuuri wasn’t going to let him avoid it, not anymore. They both knew, now. “Okay, sure. Let’s talk about it.” He too slipped off his shoes and unraveled his scarf. Stiff. “It looked like you’d been dragged by your coach. Crushed by defeat, so you started drinking. You challenged Yurio to a dance battle, like he said. Danced on the pole with Chris, like he said. Then challenged me.” Viktor took a step towards him and reached for Yuuri’s hands, guiding them around his waist as they had been that night. “‘Be my coach’, you said.”

Yuuri allowed the positioning, watching Viktor, digesting his serious tone and depiction of the banquet a year ago. Echoes of his drunken slurs…

“I didn’t know what to do. You were so… desperate...? Eager. Sincere. And before I knew it, we were dancing.” Viktor removed Yuuri from his middle and placed them in dancing positions from that night. Pulling, twirling, stretching, every made up or actual dance stance from the photos, only mirrored, with Viktor in the lead

Like the photos, the motions stirred the memories inside Yuuri. Shifting from a hazy dream to watching from the other side of the glass to being part of it.

Viktor hummed a tune that sounded very similar to Eros for a few measures, then continued his recollection. “We went around the banquet room, all eyes on us. For the first time in years I felt
alive, a fire burning, each touch of your hands--" Viktor brought up his leg to touch his thigh and
up to his back. The heat was immediate and Yuuri blushed. "like licking flames, spreading the
heat through me and your arms, so strong, held me like I was nothing, something I didn't think I'd
ever feel. I was giddy. Hopeful. And something else, like a long forgotten memory stirring at
every sensuous touch…"

His breath was at Yuuri’s throat as he spoke, dipping him low to the ground, bodies pressed tight.

“And then--”

Yuuri opened his eyes, anticipating...

“You let go.”

He was dropped onto his back. It wasn’t a big fall, but the impact was enough to get the point
across. “But I was drunk.”

“Exactly.” Viktor offered his hand. “You announced that you’d won and passed out after that. We
made sure you got back to your room safely, but that was that.”

“I do remember waking up that morning, clearly. Not what caused my body to be so sore, but now
it makes sense.” Once on his feet, Yuuri paused and waited for Viktor to meet his gaze, then took
his hand. “If you knew I didn’t remember, why didn't you say anything?”

The anchoring of his hand didn’t keep Viktor from looking away. Caught and guilty. He said
nothing.

“Now after seeing the photos and you telling me how it went, I'm getting glimpses. But all that
time in Hasetsu? Did you think I wouldn't believe you?’

His silver brows furrowed. “You could hardly stand to be around me. I didn't think adding that
would help.”

Oh. “It was like... being close to the sun. I'd lost my chance to skate with you. I'd given up. I was
ashamed. And then there you were, wanting to help me for some reason. It never was just my
video, was it? I had no idea.”

“Once I realized you didn't remember, I let it go. You were drunk. I came to be your coach because
you asked. I believed in you, Yuuri. Like I’ve said. And I would have done my best to get you to
the grand prix final whether you ever felt anything for me or not.”

“But I did feel things. Not at first like you were wanting, though.”

“Which is… fine… Like I said. Should I have told you?”

“Yes. Especially after I did return your feelings. You’ve kept this to yourself and it’s made you
upset now that I know.”

Viktor fell quiet for a moment, mulling over an answer. He sighed and looked up at him. “Yuuri...why did you tell them it wasn't an engagement ring? Or isn’t it?”

Oh. Was that the real reason he was upset? “It is! I just... wasn't expecting you to tell them. Yet,
anyway. Y-you didn't answer my question.”

Again Viktor considered, setting his jaw. “I didn't tell you about the banquet, Yuuri, because I
realized I'd just impulsively thrown my entire life and career away for a request that you didn't even remember making and that there'd be a greater chance of success if I cut my losses and focused on the goal instead. You can't be blamed for my misjudgments. Anyway it doesn't matter now, does it?”

Yuuri frowned, thinking it over. Knowing sooner wouldn't have changed anything, other than not having this hurtful conversation right and they could be celebrating their engagement instead. “I guess not.” It still didn’t explain why he didn’t tell him after they became a couple. “It’s worked out, so it’s fine. I’m here at the finals, right? I wanted you to coach me before I realized I really did. Drinking makes me really dumb, this is why I try not to at competitions.”

“I know.”

“Anything else that happened that I should know about?”

Viktor blinked at him, shocked and offended. “No! We took you back to your room, like I said. Nothing happened. Yurio and I dropped you off. Chris was the one that got your room number. That was all. Your coach was missing. We just wanted to make sure you got back safely. But nothing happened.”

He hadn’t meant to be so accusing, but he sighed of relief. “Okay. That's good. I was not happy with Ciao Ciao that morning.”

“You don't think I would have done anything, do you? You know I'm not like that. Right? Yuuri?”

His hand squeezed his, desperate and searching his face.

Even though Viktor had lied to him for months, Yuuri knew he wasn’t like that. “No! Of course not. I was just making sure I didn't do anything else. Maybe I broke something? Maybe I hurt someone.”

“No,” Viktor’s voice cracked, maybe out of fatigue. “Nothing else.”

“So many people were there... and nobody told me about this. Maybe they all thought I’d remember.”

“People like you, Yuuri. No one wants to embarrass you.”

“I guess so. Still, I’m sorry I didn’t remember, Viktor. I’d never want to hurt you.”

He shook his head and donned a fake smile. “It's fine, Yuuri. Anyway, what does it matter, right?” Viktor lifted his free hand, the one bearing the ring.

Why did Viktor bother with the fake smiles? Yuuri knew he was still upset. At least this was over something that was Yuuri’s fault. “Viktor... I.” It was now Yuuri’s turn to be quiet and bite his lip. He’d gone against his original plan. It was impulsive, sure, but he’d meant it all. He still wanted Viktor. “Well. I wanted to wait until after the finals... when I had the gold. But then I thought some motivation would be good. A physical sign, like a good luck charm? I wasn’t making light when I said a charm. Charms hold a power in them, too. When you told everyone there, I panicked.”

“...Clearly.”

“I thought you'd keep it on the downlow like you have with our relationship as a whole. I thought we were on the same page there. I guess I underestimated how excited you’d be.” Yuuri brought up his own ring finger to admire, with a genuine little smile. “Then you surprised me.”
Color rose to Viktor’s pale cheeks and he pouted. Out of guilt or embarrassment? “Ahem. Well I don't know what yours meant, I guess, but I meant what I said. About marrying you. So it's a good thing you do well under pressure, isn't it?”

“I meant what I said! ...M-meant what I meant.”

“I still don't know what you want, Yuuri.” Viktor relented with a shake of his head. “Anyway, you should get some rest for the short program tomorrow.”

All Yuuri could do was nod. It was obvious Viktor didn’t want to talk about it anymore and Yuuri really did need rest. He’d screwed up so much already tonight, he didn’t trust himself anymore. Not when Viktor was so defensive and stuck in hiding behind coach mode. They couldn’t keep going like this, it was an exhausting circle.

It hurt.

It hurt that Viktor wouldn’t talk to him about it like a boyfriend, a fiance.

“Should we see if there are any soaps on?” Viktor broke the silence. “Spain usually has some good ones. I could call down for a night cap, too. What do you think?”

His tone was lighter, the more eager and willing kind, at least. “Sounds good, Coach,” Yuuri forced his own smile, hoping Viktor was being careless about the nightcap offer and not jabbing.

“Oh right,” Viktor realized. “I just meant for myself. Since you don’t drink before competitions.”

“That's fine.” Yuuri let go of his hand.

When the champagne arrived, the pair sat on the bed and watched and didn’t watch the soap opera.

The soap opera megaverse was something Viktor shared with Yakov. Yuuri tried, but he also didn’t feel right trying to replicate and experience what he had with his father figure. Having something else to fill in the awkward silence was nice, at least.

Their eyes were forward at the television, but their hands played with the new rings on their fingers.

Yuuri wanted to ask when Viktor got his ring. He wanted to ask if Viktor understood that his ring was an engagement ring, too. What did Viktor want to do after the prix?

Too many questions with too many accompanying anxieties.

Yuuri really wanted to go for a run.

But if he left Viktor alone, would that make things worse? Even when back in Hasetsu when things were better between them, leaving in the middle of conversation made him upset.

They both needed some air.

As if reading his mind, Viktor got out of bed, though said nothing, and headed for the bathroom. Maybe he was getting ready for bed? He heard the toilet flush and the sink run and clinking on the counter surface.

Soon Viktor returned to the room, face rosey from washing his face, and climbed into the covers. Then he stretched up to kiss Yuuri’s cheek, pulling away somberly.
Was that his way of apologizing?

If Viktor hadn’t slithered back down into the covers, Yuuri would have kissed his cheek back. Instead he pat his head, fingers lingering to comb through his longer fringe.

“Don’t stay up too late,” Viktor murmured sleepily. “Yuuri... I want you to win.”

“I’ll see you in the morning. I need to win so we can get married, right?”

Viktor shifted in the bed to curl more at his side. “Is that what I said?”

“We’ll get married when Yuuri wins the gold medal’,” Yuuri repeated to him. “I can’t disappoint you.”

“No. That would be terrible. Heaven forbid you disappoint the sun.”

Yuuri’s heart sank. Here he thought they were trying to make amends, but Viktor nipped at him. He bit his lip to stop any kind of retort and tried to focus on the nonsensical television program. When Viktor’s soft sleeping sounds came, Yuuri fished around the top of the bed for the remote and turned it off.

But then Viktor reached for his wrist, “Yuuri…”

Yuuri wondered if he hadn’t meant to fall asleep. It was way past his bedtime. He waited for him to say more, but wouldn’t have been surprised if he passed out again.

“Yuuri... I’m sorry I didn't tell you about the banquet before. I didn't want to hurt you. I’m sorry.” Even though he was so tired, he did sound sincere and not in a coaching way. His Viktor.

Yuuri softened and crouched at the bedside to kiss the hand that held his wrist. "I'm sorry, too. I didn't mean to hurt you, either. It went very differently in my head.”

A little laugh. “It usually does.”

“I keep telling people I'm not romantic.”

“No one believes you for good reason.”

“I guess…”

“Still. I'm sorry. I wanted to surprise you. I guess that doesn't always work out, either.”

“I was sure surprised! Outdone by you like usual.”

“We're a matching pair…”

“They do look similar.” The more they spoke, the more Viktor drifted. Things weren’t completely okay, but it was enough for now. Yuuri poked his scalp. “Go back to sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“No... Yuuri…” he mumbled, pulling on his wrist, weakly. “We’re... the... matching pair.”

“Oh. You're right.” He couldn’t help the dumb smile that came to his face. Viktor had no right to still be cute right now.

“Love my Yuuri,” Viktor said with his eyes closed.
“I love my Viktor.” Yuuri took a knee and leaned in to kiss him. He pulled away from his lips and visibly his fiance relaxed.

If only it were that easy for Yuuri. He knew he wouldn’t sleep until his mind and body were exhausted, so he slipped on his running shoes and left the hotel.

Lamp posts and overhead signs of hotels and shops lit up Yuuri’s sidewalk run. It was far too cold for many tourists to be out at this hour, most noise coming from bars, but occasionally he’d pass a couple snuggled close in their pace walking in the direction of the beach. He wished he and Viktor were doing that instead.

Though, it was still past Viktor’s bedtime whether they had fought or not.

Yuuri rounded the hotel blocks, catching the coastal chill on his cheeks the closer he got to the ocean, then back around.

He couldn’t get over it. Nobody told Yuuri about the banquet. An entire year. A whole evening of his life forgotten and no one had brought it up. If he had remembered, it would have been a shameful moment he wouldn’t like talking about, but at least he’d feel he lived it. Had there been other times he’d blacked out drunk like that?

If only Phichit had been there, if he hadn’t had that concussion, he would have been with him the whole night. Not have let it gotten as far as it did. Not that dancing and embarrassing himself was super harmful, but it could have been. And as shocked as Phichit seemed, with his internet prowess, there was no way he wasn’t already aware.

“I didn’t have the courage to talk to Viktor.”

Talk? No, just throw himself at his idol and make ridiculous demands and challenges.

Viktor, the one he’d tried so desperately to reach, had fallen in love with him that night.

Fallen in love with a drunken idiot who didn’t even remember.

...If the triplettes had never uploaded the video, Viktor wouldn’t have come to Hasetsu. He would have remained sad, never to see the banquet boy that he’d danced with again because Yuuri had retired.

But the video was uploaded. And Viktor had come on Yuuri’s uninhibited request, coaching him despite despite the fact that his student didn’t remember and seemingly didn’t care.

Yuuri slowed his pace and jogged to the nearest garbage bin to vomit.

Once his stomach emptied, the tears came.

Viktor threw his life and career away to give Yuuri a second chance, with or without affections returned. Months later the feelings were realized and given. Viktor had a ring at the ready.

And the best Yuuri could give was a half-assed proposal.

Viktor had every right to be upset.

When the queasiness of his stomach subsided, Yuuri continued his route, though walking. He wished he were tired enough so he could go back to the hotel and sleep.
Yuuri removed his phone from his hoodie pocket and scanned his notifications. Phichit tagged him in a photo of his food from dinner.

The last time Yuuri had a crisis like this, Phichit was there to witness and comfort. Before he could talk himself out of it, he stood outside the Prince Hotel. Sighing, he sent a text to his Thai friend.

[Are you up?]

Half a minute later, his phone vibrated. [Yeah! … shouldn’t you be celebrating your engagement instead of texting me? ;)]

[We had a fight. I’m outside.]

The response took longer that time. [I’ll be down in sec]

Yuuri teetered from the ball of his feet to his heels while he waited.

A few minutes later Phichit emerged from the front automated lobby doors, shaking his head with a tsk. “A marital spat already? Happens to the best of us. Need a milkshake?”

“I would if I didn’t have to go to sleep at some point tonight. Rain check maybe?” Yuuri sighed and dug his hands further into his hoodie and motioned with his head for his friend to follow. “Phichit, I didn't know about the banquet. I had no idea.”

“Yeah, I noticed. Who knew you were such a blackout drunk?”

“He knew and didn't tell me about it until tonight. Neither did you.”

“Okay, in my defense, I wasn't there - I tried to get Ciao Ciao to let me go as a spectator but noooo, my concussion - and you didn't want to talk about the prix or anything about that weekend when you got home. It was one of those Things We Do Not Talk About Lest Yuuri Rip My head off,” Phichit said, making ample use of air quotes, and let his shoulders drop as he folded his arms. “- second only to the Olympics. I really didn't think it would help. You were already quitting skating fiverever.”

“I hurt him, Phichit. If the triplets hadn't uploaded that video... “

Phichit frowned. “So what were you supposed to do? Somehow remember to not forgot? He could have told you any time in the past year.”

“You’re not wrong, but he was also trying to not make me upset.”

“So neither of you wanted to hurt each other, but you hurt each other more in the process. Sound about right?”

“You're not helping!”

Phichit gave him a playful shove.

“And as much as I'm happy that you're happy for me and my engagement, your little announcement drew way too much attention “

“Sorry! I got really excited My best friend! Married! You've wanted to marry him since I've known you. It’s a big deal.” Phichit grabbed for Yuuri’s hand. “Lemme see your ring.”

They stopped at a bench and sat down.
Yuuri gave up his hand from the warmth of his hoodie. “We’re not married. Yet. He really surprised me, though.”

“Oh you're practically married. Been married. How did he surprised you? Give me all the deets. Ooh it’s so shiny!”

“I bought his ring to propose this afternoon. He had a ring already on him, somehow.”

“Wow, that’s so sneaky! But really, that's his shtick, though, isn't it? Surprising people? It's a perfect fit, even!”

“I know! Figures.”

“I guess that means he expected you to propose at some point…” Phichit waggled his thick brows and let Yuuri have his hand back.

“And in classic me form, I messed up”

Phichit’s hand came up to ruffle Yuuri’s hair. “Hey, he was wearing your ring, so he must have accepted.”

“Y-yeah, but when we went back to our rooms after… You saw how I was panicking.”

“Yeah, it did seem weird that he just flaunted it, but he IS Mr. Extra Nikiforov. I guess we're all friends though, right? Everyone’s fine with you two being an item.”

“Ever since we've gotten together he's been against purposefully showing it, and really we should be mindful of it in public areas. I proposed thinking he'd keep it to himself. Just be internally happy or something. And then he had to tell everyone we'd marry after I win gold and-”

Phichit’s smile went flat. “Yeah, way to put everyone after your blood.”

Yuuri sank in the bench, pulling the hood over his eyes. “I should have stuck to my plan and proposed after… but what if I lost, would he accept a ring from a loser!?”

“I kind of figured it was how you guys do foreplay, since you're both so obsessed with skating and each other. After Rostelecom…” Phichit took a moment to playfully fan himself. “Exhibitionist much? Yeesh Yuuri.”

“T-That's not… Not... exactly-”

“-ANYway, don't talk about losing. I bet your coach wouldn't like it. Besides, he probably has some secret plan up his sleeve.”

“He's fine flaunting us when it's part of the war plan, but outside that…”

“Does he ever turn that off?”

“Phichit, he struggled letting me kiss him at home. Around my parents that don't even care.”

“So... you proposed to him in public, got it. But no I meant the war stuff.”

“It was still pretty secluded. War stuff in foreplay?”

“Omg no that’s— yikes I did not need that image!”
“Oh. You mean turning the war stuff off?”

“Yeah, is he ever not a super paranoid perfectionist?”

“...Well. I guess not when I'm on top of him.”

Phichit made a face that was somewhere between horrified and confused.

“Sorry.” Yuuri really was, but he couldn’t take it back.

“That is SO not what I needed to hear.”

“But it proves that yes he can turn it off?”

“Ciao Ciao owes me ten bucks. That is the only consolation to this.”

“...What exactly were you betting with Ciao Ciao?”

“Nothing. Not important.” Phichit cleared his throat, unwilling to divulge the details.. “So about your fight; did you guys make up?”

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“Enough for the moment. We weren’t yelling, and he fell asleep, but we haven’t... really resolved everything.”

“Your problem, Yuuri,” Phichit began, eyes serious, hand clasping his shoulder. “Revolves around the fact that you and your fiance are too in love to speak your minds. There are worse things.”

There was truth to that, but it wasn’t the only issue. The war games, the lashing out for being caught, secrets, anxiety of the other’s feelings and reactions. “I threw up again,” Yuuri frowned.

Phichit blinked, then grinned again. “The fact that you’re engaged to Viktor Nikiforov just catch up to you?”

“That, but mostly I think about how lonely he was when he realized I didn’t remember the banquet.”

“Again, he had all the time in the world to tell you. Besides, I think some people have video if you really wanted to see.”

“Viktor has some, too. He showed me some photos already, but it doesn't really matter now.”

“I guess not. You’re pretty good about not checking your socials anyway, but I also tried to filter the GPF away from your feeds, too.” Phichit sighed. “So were you mad? You can be kind of scary when you're mad.”

“My heart was pounding, but I wasn't yelling or anything. I was confused more than anything. I just wanted an explanation.”

“Did you get one?”

“He didn't want to hurt or embarrass me, but he still acted like a caged animal.”

“And then”

“We both agreed knowing then or now doesn’t make a difference. And then he was upset about my reaction at dinner. Which is understandable, and that's all on me I know. I was trying to apologize
and explain, but he kept attacking and acting like I was more mad than I actually was.”

“Huh…”

“With the competition going on, it seemed better to let it sit. We had some cold silence and eventually we apologized and made up for now.”

“What a way to spend your first married night.”

Yuuri wanted to correct him again, but didn’t. There were a lot of things that had been off about Viktor, but he wasn’t about to lay out all of that laundry in front of Phichit. It wasn’t fair to him, nor was it any of his business. He’d been inconvenienced enough for one night.

“I don’t think it’s as bad as you think, Yuuri. Mai pen rai. Just take some time to cool off. You’re at the grand prix final, there’s a lot of stuff going on right now. It’s okay.”

It wasn’t okay, and probably wouldn’t be for a while, though it was nice to hear someone like Phichit say it would be. He had a way of making things seem possible with his infectious positivity. “Thanks for coming out here and listening to me.”

“Sure, Yuuri. That’s what best friends are for. For reals, though, you better get some sleep. I’m not gonna just LET you have the gold. Dunno if you’ve noticed, but I kind of beat you in Beijing.”

“Sure, but I’m going to really marry Viktor.”

“Maybe! You guys gotta calm your drama during competitions geez. Can it just wait a few days?” He winked.

“Drama has always followed me, you know that.”

Phichit took hold of both his shoulders this time and shook him. “Yuuuuuriiii! Yuuri. Congrats. You better let me come to the wedding. Wait, how many times have we had this conversation? Only now it’s real. Wow deja vu…Is that how deja vu works?”

“Maybe? And you’re still going to be my best man.”

“That's right I am! I'll fight anyone who says otherwise. But don't make me fight, okay?”

“I wouldn't dream of it. Replacing you or making you fight.”

“Sweet. Can we go back inside, now? It’s getting colder and Ciao Ciao has me on a dumb curfew.”

He’d tortured his friend long enough, so Yuuri stood with him and walked back to the hotel side by side. But he didn’t go inside with him.

“Are you sure?” Phichit asked, concern coming back in his tone.

“I’m not quite ready. Got some thinking to do. I’ll turn in soon. I promise.”

“Well… all right. Hope I helped.”

“Yeah, you did. More than you know.”

It was true, but what Yuuri really needed was someone who knew Viktor longer than he did.

Fortunately, Yurio came around the corner, chatting animatedly with Otabek Altin. He stopped as
soon as he saw Yuuri and

put on a scowl. “What are you still doing out, Piggy?”

*Says the teenager,* thought Yuuri. Did Yakov know where he was? “Out for a walk like you are, it looks like. Do you… have a minute?”

The teen sighed and looked to his friend who offered a shrug. It was answer enough for Yurio. “Fine. What do you want?”

“The banquet.”

That’s all he needed to say and Yurio was sighing again. “Let’s talk in the lobby.”

Automatic doors opened for the three of them and they found a seat in the mostly empty lobby. Yurio and Otabek shared a sofa, and Yuuri took an armchair.

“Let me guess. You want to know why Viktor didn’t want you to know about that night?” Yurio asked.

Yuuri settled more into his seat, anxiously shifting his feet on the floor.

“Tch. Look, Katsudumb, I think he should have told you, too. I was going to, since it was painfully obvious you didn’t remember, but he made me promise not to. He said he’d never forgive me if I did. I had the photos and videos ready to go and everything. But you can't reason with an idiot.”

“What was the reason he gave you?”

“You broke his stupid heart, what else was he supposed to do? Go crawling back to Yakov like a coward? He’s too stubborn for that.”

Otabek looked up from his clasped hands at his fellow skaters, settling back on the couch. “…Viktor once told me that channeling pain into focus would drive you to accomplishing more than anger would.”

“The hell!”

Yuuri was glad Yurio said it and not him.

“We discussed it a few years back,” Otabek answered matter of factly.

“Damn masochist!”

“That's... twisted, but I guess seems like Viktor,” Yuuri admitted.

“He was recovering from surgery at the time. It's not that bad of a concept, really. It seems to have served him.”

“From his knee?”

Otabek nodded while Yurio looked at him like he was the coolest person in the world. Until he remembered himself, anyway.

Then he turned back on Yuuri. “So Viktor's messed up, what else is new? You're stuck with him now, pig boy, banquet or not, maybe you should just get over it.”
“Him lying to me isn't what's worrying me. Well, it is, but…”

“What the hell is, then?”

Otabek leaned forward, curious, making Yuuri feel more on the spot.

“You know his wolves and war talk right?”

“Yeh, his obsessive paranoia, what about it?”

“He turned it on me.”

Yurio snorted. “He's been training you to be a wolf all season and he's the worst one of them all. Does it really surprise you?”

“When he's directing it at me, yes.” Yuuri’s chest constricted, thinking about he’d walked him through the dance. “He was cold and distant. Making it so I couldn't even talk anymore.”

“On the defensive... He always gets wound up during competitions. The old man is a basket case, but you know, what did you want him to do?”

“Not snarl at me. Acting like he's the only one wronged…”

“You gotta call him out on his shit if you're going to marry him. He's had no one to keep him in check for too long. You have to make up for not having Yakov.”

“You two could just... talk,” Otabek suggested. “Maybe.”

It was an obvious solution, but not so easily followed. “I tried and he bit my head off. But we did apologize for the moment. I’ll probably be the one to bring it back.”

“Do you need to? Are you pissed that he didn't tell you or that he got defensive when you confronted him about it? Cause that's Viktor, Pork Bowl. That's always been Viktor. He can't handle confrontations unless he's in control. Much as he talks about wolves, you know they don't attack unless they're backed into a corner, sick, or starving.”

“I'm not pissed, Yurio, I'm worried.”

Green eyes stared at him, confused and frustrated. He didn’t understand what Yuuri was getting at.

Otabek seemed to, though, and showed it with a sympathetic nod of his head, though his expression was as impassive as ever.

“He shouldn't be scared of me,” Yuuri continued, voice thick. “He should trust me, right? Not treat me like an enemy. Not ... I’m not Niko.”

Yurio drummed his fingers on the arm of the sofa. “Keh, yeah you'd probably be in a dumpster somewhere if you were.”

Otabek raised an eyebrow, looking from one to the other. “Do I want to know?”

“I'll tell you later. Look, Viktor doesn't even trust Yakov most of the time. This is what we were trying to tell you when you were in Saint Petersburg. Did you ever tell Viktor that we ran into Niko?”

“No...”
“What a hypocrite! Why the hell not? Why should he trust you if you’re keeping secrets, too?’”

“This is different! I will eventually. I just don’t know what good it would do right now. He won’t even let me tell him about my trip to Russia.”

“Tch, doesn’t surprise me. Bastard. Such a lost cause.”

“So I don’t have a chance of fixing this is what you mean?”

“Oi, that's not what I said! Having him in your life is going to be a pain in the ass no matter what you do. It's going to be hard. But you decide if it's worth it or not.”

“Of course it's worth it…” Try as he might, the tears came. “I love him so much!”

“Ugh… Well, he seems to be set on you, too.”

Though Yurio sounded disgusted, the words were comforting. “That's why this all hurts so much.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get it; stop crying. Gross.”

“I’m going to marry him, Yurio…”

“Uh huh,” the teenager rolled his eyes and blew hair out of his face. “And when you do, he’ll never be able to come back to Russia. So keep that in mind when you consider his commitment. He left all of us for you, Pork Chop.”

Finding some composure, Yuuri wiped his eyes with a sleeve. “Being with me doesn't mean he can't go back to Russia.”

“If he comes out publicly like he did tonight it does.”

Otabek visibly winced beside Yuuri.

“He can't just… not ever go home. He was just excited. I mean… I was expecting him to keep it on downlow, but he didn’t.”

“Do you really think that was an accident?”

Yuuri closed his mouth to think. Like Phichit said, they were among friends, yet Viktor had flaunted the ring to motivate Yuuri. Or was it his declaration to never go back to Russia? Leaving everyone behind, completely, knowing how difficult it would be...

“Maybe he really likes Japan,” Otabek offered after some silence. “And if he’s marrying Yuuri, that backs up the retiring rumors.”

“Exactly. He's not coming back and I'm the new hero of a Russia! I doubt Yakov would even take him back.”

With how warm Yakov spoke of him, that couldn’t be true. He and Yurio were both bad at showing they didn’t care about Viktor. “I don’t know, Yakov’s still pretty soft on him.”

“Soft, but sick of him. He put his foot down!”

A foot down, but still so protective. As much as Viktor went on about declaring war, he was hurting for how his actions had hurt Yakov and how the old coach reacted.
“One bad skate doesn't end a career,” said Otabek. “Not if you love the sport.”

“Wise words,” said Yurio.

Otabek shrugged. “Viktor said it.”

“Damn. What does that have anything to do with anything?!”

Yuuri had recognized the quote from his coach, though. Agreed and thought of himself. Viktor believed in him. So did his family and Yurio. Probably.

“Whatever. Oh, I have video of you and Viktor from the forbidden banquet, if you want to see it.”

The teen held up his phone, wiggling it, taunting.

Briefly Yuuri wondered if that would make Viktor mad. He had showed him the photos, a video wouldn’t be much different. Another perspective. Seeing the hours that were erased in motion and to see those moments in real time of Viktor falling for him. Yuuri nodded and Yurio found the video, pressed play, and handed it over across the coffee table.

There was no music to their dance battle. Ambient sounds of background conversations and Yurio muttering in Russian, with occasional commentary from Mila.

Expressions shifted seamlessly on video. At first Viktor was confused, maybe amused, then determined to have fun. The closer their positions got, the more genuine Viktor’s smiles became. They were rare, but Yuuri knew him long enough to tell the difference. The situation was odd, the dances themselves were weird, but there was no doubt that Viktor was falling in love and Yuuri wished he could have been himself in that moment to have seen it.

Did Viktor miss the crazy drunken fool that he’d been that night?

The video stopped and Yuuri debated on hitting play again, but instead he waited until the screen went dark from the thumbnail of the two of them side by side, getting into sync.

“Thanks for showing me, Yurio,” Yuuri said, giving back his phone.

“Yeh whatever. Don't start crying again, it's annoying.”

“Gee thanks.”

Otabek chuckled

“So, you gonna stick with him, Pork Rind? Or are you gonna give up like last year?”

“I never said anything about giving up.”

“Good, cause I expect a fight tomorrow and you better bring your best.”

“Oh you meant skating. I’m not giving up on Viktor or skating!”

“That is what I meant! You need the gold, right?”

Otabek arched a brow as if rivalry banter was getting too friendly for his tastes.

“I’ll take it from you for sure!” Yuuri had to prove he was worthy to marry Viktor. If Viktor wanted gold, that’s what he’d give him.
“We’ll see about that!”

“I’ll show you that this last year hasn’t been a waste, Yurio.”

“Ugh, that’s not my name, but whatever! Get ready to lose, Piggy!”

Talking to Yurio and Otabek hadn’t given Yuuri an immediate solution, but it had further incentivized his bringing Viktor back to Russia. Viktor couldn’t treat everyone like enemies when things didn’t go as he planned. It was one thing for having a game face, but among friends and his lover? His fiance? Yuuri’s books often ended near the I Dos (if there was a wedding at all), but even Yuuri knew a married life with Viktor like this wouldn’t be healthy for either of them. Secrets and wounds...

Yuuri inserted the room key then cushioned the door with both hands to shut it behind him. Carefully he stepped to his suitcase and felt around for his pajamas and toiletries, then tiptoed into the bathroom for a shower.

After the prix they’d have to talk properly, out of the war zone.

But what to do for the next few days? Push the gnawing anxiety away and focus on his programs?

It was strange to be more worried about Viktor than his programs. Then again, Viktor had always been the goal, but now the motive and strategy had changed.

Soon Yuuri was coming out of the bathroom, clean and warm. Should he climb into the bed with Viktor or play it safer and take the bed in their extra room?

Viktor’s eyes of betrayal from when he left him to go gather the magazines after the secret lipstick discovery came to mind.

No, he needed to be near him.

Lifting the comforter, Yuuri slid inside the sheets and snuggled in behind him.

Viktor reacted immediately and was drawn to his heat, curling into him with a hum.

Like an instinct, Yuuri wrapped his arms around him, tucking his leg between his to draw him closer, which caused Viktor to come up taller to rest his head on his chest.

“MmmYuurikay?”

“Just needed some air,” Yuuri parsed the half-asleep question. “It's okay, I'm back.”

“Please don't leave me.”

“Never.”

Chapter End Notes

Bastien: How was dinner?
Chris: Shame you couldn't have joined us, but alas, ISU duties.
B: Alas, indeed.
C: Dinner itself was delicious, but you missed Viktor and Yuuri's marriage announcement.
B: ... Really?
C: Well, it didn't look they'd planned on announcing it then, to tell the truth. It was an evening of surprises. Tonight was the first time Yuuri became aware of the banquet from the last prix. He really was a blackout drunk.
B: You mean the same banquet that Viktor up and left for Japan about? I do hope that went over well, then.
C: From the looks of it, I don't think so.
B: Are you going to check on Viktor?
C: I've done enough meddling.
ON THE NEXT GAY SKATE, Troubles in Barcelona Continue:
The Peacock / The Hamster / The Tiger / The Piggy / Let's End This
*Please look forward to it!*
Sacrifice

Chapter Summary

Things get more and more complicated as our heroes seem to backslide on crucial pieces of character development that they've earned on their journey so far... It seems that there's no communication between coach and student, which couldn't have possibly come at a worse time than the short program of the Grand Prix Final in Barcelona! What a disaster!

#miscommunication #ptsd #meltdown #blood #the boy #LET'S END THIS #politics #the falcon #barcelona #important backstory stuff #thanks we hate it #this is the reason we don't use archive warnings

Chapter Notes

Mamo: Thank you everyone for your patience with our writing conference and Life as we finally arrive to the most dreaded chapter of all. At least this is the worst of it (we think). It’s all downhill from here, and congrats; y’all made it.

Gab: omg you guys would not believe how hard it was to force ourselves to get through this chapter. Like Mamo said, life was giving us plenty of excuses to put it off, and we really, really wanted to. It was awful. But we can't get to the REALLY GOOD stuff without getting through Barcelona first, and we have a goal to get NLA done before the movie comes out, so alas!!! Thankfully, we're really good cheerleaders for each other, and Mamo is the perfect writing partner to lean on in cases like this. This is easily the hardest chapter we've written so far, I'd say...

Mamo: This chapter was really hard and taxing. Getting the boys to cooperate was like pulling a stubborn dog on a leash. Coming to the version we did through our plotting session was the truest way we found for our interpretation as well as being respectful to the material. Please enjoy. Even tho it's sad. The saddest part being on Viktor's end. And holy crap, Gab over here ripping my heart out. You'll now know why we hate Barcelona so much, and no, it's not only for Let's End This. I'd say I don't know how Gab functions daily with Viktor in her head, but we talk so often, I have an idea ‘:) he wants these chapters over just as much as we do

Gab: He really does. He is so utterly unhappy right now. :'( UGH. Whatever. Stupid boys and their gift of the magi crap. OH. SPEAKING OF GIFTS... it's finally time to do the next NLA Giveaway since we reached 75k hits a little while ago! To enter, go here and fill out this form: https://forms.gle/phqjrygaNZzNEjrz8 -- there are some eligibility requirements (you have to be 18 yrs or older and a reader, plus willing to give us your mailing address if you win), and there are some short questions about NLA that we want to use to help us record a podcast episode later, but it will be totally worth it, I SWEAR. The prize packs are AMAZING... think acrylic charms, stickers, and other things that will help you get through the PAIN OF THIS CHAPTER. Watch our twitters (@gabapple, @mamodewberry) for photo reveals over the next few days! PHOTOS HERE: https://gabapple.tumblr.com/post/188040292886/ -- We'll stop
taking entries on October 1st. :)

Fic Updates by Us:
- Can’t Relate  Mamo’s silly April Fools piece for a YOI discord.
- Little Matchstick Vitya  Gab’s submission for Shall We Read!
- For my Girls  Gab and Mamo’s fic/art submission for the Primadonna zine!
- In the Cards  (Birthday gift to Gab! Be wary of minor spoilers)
- The Better to Love You With  Gab’s Horror zine submission!
- Man on a Wire  continues!

NLA Gallery Updates:
- Dancing at the Train Station from Chapter 16  by Saniika!
- Help Me not be Gay  from Chapter 18, by Ne’ha!
- Fanart by Quel for In the Cards!

NLA Playlist Updates:
- Shatter Me (feat Lzzy Hale)  - Lindsey Stirling
- Cassini - The Grand Finale  - Sleeping at Last
- Barcelona - John Tesh
- In My Blood / Swan Lake  - The Piano Guys
- City Lights (Pretty Lights)  - Priscilla Ahn
- Nocturne in E-Flat Major, Op. 9, No. 2  - Chopin

See the end of the chapter for more notes

World Figure Skating Championships, Exhibition Gala— Moscow, Russia

Viktor (18 years old)

“Coach, I’m going to find a better place to finish up, okay?”

“Vitya, don’t you want to watch the others skate?”

“I’ll be right back. Promise.”

Although he’d changed before he left his room at the hotel, Viktor saved all of his makeup and final touches for the venue itself. The costume was easy enough to hide under his team jacket, but the rest he wanted to save as a surprise. He just needed a little privacy to do it.

Preferably where he wouldn’t run into anyone like Wei. He wasn’t going to let anyone stop him from skating his gala piece this year. It was too important.

In the gala, the pairs went first. Then the women’s. Then the men’s singles. All in order of place on the podium, from bronze to gold, with the occasional guest in between. As the gold medalist in the men’s singles division, Viktor was skating last; the final performance of the night. It was the perfect opportunity to make an impression. Something Russia would be powerless to prevent and certain to never forget.
As the champion, the rest of the world would protect him.

He had special makeup just for the performance. False lashes. Nail polish. Body glitter. Feathers for his hair. A tail. And wings. Everything that the previous performances had been hinting at, now in reality. Though gold suited Viktor, gold wasn’t enough; he would be a jeweled cockerel encrusted with a rainbow of colors. Appropriate, all things considered.

Viktor just didn’t want anyone to see it before he went out onto the ice.

He skirted through the crowd of athletes, track bag of transformative magic over one shoulder, and down the darkened hallway. According to the map in the welcome packet, the perfect place was located somewhere near the temporary staff offices. That meant it would be quiet enough to think, too, which was good. Viktor needed a lot of concentration to get those lashes on.

“Ah, Vitya!”

Viktor froze mid stride. The voice was friendly and familiar, but full of authority. He scrolled through his mental catalog, searching for a name, but found he didn’t need to when the man came out from one of the offices with a tired smile. It was the RSF rep. Abram Voronin.

“I see you’re getting ready for the gala.”

Normally, Viktor had Yakov with him to handle interactions with the man. He hadn’t had to deal with the RSF directly almost ever thanks to his coach, in fact. Now to face him, one on one, after having skated so passionately about symbolically murdering him and his ideals… and winning the gold for it… was a little unsettling.

Viktor forced a little smile. “Yeah. I hope you’re planning to watch.”

“Oh of course!” Abram’s own smile tightened. “I wouldn’t miss it, Vitya. You’ve done so much for Russia this year.”

Viktor couldn’t help it. He choked on a laugh. It was true, but still. Had Abram missed all of the symbolism? Maybe Coach had worried over nothing. “Well, you know how I feel about nationalism.”

That time, Abram chuckled, patted Viktor’s shoulder with a heavy thump of his hand. “Indeed, young Vitya. Indeed.” Then he sighed, amusement straining as he looked up and down the hallway. “Speaking of, I’m glad you’re here. I was hoping to catch you before your performance. I needed to speak with you.”

“Oh? My coach is—“

“Just you and me, Vitya.” His hand came to rest on Viktor’s shoulder again, this time taking a firm grasp. “If you’d come with me this way.”

The offices disappeared from view as Abram led Viktor to a different room; one barely large enough for a single round table and two or three metal folding chairs. On the table, a phone. Abram pushed Viktor in and came afterward, closing the door behind them.

“Take a seat.”

“I’d rather not, thanks.”
“All right.” Abram sat instead, the metal creaking under his weight. Settled, he looked up at the teenager and offered a pleasant smile. “Calm down, Vitya. You’re not in trouble. I only wanted to talk.”

“Talk. But not in your office. Got it.”

The man let the sarcasm fall flat, unphased, and continued calmly. “It’s about your coach.”

Viktor froze, tension immediately set on a spring. “What about him?”

“Yakov has been with us for a very long time and trained some of our greatest champions. We’ve trusted him with the care of many athletes over the years and he’s always shown Russia in the greatest light. Popular opinion seems to be that he’s one of the best coaches in the field. Do you agree?”

“Well… yeah. Of course.” As much as he had issue with the RSF, Viktor adored Yakov. That was never an issue. “Is he getting an award or something?”

Abram tapped his lips, smile sliding wider. “Would you say that Coach Feltsman is very supportive of you?”

“Yeah. He’s been very supportive of my entire career.” It wasn’t something that he had to think about. Viktor was only surprised that Abram even had to ask. “If you need some kind of testimonial, I can write one up for you.” He’d need time to think about all of his feelings; Coach would be embarrassed if there was too much or if it was too mushy.

“Interesting. Would you say that you’re close?”

“Like family. Don’t let the tough exterior fool you; he’s only sent a handful of people running for their lives for messing with his skaters, but he’s actually a teddy bear once you get to know him.”

The man nodded. “Does he give you advice?”

“Often, yeah. That’s the job of a coach.”

“In life as well as in skating?”

“I guess so, yeah… He’s a really good coach, like I said.”

“So he’s supported you in expressing yourself.”

Viktor hesitated at that. “We’re supposed to express ourselves on the ice in our programs… that’s why we’re so good. But we do our own programs.”

“You know there’s a law about soliciting certain propaganda to minors,” Abram said.

The words struck like a slap. “What?”

“And a divorced man, alone with these children, sharing a room with them… encouraging certain types of behavior…”

“No! No, he’s… he’s like a papa to me! You have it all wrong! He would never —“

“Good coaches and good papas control their children, and Coach Feltsman hasn’t reined you in despite repeated requests.”
The warnings from earlier in the season came to mind, and Viktor shook his head. “It has nothing to do with him, though. Coach warned me, but I’m the uncooperative one!”

“Is that so?”

“Yes! It was all my idea. I’m the one who…” Viktor found himself hesitating again, staring down at the man who wore confidence like one wears a coat in winter. “It’s my campaign. I…”

“Are you making a declaration, Vitya?”

Viktor swallowed hard. Russia operated on the principle of don’t ask, don’t tell. As long as he only flirted with the line, they could assume reasonable doubt. Anything definitive changed his position entirely. It was as good as pleading guilty.

For being himself.

The whole season, he’d pushed the message of revolution for the sake of authenticity. If there were ever an opportunity to lay it out, make an impact, have his voice be heard, it was now. No hidden meanings, no interpretation needed. Fighting it head on. Even if it destroyed his career, maybe it’d have an impact. Make some progress. What was one life in the face of a strong statement of equality?

That’s what he’d been skating for all this time. Viktor Nikiforov wasn’t a coward. Some sacrifice was worth it.

“I…”

“Vitya.” Abram sighed. “I don’t want you to stop skating. I don’t want to dismiss Yasha, either. We are good friends. But whether you like it or not, you represent Russia, and your behavior directly reflects on your coach. Your actions determine whether he is judged as a danger to society or merely incompetent. Unless…”

Viktor met his gaze, fingernails carving half-moon marks into his palms. “Unless?”

“You make him the hero. It’s up to you, Vitya.”

“He’s… already a hero. Everyone already likes him. And me. So I don’t know why you’re saying all of this stuff. I haven’t broken any rules, have I?”

“Not strictly, no. But it was one thing for you to get away with being different as a young boy. You’re an adult now. There are different expectations. Laws. You have quite a few young fans, yourself.”

Viktor fell silent, considering this.

“Even if the RSF know that you and your coach are exceptions to the stigma, we cannot protect you outside of the rink, Vitya. Many people are not as understanding or as kind. Rumors only grow…and accidents happen all the time. I’d hate to think what could happen to you. Or your coach, for that matter.”

Accidents.

Images of Yakov’s old yellow car sliding on the ice and off Tuchkov bridge flashed through Viktor’s mind in vibrant clarity. His coach was tougher than anyone he knew, but even he couldn’t stop someone from running into his car. Or running him over. Or coming after him with a gun. Or
knives.

His coach, beaten and bloody and bruised, lying in a back alley and left to die, because of him…

The RSF wouldn’t even have to do anything. If people thought his coach was someone like that, they’d kill him. Viktor knew all about that.

“Are you all right, Vitya? Sit down, you’ve gone pale.”

“N-no, I’m… I need to get ready for the gala.”

“Right.” Abram’s smile slipped back into place. “You’re skating as a peacock, aren’t you? How amusing. But remember our concern, da? We worry for you. And your coach.”

A peacock. That’s exactly what he was. A foolish, cocky, show off who thought he was everything when he was truly nothing. What had he been thinking? “Yeah. I understand.”

“Good. I’m glad we could talk about this. I suppose I shouldn’t keep you any longer. Your friend is here to see you, too, isn’t he? The Yermolai boy. I’m sure he can’t wait to see what you do. I know I can’t.”

The bathrooms were just down the hall. As soon as Viktor found them, he dropped his duffel at the sink and threw himself to the floor of one of the stalls to release the fighting tension that tore him up from head to knees. When he had nothing left but bile to purge, he coughed and sobbed and tried to throw up again.

He’d had panic attacks before. Anxiety attacks, too. This was somehow different, like warring wolves of both had joined forces inside of him intent on tearing him apart from the inside out. Some were in his head, trying to split it open; others were clawing from his chest up to his throat; others had their jaws so tightly clamped down on his legs and spine and guts that he couldn’t move. Just shake.

Over over over it was over over over. Everything was over. Over.

Everything in the past year had doomed them and there was nothing he could do about it. Cornered. Trapped. Lost. And he couldn’t tell Coach. Not if he didn’t want him to get involved and killed directly.

And friend. They knew about Niko. There was no way they didn’t. How they’d found out, Viktor didn’t know. But they knew. They knew and they were in danger. White hot bitterness choked him and ran down his cheeks. How could he skate in the gala now?

Not that he had a choice. He was Viktor Nikiforov, gold medalist of Worlds and the Russian champion. They were in Moscow. People had filled the stands to see him. His performance was the last of the gala. He’d meant to make a statement for all of them to see that he wasn’t afraid of being different… showing his stripes to the world in an arc of sparkling rainbow feathers.


But he was afraid.

He was so, so afraid.
He’d never been more afraid of anything or anyone as much as he was now.

Abram. The RSF. The people of Russia. They weren’t merely wolves. They were a keener hunter who knew just how to make a precision strike right where it would hurt the most.

The Tsar had a guardian that Viktor hadn’t considered, too busy focused on the woods and the grass that he entirely missed it. He never thought to look at the sky.

A falcon.

Even if the cockerel killed the Tsar, the falcon would kill the cockerel.

He was trapped.

“Viktor?”

The voice cut through the panic like the headlights of a car in a snowstorm. It took a moment to parse, but when he called again, knocking at the stall door, Viktor finally recognized it: his Swiss competitor, Christophe Giacometti.

“Hey Viktor?” The little voice was nervous, doing the pitchy tenor no favors. “Are you okay? It’s me, Chris.”

Of all people to find him… But at least it wasn’t Yakov. Viktor pawed for the paper dispenser to wipe his mouth. “Yeah, just a sec.”

“Okay. Sure.”

He didn’t sound convinced, but didn’t say anything else while Viktor cleaned himself up and flushed the evidence. Trapped or not, it was no excuse to take it out on Chris, and there was no time to lose his composure again.

Once he was out of the stall, Viktor swept straight to the sink to rinse his mouth out and wash his face, cool water dripping onto the front and sleeves of his jacket. “Could you get me a paper towel, please?”

“Uh… yes! Of course!”

The younger skater had always been enthusiastic when it came to Viktor, and scrambled to gather handfuls of the coarse brown paper as requested. It was only once Viktor had dried off and let his hair loose that Chris tried again.

“Are you okay?”

Viktor considered the question, combing his hair out with his fingers, the long tresses going past his fingertips even when his arm was fully extended. He let the lock go. “Chris. Would you be willing to help me with something?”

“Anything.”

“My track bag there… could you bring it here? I need to get ready for the gala.”

Chris retrieved it with the energy of eager like Makkachin, the golden curls on his head only aiding the comparison, and handed it over with a hopeful smile. “Here, Viktor. Can I do anything else?”

“Guard the door, maybe? I don’t want to be interrupted.”
“Oh!” Chris’s smile went wide. “That’s why you’re over here and not with the others. That makes sense. So nothing is wrong?”

Viktor forced a smile, but he couldn’t maintain it. He didn’t want to lie, but he didn’t want to discuss it, either. In the mirror’s reflection, Chris’s face was so sweet. Those eyes so hopeful, so excited. Innocent. “On second thought, could you braid my hair? French braid.”

The younger skater gasped. “Really? You’ll let me braid your hair?”

“Yes. You said you do it for your sister all the time, da?”

“Well, yeah, but you’re a lot taller than me…”

“Just make it loose. You’ll find everything you need in the bag.”

While Chris braided Viktor’s hair, Viktor worked on his makeup. It wasn’t anything like he’d originally planned; much more subtle and elegant, but still different enough than the previous performance to stand out. False lashes, calmer eye shadow. He’d go without the head piece, too, only plucking out some of the feathers to weave into his braid. It was a compromise.

That’s really what they were asking for, wasn’t it? For him to compromise his artistic integrity. That was something he wasn’t good at. Not on the ice, where he was supposed to be whatever he wanted to be. The one place he could be himself.

Viktor skipped the nail polish, but put the lipstick on slowly and deliberately, eyes locked on his own gaze, ice blue eyes bright against the dark eye liner.

He was beautiful. Striking.

The falcon couldn’t take that away.

He would always be a princess as long as he was Viktor Nikiforov.

“Wow.” Chris whispered.

It was sweet. Adorable, really, how easily Chris made himself vulnerable. Viktor turned to him, regarding the younger skater for a long, quiet moment in silence. He didn’t need to say anything, though, because Chris was already nodding his approval at the costume, cheeks rosy.

“Chris,” Viktor began, and smiled when he puffed up at even just the mention of his name. “Thank you for your help.”

Chris managed a subtle gentleman’s bow, which is when Viktor took his chin and pressed a kiss to his cheek, leaving behind a near perfect lipstick heart.

“You’ll keep this between us, non?”

“You— you have my word, Viktor!”

“Good. Now come watch me skate. I have something to show the world.”

Viktor skipped the banquet that evening. He didn’t have the heart. Not after skating what he was quickly realizing would be his last performance as someone with a voice. Not after posing for photos, flirting with the blurred lines of gender roles and beauty standards.
The end of an era. The defeat in battle and the loss of himself.

“Not feeling well,” he said, which was true. “I just want to sleep.”

Yakov let him be. His Vitya got that way sometimes.

No one bothered him on the flight home, either. His teammates were used to his dark moods and standoffishness by now. Viktor’s assigned place was between the window and against his coach’s arm for a long nap, while Yakov settled in with a book and an eye on the others. Georgi laughed as he chatted with a fan two rows up and across the way. He looked happy. So did the blonde girl.

Neither of them looked his way, so Viktor slept.

Lilia brought Makkachin to meet them at the airport, and though seeing his dog helped a little, it didn’t change the hard truths.

“I missed you, Makka.” Viktor looped the newly-earned medal’s ribbon around his poodle’s neck, then pulled him in for a hug, right there on the busy floor of Pulkovo Airport. Maybe if he held on tight enough, he could hold back the onslaught of emotion. “I have so much to tell you.”

“Viktor, get up.” Lilia voiced her impatience with a hiss, yanking on the hood of his coat like it was a leash. “You are a champion. Greet your fans.”

He turned his gaze upward at the waiting crowd, looking past his dog’s kisses to all of the people that were watching him. Some took photos, others whispered to each other. They were… everywhere.

After another pat to Makkachin’s shoulders, he stood, forcing a smile to replace the one that had faded moments before.

“Vitya!”

“Can I have your autograph?”

“Oh my god, Vitya! I loved you at Worlds!”

“Viktor Nikiforov!”

Lilia pushed him to keep walking with Makkachin at their heels, gold medal swinging from side to side with each bouncing step. The others would catch up.

“When you touch the world, Viktor…” Lilia said, tone casual though Viktor knew she was being anything but. “The whole world becomes your stage. You must be prepared to perform anywhere, at any time.”

“I’m too tired to pretend right now, Lilia…”

“If it’s important to you, you must make it your truth. The audience will believe you if you mean it. You are a champion, Viktor. Destroy everything in you that doesn’t believe it.”

He’d heard similar speeches from her before, but maybe she had a point.

The audience would never believe him if he didn’t believe it, himself.

He had to change.
Fundamentally.
But he could do anything for his Coach.

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**Detroit Skating Club - Detroit, Michigan**

_Yuuri (21 years old)_

Phichit was new in the senior division. He was good, and would only get better with each competition. He liked to talk about his big plans and Yuuri could never tell if he was actually serious about them, but his dream of bringing *Shall We Skate* to the ice felt genuine. There was a personal history with the song and the movie it came from, and Yuuri couldn’t fault him for it being a lover of movies from his country as well.

But backflips? Pros mostly did them when messing around since they legally couldn’t perform them in their programs.

*Do it for the Vine*, as the saying went.

Most of Yuuri’s social media presence was assisting Phichit, but he was aware of what people did for internet fame.

Phichit positioned himself on the ice and slated: “This is Phichit Chulanont doing Backflips on Ice.”

“Woo!” Yuuri cheered from behind the camera.

With a kick, Phichit picked up speed to set up the jump. He went up and up and the form almost looked like he was about to do a figure skating flip, but then it turned into a flip - the back flip - and just as quickly, Phichit went down. Hard.

It shouldn’t have been possible to have heard the impact with the whirls of the central cooling, the distance Yuuri was from his friend, the other skaters’ blades and roughhousing around them, or the pop music the lobby always played.

But Yuuri heard the fall and felt the contact of the ice crawl up his own skin.

From the lens of the camera, Yuuri watched his friend put a hand back to raise his upper body off the ice.

“I’m…” Phichit tried, facing the opposite. “Okaaay.” He bent a leg to get up, but his head swayed to the side and he went down again. Motionless.

Everything from Yuuri’s throat down seized up.

Yuuri jolted from his stupor as something grabbed his arm, the iron grip he had releasing the camera in the process.

“Yuuri! Is he okay?” Candace cried. “Oh my god, his camera!”
A camera could be replaced, but not a Phichit.

“Well, don’t just stand there. Go check on him!”

He couldn’t. His legs wouldn’t move.

Candace dug her nails into Yuuri’s arm, then released him with a huff.

Dark red was starting to blossom on the ice around Phichit’s head like a camellia.

“CHULANONT!” Celestino barked.

In a blur, Celestino called an ambulance, hailed a taxi for the three of them, and checked Phichit in.
Then, they waited in the waiting room.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Celestino paced and got coffee.

Candace got bored and talked to others in wait.

Yuuri found a stray wool piece in the rug under his seat to focus on, his surroundings cancelling out in a white noise.

Why hadn’t Yuuri stopped Phichit? So much could have gone wrong. So much had gone wrong. Would Phichit have not done it if Yuuri cautioned him more than he had? Skaters were stubborn, so probably not.

And now Phichit was in the emergency room getting stitches for his cracked skull.

A concussion? Impossible not to be.

Amnesia? Brain damage?

Or...

Yuuri shuddered.

Phichit wouldn’t be skating this season. Would he ever be able to skate again? He had to pull through, they had to skate against each other. They promised.

An arm crossed Yuuri’s line of sight, another around his back.

Blinking, Yuuri stiffened.

“Oh Yuuri… he’ll be okay,” Candace cooed, letting her head fall on his shoulder.

Yuuri straightened and shoved her away by her shoulders with enough force that the chair moved with her.

She stared back at him, eyes wide at first, then narrowed. “What’s your problem?! You haven’t said a word since it happened. I’m just trying to comfort you!”
He hadn’t asked for that. Especially not from her. He didn’t want comfort from anyone.
The only thing he wanted right now was Phichit smiling and covered in hamsters.
His friend. His only friend.

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**Grand Prix Finals -- Barcelona, Spain**

*Yuri Plisetsky (15 years old)*

“Hey Yakov! Open up! I need to talk to you!” The demand came after a succession of knocks on the hotel room door and before a kick to the frame. Then more yelling.

“Come on, Yakov. It’s important.” Yurio grumbled, trying the handle to the door that was definitely locked. “It’s about Viktor.”

Finally, there was movement inside the room, and heavy footsteps that came to open the door. Yakov, dressed for breakfast with his usual scowl. “What do you want, Yuri?”

Lilia slipped in behind the coach, peering over his shoulder. “You look like you haven’t slept, Yura. Are you not taking this seriously? It’s the Grand Prix Final.”

“Leave me alone, Lilia. I slept just fine. Tche.” He pushed his way past the adults and flopped onto the foot of their neatly made king-size bed. There, he stretched out long and lean and gave a frustrated sigh.

Yakov shut the door while Lilia turned her attention to the teen, arms folding.

“What is it?”

“Viktor went and got himself engaged to that piggie, so I need to tell him that I’m the new champion. We don’t need him. That kind of thing.”

“Engaged?” Lilia scoffed. “Of all the impulsive… proposing at the Grand Prix… I guess he’s really met his match now, hasn’t he?”

“Figures it’d be a piggie.” Yurio dropped his arms over his face. “He has to know that he can’t ever come home if he makes it public, though. Right, Yakov?”

Lilia answered for him. “Of course he knows. If anyone knows, it’s Viktor. But he’s such a selfish fool. I knew it. Didn’t I always say so, Yakov?”

Yakov made a sound to show that he was at least trying to listen, and sunk down into the chair at the desk.

“Oh, Yakov. Don’t be dramatic.”
“Grr… dammit! I’m gonna tell him that he’s not welcome back.” The teenager swung back to his feet. “Yakov! You always knew where to find him at competitions. Can you get his room number or something?”

“I’m no longer his coach, Yuri.” Yakov sighed.

“Yeah but—“

“But, I do know where you can look. Vitya always liked to go for morning walks by the water. It calmed him. I would check there.”

“Yeh. Okay. I’ll check there. And I’ll give him a good kick for you while I’m at it.”

“One for me, too, Yura,” Lilia sniffed.

“Da. Mila and Georgi, too. And the pair. All of Team Russia!”

—

Viktor woke at twilight, catching the first of the morning sun playing off the gold band on the pillow next to him. The ring he’d commissioned in Hasetsu for his lover. Yuuri’s ring.

They were engaged.

At least, more or less.

The gold around Viktor’s own finger- right hand, third finger -should have served as proof enough. He felt the weight of it even before slipping out of the covers; an unyielding presence smoother and softer than his skin, cool and warm to the touch, impossibly light and heavy with meaning all at once.


A good luck charm.

A source of contention. An embarrassment in front of their friends. Another secret he was supposed to keep from the world.

He kissed Yuuri once, lips barely making contact as he stretched between their joined mattresses. They’d only been in Barcelona for two days, but so much had already happened, had already changed. Yuuri needed as much sleep as he could get if he was going to be ready for the short program. Skating in the other cups was one thing, but the Grand Prix Final brought on an entirely different kind of pressure; there was no telling how his sleeping beauty would react.

So far, he’d been unpredictable. Moody. Impulsive.

Sight-seeing for Viktor’s sake. Losing the nuts. Buying a ring. Backing out of showing the world that they didn’t care.

Because of the banquet. The lies. The war games.

Everything that made the Russian champion who he was.

Viktor would need to be at his best to help him. That was what they were there for, after all: get Yuuri to the Grand Prix Final… and win.
Dressed and quiet, Viktor slipped from the room for a walk to take advantage of the early ocean air. With the competition starting much later on in the day, the beachfront was nearly abandoned, giving him the peace and privacy he needed to think. It was brisk, but not like Saint Petersburg in December, and bright even though it was still early. This was also unlike Russian winter, which was dark and unforgiving, with the wolves waiting and howling in every shadow.

Barcelona wasn’t like that.

Neither was Hasetsu.

Hasetsu was home.

*Yuuri* was home.

Only gold would satisfy. That’s what Yuuri wanted. That’s what Viktor expected, because that was how he showed his love. Yuuri would win and they would be married, now or later, whenever Yuuri wanted.

*Then hand in hand, by the edge of the sand, they’d dance in the light of the moon.*

Wind lapped at the waves, racing onto the shore in rolls of white foam. The salt air was refreshing in the warm sunlight, and even with the concrete barrier between himself and the sea, Viktor felt connected to it. There was a harmony in the consistent hush of water that he could find anywhere, drowning out the rest of the world to let his thoughts drift where they needed to go. In this case, the future.

So, with his arm outstretched, *Maria Dolores* gold engagement ring/good luck charm shining brighter than all of the glittering sea before him, Viktor welcomed the moment of peaceful contemplation with a weary sigh of relief.

Fifteen seconds later, Yurio kicked him right in the back.

Not just any kick, either; the several that followed, each with deliberate aim and huffing effort, convinced Viktor that Yurio was trying to break him down like he might a door.

“Viktor Nikiforov is dead!”

The teenage outburst brought Viktor’s thoughts to a halt, and the whiplash gave him further pause. He was used to Yurio roughhousing, and things hadn’t been really *good* between them for months, but it was harsh.

He turned to face his junior, now a senior competitor in the final six, jaw set and eyes blazing beneath a curtain of blond fringe. It was easy to see why Yurio was the Russian Punk; even with his hands in his pockets, his energy was electric. Aggressive. So bristled and confident and *angry* even though he was just standing there.

Viktor regarded him coolly, standing tall, his own head high, neck protected. He wasn’t intimidated; not of Yurio. Even if he was trying to act the part of the wolf. He had absolutely no trouble meeting his gaze.

Yurio’s lip curled. “Why do you look so happy, looking after that damn pig?”
A rise in tension, going after one of Viktor’s tender spots.

Funny. He’d trained him oh so well.

Viktor took two steps and bent to get eye level, lips pulling into a sly smirk. A year ago, the blond was preparing to take over for Russia as the champion. Now was the perfect chance to make it official. “Did you want to compete against me?”

“So arrogant,” Yurio scoffed, tossing the dismissive words right back in his face without even breaking eye contact. “You may not realize it, Viktor, but not all skaters look up to you. Just go away already, old man.”

It was on those last words that the teenager’s gaze finally dropped, along with his chin, voice holding steady but without the same fire they’d held just seconds before.

Weak.

Viktor snatched his jaw, palm and fingers directing the teenager’s eyes back to his own, forcing him to face him again, this time full-height. If that pup thought he could just challenge the champion of Russia without a fight…

“The ring you got from that pig is garbage. I’ll win just to prove how incompetent his owner is.”

While he spoke, Viktor tightened his grip, pressing the baby face cheeks into his teeth, but Yurio only sneered like the wildcat he was. Even with the tiniest flicker of fear in the back of his eyes, his junior wasn’t going to back down. He was ready to fight, too.

Viktor smiled, giving a soft, amused chuckle, and let his hand be knocked away by Yurio’s fist.

“Let me go!”

The challenge was over, Yurio one step back, contact broken. Viktor watched him a moment longer, then turned away, heaving a sigh as he looked back to the sea. Things had changed so much in the last year. They’d both known that they would with Yurio’s senior debut, sure, but they weren’t rivals now; they were enemies. Russia’s rightful heir versus the coach for Japan’s ace. Yurio wanted it now, and he was willing to fight for it, not just take it from Viktor’s waiting hand.

That was a good thing.

It needed to be that way. Yurio was stronger for it. So was Yuuri. Viktor, too. With a purpose and nothing left in Russia to hold him back.

“This place reminds me of Hasetsu, you know?” Yurio called back to him, the characteristic coldness in his voice unable to mask the true intention of his words.

Even as enemies across oceans, they’d still be brothers. Yurio understood. He was finally letting him go. Letting him have a chance at happiness.

Smile bittersweet, Viktor let go of it, too, relaxing the tension in the old aches battle scars. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Yuuri had completely changed everything.
Enough of a chilly breeze and light came into the room to rouse Yuuri. He moaned and curled into the sheets for warmth, but opened his eyes, knowing it was Viktor that brought the elements in with him.

Viktor found his lips in the blankets and came in for a kiss. “Good morning, my Yuuri.”

“Morning.” Yuuri smiled into the affection. “Out for a walk?”

“Da. You prefer night strolls and I prefer mornings.”

“Heh, I guess so.”

Viktor seemed rested, maybe a little in thought, but the tensity from last night was gone. Then again, he was always up and fresh in the morning before Yuuri was halfway presentable to the world.

There were so many things left unsaid; did he really think all they fought about was resolved? Or was he really that good at putting it aside for the sake of competition? Coach Mode wasn’t quite turned on yet this morning.

“I saw Yurio, by the way. He wanted me to tell you ‘good luck’ from himself and the rest of Team Russia.”

“Really?”

“No. Not really. He actually seemed somewhat hostile. But we’re truly enemies now, you know. Us versus them. I’m depending on you to knock him down a peg or two, da?”

“Oh, sure…” Yuuri frowned, thinking about that. “That’s why I’m here, afterall.”

“How about some breakfast before we head to the rink?” Viktor asked, plopping onto the bed beside him with a billowy whoosh.

The juniors kicked off the Grand Prix events at 2pm, so that gave them time. Time for Yuuri to take a nice shower and for the two of them to have an unrushed meal. Room service or hotel lobby had been the norm for their breakfasts together as of late, but Viktor had spotted a cafe on his walk. They’d both gotten better about venturing outside the hotel.

“Sure, just let me get ready first.” Yuuri threw the comforter off his body and got to his feet. Viktor brushed his arm with a hand as he walked passed.

They weren’t the only ones that wanted to have their first meal outside the hotel. Mari and Minako were already at a table in the cafe, spotting them at the hostess desk.

“Hey you two! Good morning; come sit with us.”

Yuuri thanked the hostess and the lovers joined sister and teacher.

Light and simple meals were ordered for all four of them for their varying calorie watching reasons.

With a mouth full of tomato and garlic toast, Yuuri watched as Viktor conversed with the women in his life. A little bit of home in Spain.
Would Viktor feel happy if he saw Yuuri interact with Yakov or Georgi like this? Laughing and nudging...

“You doing all right, Yuuri?” Minako asked, giving his foot a teasing kick from across the booth. “You’re spacing.”

Before Yuuri could answer, Viktor playfully bumped into his arm. “He’s just feeling the pressure is all. You know how he is.”

Among other things.

Yuuri found it best to nod and ignore Mari’s questioning gaze. She and Minako knew exactly how he was.

Thankfully Mari knew well enough to not press it even as they traveled to the rink together and had to part ways for open practice and for the duration of the competitions proceedings.

Practice consisted of fine tuning his programs and debating with himself if he was going to try and land a quad or two before the performance. After watching several skaters flub their jumps, he decided it was best to not risk it. Or reveal he could or was planning to do it.

As the stands filled, the seniors gave the ice to the juniors.

Last year was Yuuri’s first time at the finals and he’d spent his time trying to keep it together, going over his program in his head, and wishing Phichit were with him. Now he was here with Viktor - who he knew to sleep up until the seniors began their competition - watching the young skaters, instead. Was this part of his personal coach training? He was only coaching Yuuri to get him to the finals, so why watch? Maybe it was part of a battle plan Viktor hadn’t clued him in on yet.

Opening ceremonies followed the Junior Prix with Barcelona’s local high school displaying their ice ballet teams, color guard, and band from the stands.

After what felt like hours, the ice cleared once more and the seniors returned to the ice in their costumes for warmups. Viktor cheered and clapped for the young performers that exceeded the politeness of those around them. He really hadn’t sat and watched the opening ceremonies before!

The final six were focused and ready to skate for gold.

They weren’t just going to hand the victory to Yuuri because marriage was on the line. Friends or not. Not even Phichit. They all had something they were fighting to prove. All hungry wolves.

Why did Viktor have to open his mouth? Wasn’t their relationship worth more than that?

They were something to each other without skating, weren’t they?

Yuuri was the last skater on the ice after warmups, but would be the first to start the short program. Viktor handed him a towel and a water bottle. Delicately, he wiped at the sweat so not to smear his makeup, and handed it all back to his coach, who took it ever so dutifully.

He’d miss this.

Resting his elbows on the barrier, Yuuri closed his eyes, drawing long and careful breaths.

This would be the last time he’d be performing Eros for his coach. It had to be his strongest
show the world that only he would ever be the one to know Viktor’s love. The snake princess of the mountain had to seduce the traveler once and for all.

“Yuuri,” Viktor called in a soft voice.

He looked up and Viktor took hold of his hand with the ring and rotated it to plant a kiss on the band.

“His coach clasps his hand, displaying the matching rings they wear,” Marooka commentated like Yuuri had just done an Ina Bauer instead.

It was a performance. Just like in Moscow. Only…

Where were Viktor’s gloves?

Viktor was his. It was part of the plan. Viktor was his.

Yuuri smiled and held up a fist, showing the ring to Viktor, and something less intimate to the audience. “I’ll do my best!” Yuuri then pivoted and headed for the center of the ice.

“It’s hard not to wonder what’s going through Katsuki’s head as he begins his short program, a year after taking last place at the final.”

A lot was going through his head and it would have been a lot easier if it were just dwelling on his failure of last year’s season. Yuuri was glad that Marooka’s voice would be drowned out by the music in a moment.

One more press of his lips to the ring, Yuuri let his hand drop to his side for the Spanish guitar riff to play. Yuuri bent and swayed his body accordingly, determination burning in his eyes.

“I can’t stay in your oasis with you,” the traveler told the princess.

“Have I not given you all that you’ve wanted? Satisfied you to your core?”

“You have, but,” the traveler’s world weary eyes hesitated, gaze not meeting hers, but his grip didn’t loosen. “I’m meant to travel. I can’t stay in one place for long. Or be with anyone.”

“Is it a family you’ve left behind?”

“No, I have no one.”

The princess paused, considering. “How could that be? No one truly is alone…”

“They are living, but we are not close. It is why I travel.”

“No… it is it is why you run.”

Yuuri pulled out of the combo spin and positioned himself into the triple axel. The entry was a difficult one, but it was one of Yuuri’s favorites, and one he managed to frequently land cleanly.

Now for the build up of the quad flip…
Salchow.

Toe loop.

And-

He launched into the air, rotating - it should be enough - until he came down, losing his balance and touched the ice with a hand.

He had to keep going!

_The traveler hadn’t liked being told he was running from his problems - a coward - as any man with pride wouldn’t. Tight jawed, he pushed his excuses aside as he allowed the princess to take him to bed like many times they’ve shared already._

_When he first came to her, he’d never promised he would stay forever in her oasis, but with everything the princess had offered in love and shelter, why wouldn’t he? Many nights he told her she was his everything, her love was the only thing he wanted or needed in this life and the next, beg her to pleasure him to the point he’d forget his own name._

_It couldn’t all have been talk. The princess didn’t want to believe anyone was that cruel._

_But when she awoke the next morning, body stiff and loose all at once from their lovemaking, he was gone._

Yuuri held the final pose, cheeks flushed, and breath leaving his body in heaves with the white noise of applause all around him.

No matter how strong the finish was or completed rotations, the hand touch would cost him. Would it have been better not to have risked it at all? Had he made a huge mistake trying?

The ice blurred in the distance and Yuuri sank to his knees.

It wouldn’t be enough. There was no reason for the judges to show pity.

Were JJ, Phichit, and everyone celebrating?

Bending forward with clenched fists, Yuuri’s forehead touched the ice with a burning chill as he held in his cries.

He’d failed.

—

Viktor didn’t agree, of course.

It’d been an incredible performance; nearly perfect from beginning to end. The raw power had been there, captured by the jaws of the wolf that Yuuri had worked so hard to train over the season. He’d moved confidently; each step and spin executed with the kind of deliberate intention that proved that he deserved to be there.

The months of intense training had been long and difficult, but they’d been worth it. Anyone could see that; not just in the way the costume fit- bunching at his joints and hanging in places where they’d been snug before -but how he sat with his mistakes after.
There was disappointment, sure. That was normal. Viktor knew that feeling well… the heartbreak of coming close and barely missing the mark. A minor mistake in a string of otherwise perfect performances. Taking a risk and losing the gamble. He’d never had a breakdown on the ice itself, but he was very familiar with the ache of loss and the burn of regret.

But Yuuri wasn’t a wreck. He wasn’t crumbling. Viktor didn’t feel the tremor that he might have even a month ago; just tense concentration as his skater quietly worked through his emotions.

He wasn’t giving up anymore.

That was so much better. He’d come so far. Even with that display on the ice… which was good, too. Feeling it. Allowing himself to feel it. He was human. Yuuri had never pretended to be anything other than that.

Yakov might have even said it was healthy.

Besides, it really had been incredible. Certainly deserving of more than the 97.83 that it received. But that didn’t surprise him, either.

Yuuri could have been perfect and he probably still would have been underscored. It was the very thing Viktor had wanted to avoid, but… his lover was brave. Yuuri would fight through the fear of the world, with Viktor at his side.

As it turned out, gold wasn’t everything, and they were both stronger together.

Yuuri wasn’t complacent. They would get through it. Viktor would push and help him every step of the way, no matter how long it took. It was how he’d show his love, just as promised… being there, believing in him, not letting him give in.

Viktor let his arm fall away from Yuuri, and a little smile slid into place on his lips. He was proud. So proud. And excited and fond and in love and everything was just… wonderful.

He turned his gaze up to the feed of themselves in the jumbotron, suspended above the rink. Yuuri looked miserable, brows furrowed and eyes fixed on the floor. What did he need from his coach? What could he do for him? He’d wanted gold for the wedding, Viktor supposed, though there was still the free skate… and of course he’d marry Yuuri anyway.

He’d marry him right then and there if they could.

No, sometimes Yuuri just needed time to cool off. Left alone with Viktor in sight.

That was okay, too. Viktor would just wait. Stay by him and wait.

Wait and dream about the future… about next season, with programs that really get Yuuri excited. Like Chulanont and his *King and the Skater*. Yuuri needed to have fun like that. The passion was catching and so fun to watch. It was so easy to imagine a program like that— tapping into Yuuri’s fantasies or nostalgia —-and marrying it to his newly honed technical skills and confidence. He’d win. Viktor was certain of it.

They’d have more time for costumes, too. The idea books they could come up with, and oh, all of the hours of practice they could do, nailing every move that Yuuri had ever wanted to learn. Fulfilling every one of his dreams.

Viktor wanted to do it all.
Phichit’s short program was amazing. It was the best Yuuri had ever seen him perform it. Even with how disappointed he was with himself, he was proud of what his Thai friend had done for his first grand prix. His victory at the Cup of China made him a fan favorite, but would that get him to the podium? There wasn’t a huge difference between their scores after their short programs.

And Yurio… a beautiful, ever-evolving monster was right, from kicking them out of the kiss and cry to the fierce and tranquil Agape on the ice. Over the interviewers’ shoulders, Yuuri watched the Russian teen skate the program he’d developed from the early stages in Hasetsu.

How did Yuuri stand a chance against that? Viktor would be proud of his protege.

… Where had Viktor gone, anyway? Yuuri had been so busy with the press, his coach had slipped away. He didn’t blame him. Who wanted to listen to their pupil stumble over his words and explain his screw up?

Wait, did they just say Yurio beat Viktor’s short program score? For years, Viktor had held the record and now Yurio… the boy that was likely to succeed. Yuri Plesetski had surpassed Viktor Nikiforov. Was that what Viktor had wanted? Had he hoped that for the both of them he choreographed their short programs for the season?

And Yuuri had blown it.

Frowning, Yuuri left the crowd of press with a series of bows to go find his coach. He gave the locker room and bathroom a glance through and call, then headed out to the side breezeway to the bleachers.

And there he was! At the top of the steps with his back turned to him.

Yuuri started to call for him, but stopped when he realized how stiff and transfixed he was.

For a moment. Yuuri stayed quiet, observing his coach’s form, wondering if he’d sense his presence. But he didn’t. Slowly he ventured further up the stairs and Viktor startled out of where he was.

“Oh, Yuuri! Finished up? Chris is about to start. Let’s find a seat.”

“Sure…” Why did he sound so excited about it?

Yuuri followed Viktor towards the top of the stands where Sara, Mickey, and Emil were sitting. It was odd for Viktor to initiate sitting next to others, let alone other competitors, after all the talk of war and soldiers and wolves…

Was he resigned to the fact that his student had lost and was just trying to enjoy himself?

Despite how Marooka mentioned that Chris had never won the grand prix event, Viktor looked out to the ice, watching his friend with a hand to his chin. Amused? Had Viktor ever watched Chris as a spectator or a friend, not a rival?

Between this and the way he looked watching Yurio… Studying. Appreciating. Was he missing the thrill of being on the ice?

The Swiss man had consistently been second to Viktor in the last five years and it really showed. His last jump had a flaw, but Chris was still Chris. Everything else in his program had great
Chris went to the kiss and cry.

He did outscore him.

With his scores, Chris was in second place, right behind Phichit. That put Yuuri in third with three more competitors still to go.

Yuuri’s shoulders hunched in place as Viktor waved and good-naturedly cheered his friend for a good job. Yuuri’s placement was slipping fast.

To Yuuri’s right, a foot came crashing on the crevice of the head rests of the seats between he and Sara!

“DAVAI!” Yurio shouted with both his feet crossed, slouching in the seat behind them.

Yuuri had always admired Otabek. He was quiet and, mostly, unassuming, rising in the series from season to season to find himself. And when he found his stride, he really found it.

Marooka called him the Dark Horse of this year’s season. And he was right. After making it to World’s last season, he showed no signs of stopping. Like Yurio, he’d be a skater to watch for years to come.

Like Chris, Otabeks’s jumps were flawless.

There’s no hesitation in his skating. Determination is very much his trademark.

Another high score… pushing Yuuri further and further away from the podium.

“Looks like somebody else outscored the piggie,” Yurio taunted.

Viktor didn’t defend his skater or say anything to his junior. Not that Yuuri expected him to, but it felt unsettling for Viktor to be so focused on what was happening on the ice and not Yuuri. Since his botched short program there was a distance between them. A lack of warmth. It felt different than his usual, smothering support.

Last of the group was JJ and all the Canadians and international fans in the crowd went crazy as JJ took the ice. He was the only one of the six that won both of his qualifying events. Yurio would be hard to beat, though.

Yurio groaned at the support JJ got, but was smug in his posture. He didn’t think the older boy would beat him. Understandable. Viktor held that record for so long, only besting himself time and time again. As good as JJ was, he hadn’t come close to Viktor Nikiforov.

And after the first and second missed rotations, he wouldn’t this season, either.

What was happening to JJ? He’d never lost himself like this before. Crumbling to the pressure like most? Even someone like cocky and self-confident as The King could fall.

“I can rule the world JJ… I will break the walls now look at me…” the audience sang and cheered to revive him.

His quad lutz turned into a single.

It hadn’t occurred to Yuuri until now that Theme of King JJ was a song of self-worth and
overcoming oneself. An anthem…

It’s like seeing myself from last year. No that’s not right. JJ’s struggling now because he took a risk. Just like Yuuri had. That was part of the game, part of the war. Yurio snickered from behind Yuuri. No one has the right to mock the challenge he’s taken on. No matter how many gold medals a skater had, each season wasn’t a sure win.

Both Yurio and JJ were so young… something like this could happen to Yurio, too. Especially since it was Yuuri’s last year. The two of them would have to become rivals and fight for the gold from now on without him.

And I have no regrets for taking on my own challenge, either. Afterall, I’ve managed to become one of the final six.

The fist JJ held up at the conclusion of his program shook out of frustration, not victory. Defeated, JJ skated to the kiss and cry, dreading the results with a head hanging between his legs. Never had Yuuri seen him so deflated. For the short time they spent at the same skate club in Detroit, JJ always picked himself up. Whether he botched a jump or someone was mocking his Canadian accent.

Gradually the crowd started chanting JJ’s name. It didn’t take long for their energy and support to reach him. With outstretched arms and a call to stop that projected through the teleprompters. The arena was nearly quiet and then JJ forced a smile and crossed his arms into his signature JJ Style.

The adoring fans roared, seeing now that their hero had recovered, or at least encouraged to get through the rest of the finals.

Yurio kicked the back of Yuuri and Sara’s seat, clutching his ears. “Shutupshutupshutup!”

It was childish to react that way to a fellow competitor, even if Yurio clearly didn’t like him. Yuuri also got the impression Viktor didn’t like JJ either, but he hadn’t looked pleased at the low score or mocked the struggle as it unfolded below.

No speech about weak soldiers? Infiltrating the enemy camp while they were down? Or even the strength of the army lifting the general. Maybe it wasn’t the right place with Sara, Mickey, and Emil there.

At least they all collectively sighed at Yurio’s fit over JJ.

Once the short program final scores were announced, the skaters and their coaches broke off for press photos and quick statements.

Viktor didn’t talk up Yuuri with praise as he usually did. His corny, inspirational lines were even lackluster.

Yeah, Yuuri didn’t want to get his hopes up, either. Mari and Minako didn’t try to sugarcoat it, but did compliment the parts of his program he did excel at.

Nerves made Yuuri’s appetite minimal, and Viktor’s was generally the same, so he didn’t oppose a light dinner for room service - a salad with some cheese and crackers.

It was enough to quell hunger and some swirling anxiety.
The anxiety about the prix, anyway. Not about Viktor and everything that was left hanging in the air.

Last night and everything this evening…

Viktor was willing to ignore it, but Yuuri wasn’t.

“Hey Viktor…” Yuuri started, spearing the last cherry tomato with his fork. “Can we talk before we turn in for the night?”

Viktor wiped a smear of cheese from his fingers on a cloth napkin. “Is it all right if I take a shower first?”

“Sure. That’s fine.” It would give Yuuri a few minutes to collect his thoughts. He’d take a shower after their talk.

“Be right back,” Viktor smiled and took both of their empty plates and set them on the table next to the television.

From the way Viktor winked and turned to the bathroom with a soft, sultry movement in his gait, he was expecting a different kind of conversation.

If only.

There was something wrong.

What was real? What was an act? Who was the real Viktor Nikiforov? That line was blurring more and more.

The desperation in his voice over the phone when they were separated because of Makkachin, followed by the relief and clinginess of their reunion. The princess's shackles loosening more and more. Coach mode hardly presented during the first practice of the competition, more excited for the free time in Barcelona. And then Yuuri proposed…

The princess leapt out of the tower, but their fight was a chain still attached to her ankle, so she returned to the security inside, lashing out.

Viktor had resigned himself to a life of isolation and rejected anyone that wanted to get close. Too afraid to accept love or kindness from anyone. So many people cared about him and he'd convinced himself they hated him.

What made Yuuri so different?

Viktor saw something in Yuuri at the banquet, and it pained Yuuri so much that he missed it. Viktor clearly did too and felt threatened. Keeping some strange necessary lie to keep himself together in his personal war.

And then tonight Viktor watched the other finalists skate with an interest Yuuri hadn’t seen before. With how he looked out with a longing…

He missed the ice.

He missed his career.

Viktor spent the last eight months of his life training a dime a dozen skater from Japan, neglecting his own training. Was he finally realizing this and looking forward to going back?
It wouldn’t be long before he could.

Was Viktor restraining his excitement for Yuuri’s sake? More than anything, Yuuri wanted to see him skate again. No offense would be taken because he’d be retiring after the season ended and he’d get to watch his idol skate again.

Without being Yuuri’s coach, Viktor would have time for his own programs. Go back to Russia and rekindle his relationships with his team and Yakov. Yuuri would go with him for those conversations if he still wanted him to.

But Viktor didn’t know Yuuri was going to retire. If Yuuri told him tonight, rather than wait for after the finals, would that relieve some of the tension of secrets around them? Equal out?

Yuuri took out his phone to open Instagram as Marooka’s voice came on the television with tonight’s highlights.

“The short program standings are Yuri Plisetsky in first place, Otabek Altin in second, and Christophe Giacometti in third, with the remaining rankings as shown.”

A clip of Yuuri’s interview played.

Scrolling through Instagram, there was a photo of Chris and Phichit taking a selfie with Bastien in the background. Minako had a photo of she and Celestino at a bar with Mari looking like she was on her way out. There was a lot of alcohol on the counter.

The bathroom door opened and the room immediately felt humid with shower steam.

Humming, Viktor walked passed the empty bed and the one Yuuri sat on to sit on the window sill.

“That’s interesting,” Yuuri mused. “Looks like Minako’s at a bar with Celestino.”

“Wow, we better stay away from that place,” Viktor said, equally amused, head bent while toweling his hair. “Well anyway, what’s up? You said you wanted to talk. So…” He looked up, eyes soft and hopeful.

And it made Yuuri start to lose the resolve he had minutes ago.

“Right.” Yuuri clenched his hand on his thigh, trying to summon the courage back. He would miss Viktor’s pep talks the night before events. He would miss the authoritative gentleness of his voice. The teasing and the bossy. He’d miss it all, but this was how it had to be. It’s what Viktor wanted.

“After the final, let’s end this.”

It was quiet for a moment as Yuuri kept his gaze at his own knees in wait.

Viktor blinked at him, with a quiet, "Huh?"

Yuuri’s throat tightened. “You’ve already done enough for me, more than I could have dreamed of. My final season is my best one yet. It’s because of you.” Yuuri pulled himself into a bow over his knees. “Thank you for everything. So Much. And thank you… for being my coach.”

Again Yuuri waited, not raising from his position, but he noticed their feet.

Viktor’s ankles were crossed so delicately between Yuuri’s parallel spread legs.

Still, Viktor didn’t respond. Didn’t even react. Had he not heard him? Was he still taking it in? But then a tear splashed on the top of Viktor’s pale foot.
Yuuri looked up at him. “Viktor?”

Sparkling, beautiful tears collected in his silver lashes. “Damn... I didn’t expect Katsuki Yuuri to be so selfish.”

“Selfish or not, it’s my decision. I’m retiring.” Yuuri wasn’t so certain it was selfish when their arrangement had always been temporary. Retiring didn’t affect Viktor. Curious, he reached up to Viktor’s face to lift the long fringe out of his fiance face.

Viktor tensed, a flicker of anger behind his eyes. “What are you doing, Yuuri?”

“Well, I’m just surprised to see you cry.” It didn’t make sense that Viktor was the one that was crying.

“I’m mad, okay. What should I do?!” Viktor batted his hand away.

“Y-you’re the one who said it was only until the grand prix final!”

“I thought you needed my help more.”

Oh. Maybe Yuuri should have told him sooner so he wouldn’t have gotten his hopes up. “It’s okay, you don’t need to worry about me. This way you can make your co-”

“Stop! I don’t want to hear it!” Viktor stood to grip Yuuri’s shoulders. “How can you tell me to return to the ice while saying you’re retiring!”

“Because this is what I’ve decided. You don’t need to be my coach anymore. It’s okay!”

Viktor released his hold, eyes wide and livid like he’d been slapped. “I don’t... need ...?!” He tripped over the words, mouth trembling in a foray of emotions. “ I don’t need?! Yuuri, I gave up EVERYTHING ...” He stumbled back to the sill, hand coming up just in time to brace himself at the window.

“Viktor!” Yuuri got up to assist and placate, but Viktor’s other hand shot up, stopping him in his tracks.

What was happening? Viktor had never wanted Yuuri to stay away before. Or raised his voice against him.

Rigorously Viktor shook his head as shuffled awkwardly in his slippers against the wall, away from both beds, hand still cautioning Yuuri to not get close. “Permanently… with my reputation…” His voice started coming out in gasps, leaving thoughts unfinished, though Yuuri could guess what he meant. “ RUINED things with… with—!”

The gasping breaths turned to a strangled sob that Viktor tried to hold back with fingers raking at the polished wooden cabinet walls. Despite the warning, Yuuri still tried to get to him. How Viktor was acting was scaring him! He couldn’t let him go into their other room like this. Why was he so upset?

Viktor then stumbled into the wardrobe drawers on the wall with his shoulder ramming into a knob. He tried to stay upright through ragged and shallow breaths until the task was too much. Viktor slumped down the drawers at the weight, head and hip sliding until he hit the carpet with a heavy thump.

Yuuri called to him again, which was answered with nothing but a shuddering whimper.
And then Viktor was quiet.

For a moment Yuuri waited, respecting a measurable amount of space Viktor had requested, waiting for him to stand up. But he didn’t.

Although there was no blood on the carpet, a fierce panic rose in Yuuri as it had with Phichit, but far later than it should have. He was too stunned. Too confused at what he was seeing in front of him.

Yuuri got to his knees and touched Viktor’s back that faced him. “Viktor?”

More faint whimpering. Viktor had bent himself into a partial fetal position, shielding himself away from the world. And him.

Tears welled in Yuuri’s eyes, Viktor’s name caught in his throat like he wasn’t allowed to say it anymore.

He did this to him.

All good things, like dreams and storybook romances, had to end eventually.

Such was the nature of a world built on recurrent patterns. From seasons to the phases of the moon, the ebb and tide of the ocean to the strength of a spider’s perpendicular web, change was inevitable and necessary.

But no less painful.

The princess wasn’t sure what it was that turned the page for them; if the young man had suspected for some time, or if it was a recent discovery, but once the secret was spoken, it stayed between them.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked.

She wasn’t sure how to respond. Though she had a hundred answers, it was all so complicated. More so now than ever before.

“All that time I was talking about ‘saving the princess,’ and you were here all along… how could you?”

He was betrayed, and she could not blame him.

“I feel like a fool.” The young man scrubbed a hand over his weary face, heartbreak drowning what was left of would be their last evening meal together. “Did you really ever want me to save you? Why have me leave my home? You said this was part of my birthright.”

She set her fork aside. “The truth is—”

“Oh, so now you want to talk about the truth?” His laugh was harsh. Too harsh.
“...the truth is, I changed my mind. I don’t care about the curse. I can go on like this instead.”

“As a wolf? But how long can you live like this, Your Highness?”

“Please don’t call me that.”

He kept going. “How long until the firebird comes back for you?"

“It doesn’t matter.”

“It does matter! As long as the firebird is out there, you aren’t safe. I swore to protect you.”

The princess flinched, feeling the tenuous hope that she’d built in her heart the past weeks crumble like bleached bone in the wasteland. “So what will you do?”

“I will go to the tower, as planned, and destroy the firebird... once and for all.” The young man stood, drawing up his sword in his glory. He’d grown so strong in the time they’d been together; so confident, so bold. Exactly what she’d hoped for, and just what she feared.

She looked down at her plate again. “I don’t see how that’s supposed to keep me safe... taking me to the source of the problem.”

“That’s why I’m not taking you with me. I’ll do this on my own. For you, Your Highness.”

_____________________________________________

Saint Petersburg, Russia

Viktor (18 years old)

Final exams came and went, and Viktor passed them all. With no skating to distract him and the weight of his decision keeping him grounded, he had no trouble concentrating on both his academics and ballet.

“I wish you’d reconsider your career path, Vitya,” he heard over and over again. “You’d make such a wonderful principal ballerina.”

“Skating is my life,” he always said in reply.

They knew what he would say, but still they tried.

Accredited and graduated, he and Makkachin cleaned out their dorm room in preparation to move one last time- not just for the summer, but permanently. It was bitter sweet. Vaganova had been his home for the past eight years, and it had been wonderful. If he were continuing ballet, he might be able to take on more advanced classes, or stay and teach perhaps, but his time here had come to an end.

Besides, after what he was planning, he didn’t intend to see them much. The old Vitya wouldn’t exist after this summer.
So it was packing his things into boxes and his suitcase, throwing away what he wouldn’t need any more, and cleaning the room he was leaving behind for the next lucky student that would take his place.

Makka mostly helped by keeping company on the empty bed, basking in the sunlight from the window. He’d been napping on and off for the past hour, though he perked up when a knock came at the door.

“Vitya? Could I have a minute?”

It was Gavrik, dressed nicely in a suit and tie—probably to travel home to Moscow, where his wealthy family was waiting. He’d filled out and gotten tall, though not nearly as tall as Viktor, and had a strong jaw that made him look almost handsome. If it weren’t Gavrik, anyway.

Viktor rolled his eyes, and returned to his sorting. “What do you want, Gav?”

“I’m going to New York City in a couple of weeks. In America.” Gavrik said this while fiddling with the doorknob, turning it halfway, then letting it spring back. “I’ve been recruited by a ballet company.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you. But…” He then stepped into the room, closing the door behind him with a quiet click. “I thought you might like to come with me.”

Both Viktor and his poodle turned to look at him then, giving Gavrik their full and confused attention. Makka cocked his head to one side, Viktor arched a brow. “What?”

“In New York, I’m sure I could get you an audition. You’re good. Better than me, even. It would be easy for you to get into a company.”

“So you want me to just… leave everything behind and go with you, after you’ve ignored me for the past several years?”

Makkachin sneezed his disapproval.

“I know. I know. And I know you have a boyfriend, too, but he’s terrible. Leave him.” He hesitated, blushing, then went on. “You don’t have to dance. You could keep skating; there are coaches in the States. But you can’t stay in Russia, Vitya. It will kill you.”

Viktor dropped his gaze, unwilling to let his former roommate watch him process all of that so openly. He had fair points, and he probably knew more than he was letting on. How obvious had he been the last few weeks? Was his spirit so obviously crushed?

“I can’t say that it would be easy, Vitya, but we could be roommates again. I’ve got an apartment already lined up. You could… stay with me. Please.”


Gavrik immediately flushed, shrugging his shoulders. “It’s not a requirement…”

At least it confirmed what he’d suspected. Viktor sighed, and waved Makkachin over to sit with him on the floor. “Gav. I am leaving Niko.”
“Yeah?” He tried to not sound too hopeful.

“Yes. You were right about him. I was just waiting for school to be over. But I would never leave my coach. Not for anything.”

“But… Vitya, you’ll never have a chance here.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“But—“

“I don’t leave the people I love just because things get hard.”

Gavrik fell quiet for a moment, then nodded, frowning. “It wasn’t easy to talk to you, you know.”

“I’m sure it wasn’t.”

“…well, if you’re ever in New York.”

“Good luck, Gavrik. I’ll miss you.”

After he’d been home from Vaganova for two weeks, Viktor flew to Moscow to say his goodbyes to Niko. It went about as well as could have been expected. Despite all the hints Viktor dropped leading up to it, the bad boyfriend hadn’t seen it coming.

They booked a hotel for the weekend, shared a bottle of wine, some conversation. Niko rattled off his newest complaints about his family, studies, and peers, while Viktor waited for the opportunity to deliver the final blow.

“And these girls on campus… they don’t even know what they’re missing out on,” Niko muttered, fishing for a cigarette in his bag— as well as a stroke of his ego. “But you do, don’t you, Mishka?”

“Hm?”

“They think I’m beneath them, not even having the slightest idea that I’m the one fucking their idol. It’s funny, da? They’re all in love with you, but you— you would never touch them.”

Viktor touched his lips, thoughtful. “We’re supposed to be objective, though, right?”

“Hah! Mishka. You’re too much a fool in love, and I’m too smart. Too handsome. Too good. Is there any reason you would ever leave me?”

He took a breath and let it go with a soft hum. “Actually… yes. You’re a dead end, Niko.”

“What? What are you saying?”

“I think… that those women probably know exactly what they’re talking about, Niko, and you won’t have me to make you feel better anymore.”

Niko’s expression was a mix of so much anger and confusion that it was hard not to laugh— especially when he stumbled up from the bed, half-drunk and screeching. “You’re dumping me? You’re dumping me?!”

“Sounds like it, yeah.”
“You can’t do that! You need me! You need my— I can ruin your career, you know! My mother is your sponsor!”

“I’ll be fine… you need to worry about yourself, now.”

“What is that supposed to mean?!”

“Dasvidaniya, Niko.”

—

“Thanks for meeting me, Coach. I know you’re busy with summer camp.”

“Of course. But Vitya, what was so urgent that it couldn’t wait? You need to take a break now and again, too.”

Viktor turned a warm smile up at the old man, wondering how to answer, or if he could. The truth was out of his hands, now. “I wanted to skate my gala piece— from last season.”

“The Golden Cockerel?”

“No. The season before.”

“Ah, Rainbow Connection.”

“I didn’t get to at Worlds because of my ankle,” Viktor explained, one arm on Yakov’s to steady himself, the other pulling off his skate guards. “So it feels unfinished, you know?”

Yakov frowned, heavy brow settling into a world-weary sag. “And now is the best time for this? Vitya...”

“Coach.” Viktor took his arm with both of his hands, hoping that his pleading eyes would say what he wasn’t able to. Though Yakov studied his face for a moment, he only nodded for his student to elaborate. So he did, turning his gaze back to the ice. “I wanted to skate for you one last time.”

“Last?”

“I’m… going away for a while. My aunt and uncle. They wanted to go on a cruise of all things. Some tour of Europe. It’s just a few weeks.”

“A cruise? Vitya, that’s wonderful news! I think you will have a lot of fun. Is Makkachin going with you?”

He wasn’t, but Viktor nodded. It hurt to smile and he didn’t want to lie about all of this, but he had to. It was important. “Yeah. They’re… pretty excited.”

“Then why do you seem so put out by going?”

The simultaneous fear and relief at being caught made Viktor laugh, and he stomped to the barrier with a huff. “I don’t know. Because hanging out with my relatives is lame? Because I don’t want to be away from you for weeks and weeks? Because I’ll miss skating?”

Of course Yakov caught up to him, pulling him into a hug with a chuckle of his own. “You’ll be fine… and back before you know it. Take photos for me, da?”
“Sure, Coach. Sure.”

“But if it really makes you feel better, I will watch you skate.”

They didn’t always practice with music in the rink; not over the loudspeakers. Having his gala piece play while his coach watched him skate with his hair down, one last time, was everything.

*You can be who you want to be on the ice.*

*You can find yourself.*

It had been the sweetest dream and a beautiful lie for so many years, but at least for that moment, it was true. Viktor was a princess, dancing on the ice for his coach with every ounce of feeling that his broken heart possessed. No gloves, no costumes; just wild, free elegance. The program he’d wanted it to be.

He took the train home after. Yakov offered to drive him, but he couldn’t risk it. Not when he was right on the precipice of his decision. Fate hadn’t led anyone to pick up on the clues and his desperate cries for help. It was one thing for his teammates and relatives to miss the signs, but for Yakov to miss them- even down to the single black painted thumbnail -Viktor wouldn’t delay any longer.

Coach!: have fun on your trip, vitya :]

Viktor gazed down at his phone for several long moments before he pushed his way inside the house, relieved to find his aunt and uncle waiting for him in the front room by the TV.

“Oh good, you’re home! Makka’s out back chasing the squirrels.”

“Vitya, how was practice?”

“Have you been working on next season?”

With a quiet huff, Viktor set his skates and track bag down by the door and came to lean against the loveseat opposite them, wringing his hands together. “Can I talk to you about something? A serious something?”

The older couple hesitated, attention fully turned to their nephew.

“Of course, Vitya… what’s wrong?”

That was one of the best things about them. As absent as they were and as little as they understood, Viktor’s aunt and uncle really *did* care. They wanted to be there for him; they just never knew how because Viktor never told them how. It was the perfect opportunity to let them in.

He was sure they would know just what to do.

“I know this probably doesn’t come as a surprise, and I’m sorry, but… I’m gay. I’m gay, and I don’t want to be. Can you help me?”

**Chapter End Notes**
Minako: You know, my room is closer~
Mari: ... am I hearing what I think I’m--
Celestino: I like you’re thinking, la mia bellezza
Mari: I didn’t say you could use the room, by the way.
Minako: Where’s Yuuuri? He should be a good brother and get you a skater to sleep with
Celestino: or a coach
Minako: Oh yes... a big strong coach... manly--
Mari: First of all, gross. Second, you’re both drunk as hell and I will not be present for any of this. I’ll give you a few hours, but then Yuuri’s ex-hairy coach is sleeping out in the hallway!

On the Next Gay Skate:
BROKEN HEARTS! / FIREBIRDS! / FREE SKATES! / PROMISES! REAL TALK!
/

Please look forward to it!
Shattered

Chapter Summary

Yuuri's decision to retire had some unexpected consequences, like giving his coach a complete and total nervous breakdown. But that's all right; Japan's ace skater is still going to give his all to the free skate. Will the power of love help him win the gold, or at the very least, save his relationship with Viktor? Or has he messed everything up for good this time? D:

#LET'S END THIS part 2 #important backstory stuff #more reasons for no archive warnings #we basically give away all of our big reveals in this chapter #also all of our still technically canon compliant but also canon divergent plot interpretations #flashback trauma and ptsd #present time meltdown (continued) #angst #lots of angst #fighting #minor depiction of violence #dumb dumb dumb boys

**Please see the end notes for additional tags with spoilers.

Chapter Notes

**Mamo:** Aaaand we’re back! My surgery was in October and I’m nearly recovered. This chapter still took longer than we thought because it turned out to be more painful than either of us originally anticipated. But we’re here, we did it. We promise that it gets awful for a little longer and then gets better at the end of it. Those that won the giveaway should use those tissues. We promised a happy ending and we mean it! We are almost out of canon material and it’s exciting. Thank you for your patience.

**Gab:** That’s right... By the end of this chapter, things are headed toward all of the happy, sweet, wonderful, fluffy, good things that Viktuuri deserves. Idk about you guys, but after all of this angst, I seriously need a break. At least a week. We only have 4 chapters left... we can do this! (•̀ᴗ•́)و

**NLA Giveaway update:** I've sent out all but one final batch out, so most of you should have received tracking for your care packages by now. Feel free to get in touch if you have any questions. I'll be sending out the last few in the next couple of days. Thanks to those who entered! We got a GREAT response!!!

**Fic Updates by Us:**
Birthday gift for the lovely Quel - a LotR AU Elven Birthday in the Shire

**NLA Gallery Updates:**
From chapter 27 by Sleepyfortress [Yuuri and Yurio visit Viktor’s parents grave](#)
Also from by Sleepyfortress, we have [Sick Viktor from chapter 17](#)

**NLA Playlist Updates:**
*Walking in the Air* - Tom Chaplin
*Barcelona* - Rufus Wainwright
*Siren* - Toshiyuki Toyonaga
Ever After - Marianas Trench  
Broken Over You - Vertical Horizon  
The Other Side - Tatsuya Kato  

Happy New Year!  
☆ (∈'・∀・)ﾉ♀(・∀・)♀/☆

See the end of the chapter for more notes  

Saint Petersburg, Russia  

Viktor (18 years old)  

“Georgi, you need to watch your landing! If you don’t manage to stick that, it won’t matter how good your stories are!”

It was summer.

The sky was bright blue and broken by plumes of cotton clouds and sun-kissed leaves. Saint Petersburg was alive and beautiful, bursting with the same energy as the rushing canals, full from the rain storms.

Without Vitya and still hours before the training students were to arrive, it was the perfect, breezy end cap to a quiet week. One more regular session with the other young Russian champion, and summer would truly begin.

“Yes, Coach!” Georgi corrected his steps, moving into position to set up another jump. One on one sessions were rare this early in the season with Coach Feltsman so busy, and he was determined to take full advantage. He wouldn’t beat Viktor otherwise.

A dull thunk echoed from the heavy metal doors at the entrance, signalling the approach of another spectator. They rarely had the rink to themselves, so it wasn’t unusual, on or off the ice. Neither coach or student paid much mind to the visitor, dressed in hooded sweatshirt with hands in pockets. He was probably just one of the summer students checking out the rink before classes began..

“Again, Georgi.”

“Yes, Coach!”

It was only when the newcomer came to stand next to Yakov that he realized that he recognized him; not by appearance, but by his posture and the familiarity of his approach. He wasn’t afraid of the old coach at all. Yakov certainly felt like he knew that downcast gaze from somewhere, even if it was hidden behind dark shades and hood.

But the young man said nothing, so Yakov didn’t, either. Only barked more orders at his student.

Until—

“Coach.”
A small voice. Just a tremor. Confirming the unconscious suspicion and dredging up the years of long-suffering patience that came up with a huff and a sigh. “In a minute, Vitya, I’m busy with Geor—”

The thought died mid-sentence, and confusion took its place. This changed again, morphing to something like panic as the old coach turned from the ice to get a good look at the lanky teenager at his side. It had only been a week since Viktor had left for his European excursion; a cruise that was meant to take more than a month. Yet there he was, standing pale and haunted under the shroud of his sweatshirt.

“Vitya?” Yakov reached for his shoulder, but the skater pulled away, stumbling just out of reach. “Coach,” Viktor croaked. “I couldn’t do it.”

“What couldn’t you do? Vitya, what has happened?”

“I’m sorry, Coach.” Viktor’s voice pitched, and with that came a stream of tears. “I couldn’t.”

What that meant, Yakov wasn’t sure. With Viktor, it could mean anything. He took the boy in his arms, feeling the tremble against him like a broken bird fading in the dying winter leaves.

In one week, his Vitya had gone from a vibrant, beautiful princess to…

“I wasn’t strong enough,” his Vitya cried. “I’m so sorry.”


Georgi watched the pair of them from the ice, brows knit, frown fixed on his face. There had always been secrets in the team, but this was the start of something major.

Yakov took Viktor back to his house and, like many times before, set him up on the sofa in the office. He huddled against one corner, trembling and barely taking any space at all.

“Vitya.” The old man’s voice was gentle and ever patient despite the growing worry. “Can I get you anything?”

Viktor hadn’t answered any of the questions at the rink, nor in the car. Not about where he’d gone or what had happened to him. His pale blue eyes had only stared blankly out at the scenery as Yakov took them away. Just a ghost. A shadow of his former self.

It wasn’t changing any time soon, it seemed.

The sweatshirt covered his body from head down to his fingertips; but Yakov already suspected what was beneath it. After seeing the mangled clumps of hair poking out from the hood, no more than a thumb’s length long, it wasn’t hard to guess at the horrors.

“Vitya?” Yakov tried again.

Viktor closed his eyes.

Even though his first instinct was to call his ex wife, Yakov instead reached out to one of his
former students. One phone call, and Sasha was on the move, making use of his connections to hunt down the people responsible. By nightfall, he had a file folder of records—exactly what Yakov was looking for.

“This is all they had on him,” Sasha said, handing it over. “It was a six week program.”

Yakov frowned as he thumbed through it. “...while I’d be busy with summer camp.”

“Do you want me to call Dr. Mateev?”

“He is already on his way.”

“I just don’t understand why he would do this. Viktór’s always been short-sighted and selfish, but this … It just doesn’t make sense, Coach. Does it?”

“He is not like you, Sasha.”

“No. He’s not.” Sasha turned a helpless frown down the hallway. “So how is he?”

“He…” Yakov began, but his voice faltered and he fell silent. There weren’t words. Nothing to even begin to explain what either of them were going through.

He tried and failed twice more before Sasha put a hand on his shoulder, understanding. “I can have them all killed if you want. Burn the place to the ground.”

“No, Sasha.”

“Call Lilia. She’ll know what to do, Coach.”

Lilia knew it would be bad, but she couldn’t have known it would be like this. Yakov was compromised. His glass heart had permanent cracks despite the tough facade. The thick casing only meant that the fractures ran deep and took longer to heal. Some never would. Lilia hated seeing those, and the weakness that came with it. Especially in crisis. There were things to be done and a firm hand was needed. That was what Yakov was supposed to be good at, but it was here that Yakov failed.

She couldn’t stand it.

So she took over. Barked questions at the man, at Sasha, and at the printed pages in her hands, though none satisfied her.

There were burn marks. Some bruising. He wouldn’t eat. He wouldn’t let anyone touch him. The wild-eyed staring into nothing and sudden snapping to trembling fits of aggressive fear were all ‘expected side effects.’ Would Viktór recover? Could he compete again? Would he be ready for next season? Perhaps. They’d have to wait and see. All of medical advancement could only do so much to heal the body, much less the mind. It would take time.

In less than a week, the boy had been torn apart. But the doctor had seen worse. So had Yakov. Even Lilia. People had come back from worse.

But this was their Vitya, and one of this was easy for any of them. Lilia split herself between helping with Viktór and trying to keep Yakov’s spirits up, as well as managing her own life. It was
one thing to be able to order students around, but she was, as it turned out, no mother. She wasn’t even that good at keeping Yakov in one piece. The longer it took for Viktor to improve, the worse Yakov got.

“Yakov, see that you fix his hair,” Lilia sniffed. “They butchered it.”

“What can I do?”

“Shave it down. It’ll grow back. Start fresh. Even ends.”

“Lilia…”

“You have clippers.”

“Y-yes, Lilia.”

It was only two years ago that Yakov had taught Viktor how to shave. He could still remember the phone call; how nervous the then-squeaky voice had been.

“Coach, I need your help. Uh.”

“What is it, Vitya?”

“I… well, uh, I’m— it’s —can you teach me to shave? I’m growing a beard.”

The ‘beard’ was only a tiny bit of fuzz, but it had been enough to upset him.

His Vitya.

“You have to pull yourself together, Yakov. You are an international coach for these weeks. The world is watching.”

“I know, Lilia.”

“Russia is depending on you.”

“I know.”

“Forget about Viktor. I am taking care of him.”

“Yes, I know.”

“It will be fine.”

“Will it, Lilia?”

Whether it would or not, Lilia wasn’t sure, but it didn’t do any good to waste time on assuming that it wouldn’t. Why bother trying otherwise?
“You have to eat, Viktor.”

Viktor stared past Lilia, arms curled around the stuffed tissue box, unwilling to move.

She sat on the coffee table, too close to be ignored. “You must eat. You cannot put Yakov through this.”

His lashes flickered and his gaze drifted to the bowl of kasha porridge in her hands, then up to the woman. It was hard to work through the muddled thoughts in his head, competing with static and yelling voices.

“If you love your coach at all, you will eat, you selfish child!” Lilia took him by the wrist and pulled him up into a sit. “Do you understand?”

Viktor, startled, stared at her. “I…”

“Eat!”

He ate. He got sick. The cycle repeated itself.

There were days that he was better and other days where he was worse. Viktor mostly slept. Sometimes there were nightmares, sometimes he was simply quiet. Lilia tried to get him to exercise, but he wouldn’t respond. Wouldn’t go outside. When she pressed, he panicked.

“He’s lost his mind.”

“Give him more time, Lilia. He’s been through a lot.”

“Self-induced. He checked himself in, Yakov. We can’t coddle him.”

“That’s… not fair.”

Lilia rolled her eyes. “We only have so much time until the next season begins. Do you want him to miss out on it?”

“I don’t…”

“If we’re ever going to get him back to normal, we must get him back to routine. Do you want the media to get wind of this?”

Yakov cleared his throat, uncomfortable. “You have a point…”

“Discipline, Yakov. And you still haven’t fixed his hair.”

“I… tried.”

“And?”

He looked away, guilty.
Yakov’s bathroom was nothing to Lilia’s salon, but it would do. With a towel around Viktor’s neck, some clippers, and a good pair of scissors, she set to work to remedy the atrocious mess that had been left by his time in the facility.

“Whoever does hair in that place should be fired,” she muttered; a vain attempt at levity. She worked her way over his head first with her fingers and the scissors, determining what could be salvaged.

“They tried to fix it. I didn’t give them much to work with.”

Lilia slowed to a careful pause, the occasional *snip snip* of her scissors filling the lull. “You did this?”

“To ‘prove’ my commitment.”

“How?”

He reached back to mime the action, taking an imaginary ponytail in one hand, making scissors with the other. “I wanted it quick, and it’s not like they would have given me a sword.” Viktor slumped in the chair with a sigh until Lilia tapped his shoulders to get him to straighten up again. “I kept it.”

“Your hair?”

“The whole ponytail is in my jacket. Inner-pocket. I told them it would be worth something on eBay.”

Lilia wasn’t sure if she ought to be horrified or proud, but found herself a mix between. It was more than Viktor had said in days, so she’d take it. “I see. No wonder Yakov wasn’t able to handle this… but he’s always been soft.”

His gaze slid away from hers in the mirror, down to the floor.

“Do you have any regrets?”

“I don’t think it worked. Not the way they thought it would.”

Lilia let that settle while she combed back his hair, working through each strand to even out the edges. The silver clumps were now a dull grey, limp and pitiful. All those years of careful conditioning and treatment, all gone to waste. It would take years to grow it back.

It was probably too late, now. Once the public saw him, he’d never be able to return to the way things had been.

*The fool*

“Of course it didn’t work, Viktor… you can’t change something like that. What could have possibly possessed you to think that it would?”

Viktor didn’t answer, eyes staying fixed on the floor.

“Why would you even want to?” Lilia swept her fingers over the back of his head, plucking the
freshly cut hair away. “It was that boy, wasn’t it?”

He stiffened in the chair.

She switched from scissors to clippers. “I’m disappointed. Letting some stupid boy ruin you. Breakups are hard, but I taught you better than that.”

“I didn’t do it for him.” His voice turned hard, cold and quiet. “I’m not that weak.”

She laughed, but there was hardly any amusement in it. “That’s a relief. With all the time you’ve spent as a skater, I’d begun to think you were getting a glass heart like Yakov.”

He didn’t answer.

She was losing him again.

Lilia finished around his ears, the fresh ends falling in loose whisps now that they’d been trimmed and treated. He looked better. By the end of the summer, he might even be handsome.

That somehow made it more tragic.

She wiped off the stray bits of hair from his neck with the towel. “There. That will do.”

Viktor took one peek at himself, then shuddered away from her touch.

“A ‘thank you’ would have sufficed.” Lilia tossed the towel into the hamper and stood to survey her work.

The young man took his time, slipping a plain tee on over himself, covering the bony ribs and puckered burns, and shuffled for the door.

She caught him by the wrist. “Viktor.”

He stopped, eyes darting to her hand on his. She felt him tense, then relax, gaze rising to meet hers. Waiting.

The ceiling was too low, the room too dimly lit, the walls too close together. It wasn’t the spacious vanity of her elegant en suite; this tiled space was a cold and unwelcoming cave. Viktor was wild here. A lost beast to the forests of instinct and survival.

Of fear.

How Yakov could stand to live in that house, she’d never know.

“Giving in, after everything you’ve worked for... It isn’t like you, Viktor.”

“Maybe it’s not about me.”

“Explain.”

Shrugging again, Viktor pulled against her grip, but she held fast, long nails anchoring him despite the twist of his hand, arm, then body.

“Let me go, Lilia.”

“Not until you explain.”
“There’s nothing to explain.”

She squeezed, nails digging in. “No one is forcing you to stay and skate, Viktor. No matter what threats you receive, you always have the option to quit. You could even leave Russia.”

He stilled, quiet like the dark woods. Listening.

“Nothing is worth destroying yourself for except for your own desires. Never let anyone else change you or demand anything of you, Viktor.”

When Lilia let go of him, Viktor wasted no time in reaching for the doorknob again, yanking it open with no effort to hide the raw emotion that was beginning to bubble to the surface after days of very little.

“You know, Lilia…” He muttered coldly from the doorway. "I’d rather have a heart of glass than no heart at all.”

Something about it burned her, and in just the right way that Lilia couldn’t control herself. Three quick steps and she had that impertinent child facing her again, snatching his jaw with her long nails pressed tightly into his cheeks. He wouldn’t be able to look away. “What was that, Viktor?” Lilia asked, her own glare cold as she stared down at him, eye to eye. “Do you care to repeat what you just said?” Viktor forced a laugh through his clenched teeth, though he wasn’t able to move much, hard gaze staying level on hers. “Did I hit a nerve? Guess you did teach me well, didn’t you?”

It wasn’t often that Lilia lost her composure. There was only one person, in fact, who could regularly get under her skin that way, which was one of the reasons why she couldn’t stand to be around him for very long. He knew her too well. She knew him too well. Familiarity bred weakness, and she hated feeling weak. Perhaps Viktor had gotten too close.

Or, perhaps…

It came together at once. The weakness and the reason for it all. The one thing Viktor would give everything for, do anything for. The only thing he would cave to.

“Yakov. You did it for Yakov.”

The confidence flickered first to fear, then to anger, the smile fading to a thin line on his lips. It was only then that Viktor broke eye contact and tore away from her grip.

Lilia hadn’t meant to leave marks, but— “Does he know?”

The thin line became a sneer. “No, and he’s not going to.”

“I don’t think it’s something that you can just keep from him, Viktor. If the RSF has anything to do with it—”

Viktor’s expression darkened. “One word, and I’ll make sure you never get close to him again, Lilia.”

“Excuse me?”

“Don’t push me. You know who he would choose between us.”

As much as she wanted to argue, Lilia knew she’d lost. Yakov loved her, yes. He loved her far
more than he should have. But she also knew that she’d broken his heart countless times, and that while he’d always taken her back, he loved his surrogate child more than anything else in the world. She couldn’t explain the tracks she’d left on Viktor’s face without excuses, and it was all too easy to imagine Yakov casting her out. It would leave Viktor free to fill his head with any number of lies.

Or worse, the truths of her heartless ways.

Viktor was right.

She regarded him coolly a moment, then stepped back. “He doesn’t need your protection, Viktor.”

“Doesn’t matter. We defend what we want to keep; only fools run away.”

Yakov didn’t know what Lilia meant when she said she wasn’t coming back as she stormed out that day, but when he saw the marks she’d left on his Vitya, he decided that perhaps he wasn’t meant to.

“Vitya, are you all right? What happened?”

Viktor gave a small smile at his concern, shaking his head. “I can’t— let’s just focus on next season, okay? Please?”

The concept wasn’t a foreign one; Viktor had always been eager to overwork his programs long before they were needed. But... “So soon?”

“It’s just the time to start; rock bottom makes a solid foundation, da? Craft a magnificent pyre to burn the tattered remains, then rise again in a violent blaze of glory when the ground is fertile with ashes.”

“Vitya...”

The young skater grimaced, wiping tears from his eyes. Not even Viktor knew if the tears were entirely real or just part of the performance, but it didn’t matter. The headaches and tremors never stayed away for long, and Yakov helped to keep the madness at bay. Soon enough, he was sobbing against the old man’s shoulder while Yakov tried to work out the tension in his neck.

“Hush, Vitya, hush... you’re all right.”

Viktor shook his head. “I still hear them, Coach.”

“Who?”

“The wolves. They won’t stop howling.”

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Wayne University - Detroit, Michigan

Yuuri (21 years old)
“It’s rare to see you out here.”

Yuuri looked up from his music composition homework to see his classmate Alondra, a coffee cup in hand and violin case strapped over her shoulder. “I guess so,” he said as he moved to make room for her on the table where he had his books and worksheets sprawled out.

Alondra took the seat opposite him on the rickety round table of the commons hall. She took a sip of her coffee and didn’t say anything for a few moments. “How’s your roommate?” she ventured softly.

“He’s fine,” Yuuri said with a defensive bite that he noticed too late.

It was the truth, though. Phichit was doing fine. Getting better everyday, in fact. But it was hard to be in the dorm with his friend so miserable. On doctor’s orders Phichit had to limit the time he spent on his cellphone - his window to the outside world while he was forced to rest - and be patient, two things Phichit was not very good at. And being in the dorm with him made Yuuri antsy. Phichit said he didn’t blame him for needing to leave - “I’m so boring, I know!” - but Yuuri couldn’t help feeling selfish for needing to not be reminded about that day a week ago on the ice.

Yuuri offered to pick up his crucial assignments until the doctor gave the all clear for Phichit to resume classes. But he would not be able to resume skating for the season, something neither of them were happy about.

Alondra continued to drink her coffee coolly, regarding Yuuri with eyes that said she was reading what Yuuri wasn’t telling her. She often reminded him of his sister Mari - leaving things in a particular moment only to bring them up later for convenience or blackmail. “Just make sure you get some rest, too. You look like death. I’m glad he’s healing. Take care of yourself.”

Yuuri didn’t even have to look down at his reflection in his phone to know, so he settled on a nod and went back to his coursework.

Alondra finished her coffee and got her own work out of the compartment in her violin.

Off and on Yuuri felt her eyes on him as if wanting to say something. If she wanted to say it, she would, so he continued to work and shake off the anticipation.

May it be out of consideration for his very obvious designated time for homework or her patience had run out, once Yuuri finished the music theory sheet he was on, Alondra spoke.

“So. That Candace chick has been saying things since the accident. Spreading it across campus.”

Oh. “I’m aware.”

“... Doesn’t it bother you?”

“Not really.”

“But-,” she pulled her lips tight and breathed through her nose. “Well, I’ve told her to knock it off because that’s not fair to you!”

Yuuri raised a brow at her. “What isn’t fair?”
She lowered her voice. “She doesn’t have a right to take away your… coming out.”

“I’m not gay, Alondra.”

“You’re…” she paused and tried to not look too confused in her fidgeting. Had she believed what Candace said? Again she spoke low, “I mean, sexuality is super personal.”

“I’m not gay,” Yuuri said again. “She can say what she wants cause it isn’t true.”

“That’s really mature, Yuuri,” Alondra said, genuinely impressed, but also confused. “Well… it sounds like she’s just super mad that you didn’t want her around you with Phichit in the hospital and is trying to have some stupid revenge.”

He couldn’t help the wince at the reminder. He hadn’t meant to shove her so hard, but he didn’t ask for her to hug him. Saying she deserved it was a little harsh, but at least now she wasn’t borderline stalking him or Phichit anymore. Candace believing he was gay did have its benefits.

“Okay, I’m glad that’s cleared up. If you’re fine with her doing that, I won’t try and be your advocate. Though, I do have one question…” Alondra leaned over the table and pointed to Yuuri’s backpack. “What about Viktor?”

Yuuri looked down at the metal, mass produced autographed keychain on the upper zipper pocket. “What about him?”

“You like him, don’t you?”

He felt his cheeks warm. “I… I’m a fan, yeah.”

Her eyes did that thing like Mari’s again and she shrugged it aside with a hum, not convinced.

Yuuri didn’t think about Viktor like that. Or any boys. He didn’t. And if Alondra or anyone else didn’t believe him, that wasn’t his problem.

--

Viktor always had a plan for everything. Or, at least, that was what the world saw and what he wanted them to believe. He’d invested a great deal of time and energy into imagining scenarios for every situation that he might come across, from running into such-and-such reporter at the train station to being kidnapped while abroad by some crazed fan, that he usually felt prepared for whatever life threw at him.

It was true that Viktor was thinking about the future while he watched the short programs- both Yuuri’s and everyone else’s -but it wasn’t quite what the press had imagined. While they expected a scheme of Viktor coming back on his own to face down stronger competitors that he had created, Viktor kept himself busy with brainstorming program ideas for Yuuri while his lover cooled off.

Now that Yuuri had demonstrated such skill, as inconsistent as it was, Viktor had no doubt that they could find better ways to harness it next season. A program specifically designed to show off his backside, perhaps. Or his thighs. The strength in his legs. Something they could start earlier so Yuuri would have a chance at working on the score with his own composer from the ground up. A waltz, perhaps.
Yuuri wasn’t the stereotypical young Asian male, and they needed to showcase that. Yuuri deserved to embrace it. Everyone would love him for it.

Just like Viktor did.

It didn’t matter that Eros hadn’t been perfect. Heading back to their room, Viktor was filled to the brim with feeling and hope. A night alone with his new fiance. They could talk about it... all of it. The engagement, what Yurio had said about Russia and the commitment of being out, what they needed to do to start preparing for the Japanese nationals and beyond...

Most importantly, making up. Showing Yuuri what Eros meant to him. How even if the scores hadn’t reflected it, Yuuri had danced to seduce him and he’d done such a good job. Viktor wanted him to know, finally, the raw power that his skate had on him directly after competition.

But that didn’t happen.

Somewhere between the ice rink and Viktor’s quick shower to get ready, the winds shifted.

Yuuri Katsuki was a treasure, sweet and brave and wearing a smile that wasn’t like his usual sunflower glow. It was more of a grimace.

Like he was speaking to a small child.

The unsaid implications were confusing and hurt on their own, as if Viktor otherwise wouldn’t understand whatever it was Yuuri wanted to say. He listened closely anyway. Yuuri was the center of his universe upon which he was hyper focused; he couldn’t do anything but.

“After the final, let’s end this.”

For a few seconds, the words don’t even register meaning. Viktor played them back in his head, but all that came was a feeling similar to falling through ice and into freezing water below, the sudden shock squeezed the breath from his lungs until all he could manage was a quiet, “Huh?”

Yuuri offered his thanks and a bow of respect, neither of which explained anything. Neither of which stopped him from drowning.

Let’s end this.

The chill turned to a burning from lungs to the back of his throat, and the harder it was to breathe, the more his vision blurred, world shifting into fractals of gold light.

“Viktor?”

He mumbled something about Yuuri being selfish. Selfish to confuse him, to play with his head and his heart. Was this how Yuuri’d felt that day in Beijing when Viktor threatened to resign as his coach to shatter his glass heart? Viktor could feel it cracking under the pressure, chest tighter and tighter with the sinking cold nightmare that he was drowning in. There were even tears building up on his lashes.

“It’s my decision. I’m retiring.”

Viktor blinked in disbelief, but the blurred shapes in front of him only got more water-logged as the world began to crumble away from all around him. Retiring? He’d promised to be Yuuri’s coach until he retired. It was like a marriage proposal. He’d wished Yuuri would never retire.
Yuuri was never supposed to retire. Viktor was supposed to be his coach forever. The ring wasn’t a lucky charm, it was an engagement ring. Or was it?

He didn’t know.

Those dark eyes of his examined the sight of ruin before him, and that that it only made the feathers of the firebird crackle in anger. Of course he was crying. Yuuri was ruining everything, and Viktor didn’t know if it was out of malice or carelessness, and neither was good. He didn’t want to be touched. He didn’t want to talk. Not with someone who could speak so lightly about his heart.

“You’re the one who said it was only until the grand prix final!”

That wasn’t what he’d said.

“You don’t need to worry about me. This way you can make your co-”

Comeback. That’s what Yuuri was going to say. That Viktor should just forget about Yuuri. Forget about home. Go back to Russia, to competitive skating, to isolation, to starvation, to emptiness. Go back to where Viktor Nikiforov was champion and Yuuri Katsuki was dead.

“This is what I’ve decided. You don’t need to be my coach anymore.” Each word hit like a slap in the face, forcing Viktor deeper and deeper below.

Surely, the last year hadn’t just been one cruel joke after another…

Viktor felt the window behind him and the tears spilling freely down his face. He knew words were tumbling from him, too, but there were so many competing thoughts that he couldn’t keep track of which ones made it out and which ones were still trying to breach the surface.

Yuuri didn’t need him anymore.

“Viktor!”

He couldn’t breathe. Yuuri didn’t need him, but Viktor always had a plan. That was what he was good at.

Viktor hit the floor before he even realized that he’d been losing his grip on the room, though it only registered as a dull ache in a loud, echoing chamber filled with the rush of a thousand waterfalls pounding every corner of his mind absolutely senseless.

He couldn’t do it.

It was too much.

Viktor had nothing.

---

_The young man left straight away, and had little trouble preparing for the journey ahead of him, even though he would be making it alone. The townsfolk eagerly supplied him with food and weapons, a fresh horse, and armor._

_“Anything for our hero,” they said, for his quests with the wolf had made him famous throughout_
Once he was gone, the princess wept, watching the sun set over the mountains. It wouldn’t be long until he reached the tower. She’d taught him too well. He didn’t need a wolf to guide him. How could she save him now? He would call her by invoking the firebird sooner or later and she’d have no choice but to respond.

Unless…

Yes. Perhaps.

The princess went to the woods and gathered the ingredients she knew, silently thanking Baba Yaga for teaching her so much without meaning to in the years they’d spent together, and mixed a dark potion.

Once she’d forced every drop down her throat, the princess curled around the base of a willow, wolf cloak to cover her as her life slipped away. She would never see her lover again if all went well, but he would be safe from her fury.

--

Carefully, Yuuri maneuvered Viktor into his arms so he could scoop him up and place him in the bed. Viktor didn’t resist and was nearly limp as Yuuri carried him. He didn’t react to being put on a more comfortable surface.

Yuuri watched and waited, hoping for some sort of change in his love’s behavior as his mind raced in panic, dread, and confusion.

Of course no change came. It was stupid to think it so.

This was Yuuri’s fault. He didn’t quite understand why, but it was and it weighed in the worst places in his body like shifting sand.

What could he do?

What could anyone else?

Yurio was really helpful when Yuuri had panicked in Russia, but they were in the middle of a competition, would the teenager be able to-- maybe, but Viktor wouldn’t want Yurio to see him like this. Yakov and Viktor weren’t on speaking terms. Even with how close Chris and Viktor were, Yuuri knew Viktor wouldn’t want him to see him so vulnerable, either.

Which left Mari.

Yuuri bit his lip as he took his phone out of his pocket, ignoring all notifications and taking notice of how much he was shaking.

The last time he’d felt this helpless was with Phichit’s accident. At least then there were witnesses. Here, he was alone and with his mind reminding him of a time he’d tried so hard to not think about.

That’s why Mari was the best person to call.

He opened a text to his sister and typed:
[Are you awake?]

Moments later she responded.

[Yep. Probably will be for a while since Minako and your old coach are in the room and I’ve exiled myself.]

Yuuri did his best to not picture what they were doing. [... Well, Viktor and I have an extra room. You can sleep there if you want. But I need your help first.]

[Weird, but convenient, I guess. What do you need help with?]

He looked from the screen to Viktor on the bed opposite him. [Viktor collapsed. Kind of like I did at the Olympics.]

[Be right there. Need to sneak in and grab my suitcase.]

[Thanks.] Once Yuuri typed their room number, he tossed his phone next to his pillow. Help was on its way, but he couldn’t relax just yet. What if Mari couldn’t do anything either, what then?

Soon there was a knock on the door and Yuuri got up to answer. She raised a pierced brow at him as he wouldn’t let the door open more than he needed to let her in.

“No one is out in the halls, Yuuri.”

He didn’t know what time it was, but nodded and believed her once she was inside.

Mari set her suitcase in the open closet next to theirs. She stepped further into the room and stopped to watch Viktor with her arms akimbo and her right hand settling around an invisible cigarette. “Are there any extra blankets and sheets in the closet?”

“I think so?”

“Grab ‘em, would ya? I’m going to get the curtains.”

For what? Yuuri wondered. He heard the metal screech from the curtain rings being drawn shut as he stood on toes to reach the extra bedding.

“When I found you in your room back then, you were holding your head like it was too loud or something. I figured if I made the room dark and quiet for you, that’d help calm you down. Reduce the stimuli. Help me get the bedding from under him.”

Together Yuuri held Viktor up enough for Mari to snatch the comforter and sheets from under him and with the extra blankets and pillows they began to form a fort around him.

Viktor shook like he was fighting a nightmare in his sleep, but with eyes open. It was as if Yuuri and Mari weren’t there at all.

Before Viktor was completely closed off from them, Yuuri padded to the closet and took Viktor’s Team Russia jacket off its hanger so he could drape it over Viktor. Yuuri felt his sister’s eyes on him, curious, but knew she wasn’t expecting an answer.

It would have been too complicated and intimate to explain how much he didn’t feel worthy to hold on to it right now.

With Viktor dealt with for the moment, the room cast in a soft glow from the hallway light, Yuuri
rounded the edge of the bed and sat on the empty one, which he assumed he’d be sleeping on tonight.

Mari sat an arm’s length away from him. Respectful, but enough she could be closer if requested. “Do you want to tell me what happened?”

Yuuri stared at his feet.

“I’m not really qualified for relationship advice, but I’m game.”

He wanted to smile at that, but he wasn’t sure if he could completely rule that out of their argument. Yuuri clasped his hands together in his spread lap, debating where to start while he measured his breath. “I told him I was retiring.”

“You were wanting to retire before he became your coach back in March. Basically announced it. Were you waiting to see if you were going to change your mind before you told him?”

Yuuri pondered the question. He was confused and flattered that Viktor wanted to coach him, but Viktor hadn’t given him much choice. Then when Hasetsu on Ice happened and the possibility of Viktor leaving was there, he’d panicked. What Viktor had offered was an answer to a prayer and a dream. But after it was achieved, the best thing to do was retire, right? What else was there once one accomplished a goal?

“Maybe,” Yuuri answered lamely. Somewhere in the back of his mind he’d hoped Viktor had just known he wanted to retire after the prix.

The medal wasn’t what was important, anyway.

“Geez. Think about it, Yuuri; the man dropped his career and life - that he admittedly seems happy to be running away from - to coach you. Hearing that his student is going to up and retire even before the season is done is pretty thankless.”

“H-he only promised to get me to the finals. And I’ve thanked him. Plenty of times…” Now he felt he was justifying himself like a teenager that’d been caught in the act.

“Judging by how your champion boyfriend is, it all came out of left field.”

“I’ve never seen him like this before…”

Mari shifted and crossed a leg and leaned back on her hands. “Maybe he was overwhelmed with other things. A huge build up until he popped. Just like you.”

Yuuri pulled his legs up onto the bed and hugged them to himself, chin on his knees.

“At least that’s the best I can tell from what you were able to tell me.”

He nodded. “So much had happened then and I just…”

Collapsed. Just like Viktor had in front of him. Yuuri remembered a fierce ringing in his head and a suffocating pang around him he’d only experienced in portions before. It was hard to breathe. Everything was bright. Eventually he was able to drift to unconsciousness because Mari somehow knew what to do - shut out all the noise until he could relax and be ready to come back. And she was waiting for him when he did.

Olympic failure. Expectations of himself and slipping further away from his goal. His idol, who
he’d secretly hoped to take advantage of the Olympic Village time to observe and get to know better, was aggressive and intimidating just like the media had said - nothing like the Viktor he’d formed in his mind. Chris was separated from Bastien and he was miserable and openly bullied for being gay, causing Viktor to intervene and make things worse. No Phichit. Everyone was tired, overworked, and stressed. It was a toxic environment and Yuuri hated it.

One week before the Olympics concluded, Yuuri had his first full-blown anxiety attack, and the worst of it was realizing he’d been battling a mental illness for years unnoticed. It explained so much about how he was and why he couldn’t reach far enough.

Everyone knew but him.

“It’s not a bad thing,” Mari soothed in the darkness of their room with one of the only times he remembered her hugging him. “Lots of cool people have depression and anxiety and get a ton of shit done. Not everyone can say they made it to the Olympics or were one of their country’s best skaters, right? Everything is ten times harder for you. You’re strong, Yuuri.”

It was hard to feel strong - still was - but Yuuri accepted that it was all part of him. A day off and a cry did a world of good. And that was okay.

Did Viktor not know of his own condition or was this him rejecting his “weakness”? 

“I hurt him, Mari, it doesn’t matter if it was a build up or not.” Yuuri pressed his forehead to his knees. “I messed up.”

“We can’t do much until he’s awake, but saying you’re sorry would be a good start. And if he’s had stuff bottled up, he should be able to tell you those things.”

“I wish talking were easier.”

“Yeah, it’s definitely not your forte.”

He ignored the jab. “Ever since I proposed I keep making things worse.”

“Stakes getting too real. Did you really plan on proposing to him at the finals, by the way?”

“I… originally wanted to propose after I won gold, but…” he sighed, ashamed of his own impulsiveness.

“He said something, didn’t he?”

Yuuri rolled his head to look at her. “Like what?”

She smirked crookedly. “Nothing. Nothing at all.”

What did she suspect?

“How so?” Yuuri had noticed on a few occasions, but what did Mari see?

“Stubborn idiots.”

Yuuri opened then closed his mouth. He couldn’t argue that. Especially now. Other than Viktor wasn’t being either of those right now. He was hurting and fighting to come back from the chasms of his mind.
At least, that’s what Yuuri hoped. Makkachin would be really helpful right about now.

And not just for Viktor, either.

What did Viktor do when— he then remembered the tissue box and how Viktor had placed it in his hands at the qualifiers.

Yuuri got up from the bed and once more padded to the closet, where the plush tissue box was placed on top of Viktor’s clothing. Giving the fur a few pets between the ears, Yuuri brought the mini Makkachin to the bed. He didn’t want to disturb the nest they’d made.

“Viktor… I have Makkachin here for you.”

He wasn’t surprised when there wasn’t a response.

“Well, he’s right here. When you need him.” Yuuri pat the comforter and laid the poodle down.

There were several beats of silence of Mari observing until she eventually pushed off the bed. “It’s getting late. It’s a free day tomorrow, but I imagine you’ll need the rest to deal with all this in the morning. Hope you can get it worked before the free skate.”

He looked up at her, half her form in darkness. She’d always been supportive even in her more neutral tones and teases. “You think I have a chance?”

“If that Canadian guy can choke that bad, I think you’ve got a shot. You know better than anyone how the ISU works; anything is possible.”

A sad and unfortunate truth.

Yuuri reached into his pocket for the extra key card and handed it to his sister.

“I’m going to take a quick smoke before bed. If you need me in the next hour just text me, okay? I’ll knock in the morning.”

“Yeah. Thank you, Mari.”

Sleep was not successful. Anytime Yuuri lost consciousness he saw Viktor’s motionless body on various hotel beds or in Hasetsu never to wake up again. Sometimes he was floating in the ocean and drifting further away. On the ice with a moat preventing Yuuri from getting closer. Or at a wake ready to be cremated.

Each time he startled into a semblance of awakenness, the weight of the ring on his finger he was not yet used to, burned.

Yuuri rolled over to face Viktor as the sun started to rise. With all the scenarios his mind kept feeding him through the night, it was hard to tell if he was awake or not.

There had been a shift in the fort. Good, maybe that meant he’d finally been able to relax enough to get some rest to reset.

Mari knocked like she’d promised, what Yuuri imagined was hours later as the room was much brighter.

“You look worse,” Mari said unhelpfully from his bedside.
Groaning, Yuuri grabbed a discarded pillow and hid his face.

“Were you going to go to practice later?”

He barely heard the question from under the cheap pillow. “I don’t feel right leaving him.”

“I could stay here with him.”

“I’ll think about it.” Really he didn’t want to think about anything, just exist until he could function.

“Take a shower.”

Yuuri moved the pillow enough to give his sister an incredulous look. “What for? I’m not going anywhere for awhile if at all.”

“You’re moping.”

He knew he was and what did it matter? It’s not like Viktor was awake and aware. But Mari took the pillow and smashed it in his face.

“Go.”

“Fine,” Yuuri whined. Relenting, he rolled to the edge of the bed taking the comforter with him and wore it like a cloak as he walked to his luggage to rummage for clean clothes. The comforter was abandoned in the entryway once inside the bathroom.

The mirror reflected a very tired and worn Yuuri. Eyes dark and sunken, skin pale, and mouth tight. He’d seen it many times and with Viktor in his life, he’d hoped he wouldn’t see it often. This time, it was because of Viktor.

Shaking away from the mirror, Yuuri undressed and shivered at the cold shower titles under his feet.

The cold was soon replaced by a rush of hot water and Yuuri let it pound against his skin and roll down his body in waves of burning comfort. Minutes passed and Yuuri realized that the hot water coming from his eyes was not from the shower.

Steam escaped as Yuuri opened the door, towel around his waist, feet leaving damp prints in the carpet as he walked to Viktor’s bed and dropped to his knees.

Mari called for him, but her voice was drowned out by Yuuri’s sobs.

Like usual, once he’d cried, he felt better. He surprised himself he hadn’t until then. It didn’t solve the issue at hand, but the tensity in his body had ebbed and he felt he could think once again. Mari reminded him he was only in a towel and he excused himself to dress and gave her a hug when he came back out.

Mari left the room to get them all breakfast from the cafe across the street, coming back with piping hot tea, extra teabags, lemons, eggs, and biscuits that hadn’t quite stayed quite so hot in the journey. Easy food to eat for anyone upset.

While they ate, the mound of blankets shifted again.
They waited for a voice or a head to poke out, but nothing else happened.

“Viktor… we’ve got some tea with lemons out here for you,” Yuuri coaxed.

Silence.

He turned to Mari. “I’m not going to go to practice. I should be here for him for when he wakes up. Keep trying to get him to eat and… I don’t know. Maybe he’ll listen to you.”

“I guess I can try…” she stood and rounded the bed and went to where she estimated his head was at. “Hey, Viktor. You hungry?”

There was a grunt and then he moved he and the blankets away from her.

She gave a shrug at Yuuri. “I guess he’s not going to listen to his big sister, either.”

The admission caused Yuuri’s chest to constrict and he looked down at the ring on his hand. She would be his sister - sister-in-law - if they could ever get out of this.

There was a flicker of light at the edge of Viktor’s vision, but he was no closer to understanding what it was than picking up the words drifting around him. The voices were harder to pick out… words beyond his comprehension, tone serious. Japanese. His Yuuri and Mari?

Viktor picked up bits and pieces here and there, snatches of the past and competition, of names- ‘Yuu-kun’ and ‘Viktor’ - and of them together.

But there was no together anymore, was there?

*Let’s end this.*

They weren’t in Hasetsu, they were in Barcelona. The warmth around him was a recently bleached hotel comforter, not his lover.

If Yuuri quit, if they’d been on entirely different pages the entire time, then Viktor would have to look back at the past year- no, his whole life - and question everything. Every choice and conversation, every outcome.

If Viktor couldn’t trust himself, he had nothing.

No matter how he looked at it, Yuuri was letting him go. Viktor didn’t have the strength to open his eyes, much less fight the wolves that came for him. They ate at his consciousness, and he fell in and out of it as his mind and heart gradually prepared to deal with what it needed to. It was just too painful to bear.

It took hours for Viktor to truly fall asleep, utterly exhausted from the tension. Several times that morning, he tried to stir, but as soon as his conscious mind spun up, everything shut down again.

Viktor had tried to be honest. He’d tried to be himself.

He’d tried, but it hadn’t been enough.

He was never enough.
The team jacket draped on him was just more evidence: Yuuri didn’t need him at all.

*Every step that the deer took was cautious, but deliberate, pushing through the undergrowth against the bitter wind. The bramble raked its fur like rattling black claws, forcing an already slow journey to be even more painstaking. It didn’t know where it was going, just that it heard a voice weeping in the distance. A call, just like its own.*

Have you been abandoned, too?

*The deer knew the pain of loneliness; it was no stranger to loss and grief. Its dapple grey coat was only barely enough to keep it protected from the onslaught of the weather, but it was strong from having survived many long winters alone. But it knew that if it stopped, even for a few moments, that it would die. It hated the thought of someone else being trapped in the same fate.*

*As long as the deer had strength, it would keep looking.*

Come now...

*An answer. The deer surged forward, leaping from the thorns and into open ground—a meadow. The voice called again, longing, cutting through the wind.*

I’ll start to get ready…

*The wind broke, sending swirling gusts asunter to reveal a stag waiting on the other side of the field. Dark and haunting, it raised its head to watch the deer, who broke into a run through the deep snow. The stag continued to watch when the deer hit the ice, too, which gave way under its weight. The deer struggled, striking at the frozen surface, but the water soaked into its coat, dragging it down.*

Be quiet now, the stag said, doing nothing to stop the deer from being taken by the current.

They tried to get Viktor to respond. There might have been tears and other conversations in English that he was meant to be privy to. None of it stuck. It was well until the late afternoon the next day that Viktor finally came around, with light streaming in from the big windows.

“Oh hey, you’re awake. How’re you feeling?”

Viktor looked for Mari, but found Yuuri at his side, fast asleep. It looked like he’d showered at some point; the luscious locks of dark hair falling in messy swaths untamed by product. *Beautiful…*

“Viktor?”

Right. Mari.

With far more effort than it should have taken, Viktor managed to sit up, which immediately brought on a throbbing headache.

“Yeah, that’ll happen.” Somehow anticipating the pain, Mari had a bottle of water ready. “You’ve been out a while.”
The water helped, but it didn’t change the fact that Yuuri was asleep and Viktor wasn’t dressed. He groaned. “What time is it? Yuuri… get up, we’re going to be late for practice.”

Beside him, Yuuri stirred, draping an arm over his face in protest. “Huh? Viktor?”

Good. The faster they got ready, the more chance they had of getting to stop by the staff room for a quick snack before catching a ride to the rink. Something to go, maybe.

“You guys already missed practice.” Mari took a seat on the sill. She was even-keeled as ever, cool gaze leveled on Viktor like the warden of a lockdown. When he didn’t reply, she turned to Yuuri. “Right, Yuuri?”

“Oh, yeah…” He didn’t sound as confident. “With everything going on… it was optional, anyway. No one would miss me.”

The tension tugged at the back of Viktor’s neck as the details settled in, and he turned to the bedside clock— they were completely off schedule. Why was Mari even there?

“Like I said, you’ve been out a while, man… it’s okay. Just relax. We’ve got you.”

As calm as she sounded, Viktor felt anything but.

Next to him, Yuuri had gotten up, but he wasn’t moving to get ready to go to practice- he was trying to reassure him. “Viktor, about last night, I…”

Viktor pulled out of his reach, swinging his feet out from the blankets and onto the floor. Mari was there to steady him, and he pulled back from her, too. “Don’t,” he said, to both of them, and pulled his robe closed. But he didn’t get up; he didn’t have the strength. Not with his head… like this.

Let’s end this.

Again, Yuuri reached for him, and again, Viktor pulled away, hunching forward with a shuddering breath.

“I said don’t, Yuuri.”

Yuuri went still.

“He’s trying to talk to you, Viktor, you can’t just ignore him.”

Viktor shook his head, fingers finding their way into his hair, and bent toward his knees. He couldn’t discuss it. Not here, not now, not with Mari watching, not with so much at stake, not like this, with the whole world falling apart. He could usually keep himself together long enough to fake it. But not now.

Let’s end this.

“We’re here to win the gold,” Viktor said, forcing each word past clenched teeth. The pain in his head was making it harder to make sense of what was in front of him. He knew it was Mari, but the haze twisted her form like smoke on the water. Firebird ashes. He shook his head again. “We have to practice, Yuuri.”

With an uncomfortable shift, Yuuri retrieved his glasses and phone from the other nightstand- the one Viktor should have been using. “The juniors have the rink right now. It’s their block. Then the pairs and ladies.”
“That’s right.” Mari confirmed it with a couple of swipes on her own cell, holding the screen up for Viktor to see. “Relax, Vicchan.”

“I’m fine…”

“Like hell you are,” Mari scoffed. “What did you say when he got sick over the summer, Yuuri?”

“Oh. That I can’t skate my best while my coach isn’t at his best?”

“Something like that.”

Were they baiting him on purpose? Trying to rouse the wolf, get him to fight as Yurio had? He couldn’t understand why. There was some sort of sadistic pleasure in it to be sure, but they had to know that Viktor wasn’t so easily defeated. He wasn’t a champion for nothing. He mended so much better than anyone ever guessed, and came back stronger for it every time; it was one of his finer qualities.

*With a sword I wish I could cut those throats singing about love...*

If they wanted him to fight, then...

Viktor managed a small smile, finally sweeping the rest of his emotions out of sight for the immediate present.

“I guess that makes sense,” the soon to be ex coach shrugged. “If you’re retiring, why take it seriously? It’s not like you have any stake in winning now that you’ve made it this far. What would it prove?”

“Hey!” Mari warned.

Yuuri held up a hand of his own. “I hear what you’re saying and yeah, that’s fair. But Viktor, last night…”

“Unless you want to tell me that you’re not going to retire, I don’t want to talk about it, Yuuri.”

“It’s my decision.”

“We can talk about it after the final.”

“Viktor…”

But Viktor didn’t answer, gaze somewhere between the windowpane and the ceiling, though he wasn’t really looking at anything. The afternoon light was already shifting in its arc, the day wasted. He needed a plan, but while the gears in his head were all trying to move, none of them knew which direction to turn.

For a while, none of them said anything.

Then Mari cleared her throat with a loud cough. “Hey, Yuuri. I’m going outside for a bit. Need a smoke. Want me to bring you back anything?”

Yuuri hopped off of the other bed on the opposite side. “Nah. I’ll come with you. I could use some air.”

“Cool. We can bring back dinner.” Mari gathered her things and joined Yuuri at the door. “Try to rest, okay Viktor?”
Viktor waited until they were gone to get dressed. He still looked like a disaster, but he felt like one, too. It seemed appropriate.

He sat on the foot of the bed to think, the quiet of the room seeping in. Maybe he was better on his own.

No. That wasn’t right. He didn’t believe that. Not for a second.

Viktor crawled back to the pillow and the blankets, dragging the pile on top of himself for that comforting weight. His team jacket, even though it was for Russia, now had Yuuri’s scent, so he buried his face in it, and let the pain wash over him all over again.

_I wish I could enclose in ice the hands that write those verses of burning passion..._

He didn’t want to lose Yuuri.

He didn’t want any of this.

The Katsuki siblings deftly avoided the crowds, finding quiet corners for Mari’s smoke breaks in the fading afternoon while they made small talk. There were posters of Yuuri at the venue and nearby bus kiosks, among the other skaters. Mari showed him the selfies she and Minako-sensei had taken with them, the ladies posing with their famous homeboy in larger than life printed form.

They didn’t talk about the future. They didn’t bring up Viktor.

They brought back dinner a little while later, but getting Viktor to be responsive and willing to eat was as difficult as it had been before. He was shutting them out- Yuuri more than Mari -and doing so in the worst ways. When he was awake, he was dismissive and quiet. Distant. Then he’d fall asleep again.

“‘We can talk about it after the final,’” he’d say, again and again, refusing to budge. “‘We’ll make our own decisions after the final. That’s what you wanted, right?’”

It was hard to keep track of the time as it slipped by, especially buried under crushing guilt or mountains of blankets. Mari left and came back. There was more talk. Competition highlights replayed on the TV, volume too low to hear what was being said, but enough that it was a hum in the background.

The free skate was less than twenty-four hours away. Men’s singles group one would begin at 9pm. Between now and then was another long night, a morning practice, and the free skate preparation.

Viktor could imagine what was coming. They’d face the crowds together and smile at the press. Yuuri would skate to Yuri on Ice, the story of their love- coming together and coming to an end - for the last time. His score would show what the past year had meant and what they meant to each other, whatever that meant. And then… it would be over.

Midnight. Spell broken. Ended, just as Yuuri wanted.
It was the scent of fresh coffee that woke Viktor the next morning, dragging him out of his haze. Lifting his head, he found the bed empty and Mari kneeling at his side, transferring dishes from the tray in one hand to the window sill with the other. In the tabloids, one might expect the situation to be something salacious, but Viktor simply watched her, thoughts drifting to Hasetsu.

She was his sister, after all. And she’d brought breakfast.

“Mari?”

“Depends.” She finished clearing the tray with the final fork in position, then held up the tray in warning. “Are you going to be an ass this time?”

“Uh…”

Mari set the tray against the wall and sighed, shifting to get comfortable there on the floor. “It’s okay. You were going through some shit.”

Shoulders hunched, Viktor scooted up against the wall with a cautious frown. “It’s kind of foggy.”

“Not surprised. Coffee?”

“Sure. Thanks.”

“Get it yourself.”

Though it took a moment, Viktor soon realized that she was serious, and pulled himself from the covers for a cup. They were just within reach. “Thank you.”

Mari smirked. “Sure. Glad to have you back.”

The coffee was strong, which Viktor could appreciate. He sipped it slowly. His head didn’t hurt much anymore; it’d become a dull sort of ache, but he was tired, muscles worn from all the tension of the past two days. That made him all the more tired. So was having an empty stomach, though he wasn’t especially hungry.

Viktor raked spare fingers through his hair and took in the room. Being so small, there wasn’t a lot of space to make a mess; nevertheless, it was as disheveled as he felt. He’d been in bed for far too long. “Where’s Yuuri?”

“He went to practice. Free skate today.” Mari studied him from the floor, drinking her own coffee. “He wanted to be ready. You should, too.”

“He went without me?”

“He’s a big boy.”

Viktor took another sip of the coffee, though it was now a little too acidic for his tastes. Mari was right, of course. Yuuri was more than capable of going to practice on his own. That wasn’t really the issue, though; they were supposed to be a team, at least until the end of the final. Viktor was still his coach… for now.

“Seriously, though, you need to shower.”

As if there hadn’t been enough insult to injury. Viktor set the coffee aside, trading it for his mobile. There were dozens of notifications- half from Chris -which he dismissed with a simple swipe, and winced at what the selfie camera betrayed; scruffy stubble, bags under his eyes, severe, curly
bedhead, and an expression of absolute dread.

It still matched his feeling, but it wasn’t good for a coach.

Viktor scrubbed a hand up and down his face unhappily, taking mental notes of what grooming he’d need to do to be fit for the competition that night, and nodded toward the sill again. “Is some of that breakfast for me?”

“If you’ll actually eat this time. And you should, since you have the gala tomorrow.”

Right. The gala. Would they be able to do a pair skate with… all of this hanging over them? Maybe Yuuri could, but Viktor wasn’t sure that he’d have the strength. Hell, would he ever be able to skate Stay Close to Me ever again? Just the thought of it made him so heartsick, he nearly got back into bed.

He went back through his phone messages with a noncommittal hum.

Chris G: congratulations on your engagement~

Chris G: i hope you enjoy your celebrations ;3

Chris G: please know that just because your lover wants gold doesn’t mean i’m going to go easy on him, viktor~

Chris G: you two must have been out late last night~ ;3

Chris G: are you both skipping practice?

Chris G: i do hope yuuri’s alps have been kind to your gentle maiden meadows. Just because you’re not skating doesn’t mean you can be entirely reckless. I can’t be the only one that noticed in moscow ;)

Chris G: really, though, is everything all right? I haven’t seen either of you all day

Viktor tapped through them all and set his phone aside without answering them. Yuuri should have been back by now if all he’d done was go to the morning practice without his coach. Something could have happened. Would he have had the sense to contact him? Should he reach out first?

“You can have your pick of what I brought up. You didn’t eat much yesterday, so have at it. I can always get more.”

Nothing looked all that appealing. Slices of toast with jam and one with cheese, a small sandwich, a croissant. Viktor went for the pastry, testing the corner with a cautious nibble. He was hungry, but it took so much effort to eat, it hardly seemed worth it. Very little did.
But it was the day of the free skate, and even though *Yuuri* was already acting solo, Viktor was still his coach until the end of the final. That much they’d decided on.

Besides...

There was a small part of him that wondered if he’d been overreacting about the whole thing. Maybe Yuuri hadn’t meant it quite *so* seriously. Retiring? He’d tried to quit skating last year, too. Wanting Viktor to come back? He was Viktor’s biggest fan, of course he would want that. Maybe he just hadn’t thought it through; all of the implications and complications and the meaning and weight of his words. It was possible. Yuuri was smart, but there were some things that even he got terribly wrong from time to time. Maybe.

*Maybe.*

He’d find out after the final.

Viktor forced breakfast down with the help of the coffee, ignoring Mari’s sarcastic comments about how impressed she was, and got up to put on his wolf’s clothing for the day.

Yuuri got back a little while after Viktor had finished his second cup of coffee. They’d called for housekeeping to straighten up, remaking the beds, and both Yuuri’s costume and Viktor’s coach uniform were laid out on top of the fresh linens. Viktor, freshly shaven, showered, and dressed, looked worlds better than the day before. He needed to; they were going to fight a war, after all. Every bit of makeup or caffeine he could sneak in would be essential today.

Viktor couldn’t manage a fully convincing smile at Yuuri when he came through the door, but it was pleasant enough, eyes closed and the corners of his mouth crooked at each side. “Yuuri, you’re back. How was practice?”

It clearly wasn’t the reception that Yuuri had been expecting, stalling in the entranceway while the door closed quietly behind him. “Viktor. You’re up.”

“Today’s the big day.”

“Yeah, but...” Yuuri turned a helpless glance to his sister, who was back to perching on the window sill. When she shrugged, he looked back at Viktor. Back at his… whatever he was to him now. “If you’re not feeling up to it, it’s okay. I can do the free skate on my own.”

It stung more than Viktor expected. “I know,” he said, forcing that smile a little harder. “But I’m fine, and I made a promise, da? You need a coach.”

Yuuri looked at him doubtfully. “Are you sure? I can cover for you.”

“I’m fine, Yuuri.” If Yuuri didn’t need Viktor looking out for him, Viktor didn’t need it, either. It was just as much *his* career and decision being decided, after all. “It’s not good to give the press so much control, and I’m sure they’ve already come up with stories to explain yesterday and this morning. Now get ready.”

Yuuri stared at him, looking like he’d been the one to be verbally slapped that time. After a moment, he nodded. “Sure, Viktor.”

So they did. Mari let herself out, reminding Yuuri that she was just a phone call or text away. “I’ll just be hanging in my room until the competition starts.”
“Thanks, Mari.”

With her gone, there was nothing but awkward silence to fill the chasm of things they weren’t talking about.

Yuuri got dressed in his costume for Yuri on Ice, Viktor changed into his dark, professional suit. Each layer added to the bulky facade, carefully curating his masculine appearance. Even though it was probably the last time he would be skating the program they’d built together, Yuuri did his own hair and makeup, and Viktor didn’t argue. A good general knew how to choose his battles.

They left the hotel room together, track bag and Makkachin tissue box in tow, all without a word to each other.

Outside, the evening light was too bright. The venue was even worse. Yuuri walked ahead and Viktor stayed a step or two behind. The usual energy of the crowd was drowned out in the hum of the Russian’s thoughts, mulling over the inevitable fact that it would be the last time that he’d be seeing this view; a retreating Team Japan jersey on the way to the rink.

Though there were few strangers in the exhibitor’s space to the student and coach by this point, neither made the effort to show anything but detached indifference unless directly addressed. The performance had already begun, and Yuuri was ready to fight. Viktor’s heart wasn’t in it. He had the war paint, he knew all of the tricks, the rules, and the tactics, but he didn’t want to fight anymore.

It was only when his name was called that Viktor stopped to push a small smile, delivering a less than convincing request to ask for the people of Japan to continue to support Yuuri.

All eyes were on the pair, just as Viktor had planned from the start, this wasn’t how he’d wanted people to see them. People were definitely talking about Yuuri’s missing day and about how tired they looked. It was the curse of the free skate all over again, only this time, they had matching rings.

Other competitors went, their music loud and muffled behind the stands. Normally, there’d be a pep talk, or at least some kind of quip. Drama, maybe. The silence was deadly. Yuuri was pulling away. Viktor couldn’t get anything from him; no read, no emotion. Yuuri didn’t need him. Didn’t want him. But even though it made it hard to stay positive, it was still Viktor’s job to be the coach, even if just for the next hour or so. He could do that. He was a professional. He wouldn’t let Yuuri down. He would stay close to him, watch over him, let Yuuri find whatever he was looking for as long as he let him be by his side, and then…

Then…

Yuuri gave him his jersey without even looking back and stepped onto the ice.

How was he going to get through this? Viktor walked to his position at the barrier and took hold of the sides, breathing in deep. As a coach, what should he do?

What would Yakov do?

A good coach, like a good general, knew how to motivate his skaters, no matter the situation. He never let his personal feelings interfere with the competition. It was about Yuuri Katsuki, not
Viktor Nikiforov.

Yuuri’s fairy tale. Yuuri’s career. Not his own.

He was simply the fairy godmother.

*This story that has no meaning will vanish tonight together with the stars.*

By the time Yuuri returned to him at the barrier for final preparations, Viktor was ready for him with a smile. It was a better one than he’d managed with the press, even with Stephane. Though it was full of pain, it was genuine. “Don’t worry. You can win gold, Yuuri.”

That he did believe, with all of his heart. Putting all else aside, even if Yuuri left, even if they never saw each other again, Viktor believed in him even if Yuuri didn’t. He brushed his hand against Yuuri’s, touch light and cautious. It already felt like he was crossing the line. They weren’t just coach and student; they were in the middle of ending a long-term contract. Still, the cool touch of Yuuri’s skin, the way his hand felt so strong and so delicate in his own… He would miss this.

“Believe in yourself,” Viktor finished, leaving the pep talk at that. Anything more, and it would get too sentimental for the cameras, too difficult for himself, and too much for Yuuri. Simple was better.

“Hey Viktor.” Yuuri spoke with his head bowed toward the ice; body bent to work out his back and stretch his arms. It wasn’t a stance of submission or defeat, but one of battle, and Yuuri’s voice matched the irritation that came with the aggression. “I told you before that I wanted you to stay who you were, right? Don’t suddenly start trying to sound like a coach now.”

Of all the things Yuuri could have said, Viktor couldn’t have thought of anything that would have hurt more. He was Yuuri’s coach. That’s who he was. That’s who he had worked so hard to become. That’s who he loved being.

It was a brutal assault for someone trying so hard to put himself aside for the benefit of someone else.

Yuuri took his hand. “I want to smile for my last time on the ice.”

Yuuri still wasn’t looking at him, but Viktor understood. Right. Yuuri hated to be babied and pampered. He hated to feel guilty. Pep talks weren’t going to cut it. If Viktor was going to be a real coach… a good coach… Yuuri’s coach, just one last time, he knew what he had to do.

He became the wolf, leaning in with his voice low, gaze dark and serious. “Yuuri, listen to me. I debated whether or not I should tell you this now, but… I took a break after becoming the five-time world champion to coach you; so how is it possible that you still haven’t won a single gold medal?”

When Yuuri finally looked at him, Viktor met his gaze straight on, strong and fierce and with every ounce of command from his years of experience at war. He would not be challenged by his soldier.

For Yuuri, he would be strong one last time.

The burning anger in Yuuri’s eyes turned to astonishment, then slowly gave way to a trickle of guilt, and finally to worry. The Yuuri that didn’t want to disappoint him was there before him, falling in line. So, like any good general, Viktor eased back, letting the hard line of his mouth soften into a smile as he continued the lecture, more gently now. “How long are you going to stay
in warm-up mode?”

Yuuri had no response; he only looked frightened, like he had so many times before when Viktor had gone too far with his teasing and his games and his tactics. He hated that look. He hated the thought that Yuuri could ever think that he would leave him, even for a moment. Even then, at the very end of their time together, Viktor couldn’t stand it; he loved him too much.

He pulled Yuuri into a hug, there over the barrier, knowing that the tears were already burning in his eyes again, and not giving a damn. “I really want to kiss a gold medal.”

The gold medal. The ring. The wedding. The coaching. All of it.

*Stay close to me. Don’t go away.*

*I’m afraid of losing you.*

When Viktor eased back, Yuuri’s look of confusion was so cute that Viktor couldn’t help but laugh a little, and *oh* how he wanted to kiss him. He would have given anything to at that moment. Even more when Yuuri’s mouth broke into a wide, stupid grin and he returned the hug, until they were both embracing each other. Crying.

Understanding?

The way their hands slipped apart, Yuuri’s touch so tender as he moved out and back to the ice, Viktor knew at least one thing; Yuuri still loved him.

Everything else just needed to fall into place.

—

The truce to come to a decision after the free skate was so… divisive. “Our own decision.” It didn’t sit well with Yuuri, but the agreement allowed them to take a step... Somewhere.

As he stretched in the breeze way, careful to not make eye contact with Viktor, Yuuri thought about their reunion at the airport. Both of them had been cryptic. Yuuri too afraid to say what he actually meant and Viktor had been hopeful, sentimental even, in his skating analogies. It all meant more than his career didn’t?

Yuuri inserted his earbuds to listen to his free skate song. When he pressed play, what came on was the latest version Alondra sent him of the song he’d been working on composing for Viktor. For Viktor. He allowed himself to listen to the handful of measures until the somber piano keys in the intro and first portion of the verse were too much. Too real for this moment.

Shaking it off, Yuuri scrolled to Yuri on ICE and resumed his stretches.

He had to focus. Salvage what he could of the competition first, and then he’d be able to repair things with Viktor.

When Yuuri returned from warmups, Viktor said his name. He had his attention, though he didn’t look at him. But when he scolded him for not winning a gold medal yet, he looked up at him - blue, intense and desperate eyes staring him down.
It was more than Viktor being pissed that his skills as a coach had been called into question, but affirming that yes, they were still in this together and yes he still wanted to marry him.

They were still arguing, but Viktor really wanted to kiss Yuuri’s gold medal. Kiss the gold band on his finger at a future altar.

Yuuri would just have to win first.

Exhaling, Yuuri lowered his head and closed his eyes, waiting for the piano scales to begin for the last time.

He knew what his goal was. It had never changed. Not even now that things with Viktor seemed to be changing.

At twenty-four, Yuuri was still a dime a dozen skater certified by the JSF with a career goal in mind.

For years he had the same recurring dream of Viktor with his long hair skating in the moonlight. The more he got to know him, the more frequent the Viktor he now knew came out of the shadows.

*I’ve spent more than half my life watching Viktor, trying to catch up. And now, thanks to him, here I am. Well... not just him.* Viktor gave him a push. Yurio lit a competitive fire in him and taught him the quad salchow. Minako and her encouragement of what Yuuri had inside him all along. His family and their quiet and not so quiet support with their varying degrees of skating and Yuuri knowledge. For Phichit and his constant friendship. And the Nishigoris…. Without them, would any of this year have happened at all?

He loved them all. That was the theme for this year and he had to show it to everyone.

*My performance needs to be better than flawless for a chance at the gold. I’ve been thinking ever since the short program I would like the final free skate of my career to have the same difficulty as Viktor’s.*

The music slowed and he set up for a triple axel. Quad toe loop.

*Do you realize it now, Viktor?*

The longer Yuuri skated, the longer he himself realized. He didn’t want to let go of this feeling of love after today. The last several months had been life changing on and off the ice. As scary as change was, he didn’t want to remain stagnant. With Viktor at his side he could keep moving. But...

Triple axel again. Triple salchow.

*I don’t want it to end here! I want to skate with you forever!*

Triple lutz. Triple toe loop.

*But the price of keeping you as my coach would slowly be killing you as a competitive skater. It didn’t matter if Yuuri wanted Viktor to stay on as his coach. More than anything, Yuuri knew Viktor needed his family, be home in Russia. Yuuri saw the way he watched the skaters yesterday. Viktor missed the ice! But coming to Hasetsu wasn’t for nothing. It wasn’t just their romance over the summer that had changed them both. Look at the Viktor who lives on inside me. Becoming my coach wasn’t a waste of time. I’m the only one who can prove it and that’s what I’m doing now! I*
can show the world that you are more than what they think - what you think. You can do anything. You're still the champion, through me.

Quadruple flip, landing it perfectly. Just like Viktor.

A cheer rose loud enough over the rush of cold and movement around Yuuri and it continued even as he completed his free skate with a combo spin and extended his left hand towards his coach.

The tears in his eyes prevented him from seeing Viktor even less than usual, but facing him, he knew what he skated was heard by his princess.

Marooka’s praise was lost as Yuuri threw up his hands in a whooping cry.

It was over. Yuuri did the best he could. He skated his heart and his body shook with emotions and aching muscles.

Eventually he heard Viktor’s call. Yuuri blinked a few times until Viktor came into focus.

His arms were outstretched in a playful way and his smile looked genuine. And it scared him.

*I don’t want to go to the kiss and cry. Going back there means it’s over.*

Staying on the ice longer wasn’t an option, not with Viktor waiting and a rink full of spectators. Wiping his eyes, he came to the barrier and Viktor offered him his Japan jersey.

Together they sat at the kiss and cry, closer than Yuuri thought possible from how they’d been in the last twenty-four hours.

The megatron TV above replayed the quad flip on loop. It did look impressive, but would it be enough? He lowered his elbows to his knees and clasped his hands, begging any kami between shallow breaths.

“Don’t worry!” Viktor’s voice was fond in his ear as he put an arm around his shoulders. “Your performance was so perfect, I’m sure you’ll get a great score.”

Yuuri jumped at the sound of Marooka saying his name and then--

“--319.41! Incredible! His free skate score is 221.58 - he’s broken the world record for the men’s single free skate, long held by none other than his coach, Viktor Nikiforov! His combined score is 319.41! He jumped all the way to first place!”

World record? Yuuri held a world record? Took it from The Viktor Nikiforov? And now he was in first place? Was this real?

Wide-eyed Yuuri turned to face Viktor.

Cordially smiling, Viktor held out his hand as if for a shake. Odd, but Yuuri took it anyway only to be pulled into a close, yet distant hug with the other arm.

“Congratulations, Yuuri,” Viktor spoke low into his ear. “Having both Yuris beat my records is the ultimate bliss as your choreographer and coach, but it’s the ultimate diss as a competitor.”

Yuuri’s heart threatened to leap out of his mouth. “Wait, does that mean… you’re coming back?!”

Viktor smiled back at him with an affirming hum.

With Yuuri’s retirement and world record, Viktor would be returning to the ice! This was what
they both wanted. Had it taken Yuuri’s resignation to help Viktor realize?

Elated that Yuuri took the announcement so well, Viktor took out his phone for some selfies. History was definitely being made in more ways than one.

The photographers came over for their footage as Chris took the ice.

Yuuri and Viktor gave him a hearty “Allez!” from their seats before retreating for interviews. Viktor’s gaze lingered on Chris as they left. Looking forward to skating with him again?

It was exciting and Yuuri was sure he had to keep his mouth shut. Thankfully the giddiness for Viktor’s return mingled with Yuuri’s current position and new world record so the press wasn’t getting suspicious of anything.

When would Viktor make a public announcement?

The questions and congratulations went on long enough that Otabek was taking the ice. And somewhere in that transition, Viktor disappeared. At a time like this, where would he have gone?

“Viktor?” he called out.

——

It was easy for Viktor to sneak away once the interviews started, and he took full advantage of Yuuri’s anxieties around the press to do so. Not because he wanted to abandon the defenseless skater to the wolves, or because he knew there would be an onslaught of questions for him as soon as they had the chance to redirect the conversation, no; Viktor had things to do, and not a lot of time.

The free skate was quickly wrapping up— just two more competitors to go, then the medal ceremony, and the Prix would be over. He had to convince Yakov to take him back, get the news circulating, and… find a way to face the reality that it really was over.

For a brief moment, when Yuuri had nailed that quad flip in front of everyone during a competition, Viktor could have sworn it was a message. That it meant that Yuuri had changed his mind. To him, it’d spoken volumes of love and dedication to both him and the sport, of willingness to keep going, of passion for their future together. Viktor had never felt so much pride before. Yuuri, breaking past his own barriers, overcoming his weaknesses to accomplish something so monumental, reaching that goal that he’d wanted so much … To have been a part of that was life-changing; the most incredible, amazing, wonderful thing Viktor had ever felt in his life. The love pouring out of him, out of Yuuri, the way he’d cried out on the ice- the elation! Oh, it was… it was…

But at the kiss and cry, there was no talk of Yuuri coming back. Even with the bait of Viktor being a competitor again. Yuuri was still retiring. He was giving it up. Throwing it away.

He didn’t want that dream together.

Nevertheless, Viktor was a man of his word.

It wasn’t hard to find the old coach; Yakov had a set routine for these competitions, and Viktor had
become very well-acquainted with his schedule over the years.

Viktor swung around the corner and into the next corridor just in time to see them retreating down the hallway. Perfect. “Yakov!” He called after, forcing a bright smile to reflect the tone in his voice. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“Right now?” Unlike the time in Beijing or even in Moscow, Yakov’s tone was brisk, but not as terse as it had been. “Tell me later. It’s almost Yuri’s turn!”

Distracted as he was, Yakov was just in the right mindset for the bombshell that Viktor was about to drop. All he had to do was put on one of his beautiful, safe press smiles and deliver the news. It was, after all, just what Yakov had wanted all along.

“Will you be my coach again? For skating. It doesn’t matter if you’ve changed your rates, I’ll pay whatever the fees are.”

The old man’s reaction wasn’t exactly what Viktor had been expecting, but it was no less satisfying. At first it was confusion, much like Lilia and Yurio’s faces. Then it quickly turned to surprise and anger. “What?! You’re coming back?!”

“Yeah.”

The shock settling in between the three was the best thing about the whole process. At least he had this small victory. If only it weren’t a result of his life ending.

“For now, I’ll time my return to the Russian Championships,” he explained, nodding to Yakov for his approval—which didn’t come. The coach was still dumbfounded, as was Lilia.

“Hey, does this mean that the pork cutlet bowl’s retiring?” Yurio was not bound by the same reservations, yanking out his headphones and confronting the problem directly. It had always been one of his strengths, and one of the reasons why he was stronger than Viktor in a lot of ways, and why he was his successor.

Viktor lowered his eyes. Whether or not Yurio meant what he said about Viktor being dead, he cared about Yuuri. None of that made it any easier.

“That’s his decision. He said he’d decide after the Grand Prix Final was over.” Viktor issued the statement with no apology, no real feeling. Just a little, nearly imperceptible, regret. Nearly, that is, because Yurio saw it.

The attitude the teenager wore like armor was gone, replaced only with worry. Worry for Yuuri. Worry more for Viktor. He could say what he wanted, but Yurio cared about him, too. Viktor had always known this, but now he knew, and he’d had no idea how much he needed to that until that moment.

Yurio wasn’t looking at him like a hated rival or even a competitor. He was a brother. Family.

He hugged him, and for once, Yurio didn’t pull away. He missed him. He missed all of them. Viktor tightened his arms, holding Yurio close to his chest, dropping forehead to shoulder. He wasn’t sure if he was trying to comfort the teenager or seeking comfort for himself anymore, but it hardly seemed to matter. Yurio let him, raising a tentative hand to his shoulder. “Yuri…” Yakov cleared his throat. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

With a glance back to his coach, Yurio carefully extracted himself from Viktor, both hands on shoulders, fixing the former champion with a glare. “Viktor, listen to me. I’m going to take the
gold right out of his hands and you will be my coach, da? Come home.”

That was the kid he knew. Viktor took him in with a faint smile, unsure of how to reply. It was too much to even take in, much less consider. Neither Yakov nor Lilia looked upset, so they either hadn’t heard, or they weren’t surprised. Was there really a place for him in Russia after all?

Yakov sighed. “We’ll talk later, Vitya.”

Viktor looked at him hopelessly. “When?”

“After the final.”

Yurio let go of Viktor’s arm with a kick to the floor. “I’ll make him regret it, Viktor.”

Viktor had no doubt about that, but he didn’t know how to feel about it, either.

“Come, Yuri,” Lilia called.

There was a war going on, and Viktor had no army.

But if he played his cards right, it would only take one well-placed suggestion with the right member of the press to make his next move.

He slipped back into the crowded back area where several hounds were giving Chris his due. Perfect. Just what he needed. Josef and Bastien were running interference, but only enough to ensure that their skater still had the spotlight. Polite smiles, nodding, deferring to the tall Swiss man with the rose crown atop his golden head. Pain was too easy to read in those big cow eyes. Understandable, given his scores and present ranking.

Viktor pushed his way through the reporters and slipped between Chris and Mr. Mancakes himself, slinging an arm around his former rival’s shoulder with a big smile turned to the camera. “Salut, Chris! What’s going on here; excuses for not making the podium?”

The tension at his sides told him that he’d hit where the Swiss crew were tender, and though that wasn’t really that hard to do, the hunger that glinted in the eyes of the media spoke even louder.

Chris gave a soft chuckle, which read somewhere between uncomfortable and disapproving. “Something like that, Viktor…”

“Well! Not to worry.” Viktor pulled Chris closer, just enough to tip his balance, and reached back for the beau, who he dragged in for a chummy side hug—would make for good photos, which they’d need. “I think we can all agree that you just need proper motivation, da?”

Chris batted those long lashes down at him, a little confused, a little concerned, but Josef picked up on it right away, gesturing with gusto. “That’s right! Christophe hasn’t been himself this whole season because you’ve been gone, Viktor. It just hasn’t been the same.”

“It was really unfair of me to run off like that, wasn’t it?”

“It was…” Chris agreed, though with far more confusion than conviction. He knew that Viktor was up to something. Of course he did. He always did.

“Well. You won’t have to worry about that any more.”
“What do you mean?”

Viktor took his arm back from Baz to give his trademark secret expression to the press, leaning into Chris for full effect—“I can’t say yet, but there may be an announcement soon that will solve all of your problems, and mine.”

It was cute, finger pressed to his lips with a charming wink that left the press breathless and clamoring with questions.

“Wait, does that mean you’re coming back?”

“Viktor, will you be at the European Championships?”

“Worlds?”

“Russian Nationals!”

“What about Katsuki? Is he retiring?”

“What does this mean?”

“Is Coach Feltsman taking you back?”

Viktor let the questions wash over him for about ten seconds, smiling all the while, then held up a hand. “Like I said, I can’t say anything yet. Anyway, this is Christophe Giacometti’s time!” He shook the tall man next to him, giving ample opportunity for more fun photo opportunities, which they always loved. “You’ll see me at the gala tomorrow. I’ll let you know then.”

With one final pat to Chris’s shoulder, he departed, leaving the three Swiss men staring and the press craving more, which was just what he wanted. Get them talking. Rumors circulating. Stir up the media machine and get it working for him so that he wouldn’t have to waste the time doing it himself.

Better still, and perhaps more telling, there was no Yuuri in sight. Knowing him, he was either watching the competition or agonizing over the medal ceremony. Either way, he wasn’t thinking about Viktor, and that suited him just fine.

He needed some time to himself. It wouldn’t be good to lose it in front of the public, especially after making such a big deal about not announcing his comeback. They could ask Yuuri to explain if they really, really wanted more details.

Viktor went for the restroom furthest away from the competitors but still cut off from the public, as was routine, steps brisk, but semi-casual. He couldn’t draw any more attention; he just needed to look like he knew what he was doing.

“Viktor!”

Who of course should be coming down the hallway after him? Chris. Still in skates, flower crown lopsided, brows furrowed. He didn’t look angry, per se, just… unhappy.

Viktor sighed, hesitating with one hand on the push door as he waited for him to catch up. “Chris! Fancy seeing you again so soon.”

Chris gestured to the door with a nod, so Viktor went first, checking to make sure that the bathroom was empty before heading to the last sink against the wall.
“Don’t you think this is getting a little old, you following me around, especially into public washrooms?”

It wasn’t long before Chris came to stand beside him, though his face was much less cheerful than it had been earlier. “Seeing as how I passed that responsibility onto someone else and he’s not here, I’m here instead.”

Chris was good at that. Very few could keep him on edge as well as Christophe Giacometti, and it was the last thing he needed at that moment.

“You know that I don’t know what you’re talking about, right?”

Chris frowned. “I told Yuuri he was to go after you no matter how much you insisted you were fine.”

That explained so much from the Cup of China. Viktor drew back on those memories, switching on the faucet to let the water run and loosened his tie. “He didn’t even notice I was gone.”

“Are you two in a fight?”

Next came his coat, which Viktor draped over the hand drying unit, and his suit jacket, which he shook out twice before folding over his arm. “He’s retiring.”

The dry delivery didn’t shake his friend nearly as much as the news itself. “Still? I thought for sure he’d change his mind with how well he’s done this season…”

“He wants me to focus on my comeback.”

It was then that Chris took a moment to study Viktor, really look at him, instead of just being in the same room. Viktor let him gaze while he rolled up his sleeves, his own eyes focused only on the water disappearing down the drain.

“You never intended to come back, did you?” Chris finally asked. “This was more than a break.”

“You should know. You told me to go, after all. You and your meddling.”

“A break was all that I meant for you… and you up and wanted to be his coach.” Chris leaned against the counter then, hip out, arms folding, watching the meticulous process of Viktor washing his hands and arms of it all. Soap. Lather. “Which, admittedly, has done you both a world of good, but…”

Viktor laughed, but not because it was funny.

“I meddle because I care, Viktor.”

Rinsing was a much faster affair, but Viktor was no less thorough. The same was said about drying. “Well. He ended things and he’s retiring.”

“But you’d just gotten engaged!”

“Oh, weren’t you listening?” Viktor held up his right hand, the one with the ring, gleaming bright. “This is a good luck charm; a thank you for all of my help up to this point.”

“…that doesn’t even make sense. Who gives a ring as a thank you? Surely, Yuuri was just nervous and trying to not out you both or something.”
“Mm. I suppose you did that well enough for us, didn’t you?” Viktor swept his hands through his hair, then walked his fingers back to his tie. “Whatever the case, it’s over. Or will be after the final.”

“I was…” Chris hesitated. “Excited for you, it’s true. I saw the rings and know that’s something you’ve always wanted. I’m so sorry, Viktor.”

As much as he hated to admit it, it did feel nice to have some acknowledgement for it. Sorry for his loss, his heartbreak. No one else would really understand how much pain Viktor was in.

“Don’t tell me that this behavior is how you’re coping…”

The charitable feelings faded quickly. “What about my behavior?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Chris gestured at him. “Barging in on my interview, rubbing my loss in my face. That sort of behavior. You seem frazzled and frantic.”

“And here I thought you’d enjoy the playful banter.”

“A little cruel for my tastes.”

Viktor hadn’t meant it to be cruel, but what good was saying that now? He tugged on his sleeves, pulling them back down to his wrists, and smoothed the fabric out. “I only meddle because I care,” he muttered, throwing the words back at him. “But I really didn’t think you would mind.”

“And maybe I wouldn’t mind if I felt this is what you really wanted.”

Leave it to Chris to give him some kind of lecture. He was the perfect image of condescension in the reflection of the mirror, standing at Viktor’s shoulder with a disapproving frown. Viktor was supposed to be the one who had the answers, who knew the world and all of the things in it. Chris was supposed to look up to him, not down at him.

He hated feeling weak. He hated that Chris made him feel that way.

“Since when did you care about what I want, Chris?”

“Pardon moi?” Chris asked, aghast. “I’ve always cared about what you’ve wanted. There are some things I can ‘meddle’ with and some I can’t.”

“No, Chris.” Viktor finally turned to him, speaking directly to match his tones. He wasn’t going to back down now. “You care more about what you think is best for me. I get that you’re the ‘white knight,’ but I don’t need to be rescued or protected, okay?”

Maybe it was a little harsh, but he meant every word of it.

Chris stared down at him like he’d been hit in the gut. The expression it left on his face wasn’t one that belonged; one of hurt and betrayal. Not terribly unlike the one from when Viktor had broken his heart so many years ago. Only this time, Chris was much better at holding it back, even if it took him a moment before he replied.

“You’re right. Whether my concern has been rightly placed in my heart, you’ve not asked for it. And what has my needless help gotten you?”

Viktor didn’t have any answer for that, waiting for Chris to finish his thought.

Instead, Chris plucked a rose from his red crown and brought it down, tucking it in behind Viktor’s
ear with just enough silver hair that it stayed put.

“I’ll see you next season, Viktor,” Chris said, and turned on his heel.

It wasn’t what he’d been expecting. The rose, the feelings of guilt, the admission of fault. Viktor stared after the retreating form, feeling that familiar surge of panic welling in his chest, both helpless and unsure of how to react. He’d meant to push him away, yes, but he’d always expected Chris to stay and fight him. Why was he leaving?

“Chris! Wait.”

The blond stopped at the door, but only long enough to give him one last look of pain. “A knight has been dismissed by his princess. One rejection is all I need.”

Viktor found an empty room by checking handles until he found one that was unlocked and unoccupied. He didn’t bother with the light, just pulled the door closed and moved for the empty corner behind the desk and sank to the floor. It wasn’t graceful or dignified, but it was better than the restroom. Even Chris wouldn’t think to look for him here. Not that he’d come looking for him now.

Not that he’d stay long. He just needed time to think and to be alone. He just needed to collect himself so he could get through the rest of the night. So much had changed so quickly. Dead to competitor to coach again, only for Chris to call his bluff, and either way he was losing Yuuri.

*If I could see you, eternity will be born from hope.*

Ordinarily, the final free skate was his to do in the Grand Prix Final. He hadn’t missed one in years. Now he was hiding while Yurio decided his fate.

The tiger had been right all along.

He was nothing but a coward.

The princess was a coward.

*When he called for the firebird, all those miles away, she wasn’t surprised. It was almost a relief. He’d kept true to his word and he’d made it there safely.*

*He loved her. He wanted to rescue her.*

*He just had no idea what he was doing. How could he? She’d never told him.*

*Her form disappeared under a cloak of fine gold and red down, feathers consuming every part of her with steady hunger. Once all of her human skin and bones had been burned away, the firebird shook off the ash and took to the sky, leaving streaks of smoke behind her.*

*It didn’t hurt to transform anymore, she’d done it so many times. That was part of the curse, too; doomed to be stronger than anyone should be. Even when she wanted to give up, she couldn’t, soaring toward the tower with the heat of vengeance in her wings.*
“Firebird, face me!” the young man yelled. “You must let the princess go!”

It was an amusing sight; the man who’d stolen her heart for the better part of a year, stomping around at the base of the tower and waving his sword. The only way in was with Baba Yaga’s magic, and that was something he would never get like that. Not that it would help him, anyway; there was no princess in the tower. He could scream all he liked. She’d seen it so many times before.

But it didn’t stop the challengers from slashing and taking wild stabs at the heavy stone, or trying to climb it. Many thought burning it down would help. Or bringing armies and spies. None of that worked against the firebird. No traps, or lures, or pretty songs. The men who sought to kill the firebird for the reward of the princess, or even just for the firebird’s head, would have neither.

That her young hero was acting no different made her feel hollow. Disappointed.

She could see him from high up in the clouds, hear his calls as he searched for a way in, using force. He knew better. The wolf had taught him so much more than that in their time together, but he only had one thing on his mind.

“Firebird!”

She felt her feathers bristle, snapping with fresh ire at his invocation. She couldn’t delay any longer. It was the end. The moment of truth. Would he break the curse or simply kill her? Would she have to destroy him?

The firebird swept low, dragging the tips of her wings and her long tail over the fields to light up the night with sparks to scare him. In her throat, she gave a horrible, piercing call that made him cover his ears. Defenseless. Weak.

She flew low, raked with her claws. She blew fire. She launched every kind of attack that she could think of without directly killing him, hoping that, maybe he would realize. Maybe he would notice.

But when he didn’t…

“Firebird! Why are you toying with me?!”

She landed, hopping on two legs toward him, wings outspread to flare blasts of heat and sparks in his direction.

“I’m warning you.” The young man leveled his sword again, staring right into her eyes.

The firebird scratched at the dirt, staring right back. Begging to be seen. No one had ever been so close before, and maybe that was part of the curse; wanting to let someone in. Letting them.

Now she had.

Please, she said, though the firebird couldn’t speak.

The young man seized the opportunity to strike, thrusting the sword deep into the giant bird’s unprotected breast.

The creature gave a strangled cry of confusion as she died, boiling blood dripping down the length of the sword that had pierced her heart. But even as her body slid to the ground, stars just beyond the smoke that rose from the pieces that crumbled away from her, she found she couldn’t blame him for what he’d done.
Viktor startled when the mobile vibrated in his hands, signaling the alarm that he’d set. The free skate was over, and the award ceremonies would be finishing up, too. He was out of time. There was nothing left but to howl like the wolf and make the reality his desire. Accept it, move on. It was what Yuuri wanted. Yuuri was happy.

He got to his feet and fixed himself up, using a handkerchief to wipe his eyes. Though he was exhausted, there was nothing left to do but find out where the chips had fallen and say goodbye, even though it was the last thing he wanted to do.

Once out of the room, it took very little effort to pinpoint the sound of fanfare and follow it toward the crowds. The Russian national anthem played over the loudspeakers and under announcements from the ISU. Yurio had taken gold, as promised. But it didn’t change anything; it probably just made it easier for Yuuri to leave him.

If Yuuri hated skating that much, Viktor wouldn’t force him through it again. Even though it didn’t make sense. He’d been so happy on the ice. So free. So beautiful. He’d grown so much. That confidence had come from not giving in, not… giving in.

That was one thing that had always been different between he and Yuuri. Where Viktor refused to give in, even at the cost of his own health and sanity, Yuuri caved too easily, despite having all of the strength and skill to win. This season had proven that.

They complemented each other well. Like soul mates.

*Stay close to me. Don’t go away.*

*I’m afraid of losing you.*

“Viktor!” voices called from the crowd down to him- fans of his, some even with flags despite his season off. “Viktor Nikiforov!” It was loud, but he could still hear them through the noise, and he gave them a smile and a wave like he’d always done before.

To them, it didn’t matter that there was another Russian champion or that his records had been broken. It didn’t matter that his skater had left him.

He was Viktor Nikiforov, *their* Viktor Nikiforov. He took what he wanted.

And that gave him an idea.

——

Yurio knocked Yuuri down to second place by a mere .12 points. It’d be insane if they hadn’t both beaten Viktor’s records; of course they’d come close in the end. As Yuuri stood with Yurio elevated at his right, with Russia’s national anthem playing, he felt proud of them both.

Yuuri was also impressed with JJ and how he was able to raise his score to third. Yurio grumbled about ISU favoritism, and maybe it was, but Yuuri couldn’t help but feel JJ would be humbled by
the experience.

The podium ceremony concluded and, after plenty of photos, Yuuri skated to the barrier to meet his love as his coach for the last time. Gently he removed the ribbon that held his silver medal with a soft smile.

“Well it’s not a gold medal, but...”

“Mmm that’s nice, but I don’t feel like kissing it unless it’s gold, sorry!” Viktor’s voice was playfully forced as was his large, plastic smile.

Yuuri thought he’d be a little proud of him for podiuming!

“Man, I really wanted to kiss Yuuri’s gold medal,” Viktor continued. “I’m such a failure as a coach. How can I ever recover from this? Yuuri, do you have any suggestions?” He took a step, forcing Yuuri against the barrier, and he just barely caught his balance so not to do a backflip over it.

“Something that would excite me? Weeeell, anything come to mind?”

Failure? It wasn’t Viktor’s fault for Yuuri’s shortcomings. He did his best, receiving a world record at that, and that was still somehow a failure? Was gold really the deal breaker for marriage? “Um, well I--” And Yuuri found his footing and pushed Viktor off of him and them both onto the ground, medal falling from Viktor’s uncaring hands. In the same instance Yuuri made his decision - he knew what he needed to do next. “Viktor! I want to stay in competition with you for one more year! And this time I’ll win gold!” I’ll win that right to marry to you, he thought to himself with an ache in his chest.

Viktor stared back at him for half a second, shocked, and then sparked with joy. “Perfect! Well, almost.” Fishing around at his side for the fallen medal, Viktor laughed in his throat. “Even I’m worried about making a full comeback if I’m also staying on as your coach...”

Stunned, Yuuri watched as Viktor placed the ribbon back around Yuuri’s neck where it belonged.

“...In exchange, I’ll need you to become a five-time world champion, at least.”

It sounded impossible, but with Viktor he had a way about things becoming possible in an unexpected way. Tears welled and his throat constricted. “Okay...” was all Yuuri managed to say but pulled his coach and fellow skater into a hug.

Local media outlets and the usual ones that followed the skating circuit took advantage of Viktor and Yuuri’s lingering. They’d let them finish their hug on the floor, but the moment they were in a more suitable public area, the barrage of questions began.

Most were echoes of the short ones that Yuuri was asked at the kiss and cry, but now he had silver around his neck, the physical evidence of his win, their enthusiasm felt less politely professional.

“Viktor Nikiforov,” a woman asked, “it’s clear you’re proud of your pupil and his improvements were shared in part with your expertise – will you be continuing on as Yuuri Katsuki’s coach next season?”

“Yes, we’ve heard rumors,” another man added. “Could you comment on that?”

Viktor winked at Yuuri. “I will. Not only that, I will be returning as a skater as well.”
The collection of journalists gasped.

“Both?”

“That’s unheard of!”

“Is that against ISU regulations? Has anyone done that before?”

Viktor kept his camera smile on and waited for the clamor to die down. “All will be explained soon… but it is safe to say that I’m not done with the ice.”

There was a pause before there was another roar of questions and flashes of lenses.

“How?”

“You are Viktor Nikiforov, you always have spare programs in your pocket. Is that right?”

“Have you been keeping your skills sharp as you’ve been coaching?”

Nodding, laughing, and saying yes a lot, Viktor kept Yuuri close to his side, hand discreetly on his waist under his jersey.

Through the mesh and embroidery of his free skate costume, Yuuri could feel Viktor’s hand shaking, fingers alternating between laying still and squeezing. Something about it felt like it was more than being cute and intimate.

Like anchoring.

He watched his profile as Viktor answered more questions, the reporters nearly had forgotten Yuuri was there. Yuuri didn’t blame them; a silver medal was nothing compared to Viktor coming back. It was something Yuuri had feared he’d never go back to because of him. And now he was because of him.

If Yuuri didn’t know Viktor as well as he did, he could have believed the smiles he was giving the press of his return announcement as genuine.

A lot had happened. They still hadn’t technically made up from their fight and emotions had been thin since this morning and now so was his energy.

Yeah, Viktor was just tired.

And Yuuri just needed to get him back to the room for apologies and sleep. Yuuri did say he wasn’t retiring and that was part of the negotiation of talking, after all.

Under his jersey, he patted Viktor’s hand.

Viktor startled and looked down at Yuuri and his hopeful and pleading smile, then turned back to the press with a wave of his free hand. “We must be going, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your warm wishes. We’ll see you tomorrow at the gala. Please look forward to it.”

Together coach and student walked away from the crowd and into the locker rooms to change and gather their things for the night. Zippers pulled closed and metal doors shut, Yuuri slipped into his street shoes and shouldered his skating bag. Viktor had gone quiet through it all, staring off into everything and nothing.

Tired…
“Vitya,” came a firm, yet tentative call once they were in the lobby of the rink.

At once, Yuuri and Viktor turned to face Yakov who was behind them and lumbering closer.

Yuuri looked to Viktor, gauging if he was okay with talking to him or if he needed to rush out the doors with him.

But Viktor stood watching Yakov, tense, but not to the point of frozen and unable to run. He really was tired.

Had Yakov said Vitya? That was a good sign at least.

“Vik-,” Yakov started to correct himself, then shook his head, withered face relenting, “Vitya. Can we meet tomorrow to go over your proposal??”

Things like his return to the ice? Had he talked to Yakov during that time Yuuri couldn’t find him?

The sound of his diminutive caused Viktor to quietly choke on a myriad of emotions. “Da.”

“Meet me at the usual. At seven.”

Viktor nodded and Yakov awkwardly did so back and pocketed his hands and walked away.

“Ready to head back?” Yuuri asked after several beats of stillness. They both could fall asleep on their feet if they didn’t hurry back.

Viktor didn’t respond, only followed after him into a taxi.

The ride to the hotel was subdued and off. Thankfully it wasn’t tense like yesterday or that morning. They were speaking, though more one-sidedly.

Although Yuuri had more questions than answers after that exchange with Yakov, it was progress.

Once in the room Yuuri offered to order room service.

“How about a night cap for me,” Viktor said as he undid his tie.

“You’re not hungry? Shouldn’t you have a little something with the wine?” Yuuri gently suggested.

Viktor didn’t argue, but wasn’t helpful in what he’d like to pair.

Yuuri then went ahead and got them both a chicken wrap. Viktor liked crepes and it was close to a savory one.

Two wraps and a bottle of wine were brought up within thirty minutes.

With the competition over, it was tempting to have a glass or two. But with how quickly Viktor went for the bottle, Yuuri decided to wait for tomorrow night. By then things could be better between them, too. His lover needed this more than him.

“There’s still the gala tomorrow,” Viktor reminded him with a raised glass.

“Yeah.” No points were involved, so if he messed up there wouldn’t be any docked points, but
dropping Viktor would be worse than any of that. Tomorrow night he’d drink with him if he wanted.

Glass by glass Viktor downed the shiny bottle of red wine. He took a bite of the chicken wrap at some point, which Yuuri was happy, even if it was just to humor him.

It wasn’t bad to drink, and for Viktor it was fairly normal, but with how much Viktor wasn’t talking or not looking at him and the bottle got more and more empty…

Something was wrong. Still wrong. Things should have started to improve.

Yuuri bit his lip in time with the crinkling the food wrapper with stray pieces of lettuce inside. Once the noise subsided, “Viktor… I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.” He’d said it so many times yesterday, and he’d meant it every time, but now Viktor was seemingly more receptive. No raised hackles or bared teeth.

There was a moment’s pause before Viktor looked at him from his glass like he hadn’t expected him to speak. A thin smile on his lips that seemed a million kilometers away from his eyes. “Hmm? What are you talking about?”

“When I said I was retiring. I didn’t know you would react that way. If I did, I wouldn’t have said anything.”

“Ever?”

“No! I’d tell you after the prix or when we got back home to Hasetsu. I just… I panicked. Again.” Yuuri ran a hand through his slicked hair, undoing it from its gel confines. “Like I keep doing. This whole damn competition.”

Viktor considered this while he swished the wine in its glass with delicate fingers. “It’s fine, Yuuri. It’s good you told me.”

“Is it fine?”

“Yes. I’d rather know than not if you wanted me to come back so badly… you could have just said something earlier,” he shrugged with his shoulder not connected to the wine. “Instead of threatening to quit.”

“You said you were going to get me to the grand prix. I saw how you watched everyone from the stands. I thought I was helping you so you wouldn't feel obligated to end your career. I never said I wasn't going to retire after the prix, either.”

“Well, you got your way in the end.”

He’d said it in such a childish finite way, it stung. “So did you,” Yuuri said right back.

“...right. So there's no need to apologize.”

“But is it really what you want?”

Another pause and there was a flicker of something in Viktor’s eyes before he turned away to hide it. Then set his glass down with a tiny clink on the bed stand and brought the same hand up to unbutton his white shirt. The old bed groaned as he shifted onto his knees and began to advance towards Yuuri, minding the small gap between their beds. “It’s what you want, isn’t it?”
Viktor was trying to avoid talking about it. He was using their love to run away from the conversation. And Yuuri wouldn’t have it.

When Viktor’s lips touched Yuuri’s neck, he held up his hands at his shoulders to prevent him from leaning in further. “It doesn’t matter what I want and that’s part of the problem, isn’t it?”

Hesitating, not moving closer, but not pulling back, Viktor let out a hollow little chuckle in his throat. “You say that like I don't care, Yuuri. But the truth is…” Again he leaned in, and with enough force to pass the barrier against his shoulders for Yuuri’s lips, “I care very much about what you want.”

Their lips were close, but Yuuri didn’t allow them to connect. “And I care about what you want. What do you want more - to be my coach or a competitive figure skater again?”

The refusal of the kiss or the question got Viktor to back off. “Yuuri,” he smiled again—a weak one at that. “I want Yuuri more.”

“And you can have me in either of those things. Of the two, what do you want more?”

“Oh, I don't know... why not both...?” Slowly, Viktor began to falter. If only Yuuri could believe it was just the alcohol. “I already have programs. It's going to be fine. Yakov will help me next season. It's fine.” He started to walk back on his knees. “We should get going to bed. We both need to rest up for the gala.”

“Viktor…” Yuuri reached for his retreating hand and didn’t continue to speak until Viktor was looking at him. “If you want to skate, skate. If you want to keep being my coach, then coach. But you can't do both.”

Viktor opened his mouth, but Yuuri quickly interrupted him.

“I know I was excited when you said you were coming back to the ice. That's what I thought I wanted. But maybe I was wrong.”

The fake smiles weren’t just from the exhaustion of their fight or putting on a show for the camera, they were from pain. A deep rooted pain. An act he’d put on for so long and it was cracking. The princess was hiding again. Yuuri hated how long it took him to realize.

“But you... wanted to see me come back... isn't that what you--? Everyone wants me to come back.”

“And I just admitted that I realized it may not be best for you. You don't have to compete to skate with me. If that's the reason you're really considering.”

“I'm not considering , Yuuri. It's already done.”

It would easily be reversible. A handful of reporters could scratch their coverage for the morning. Yuuri just had to get out of Viktor what he truly wanted. And there was only one way to do that; he had to shatter his heart one more time. “Okay. Then... You're fired.”

Viktor’s expression resembled the one he wore before collapsing - slapped straight across the face.

It was a risk, but Yuuri had to try reasoning with him. “If you’ve already decided, I’ll make it easier. Help ease the stress.”

Slowly Viktor lowered from his knees to a sit. “Y-Yuuri! You... you can't just!”
“You’re not leaving me a choice.”

“You, Yuuri- what...? You're not serious!”

“I’m being as serious as you are.”

“You!” Viktor cried, but it was useless.

“You’re tired enough as is! Doing both will only make it worse and I won’t let you work yourself to death.” Yuuri took a long breath, hoping that he was right. “You’ve wanted to leave the ice, haven’t you?”

“I-- I don't know!” Viktor drew his attention away from Yuuri and picked at a thread on the comforter.

“These last few months... I've seen you change. And when you told me you were coming back I wasn’t really paying attention then. Tonight while you talked to the reporters and with Yakov... the way you looked back at me at the kiss and cry, you weren’t being fond and hopeful for the future, you were resigned. I’ve said so much to you while we've been here and it's hurt you without me knowing.”

“You looked so happy…”

“I don't want to keep doing that. Let me fix this before I make it worse. I'm still a stupid fan! Of course I want to see you skate, but that's the selfish and irrational side of me. It’s why it took me so long to love you for you.”

“...Yuuri,” Viktor choked on his name.

“Because I love you, and I care, I don't... I don't want you to compete. It’s been killing you, hasn’t it?”

Tears welled in Viktor’s eyes and his breath quickened as he tried to respond. It was hard to tell if he was hurt and confused by the words or touched again.

“I know I'm sounding contradictory. All this time I thought I was keeping you away from the ice, but maybe that's a good thing.”

The tears broke free and this time they weren’t out of anger. He was fighting himself.

Yuuri tentatively scooted over to him, his own heart and voice heavy, and hugged him. Viktor was stiff, but allowed it. “People say they want you back, but would they really if they knew how much you’ve been in agony over it?”

“I...” Viktor struggled to speak against his shoulder. “I'm nothing without it. It's all I have, Yuuri! The moment I stop, I'm-I'm- nothing to them. To anyone!”

“But you're everything to me.”

Viktor loosened and then hugged tighter.

“You love music and dancing, Books and fairy tales, Art, Animals, Good food. There's more than you let yourself know, Viktor. There's nothing stopping you from doing something else with your life. I'd just like to be a part of it. If that's okay.”

“I-- that's why--- that's why I-that's why I'd still skate! Even if it killed me I'd skate for you... If it
made you happy because, I-I can’t stand the thought-- even if it's just your idol, I… Please, Yuuri!”

Gently Yuuri pulled away to give him a crooked grin. “Viktor, you are someone to me, not just my idol. Weren't you listening?”

“I… can’t lose you!”

Was that why Yuuri telling him he was retiring scared him? Did he think he was ending their relationship as fiancés? He hugged him again, burying his face in his neck. “I'm not going anywhere. I never said I was. Just be my coach.”

“W-wh-what did you…”

“We can keep doing what we have: get up and go to the rink together. Practice and exercise. You looked a lot happier doing that and being on the sidelines than you ever did in your programs. I'm so sorry it took me this long to see it.” Again he pulled away from him to look him right in the eyes. “Be my coach, Viktor?”

For a while Viktor searched his face, digesting everything they said and recalling those exact words from the banquet. Eventually, a little sparkle returned to his eyes and he nodded.

“How could you think I'd ever leave you?” Yuuri asked with a small, fond laugh and touched his cheek.

“You said you wanted to end it, even though I said I hoped you would never retire!”

“I never meant that I wanted to end us.”

“But I thought you only spoke in skating metaphors…” Viktor dropped his head onto Yuuri’s shoulder to hide the wave of emotions that overcame him.

“Idiot. My beautiful idiot. I love you.”

Viktor wrapped his arms around him again, clinging in a muffled sob, “Yuuri… Does this mean I'm unfired?”

If that didn’t prove how much he wanted this, Yuuri didn’t know what did. “Yes. You're rehired. You’re my coach.”

He hiccuped on a sob and curled more into Yuuri’s body, which made it harder to sit upright, so Yuuri moved them both to their sides.

The contact and warmth felt so nice after days of feeling cold and distant.

As much as talking and communicating wasn’t either of their strengths, it really was what they needed to do. A weight had been lifted and the aches of it all would take time to heal.

Together. They were together.

Relieved and exhausted, they decided it was time for bed and slid out of their clothes without breaking contact as much as possible. Nothing they hadn’t done under different circumstances before.

Yuuri stretched his arm for the lamplight and the room went dark.

As soon as he was back under the sheets, Viktor nestled into him with his head on his chest and
entwined their legs.

“Are you still going to see Yakov in the morning?” Yuuri asked as he stroked Viktor’s hair.

He nodded. “I’ll have to tell him I’m not coming back to skate under him after all.”

“Will you be okay?”

It took Viktor a moment to answer. “I think so… I’m so tired of running.”

“Good luck.” Yuuri still intended to help Viktor mend the broken bridges with Team Russia, but depending on how his morning talk with Yakov went… He leaned down to kiss Viktor’s head.

Viktor hummed at the luck and affection.

Sleep did not come immediately for either of them. Too tired to say anything else, but enjoying the companionable silence and the presence of one another, minds abuzz.

As Yuuri lay there in the quiet, hand straying to his back, he knew how to end the song he was composing. It was this moment, right here - heavy with resolve, but healing. Hopeful.

Soon the tune of the song transitioned in his sleepy brain to the song they’d be skating to at the gala and it began to filter through his mouth.

“Stammi vicino, non te ne andare... Ho paura di perderti...” The only Italian Yuuri knew were the lyrics to Stammi Vicinio, and he was sure his accent was terrible. Even more so in fatigue.

“Yuuri, you stopped,” Viktor said, poking at his chin.

“Sorry… I got self-conscious. I’m not a very good singer.”

“Nonsense. I love your voice,” Viktor said sweetly with a yawn. “Please continue.”

Yuuri sighed, feeling the heat on his cheeks, but for Viktor he would keep badly singing because it was the song that brought them together and it meant more to them now than ever. And soon Viktor would hear a song he’d written for him and hoped it would be just as special. “Le tue mani, le tue gambe. Le mie mani, le mie gambe. E i battiti del cuore. Si fondono tra loro...”

“Partiamo insieme,” Viktor cut in with his beautiful honey baritone, accent more refined. “Ora sono pronto...”

“Let’s leave together,” Yuuri echoed in English. “I’m ready now.”

“I’m ready now.”

Chapter End Notes

Lilia: You can’t let Viktor come back to compete.
Yakov: And why is that? Is this jealousy I’m sensing?
Lilia: No. In fact... I’ll explain it all later, but Yakov, he’ll get himself killed. If not by the federation, then through his own stupidity. The RSF is responsible for what happened to him all those years ago. They’ve been watching him very closely. It’s not
safe for you.
Yakov: I think I would know if one of my skaters had been threatened.
Lilia: He didn’t want to tell you.
Yakov: But he told you?
Lilia: He knew that if you knew, you’d have gone to Avram’s house and killed him in
his sleep. Admit it.
Yakov: I would not.
Lilia: Because you’ve never done something like that before, da?
Yakov: ...No...
Yurio: That asshole! I’m going to make that pig eat snow cones! I can’t believe I
missed Beka for this!

On the Next Gay Skate!
Breakfast with Papa! / PAIR SKATE!!!!!!! / A Banquet! / Revised Plans!

Please look forward to it!

ADDITIONAL CHAPTER TAGS (WITH SPOILERS):
#conversion therapy #abuse #mythical animal death

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